

International Conference “Roman Provincial Capitals Under Transition”, Plovdiv, 4–7 November 2019

Milena Raycheva^a

^a Antiquity Department, National Institute of Archaeology and Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2 Saborna Str, 1000 Sofia, Bulgaria; milenaraycheva@gmail.com

The international conference “Roman Provincial Capitals under Transition” (fig. 1) was held from the 4th to the 7th of November 2019 at Grand Hotel Plovdiv. Jointly organized by the National Archaeological Institute with Museum – Sofia and the Austrian Archaeological Institute, the event was deliberately hosted in Plovdiv. This choice was justified by the city’s rich Roman past as Thrace’s bustling *metropolis* Philippopolis, complemented with its recent status as European Capital of Culture for 2019.

Invited participants from 12 countries presented a wide range of scientific problems related to Roman and Late antique cities known as capitals at a certain time of their existence. The geographic span of the conference was more than impressive, covering most of the territories of the Roman Empire – from Tarraco to Tomis, and from the Danube limes to North Africa – including cities like Salona, Viminacium, Stobi, Corinth, Ephesus, and many more.

Professor Rudolf Haensch was accordingly entrusted with the keynote speech (fig. 2). It was a logical choice on behalf of the organizers, considering his contribution to the problematic area of capitals in his book *Capita Provinciarum: Statthaltersitze und Provinzialverwaltung in der römischen Kaiserzeit* (1997). Nearly 20 years after this seminal work, he revisited the topic and delivered an overview of several provincial capitals, touching upon some key issues which were consistently addressed throughout the conference – and especially the very touchy definition of “capital” itself.

Eight thematic sessions followed, dedicated to various aspects of research on Roman capitals. “What makes a capital?” was the opening session, aimed to focus on several important questions, such as – is the capital simply a seat of power, the location of a governor’s residence, an assize centre, a provincial cult centre? The approaches of contributors varied largely – from tracing the Hellenistic roots of a possible governors’ residence (Baier’s paper on Ephesus), through the exploration of changes in burial practices (Hinker’s talk about Virunum), to an analysis of the city’s epigraphic record (Avram’s presentation of Tomis). The exchange of opinions that ensued set the tone for many active and challenging discussions that continued throughout the conference.

A session was necessarily dedicated to “Administration”, exploring the complexities of (mostly) epigraphic evidence. It became apparent that, despite the thousands of inscriptions available related to administration, there are still several inconsistencies and unanswered questions regarding the way the seat of a governor actually functioned, or the number of staff he had (especially in Kirbihler’s contribution on the *officium* of the proconsul of Asia). Furthermore, Sharankov’s paper demonstrated the insufficiently explored

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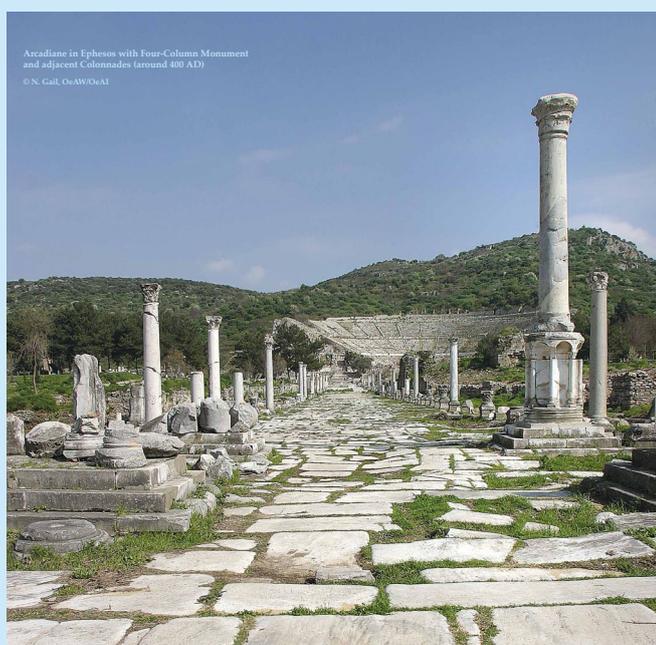


Fig. 1. Poster of the conference
Обр. 1. Постер на конференцията

relationship between the capitals and the rest of the province, especially “the second cities”, as in Philippopolis’ role for the fiscal and religious life of Thrace in comparison to that of Perinthos. Special attention was paid on the date of conferring and the meaning of the title of *metropolis* to the city, which sparked fruitful discussions.

The third and fourth sessions, “Urban development of the capital from the Imperial period to Late antiquity”, dealt (in two parts) with the manifold urban manifestations of transition processes in cities. Many geographically distant and contrasting cities, unified by the mostly architectural and urbanistic features under consideration, were presented in this session. Papers were dealing predominantly with spatial organization (Ruiz de Arbulo on Tarraco and Matijević on Salona), sometimes with respect to the governor’s residence (Láng about Aquincum). A recurring motif was the architectural splendor of capitals, represented by impressive complexes (Blaževska’s talk about Stobi and Işkan Işık’s about Patara), and Adam-Veleni’s paper revealed to the audience the most recent, unseen so far discoveries brought to light by the metro excavations of Thessaloniki.

The Session on “Newborn capitals on the eve of Late antiquity” presented a very large number of newly emerged capital cities in the light of changing political landscape,



*Fig. 2. Prof. Haensch delivering the keynote speech
(photo: M. Raycheva)*

Обр. 2. Проф. Хенш, произнасящ пленарния доклад (снимка: М. Райчева)



Fig. 3. Some of the conference participants on a walking tour in Plovdiv (photo: A. Pircher)

Обр. 3. Някои от участниците в конференцията по време на пешеходна обиколка из Пловдив (снимка: А. Пирхер)

with a special focus on the Balkans. It started with an overview of the general situation within the new administrative system of dioceses of Thracia and Dacia in Dintchev's paper (covering as many as 17 capitals!), and continued with the separate case studies of Ratiaria presented by Dimitrov, and Marcianopolis presented by Minchev. This session encouraged discussions about the criteria for the promotion of particular places as new capitals on the reformed administrative map of Late antiquity.

The sixth session, "Capitals in Crisis", analyzed crucial or difficult moments (and even downfalls) encountered by capital cities, with thought-provoking contributions by Sayar on Perinthos, Golubović on Viminacium, and Marcu on Sarmizegetusa, exploring a combination of archaeological evidence with the extant historic and epigraphic sources.

The next session dealt extensively with "Trade, Economy, and Monetary Policy", exploring the commercial networks of capitals. González Cesteros presented Ephesus' pottery trade with centres like Rome, Carthage, Alexandria and Constantinople, while Zoumbaki offered a comprehensive analysis on Corinth's economic role for the province of Achaia. They were followed by two numismatic papers – an impressive approach towards Roman monetary policy was demonstrated by Tasaklaki, who juxtaposed "capitals vs. local mints" in Thrace; and Boteva added further thoughts on the need of reassessment of coinage evidence from Perinthos.

The last session, "Material Culture Under Transition", saw some tangible aspects of lifestyle in capitals. Scheibelreiter's paper demonstrated luxury through the special use of mosaics in the Greek East, and Kremer explored the peculiarities of votive monuments from Carnuntum.

In closing, organizers Martin Steskal and Milena Raycheva offered some concluding remarks on the several newly emerged issues and the forthcoming publication of the proceedings. On the last day, some of the speakers enjoyed a walking tour in Roman Plovdiv (fig. 3) led by Nicolay Sharankov and Milena Raycheva in the mild November weather.