The Hellenistic period witnessed a second rise of the Greek city, when Greek-style urbanism spread from the western Mediterranean to the depths of present-day Afghanistan. New poleis were founded by Alexander and his successors, but ancient Greek cities flourished too. Urbanization à la grecque reached levels that would remain unequalled until the modern era. All this time the polis proved an attractive model: rural communities or indigenous settlements adopted the character of a polis. New poleis continued to be created or re-created under the Roman emperors, starting with Augustus, and well into the empire. And the polis remained flourishing up to the end of antiquity. Yet, even if these cities bore the name and title of polis, scholars have long refused to take this claim seriously. Scholarship of the political history of the later Greek city was long phrased in terms of decline resulting from a classicizing myopia that privileged the experiences of the best-documented case, i.e. fifth and fourth-century Athens. For most scholars, the rise of Macedonia signalled the beginning of the end. As recently as 1990, the sociologist W.G. Runciman could still write about the history of the later Greek city as an ‘evolutionary dead end’. He stands in a long tradition of scholarship, yet the end of the polis has been remarkably hard to find. The great French scholar Louis Robert never tired of arguing that...
the Greek city did not die at Chaeronea, but that it was actually about to reach its greatest apogee in the Hellenistic and imperial periods. Robert’s view was taken up and refined by Philippe Gauthier and his followers, who argued that the Greek polis was certainly vibrant until the advent of Rome in the eastern Mediterranean. This view is now widely shared, and is becoming a new orthodoxy. More recently, scholars have even argued for the continued significance of the polis as a form of social and political organization well into the imperial period.

In the Hellenistic period, political life had entered a paradoxical stage which defies easy categorization. Civic spirit and local pride were still common among the local elites, but civic identity was also important at the level of ordinary citizens. Moreover, although Hellenistic kings and dynasts, and later Roman emperors, turned international politics into an uneven playing field, most cities still seem to have enjoyed a degree of autonomy, and sometimes freedom. Greek intra-city diplomacy was flourishing. John Ma has recently described this situation in terms of peer polity interaction: ‘The concept promotes the study of equipollent, interconnected communities, which must be considered qua network rather than by trying to differentiate between core and periphery. I believe that this model might help organize the evidence about the Hellenistic poleis into a single interpretive picture, which will illustrate the continued vitality not simply of the polis, but also of a whole network of peer polities’. Even though this model does not fully take into account that the cities also had to deal with the very real concentration of power in the hands of kings and emperors, it is still the best model around if we want to understand how the Greek cities imagined their own position in the world, as well as the nature of their relationship with other Greek cities.

One particularly important aspect of this model is that it draws attention to the remarkable degree of uniformity of this new Greek urban world. This was particularly evident in architectural terms. Most cities were laid out along the familiar Hippodamian grid, and domestic architecture for the ordinary citizens does not seem to have varied greatly. On the other hand, elite families marked their rising ambitions and growing power by build-

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4 Robert 1969, 42.
5 Gauthier 1984; his position is taken further by the various articles in Fröhlich and Müller 2005.
6 Ma 2000; Zuiderhoek 2008; van Nijf 2011b.
7 Ma 2003, 15.