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Nikos Tsivikis\*

# Moving beyond the Invisible Cities of Byzantium

Focusing on the use and abuse in the study of Byzantine archaeology and Urbanism of the idea of the “Invisible Cities” as introduced in literature by Italo Calvino, this article attempts to set a framework for understanding Byzantine cities within clear and scientifically defined analytical categories as part of a modernist agenda. At the same time the article examines the distorting influence of Constantinople, as the capital city, on any and all our efforts to understand Byzantine urbanism as a social phenomenon in its true scale.

**Keywords:** Byzantine archaeology, Byzantine urbanism, “Invisible Cities”, post-modern archaeological theory, Constantinople

*L'articolo vuole definire una cornice per la comprensione delle città bizantine attraverso categorie analitiche chiare e scientificamente definite come parte di un'agenda modernista, focalizzandosi sull'uso e abuso dell'archeologia bizantina e dell'urbanesimo e utilizzando il concetto calviniano di “Città Invisibili”. Allo stesso tempo l'articolo esamina l'influenza distorta di Costantinopoli, come città capitale, su tutti gli sforzi per capire l'urbanesimo bizantino come fenomeno sociale alla sua scala reale.*

**Parole chiave:** archeologia bizantina, urbanesimo bizantino, “Città Invisibili”, teoria archeologica post-modernista, Costantinopoli

In 1972 the Italian novelist Italo Calvino published one of his late career books, *Le Città Invisibili (The Invisible Cities)* (Calvino 1972). While is not easy to describe the novel's complex structure, one could summarize it as follows: old Kublai Khan discusses with young Marco Polo; the Tatar emperor with his physical end in sight is anxious and pessimistic, the Venetian explorer tries to take his mind away from worries narrating stories about cities that lie almost lost in the vast empire of the great Khan. It won't be long before the emperor discerns that all these fantastical cities are after all different faces of the same place.

Calvino's book was immediately hailed by its contemporaries as a masterpiece, a “fabulous construction” in Gore Vidal's words (Vidal 1974), and

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translated very soon into most European languages. It was translated into English in 1974 and published as *Invisible Cities* (transl. William Weaver), London and New York 1974; the same year it came out in French: *Les Villes Invisibles* (transl. Jean Thibaudeau), Paris 1974; in German a few years later as *Die unsichtbaren Städte* (transl. Heinz Riedt), Munich 1977. The book met equal recognition also in many Eastern European countries: Poland (1976), Romania (1979), Hungary (1981).

But beyond the literary domain Calvino's fictional world of the *Invisible Cities* found an unexpected field of application. In the study of Byzantine urbanism, which has been thriving for the past twenty years, there has been quite a trend when referring to byzantine cities, to begin a study with a small, or larger, passage from the *Invisible Cities*. One can point to studies both general and site specific, the number of which would be even greater with an yet more thorough and meticulous search (Zavagno 2008, p. 23; 2009, p. 3; Necipoğlu 2001, p. 1; Musto 1988, p. xxi; Santangeli Valenziani 2006, p. 131; Schoolman 2010, p. 8). The most concise historical study so far on Late Byzantine cities and their social structure, written in Greek by Tonia Kiousopoulou (2013), is actually entitled *The Invisible Byzantine Cities*, making this connection a structural part of our understanding of the urban phenomenon of the period in reference either to its fluidity or to the methodological issues regarding medieval byzantine urbanism. This trend has been recently commented extensively by Florin Curta (Curta 2016) in this journal. Curta himself, although skeptical of the use of Calvino's work as a metaphor for byzantine urbanism, in the PCA article could not overcome recalling in its title "Postcards from Maurilia", one of the *Invisible Cities* of Calvino paying homage to the liquid postmodern world by Calvino. This attitude of being trapped by the unavoidable relativism had been commented before<sup>1</sup>.

In his article Curta recapitulates the discussion on Byzantine "Dark-Age" or "Transitional" cities, namely the urban settlements of the Byzantine state in the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries (Curta 2016, pp. 91-92). He goes into a lengthy critique of the main arguments regarding the existence of real cities in Early Medieval Byzantium extending the discussion to the central role played by Soviet historian Alexander Kazhdan. Kazhdan, who was writing Byzantine history during the post-war years in the Soviet Union and was largely inspired by Marxist historical understanding, had been in search of the break between the receding antique slaveholding mode of production and the emergence of the feudal mode of production. In this sequence, the Early Middle Age Byzantine society in the

<sup>1</sup> TSIVIKIS 2012, where some of the ideas discussed here first appeared in Greek.

East could not produce functioning cities, as the social relationships and social classes necessary for this had not emerged yet. Curta's critique extends to contemporaneous aspects of the discussion on Early Medieval Byzantine urbanism by tracing Kazhdan's legacy of Marxist ideas into the work of John Haldon, one of the most influential historians of Byzantium in our times. Despite the interesting side of this historiographical discussion, we do not find a clear and detailed definition of the characteristics identifying an Early Medieval Byzantine city. Curta makes use mainly of the idea of central places that is known and discussed mostly in the West, in the recent interesting work on the subject in Byzantium conducted mainly by Myrto Veikou (Veikou 2009, 2010 and 2012).

One might easily overlook these small passages and references without taking any particular interest in them, attributing them to the romantic aptitude of the researcher in an effort to express her hidden literary sensibilities, or think that since Calvino's novel is about two real late medieval historical figures discussing about cities, the relation would be justified. And note that allusions like these have occasionally been used also in other branches of the study of historical urbanism: e.g. in pre-Columbian archaeology (Carrasco 2009, p. 447), in biblical archaeology (Moxnes 2000, pp. 169-70), in Etruscan archaeology (Harris 1989, p. 375).

I would like to argue here, however, that this is not a coincidental event, and that in effect it is directly connected with a general historiographical perception of the Byzantine city that still plays an important role in our understanding today.

In Calvino's *Invisible Cities* the theme of multiplicity and wholeness is explored almost to its limits (Vidal 1974). In an almost Borgesian universe the constructed narration of non-existing urban-scapes in Calvino's book takes over any hope for objective description; true geography or real history do not have anything to do with the narration. Marco Polo states at some point "Perhaps I'm afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it, or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it" (Calvino 1974, p. 87) or as Calvino quotes in another work of his "every city is the City" (Calvino 1971, p. 73). *Invisible Cities* is a book that because of its approach to the imaginative potentialities of urban settlements, except its position in literary critique, has been used widely by architects and artists to visualize how cities can be, where the human imagination is not necessarily limited by the laws of physics or the limitations of modern urban theory (Markey 1999, pp. 86-100). It has largely offered for post-modern theorists an alternative approach and path to thinking about cities, how they are formed and how they function as has been shown by Letizia Modena (2011).

But how do Byzantine cities come into play? It seems that a considerable part of related research identifies, directly or indirectly, its subject within the multiplicity and unpredictability of this literary universe, and in a way, projects the fictional dead-ends onto real historical problems. The pivotal position of Marco Polo's Venice in the book is substituted by Constantinople in the relevant discourse, and the endless facets of the narrated imaginary cities correspond to the countless cities of the empire as reflections of the one capital. As Necipoğlu (2001, p. 1) states when talking about Byzantine Constantinople "it is tempting to read almost any one of Calvino's "Invisible Cities" into one's favorite historical city."

But apart from byzantinists, at least to my knowledge, no other researchers of historical urbanism have so actively identified their respective period cities to Calvino's literary passages. It goes without saying that for our colleagues of the Greco-Roman world, relativisms like this are far from adequate for their understanding of the past. This is quite evident in some modern works on the ancient *Polis* and its evolution in Hellenistic and Roman times, such as Susan Alcock's (Alcock 1993; Rousset 2004) overviews or most recently Emily Mackil's article (2004) on the "Wandering Cities", that except for its title is an exquisite down to earth analysis of the causes of urban abandonment. In studies like these there is a firm grasp of the material reality of ancient settlements based on a substructure of relevant studies, excavations and field surveys. These are the same surveys that, although they have been so helpful for our colleagues in the classics, have been far less and effectively used by Byzantinists despite the hype (Bintliff 2007).

The remoteness of relativisms of this kind is even more strengthened if we consider that at the same time Byzantine urban studies are still struggling to set a framework for the proper positivist and "old school" scientific study of byzantine cities. It has not been long since Charalambos Bouras called for a methodology for organizing the research, both archaeological and historical, concerning byzantine cities, and much of this call still almost twenty years after remains at large a *call to arms* (Bouras 2002, pp. 499-500).

That is not to say that there has not been an ever-growing interest in Byzantine cities and numerous works have been produced over the past decades, though one has to note the great majority of it has been concerned with the Late Roman or Early Byzantine city, only recently breaking more into the formative Early Medieval Byzantium<sup>2</sup>. Middle and

<sup>2</sup> Most of the newest publications on history are presented in: SARADI 2006 and 2008; ZAVAGNO 2009, pp. 1-32; BRUBAKER, HALDON 2011, pp. 531-572.



mostly Late Byzantine cities remain still out of the scope of research for most scholars concerned with the history of the respective periods<sup>3</sup>.

Elsewhere for many researchers, historians and archaeologists, working on the western Middle Ages, trying to categorize and discern the characteristics of medieval cities or towns had been early on a top priority. The famously proposed characteristics of an ideal type of Early Medieval town by the archaeologist of Anglo-Saxon England Martin Biddle had been for years one of the most inspiring examples (Biddle 1979). This kind of approach of processualizing the criteria and characteristics of medieval towns, despite its many limitations, gave the opportunity to students of medieval urbanism to free themselves from the constraints of the historical record and the tight connection of actual towns to settlements that were only recognizable as such by the relatively incomplete historical sources (Goodson *et al.* 2010, pp. 5-7).

Brogiolo (2018) rightfully has also set as the beginning of the true archaeological understanding of post-classical cities in Mediterranean contexts, the “rigorous stratigraphic method” first applied by Martin Biddle in the excavation of Winchester in England. To that I would add the post-Roman work on another British site, that of Wroxeter, by Philip Barker. But the problem that we face, as shown actually in the list of names of sites included by Brogiolo (Brogiolo 2018, p. 8) where stratigraphical excavation has diffused from the British Isles to mainland Europe, is that work in the East and on Byzantine cities is nowhere to be found among them. To this list the excavation of Amorium and its publications should be added, as based on such a “rigorous stratigraphic method” we were able to convincingly date material by century even for the very difficult and demanding Dark Ages, a labor not mean for Byzantine archaeology. Especially the recent work by Eric Ivison, in the publication of the detailed stratigraphy in the area of the so-called Enclosure in the lower city of Amorium, is, to my knowledge, among the very few concise archaeological publications in the sphere of Byzantine archaeology adhering closely to the paradigm<sup>4</sup>.

In Byzantine urban studies, however, this way of approaching the material has not borne the fruits one might have expected, mainly because it was applied in a period when archaeological evidence was not sufficient, or adequately interpreted (Trombley 1993; Zavagno 2009, p. 14). Despite these results, recent studies have insisted on the need to re-establish or

<sup>3</sup> Most of the seminal works on medieval Byzantine urbanism are covered by: BOURAS 2002, pp. 497-528; KIOUSOPOULOU 2012; KIOUSOPOULOU 2013.

<sup>4</sup> IVISON 2012. A concise and updated check-list of publications on the excavation of Amorium in: LIGHTFOOT *et al.* 2017, pp. 153-157.

refine a set of tools when dealing with medieval (and Byzantine) urbanism. In Chris Wickham's (2005, pp. 591-592) words the way to find a common language that can unify all different levels of urban settlements in a certain period against each other in a common argument "is to set out the key elements of an ideal type". And indeed, some of the most recent attempts to deal with neglected subjects, like the Late Byzantine cities, have shown that this approach can be useful (Shea 2010, pp. 5-7).

This brings me to a second point. One might suggest that there exists a unique and particular relationship between historical and archaeological research on one hand and the study of Byzantine cities on the other. A relation formulated under distinct historical conditions at the very naissance of the discipline, conditions that still mark some of the main research questions that Byzantine studies are examining.

At the core of this discussion resides a logical paradox. I will attempt with the help of a small game of words to shed some light onto this paradox. Let's first consider how we self-identify and in this we might find also what our scientific field is supposed to be. We are Byzantinists. This term of course is not preferred by everyone in the field especially for the newer generation of scholars, but none the less the Oxford English Dictionary gives us the honor, as such, to be considered amongst some much more illustrious –ists, like the Classicists or the Egyptologists<sup>5</sup>. In the Dictionary we also read that a *byzantinist* is *a student or an expert in Byzantine matters*. It seems that this leaves us in need of a second definition. What exactly are *Byzantine matters*? They are of course the matters of Byzantium, the thousand-year empire that has borrowed its name from the Greek city Byzantion (Βυζάντιο), subsequently renamed by Emperor Constantine as Constantinople (Κωνσταντινούπολη) when he transferred there the capital of the Roman Empire (Mango 2004, pp. 15-21). But by the end of the middle Ages this great city, because of its history and fame all across the known world, was referred to, quite often, as just η Πόλη, the *City*. So what would this farfetched equation make us? Is a *byzantinist* after all just a *cityist*? And even more with a capital C. And what kind of neologism is this: a *Cityist*?

Of course, there is nothing like a *Cityist*, as any consultation of a lexicon can easily demonstrate. But as always the internet can be a really helpful tool; a New York – the nowadays Metropolis – digital magazine named *the City* can assist us through its web-page to define this unknown, but not non-existent, term. "A *CITYIST* is a person who defines the creative, cultural and social imperative of city life. A *CITYIST* is an

<sup>5</sup> Byzantinist, n., *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second edition, 1989. First published in A Supplement to the *OED* I, 1972.

*architect of influence, a person who drives ideas, births trends, limns taste, and starts the conversation*"<sup>6</sup>.

By rephrasing this definition just a little, we can make it more accurate for our case: *a Cityist (byzantinist) is a person whose research is defined by the creative, cultural and social imperative of the City life.* The city being always with a capital C, none other than the capital city itself, Constantinople.

A simple research in bibliographic data-bases can provide some interesting statistical data for our argument, though still far from systematic. Searching JSTOR, the electronic data base that contains most of the Anglo-Saxon historical and archaeological journals, we find that we byzantinists/Cityists and friends from other fields have written an inordinate amount on Constantinople in comparison to all other cities. Constantinople is attested in 37.549 articles, while Byzantine Thessaloniki alone is attested 4.829 times, and an even smaller example is Amorion or Amorium, an important middle byzantine thematic capital is attested only 85 times, while the combined term "byzantine city" as a general term appears only 78 times<sup>7</sup>. This observation is not striking for scholars of byzantine history and archaeology, as this tendency is demonstrated also in many other media. One needs to observe e.g. the major exhibitions on byzantine art, like the ones held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where more than 60% of the exhibits with known provenance are attributed to Constantinople, and this after special care was taken for as many as possible of the Empire's provinces to be represented (Evans, Wixom 2004). The dominant role of Constantinople in our perception of the Byzantine past is so self evident, that it makes even the attempt to quantify less meaningful.

Through this exclusive perspective, the City (Constantinople) is established from the beginning as the epicenter of all our efforts to understand, the always unattainable subject of our desire: what by default we are eager for, but what we can never obtain as it does not exist anymore, being even in historical terms somebody else's capital, the Ottoman and modern Turkish Istanbul (Necipoğlu 2001, pp. 1-15). This kind of a dead-end relationship is aptly described in a different context by Sigmund Freud as one of the main causes of neurosis in the acute version of the Oedipus complex, where the object of our desire is totally forbidden to us (Simon, Blass 1991).

And even more intellectually challenging is the way in which Jacques Lacan has developed these ideas towards a new definition by arguing

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cityist.com> (last accessed 28.01.2019).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.jstor.org/analytics> (as accessed 10.03.2015).

that exactly because of the unattainable nature of certain conditions, like the ones illustrated above, we part with a piece of ourselves that we attribute to the Other, a remote reflection of ourselves in a mirror that contains all the qualities we cannot reach (Lacan 2006, pp. 76-81). None of this is to say that we are all suffering from neurosis but that a deep and traumatic preconception is rooted in our field of studies, where all views are distorted by the immense gravitas of the Capital City, diverged or ultimately blackened like photons with altered trajectories near astral black holes.

To recapitulate what we have argued so far: we have commented on one hand on the circumstantial but consistent effort of some of the research on Byzantine urbanism to incorporate post-modern theories of hyper-relativism, with doubtful results for the actual outcome. And secondly, we commented on the erratic and almost traumatic relationship of byzantinists with the City (Constantinople) and the cities. This very brief attempt to analyze a few aspects of the study of Byzantine cities by no means constitutes a general overview or critique of the field, but functions rather as a pattern indicative of intriguing and provocative thoughts, ideas that can only attain some validity if they encounter the real Byzantine towns. In this way, we come face to face with the vast range of issues that the historical and archaeological record presents to the researcher of Byzantine urbanism.

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