

Exploring Late Antiquity through cities in southern Spain and northern Africa, and beyond: A review of ATLAS' final colloque and the “Invisible Cities” exhibition.

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Introduction

Late Antiquity has been, and continues to be, on the rise amongst scholars from different fields, having been largely overlooked until the late 20th century.¹ However, in the present day it has become a prolific area of research that encourages an interdisciplinary approach. It is in this context where the project “ATLAS – Late antique cities in the South of the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa during the 3rd to 8th centuries” has emerged, led by the Universität Hamburg (Germany), the La Rochelle Université (France) and the Casa de Velázquez – School of Advanced Hispanic and Iberian Studies (Madrid, Spain). With Sabine Panzram and Laurent Brassous as PIs, it has gathered a substantial network of researchers who focus on this extensive period in order to shed light on specific towns scattered across the ancient Roman provinces of *Baetica* and *Africa Proconsularis*. The aim of the project is threefold, as it has created a GIS where all the information gathered has been included, a publication or “companion”, and a travelling exhibition under the title “Invisible Cities”.

The final meeting of ATLAS took place from March 20–22, 2024, at the Casa de Velázquez in Madrid. Researchers attended a series of conferences titled “The Cities of Late Antiquity put to the Test of a Comparative Analysis”. In them, scholars unaffiliated with the project presented case studies on similar periods in different regions, providing counterpoints to ATLAS researchers and fostering lively debate.

As well as the inauguration of the final meeting, on the 20th of March was launched the exhibition “Invisible Cities. Towns of Late Antiquity in Southern Iberia and Northern Africa (300-800)”. It is available digitally on the project's website and as a physical travelling exhibition, displayed at the Casa de Velázquez at the time of writing. “Invisible

¹ Peter Brown's referential work *The World of Late Antiquity* was published in 1971.

Cities” explores the restitution of a series of late antique buildings and spaces belonging to some of the towns studied by the ATLAS and is expected to reach a wide audience.

Comparative analysis as a tool for understanding the urban fabric in Late Antiquity

Throughout their introduction to the event, Panzram and Brassous restated the main aims of ATLAS and its contribution to updating and making knowledge about the period more accessible. Terms such as the crisis of the 3rd century AD or “decadence”, which have been shed by scholars long ago, have given room to explore how transformation took place in the cities. In the case of this project, this had been done through research groups and discussions, which were expected to be emulated during the presentations of the forthcoming days. Following their introduction, Jean François Bernard and Titien Bartette gave a brief overview of the innovative methodology applied to the creation of the digital models of “Invisible Cities”. These models incorporated techniques such as photogrammetry, mapping, bibliographic analysis, and earlier reconstructions, along with detailed architectural and archaeological reflections for each 3D model. To conclude the first day of the conference, the attendees visited the exhibition, guided by the two specialists.

The following day began with Mateusz Fafinski’s presentation about his research on post-imperial cities in a post-transformational world, which aimed to change the paradigms in which the city in Late Antiquity is understood. Fafinski initiated the debate around the definition of a late antique city, which continued throughout the rest of the conferences, and suggested an analysis of these spaces based on an ecosystem that, not only responds to its larger environment, but also has agency in its decisions. Questions regarding terminology, one of the initial focuses of ATLAS, arose as the attendees debated on the definition of “city”, “roman”, “transformation” and “adaptation” amongst others. Fafinski’s intervention set the tone for the rest of the conferences and touched upon important topics that were capital for the ATLAS network. Antonio Felle devoted his presentation to the evolution of Christian epigraphy in Rome during Late Antiquity, posing a question about how to interpret rupture and/or continuity; he noted how the epigraphical habits of the city changed along with its morphology: the techniques, who commissioned the texts, as well as an increase in icons, amongst others, denoted that the political powers as well as the morphology of the urban fabric shifted in Rome. This prompted a series of questions about language and alphabet, while other specialists reflected upon how this very same phenomenon manifests in other regions of the former Roman Empire. The last lecture of the morning was given by Edward Schoolman, who, through a series of analysis that included textual sources as well as paleo-environmental studies, presented three Italian case studies on how landscape changed in relation to its nearby cities and the behaviour of its inhabitants. The most striking one, that of the *ager* that surrounded Rieti, reflected an increase in silvopastoralism in the 600 AD that barely left any recorded traces. Schoolman stressed the importance of locality and periodization, and how they need to be observed parallelly in order to understand the late antique transformations in the Italian peninsula. Jesús García Sánchez and David Stone, whose research also focuses on territory and landscape, presented some of their own investigation regarding the topic on their respective geographical regions. Through the discussion arose two interesting aspects of Schoolman’s intervention, which seemed to

engage the attendees' attention: Arce revisited the economic aspect of a city and how that transformed it, using the Crypta Balbi in Rome as an example, while Stefan Ardeleanu wondered about the actual impact of broader environmental phenomena such as the Little Ice Age on specific areas.

The afternoon was set off by Gideon Avni's presentation, which was intended to serve as an update on Hugh Kennedy's "From Polis to Madina" (1985) through several case studies from the Eastern Mediterranean (specifically Israel), each with a set of very specific characteristics. From the archaeological point of view, they displayed, just as in the Italian case, a great regional variability, and generally denoted an increasing distance between them and the academic notions popular before Kennedy's work (namely, a sharp and destructive entrance of Islam in the region). Avni's talk inspired a series of questions from the ATLAS network that sought to compare his examples to theirs: Ardeleanu asked about the funerary world, while Panzram extended the question to the outskirts of the city and its productive and/or religious areas. The second day concluded with Pascale Chevalier's intervention regarding the meridional and western Balkan cities. They all shifted in their morphology with the foundation of Constantinople, intensifying their activity significantly in the coast, and showed a strong imperial presence through the late antique centuries. In them, the increase in Christian buildings was noted by Chevalier as one of the driving forces for change, as well as the privatisation of public spaces, such as theatres and amphitheatres: she emphasized the reuse, *réemploi*, of areas that fell in disuse. The contrast between the number of contemporarily active churches surprised Arce, which led to a discussion between him and Panzram about the lack of knowledge that exists (according to her) about this topic in cities like Mérida. Another point that was stressed by Brassous, and mentioned by Avni in his lecture as well, was the multiplication of gardens and agriculture within the city: Chevalier explained that the spaces that were left vacant in the urban fabric ended being taken by burials and gardens, repurposed by the inhabitants.

José Remesal Rodríguez inaugurated the third and last day with an intervention related to the interdependence between the provinces and the Roman Empire, and specifically how it evolved through the reign of the different emperors. Particular emphasis was placed on the spread of the municipalisation of towns during the Flavian dynasty, which implied oftentimes the building of "empty" cities that were unsustainable in the long run. This notion was stressed during the debate as well, by Rubén Olmo López and Arce, who reminded the attendees the difference between *urbs* and *civitas*, and the importance of *villae* as time progressed. Jerusalem became a protagonist during Anna Gutgarts presentation, which discussed what the perception of the crusaders was of the city of Jerusalem and its layout during the Latin Kingdom. The scholar examined how they grappled with the past of their newly-acquired town and how they reorganised it based on a new W-E axis that did not exist before their arrival. This created a certain memory-scape that appeared hinted, not only in the city, but also in the oral tradition which was recorded at different moments of history. Many fascinating points arose during the dialogue after Gutgarts' talk: Sonia Gutiérrez Lloret suggested looking into how each period inherited their predecessor's urban fabric and took their presence into account in their own memory-scape. Fafinski reflected on the perception of decline that the Latin Kingdom had on the textual sources and how the dichotomy between the bad shape of a city and an imposition of a *renovatio imperii* was possible. The conclusions of the conference, and more broadly of

ATLAS, were brought by Arce's expertise, who reminisced about capital authors for Late Antiquity² and how this project inherited that brand new mentality and scientific solidarity with its work and extended discussions within its research groups. He focused his closing statements around three different definitions of what a "city" was during the 2nd, 4th and 7th centuries AD; two aspects came to the forefront of the definition: specific infrastructure such as walls or water supply, and a political power. These statements led, once again, to a debate around terminology regarding the terms "city" and "town" in different languages and moments of history. This branched into two different discussions: the first one, brought by Panzram, regarded methodological setbacks, such as what happens when an undeniable city does not follow the specific characteristics of what a "city" is; which aspects are unnegotiable in a late antique city, and which are not? How much flexibility should there be in this definition? The second one, touched upon by Fafinski and Olmo López, is the lack of certainty about what authors from a certain period defined as a city: sometimes even primary sources debate when something is a city, and when it might have stopped being one as its infrastructure started decaying, more so taking into account that the term is nowadays polysemic. Gutiérrez Lloret included in the dialogue the issue of chronology, stating that certain characteristic infrastructure of a city might have been unnecessary in the 2nd c. but essential in the 7th: she assessed that it was the political (or alternatively religious) power what was a requisite. Although many other topics were brought up, such as city renaissance or the role of the kingdom of *Toletum*, and the conversation would have gladly continued, it was concluded on the hopeful note that there is still a lot of work to be done.

Overall, the ATLAS conferences succeeded in creating a space for debate on the various examples presented by the network and external speakers. The focus on the urban fabric in Late Antiquity, which was fairly clear, allowed an exploration of the different areas of research that seemed to rouse everybody's interest. However, the wide range of cities, geographical locations, and chronologies sometimes made it challenging to draw meaningful comparisons. Yet, the recurrence of several themes, many of which revolved around terminology and academic perception, resulted in particularly interesting considerations that historians, archaeologists, and other specialists studying this chronology should always take into account.

Visualising the "Invisible Cities" of Late Antiquity

As mentioned before, it was during the initial day of the conferences when the exhibition "Invisible Cities. Towns of Late Antiquity in Southern Iberia and Northern Africa (300-800)" was inaugurated, which presents a selection of 3D restitutions based on the research carried out by ATLAS, aiming to reach a broader and less specialized audience than other outputs of the project. This has been done specifically through two different channels of communication, digitally and physically, maintaining one of the main aims of the ATLAS, which is to make all the materials as accessible as possible. The travelling exhibition will be displayed at the Staatsbibliothek in Hamburg, the Museo Arqueológico Nacional de

² Other than Peter Brown, from Henri Pirenne and A.H.M Jones, to Stephen Mitchell and Efthymios Rizos were mentioned, as well as the work of the programme "Transformations of the Roman World".

Madrid (MAN), the Museo de las Excavaciones de Baelo Claudia (Cádiz), the Casa Árabe in Córdoba and the National Heritage Institute of Tunisia for the time being,³ alongside its initial location at the Casa de Velázquez. It was created through a collaboration with the renown French company ICONEM, which specialises in the digitalisation of cultural heritage in 3D, to which Bartette belongs, while Bernard is part of the Institut de Recherche sur L'Architecture Antique, from the Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour. Given the breadth of ATLAS's research, the focus has been put on four specific towns, two from each region, Baelo Claudia, Mérida, Carthage and Makthar, and on some of their most representative buildings, districts and urban areas. The great achievement of this exhibit resides on how it was created, requiring, not only a constant exchange of ideas between different specialists, but also a symbiotic relation between on-site documentation and modelling. On the one hand, the sites were digitalised through photogrammetry; while, on the other, models were created, often based on plans and sections amongst others: merging these two while doing extensive research implied, in itself, an act of interpretation which is adequately communicated through the exhibition. This interpretation had the aim of representing the different recurrent areas of the ATLAS, touched upon during the conferences: change in use, evolution of spaces, new structures and their solutions and locations, and so on.

The shape that this project takes online is as a multilingual website (available in Spanish, English and French, spoken as well during the conferences, acting as the three official languages of ATLAS) composed of an introduction followed by two sections. The introduction, a short text on the art of restitution, points at the history of the discipline and what the next segments display, although without discussing any of the changes that happen in the urban fabric during Late Antiquity: it is required from the viewer to move forward to understand what they are and how do they manifest. Scrolling down, a six-minute film appears, summarising the work and giving little context on each building and city, but displaying them in a scenic way that allows, amongst other things, to understand how they are inserted in the urban areas of each town. The last section is devoted to the nine individual models created for the exhibition. Each of them is available to handle by the viewer and, more importantly, accompanied by a series of important resources: a short description, some plans and sections, explanations of interpretative choices (which is one of the most notable aspects of this section), a bibliography, and, finally, some images. It is relevant to consider what spaces have been chosen to be modelled, as this decision has been taken with great care: they cover different chronologies and time spans, and types of buildings and cities. There are two habitats, the Casa de Los Mármoles in Mérida and the Maison de la Rotonde in Carthage, which demonstrate different types of occupation of previously existing structures from the 5th century onwards, giving extremely different results in the aspect of their 3Ds. Three churches have been selected, the basilica of Hildegundus in Makthar, that of Santa Eulalia in Mérida and the Silla del Papa (much smaller in size) near Baelo Claudia, in Tarifa, to offer a varied view of how this “new” building spawned in different locations with somewhat similar plans but unique solutions.

³ Some of these institutions have an established relation with the project and some of their researchers are part of the ATLAS network, e.g. National Heritage Institute of Tunisia, where the last meeting of the group took place in May 2023.

Other constructions show a much more uncertain and debated function, such as the “monument à auges” from Makthar: that ambiguity is part the archaeological and historical disciplines, and it is stimulating to see it appear in an exhibition of these characteristics. Emerita Augusta and Carthage are the two cities modelled in full, where the viewer can see how buildings are evolving and appearing in the urban fabric and its immediate surroundings: these also display that lack of knowledge around how most of the city looked, which is shown through a transparency for all the structures that remain unknown, offering approximate volumes without any invention. Lastly, the one remaining model built happen to be one of the most illuminating ones: the southern sector of the forum in Baelo; it is composed of three different 3Ds which show how a public space, having lost its function, is abandoned and then transforms into private ones. Overall, the collection of pictures or tableaux, as they call them, convey beautifully this evolution shown in late antique towns and the uncertainties that it often carries for scholars.



Figure 1. Exhibition as displayed at the Casa de Velázquez.

The physical exhibition complements the digital one but does not fully overlap in content: this not intended as a critique, precisely because it shows the understanding that each of them will probably have different audiences and, hence, information must be displayed differently. However, some of the aspects that are most interesting in the physical version are lacking in the online one (assumed to be understood from the general website of the group): for example, the former begins with an extended panel that covers, explicitly, what ATLAS research and how it relates to what is presented in the exhibit. Likewise, the following panel offers the visitor an overview of all the models with their brief descriptions and chronologies (which are much more diffuse online), conveying well the choice of 3Ds. A remarkable aspect that runs through the itinerary is the use of QR codes accompanying each of the pictures, which are linked to the online version, where the more artistic decisions are discussed. The display is concluded with the six-minute film, which in this case acts as a summary of the project itself. Sharing images and text without fully overlapping in content, both exhibits seem to be complementary.

Altogether, the two exhibitions, and the project itself, show great innovation by using cutting edge techniques, and a will to represent thoroughly and artistically these areas and how they are studied. The focus on the different buildings and spaces provides an illustrative view of how cities were transformed by their inhabitants, how they changed and evolved in Late Antiquity, and not simply “declined”. Although the audience of each format may understand this transformation differently, and might lack some context, the accessibility of the research ensures inclusivity for all viewers: simply following a QR code and/or clicking on the ATLAS website unlocks numerous resources that highlight the extensive investigations conducted by the project. But most interestingly, anyone engaging with the exhibit will gain insights into how historians, archaeologists and other specialists study and interpret the urban fabric during this often misunderstood period, Late Antiquity.

References

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