ROMAN URBANISM IN ITALY: EXPLORING NEW AND TRADITIONAL APPROACHES

ELLIS (S.J.R.), EMMERSON (A.L.C.), DICUS (K.D.) *The Porta Stabia Neighborhood at Pompeii. Volume I: Structure, Stratigraphy, and Space*. Pp. xx + 758, b/w & colour figs, b/w & colour ills, b/w & colour maps. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. Cased, £145, US$190. ISBN: 978-0-19-286694-3.

HAUG (A.), HIELSCHER (A.), KRÜGER (A.-L.) (edd.) *Neighbourhoods and City Quarters in Antiquity. Design and Experience*. (Decor. Decorative Principles in Late Republican and Early Imperial Italy 7.) Pp. viii + 176, b/w & colour ills, b/w & colour maps. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2023. Cased, £109.50, €119.95, US$131.99. ISBN: 978-3-11-123802-9. Open access.

FLEURY (P.), MADELEINE (S.) (edd.) *Topographie et urbanisme de la Rome antique. Actes du colloque organisé à Caen (11–13 décembre 2019)*. Pp. 490, b/w & colour ills, b/w & colour maps. Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 2022. Paper, €55. ISBN: 978-2-38185-176-1.

CALDELLI (M.L.), LAUBRY (N.), ZEVI (F.) (edd.) *Ostia e Portus dalla Repubblica alla tarda Antichità. Studi di archeologia e di storia urbana sui porti di Roma. Atti del sesto seminario ostiense (Ostia Antica-Roma, 10–11 aprile 2019)*. (Collection de L'École française de Rome 612.) Pp. vi + 408, b/w & colour figs, b/w & colour ills, colour maps. Rome: École française de Rome, 2023. Paper, €58. ISBN: 978-2-7283-1597-0.

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INTRODUCTION

After reading these volumes one can hardly conclude otherwise than that the study of urban space in Roman Italy is thriving. These large volumes, collectively exceeding 1,800 pages and comprising 86 chapters/articles (in addition to supplementary materials), include contributions in four languages – though, perhaps surprisingly, none contain contributions in German. The array of contributors suggests that even more modern languages could have been included, if desired. The authors range from early career scholars to renowned professors.

These works represent only a fraction of the extensive recent scholarship on Roman urbanism in Italy, which consists of countless articles, several books and even entire book series. One might even assert that Roman urbanism is currently a popular topic.

Although the study of the Roman cityscape has long held a significant place in research on antiquity, as much of the surviving literature is set in Rome or other urban environments, it is likely that more in total has been published on Roman urbanism in recent years than ever before. Yet, if we consider the proportion of all research on the Roman world, the figures may not differ significantly from earlier periods – depending, of course, on how one defines scholarly work on Roman urbanism. This enduring scholarly tradition is clearly reflected in these four books.

Even so, the numbers are impressive; thus, I focus on the quality. The quality of publications – particularly those with multiple contributors – is an ongoing topic among scholars (see e.g. M. Smith's blog posts published already in 2007: http://publishingarchaeology.blogspot.com/2007/08/why-are-so-many-edited-volumes.html). Quality is obviously very subjective. Someone with little preliminary knowledge likely values a publication differently from someone who has worked for decades on the subject. Additionally, a polished appearance and well-written text might lead us to believe that a publication is of high quality, but the primary purpose of research is to produce new information. Consequently, my aim is to assess the value of the research as new work, evaluate how it has been presented, and explore ways in which we can improve these processes. Although my discussion is centred around these four books, I would argue that the topics raised represent the field more generally – my own work included – and perhaps even reflect the level of the study of antiquity and history in general. Consequently, these considerations extend beyond the readership of these books.

PUBLISHING EXCAVATIONS

There is a substantial amount of archaeological excavation work underpinning these publications. *The Porta Stabia* book is one of the outcomes of the University of Cincinnati's extensive excavation project in the southern part of Pompeii (*insulae* I,1 and VIII,7). In several contributions of *Ostia e Portus* (e.g. G. Mainet, 'Prolégomènes à l'étude morphologique des quartiers occidentaux d'Ostie (IV^{e} siècle av J.-C. – II^{e} siècle apr. J.-C.'; M. David and S. De Togni, 'La città che sale. I rialzamenti dei livelli d'uso nel suburbio marittimo di Ostia antica'; M. Turci, 'Dinamiche urbane pre-adrianee nel settore costiero della città di Ostia: nuovi dati dalle insulae delle c.d. Terme Marittime e delle Terme di Porta Marina'; É. Bukowiecki and M. Mimmo, 'Infrastrutture portuali a Portus: le recenti indagini dell'École française de Rome'; J. Bermejo Meléndez et al., 'El muelle este-oeste de Portus y sus ambientes, primeros datos sobre su configuración arquitectónica'; C. D'Amassa et al., 'Portus: lo scavo di un isolato presso la fossa Traiana. Continuità, cesura e occupazione sporadica tra età imperiale, tardoantica e altomedioevale (II–VIII secolo d.C.)'; P. Germoni and C. Genovese, 'Persistenze e transformazioni: il complesso monumentale di Sant'Ippolito all'Isola Sacra') and *Topographie et urbanisme de la Rome antique* (e.g. P. Baldassarri, 'L'area a Nord della Colonna Traiana e il Tempio dei diui Traiano e Plotina: riflessioni in merito alle indagini di Palazzo Valentini'; J. Thuillier, 'Le siège des quatre factions du cirque au Champ de Mars. Retour sur les fouilles du Palais Farnèse (1974)'; F. Coarelli, 'La découverte du temple de Jupiter Tonans dans l'area Capitolina') the analyses of both new and old excavations play a major role. Consequently, it is worth thinking about how to publish contributions that rely heavily on excavation data, such as context sheets, field reports and photographs.

These books contain numerous SUs (stratigraphic units) and other abbreviations representing the excavated contexts and different phases. Ellis, Emmerson and Dicus (*The Porta Stabia*, p. 7) observe that excavation publications often focus heavily on detailed descriptions of data, which can be challenging for readers to follow. Their aim is to emphasise narrative, thereby making the book more reader-friendly. In my opinion, they partially succeed in this aim. There are instances, however, where the descriptions of stratigraphic units and their relationships become overwhelming. These are the parts where one's focus tends to slacken, and fully understanding them requires considerable attention.

Regarding new information, recent archaeological excavations meet the criteria for publication and thus merit dissemination. The challenge lies in determining how and where to publish this information. Online publication might be a more suitable format in many cases. While printed publications can be justified by concerns about the longevity and preservation of electronic formats, similar arguments could be made in favour of parchment.

For excavation publications, the hierarchy based on the level of data analysis and interpretation is crucial. Organising publications according to this hierarchy will best serve the reader, and *The Porta Stabia* provides a laudable example of how to organise data in a reader-friendly manner: the appendices. They present interpretations and analyses of various features, such as cooking facilities and soak-aways, followed by concise descriptions of these features – this descriptive section could also be published only online. I can see that the appendices will have many readers and users, and ideally, if feasible, making them open access would be advantageous for writers and potential readers.

In general, print publications should prioritise high-level interpretations – really focusing on the narrative. Such a narrative should be clearly supported by excavation data, such as stratigraphic relationships, but their descriptions should be minimised, as it makes the text easier to follow. While it is essential to document all stratigraphic relationships and associated excavation data, these details could be primarily reserved for online formats. Online publications could use hyperlinks to facilitate easy navigation between different data relationships.

In the future, technology might partly eliminate the problem of how to publish excavation results in a manner that is easy – or at least easier – to follow. The development of 3D models of excavation processes (N. Dell'Unto and G. Landeschi, *Archaeological 3D GIS* [2022], pp. 55–82) might offer a solution that could replace traditional descriptions of stratigraphic sequences. Such models would allow users to explore and interpret stratigraphic relationships interactively and visually. However, we are still some distance from fully realising this capability, and it will remain necessary to include detailed field notes to clarify the conditions at the time of excavation. Therefore, it is crucial to carefully consider the methods of publishing excavations to ensure that the extensive work conducted in the field is effectively communicated and preserved.

DIGITAL TOOLS

While these books are relatively recent, the information they contain has been developed over a long period, and their approach to digital technologies reflects earlier perspectives. Technology in these publications is primarily utilised as a tool for managing and organising information, such as the database for the Porta Stabia project (which apparently is not online yet). Additionally, technology is used to reconstruct past appearances, as demonstrated by the models from the University of Caen. However, new digital tools have also demonstrated significant potential for the analysis phase of research and should be incorporated into it more extensively in the future.

The models from Caen appear particularly versatile and information-rich. They include several notable examples, such as a 3D model based on the miniature model of ancient

Rome by P. Pigot, which is housed in Caen. Additionally, there is a virtual model of Rome (despite multiple attempts and various methods, I was unable to access it). Scholars often critique 3D models and other representations of the past. It is relatively easy to identify problematic aspects, such as those lacking source documentation or elements that appear inconsistent with established knowledge. Many contributions in *Topographie et urbanisme de la Rome antique* appropriately address these issues, highlighting the challenges and limitations associated with building models (e.g. M. Royo, '«Entre les murs»: la périphérie de Rome à la lecture du relief de Paul Bigot'; P. Liverani et al., 'Dai Castra Noua alla Basilica Lateranensis, trasformazioni della Roma costantiniana'; C. Davoine, 'Les décors qui éprouvent la vieillesse du temps: réflexions sur l'état de dégradation des bâtiments dans la Rome du IVe siècle'). Nonetheless, these models have the potential to add an extra layer of analysis, but this is rarely integrated into the analytical framework of the chapters. Instead, their role often remains limited to mere visualisations. This has long been the role of various visual reconstructions of ancient Rome, as is demonstrated by L. Ungaro in her knowledgeable chapter on historical representations of the Imperial Fora and the so-called *Mercati di Traiano*.

Nonetheless, there are chapters where new technologies play a significant role. For instance, P. Carafa presents an archaeological information system – likely inspired by geographical information systems – and demonstrates how it is used to map the locations of pieces from the Severan marble plan. A. Vincent has modelled various soundscapes of public spaces in Rome, contributing to the emerging field of studying auditory environments in the Roman world through quantitative methods and models (see also, K. Kopij and A. Pilch, 'The Acoustics of Contiones, or How Many Romans Could Have Heard Speakers', *Open Archaeology* 5 [2019], and J. Veitch, 'Soundscape of the street: Architectural acoustics in Ostia', in: E. Betts [edd.], *Senses of the Empire: Multisensory Approaches to Roman Culture* [2017]). E. Poehler's chapter in *Neighbourhoods and City Quarters in Antiquity* employs various models of Pompeii's street network to explore potential neighbourhoods. However, he concludes that these models are not particularly effective for precisely defining neighbourhood boundaries. Instead, they underscore the fluidity of the concept of neighbourhood.

Traditional methods remain integral to the field, but digital tools are increasingly important for the analytical aspects of research on ancient urban spaces. While some may argue that these new methods present an overly rationalised view of the past, reducing its complexity to mere numbers, modelling is fundamentally aligned with the principles of ancient research methodologies (see S. Simelius, 'Moving magistrates in a Roman city space: the Pompeian model', in: A. Lopez Garcia [edd.], *Running Rome and its Empire: The Places of Roman Governance* [2024]). We often use the limited surviving evidence to construct a more comprehensive picture, such as using brief literary passages to reconstruct centuries of history or applying our understanding of language to reconstruct partially preserved texts. In this context new models fit well within the established scholarly tradition. However, it is important to recognise that this approach, building only on existing knowledge, can potentially lead to a too homogenised view of the past.

ROMAN ITALY?

Although these books reflect the urbanisation of Roman Italy, they mostly focus on a limited number of locations: the city of Rome, Pompeii and Ostia, along with Portus. Surprisingly, Herculaneum plays a very minor role in these studies. Given the wealth of material available from Rome, Ostia and Pompeii, it is not surprising that these sites are frequently examined. However, it is repeatedly noted that even these sites cannot be considered to reflect one another (e.g. *Neighbourhoods and City Quarters in Antiquity*: C. Bruun, 'Regiones, Vici and Grassroots Dynamics at Roman Ostia', pp. 21–2, and S. Malmberg, 'Neighbourhoods by the Tiber: Life at Two Harbours in Rome', p. 83, see also S. Simelius, *Pompeian Peristyle Gardens* [2022], pp. 3, 83). Therefore, can we truly consider them to reflect Roman Italy?

Neighbourhoods and City Quarters in Antiquity offers two chapters where the investigation goes beyond this trio. P.-A. Kreuz examines the so-called Dörpfeld area – named after its excavator – in Athens from a *long durée* perspective. M. Flohr studies neighbourhoods in relation to the formation of inequality in Herculaneum, Fregellae, Norba and Paestum, in addition to Pompeii and Ostia.

One problem between the various sites is the mismatch of data: Rome, Ostia and Pompeii have an enormous amount of data compared to other less-known and less-excavated sites. This makes it quite complicated to compare analyses and results. Flohr offers exemplary work in this regard. He has managed to compare the sites in a way that makes his conclusions feasible. Hopefully, this example will encourage more research of this type.

The mismatch of data is also highlighted by its availability. There are plenty of off- and online resources to study the three cities. In particular, Pompeii provides many easily available tools that make studying the city easier (e.g. for Rome, E. Steiby [ed.], *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae* [1993–2000]; for Ostia, J. Bakker, *Topographical Dictionary of Ostia*: https://www.ostia-antica.org/dict.htm; for Pompeii, G. Pugliese Carratelli [ed.] *Pompei: pitture e mosaici* [1990–2000], J. and B. Dunn, *Pompeii in pictures*: https://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/, E. Poehler and A. Stepanov, *Pompeii: Navigation Map 2*: https://digitalhumanities.umass.edu/pbmp/?page_id=1258, and Pompeii's official sites map: https://open.pompeiisites.org/). A similar type of data packages – especially online – for other sites would likely facilitate comparisons between them. Although we frequently read in traditional and social media about fascinating fieldwork employing innovative new methods across Italy, the data, results and publications from these endeavours often remain difficult or even impossible to access.

DWELLINGS

Surprisingly little of this extensive work on Roman urbanism focuses on houses and dwellings. Although they constitute the majority of buildings in every city and house the people who make the city function, they remain somewhat underrepresented in studies.

The study of ancient domestic space thrived in the 1990s and early 2000s, producing numerous analyses of the Roman house using various sources. This period also saw a critical examination of previous interpretations of the Roman house, which – slightly simplified – assigned clear locations for each function and activity within the house. One of the best-known critiques of this system was made by P. Allison (e.g. *Pompeian Households: an Analysis of the Material Culture* [2004]), based on the archaeological finds in Pompeian houses. Her work led to a more flexible and multifunctional interpretation of the Roman house – a functional model that has also been applied to the public spaces of the Roman world (e.g. in *Topographie et urbanisme de la Rome*: C. Chillet, 'La porte esquiline: une zone multifonctionnelle d'entrée de ville'; on multifunctionality as interpretation, see S. Simelius, *Pompeian Peristyle Gardens* [2022], pp. 40–2).

It is typical for a period of intense scholarly focus to be followed by a period of diminished interest. Nonetheless, I suggest that the decline in research on housing might be partly due to the new critical interpretations that complicate the study of house functions, leading researchers to avoid this area of study. However, it sometimes appears that this critical examination is applied only to domestic spaces and not to other types. For instance, in the case of semi-public functions, the presence of a marble counter or a masonry triclinium might lead one to conclude that the space was used for commercial purposes (*The Porta Stabia* and *Neighbourhoods and City Quarters in Antiquity*: P. Kastenmeier, 'The Green City Quarter Close to the Amphitheatre in Pompeii and its Rural Identity'). However, the identification of cooking facilities and ritual behaviour begins with cautionary notes, emphasising the need to be careful with interpretations and reminding us of the possible multifunctionality of spaces (*The Porta Stabia*: J. Kreiger, 'The Cooking Facilities of Insulae VIII.7 and I.1', and J. Kreiger and A. Spinell, 'The Ritual Contexts in Insulae VIII.7 and I.1').

Although analyses of commercial spaces might benefit from a more critical approach similar to that applied to domestic spaces, my main point is that we should also embrace new interpretations of domestic spaces. The best we can do is infer what likely occurred in a house or a room based on the information available. For example, if a room contains a *lararium*, it was likely used for ritual purposes; and if it features a cooking facility, it was likely a kitchen. While it is possible that this was not the case, it is also possible that a masonry triclinium or a marble counter was not used for commercial purposes, despite the likelihood that they were. Furthermore, those likely were not the only functions and activities occurring in the space – whether domestic or semi-public –, but we can still reasonably conclude that they were likely important features of the space and somewhat define the space and its functions.

The Porta Stabia book frequently notes that the premises under study were also used as residences; however, its primary focus is on the commercial aspects of the area. This emphasis is unsurprising given the material evidence from the excavations, which clearly indicates a transition from industrial to retail use (*The Porta Stabia* and *Neighbourhoods and City Quarters in Antiquity*: S. Ellis, 'Roman Neighbourhoods and the Archaeological Process: A Case Study from the Porta Stabia Neighbourhood at Pompeii'; see also S. Ellis, *The Roman Retail Revolution* [2018], pp. 152–67). Nonetheless, this development could have provided a valuable basis for a deeper investigation into the living conditions within the city block. It is likely very different to live in a building dedicated to the fish-salting industry compared to residing in a building primarily used for retail activity.

A significant portion of the discussion regarding the living conditions in the Porta Stabia area is reserved for the third volume of the series, *The Environmental Record* (*The Porta Stabia*, pp. 347–51). This volume will undoubtedly be of great interest. However, it must – if it is not done in Volume 2 – address an important methodological decision: whether the architecture reflects the socio-economic status of the owner/inhabitants/consumers, and thus the other associated finds – such as food remains and pottery – also indicate their quality of life, as has been previously done (E. Rowan, 'Sewers, Archaeobotany, and Diet at Pompeii and Herculaneum', in: M. Flohr and A. Wilson [edd.], *The Economy of Pompeii* [2017]), or whether the finds provide insight into the socio-economic standing of those using these spaces, potentially altering our understanding of who lived in these buildings. If the first approach is chosen, it is important to note that this type of property likely reflects relatively wealthy inhabitants, considering the broader population of Pompeii, where many did not own property or lived in much smaller apartments (S. Simelius, 'Unequal housing in Pompeii: using house size to measure inequality', *World Archaeology* 54 [2022]). Another question is whether food and other goods reflect the standards of the owner or the customers of these premises, and whether the remains can be interpreted as being indicative of the living conditions of other individuals residing in the buildings. Did all the food and items 'trickle down' to the lower social levels? It is also necessary to define more precisely what is meant by the 'sub-elite', a term currently used to describe the neighbourhood. Specifically, it is important to clarify more exactly which social and economic groups lived in and utilised the houses in the Porta Stabia neighbourhood.

Ostia e Portus examines various types of sources, including inscriptions, graffiti, coins, sculpture, small finds and pottery. However, the analysis of domestic space plays a minor role. While there are contributions to the evolution of the city and its architecture, including its dwellings, the primary focus remains on the development of the city plan rather than on the residences. In particular, Portus would benefit from an exploration of where the individuals working in and utilising these structures resided. In *Neighbourhoods and City Quarters in Antiquity* S. Malmberg, studying Pietra Papa and ancient Ripetta – the harbour areas of Rome –, notes that the first-mentioned area lacks indications of a permanent population. Therefore, investigating the housing of port labourers in Ostia and Portus would provide valuable insights into this observation. Did the workforce primarily reside in Ostia, or is it possible that the structures around the harbour also provided housing for the labourers? Some potential residences have been identified near the area of Portus, as indicated by the work of C. D'Amassa and his group in their study ('Portus: lo scavo di un isolato presso la fossa Traiana. Continuità, cesura e occupazione sporadica tra età imperiale, tardoantica e altomedioevale [II–VIII secolo d.C.]'), which could serve as a starting point for such an investigation.

Neighbourhoods and City Quarters undoubtedly takes residential buildings into account – after all, can a neighbourhood exist without dwellings? However, because the focus is on the community of dwellings, the analysis often extends to examining features outside the houses, such as the spaces between them, including streets and rivers. Although the contributions collectively provide a varied picture of neighbourhoods, they generally reach similar conclusions, underscoring the challenge of clearly defining an ancient neighbourhood.

The study of domestic space in Rome has always been markedly distinct from the approach taken with the largely excavated cities of Italy, such as Pompeii and Ostia. In the study of Roman topography, the focus predominantly centres on public buildings, which are the primary subject of most contributions in *Topographie et urbanisme de la Rome antique*. When Roman topographers address residential structures, the emphasis is principally on elite dwellings and their specific locations (e.g. A. Carandini et al., *Le case del potere nell'antica Roma* [2010]; cf. T.P. Wiseman, 'Where did they live [e.g., Cicero, Octavius, Augustus]?' in *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 25 [2012]; see also W. Eck, '*Cum dignitate otium*: Senatorial domus in Imperial Rome', *Scripta Classica Israelica* 16 [1997], and J. Heikonen et al., 'The Administrative Topography of Rome: Mapping Administrative Space and the Spatial Dynamics of Roman Republicanism', in: A. Lopez Garcia [edd.], *Running Rome and Its Empire: The Places of Roman Governance* [2024]). *Topographie et urbanisme de la Rome antique* somewhat continues this tradition by analysing the so-called *Casa di Augusto* and *Domus Tiberiana*. However, the focus in this volume is on the reconstructions and development of these Imperial residences.

The houses of commoners are often a neglected topic in the study of the city of Rome. Archaeological sources are scarce, as are anecdotal references in ancient literature. Consequently, the late antiquity regional catalogues, the so-called Regionaries, are one important source for the study of non-elite housing. C. Courrier's chapter highlights the issues associated with the textual tradition of these catalogues, which are discussed in more detail in his forthcoming new edition of the Regionaries (*Le Régionnaire de Rome. Introduction et nouvelle édition critique*).

Although houses and dwellings may not be a particularly trendy subject at the moment, and studying them presents several challenges, they are such an integral part of the cityscape that they cannot be overlooked in the examination of ancient urbanism. Moreover, they are key locations that shape people's lives. Since our primary aim is not merely to study ancient buildings or objects but also to gain insights into the people and lives of the past through them, more research in this area is essential – despite the need to also investigate other aspects of the cities.

WHY DO WE PUBLISH?

I believe that many of these contributions could advance their conclusions a little further. The discussion of the living conditions in the Porta Stabia area functions as an example of this. Nonetheless, the book on this area clearly connects its findings to our previous understanding of Roman society and how it was reshaped: there was a clear change in this urban area from industry to retail in the Augustan era. In several other contributions even this type of conclusion is missing, or it is left somewhat unclear. It is sometimes regrettable to see the substantial effort invested in fieldwork, library research and archival studies not receive the attention it merits, just because there is no clear indication how the study changes our view. Editors should ask that contributors clearly explain how their findings impact our understanding of the Roman world. Why should we be concerned if a building's appearance differs from previous assumptions, or if the urban development of an area is different from earlier theories?

Contextualising findings within the framework of existing knowledge does not necessarily need to imply that it will entirely overturn previous ideas. I personally do not think that all conclusions need to be paradigm-shifting. The demand for groundbreaking results – likely driven by increased competition for research funding – can create the impression that scholarship is unstable, wavering between extremes. In reality many findings corroborate existing knowledge and offer moderate revisions to our understanding. It is the pressure to produce 'revolutionary' results that often leads to framing introductions in a manner that suggests previous interpretations were simplistic or incorrect, only to be corrected by the new research.

This approach is both unnecessary and a misuse of valuable resources and time. In an era in which new media outlets propagate pseudo-archaeology and conspiracy theories it is crucial not to disregard results that corroborate established interpretations. If multiple sources point to the same conclusion, it likely reflects historical reality. While studies should indeed clarify how they alter our understanding of the past, it is acceptable for them to conclude that they do not significantly change our views, but rather reinforce existing interpretations. Yet, in both cases, it is still important to clearly state how the study contributes to the field.

The fear of over-interpretation may lead us to avoid contextualising our results within the broader framework of Roman urbanism. However, over-interpretation might be preferable to under-interpretation. M. Della Corte's work is a notable example of over-interpretation. His text, *Case ed abitanti di Pompei* (1954), has faced repeated criticism (see e.g. P. Castrén, *Ordo Populusque Pompeianus: Polity and Society in Roman Pompeii* [1975] and H. Mouritsen, *Elections, Magistrates and Municipal Élite: Studies in Pompeian Epigraphy* [1988]), but remains a point of reference today – albeit with caution, as should be the case with all publications. The skill and effort invested by Della Corte are evident in his work. Similarly, later scholars who utilised Pompeian inscriptions, such as Castrén and Mouritsen, provide examples of how studies, even if their interpretations are criticised and revised, can remain influential and be frequently cited. One aspect that contributes to the enduring impact of Castrén's and Mouritsen's contribution is the clear separation of the different phases of analysis and interpretation. Therefore, separation of various levels of scholarly work discussed at the beginning in relation to publishing excavations is not solely a consideration for archaeologists but a matter relevant for all scholars working on Roman urbanism.

WHERE DO WE PUBLISH?

I still have one more notion about how one might possibly enhance the quality of publications on Roman urban Italy. This relates to the habit of publishing relatively similar research several times. A persistent topic among scholars is the increasing frequency of new publications, which raises the question: who has the time to read all these works? In particular, new artificial intelligence tools will likely accelerate the research process and result in an increase in the volume of publications.

Within these publications there are instances where contributions address relatively similar topics – albeit with slight variations – or where the content seems otherwise familiar to me, or one quickly notices that these studies frequently reference the authors' previous work, indicating that the research and results have been published before – at least partly.

This approach is a relatively economical way of publishing in a world where scholars are often engaged in multiple projects simultaneously. It also generates citations that contribute to the metrics used to assess our research output. Additionally, these publications allow us to revisit our topics, offer minor additional contributions to our previous discussions and potentially reach audiences who have not read the other publications. However, when considering only the new information provided, these publications usually contribute only a little to advancing knowledge.

It is difficult to fault early career scholars for this practice, as they often have limited means to shape the habits of their field, and their futures depend on quantitative evaluations. Thus, publishing – even without substantial new information – is often a good career move. While senior colleagues are also constrained by the quantitative demands of university bureaucracy, which may encourage such publications, it is important to recognise that we sometimes underestimate our potential to influence the field. Opportunities for change should be leveraged to enhance the overall quality of research in the discipline. I do not mean that we should reject more papers, but encourage the authors to add new analyses and contextualise the findings even more. In this way new contributions could be even more meaningful – even for those who are already familiar with the topics.

I propose a system that could streamline both writing and reading processes. An online platform, akin to a blog, could be established where scholars can easily add updates or supplementary notes related to their previous work. This platform could be managed by individual scholars, offered by various university departments – providing students with editing and publishing skills – or integrated into existing academic journals. Although such publications might be dismissed as less significant, similar issues arise with many current print/online publications – many of them barely find their audience. A more pressing concern is that these platforms might not be valued equally in terms of research input, which encourages the repetitive publication of similar work across various outlets; however, addressing this issue is something we can influence collectively.

CONCLUSION

I have outlined here some issues that could strengthen the field of Roman urbanism. We should continue to refine the way in which we publish excavations to make them more reader-friendly and accessible for future research. Greater integration of digital tools is necessary, not only for data storage and building visual reconstructions, but also for acquiring new insights into ancient life. Cities beyond Rome, Ostia and Pompeii should be more prominently featured in our analyses. Housing, a major component of the urban fabric, needs to be more thoroughly reintegrated into studies of urban space. Furthermore, we should strive to push our conclusions further, clearly explaining how our research reshapes our understanding of the Roman world, and focus on publishing articles and book chapters that offer a significant amount of new information.

I fully acknowledge that critiquing and proposing new approaches is often simpler than implementing them. This review article has been constructed around criticism and potential improvements, although I have also aimed to highlight instances where solutions to these criticisms have already been addressed within the four books reviewed. In addition, my approach has limited me to focusing on only a part of these works – although I believe it would have required a significant amount of space to deal with all these publications in a detailed manner. To reiterate my initial point: the study of urbanism in Roman Italy is progressing well, as evidenced by the contributions of these four volumes.

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