

STREETS AS CONTESTED SPACES IN ANCIENT MILETUS

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Abstract: *The contribution presents current research on the streets of the ancient metropolis of Miletus. Here we focus on the micro perspective of the residents. Through limited excavations and observations of marginal traces in public space, we have succeeded in gaining an idea of the diversity of urban streets and their use during the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods.*

Keywords: *Miletus; Grid plan; Contested spaces; Classical Antiquity.*

Resumo: *Este artigo apresenta pesquisas atuais sobre as ruas da antiga metrópole de Mileto. Aqui, concentramo-nos na perspectiva micro dos residentes. Através de escavações limitadas e observações de vestígios marginais no espaço público, conseguimos obter uma ideia da diversidade das ruas urbanas e seu uso durante os períodos helenístico e do Império Romano.*

Palavras-chave: *Mileto; Plano de grade; Espaços contestados; Antiguidade Clássica.*

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to modern observers of urban spaces, archaeologists face the problem that they encounter their object of study in an abandoned state. Apart from very specific cases like Pompeii, covered by the ashes of Vesuvius in 79 CE in its heyday, most cities of the past have been given up at some point or they are so thoroughly transformed that direct traces of ancient daily life are no longer preserved. Therefore, studies on ancient streets often focus on rather general aspects such as their contribution to the layout of urban space. Changing to the micro-perspective however reveals a surprising diversity of street designs and forms of usage, and unfading marginal traces like scratchings, markings, and scribbles are reflections of at least some practices of daily life¹. A close reading of their position, form, and execution unfolds how different agents adapted and improved the built environment to their daily needs.

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¹ Cp. HAUG, MERTEN, 2020: 6-7.

In the following, we will discuss this in more detail using the case study of Miletus, a long-term excavation of the University of Hamburg².

Miletus, located on the west coast of Asia Minor or modern Turkey, was a big city in many periods of antiquity. The oldest remains of the settlement date from the late fourth millennium BCE, and from that time onwards, we can trace an almost continuous development until the 15th century CE³. Urbanists mainly know Miletus because it was the hometown of the ancient city planner Hippodamos, who lived in the 5th century BCE. Handbooks sometimes attribute him as the inventor of the grid plan, which is not true, but he still seems to have played an important role in the development of the planned orthogonal city. It is not surprising that generations of researchers have therefore searched for traces of Hippodamian urban planning in Miletus itself⁴.

Even the first excavator, Theodor Wiegand, began his work at Miletus by uncovering fortification walls and streets rather than searching for monumental buildings. Understanding both as crucial elements of the urban layout, he started to reconstruct the general plan of the city with its characteristic grid system as soon as he had uncovered the first sections of paved roads⁵. In the following decades, archaeologists repeatedly addressed the question of the Milesian street system and reconstructed several ideal plans. All of them inevitably grounded on relatively few clues; due to the size of the city area, it was only possible to uncover a small selection of streets⁶. This situation changed in 1993 when large-scale geophysical surveys allowed exploring a great part of the city surface in a comparatively short time. Measurements with magnetometer as well as ground-penetrating radar produced rather clear images of rectangular streets. For the first time, a reliable picture of the whole city plan was drawn⁷. The plan depicts a network of streets that extends over the entire 150-hectare city area with few variations.

This idea of homogeneous Milesian streets, however, is also a reflection of the geophysical survey method, which only measures anomalies in comparison to the

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³ KÄPPEL *et al.*, 2006; DALLY *et al.*, 2009; NIEWÖHNER, 2016: 17-28.

⁴ VON GERKAN, 1924: 28-61; CASTAGNOLI, 1971: 65-72; HOEPFNER, SCHWANDNER, 1994: 17-22; HÖCKER, 2006; WEBER, 2007: 327-347.

⁵ WIEGAND, 1901: fig. 2; WIEGAND, 1911: pl. 1. For the history of research at Miletus: BERNIS, 2015.

⁶ Cp. the general overview of the history of research regarding the Milesian city plan by WEBER, 2007.

⁷ RABBEL, STÜMPPEL, WOELZ, 2006; WEBER, 2007: 354-360.

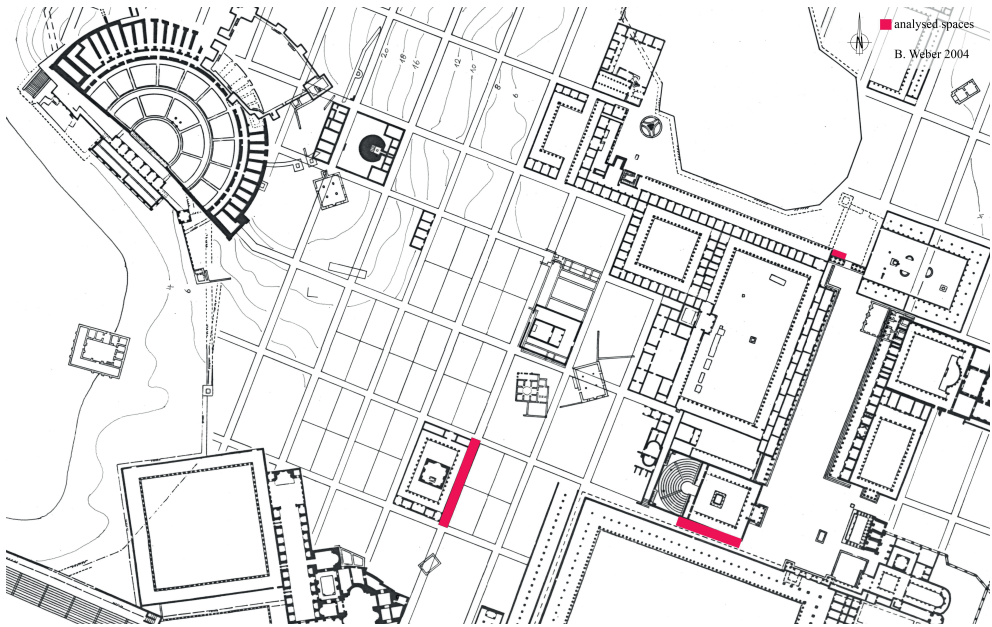


Fig. 1. Overview of the analysed areas in the city centre of Miletus. Source: Plan of Miletus by WEBER, 2004 with alterations by L. OSTHOF

surrounding ground. Neither does it provide us with clues to reconstruct the historical development of the streets, nor does it display their surface. In other words, with the geophysical images, we detect a road system, but not the street space.

Our aim in the current research programme at Miletus is therefore, to examine the streets from the micro-perspective of their users. To achieve this goal, we are conducting a number of very limited excavations in different parts of the city. At the same time, we produce detailed documentation of permanent marginal traces of usage in sections of streets excavated in past decades. In the process, a surprising diversity of street designs and forms of usage became apparent — a diversity that seems to have emerged from the limits of urban planning coupled with the conflicting interests of the residents. For both cases, we will now give a number of examples from the Hellenistic and Roman imperial periods, i.e. the 300 years before and after our era.

One of the results is the understanding that the grid plan that supposedly shaped the cityscape over long periods was often characterised by considerable instability. An *insula* and its surrounding streets in the Hellenistic-Roman city centre may exemplify this observation⁸.

⁸ KLEINER, MÜLLER-WIENER, 1972: 47-54 and Beil. 1.

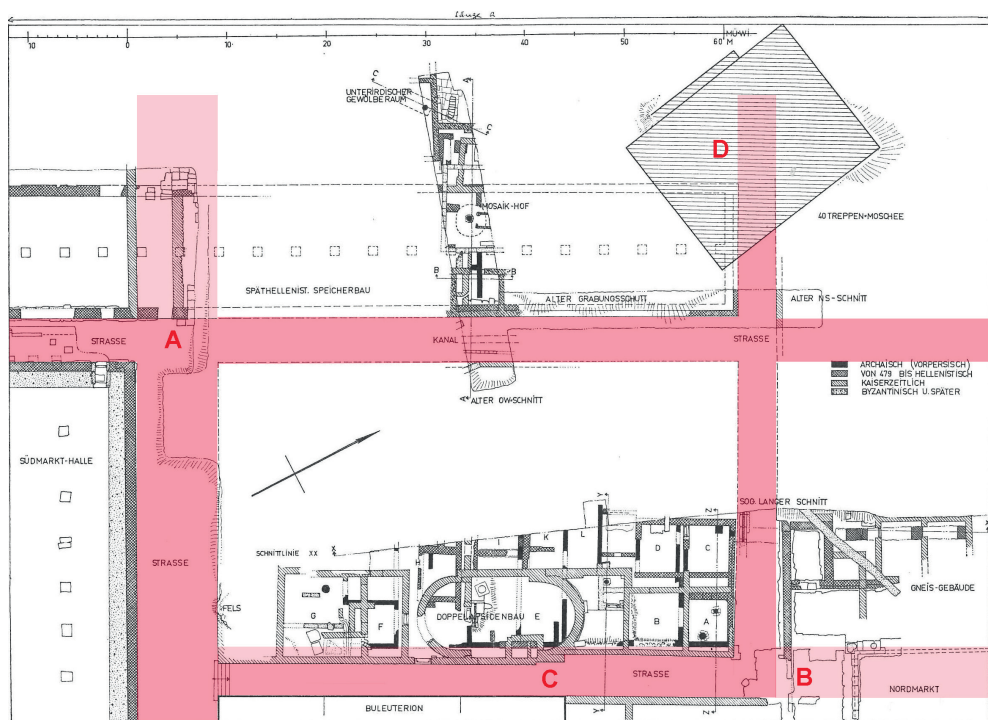


Fig. 2. Insula west of the Bouleuterion. Source: KLEINER, MÜLLER-WIENER, 1972 with alterations by Ch. BERNIS

At (A) a huge magazine was built over an important connecting road in the IInd century BCE⁹. From then on, it was no longer passable, and the inhabitants had to take long detours. Later, the northern part of the hall was dismantled, and the street reopened. Another street, however, remained closed, after the Milesians had created a court-like sanctuary in the IInd century BCE, framed by halls, one of which extended over the road (B)¹⁰. In the Roman imperial period, a private homeowner extended his house into the street space through continual alterations at (C)¹¹. As a result, the street became considerably narrower in its southern section. Finally, much later, in the Middle Ages, a mosque was built at (D) above another street in the area¹². All of these interventions brought about a fundamental change in the use of the street space for the inhabitants of Miletus. We cannot assume that they always had collectively negotiated the conditions of these alterations. While the magazine had hardly been erected and demolished again without public consent, and the expansion of the sanctuary certainly followed a public decision, the extension of the private house

⁹ KNACKFUSS, 1924: 156-180; NIEWÖHNER, 2016: 100-105.

¹⁰ EMMER, 2013: 53-59.

¹¹ KLEINER, MÜLLER-WIENER, 1972: 64-65.

¹² Mosque of the 40 steps: WULZINGER, WITTEK, SARRE, 1935: 38; NIEWÖHNER, 2016: 49-50.



Fig. 3
Section of the so-called
plateia with rock
Source: Photo by L.
Steinmann

area onto the adjacent street seems more like the arbitrary action of a house owner who shifted his walls as part of a reconstruction project.

Another result of our investigations is the variety of road surfaces we encountered. In several areas, the excavations yielded the expected cobblestone streets. Some of them were paved with large, more or less regular, and densely laid slabs (Fig. 6)¹³, while on other streets the paving is very irregular. At several places rocks have been left standing, protruding into the street¹⁴.

Sometimes, we could not observe a solid pavement at all. According to our recent excavations, even in the central part of the city simple tamped clay could form the road surface¹⁵. These observations point to the fact that the street space of Miletus was quite diverse, while the extent of central planning penetration seems to have been rather low. As in other cases, neighbours may have been responsible for the construction of the roads¹⁶.

Marginal traces on the pavement underline the impression of a strong imprint of the street space by individual agents or smaller groups that appropriated it in competition to each other. In the following we will argue that on the one hand, these marginal traces prove gradual individual adaptation of public space, on the other,

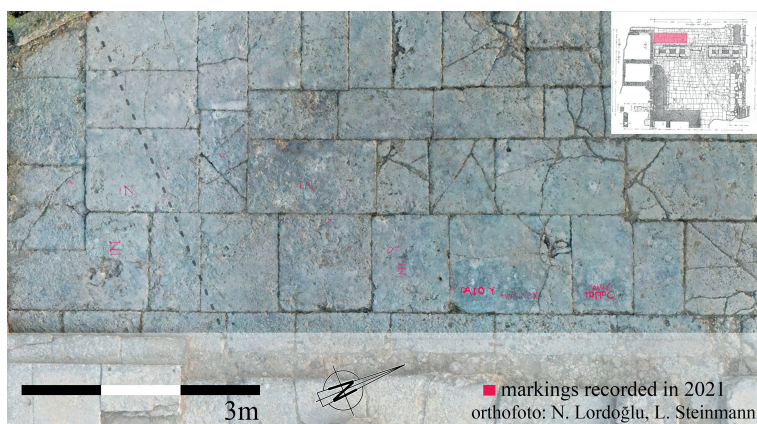
¹³ Cp. VON GERKAN, 1922: pl. 12; WEBER, 2004: Beil. 2.

¹⁴ DIETRICH, 2016 has first observed this phenomenon. Detailed documentation of such rocks in the street space of Miletus is currently prepared.

¹⁵ Results from 2021 are unpublished yet, cp. however WEBER, 2007: 354.

¹⁶ HEINZELMANN, 2003.

Fig. 4
Harbour Gate with
inscriptions
Source: Orthophoto
by L. Steinmann,
N. Lordoğlu



they reveal collectively planned changes. Both are based on communal practices. The streets of our case studies (as marked in Fig. 1) were framed with walls and porticos from which only the basis or walls endured. Many other inscriptions, such as building or honorary inscriptions, which point to various actors, have not been preserved in situ. Therefore, we focus on the evidence on the ground level¹⁷.

The first case study is the pavement of the Harbour gate, which exemplifies how public space was inscribed and thus occupied by individuals. The Harbour Gate forms the architectural frame of the transition of the main harbour to the so-called *plateia*, a wide street in the city centre¹⁸. Its pavement dates to the 1st century CE¹⁹. Already in the first stone plan, the excavators integrated roughly the inscriptions and incisions on the pavement²⁰. In the north-western corner of the gate, three inscriptions are preserved, so-called *topos* (gr. place) inscriptions²¹.

The inscriptions were placed on two slabs next to the gateway facing towards the gate. Gaius inscribed his name on two slabs, Myrtilos inbetween the two²². They were carried out with different techniques or tools. Therefore, the inscriptions were applied subsequently and by divergent agents — Gaius and Myrtilos — probably with the same intent²³. Both inscriptions visually occupy the spot on the paving next to the gate. One does not overwrite the other. Their orientation implies that the producers

¹⁷ A detailed study of the public spaces in Miletus will be submitted in the doctoral thesis of Ann Lauren Osthoof.

¹⁸ VON GERKAN, 1922: 45-47, 54-55.

¹⁹ VON GERKAN, 1922: 47, 54. Armin von Gerkan considers it to be younger than the Harbour Gate, which he dates to the first half of the first century CE.

²⁰ VON GERKAN, 1922: plate XVIII.

²¹ I. Milet 192 c-e. The letter combinations on the pavement do not react or interact with the urban environment. They can be interpreted as architectural markers. *Topos-Inscriptions* in other ancient cities e.g. LAVAN, 2015: 333.

²² I. Milet VI 4: 151, 464; I. Milet 355, I. Milet 394. The name Myrtilos is only attested in this instance in Miletus. In Roman times the name Gaius is attested with two additional *topos*-inscriptions in Miletus and on several other instances.

²³ VON GERKAN, 1922: 47. Armin von Gerkan proposes that they marked market stalls.



Fig. 5
Southern basis of the *Bouleuterion*
Source: Photo: A. L. OSTHOF

were in the same position when executing it. Furthermore, communication with recipients seems not to have been the primary aim of the producers, as passers-by would have seen the inscriptions upside down. So, we interpret these *topos*-inscriptions as individual acts that should be understood as «Gaius was here» rather than «place of Gaius». Their *topos* inscriptions display that Gaius and Myrtilos stayed at the front of the Harbour Gate, where they could see and be seen well. Sitting down on the steps of the gate, they seem to have self-interestedly inscribed their names. The individual occupation of the space is further supported by a graffito of two heart-shaped signs. Our own experiments showed that such simple inscriptions can be made quickly, easily, and without training. Additionally, dirt would have easily made these shallow inscriptions disappear. Altogether, we should understand these inscriptions not as durable memorials, but rather as traces of ephemeral actions.

Public space was also inscribed individually with non-textual markers, as the second case study, street 19/T-V at the *Bouleuterion*, demonstrates.

The abrasion on the sidewalk of the street documents its frequent use. The basis of the *Bouleuterion* (the town hall) was partly incised with geometric forms and gameboards. They prove that the inhabitants or visitors of Miletus utilized this step-like structure for sitting, chatting, doodling, and gaming as it was a perfect



Fig. 6
Street Q with two
geometric forms
Source: Photo A. L.
OSTHOF

spot to observe who was entering the city centre from the west. The preserved signs are geometric forms, some can be identified as squares with four spokes; others are just lines or circles. The lines that form a square with four spokes (S.3) were used to play Three Men's Morris, today better known as Tic-Tac-Toe²⁴. Some incisions were made on the back part of the lower step after the upper step had been destroyed. These are deeper preserved than the ones on the surfaces of steps. Accordingly, the inscriptions and incisions were applied consecutively as individual acts. In general, one could argue that the spot kept its attractiveness over a long time. This is also supported by the evidence of overwriting. Even after the partial destruction of the building, the habitus of incising the spot did not change.

The third case study exemplifies how the public space was inscribed in a planned way, thereby adding a further function. At street Q/19-20 seven geometric signs have been chiselled on the slabs in the middle of the street²⁵.

It appears that in almost regular intervals circular signs were incised on the pavement²⁶. Understanding them as game boards seems rather implausible, as not only their execution but also playing on them would have occupied the street, but being geometric in shape, they could have been ambiguous or better multifunctional²⁷. Probably, they have served also as illiterate markers for rituals²⁸. In favour of a collective and systematic execution speak the intervals as well as the choice of seven different

²⁴ BELL, 1979: 91-92.

²⁵ WEBER, 2004: plate 2. Due to a trajanic inscription, we can date the paving: I. Milet 401; WEBER, 2004: 101; NIEWÖHNER, 2016: 36.

²⁶ These thoughts are preliminary since the campaign of 2021 is not fully evaluated.

²⁷ First working typology for game-boards in antiquity: BELL, ROUECHÉ, 2007: 106-109. Yet, they are frequently attested in Asia Minor e.g. Ephesos, Aphrodisias, and Sagalassos. cf.: BELL, 2007: 98-99; ROUECHÉ, 2007: 102; LAVAN, 2008: 207.

²⁸ ROUECHÉ, 2007: 103 no. 9 Fig. 12.3. For textual procession markers on pavement cf. HAMMERSCHMIED, 2019.

designs. Since they are incised in a section of the street that runs parallel to a Heroon, i.e. a public place of veneration of a hero, we can perhaps understand them as small remains of public practices that took place on the spot²⁹. Even if the visibility of the signs might have been reduced due to dust and dirt, we have to assume a collective insider knowledge of the practices. In comparison to the inscriptions at the Harbour Gate, we can deduce that the producers used the same tools but adapted the street space with a different intent. This is made clear by the divergent placement and an apparent collective plan.

Our case studies presented how divergent intents have been carried out with the same tools and in the same type of space (ground level). The inscriptions at the harbour gate and the geometric forms on the sidewalk of street 19/T-V refer and react to the function of the space in the cityscape. They use existing structures and enhance their character, e.g. improving resting spots with game boards. These inscriptions can hardly be connected to specific groups of agents, as the streets were publicly accessible. Their technical execution did not require any special knowledge, nor were they difficult to read. In contrast, the geometric forms on street Q/19-20 next to the Heroon prove a collective, planned adaption with a larger extent.

To conclude, the markings on ground level have a low authoritative quality and reflect bottom-up adaptations of the urban space. They convey insider knowledge of individuals or possibly of collective instructions that are not necessary for the general functioning of the infrastructure. Seen together with the structural diversity of the streets, described in the beginning of our contribution, the inscriptions support the image of an appropriation that is at least in part decentralized and uncontrolled, and leads to a continuous change of the street space.

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²⁹ WEBER, 2004:154 on the architectural features designed for activities. HERDA, 2013: 76 on indications for cultic activities in Heroon III. For intramural burials in imperial times see also: SCHÖRNER, 2007; CALANDRA, GORRINI, 2008.

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