

THESSALONIKI FROM CASSANDER TO GALERIUS

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From a city planning perspective, Ancient Thessaloniki has had a continuous history, uninterrupted by significant material destructions. The transitions between its various historical periods do not correspond to radical changes in the form of the city itself. Certain fundamental characteristics—such as the city plan—have been preserved from its original phase, in the early Hellenistic period to late Antiquity, all the way to the present day. The diachronic nature of Thessaloniki is one of its most substantial features.

As we learn from Strabo (VII frag.21), Cassander founded Thessaloniki in the Thermaic Gulf—at the site of modern Thessaloniki—by doing away with 26 smaller settlements in the region. Of these *polismata*, as Strabo describes them, the most important was Thermi, which survived the founding of Thessaloniki, as we deduce from a contemporary reference by Pliny (*NH* IV 10). Thermi, which had a harbor, may very well have been located on the small peninsula in the Thermaic Gulf now known as Karabournaki.

Most researchers now agree that the city of Thessaloniki was founded soon after Cassander's wedding to Thessaloniki, daughter of Philip II, in 315 BC. The founding of a city named after Philip's daughter was a political act, an attempt by Cassander to consolidate his position in Macedonia; however, it also had broader aims, seeking to promote the economic development of the region by founding a new urban center at a site with great geopolitical significance.

Thessaloniki would indeed evolve into one of the most important cities of the Macedonian kingdom, and the foremost center of trade in Macedonia. Its economic growth was rapid, for the harbor provided a direct communication channel between the Macedonian state and the Aegean. This development led to a population boom and attracted many foreigners occupied with trade and

manufacturing. This was a city open to outside influences, as witnessed by the spread of foreign cults, primarily Egyptian ones.

Thessaloniki cannot be appreciated as a regional urban center independently of the great cities founded in the East during the reigns of Alexander and his successors, which contributed to the broader urbanization of the conquered territories. The design of the city could only have been inspired by these great urban centers, which changed the face of the immense state. Yet it is very difficult to reconstruct an image of Hellenistic Thessaloniki, for the archaeological remains are quite fragmentary. One important factor under investigation is the extent of the walled city. We have only identified one small segment of the city's original fortifications, on the northeastern side of the later walls. The eastern wall of the Hellenistic Age, then, must have followed the same course as the later wall, at least at its northernmost end, while further to the south it traversed the area west of the Rotunda. This clue does not provide a definitive answer as to the precise area of the Hellenistic city, but it does allow for certain hypotheses in conjunction with some other data. According to the prevailing, and most likely, view, the area of Hellenistic Thessaloniki was approximately 260 hectares, meaning that it was already a large city in direct contact with the sea, not much smaller than the later Roman city, and comparable in size with the Macedonian capitals of Pella and Demetrias. According to another opinion, it was a much smaller town of no more than 90 hectares, without direct access to the sea, which gradually extended its southern border into the plain. This theory is not supported by the written sources, which mention a harbor, nor by the archaeological finds (e.g. the location of cemeteries). Furthermore, this position would not be consistent with a Hellenistic city of Thessaloniki's profile.

The new city was carved out according to a system applied in other large cities of the East, the so-called Hippodamian system, which can be seen from the surviving ruins of the Roman period. This plan is based on a grid of horizontal and vertical streets, which bisect each other to form city blocks approximately 102 x 58.5 meters in size. It survives in general to the present day, and can be seen in the city plan of Thessaloniki, which predates the catastrophic fire of 1917: there are streets parallel to the central artery, which coincides with the modern

Egnatia Street, and streets perpendicular to the above, whose course has been verified through archaeological finds (e.g., paving slabs and the outlines of buildings). A funerary inscription from the 2nd c. AD mentions the purple dyers of 18th Street, referring us to a numbering system of streets inscribed at regular intervals familiar from modern cities.

By the Third Macedonian War at the latest, Thessaloniki had an organized harbor, for according to Titus Livius (XLIV 10), Perseus ordered the city's shipyard burned when informed of the arrival of the Romans at Heraklion/Pieria in 169. This harbor could not possibly have been disconnected from the city, which must have extended down to the sea. In addition, archaeological finds in the southernmost region of the city (namely, a portico on Grigoriou Palama Street and building remains beneath the Galerian Complex), as well as the presence of a Hellenistic Sarapion in the western quarter, support the claim that Thessaloniki was, by the eastern standards of the period, a fairly large metropolis.

Evidence concerning the city's other public buildings is scarce. From a passage in Diodorus Siculus (XXXII 15), we may deduce that 2nd-century Thessaloniki had a palace, which may have been connected to Philip V and his stay in the city. An honorary decree of young men for their Gymnasiarch in 96/95 BC (*IG X 2.1 no.4*), found north of the church of St. Demetrius, attests to the existence of a Gymnasium, for the decree states that it must be installed in a special spot "within the Gymnasium".

The presence of an Agora, which could not possibly be missing, is also attested by an inscription from 60 BC found on Olympou Street not far from the later Roman Forum (*IG X 2.1 no.5*). This is a decree with which the city honored a certain person, and would have been erected, as is mentioned, in a central location within the Agora. This Hellenistic Agora would have had a monumental form; however, excavations have not uncovered it at the site of the later Roman Forum. Workshop activities in this area, dating as early as the 3rd c. BC, indicate that the Agora cannot have been far from this location. Furthermore, a notable architectural sculpture, an Atlas dating to the 2nd half of the 2nd c. BC, was found beneath the pavement of the Roman Forum. The statue comes from an architectural façade, which it supported along with several other identical figures,

and it confirms the presence of a significant public monument in the area, possibly incorporated in the Agora.

The recent excavations in Kiprion Agoniston Square have been exceptionally helpful in uncovering the period when the city was founded. Beneath a 1st-century BC administrative building complex, older phases were found, some dating to the 2nd c. BC, while the oldest archaeological remains can be traced all the way to the city's founding. On a tile excavated from the destruction stratum, there is a stamp with the inscription *BASILIKOS* ("royal"), signifying the administrative oversight of the king.

We have only scant clues about the position and form of the sanctuaries of this period. The Sarapion, the shrine of the Egyptian gods, is the only excavated one whose oldest phase dates to the Hellenistic Age, but it now lies beneath the apartment complexes of Diikitiriou Street. An important inscription (*IG X 2.1 no.3*) found here is a royal *diagramma*, or legislative measure, of Philip V, issued in 187 BC to regulate the administration of temple funds. From other inscriptions we learn that there were a *temenos*, peristyle, shrine, and altars in this location. Among the many votive sculptures discovered, it is worth noting a very interesting votive relief from the late 3rd c. BC, dedicated to *mystis Osiris*. It depicts two priests before an altar, with a figure in the background that probably represents the donor or the god himself.

Following the battle of Pydna, Thessaloniki became the capital of the second administrative district (*merida*) of Macedonia. After 148 BC, with the founding of the Roman province of Macedonia, it became the permanent seat of the Roman Proconsul. Cicero, who came to the city as an exile in 58-57 BC, mentions the *quaestorium* (*Pro Caneio Plancio XLI 99-100*), the Proconsul's headquarters. After the battle of Philippi in 42 BC, Thessalonians were rewarded for their stance toward the victors, Octavian and Mark Antony—i.e., their refusal to receive the murderers of Caesar, Brutus and Cassius. Thessaloniki was then declared a "free city" (*civitas libera*) and relieved of its taxpaying duties to Rome. The city's new role did not influence its institutions of self-governance, which did not undergo any significant revisions during this period.

One factor contributing appreciably to Thessaloniki's importance was the construction of the Via Egnatia by the Roman Proconsul Gnaeus Egnatius, governor of the province during the 2nd c. BC. This road led from Apollonia and Dyrrhachium on the Adriatic coast all the way to Byzantium. Thessaloniki was the chief stop, and the only port, along this axis. Surviving inscriptions indicate a rapid evolution in the demographics of the city, which received a large number of immigrants and developed into a cosmopolitan center. It gathered people from other Macedonian cities, and from the Greek world at large. It also drew immigrants from Asia Minor, chiefly sailors and merchants, who banded together into a league of *Asianoi* under the protection of Dionysus, as well as Thracians and Jews. The most important foreign community, however, was the Italian one. Italians had begun to arrive in Thessaloniki in the 1st c. BC, but their number grew considerably in the 1st c. AD. They formed a "union of Roman citizens" with its own financial interests, for they were chiefly merchants. There is no doubt that, through the establishment of a Roman administration and the settling of Roman citizens, Roman influence extended to all areas of public life. However, Greeks remained the most populous element, as attested by the inscriptions, which are overwhelmingly in Greek.

During this period Thessaloniki became a heavily populated city, an *urbs celeberrima* according to Titus Livius, the *mother of all Macedonia* in the words of the poet Antipater. Lucian would praise the intellectual level of Thessaloniki, which was frequented by orators, authors, and famous sophists.

The appearance of the city must have reflected its greatness. In the first years of Roman governance, construction programs were fairly limited. The city walls were no longer maintained, so that by Cicero's day their defensive potential was diminished. The situation apparently changed in the early Imperial Age. The western quarter of the city, north of the Sarapion, underwent changes possibly connected with the introduction of the imperial cult. Statues of emperors, including one of Augustus and a now-headless one, had been installed in a building, unknown to us today, on Stratigou Doubioti Street. Above all we must note the relocation of the great 5th-c BC Ionic temple, which had originally been erected somewhere in the Thermaic Gulf, possibly Aenaea. It was recently

discovered at the intersection of Kristalli and Diikitiriou Streets. Its relocation to a new foundation in the Imperial Age may have served the imperial cult, which was the official expression of the loyalty of each city to the emperor and to Rome. The *High Priest of the Sebastoi*, a distinguished citizen, would organize sacrifices and games in their honor. Several imperial statues were found in and around this temple, all unfortunately headless. The now headless statue of an emperor wearing a cuirass, with a barbarian at his feet, may represent Hadrian, while the headless female statue in the type of an Amazon represents Rome, a Greek-inspired goddess worshipped in tandem with the emperor.

It goes without saying that the grid plan of the Hellenistic city was retained. Now the streets were paved, and perhaps broadened, often with built-in gutters. The Via Regia, the main road, ran through the city from the Golden Gate to the west (Demokrateias Square) to the Cassandreotic gate to the east (Sintrivani Square). Another important road was that which connected the Litaeon gate and the New Golden Gate, along the axis of present-day Aghiou Dimitriou Street. Between these two roads were two more, at the height of modern-day Olimpou and Filippou Streets, respectively. Between them, in the center of the city, lay its administrative center, the Forum.

During the Hellenistic Age, the site of the later Roman Forum was home to pottery and metallurgical workshops, which remained there until the 1st c. AD. These workshops were housed in temporary buildings that have left no trace. During this period, there was also a bath in the southeast corner of the archaeological site, with private housing on the eastern side. The embellishment of the space seems to have begun in the time of Augustus, which is when it assumed a public character. The first building complex of the Forum was developed between the 1st and early 2nd c. AD, and we know very little about it. On the eastern side, a series of rectangular spaces were found on either side of a large room, which is thought to have been a place of assembly (*bouleuterion*). But the Forum, as it survives today, mostly dates to the late 2nd or early 3rd c. AD. In the Antonine period, a large-scale construction program was initiated, which was completed in the early years of the Severan dynasty, ca. 200 BC. The Forum occupied a space of 2 hectares, organized in a Π shape around a rectangular paved

open space about 146 x 75m opening onto the north side. Three of its sides were surrounded by double porticoes with Corinthian colonnades, possibly two stories high, with rows of rooms in the back. On the south side, which was on a natural slope, an underground vaulted corridor (*cryptoporticus*) was built, and in front of that was a row of 20 rooms in two stories, which functioned as shops. The top story was accessible from the southern *porticus* of the Forum, while the lower story was at the level of the *cryptoporticus* and could be reached from the street running to the south of the complex. This street, which was only 2.5m wide and had a drain, was not traversable by cart. A large staircase 3.5m high led from the street to the Forum courtyard. The Forum was a restricted area, with the spaces between columns blocked by parapets except at designated access points. There would also have been access from the north side, which is now beneath Olimpou Street.

The eastern side of the Forum was the most important one, for this is where the administrative functions were concentrated. An *odeum*, a roofed theatre with curved rows of seats that could accommodate 400 people, was built in its center around 200 AD. This structure, which was also curved on the outside (having replaced a smaller building inscribed in a rectangle), has been identified as an *odeum* from the founding inscription discovered during excavations. It consists of a free-standing *cavea* raised, according to the Roman system, on a massive substructure, plus a semicircular *orchestra* and an elaborately decorated stage building. Of the decoration, three statues of Muses and one statue of a woman survive; the woman may have been the sponsor of the building, or of a part of it. The Muses and Apollo are linked with the function of the building, for they were the patrons of music and poetry. It is almost certain, however, that this building hosted not only concerts and dramatic performances, but also political gatherings, functioning as a *bouleuterion*. In the 4th c. AD, however, it acquired a new function as an open-air theatre with a large seating capacity. On the same side of the Forum, the southernmost room has been identified as an archives building (*tabularium*), where public administration records were kept, while the mint has been discovered on the northern side of the same wing. Archaeologists have discovered metallurgical ovens and clay molds used in the construction of flans.

To the north of the Forum ran one of the main streets of the city, and directly above that was a raised terrace on which there have been discovered two buildings that must have been temples. The larger and more luxurious of the two was originally identified as a library, but based on its shape as well as the finds uncovered in the area I believe it was a temple of the imperial cult. To the south of the Forum, near the present-day Egnatia Street, a *porticus* survived within a Jewish house until the 19th century (as depicted in the drawing by Cousinery), known by the Spanish name of *Las Incantadas*, or “the Idols.” This was a two-story colonnade and was all that survived of a magnificent early-3rd c. BC building, parts of which are now in the Louvre. The pilasters on the second story bore reliefs of mythological figures.

Among the city shrines, we must make note of the Sarapion on the western side of the city, which flourished, according to the numerous archaeological finds, in the Roman period. Although we do not know its exact borders, it seems to have been quite extensive. The most important of the buildings it included must have been a temple with a vestibule and a main hall with a niche for the cult statue; an underground crypt, which was found sealed, contained the cult herm of a bearded god. It is worth noting that this temple housed the cults of many deities, as the inscriptions inform us: Sarapis, Isis, Anubis, Osiris, Harpocrates, Aphrodite Omonoia, Athena, Zeus, and others.

The Severan Age, and the period that directly followed, were prosperous times for Thessaloniki. Under the Philhellene emperor Gordian III (238-244 AD), Thessaloniki received the title of *neokoros*, which identified it as the city hosting the official imperial cult temple of the province—an honor previously reserved for Beroia. Soon after, under the reign of Decius (249-251 AD), the city also received the honorary titles of *metropolis* and *colonia* as a reward for its successful repulsion of the Goths.

Indeed, the barbarian incursions of the mid-3rd c. AD were a milestone in the history of the city. The barbarian threat in the Balkans increased the strategic importance of Thessaloniki, whose walls were re-built in the middle of the century, after many centuries of neglect. The walls were reinforced by rectangular towers, and many parts are still visible today. This mid-3rd c. AD fortification

gives us the limits of the urban center. From this we know that Roman imperial Thessaloniki had an area of over 300 hectares. Thanks to the walls, the city was able to repel two Goth sieges, the first in 254 AD and the second in 268 AD. The residents attributed their success to the protection of Kabeiros, a god referred to in 3rd-c. inscriptions as *patrios theos*.

The city's significance during the 3rd c. AD determined its later fortunes. By the end of the century, Thessaloniki had been transformed from a provincial capital to an imperial residence. Under the new system of the Tetrarchy introduced by the emperor Diocletian in 293 AD, Maximianus Galerius was appointed Caesar of the eastern portion of the empire. After his decisive victory against the Persians in 297 AD, he made Thessaloniki his seat, as we know from the opening of an imperial mint in the city. The written sources tell us nothing about this decision of Galerius', nor do they refer to the construction of a palace, with the exception of a late source, which mentions that Galerius had erected *basileia* in Thessaloniki. As the archaeological finds show, however, he built an extensive palace compound in the eastern part of the city, which changed the city's face.

The visitor to Thessaloniki, crossing the main axis of Dimitriou Gounari Street, notices that there are portions of a large ancient building complex still standing along the length of the street, beginning right above Tsimiski Street not far from the sea and culminating in a magnificent circular building known as the "Rotunda." This was Galerius's palace complex, whose easternmost border, according to recent finds, was Filikis Etairias Street immediately inside the wall. The design of such an ambitious construction program, which included official halls, private quarters, baths, temples, and other monuments glorifying the Tetrarchy, could not have been an easy undertaking; the city limits were already prescribed, and the urban area was largely built up. Nevertheless, Galerius' architects succeeded in creating a magnificent imperial composition based on an imaginary lengthwise axis running through the entire complex. The result was two sub-complexes, which were closely linked architecturally and conceptually: the main palace in the south, and the monumental complex, containing the arch

and the Rotunda in the north, which stood on higher ground—both topographically and ideologically.

The main palace uncovered among the modern structures was built atop a lavishly decorated Roman villa. One of the main entrances to the palace was on the south side, which the visitor may have reached by a port. A large peristyle courtyard would have provided the venue for ceremonial gatherings. On the eastern *porticus*, there was a niche containing a statue now lost, as well as an elaborate marble arch. On the right side of the arch we see the owner of the palace, Maximianus Galerius, and on the left his wife Galeria Valeria, whose figure was later reworked to represent the *Tyche* of Thessaloniki. The northern *porticus* of the peristyle leads, through a propylon and a large vestibule, to what may have been the most luxurious part of the palace, the so-called Octagon. With an internal diameter of 30 meters, it was even larger in size than the Rotunda. Across from the entrance was a large niche, with six other, smaller ones on the perimeter. Its function has not been determined, but the lavish relief decoration depicting gods suggests that this may have been a throne room or temple. To the north, there is a smaller courtyard with peristyle, surrounded by rooms and a corridor decorated with mosaics. This is where the emperor's personal quarters must have been, for a luxurious bath and other hygiene facilities were discovered near its southern entrance. To the east, right on the axis of Dimitriou Gounari Street, lies the large basilica, which served as an audience hall and law court. It is 67 m long, with a large niche to the south and an entrance to the north. Further east, at present-day Ippodromiou Square, was the hippodrome, where the emperor followed the spectacles and communicated with his people. Further north along the axis of Dimitriou Gounari Street, we come across another luxuriously appointed palace chamber with a large niche on the north side. This may have been the *triclinium*, or official dining room. To the north of this, and up to the present-day Egnatia Street, we do not know what palace structures may have stood; excavations in the area have yielded very little, e.g. a portion of a mosaic floor.

The structures described above were connected with the northern part of the complex via a significant intervention in the city plan. The principal horizontal

street of the city, the Via Regia, which had hitherto run straight from west to east, culminating in the Cassandreotic Gate, now changed direction. Under the new plan, it now turned through the triumphal arch, known today as *Kamara*, which was placed at a low altitude, at about the same level as the Rotunda. Thus the street functioned as a connecting link between the main palace and the northern monumental complex. In the obtuse angle formed to the south of the arc (where the street had formerly run), a huge, lavish propylon was now erected, leading from the level of the arch via a monumental staircase to the lower level of the palace (about 3 m down). So the arch was not designed as an isolated structure, but rather incorporated into the broader design of the complex, a view reinforced by recent excavations in the area.

The triumphal arch, of which only the western part survives today, was erected between 299 and 303 AD, and may be the oldest structure in the entire complex. The relief decoration adorning the arch constitutes a panegyric praising the achievements of Galerius against the Persians in the East. The most formal scene depicts the four Tetrarchs as masters of the Universe standing among their patron gods. The frontal depiction of the rulers expresses a new model of authority, one that originates from the god. In my opinion, the triumphal arch constitutes a state monument functioning as the hub of a broader plan in this part of Thessaloniki. This conclusion is consistent with the role assumed by the new Tetrarchic seats in creating a new monumental framework, a “backdrop” fitting to receive the emperor and promote him using magnificent monuments, the likes of which had to that point existed only in Rome.

The high point of the entire building complex was the famous circular building, the Rotunda, which is reminiscent of the Pantheon of Hadrian in Rome. The prevailing view held that this was the Mausoleum of Galerius. However, it is very likely that it was the temple of the official gods of the Tetrarchy, Jupiter and Hercules, as well as a temple of the imperial cult, i.e., a Pantheon. Recent excavations in eastern Serbia (Gamzigrad), in the region of ancient Dardania, where Galerius came from, have uncovered a walled palace identified as the Romuliana, named after Galerius’s mother Romula. The Mausoleums of Galerius and his mother were found not far from this complex. Thus, the Rotunda in

Thessaloniki cannot have been the emperor's Mausoleum. Furthermore, it is known that Galerius did not die in Thessaloniki. In 311 AD, very ill, he abandoned the city. He died in or near Serdica (modern-day Sofia) and was buried in his homeland, at Romuliana.

Thessaloniki was founded by Cassander, a successor of Alexander who fostered dynastic ambitions and assumed the title of king. He built a large, important city that soon became the metropolis of Macedonia. Galerius Maximianus, a shepherd from Dardania, a brave soldier and a capable officer in the Roman army, rose to the highest ranks during the reign of Diocletian, and finally draped himself in the royal purple, first as Caesar, then as Augustus. Like every native of the Balkans, he was keenly aware of the charms of Thessaloniki, and stamped the city with his presence, transforming it into an imperial capital. A few years later, in 317, Thessaloniki passed to Constantine, who made it his strategic headquarters. Shortly before his final confrontation in 324 with Licinius, a battle that would make him a monarch, he spent a considerable amount of time in Thessaloniki, and dealt with the construction of its harbor (Zosimos 2,22,1) and other works, as we learn from Kedrinos (1,496): *και δη τα κατά χώραν και τόπους ερευνών τη Θεσσαλονίκη επιβαίνει, και τω τόπωι αρεσθείς δυσί χρόνοις εκεί διατρίβει, ναούς τε θαυμασίους και λουτρά και υδάτων εισαγωγάς κατασκευασάμενος ...* All this reveals the well-aimed hypothesis – or the probability of the hypothesis – that Thessaloniki was one of the cities that Constantine had considered as his new capital city before finally deciding in favor of Constantinople.

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