Colonnaded Streets in the Cities of the East under Rome

Apamea, northern Monumental Street (photo: R Burns 2009)

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ABSTRACT

Many of the major and mid-ranking cities of the Greek-speaking East under Rome adopted the cross-city colonnaded axis as the central unifying element of their urban layout. This thesis seeks to explain the origin of the idea. Earlier works, usually treating the issues briefly in the course of more general surveys, have identified possible origins in the Greek and Roman architectural traditions (the Greek *stoa* or the Roman *porticus*). Other have identified influences stemming from the Pharaonic or Achaemenid traditions. This study looks at the whole range of ideas on urban development prevalent in the Eastern provinces under Rome in the early centuries of the Empire (up to AD 250), including the use of monumental architecture to implant Roman authority in the loose political structure of the Eastern provinces. It seeks to identify why the first colonnaded axis (Antioch), attested in the writings of Josephus and attributed to Herod the Great in the early Augustan period, is apparently not replicated until the early second century AD when the axis suddenly becomes a common element of the town plans of most major cities and many minor ones. The study looks at possible 'missing' examples of street colonnading in the first century AD and at the complementary idea of a straight and wide cross-city axis which had some precedents in both Greek and Egyptian planning. It concludes that the adoption of the colonnaded axis in the Eastern provinces is a reflection of a diverse range of architectural and town planning practices in the eastern Mediterranean at the time, over which Rome sought to impose only a weak centralizing influence. It was, however, given new emphasis by the introduction in the second century AD of a more centralized architectural vocabulary which went hand in hand with the reorganisation of the system for the mining and transporting of the materials and the provision of the expertise required for such massive projects. It was not specifically a tool of 'Romanization' but by the second century AD it was to become an indicator of cities' attachment to the Roman system. It was the product of the collective inventiveness of the architects, builders, patrons and administrators operating within a system that allowed ideas to flow freely, tolerated experimentation and a sense of competition between urban centres, provided the right administrative and legal systems to protect the use of public spaces and could assemble massive amounts of material efficiently.

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