

BOOK REVIEW

Near Eastern Cities from Alexander to the Successors of Muhammad. By WALTER D. WARD. London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2020. Pp. xx + 241. Hardback, \$112.00. ISBN: 978-1-138-18570-8.

As stated by Walter Ward in the preface, the book intends to be accessible for a large audience, in particular to university undergraduate and graduate students. For this reason, Ward focuses on the development of eight cities in the Near East, based on geography, culture and archaeological data. The towns are divided into four groups of two, according to their geographical and socio-political context.

The aim is to cover a long history of the Near East, from Alexander the Great to the Umayyad dynasty, trying to understand the development of the communities before Rome's conquest and the changes that occurred over the long term. The intent of the author is to write a story suitable even for inexperienced readers, and all his choices (such as the lack of footnotes and bibliographical references to a few, essential texts) are justified by him with this target.

The first chapter consists of a general introduction, which deals with current issues, linked for example to the debate on the extreme Hellenization of the East, a hypothesis criticized by many parties (see, for example, the volumes of Butcher and Sartre),¹ or on the use of towns as an instrument for imperial powers to display their ability to command, a habit that began with Antiochus IV and developed enormously under Roman rule.

In the second chapter, Ward deals with the problem of the organization of the towns, with a brief description of the most important urban structures: economic (such as agora, *forum* and slaughterhouse), religious (temples, churches and mosques), entertainment (theaters, amphitheaters, racecourses and bathrooms) and residential (houses and palaces). In this regard, there is no mention of

¹ K. Butcher, *Roman Syria and the Near East*, Getty 2004; M. Sartre, *The Middle East under Rome*, Harvard 2007.

political structures, such as *boulē* and *ōdeion*, which are also found in eastern towns, although they are not always easily identifiable.

With the third chapter, Ward begins the analysis of towns, divided in groups of two, according to geographical similarity, and he compares similarities and divergencies in their developments. The third chapter includes a comparison between Apamea and Antioch, the fourth Gerasa and Scythopolis, the fifth Jerusalem and Caesarea Maritima and, finally, the sixth Petra and Palmyra.

Ward reconstructs the development of these towns between the Hellenistic age and Late Antiquity. In summary, the urban history of the towns examined is closely reconstructed, although sometimes Ward does not seem to acknowledge some scholarly works on specific monuments. For example, most scholars nowadays are not inclined to define as a “hippodrome” the structure found in Scythopolis, since it would rather seem to be a hybrid between an amphitheater and a hippodrome.

Overall, however, the analysis of the case studies is always well done and clearly designed for those who want to try a first approach to the topic. Among the expositional choices, it might have been better to avoid combining Petra and Palmira, apparently only based on their common feature of being towns built in a desert. First of all, the two towns are located far away, in different political and environmental contexts; furthermore, it is now clear that the two towns had very different roles. The idea of making one case of the two of them seems still very much anchored to old Rostovzeff's vision of caravan cities, and it does not seem to be now accepted as it once was.

In his conclusions, Ward states that the monumentalization of the towns took place only starting from the first century BC and that afterwards it was the emperor Hadrian who played a fundamental role in their development, just as Christianity ended up definitively changing their appearance. Historical events, therefore, had enormous importance in the evolution of eastern towns. What seems to be missing is at least a hint to the importance of the territories around the towns, with a special focus on some villages, especially the *metrokomiai*.

Ward's book is rather simple and easy to read. The lack of some insights could be a problem for scholars with a good background knowledge of the history of the individual towns under scrutiny, but the book can still be considered a successful endeavor to make a broader readership aware of the general features and problems of urban development in the Near East.

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