The Formation of Roman Urbanism 338–200 B.C.: Between Contemporary Foreign Influence and Roman Tradition


Reviewed by 116.2
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The subject of Roman urbanism and its multifaceted origins continues to fascinate scholars and students. Where does urbanism come from, what influences were at play, and how is it adapted? These are questions that Sewell seeks to answer with reference to the development of urbanism in the intriguing period of the late fourth century and through the third century B.C.E. This choice of period is somewhat earlier than some might expect, but this is precisely what makes the book valuable.

The book falls into two halves: the first concerns the layout of walls, streets, and forum, and the second concerns housing. There is a concentration on the excavated sites of Alba Fucens, Cosa, Fregellae, Paestum, and Rome with cross-comparison with Metapontum, Morgantina, Kassope, and Priene. There is mention of other sites (e.g., Falerii Novi), but the focus of all discussion is on a small number of well-excavated sites. As the author makes clear, the work is conducted with reference to Italian and German scholarship and is very much shaped by these traditions, rather than an Anglo-American tradition that places a greater emphasis on archaeological and urban theory. The book is well-illustrated, with line drawings of sites, structures, and houses that are interspersed across the volume in the usual JRA format.

The author sets out the problem of “foreign influence” and “Roman tradition” clearly in the introduction with reference to the physical composition of urbanism in the third century. Forms of Roman urbanism can be traced back to Greece, but numerous forms found in the Hellenistic tradition of urbanism are not attested on Italian sites of this period, a phenomenon that Sewell carefully evaluates in the third chapter of the book—not least that there was an absence of Greek political architecture pointing out that the forms of urbanism found in Italy were quite different from those found in Greece. Much space (67–85) is given over in this chapter to the debate between Coarelli and Mouritsen over pits found in forums in Italy. The debate stems from a comment of Aulus Gellius (NA 16.13) that colonies were effigies parvae simulacraque. In his evaluation, Sewell goes back to the evidence of the excavators and argues that in the replication of urbanism, there was much adaptation rather than reproduction of urban form. This can be seen to have been the Roman tradition found in the title of the book.

While positing a thesis that there was a distinctly Roman tradition of urbanism, Sewell also seeks to identify the Greek influence on town planning with reference to the layout of walls, forum/agora, and street grid. The author carefully works through examples from Kassope or Priene to be compared with Alba Fucens, Cosa, Paestum, and Fregellae. The agora at Priene and the forums of these Italian towns show some similarities with a space defined by roads leading to/from gates. The substance for defining this diffusion of urban form is articulated with reference to the town plans of Olbia and Minturnae (fig. 20). It is true that both towns were approximately square and had a grid of streets with gates situated at the midpoints of each side of the square. However, if we look at the internal subdivision of the two cities, there is a fundamental difference: Minturnae features a much higher level of internal subdivision than Olbia. Looking back to other plans in the chapter, we can
also see that the subdivision of all these cities under comparison was quite different, with the result that the density of streets within each settlement is equally different. There is a real need, if comparison is to be made, for an adequate understanding of this key feature of urbanism—a feature that can be approached via space syntax—that is absent in this study.

The second half of the book opens with a chapter on the Roman adaptation of Greek house design and the introduction of the atrium house. Here, Sewell moves back the traditional dating of the introduction of the atrium house from the second into the third century B.C.E. The focus shifts from layout and plan to the subject of finance and management to produce a stimulating discussion of this neglected subject. The author presents an argument of preplanned housing stock that was designed with reference to Greek models. This allows him to argue that the houses of third-century Cosa were based on a Greek prostas on grounds of proportions, and then these are cross-referenced to the layout of “row houses” in Pompeii. In contrast, the atrium house, he suggests, was a Roman rather than Italic creation that was developed to distinguish an elite in third-century colonies and was widely adopted, including the countryside as seen from the excavation of a villa site in the development of Rome’s Auditorium not far from the Mulvian bridge. The argument is intriguing, but the limited number of pieces of evidence means alternatives can always be found and articulated.

The fifth chapter looks at the atrium houses as semipublic space when constructed close to forums in Latin colonies. Drawing on the work of Fentress to differentiate the size of housing at Cosa, Sewell adjusts and extends the explanation to view the forum and its associated housing as an integrated colonial space. This pattern can be traced, through admittedly fragmentary evidence, at Alba Fucens, Fregellae, and Paestum. He then turns to Pompeii and Rome, before looking at textual sources. The latter are much later than the period of study (third century) and depend on Vitruvius’ conception of public and private, as are the sources that underpin the discussion of the salutatio. It should also be noted that the sources tend also to refer to a quite different urban context: Rome, a city in which the physical distance of the elite houses on the Palatine from the Roman Forum is rather different from the pattern found at Cosa of elite houses adjacent to the forum there. This is a bit of a side issue; what seems to be significant is that the forum in a colony was created as a center around which the houses of the elite were established. Both houses and forum provided an image of the new city—a space dominated by elite who were magistrates and members of an ordo. Importantly, regardless of the differences in physical distance from house to forum, their residences were within sight of the forum and created an image of an elite-centered city.

The book as a whole is at its most effective in the discussion of Cosa. Arguments around the “adaptation” of Greek ideas based on diffusionist principles may disturb some readers. It is for them to wonder whether the prostas house is a Mediterranean architectural form or an exclusively Greek one. Equally, is the design so sophisticated and thus difficult to replicate in other societies in the Mediterranean?

The author is quite often modest, suggesting that the book can “provide only a very limited contribution” (19). This seems a little unnecessary, given that his book is one of the only books in English to tackle this subject, and we may expect it to stimulate the subject area. Still, there is more to say on the production of urban form in this early phase of the Roman city.
The formation of Roman urbanism, 338-200 B.C.: between contemporary foreign influence and Roman tradition. (Journal of Roman archaeology Supplementary series; 79). Portsmouth RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology. Sogliano, A. 1898. “La Casa dei Vetti in Pompei.” Monumenti Antichi 8:234-387. Trevelyan, R. 1976. Since the Romans had left the British Isles some time before the invasion of the West Germanic tribes, there could never be any direct contacts between the new arrivals and the Romans on British soil. It follows that the elements of Roman culture and language which the new invaders learnt in Britain were passed on to them at second hand by the Romanised Celts. It must be recalled, however, that the West Germanic tribes had already come into contact with the Romans, and the Romanised population of continental provinces, prior to their migration to Britain: they had met Romans in combat, had gon