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Imperial Architecture and Identity: An Introduction

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Imperial dynamics and the built environment

This special issue of JEMAHS focusing on imperial architecture and identity is an elaboration of a workshop that took place at the University of Helsinki's Centre of Excellence in Ancient Near Eastern Empires and brought together scholars from different disciplines—architecture, archaeology, history, social science, and heritage studies—to discuss new interdisciplinary approaches to investigate identities in past societies and the role of architecture in shaping them. Over the last centuries, imperial architecture has been extensively researched in both Classical and Near Eastern archaeology as a separate, independent subject. While previously this field may have been labeled as “old fashioned” and “elite focused,” the expanding geographical horizon of

Eastern Mediterranean Studies and its increasing utilization of anthropological evidence, as well as broader theoretical and methodological advances, have in recent decades emphasized a shifting perspective for studies of imperial architecture and its role in shaping community identities.

The early exploration and studies of imperial architecture have left behind impressive scholarly tomes emphasizing the buildings' origins, i.e. exactly how and when they were built, and their historical connections. Regarding their features and associated artefacts, the focus was on those elements considered of significance to their excavators. This meant a deep focus on artistic elements (e.g., reliefs, capitals), artefacts of precious and non-local materials (e.g., gold, ivory, imported wares), and text-bearing objects (e.g., clay tablets, inscriptions) (see, e.g., Von Luschan, Humann, and Koldewey 1898; Dörpfeld 1902; Kohl and Watzinger 1916). The preponderance of the material culture assemblage was relegated to a supporting role in dating, or even more often simply went unrecorded. With a lesser focus on stratigraphy and contextual materials in the fieldwork, interpretations were often based on art-historical and typological parallels or textually-recorded histories (see, e.g., Baird 2007 for room identifications in early excavations at Dura Europos). To be sure, from the perspective of an architectural historian the products of these early modern expeditions are still very much relevant today. However, they have also become historical documents of their own, often showing signs of nineteenth and early twentieth century colonialist attitudes (Figure 1).

The age of these large-scale investigations, in which hectares of sites could often be exposed and documented in a matter of years, is long over, and the eastern Mediterranean is full of excavation projects that emphasize interdisciplinary approaches from the start, practices which are more inclusive, stratigraphically minded, and have a clear focus on the life of past

communities. Likewise, developments in anthropology have contributed to the advancement of postcolonial theories, which can provide a more critical and nuanced analysis of the built environment and its influence on past communities (Yeoh 2003; Segaud 2010; Nitschke and Lorenzon 2020). Studies have highlighted the role of the ruling elite and power structures to convey messages and control social interactions (Moore 2003; Parker Pearson and Richards 1994). More recently, scholars have started to emphasize the longevity of built structures across changing imperial landscapes and their repurposing in those later landscapes (Hamilakis 2007; Olivier 2011; Bille and Sørensen 2016). These wider developments in the field have helped overcome the idea that imperial architecture was connected only to elites, and favors comparisons between different forms of “imperial” architecture across space and time to highlight the relationship between power and the built environment (Ball 2001; Kolb 2005, 2019; Segaud 2010).

Imperial architecture can be defined as specific structural manifestations that facilitate “the maintenance of an empire, including its edges and its infrastructure, and recall [...] the source of [an empire’s] authority” (Leach 2016: 1). This definition is shared by the authors of this issue with the caveat that the types of imperial buildings are not confined to certain functions or geographies. Architecture associated with the word “imperial” is often considered to be monumental by definition, that is, “designed to be recognized, expressed by their scale or elaboration, even though their meanings may not be understood by all members of a society” (Moore 1996: 92; see also Thomas 2007: 2–11 for a detailed discussion of the term “monumental”) (Figure 2). Aside from the more obvious palaces (see Kertai, this volume), fortification walls and city gates (see Lorenzon, this volume), buildings associated with religious gatherings (for synagogues, see Bonnie, this volume), and symbols of imperial administration

(for libraries, see Lopez Garcia and Bueno Guardia, this volume) can also be included in this category, among many other types of building.

The social identities of the members of the communities who designed, built, and inhabited these buildings are multifaced and complex, but can be defined by their individual recognition within specific groups (i.e., Assyrian vs Aramean; skilled vs unskilled labor; Jewish vs Christian). As such, imperial architecture in all its forms is often at the heart of archaeological discussions of community identities, whether social, cultural, or religious, as an individual may have had more than one identity and these can overlap and/or contrast with each other. This volume aims at displaying recent developments in this field by presenting a series of case studies from different areas of the eastern Mediterranean, from different periods—from Neo-Assyrian to Roman to Islamic—and from different regions—including Italy, Greece, Anatolia, the Levant, and Iraq—that reassess the role of imperial architecture among a variety of communities.

Power and Architecture: new directions

The built environment is a paradigmatic reflection of a community's identity, as a material and tangible representation of a people's culture and the setting of social engagements with each other. As such, architecture has often been used as a tool by the politics within empires to convey specific messages of power and cultural narratives (Moore 1996; Grossman 2004; Russell 2015; see also, more generally, Markus 1993; Dale and Burrell 2005). The contributions in this volume use different methodologies to explore how imperial architecture affected the wider socio-cultural context of distinct communities by shaping social interactions and perpetuating political messages as a proxy between designers, beneficiaries and potential users.

As the analysis of imperial architecture often focuses on elite expressions and then extrapolates these as representing the experience and point of view of all members of society, it is essential to include narratives built on different fields of expertise that have previously been excluded, in order to arrive at a more inclusive understanding of the relationship between identity and the building process (Wescoat and Ousterhout 2012; Buchli 2013; Van Oyen 2015; Stern 2018). These approaches enable scholars and architectural practitioners to dissect building forms in their basic components, and to answer questions regarding the social context of the production, use, and experience of architecture (Kramer 1982; Rapoport 1990; Gates 2011; Harmanşah 2014). In addition, the exploitation of specific designs and architectural styles may also represent adaptation strategies for a particular natural environment (Anastasio, Gilento, and Parenti 2016; Lorenzon et al. 2020).

The four articles in this issue provide evidence of the ways in which these approaches integrate with an empire's need to control the messages conveyed through architecture by its forms and durability, as well as the persistence of building techniques and shapes. Using the case study of the Assyrian capital of Dur-Sharruken established under Sargon II (722–705 BCE), David Kertai explores the problematics and politics of the founding of a new city to assess the role of architecture in establishing royal identities and the nature of innovation and tradition within the Assyrian empire. By using royal inscription and archaeological data, this article critically assesses the relationship between power, the urban environment, and the landscape.

Marta Lorenzon explores the Iron Age city gates of Sa'mal/Zincirli, Carchemish, Til Barsip/Tell Ahmar, and Melid/Arsilantepe from the perspective of design and materiality, thereby emphasizing the variety of *senses* exercised and experienced by the elite, the builders, and urban communities. The Syro-Anatolian case studies she provides illustrate how city gates as

public architecture forged and maintained identities, first as a proxy for the ruling elite and then as part of the imperial program during the Iron Age. The contribution also explores the agency of the builders in the creation of built spaces during the early Iron Age.

By combining literary and archaeological evidence to discuss a multitude of examples in Rome, Greece, and Anatolia, Antonio Lopez Garcia and Miriam Bueno Guardia explore the question of the spread and functioning of libraries within the Roman Empire, and specifically their significance within the provincial communities of Anatolia. They emphasize in their discussion of the evidence the multifunctionality of these buildings, including as spaces for meetings, administration, and religion, while also arguing that it remains unclear to what extent the libraries found in the eastern provinces were accessible to the general public.

Finally, using several synagogue sites as examples, Rick Bonnie explores to what extent the synagogues of late antique Galilee continued to live on after their time of initial use, and how people built new relationships with these buildings during the early Islamic period and beyond, whether as synagogues, as sites for new functions, or as ruins. The article explores the remains of several synagogue sites in eastern Galilee using archaeological data, medieval Muslim and Jewish traveler accounts, and early modern depictions of the ruins.

In closing, we sincerely thank the journal editors Ann Killebrew and Sandra Scham for encouraging us and guiding us through the publication of this special issue. We would also like to thank Gabriele Faßbeck for her excellent work as a copyeditor on these contributions.

Figures

Figure 1. Artist's impression of the Assyrian palaces of Nimrud (produced by James Fergusson, Thomas Mann Baynes, and Ludwig Gruner, from Layard 1853: frontispiece, in public domain,

from Wikimedia,

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Artist's_impression_of_Assyrian_palaces_from_The_Monuments_of_Nineveh_by_Sir_Austen_Henry_Layard,_1853.jpg).

Figure 2. Colonnaded street, Jerash, Jordan (Photo by Rick Bonnie).

Cover photo: Palmyra, standing remains of the Temple of Bel and its colonnaded streets, view from Qalaat Ibn Maan (Photo by Arian Zweegers, from Wikimedia, reproduced under CC BY 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palmyra,_view_from_Qalaat_Ibn_Maan,_Temple_of_Bel_and_colonnaded_axis.jpg)

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