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Orthogonal Town Planning in Antiquity

Ferdinando Castagnoli

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The decisiveness of the right angle, which is uncommon in nature, would seem to exercise an irresistible appeal to the human mind, for it permeates man's art, artifacts, and architecture. That it should also appear as a basic organizing element in town plans over many centuries and in many cultures only confirms this appeal. The present work examines Greek, Etruscan, Italic, Hellenistic, and Roman cities that were based on orthogonal or grid plans—those characterized by streets intersecting at right angles to form blocks of regular size and spacing. Some of these have only recently been uncovered.

The author suggests that the implementation of these plans may have constituted the first exercise in master planning for the future extension and development of cities. These goals doubtless varied in ancient times from the tyrannical—suggesting an authoritarian control with the power to order a population into a strict grid pattern—to the egalitarian—implicit in the essential uniformity and equality of the blocks regardless of location.

In Roman times the orthogonal plan was to evolve into a quadrant system in which two broad streets at right angles served as the defining axes of the town, meeting to form a formal central space, the "origin" of the coordinated city. These plans are discussed in the book, but the major emphasis is on "Hippodamean" layouts, in which a few—usually three or four—main parallel roads are intersected at right angles by numerous narrow streets to form long, narrow blocks.

Hippodamean plans are named for Hippodamus of Miletus, a Greek of the fifth century B.C. Although in antiquity Hippodamus was believed to have devised this scheme, the author points out that such plans predate Hippodamus by a considerable period, and his role was one of refining and further systematizing the plan. His chief contribution would appear to be his application of his studies of political organization and social behavior to town planning.

Indeed, Hippodamean plans go back at least to the seventh century B.C. in Greece, and rectangular elements basic to such plans have been found in settlements older still. Moreover, cities based on orthogonality are found not only throughout the Mediterranean region but in Aztec, Indian, and Chinese cultures as well.

A number of aerial photographs are juxtaposed with detailed plans prepared by archaeologists, which provide a fascinating insight into the solutions which Hippodamus and other planners evolved in the process of adjusting the needs of urban settlements to the exigencies of the terrain.

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