

Before/After

Transformation, Change, and Abandonment in the Roman and Late Antique Mediterranean

edited by

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Introduction

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Rome's impact on its territories generated a wide array of transformation and re-configuration, both on the physical and socio-cultural landscapes. The strengthening of the Empire, at the end of the last centuries BCE, coincided with a moment of political turmoil in the Mediterranean basin, one that contributed to the success of Rome over its conquered territories. Large cities, wealthy and productive countryside and large-scale infrastructures were commonly used as proxies for the imperial expansion and cultural change. Such intense urbanization fuelled continuous re-shaping processes in both major cities and the rural world, whose economic success was mutually tied to the regional and global context.

And yet, while some areas underwent cycles of transformation and cultural renaissance, some other regions/cities experienced periods of abandonment and demographic decrease. In addition, environmental phenomena, natural disasters, and epidemic outbreaks might have contributed to the success and failure of one place over another (Harper 2017).

Transformation, however, intrinsically implies a kinetic system in which a current state is not destined to stay the same, and this is certainly true of the ancient world and the Roman Empire in particular.

Indeed, on a micro-level, the abandonment of cities and urban centres and their successive re-occupation are usually testified by multiple architectural and functional reconfigurations and processes of space (re)adaptation. On a regional scale, however, this transformation is witnessed by multiple factors such as reduction in number of settlements, occupational change (i.e. from sedentary to pastoralists or vice versa) and abandonment of natural and resource exploitation areas. These phenomena generated socio-economic outcomes and, more importantly, demographic change and increase/decrease in population.

Past and modern studies have constantly focused on themes such as collapse, crisis and reconfiguration in the Roman world, broadly defined from Britain to the Near East, with an emphasis on historical, long-term dynamics, rather than on specific archaeological contexts.

Indeed, as already outlined by Helen Dawson, 'there is a distinctive shortage of studies relating to abandonment, at least in the Mediterranean' (Dawson 2014, 181). This is due to the difficulty archaeologists have in identifying precise markers of abandonment on a house or a site. There are indeed several challenges in defining abandonment and its effects on the site contents, especially in the archaeological field, and not all of them are approachable and comprehensible (Nelson 2000).

In recent decades, abandonment has been usually considered as a direct consequence of decline, decay or destruction. The common image of an abandonment, in example, related mostly to catastrophes or mass migrations. The works of Michael Brian Schiffer in the 1970s were particularly focused on this view, linking abandonment to the production of *de facto* refuse, considered as usable cultural material left behind when a site was abandoned (Schiffer 1972, 160; 1976, 33-34). In this period, ethnoarchaeology substantially influenced research on site formation processes, focusing on the effects of abandonment behaviour on archaeological patterns.

Although natural and human-driven disasters, as well as environmental crises, did indeed occur, movements of people and mass migration phenomena were not necessarily caused by natural failure. In example, some scholars started to consider abandonment as the outcome of a strategy for using landscapes (Nelson 2000, 52). Inés Gordillo and Bruno Vindrola-Padrós have recently considered destruction as ‘a part of a dynamic process that is constituted in time according to the agents’ dispositions, and integrated within a network along with other practices. Thus, any proposed definition is necessarily an arbitrary delimitation of the dynamic network of social practices’ (Gordillo and Vindrola-Padrós 2017, 156). This view, influenced by the works of Bourdieu (1977), Miller (1987) and Chapman (2000), implies that destruction or abandonment do not constitute an opposition to life or production, but rather that it is strictly related to other practices, as part of a complex system. From this perspective, we can understand Margaret Nelson, who considers abandonment as ‘an aspect of ongoing social change and reorganisation’ (Nelson 2000, 55). In this way, we recognize its intentional quality, whereby leaving places and things constitutes another way in which a society constructs itself and allows the archaeologist to interpret aspects of ancient lives that are practically imperceptible from a production-based approach. In other words, studying abandonment as a strategy can help to understand the manner in which objects acquire value and how that value is manifested when they are destroyed or left.

The scale of the abandonment is also a critical aspect to take into consideration, as such processes do indeed take place in small (sites) and large areas (Cameron 1993, 4). Understanding transformation and changes requires detailed information on site or regional-level processes of growth and decline. Thus, it is very hard, if not impossible to distinguish between the effects of abandonment processes and the post-depositional disturbance that naturally might have occurred. If a site is abandoned over a long period of time, items may be mined by the residual occupants, who reused them for the same or different purposes in other areas.

In this specific contest, one must distinguish two types of abandonment: the abandonment of settlements and the abandonment of structures or isolated areas within the same settlement. The former type is usually a gradual process, sometimes due to catastrophes or natural disasters. It can have a seasonal trait, and it seems to be more evident among earlier societies. Indeed, if not caused by natural events, such transformation processes were perhaps part of a larger land-use pattern which involved different lifestyles, including pastoralists, hunter-gatherers and swidden agriculturalists. Therefore, human groups rotated among a series of settlements, periodically occupying or re-occupying specific areas. It is possible to have a clue of this behaviour among semi-sedentary societies, whose occupational history is usually reflected by seasonality, while the abandonment of a site is less predictable in a fully sedentary system. In this case, it is more likely that a second type of abandonment occurs. In architecturally structured settlements, abandonment processes and the sub-sequent re-occupation of the space are far more evident in the archaeological record. This has generated an extensive literature of micro-level histories of abandonment in urban centres and/or major cities (Gerritsen 1999).

Both types of abandonment suggest that most of the interpretations of the archaeologists necessarily refer to the last occupation phase before the definitive abandonment of the site (Carrer 2015, 325). A single-event abandonment without a subsequent reuse of materials or reoccupation of the area is very rare. Therefore, the abandonment process and its effects upon artefacts, architectures and landscape does not stop with the end of a continuous occupation of the site (Tomka and Stevenson 1993, 192). Transformation, re-organization and re-adaptation define the post-abandonment moment, and this is why the present book seeks to explore these phenomena, rather than the exact moment of collapse.

The volume is the result of a workshop titled ‘Filling the Gap: Investigating Abandonment in the Roman Empire’, which was organised in the framework of the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

held in Rome in March 2016 (<http://trac.org.uk/events/conferences/trac2016/sessions/investigating-abandonment-in-the-roman-empire/>). This session aimed to analyse traces of abandonment, re-use, reconfiguration, and the possible subsequent re-organization as they are perceivable in different archaeological contexts from all over the Roman Empire. Our purpose was to define a model for the understanding of abandonment through the analysis of the archaeological record, but also to emphasize abandonment processes and post-abandonment re-organization not as unrelated phenomena, but rather as a critical aspect of cycles of evolution in past societies. Among the investigated characteristics, the response of specific areas to imperial abandonment, the change in human landscape and the response of material culture accordingly are central to the investigation of the topic. Particularly welcome were those papers focusing on the transitional periods between a firm occupation and abandonment, the causes of abandonment and post-abandonment processes and the human and social perception of a distinct power hiatus.

Six papers and two posters were presented at the conference, most of which have been included in the present volume. Furthermore, two papers were added later. Therefore, the volume consists of seven contributions written by: Marco Cavalieri (Louvain-la-Neuve), Alessandra Esposito (London), Tyler Franconi (Providence), Joan Oller Guzmán (Barcelona), Dario Nappo (Naples), Giorgos Papantoniou, and Athanasios Vionis (both Cyprus). The contributions have been organized according to a thematic division within the volume. The primary goal was to investigate the dynamics that led to the collapse or abandonment of a site or region and what caused a later re-occupation or the definitive disuse of specific buildings, urban centres, or larger areas. This is the main research avenue that connects all the contributions together. The articles are arranged following specific criteria. The first two articles deal mainly with the 3rd c. CE crisis, focusing the analysis on the political and economic aspects that led (or not) to abandon some areas. The first paper is titled “Crisis or transformation: the effects of the ‘third century crisis’ in the Layetania Interior. An example from the Hispania Citerior Tarraconensis”, written by Joan Oller Guzmán. In this paper, the author analyzes both urban and rural areas of the north-eastern Iberian Peninsula during the third century. Several cities seem to preserve their previous role with very few changes connected with the ‘Christianization’ of the settlement and without decreasing power.

In the contribution ‘The Abandonment of Myos Hormos’, Dario Nappo focuses on the development and decline of the site of Myos Hormos. Many scholars tried to explain this decline with the general crisis of the period, but the author gives another hypothesis connected to a voluntary abandonment by Roman traders, who gradually shifted toward other ports, like Clysma.

In his chapter, titled ‘Hydrological change and settlement dislocation along the later Roman Rhine’, Tyler Franconi explores the strict connection between physical and cultural transformation in a borderland area. The author focuses on the impact of climatic changes and the role of humans in modifying the urban and rural landscape, outlining the connection between the period of political upheavals and the hydrological crisis

Another important aspect often analysed is the abandonment of religious practices. The contribution ‘Abandoned but not forgotten. Dynamics of authority negotiation in the British sacred landscape’ by Alessandra Esposito offers an overview of the ritual practices in the area of east and south-east Britain between the second and the fourth century CE. The study of the deposits of headdresses from Hockwold-cum-Wilton, Cavenham Heath, and Deeping-St-James allows us to explore the dynamics of changes in rituals connected with a modified world.

Giorgos Papantoniou’s paper, titled ‘Contesting Sacred Landscapes: Continuity and Abandonment in Roman Cyprus’, instead, focuses on the abandonment or the loss of power by extra-urban sanctuaries of Roman Cyprus, which probably started with the Roman annexation of the island during the second

century BCE. Papantoniou shows how the shift of the political and administrative power modify the sacred space and the social perception of the landscape.

The last two articles show two cases of changes and revivals of apparently abandoned sites. 'Abandonment and Revival between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Facts and Fiction' by Athanasios Vionis re-evaluates archaeological evidence of Late Antique Cyprus, outlining that the changes of that period did not lead to a pauperisation of the area, but to the emergence of new actors in the political and economic scene. Marco Cavalieri's 'Investigating Transformation through Archaeological Records in the Heart of Tuscany. The Roman Villa at Aiano between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (4th-7th c. AD)' focuses on a case-study, a Roman villa near Siena, in Italy. The villa is characterised by phases of abandonment and re-use, changing its functions, but preserving its economic power.

All these contributions do not want to represent a comprehensive and ultimate overlook on aspects and phenomena of abandonment in the archaeological record. They rather aim at the precise analysis of specific case studies, mostly related to the Western Mediterranean world, which represented an outlier in the literature panorama. The inclusion of a wide chronological framework that embraces the post-imperial period up to and including the early Medieval phases serves the goal of presenting long-term processes of re-organization and landscape adaptation, but also different societal and urban responses to collapse/transformation. In addition, the combination of single-site studies (Cavalieri, Nappo) and regional approaches (Franconi, Guzman, Esposito, Vionis, Papantoniou) aims to cover a more complete spectrum of evidence. Within the regional studies, environmental (Franconi), religious (Esposito), economic (Vionis and Papantoniou), and societal change (Cavalieri, Guzman), or lack thereof, are explored as triggers – among other phenomena – of significant and of minor or major impact abandonment processes.

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