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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*Alessandro Launaro*

Towns and urban life have existed for a very long time, well before the Romans, and yet they came to represent a quintessential feature of the Roman world. Throughout Antiquity most of the population lived in the open countryside, but their settlements and lives almost invariably gravitated around – and indeed supported – a sprawling network of towns. Their relationship was very much symbiotic as urban sites ‘were administrative centres, they were garrison towns, they were centres of exchange both as between towns and regions, and between townsmen and the surrounding countryside’ (Hopkins 1978, 75; also Zuiderhoek 2017, 37–55). The specific conditions brought about by the Roman political unification of a vast empire could not but enhance the role towns played in connecting peoples and cultures, easing the (re)distribution of resources whilst extending the reach of political control and effective administration. Even more than this, the Roman empire could not have existed the way it did without towns and urban life: to understand Roman urbanism is to understand a fundamental dimension of Roman civilization.

Luckily for us, the sources at our disposal for the study of Roman urbanism are numerous, varied and – as this volume attests – ever-increasing. Towns not only occupied central stage in the lives of the literate elite whose accounts are preserved in ancient texts, but they left plenty of archaeological traces. The exploration of individual urban sites has undoubtedly added the most to our understanding of Roman urbanism, highlighting not only recurring features, but also the varied range of solutions adopted by different people in different places at different times. These individual studies, and the specific evidence they are based on, constitute the very foundation without which no synthesis of higher level could effectively exist (de Ligt & Bintliff 2019, 28).

The study of Roman urbanism – especially its early (Republican) phases – is indeed extensively rooted in the evidence provided by a series of key sites, several of them located in Italy. Some of these Italian towns have received a great deal of scholarly attention in the past and they are routinely referenced as ‘textbook examples’

in scholarly discussion, framing much of our understanding of the broad phenomenon of Roman urbanism (Gros & Torelli 2007, 5–270; Sewell 2010; Laurence *et al.* 2011, 37–63; Yegül & Favro 2019, 4–111). However, some discussions of these sites tend to fall back on well-established interpretations, with relatively little or no awareness of more recent developments. This is remarkable, since our understanding of these sites has evolved significantly thanks to new archaeological fieldwork, often characterised by the pursuit of new questions and the application of new approaches. Similarly, new evidence from other sites has prompted a reconsideration of time-honoured views about the nature, role and long-term trajectory of Roman towns in Italy.

This awareness lies behind the decision to devote the 2022 Laurence Seminar to a conversation about *Roman Urbanism in Italy: recent discoveries and new directions*. This event, which took place at the Faculty of Classics of the University of Cambridge on 27–28 May 2022, aimed at bringing together scholars whose recent work at key sites is helping to expand, change or challenge our current knowledge and understanding of Roman urbanism in Italy. The selection of case-studies was also guided by the desire to offer as representative a picture as possible of Roman urbanism in Italy, in terms of variety of urban types, chronological range (Mid Republic to Late Antiquity – and beyond), and geographic coverage (North, Central and Southern Italy; both Tyrrhenian and Adriatic side of the Peninsula). The individual contributions were grouped thematically, and this structure is reflected in the parts in which this volume is divided.

The body of available evidence for the study of Roman urbanism has been steadily increasing, thanks in no little part to the integrated application of new approaches (Part I). As several of the contributions in this volume make clear, remote sensing has played a crucial role in this. The case of Falerii Novi (Millett) is especially notable: one of the earliest Roman towns to be subjected to full-scale geophysical prospection, it provides concrete illustration not only of what these methods can reveal about the layout of ancient cities, but also the range of questions such evidence can be used to answer. The systematic application of non-intrusive methodologies within an overbuilt environment and the integration of different datasets is what allowed the ‘Rome Transformed Project’ (Haynes *et al.*) to reconstruct and visualise the development of a sector of Rome’s periphery, the eastern Caelian, in the 1st–2nd centuries AD. It is indeed by combining and integrating a varied range of archaeological approaches, methods and techniques – and their resulting evidence – that best results can be obtained, as illustrated by ongoing fieldwork at Aquinum (Ceraudo).

The availability of new evidence is naturally bound to affect existing interpretations, even in the case of those ‘textbook sites’ whose understanding is often taken as more or less established (Part II). Nowhere this is more evident than at Cosa (De Giorgi), a site which has much contributed to framing the study of Roman urbanism generally, and (Latin) colonies specifically: once again its interpretation is being enriched by new data, prompting a further reappraisal of its early phases.

At Fregellae (Diosono), a unique site due to its being a 'closed context' from the Republican period, a review of the available evidence and associated documentation provides new insights about the development of key buildings and aspects of daily life in a period which is not particularly well known. New work around the *forum* of Alba Fucens (Evers) has expanded our understanding of this other important site, providing new evidence of the monumental transformation undergone by the town at the end of the Republic and during the Principate.

Recent work has further confirmed the varied range of urban solutions adopted across Roman Italy in response to local conditions (Part III). Not the only site known to have done so, Lucus Feroniae (Kay *et al.*) featured the bare essentials of a Roman town (i.e. a *forum* and a series of public buildings around it) even though it served a fundamentally rural population living dispersed in the countryside. As the case of Septempeda makes clear (Vermeulen), the process of town formation could vary significantly, and new towns could develop organically as a local initiative aimed at taking advantage of the territorial infrastructure promoted by the Romans.

As conditions changed, so did towns. The long-term development of Roman urbanism therefore reflects – and may thus be used to illuminate – broader transformations taking place both locally and across Italy more generally (Part IV). Recent excavations at Lunae (Menchelli *et al.*) have revealed a series of distinctive phases of occupation that are quite indicative of the general development of the town. A combination of full-coverage geophysical prospection, systematic analysis of the ploughsoil assemblage and excavation has made it possible to outline the long-term trajectory of Interamna Lirenas (Launaro), with potential implications for our understanding of Italy in the 2nd century AD. Comparable patterns have been identified at Aeclanum (Russell & De Simone), another relatively small town whose place in relation to the communication network guaranteed its success, particularly from the 2nd century AD onwards.

As several Roman towns continued to be occupied in the Late Antique and medieval periods, these changes became even more significant (Part V). However, patterns of both continuity and marked transformation are attested at Aquileia (Basso), whose strategic position guaranteed its continued relevance in relation to trade and supply in the 4th–5th centuries AD. The crucial importance of Parma (Morigi) in relation to the communication network can be clearly appreciated when considering the long and articulated history of its bridge – or rather bridges – along the route of the *via Aemilia*.

Notwithstanding the thematic organization adopted by this volume, the significance of each of these case studies is undoubtedly much broader. All these recent discoveries can indeed contribute to review and revise our understanding of the development of Italy in the Roman period (Patterson). In this sense, we hope that this volume will provide not only an accessible and up-to-date overview of current approaches to the study of Roman urbanism, but also a useful resource for those researching the archaeology and history of Roman Italy.

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