

CONSTELLATION OF *POLEIS* IN THE NATURAL SPACE OF THE MEANDER VALLEY

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ABSTRACT

This contribution aims to investigate several Aegean *poleis* – Priene, Miletus and Magnesia on the Meander – located on the coasts of Asia Minor in the Meander Valley, with the ambition of investigating the origin of an urban culture and living space that could be summarised by the term *Stadtbaukunst* – that is, the art of building the city – linked, that is, the foundation *ex-novo* foundation of a typically Greek settlement model, destined to expand on a geographical scale in the ancient world. A territory, that of the Aegean, promoter of the birth of an architectural culture that, by elevating geographical centrality to a matrix for producing new urban forms, delivered to posterity places of unsurpassed magnificence.



The Meander Valley

If in the ancient world it was, according to myth, the divine powers that guided the founder's settlement choices, it would be quite inaccurate to exclude the role that *logos* assumed in the *ktisis* (division of the land as a founding act) of a new settlement, just as it would be fallacious to keep out of the discourse the role that the geographical configuration of the territory assumed in the choice of the place in which to settle the city. Following Arnold J. Toynbee (1959), it could be argued that it is precisely the richness engendered in the physical features of the land that nourished and nurtured the Hellenic spirit to the point of elevating the «Aegean Sea basin as the cradle of Hellenic civilisation [in that] it was the original habitat of that culture and always remained its focal point». The different territorial characteristics found in the Aegean basin, where chains of bare islands bathed by the sea are arranged to rim the Anatolian coastline, the original had a significant influence on the habitat thus had a significant on the “exact” selection of the places where the nascent civilisation was to settle.

The *poleis* – Priene, Miletus and Magnesia on the Meander – located in the present-day region of Aydın, are paradigmatic in this sense, not only because of the “foundational” relationship they once established with the Meander River (now Büyük Menderes), but also because of the singular ge-

Figure 1. Meander territorial organism with identification of the poleis of Priene, Miletus and Magnesia on the Meander. Author's drawing.

ographical configuration that accommodates them, in relation to a circumscribed natural space that could be defined morphologically as a «territorial room».¹ Geomorphologically united by the natural presence of the river (Ratté, 2008), the three urban settlements are masterfully inserted into the mountain formations that circumscribe the Meander valley (Fig. 1), a closed, natural space capable of orienting the settlement structure of the cities. In this way, the original layout of the cities was always in close relation to the river, on steep terrain open to the sky and, above all, the sea, on which the cities relied for their sustenance since agriculture and crafts were not the exclusive source of supply. In fact, by qualifying the space of the plain through its ravines, a discontinuity is determined in the subdivision of agricultural plots, which in turn drives the construction of the foundation cities, binding them closely to the environmental context and the governmental and religious structure that underlies the form of the city.

It could be said that the Hellenes demonstrate an unsurpassed ability here to recognize the theatricality of the landscape. All the places they selected for the construction of life are conspicuous points in the territory, from which to grasp the open dimension and composite richness of the externality around them but also, likewise, show themselves as identifiable strongholds in the breadth of the landscape. A further characteristic that is worth pointing out is that, within the boundless natural dimension on which they hang in form, the foundation *poleis* – cities born and planned *ex-novo*, built over the course of a generation – do not indiscriminately increase their boundaries (i.e. they do not expand) to accommodate the demographic increase of the population, but prefer to grow by separation (or one might even say “multiply by budding”), defining fragments of multiple realities that are recognisable and coexistent with the morphology of the territory. It follows that the logic of centralisation, already seen in some respects in the role urban played by the agorai in the city-states, is reiterated even in the space “around” its centre, organising in the vast natural dimension a polar system of centres that are set in tension with each other. In this way, the Anatolian territory is confirmed as an attractor capable of polarising the centres, or *poleis*, between them, defining a “society” of city-states that recognise themselves in a precise settlement structure predisposed to the coexistence of large portions of nature with human settlements. Even today, in spite of the progressive silting up of the Meander, which deprived the surveyed cities of the sea (Fig. 2), it is possible to find this original structuring of the territory by *poleis*, auton-

¹ A term coined by Franco Purini to indicate a morphologically defined and identifiable geographic boundary as an autonomous landscape unit in which the multiplicity of phenomena finds a common attribute, participating in the identified geographic unity.

omous yet interrelated, founded in the privileged places of geography: primary forms that conditioned their settlement characteristics. It is no coincidence that the extraordinary urban and territorial model expressed by the Ionian Greeks in the three Aegean formations of Priene, Miletus and Magnesia on the Meander, can thus be identified as cooperation between archipelagos of cities concluded, interspersed with vast natural spaces that established them as strongholds within the territory.

This way of constructing the relationship with the outdoors still calls for reflection on the “way” of relating civil and formal aggregations with nature. Rather than thinking of a «delirium», to use an expression by Massimo Cacciari (2009), that would overstretch the territorial boundaries to be urbanised, invading further natural spaces, the way of thinking of the ancient founders of the *polis* is based on the idea of the constellation, restored by relations at a distance that elevate the multiplicity of characters, including orographic ones, as an underlying structure for the construction of dialogic relations between poles. This idea would seem to be directly connected to that of the finiteness of the settlement system, since it does not accept the hypothesis of invading the outside of the walls, making the territory homogenous and undifferentiated, instead consolidating it through disseminations of

Figure 2. From left to right, top to bottom: progressive filling of the mouth of the Meander River. Author's drawing.

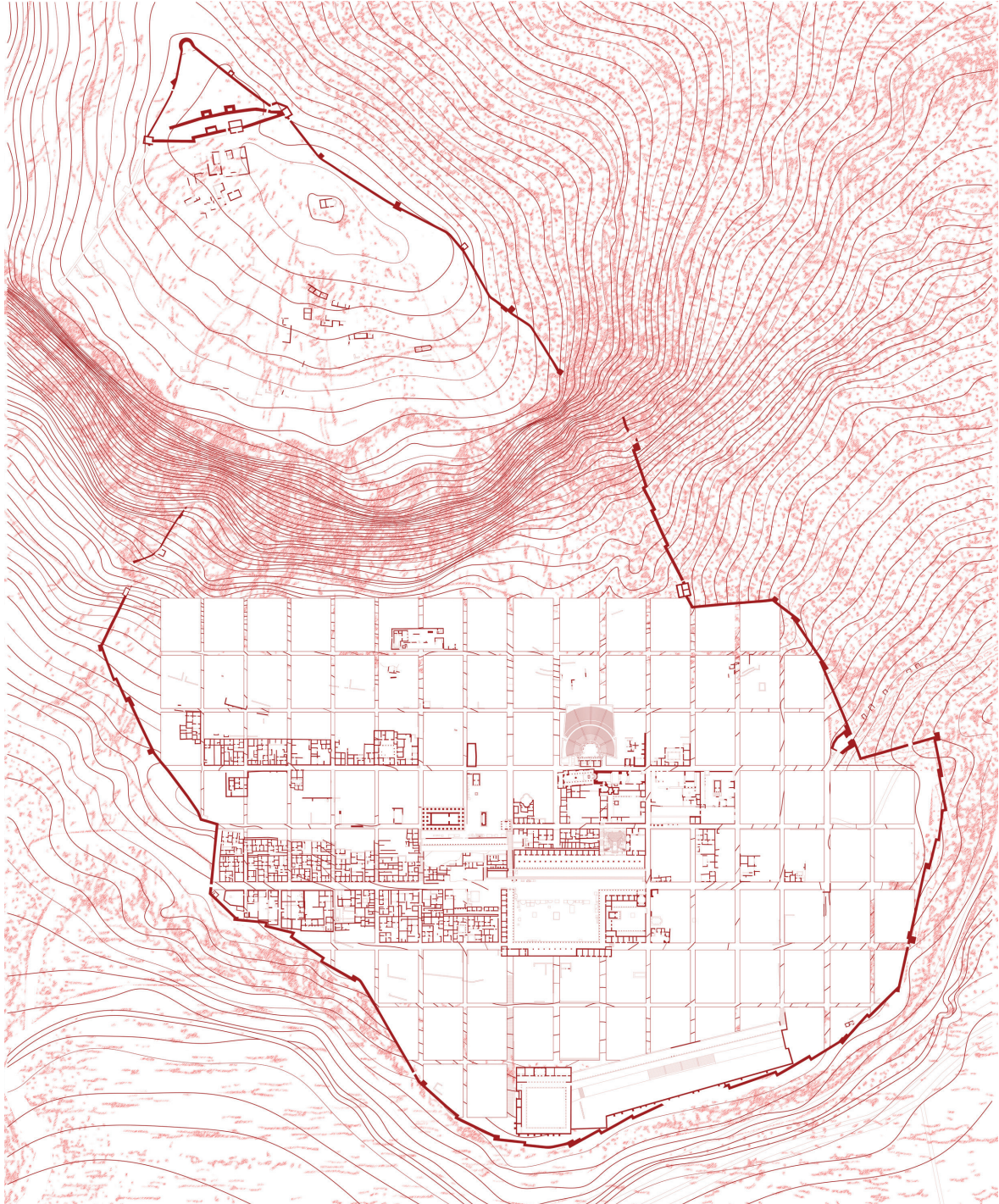


satellites capable of preserving their own formal autonomy. From the agora, as the “centre” of the *polis*, emerged the interscalar metrics that defined the relationships between the domestic space and the monumental dimension of the city, which, through the connections between the unfold *poleis*, finds the reasons to structure the territory and giving order to the world that hosted them. In this sense, the ancient cities bathed by the Aegean waters demonstrate a profound ability to construct a sense of the collective dimension, referring not so much or not only to the more general form of the city, but rooted in the relationship that cities establish among themselves, making participate in the elements outside the city, those of the territory, the “vision” of the world.

Priene

Situated on the coast of Asia Minor, overlooking the island of Samos, the settlement of ancient Priene (Fig. 3) initially stood on the slight, marshy slopes of the Meander River where, due to constant flooding, the Ionian citizens decided to move to a natural elevation raised from the muddy river plain and there found the «new» Priene (Hoepfner, 2005). The site chosen for the «re-foundation» of the city (Wiegand, Schrader, 1904), already in the mid- 4th century b. C., is rooted on the southern summit of the panoramic slope of Mount Mycale, at the foot of a precipitous rocky rise «inserted like an acropolis within the walls» (Burelli, 2017) that was never inhabited but was probably conceived by the Prienean community itself as a natural defensive system called upon to protect the city from a land that had not always been favourable to them.

Pytheos was probably the architect, or the designer of the plan, adopting an orthogonal grid of roads capable of measuring the steep and irregular natural modelling that, developing in a direction north-south, made the formation of the new particularly steep *polis*. Through the introduction of a terraced scheme – composed of four large platforms – Pytheos was in a position to compose a coordinated set of architectural masses, regimented by a regular but ductile distribution of streets whose intersections determined an ordered system of insulae. These insulae (almost quadrangular, measuring approximately 35x47m), in addition to accommodating the spaces where the private life of the citizens takes place, solve the problem of the difference in elevation. Since the terrain has a pronounced difference in height, the streets running from east to west assume a more or less constant course – following the natural slope of the land – while, in the direction, north-south the introduction



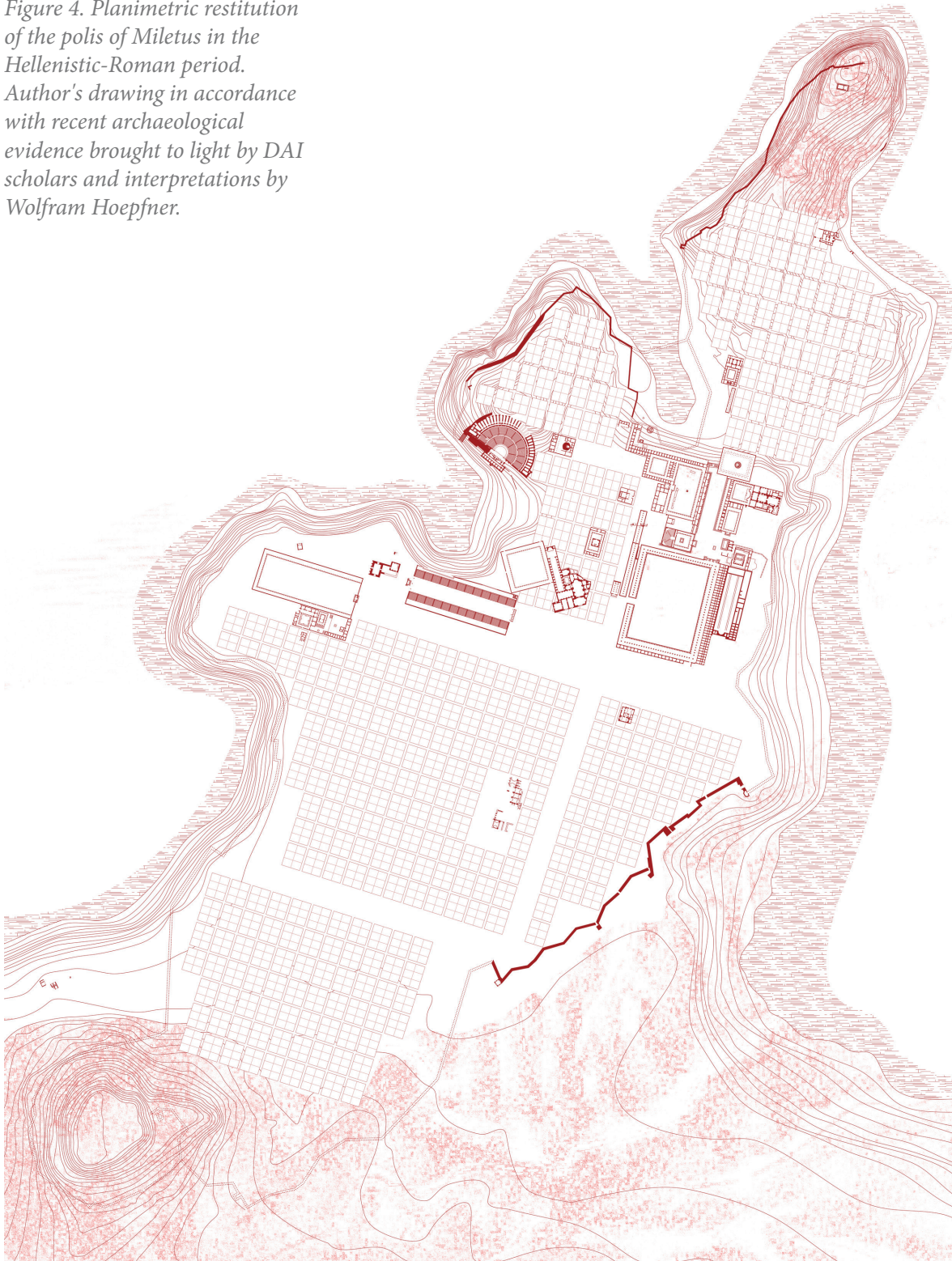
of stairways makes it possible to connect the plane. The city's "center" of urban composition is evidently the agora (approximately 60x90 upward m), an open public square bordered by deep shaded stoai where, as in other Hellenistic cities, public gatherings, political events, ceremonial and commercial activities took place. It originates within the settlement matrix of the street layout and represents, as is well known, a dilated place called upon to gather the necessary elements of the city's public life, determining the

Figure 3. Planimetric restitution of the polis of Priene in the Hellenistic-Roman period. Author's drawing in accordance with recent archaeological evidence and interpretations by Theodor Wiegand.

principle that governs the grouping of architecture, religious and civil, in space.

The city of Priene represents an eminent example that confirms the Hellenes' extraordinary aptitude for confronting the richness and heterogeneity of "prime" forms, the natural ones, interpreting them – in their specific topographical con-

Figure 4. Planimetric restitution of the polis of Miletus in the Hellenistic-Roman period. Author's drawing in accordance with recent archaeological evidence brought to light by DAI scholars and interpretations by Wolfram Hoepfner.



sistency as much as in their reciprocal relations – as privileged references of choice, *ab origine* of any construction and transcription aimed at restoring to man his own “measured” space to inhabit.

Miletus

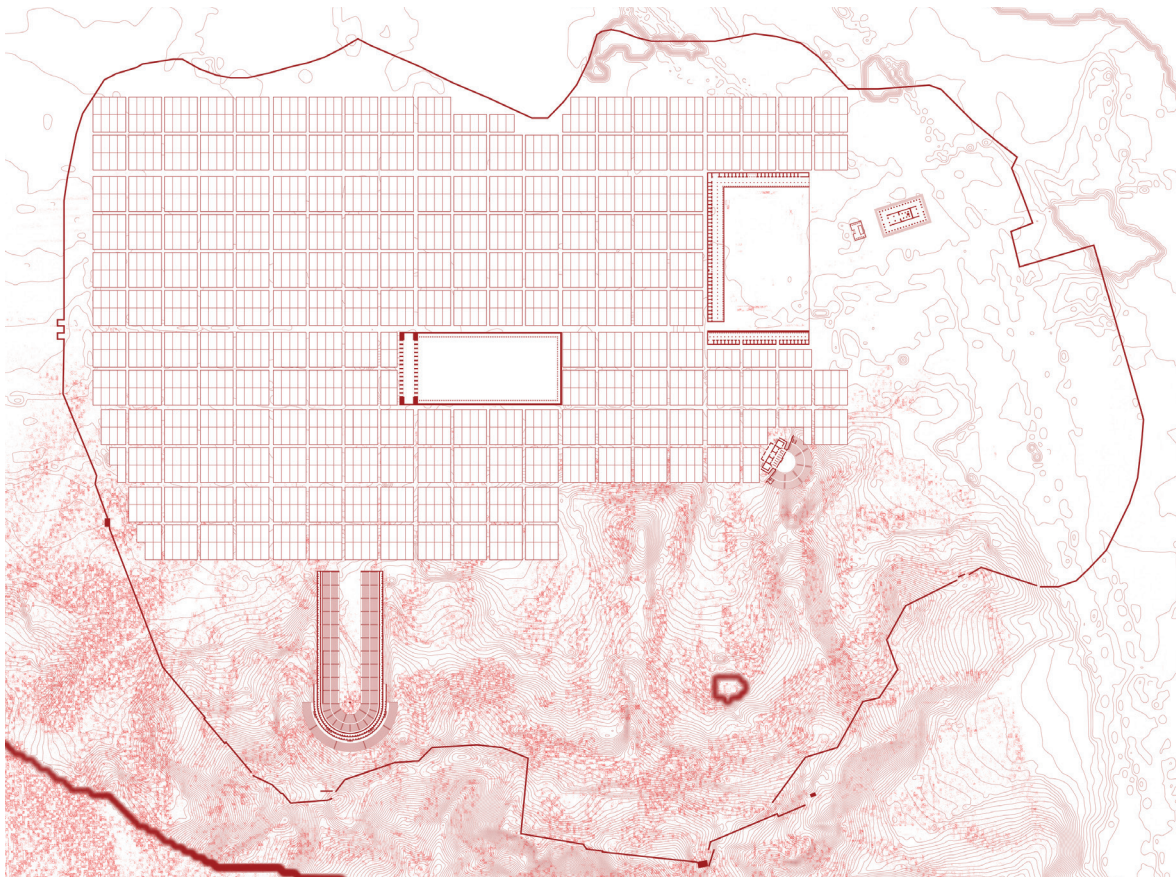
The birthplace of the man who is considered by many to be the *protos heurtes* (first inventor) of regular urban planning, i.e. Hippodamus, is located in a peninsular location whose orographic values gave the Milesians the opportunity to build no less than four seaports (Akrugal, 1978) that, from east to west, greeted sailors busy contributing to an agricultural area. already lucrative Some archaeological finds resurfaced from the moistened depths of the ground near Athenaion testify to the presence of a small settlement of Cretan origin, among other things already mentioned by Strabo when he states that the first founding nucleus was due to Sarpedon, brother of Minos, in a region of space between the promontories of Humeitepe, Kalehtepe and the rounded hill of Kalabaktepe (Cobet, 1997 - Longo, 1999). It was precisely those dominant heights – extended from the sea routes of routes the port to the land in the immediate hinterland – bordered by the seas and furrowed by rivers that attracted the later archaic settlements (Finley, 1977) – destroyed by the Persians in 494 b. C. – and conditioned the arrangement of urban forms in the *chora*, progressively changed by the alluvial deposits of the Meander that gradually filled the ancient gulf.

A walled circuit severely resting on the ground accommodates the two major sanctuaries, the Delphinion on the northeast and the Athenaion on the opposite side, which introduce the ritual and spiritual dimension of the Milesians' predecessors and allow for the orientation of the placement of the subsequent architectural episodes that, precisely between the two oldest monuments, will become unalterable matter and form, the stable architectural image of a society yearning to constitute itself as such and to feel finally united. At the “center” of the large public space garrisoned, at the extremes, by the two religious' polarities, four stoai surround the “south” agora, binding the civic aspirations of individuals to a clear and concise boundary. In the western part of the city, on the other hand, the theatre and the stadium introduce the theme as that of the spectacle of community, the main mechanism for observing, knowing and understanding things. With their position, the two factories are arranged to comment on the annular bend in front of them,

presenting themselves both as a privileged space for the staging of tragedy and at the same time a place of overlook from which to observe a more complex reality, one made of participation and sharing, through which the community could construct a common consciousness.

By carefully and ingeniously establishing the geometric rules and principles of the *polis* (Fig. 4), the *école Milesienne* (Martin, 1956) contributes in no small measure to the conquest of that idea of the city that so animates the spirit of the Greeks of Ionia, aimed at erecting together the community civil and political and the physical space that welcomes it, both within the walls and in the areas outside the *chora*. It is in those constructed and fully human-inhabited forms – domestic fabric, monumental episodes and public spaces – in their adherence to an overall weave of road and topographical networks, that one can discern the tortuous relationships that, from the Athenaion to the Delphinion, testify both to the fragility of the human dimension and to that immaterial tension towards isonomy founded on the capacity to extract from the everydayness of life – made up of both domestic and sensitive rituals and religious and supersensible ones – the principle of order necessary for the construction of the city.

Figure 5. Planimetric restitution of the polis of Magnesia on the Meander in the Hellenistic-Roman period. Author's drawing in accordance with recent archaeological evidence and interpretations by Orhan Bingöl.



Magnesia on the Meander

Between the clear waters of the Lethaios River (present-day Gümüşçay, literally “silver stream”) and the rocky embroideries of Mount Thorax (Gümüşdağ, “silver mountain”) emerge the geometric, luminescent stones of the city of Magnesia (Fig. 5), founded by the eponymous settlers from faraway Thessaly. The newly founded was built by summoning citizens and groups of architects around the sanctuary *polis* of Artemis Leukophryene, the (non-geometrical) “centre” of the new foundation capable of reifying, in a complex and harmonious unity, that notion of “togetherness” and that movement of aggregation that animated the turbulence of the creative spirit in the Hellenic world. In later times, the archaic and protective sanctuary of the city was rewritten in its volumetric articulations by Hermogenes, who restored the pseudoperipteral form so appreciated by Vitruvius (Bingöl, 2007 - Hoepfner, 1988), without changing its location, which, for symbolic and ritual reasons, still remains oriented towards the most significant promontory. The monumental dimensions of the temple (67.50 x 40 m), with those orderly sequences of columns placed in succession, herald the appearance of the later agora, defined in its primordial aspect as a large open square, whose ample dimensions hint at its centrality within the life of the city. From here, precisely from the threshold returned by the propylaea, begins a succession of discontinuous stages marked by the intention to lead citizens from the domestic space to the theatre and then culminating near the stadium. These two urban forms – the theatre and the stadium – built during the first foundation interpret, with their position, the geography of the ground, which, in turn, presides over and defines their typological and spatial characteristics. It was precisely in these places of celebration, representation and staging of collective festivities (Kerényi, 2001) that, following the alleged epiphany of Artemis Leukophryene, the ethnic and cultural identity of the Ionian world was strongly affirmed, extending the celebrations to non-Asian peoples who, despite their differences, responded chorally to the call (Kern 1900), elevating the religious circuit to a symbol of a shared human condition. It will come as no surprise, then, that the Ionian polis did not delay in becoming an important crossroads between Priene, Ephesus and Tralleis as, the “city sacred” to Artemis, invested a central role in intellectual, economic and political development in the Western world throughout the Hellenistic period.

By juxtaposing and holding together the finite dimension of the architectural elements (domestic fabric and monumen-

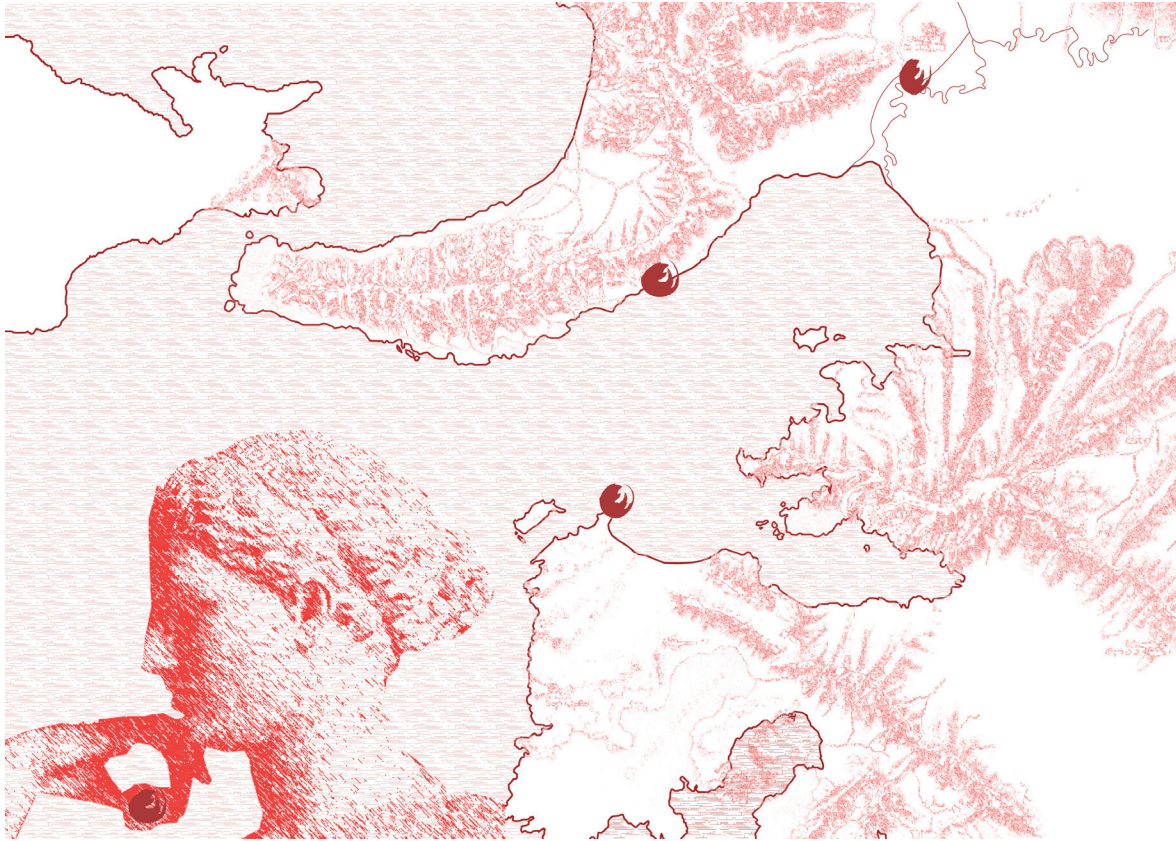


Figure 6. *The concave space of the Gulf of Latmos in the VI century b. C. Author's drawing.*

tal figures) with the indeterminacy of the boundless (landscape) and supersensible (divine) dimension, the Meandrian polis, though remodeled over time, seems to translate into form that Greek desire to build a prosperous way of life, made up of politics, conviviality, family ties, and not necessarily devoted to war (not only toward the external world, such as the Persian, but also internally, toward other poleis). So that in the immeasurable territorial vastness, between the mountainous landscape on one side (Mt. Thorax) and the crystalline waters (the Lethaios) on the other, cohabit a multitude of existences, cultural and formal, fixed by the whiteness of the great magnesian stones, which assign solidity to the place by producing an unexpected turbulence necessary to describe the deepest identity of that land: marked by the contrast between rounded shrubby masses silhouetted against the geometric and sculptural bulk of the city.

Conclusions

Within these considerations, the rediscovery of the *poleis* of Ionia could open up multiple future goals. Above all, for example, the possibility of continuing to popularize and promote the extraordinary urban and territorial model expressed by the Ionian Greeks in close relation to the environmental context and the governmental and religious

structure connected to the form of the city, could open up a vast field of opportunities with the more inclusive and continuous involvement of multiple scholars. Experts who, engaged in methodological pluralism, could effectively contribute to the revitalization of these extraordinary territorial strongholds (Fig. 6), with a view to real enhancement that would allow Turkey to make them a foundational element of our common Mediterranean culture.

But even more so, it is believed that in order to continue taking care of ourselves and the world around us, a continuous questioning of the extraordinary lesson that the ancients have delivered to us is necessary. A legacy, that which the Hellenistic city entrusts to us, which lies in the stringent relationship established between ancient forms of nature and urban forms, and which seems to prove as relevant as ever for our lives. To reflect again on this way of “making” cities means to search for elemental units that conform to our time, to be composed, in tune with the forms of the orographic substratum, in order to return to building cities, or parts of them, to once again form a fabric that reflects our humanity, both individual and collective. In other words, there is a responsibility today to reiterate how useful and operative this teaching still is in the conviction that there is a need to re-propose an echo of this value in the present city.

Although those repeated practices around mythical and super-sensible beliefs may seem distant in time, the ancients' strenuous attempt to construct the inhabited world as a theatre for the enactment of participatory and shared values, still able to order the physical traces around us in an attempt to keep their meaning alive and construct a point of view oriented toward solving the problems of ancient cities that persistently, despite everything, point the way to the construction of a new world, may be closer to us.

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