COLONNADED STREETS WITHIN THE ROMAN CITYSCAPE: A "SPATIAL" PERSPECTIVE

Shaker Rababeh*, Rama al Rabadyb, Shatha Abu-KhafaJahc

Department of Architectural Engineering, Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan
E-mails: *srababeh@hu.edu.jo (corresponding author); bramanrabady@gmail.com; eintshatha116@gmail.com

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Abstract. Studies tackling the Roman legacy of colonial cities and Arabian provinces are still grappling with these cities from an urban planning perspective and/or building typologies. They do not provide a 'spatial' analysis that allows reaching the Roman cities through the features that structured its urban language, one of which is the colonnaded streets. The study adopts a holistic approach to confront the ambiguities about possible origins, uses and meanings of the Roman colonnaded streets when traced in the Roman East as well as other Western cities. Besides its utilitarian and cultural value, the colonnaded streets are analyzed according to two interrelated interpretations: astrological interpretation to represent an empire of astral divinity and performative interpretation to represent an empire of imperial power. The colonnaded streets are transformed from a 'line on site' into a 'line of sight' that testifies to the social norms of the Roman people but also to their ideologies, beliefs, and aspirations.

Keywords: colonnaded streets, Roman urbanism, spatial analysis, astrological interpretation, performative urbanism.

Introduction: the colonnaded streets as an urban discourse

Most urban studies tackling the Roman legacy of colonial cities and Arabian provinces are still grappling with these cities from an urban planning perspective and/or building typologies. Discussions could be grouped within two umbrella themes: planned versus unplanned Roman cities, and standardized versus adaptable planning schemes.

As per the planned versus unplanned Roman cities, analyzing the formalization of Roman cities is usually made through distinguishing between the geometrically planned and the organically unplanned cities. The classification is mainly tackled from a political point of view. It depends on the norms of creating new cities, increasing the size of existing ones or refurbishing existing cities according to Roman standards.² Cities of this typology are analyzed based on the layout of the streets (main and secondary) and the divisions of the city’s functional zones. Some scholars suggest that streets in un planned cities emerge gradually according to the needs and expansion of the city (Segal 1997; Cavagli 1949). They are randomly distributed with open spaces that serve the free movement of people and goods. Nevertheless, these cities are based on zones and districts that have uniform character, such as the capital city of the Roman Empire, Rome and, to some extent, Ostia. The opposite situation is experienced in planned cities, including colonies that are adyorganized or cities grown out of military camps. Cities feature street layout that is designed according to an urban program and prior to laying out the city’s zones, buildings and other functional divisions. They are described as ‘regular’, ‘geometrical’, ‘grid’ or the ‘castraum’ plans.

² Cavagli (1949) used three relevant classifications for the design adopted by the Romans for their cities in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. They include cities grown up without general pre-planning; existing cities transformed into Roman colonies, and cities grown out of military camps.

For many other scholars, ‘standardized versus adaptable city planning’ is the main criterion for analyzing the urban morphology of Roman cities. Notions...