
Streets in the Roman city: built spaces, lived spaces

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Résumé

A city is not a city without its streets. In ancient Roman towns they were the key element that transformed a collection of individual buildings and spaces into a city, connecting them and giving a whole meaning to the cityscape. Since its first approaches as a tool to reconstruct the grid plan of ancient cities, streets have been paramount to explore the definition of urban space, even if, until recently, they had mostly an instrumental role within scholarly research on Roman urban studies. However, over the last years, the approach on streets have shifted, highlighting its significance as built environments in constant evolution and as one of the main arenas of social interaction in the Roman town.

Regarding the architectural dimension of the street, the analysis of the planning and construction methods used to execute its initial layout and later transformations is decisive for, in the end, reflecting about the configuration processes of urban landscape and its changes through time. The built dimension of streets is not restricted to its roadbeds, sidewalks, and porticoes. It also includes its façades and urban furniture, such as fountains, benches or traffic control devices, and everything that the road hides beneath: the urban public services related to water management. All these features are inextricably linked, and their combined examination could offer a more holistic approach to Roman streets.

As is widely known, streets were spaces with almost no restrictions in accessibility and thus, very inclusive and diverse, a scenario of a wide range of interactions between people of all social classes. Because their high visibility and transversality, they were also an excellent space for commercial and political activities, and for displaying symbols of civic identity and propaganda. The spatial turn recently applied to the analysis of Roman cities have focused precisely on exploring these matters, radically changing the way of looking into archaeological and textual evidence on streets. Its main goal is to examine further how the street life in a Roman town was sensed and experienced and, at the same time, how the built environment shaped social interactions in these spaces.

To tackle this new approaches, innovative methodological interdisciplinary perspectives have been implemented. They include, among others, the use of analytical tools (space syntax, network analysis) to understand movement and connectivity inside the city, and also the application of archaeological sciences, such as micromorphology, to help us better comprehend the construction processes and uses of street space through time.

Bearing all this in mind, the aim of this panel is to discuss the street space in the Mediterranean Roman and Hellenistic world, even if proposals covering the Iron Age and Late Antique periods will be accepted, to better address diachronic changes in the city. We will favour contributions dealing with street spaces from different points of view, including

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analysis about the construction, architecture and public services of the street and their transformation from a long durée perspective, but also approaches regarding social, sensorial, and behavioural perceptions of Roman streets. We are also interested in tackling new methodologies applied in the study of the streets, to discuss how its use could help us rethink the construction processes and everyday life in these public spaces, as well as their limitations regarding these matters.

Mots-Clés: urban planning, Roman towns, streets, water management, social interactions, public space