



Review Article

Old cities, new pathways: approaches to Roman urbanism in Italy

Adeline Hoffelinck*

* Department of History, Art History and Classics, Radboud University, the Netherlands (✉ adeline.hoffelinck@ru.nl)

DUNIA FILIPPI (ed.). 2022. *Rethinking the Roman city: the spatial turn and the archaeology of Roman Italy*. Abingdon: Routledge; 978-1-032-16187-7 paperback £39.99.

ALESSANDRO LAUNARO (ed.). 2023. *Roman urbanism in Italy: recent discoveries and new directions*. Oxford: Oxbow; 979-8-88857-036-4 paperback £42.

ALESSANDRO LAUNARO & MARTIN MILLETT. 2023. *Interamna Lirenas: a Roman town in Central Italy revealed*. Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research; 978-1-913344-11-5 ebook OpenAccess <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.99664>

Throughout the twentieth century, considerable research has been dedicated to understanding the rise, development and end of ancient cities. In recent years, there has been a remarkable upsurge of new methodological and theoretical approaches applied in urbanism studies, which enables us to improve, validate or question our knowledge about ancient urban life. The three books reviewed here concern the development, transformation and experience of ancient Roman cities; leading experts in urban history and archaeology discussing the potential of new technologies and conceptual frameworks for analysing Roman urban space.

These publications are valuable resources for anyone interested in ancient urbanism and society, although some critical points may be raised here about the specific historical and social aspects they emphasise.

All three volumes examine a wealth of historical and archaeological evidence from urban case studies in Italy. Within this confined geographic scope, the authors bring attention to both lesser-known archaeological sites, such as Interamna Lirenas, a mix of key and less-studied towns and the ‘usual suspects’ of Rome, Ostia and Pompeii—the dominant triad in Roman urbanism studies. This focus on Italy is warranted in the light of the new types of evidence presented and allows the authors to (re)address themes of Roman expansion, city planning and the social experiences of urban space. Although the books have complementary goals, focusing on the contribution of new research initiatives to the physical reconstruction and transformation of cities, only the third book on the *Spatial Turn* particularly foregrounds the subject of lived experiences.

Interamna Lirenas: a Roman town in central Italy revealed presents findings from 13 years of archaeological fieldwork at Interamna Lirenas, located in the Sacco-Liri Valley (Southern Lazio). In their introductory chapter, Alessandro Launaro and Martin Millett firmly

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Antiquity Publications Ltd. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

articulate the project's main ambition: to deepen our knowledge of urbanism in Roman Italy with more comprehensive archaeological data from a relatively obscure middle-sized town. The authors rightly argue that the study of Roman urbanisation has traditionally placed those urban sites in the spotlight that have been well-preserved or extensively excavated, primarily towns "of considerable size or distinctive importance" (p.2). For other Roman settlements, archaeological evidence is often restricted to urban layouts and "some key monumental buildings, often situated around the forum" (p.3). This selective excavation strategy, concentrating on political and administrative buildings in the heart of the city, has heavily skewed our view of life in ancient cities. According to the authors, non-destructive archaeological techniques, especially the increasingly popular geophysical survey methods, offer a solution to these issues and can drastically reshape this inaccurate perception of Roman urbanism. The book presents results from the geophysical prospections at Interamna Lirenas, which revealed an almost complete town plan. Combined with evidence from artefact surveys, targeted excavation of the theatre and supplemented by written documents, the book proposes a revised biography for this long-overlooked Roman town.

The book is well organised and consists of five chapters. The first outlines the project's objectives, while the second chapter places Interamna Lirenas in its environmental and historical context and summarises previous archaeological research. Founded as a Latin colony in 312 BC, the site was settled and became a stronghold during Rome's military battles with the Samnites. The settlement benefited from its strategic location on the main route connecting Rome to Campania and southern Italy (Via Latina) and along the Liris river, which connected the site to the Tyrrhenian coast. Due to this advantageous location, the town was included in periodic marketing networks (*nundinae*, as attested by written evidence) in the first century AD, demonstrating its regional economic importance.

Earlier studies, however, suggested that the site gradually declined, based on its absence from later textual sources and the realignment of the main road, which bypassed the site and initially eluded modern archaeological exploration. The book challenges this narrative of urban failure and argues for its successful urban character well into the third century AD.

The geophysical prospection methodology that lies at the heart of this archaeological reassessment is detailed in chapter three. A comparison of magnetometer (fluxgate gradiometer) and ground-penetrating radar (GPR) surveys at the site reveals differences in their resolution and potential. While the magnetometer survey provided evidence for the town's street system and monumental centre, the forum and theatre, the GPR survey produced a highly detailed town plan, revealing various buried archaeological structures, both public and private buildings and squares preserved with colonnades and floors. The chapter concludes with a comprehensive explanation of the GPR survey method by specialist Lieven Verdonck, made accessible to non-specialists through numerous images.

Chapter four interprets the buried structures by city block (*insula*), supported by high-quality, coloured and numbered plans. Most buildings were identified as domestic properties (218 out of 308), recognisable by their standard layout. Other building plans, such as open square structures surrounded by rooms (courtyard buildings), which appear frequently in the city (19/308), were less easily associated with specific functions. The authors suggest uses such as storage buildings, markets, guildhalls and even apartment complexes. Additional

purposes, such as venues for the periodic markets or productive enterprises, might be proposed here. Since productive activities often occur in spaces that are now not easily discernible, they seem to be almost entirely absent from the city. It thus appears that Roman buildings with standard plans, often related to strict functional uses, are easier to interpret from GPR results, while other (more fluid) activities in the urban landscape remain unidentified.

GPR prospection does not provide chronological details, so the final section of the chapter presents maps and brief conclusions on the distribution and chronology of pottery, indicating initial occupation around the forum, expansion and a significant reduction to the forum by the fifth and sixth centuries.

The fifth and final chapter, the heart of the book, presents the town's new biography. The authors reconstruct the colonial settlement, hypothesising about the original layout and sizes of building plots, their differential allotment to colonists, and the public structures housed within. They estimate that the town's early population was about 2000, with half likely residing in the countryside. In the second and first centuries BC, the town expanded significantly with monumental public spaces, including the excavated theatre. Interamna's heyday is assumed to have occurred in the first and second centuries AD, when its population likely doubled. The authors attribute this growth to the town's economic success as a market centre and its participation in regional textile trade, evidenced by its connection to transhumance routes, a cattle market (*forum pecuarium*) and a written document. This prosperity continued into the third century AD, after which the town contracted but remained locally important, as demonstrated by restorations of public buildings, until its eventual abandonment by the sixth century AD.

This book will appeal to anyone interested in the potential of geophysical survey for studying ancient sites. At Interamna Lirenas, the large-scale application of this non-destructive survey method, resulting in an exceptional town plan, is to be commended. However, two critical remarks arise. First, due to the lower resolution of GPR data, the town's biography remains largely hypothetical. The new reconstruction of Interamna Lirenas as a 'successful urban centre' is thus built on metrics such as the number of buildings (and types), the level of monumentality, town size and population, rather than material evidence that reflects human (hi)stories and experiences. While geophysical techniques certainly move the discipline in new previously unimaginable directions, revealing entire archaeological landscapes, it does not fully permeate the communities that inhabited those landscapes. A crucial question then becomes how these new technologies could (or should) be used to give voices to these past communities.

Second, the project excavated only monumental buildings around the city's forum, which seems at odds with its primary argument looking beyond overexamined monumental (and elite) areas in Roman towns. As such, the town's biography remains very much a biography or history 'from above'. Perhaps the true potential of GPR might lie more in identifying and subsequently excavating those structures that deviate from well-known and excavated Roman building plans, areas less associated with particular functions, or urban zones and buildings that allow us to ask questions about the experiences of those who lived and worked in ancient cities, penetrating the true depths of what 'success' (but also 'failure') looked like on a day-to-day basis.

The second book *Roman urbanism in Italy: recent discoveries and new directions* comprises 13 short chapters discussing recent archaeological fieldwork at Roman towns which originated from a 2022 research seminar. The volume's purpose, synthesised in its brief introduction, is to illustrate how new research initiatives with non-invasive survey and traditional methods such as archival and topographic studies and excavation have enhanced and/or reassessed our knowledge of the development of both well- and lesser-known urban sites across Italy. The volume offers an outstanding overview of both long-standing and more recent archaeological projects, including new excavations and the re-examination of previously collected data, at 13 diverse towns. It is this comprehensive coverage that gives the book its greatest value and is perhaps its most significant addition to scholarship on Roman urbanism.

The book is structured into five well-illustrated thematic sections, each featuring specialists who focus on new archaeological approaches, major Roman sites, varied urban strategies, long-term urban transformation and the Late Antique and later periods, with many of these topics overlapping in the individual contributions. While the book shares many similarities with the previously discussed book, especially in its demonstration of the benefits of non-invasive archaeology, it also touches, both implicitly and explicitly, on a variety of issues central to current broader debates in modern archaeological scholarship. These themes, some surfacing only intermittently, include community agency, (peri-)urban neighbourhoods, the definitions and functions of towns, the human-environment relationship and resilience, and migration and population relocation, though one might certainly find additional topics in the individual chapters. Each chapter centres on different case studies but they collectively address these themes—even if one sometimes has to read between the lines. I highlight some of these subjects here as they invite wider reflection on the nature of ancient urbanism. Even if the volume focuses on the Roman period, readers with a broader interest in community and settlement archaeology may find overlapping interests.

The role of local, indigenous communities in the foundation and transformation processes of Roman towns forms an undercurrent in the chapter on Falerii Novi (Millett) and Cosa (De Giorgi). At Falerii Novi, a mid-Republican town in the Middle Tiber Valley, the urban community laid out a route connecting the new town to their sanctuaries in the old town. The predominance of temples in the new town may also reflect the significant role of religion and ritual in this indigenous culture. The hilltop town of Cosa (coastal Tuscany), founded in 273 BC as a Latin colony, is a 'textbook example' in the study of Roman urbanism and colonisation. New fieldwork data suggest that local communities, possibly from the nearby settlement of Orbetello, played a crucial role in the city's earliest phases, particularly in constructing a water-management system. These chapters encourage reflection on the active role of locals in top-down expansion, rather than reducing them to bystanders, constructing alternative 'local' histories in ancient town formation.

Ancient cities were made up of diverse neighbourhoods spread across the city. In recent years, closer study of these areas has become increasingly important in the archaeological study of towns, since these tell us about the everyday lives, long-term changes and social experiences of different urban communities (e.g. most recently Haug *et al.* 2023). The Rome Transformed Project has reconstructed the long-term physical changes of the eastern Caelian, a peripheral area in ancient Rome (Haynes *et al.*), exposing four centuries of various neighbourhood activity, from horticulture to building imperial palaces and a church. Recent

fieldwork at the Northern Adriatic trading port of Aquileia reveals that peri-urban districts were often vital commercial hubs in ancient cities (Basso). Established in 181 BC, the city experienced major transformations during the fourth and fifth centuries AD with the construction of several market squares near its perimeter linked to trade via the nearby river. New excavations at Lunae (Liguria) explored a neighbourhood with wealthy elite residences close to the city's edge and harbour (Menchelli *et al.*). The prosperity of this urban area and these urban elites should be seen as closely related to Lunae's role of commercial harbour.

Archaeological evidence from the towns of Lucus Feroniae and Septempeda shows that there is no single and straightforward answer to what exactly constituted an ancient city. At Lucus Feroniae, a small town 28km north of Rome, geophysical surveys have revealed an absence of residential structures and a concentration of public buildings, indicating the town primarily functioned as an administrative centre for the surrounding rural population (Kay *et al.*). Septempeda, a site in Central-Adriatic Italy, evolved from a roadside village into a small town but appeared to lack certain urban amenities such as an amphitheatre and theatre, which have often been deemed essential for defining a Roman town. Nevertheless, a large open square found just outside the city likely fulfilled similar roles. Definitions and functions of ancient cities should thus be less rigid, leaving more room for the originality of local urban communities.

The need for communities and cities to adapt and foster resilience in the face of drastic environmental changes is evident in the urban transformation of Aeclanum (Russell & De Simone). After an earthquake struck this south-Italian roadside town in AD 346, its residents not only bounced back but also forward through new investments, experiencing a late flourishing. The Parma case study similarly illustrates the dynamics between human interventions and environmental changes (Morigi). The study of an ancient bridge reveals how Roman and medieval communities had to adapt to the changing course of the river/coastline and frequent floods.

The book's final chapter delivers concluding observations and briefly addresses the impact of migration and population relocation on urban development in Roman Italy, which occurred "both as a result of state policy and individual initiative" (p.262, Patterson). The chapters in this volume all implicitly deal with migration because Roman colony and town foundation involved various forms of migration, both forced and free, at different stages of town development. Inevitably this led to friction between original and new residents. For instance, the original settlers of Alba Fucens must certainly have been displeased with the state prisoners sent there by Rome as punishment (Evers). In contrast, the case of Fregellae shows the harmonious interactions that could emerge between people and cultures following migration (Diosono). The kitchen pottery found in some of Fregellae's excavated houses reveal the merging of local and non-local (southern Italian) food practices, demonstrating that cultural traditions often blended.

Among the three books reviewed, Dunia Filippi's *Rethinking the Roman city: the Spatial Turn and the archaeology of Roman Italy* stands out due to its emphasis on the social experiences of ancient urban environments. This edited volume aims to bridge the gap between traditional topographical approaches to ancient urban space, which focus on terrain analysis of visible physical layouts and structures and socio-spatial theories that emphasise the social and often hidden experiences these spaces embodied. The book is a significant addition to the

‘Spatial Turn’ in (Roman) archaeology, a paradigm shift that has defined spatiality as a material manifestation of ancient social structure. This book will be of interest to scholars of urban space and architecture who wish to look beyond the material dimension and aim to unlock the social complexity of space.

The volume is organised into three thematic parts, opening with two chapters on topographical and innovative archaeological methods, followed by four contributions on Rome, Ostia and Pompeii, and concluding with four chapters analysing the forum as a central space within the Roman city. In the Introduction, Filippi situates the reader within the theoretical background and agenda of the volume. Filippi calls for a more effective convergence of “two different strands in ancient urban studies”, the topographical and the spatial theoretical (p.2). These approaches have traditionally explored the ancient city from either a material or theoretical dimension, without engaging with one another. Filippi rejects this fragmented view of the ancient city and proposes a new model that blends the different physical and social dimensions of space, drawing on the work of the French sociologist and theorist Henri Lefebvre to support this new discourse. Lefebvre’s spatial theory, that space is not a neutral setting in which social relationships materialise but is rather *produced* by and *produces* social relations and experiences, lies at the heart of the ‘Spatial Turn’. While applying this sociological lens to the study of ancient space is a praise-worthy and ambitious effort, even if it is not entirely novel (e.g. Creekmore III & Fisher 2014) it is regrettable that the introduction does not fully elucidate Lefebvre’s spatial concepts. This makes the volume less accessible for audiences unfamiliar with the sociologist’s work. Moreover, since just one chapter directly engages with and reflects on the new conceptual framework (Veitch), this potentially limits the book’s full impact of “rethinking” ancient urban space. Furthermore, the volume’s contributions are not entirely in dialogue with each other or the overall research agenda. Collectively though, the chapters each invite reflection on where the discipline has been, where it stands now and where it is (or should) be heading.

While the first chapter zooms in on early nineteenth-century topographical surveys of Rome, comparing past landscape-oriented and philologically focused survey traditions (Wallace-Hadrill, Millett), the next chapter moves to recent advancements in landscape archaeology (Campana). The focus is on the interactions between city and country, and a better future integration of the urban and rural in archaeological research is argued. These landscapes are frequently studied as conceptually and physically separate entities, a trend reflected even in the three publications reviewed here, even though their transformation was mutually dependent and synchronised.

The following chapters investigate cities with ‘optimal data’. A new digital mapping project for Ancient Rome, bringing together archival documents and archaeological data, will facilitate the creation of ‘landscape biographies’ of the ancient city, studying the diachronic evolution of its monuments rather than viewing them as separate structures (Carafa). Another contribution with a topographical focus presents the results of geophysical surveys carried out between Ostia and Portus, providing new information on Rome’s complex harbour system.

The volume’s focus on social experience first becomes visible in two contributions that discuss the role of the body and its senses in the perception and social experiences of the ancient landscapes of Ostia and Pompeii (Veitch, Haug, Kobusch). These case studies demonstrate how sensory experiences, such as hearing and seeing, shaped the daily experiences of

ancient people. One is curious how these sensory aspects, a growing topic in urban space studies, could be studied in other urban—and rural—contexts across the Ancient World.

The book closes with an analysis of the *Forum Romanum*, one of the most prominent public spaces in ancient Rome. Traditionally studied through a political lens, this section moves the focus to the historical and social context of the forum. Nicholas Purcell's biography of the forum ties its transformation to key events in Roman history, reconstructing it as an urban space imbued with historical meaning. Dunia Filippi and Ray Laurence focus on the forum's social dimension by analysing the development of a specific monument and the role of a specific social group, children and teenagers. As such, they stress the importance of integrating social experiences into future studies of this public space. In the final contribution, the focus shifts to the role of Italian local communities in the development of public central squares, widening the section's geographical scope. This geographical expansion will undoubtedly be appreciated by readers. However, while the book has certainly shown how our study of the Roman city and urban life can be enhanced, one might imagine that future studies exploring areas beyond the towns discussed in this volume, but more especially beyond those monumental zones, could do even more to illuminate the lived and social experiences of ancient cities.

References

CREEKMORE III, A.T. & A.D. FISHER. 2014. *Making ancient cities: space and place in early urban societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

HAUG, A., A. HIELSCHER & A.L. KRÜGER. 2023. *Neighbourhoods and city quarters in antiquity: design and experience*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.