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The transformation of classical cities and the Pirenne debate

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R. HODGES AND D. WHITEHOUSE, *MOHAMMED, CHARLEMAGNE AND THE ORIGINS OF EUROPE: ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE PIRENNE THESIS* (Duckworth, London 1983). Pp. ix + 181. Out of print; currently reprinting in paperback £9.20. ISBN 0-7156-1703-6 (1744-3 for paperback).

B. WARD-PERKINS, *FROM CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY TO THE MIDDLE AGES: URBAN PUBLIC BUILDING IN NORTHERN AND CENTRAL ITALY, A.D. 300-850* (Oxford University Press 1984). Pp. x + 286. £30. ISBN 0-19-821898-2.

It is now some 50 years since the publication of Pirenne's *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, and more than 60 since the appearance of his *Mediaeval cities*. Archaeology and numismatics have now advanced our data on the economics and material culture of the 5th to 9th c. by great strides; our understanding lags far behind, treading and retreading the theories and problems that he laid out: when, why, and to what degree did the urbanised and united social economy of the Roman world disintegrate? Were the Germans or the Arabs to blame? Was it plague, climatic change, or the intolerable financial and administrative burdens of the later empire? The recent study by Richard Hodges and David Whitehouse attempts a synthesis of the new evidence and a reinterpretation which respects but modifies the judgements of Pirenne. Confining themselves to the material evidence, set in a strangely limited framework of political narrative, they conclude that Roman trade, cities, rural settlement and population levels collapsed in the west not in the 7th c. but in the 5th, at least in part under the impact of barbarian invasion. In the east, this change took place in the late 6th and early 7th c., thanks largely to the wars of Justinian. The result was a general entropy of social and economic life: in the countryside, autarkic settlements, with population and production in severe decline; cities vanishing, or at best reduced to ecclesiastical and administrative nuclei; commercial markets all but dead, the limited movement of goods directed by "complex chiefdoms or incipient states" for non-commercial ends. In the west, recovery came suddenly, when the early Carolingians linked hands, through the Baltic, with the Abbasid Caliphate, to import the silver they needed to unite and govern their empire. Compared with the thriving commerce and political developments of Mesopotamia and northern Europe, trade in the dark-age Mediterranean was "reduced to an almost 'prehistoric' scale", and the Byzantine empire was an irrelevancy.

It makes some apparent sense to treat the post-Roman world as roughly uniform in its destiny, if not in its chronology. One scholar has recently likened the Arab invasion of a decaying Syria to the Lombard invasion of Italy.¹ Aphrodisias and Luni, both marble-quarrying cities, suffered a similar fate. Thessalonica was dominated by its patronal basilica, like many western towns.² The structures which replaced the baths basilica at Wroxeter may recall, in a provincial way, the private *fora* of 5th c. Rome, and also the *suqs* that were coming to dominate the Syrian east.³ Wroxeter, Silchester, Amiens, and, eventually, Rome itself all developed industrial activities in their monumental hearts. And, by c.700,

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- 1 H. Kennedy, in "Antioch from Byzantium to Islam and back again," a paper given at the Nottingham Conference on the late antique and early mediaeval city, April 1988, proceedings forthcoming.
 - 2 Aphrodisias and Thessalonica: see R. Cormack in *Byzantium and the classical tradition*, ed. M. Mullett and R. Scott (Birmingham Univ. 1981) 103-22. Luni: see Hodges and Whitehouse 30-32.
 - 3 P. Barker, *Wroxeter, Roman City: Excavations, 1966-1980* (Dept. of Environment pamphlet) 13, gives the *suq* comparison; 18, the private complex interpretation. Not all archaeologists are convinced by his reconstructions. For private Roman *fora*, see Olympiodorus fr. 41. 1 (Blockley), *C. Th.* 13. 5. 29, *ILS* 1281.