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# [Review of: R. Rönnlund (2023) The Cities of the Plain: Urbanism in Ancient Western Thessaly]

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**Robin Rönnlund, *The Cities of the Plain: Urbanism in Ancient Western Thessaly*. Pp. 192. Oxford: Oxbow Books 2023. ISBN: 1789259924, paperback $58.03.**

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Besides his contributions to several fieldwork projects in Thessaly, Robin Rönnlund has produced a series of publications about sites, inscriptions and other finds from the region, also revisiting legacy data. The book reviewed here can be seen as a culmination of that work, at least for now. Soon after it came out it already made some headlines, after parts of its content and some of the more remarkable conclusions, and additional hypotheses based on them, were highlighted in an article in *Antiquity.*

In this article, Rönnlund presents his sample of Thessalian urban sites as exemplary for Greece, arguing there was no major urbanization in Greece before the 4th century BCE and that, by consequence, Greek cities have not influenced the development of early urban settlements in northwestern Europe, and/or their layout, as has been suggested by some scholars. Both these claims are surprising to say the least, since even if proper cities may have been rarer than often suggested and many would have developed later than generally thought, there were some major cities in Greece long before the settlements possibly inspired by them were built. To give just some examples, probably well known to many of the readers here: Archaic Corinth already had a substantial city wall early on, enclosing a large (admittedly partly empty) area, with a monumental temple in its center, several smaller sanctuaries and some public buildings. The Athenian city wall was later, but the Archaic city contained substantial public architecture and the fortified Acropolis was already monumentalized in the course of the 6th century BCE. In the east, apparently not considered by Rönnlund, Samos, Miletos and Ephesos have yielded substantial Archaic remains of a decidedly urban character, including some extensive and densely inhabited living quarters. Furthermore some of the Greek colonies in the west, particularly Akragas, Selinous and Syracuse, were of course major cities by ancient standards already in the 6th century – Syracuse even earlier.

Rönnlund's disregarding of this area is inexplicable, as it is clear that the Greek colonies of the south and Sicily directly influenced city planning and architecture further north in Italy. If Greek cities indeed impacted urbanization north of the Alps, the 'Italian route' is in fact a far more likely inspirational path than direct influence from Greece proper. However – and this is another peculiar aspect of Rönnlund's claims -- it does not seem that many scholars still consider Greek cities to have been significant sources of inspiration for the Celtic 'Fürstensitze', which as Rönnlund himself acknowledges, do not look much like their supposed examples. The idea of 'Greek inspiration' very much belongs in a traditional classicizing framework that by now has been abandoned by most scholars. In fact it is not a coincidence that Rönnlund cites a 1969 article by W. Kimmig (born in 1910) as his reference point.

While not completely absent, the claims that dominate the *Antiquity* article are not so prominently put forward in the book under review here, which is indeed focused on the cities of the (West-Thessalian) plain mentioned in its title. Influence beyond Greece is not discussed, but though less outspoken there again is the suggestion that the supposed late 4th BCE century start of urban development in the area is not a local phenomenon but representative of the whole of Thessaly, and much of the rest of Greece as well. I will come back to this below.

First, a general overview of the book itself. Apart from some of the wider ranging reflection this is above all a fairly traditional overview of the main settlement remains of a single region, the large western plain of ancient and present-day Thessaly, around modern Karditsa, an atypically flat and (before recent drainage) wet and marshy part of Greece, and now as then a peripheral and often overlooked area. A regional study is long due here, also because the archaeology is interesting, even puzzling. Although this area is traditionally seen as part of the non-urbanized and more tribal part of Greece, the western Thessalian plain and the surrounding foothills do in fact contain a large number of sometimes extensive fortified ancient settlements, often on top of or on the slope of hills, that at first sight qualify as cities.

No modern comprehensive study of the plain existed yet, even though most of its potentially urban sites have been studied individually, hundreds of rescue excavations have taken place during the last decades and many attempts have been made to connect the present remains with ancient topographical sources in order to name them. It is laudable that Rönnlund took up filling the gap, and he indeed did a very thorough job in extracting much 'new' information from countless published but not always easily accessible reports of rescue excavations, sometimes personally contacting the archaeologists who have worked in the area and tracing unpublished documentation, and combining all this with personal in situ autopsy. Particularly the inclusion of information based on older photographs, maps and other documentation is important because agricultural development, drainage projects, building activities and looting

have severely affected the archaeological record in this area from the 1950s onwards.

The collected basic information is presented in two site catalogues that comprise about 60% of the book, the main one (Appendix 1) with extensive descriptions of 30 (potential) cities or other large, usually fortified, sites, and a much more concise annotated list of 63 smaller fortified sites (Appendix 2). Each entry in the main catalogue offers a systematic description of documented remains of all periods, discussing chronology, functional aspects and the presence or absence of urban features, and listing historical, epigraphic and numismatic data as well. All entries are illustrated with a map (in a few cases several) and at least one black and white photograph, but often a few more. The descriptions are usually clear and offer comprehensive overviews for all sites. Unfortunately, many photographs, especially the panoramic views, are rather gray and blurry, and many do not show much because they are taken from some distance. Apart from a small number of historical photographs, usually of much better quality, the images (taken by the author) are unfortunately not dated. The site maps are detailed and precise sketches, but a comprehensive (d)gps survey was not possible in the scope of the project. As a background to the present state plans, historical geographical data (from maps and aerial photographs) have been used, that usually offer a better impression of historical site contexts than the present situation, but could perhaps complicate ground truthing in some cases. The use of different orientations (north is not always up) and various scales for the site maps is potentially confusing as well, despite helpful numbering of the main features of sites. It certainly hinders perceptions of relative size and comparisons between sites. The limited use of recent aerial photography in both analysis and presentation is also surprising in a 2023 publication.

The rather old fashioned approach in presenting the sites is reflected in the selection of sites in the catalogues, which does not appear to be very systematic or consistent. In almost half the entries of the main catalogue of sites documented, remains are rather unclear and may not relate to a significant, let alone urban settlement (sites 3, 5, 8, 9, 12, 15, 16, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 30). Several of these actually look like the same kind of small fortified hilltops that are listed in Appendix 2 (sites 12, 21, 23, 26, 27, 30) – some mentions of possible lower towns with those even seem to be based more on wishful thinking than on actual evidence. The most baffling entry is site 22, consisting of nothing more than the remains of an (admittedly substantial) earthen embankment, of unclear date and without associated remains. On the other hand, it is surprising to see an 18 ha site appearing among the small fortified hilltops of Appendix 2 (site 10.6); and though not likely to be candidates for an urban classification, a 3.75 ha and a 5 ha enclosure (sites 4.4 and 4.6) also seem a bit out of place here. To add to the confusion, many of the sites listed in Appendix 2 are also described in the catalogue of Appendix 1, where single entries often cover two or even three individual sites, some close enough to be connected, but often quite far apart (see sites 1, 3, 5, 8, 11, 14, 15, 16, 21, 25 and 30 – there are cross references in Appendix 2, but not in Appendix 1). It may also be noted that site 12 is not in the plains but up in the mountains, and sites 2, 21 and 23 are fairly high up as well, at the edge of the area that would allow them to qualify as 'cities of the plain'. Appendix 2, finally, also includes a few Byzantine sites with no ancient remains. Besides confusing the reader, the lack of a clear classification in the catalogues also blurs the general interpretation and its conclusions in the preceding main text (more about that below).

Just as the catalogues, the main text of the book has a straightforward and clear general structure, with an introduction, an overview of the archaeological and historical evidence and a synthetic discussion at the end, all brought together in 60 pages. The introduction sets the scene, offering brief overviews of the histories of Thessaly itself and of archaeological research in the area covered by the book, and some reflection on how to define sites as cities, also related to the setup of the catalogue. The historical overviews offer good summaries, but there is one puzzling omission. No mention is made of the ancient historical tradition, first encountered in Herodotus, that Thessaly was a dominating regional force in mainland Greece in the 7th–6th centuries BCE, repeatedly invading Phocis and Boeotia further south and apparently controlling large parts of those areas for long periods. While there are serious issues regarding the chronology of events (at the edge of the reach of later historians) and the reliability of many specific details, the supra-regional prominence of Thessaly, apparently operating as some form of unified political and military force, cannot simply be ignored, and actually ties in well with the image of a rich region dominated by a cavalry-based aristocracy in sources that are acknowledged by Rönnlund. The problem here is of course that, leaving aside some very rich graves containing lots of weaponry, the archaeology of Thessaly does not appear to show this well organized, centralized regional superpower. Perhaps we do not need the presence of cities to have supported this political and military structure, but sketching a very basic and small scale world

while simply leaving this issue unmentioned, like Rönnlund does further on, only highlights the elephant in the room.

Rönnlund's discussion of the thorny issue of how to assess urban development archaeologically appears to be more thoughtful at first. He rightly underlines that we should not equate the development of the Greek polis with that of the Greek city, that the main centers like Athens are not representative for what happens elsewhere in Greece, and that archaeological remains of large dense settlements in Archaic and even early Classical Greece are more limited than is often thought. Likewise, he highlights the problematic aspects of various existing attempts to define cities (not only in Greece) and/or the polis through archaeology. This critical reflection is followed (on page 15) by a check-list showing how eight of the catalogued sites (sites 4, 6, 11, 13, 17, 20, 24 and 29) would fit a series of criteria for recognizing cities formulated by M.E. Smith in 2017. They indeed do so pretty well.

Here problems start again. The reason offered for these eight sites being chosen out of the 30 in the catalogue is simply that, according to Rönnlund, they are the only ones that fit enough of Smith's criteria to be considered as cities – even though no site fits all the criteria. While the eight are clearly among the more substantial and best documented settlements of the area, it remains unclear how much less well other sites fit the criteria, and what this selection implies for the (lack of) urban character of the other 'cities of the plain'. In fact, already at the beginning of his discussion of the problems in defining cities, Rönnlund presents the disclaimer that the catalogued sites 'may not all have reached an urban level', but nevertheless are 'relevant for this study' because they are a base to select from (page 13). Further on he then claims that 22 of these sites can be classified as urban during the Classical-Hellenistic period, but fails to mention which ones and does not explain or motivate this selection – which is surprisingly large considering that, as I mentioned above, 15 of the 30 catalogued sites are either very small and basic or so badly preserved and/or explored that there is no basis for convincingly labelling them as urban. How the eight sites in the checklist just mentioned compare to the other fourteen supposed cities is not explained either. It is simply impossible to follow what is happening here. It is also rather disturbing that a sensible call for a more thoughtful and precise approach to define cities through archaeological remains is followed by this apparently arbitrary selection and classification of the catalogued cities, that results in an unexplained mystery list.

A similar mismatch between general reflection, specific evidence and interpretation happens in the next chapter, 'Evidence'. At first sight, this offers a solid, reflective analysis of the settlement pattern of the western Thessalian plain, exploring how a society of small towns and villages, some with a large fortified 'acropolis', some with smaller walled fortifications and/or perhaps refuge sites on hilltops, was restructured after the mid-late 4th century, when larger planned walled urban centers were build, often on or near the sites of previous settlements, and sometimes incorporating earlier fortifications. The traditional idea that the earlier hilltop fortifications were typically directly attached to (non-walled) lower towns is criticized (though endorsed in several specific cases): many 'acropoleis' seem to have been empty inside their walls, and, as far as traceable at all, lower towns are often at some distance. Rönnlund also points out that the countryside of Thessaly is full of isolated sanctuaries, and also many of the richer burial areas cannot be connected to any major settlement nearby. Altogether, for him, this suggests a population dispersed in villages that would have used fortified hilltops as refuge or garrison sites and, in some cases, possibly also as large community projects and identity markers.

The picture sketched is certainly a viable hypothesis that may hold well for many parts of Thessaly, especially in the Early Iron Age and at least the first part of the Archaic period. However, in order to uphold this as the dominant or even sole model for the whole of Thessaly (the claim is not limited to the western plain only) till the early Hellenistic period, much evidence is pushed out or disregarded. To start with, Rönnlund presents a lot of evidence that many (though certainly not all) of the hilltop forts were not just empty sites used only in times of need. Traces of buildings and pottery scatters do indicate a substantial number was intensively used for some period, and without further research Rönnlund's attempts to push many of these (undated) remains in a brief Hellenistic phase are wishful thinking. The fact that many of these hilltop sites do show traces of habitation also weakens Rönnlund's additional general argument that their exposed, isolated, steep locations, far from water sources makes them inhabitable – a problematic point anyway since some were incorporated in later cities, and refuge sites or garrisons have to be reachable and need drinking water too (as Rönnlund himself indicates later on).

Even more problematic is Rönnlund's categorical denial that there were any major (potentially) urban settlements in Thessaly before the mid-4th century.

This is also the main claim in the 'Discussion' chapter that follows the 'Evidence' one, and in the short, summarizing concluding chapter. Here again, the data presented in his own catalogue show a different picture. As said above, almost half of the sites do not look urban on present evidence (and some of these, sites 5, 9, 16, 22 and 25, apparently have no dated Hellenistic finds either). More significantly, six out of the 16 larger sites that have features indicating they classify as cities (sites 6, 14, 18, 19, 20 and 24) have yielded substantial Archaic and/or Classical habitation remains, apparently covering large areas. Admittedly, evidence is scattered, but not much more so than for most of the (more frequent and better preserved) excavated areas of the 4th-3rd centuries. Half of these sites also have pre-Hellenistic urban or peri-urban sanctuaries (sites 6, 14, 19), and, leaving aside general dating issues of fortification walling, quite a few larger circuit walls, or parts of them (at the larger sites 6, 14, 19, 20 and 24, but also without associated settlements at sites 29 and 10.6), also seem to pre-date the early Hellenistic surge of fortification (that is not limited to large sites only, moreover). Finally, while not definitely proving continuous dense habitation inside the perimeter, several sites (6, 14, 19, 24) are surrounded by substantial cemetery areas forming rather wide circles even early on, sometimes as early as the Archaic period. All of this clearly shows that some, though not many, sites of the western Thessalian plain (and the rest of Thessaly) had clear urban features already in the 6th or 5th centuries. With the possible exception of Pharsalos (site 6) and Palaiogardiki (ancient Pharkadon? (site 20) and Kierion (site 24) these were fairly small towns, even if some probably grew over time. But they were more than villages, and show that the pre-Hellenistic habitation pattern of the area was more complex and more diverse than Rönnlund presents it.

However, the presence of significant Classical sites is not the only issue here. There is also a fairly large group of probably urban sites for which no proper starting date seems available beyond a generic Classical-Hellenistic or even Archaic-Hellenistic label, usually based on a rough pottery chronology (sites 1, 2, 7, 10). Even many of the sites that do seem to have grown substantially or were (re-)founded in the Hellenistic period do not fit Rönnlund's framework, because precise dates are lacking or suggest expansion only happened in the course of the 3rd century (sites 4, 13, 17, 18, 19, 28). This leaves less than a handful of sites that do unequivocally fit his claim (sites 5, 11, 20 if we disregard the earlier phases and probably, if it is not too early, 29). In view of the limited chronological data from many sites it is likely there were more cities that only took off in or just before the Early Hellenistic period, but presently available evidence simply does not indicate which ones, and is equally possible that some Classical urban settlements are still eluding us.

In any case, we can be quite sure that the chronological developments were much more diffuse than the picture sketched by Rönnlund, with the first few cities in the western Thessalian plains appearing in the Archaic period and gradual growth in both the number of (potential) urban sites and their sizes afterwards, up to the mid-4th century. This probably went hand in hand with a very diverse organization of political and spatial units: besides proper city states, we may have to consider city states with a small inhabited hillfort and/or tell site as their center, polycentric statelets containing several of these smaller towns and possibly also (tribal?) areas where populations were dispersed over even smaller villages and hamlets, with the occasional fort and perhaps isolated farms in between. This variation is not only visible in the landscape, but also appears to be reflected in the local coinage, which seems to start at very different dates and to be organized in various ways in each political unit.

While concentration of the population in larger sites seems to have started earlier, the explosion in building new fortifications and city walls, and the (likely) substantial expansion of urban areas from the mid-4th century onwards does seem to indicate considerable population growth and perhaps at least some active intervention by the Macedonian rulers, as suggested by Rönnlund. This appears to have been a more gradual and uneven process than he claims, however, and can therefore hardly have been the result of an active consistent general Macedonian policy, as he also suggests. Indeed, just as seen elsewhere in Greece (Olynthos, Messene and Megalopolis come to mind here) urbanization may well have started before that in at least part of the area. In any case, it remains to be seen to what extent the situation in western Thessaly is indicative for the rest of the region or even other areas of mainland Greece -- but this becomes a moot point if variation and diversity are widely present phenomena anyway.

A final point is that the scale of the archaeological remains suggests that Rönnlund overestimates the number and sizes of truly urban settlements in the Hellenistic period: as mentioned, 14 of the 30 catalogued sites are so small and/or have such minimal remains that they are not likely to have reached urban level at any point. The eight sites, including one of about 10 ha and one of about 15,

Rönnlund lists as ticking the right boxes to be a city in the table mentioned above are probably closer to the real maximum than the 22 unnamed cities he claims as urban. An implication of this is that the sharp drop in urban population of the region he sees in the Roman period (which shows a reshuffle and a concentration of main centers) may have been less dramatic than Rönnlund suggests. Much possibly also depends on what happened outside the catalogued sites and forts, in the mostly uncharted rural territories.

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