# Religion and urban beginnings: Origins and retrospectives

## DAI, via Sardegna 79/81, Roma, 8–10 October, 2025

Workshop co-organized by Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom – Centre for Urban Network Evolutions, Aarhus University – Research group "Religion and Urbanity", Max-Weber-Kolleg, Erfurt University

## Programme
Wednesday, 8 October

14.30 Welcome and introduction
**15.00-19.00 Early Urbanism in Italy**
Giovanna Bagnasco Gianni, Milano: Epithets and the Long-Term Formation of Religion at Tarquinia: Between Micro- and Macro-History
*Coffee break 16.00-16.30h*
Francesca Fulminante, Università Roma Tre: From family cult to state religion: the role of religion in early urban formation in Central Italy (Etruria and Latium, ca. 1050–500 BC)
Laura Michetti, Roma: Power and the sacred in southern Etruria: the example of Pyrgi
*General discussion 18.30-19.00 h, chaired by Christopher H. Hallett, UC Berkeley*
**19.30 Dinner for all invited speakers**
Thursday, 9 October
**9.30-13.00 Gods in the City**
Charlotte Potts, Oxford: Gods as collectors: Votives and Community Stabilisation in Pre-Roman Central Italy
Gabriele Cifani, Roma, Tor Vergata: The religious cityscape of the Early Republic and its social significance
*Coffee break 11.30-12.00h*
Vincenzo Timpano, Berlin: The (im)material dimension of early Roman religion: Ritual behaviour and cult buildings as agents of memory
**13.00-14.00 Lunch in the Germanico**
**14.00-19.00 Doing beginnings in the Imperial Capital**
John N. Hopkins, New York University: The Art of Forgetting and the Creation of New Sacred Landscapes in Rome, 4th-2nd c. BCE
Colleen Kron, Erfurt: Chronotopic Comentarii: Mapping Iterative Foundations in the Acta Arvalia
*Coffee break 16.00-16.30h*
Jörg Rüpke, Erfurt: Religious Factors Attributed to Early Urbanism
Mateusz Jakub Fafinski, Erfurt: (Re)founding Rome: Writing Roman monasteries into the urban origin story
*General discussion 18.30-19.00 h, chaired by Christopher H. Hallett, UC Berkeley*

Friday, 10 October
**9.00-12.00 Looking back towards the beginnings**
Annemarie Schantor, DAI/Giorgio Ferri, La Sapienza: The Lupercalia
*Short coffee break 10.00-10.15 h*
Final discussion chaired by Rubina Raja, Aarhus University

**Abstracts:**

Giovanna Bagnasco Gianni:
**Epithets and the Long-Term Formation of Religion at Tarquinia: Between Micro- and Macro-History**

This work examines the theological and cultic function of divine epithets in the ancient city of Tarquinia, with a particular focus on their role in the worship of the city's principal female deity at the 'monumental complex'. It argues that these epithets were key mechanisms that articulated the goddess' attributes and influence, mirroring the features of her presence in the archaeological context, sacred topography and iconographic representation in the necropolis. Through a diachronic lens, the analysis integrates the long-term formation of Tarquinia's religious identity: from early evidence of Greek epithets in the 7th century BCE to later Hellenistic developments.

The study highlights how the use of epithets functioned as a religious resilience and adaptation mechanism at the ancestral sacred area of the 'monumental complex'. Epithets shaped divine agency by emphasizing specific attributes—such as protection, sovereignty, and cosmic power. Early attestations reflect an internal vocabulary of sacred identity, demonstrating that religion at Tarquinia integrated external influences without losing its indigenous framework. By the second century BCE, the adoption of Greek-based epithets for the city's tutelary goddess exemplifies continuity-in-change, reinforcing rather than replacing her archaic functions.

This paper argues that epithets were a strategic tool to engage with wider Mediterranean currents while safeguarding local theological traditions. Their use reflects the interplay between micro-historical ritual practices and macro-historical shifts, allowing the city to express its divine authority in ways that were both culturally adaptable and deeply rooted in its sacred past.

Gabriele Cifani:
**The religious cityscape of the Early Republic and its social significance**

In this paper I will discuss the background of the religious reforms which took place in the late 6th and early 5th century BC in Rome, as the result of the social dynamics inside the civic body, in the light of recent archaeological discoveries and by a critical assessment of literary and epigraphic data.

Mateusz Fafinski:
**(Re)founding Rome: Writing Roman monasteries into the urban origin story**

In 410 Alaric, a Roman commander disillusioned with his position and recent attempts at changing it, entered Rome and begun a rather timid attempt at pillaging. He probably did not consider this but his decision would send waves among Christian scholars and authors of the time. Something was broken, and broken irrevocably, wrote Jerome, Augustine or Orosius. The

story of Rome from its origins to the present, fifth century reality, was interrupted, the unbroken connection with Roman beginnings—lost.
This rhetorical and eschatological panic did not mirror the realities on the ground. Rome continued to function, even if, already for some time, did not fulfil many of the practical functions of imperial capital. Now, though, it was increasingly on the rise as a centre of Christian power. Establishing a connection with the urban past was, at times, not easy for episcopal actors within the city. Monasticism is rarely seen as part of this endeavour. And yet, founding of monasteries played a crucial role in connecting with urban continuity—and urban origins—in late antique Rome. This paper looks at how actors like Gregory the Great and texts like *Liber Pontificalis* framed monastic foundations in Rome. Instead as seeing them as incursions into the urban story a different picture emerges, that of monasteries fitting into the city—in fact providing a continuation of its origins. Their placement but also their embedding in the urban fabric provides them with a special position in the history of the city. They take over the signposts of Roman landscapes and become new carriers of its origins—this time Christian but no less Roman.
Monasticism played little provable role in Rome when Alaric entered it in 410. Over the next few centuries monks would become an integral part of the city, dominating its new, Christian urban origin story..

Giorgio Ferri/Annemarie Schantor:
**The Lupercalia**
The founding of the city is an important point of reference for numerous Roman state cults, and their reception (or utilization) within Roman society is multifaceted. The case of the Lupercalia provides a valuable opportunity to explore two different points of view. Firstly, based on the literary records, we analyze their ever-present connection to the origins of the city and how such a ritual performance could possibly be used to 'restore' this distant past, such as in the case of Claudius' pomerium. Secondly, there are portraits of the participants in the ritual themselves in the form of grave statues and reliefs and on a sarcophagus. These images show which part of the ritual and the myth(s) were most important for them (and their families who paid for the monuments). Finally, we will compare the different interests in the rite and its history expressed in the two different sources.

Francesca Fulminante
**From family cult to state religion: the role of religion in early urban formation in Central Italy (Etruria and Latium, ca. 1050–500 BC)**
Between the 10th and the 5th century BC Italian populations underwent radical changes in the social, political and ethnic organization whihc led from the mainly „egualitarian" communities of the dispersed villages of the Bronze Age, to the „hierachical" and „centralised" societies of the Archaic cities.
Many scholars have contributed to delineate this trajectory by looking at various aspects of the social structure, production, economy but probably the religious aspect has been less intensively investigated, apart the emphasis posed by Alessandro Guidi on early urban cult places, preceeding

the monumental realization of the temples of the Archaic Period, especially in Latium vetus.

By analysing religious practices in Central Italy from the family cult activity of the end of the Bronze Age to the city-state religion of the Archaic Period, this paper will explore the dynamics of heterarchies and hierarchies and the changing relation of the individual within collective cults at the birth of the first cities and state organization in Western Europe.

John N. Hopkins:
## The Art of Forgetting and the Creation of New Sacred Landscapes in Rome, 4th-2nd c. BCE

I plan to build on two ideas I've written about recently: the active silencing of early Italic (including Roman) sacro-material practices during the 3-2 century BCE and the resulting creation of what I'm calling Dark Sociocultural Matter in that period and afterward. In the talk I'd like to look at three different examples of urban sacro-social phenomena that are recognizable in textual or archaeological sources: a procession, a region of the city, and a sacred sculptural typology. All three are recognizable as having existed in a certain way from the 6th to 4th c., but from that point they begin to be forgotten, built over or altered, such that by the 2nd century a very different sense of topography, region, cult and cult images had taken over (overwritten) what had been.

Colleen Kron:
## Chronotopic *Comentarii*: Mapping Iterative Foundations in the *Acta Arvalia*

The collection of Latin inscriptions known as the Acta Arvalia document in detail the religious rituals of the priesthood of the Arval Brethren (Scheid 1998). The Arvales' idiosyncratic habit of inscribing the events of the year on marble stelae in the grove of Dea Dia constituted an act of symbolic communication (Beard 1985), confirming the relationships between grove and goddess (Scheid 1990), arvals and emperor (Syme 1980), and the ranks of the Brethren (Ruepke 2016; 2018). Performing the Arval cult required defining and obscuring boundaries between the urban and the non-urban as well as the deep past and the political present (Rüpke 2023, Rüpke & Raja 2024).

This paper treats the corpus of the Acta Arvalia as an 'iterative' foundation narrative(s). In doing so, it draws on and extends two of the second-order concepts developed by the Religion and Urbanity KFG: co-spatiality (Levy 2021) and its sister co-temporality (French 2023). Furthermore, this paper introduces chronotopic "mapping" (relational network graphs) as a new heuristic tool for visualizing, describing, and understanding the dynamic process of the mutual formation of religion and urbanity.

The notion of "foundation" is part of the core identity of the Roman priesthood of the Arval brethren.' According to legend, Romulus himself founded the cult, and so its attention to rural and archaic deities is a first-order foundation that pre-dates the very existence of the urban. As evidenced by the inscriptional record, Augustus re-founded the brotherhood at the end of the Republican period, and so the cult is also linked to the (re)generation of the city. Each new calendar year was also an opportunity

for re-foundation, and the inscription of each successive entry in the *acta* offered the possibility to reflect on the old and reject or develop new procedures vis-à-vis their plans for past, present, and future.

These complex spatial-temporal connections form a *chronotope*, which is a concept proposed by Bakhtin (1981) and popularized for anthropological analysis by Basso (1996). Weller and Wu (2023) apply the topic to the study of urban religion and articulate three varieties of chronotopic 'origami,' postulating chronotopic 'folds' that bring the far-away nearer or separate inside from outside. In a process of mutual formation, such a fold in the fabric of time (then/now) thus facilitates a reciprocal fold in the space occupied by the reader of the inscribed text (here/there, far/near).

To connect co-spatiality and co-temporality to the material evidence, this paper adapts the XML spatial schema developed by the AHRC project 'Chronotopic Cartographies' (Bushell et al. 2021). This schema "spatializes" the inscribed texts, identifying places, people, objects, and actions as nodes, connected (or separated) by paths of various types (direct, indirect, jumping). In the Arval chronotope, these spatial-temporal indicators include locations, objects, and practices, all of which are strongly coded in terms of their *urbanity.* This relation may be one of distance from the urban (e.g. the archaic language of the Mars hymn) or nearness (practices of dress, dining, and bathing).

For practical purposes, this paper focalizes a moment near the end of this in this process of mutual formation: the dossier of five documents from the brief reign of Elagabalus (218–222 CE; Scheid 1998, nos. 100–104). These documents represent a moment of particularly intense chronotopic folding, as evidenced by the specific markers of urbanity that are concentrated on and performed by the bodies of the priests, particularly bathing, dressing and undressing, and particularly in singing the Arval hymn.

Laura Michetti:
**The relationship between power and the sacred in southern Etruria in the Archaic period**
I will treat the topic of the relationship between power and the sacred in southern Etruria in the Archaic period through the case study of Caere (Cerveteri) and Pyrgi, port and site of the great international sanctuary. In the case of Pyrgi, the foundation of the port settlement by the mother-city at the end of the 7th century B.C. and the monumentalisation of the sacred area (510 a.C.) by Thefarie Velianas, tyrant of Caere whose power is fostered by the support of the divinity (as indicated in the text of the gold plates), represent a significant moment in the construction of the community's sense of identity and aggregation.

Charlotte Potts:
**Gods as Collectors: Votives and Community Stabilisation in Pre-Roman Central Italy**

This paper considers how the development of permanent cult sites in pre-Roman central Italy renders the gods akin to collectors. Scholarship on collecting has identified that the processes involved in creating ensembles of objects which are removed from economic circulation and safeguarded in

special places may change character in different times and places but offer consistent individual and group benefits. These histories include a long sequence of sacred repositories that express the power and interests of, on the one hand, divine collectors and, on the other, the communities who act as custodians and curators, policing what the collections contain and their relationship with daily life. Such collections can thus be studied simultaneously as religious objects, art, and evidence of cultural history.

Framing the gradual intensification of religious buildings and votives at cult sites in Etruria and Latium during the first half of the first millennium BC as emerging collections provides a different perspective on how they may have contributed to the identity and stability (both physical and social) of developing communities. Beyond considering how these collections may have functioned as civic engines in an urbanising/urbanised landscape via the institutionalisation of religion or the social dynamics of donors, this paper will consider how the collected objects and their perceived owners could have affected community formation. In other words, this paper will focus on what is *religious* about these particular collections and the effects of their materiality.

Jörg Rüpke:
## Religious factors in early urbanism
In a comparative perspective, religion was rarely a primary drive for the growth of settlements or (secondary) urban foundations but in many cases important for normative frameworks and collective urban aspirations employed in distinguishing "urban" settlements from all others; this is what the Erfurt research group is addressing as "urbanity". In my paper I would analyze the religious factor in urban beginnings of Rome as presented or assumed in texts and practices of the 2$^{nd}$ and 1$^{st}$ century BCE. Beyond the classical accounts of Rome's foundation for instance in Livy and further references in late republican and Augustan literature, the contribution will also take a look at other ritual or commemorative practices. The focus is on how such beginnings are conceptualized as actions involving deities and leading to religious institutions.

Vincenzo Timpano:
## The (im)material dimension of early Roman religion: Ritual behaviour and cult buildings as agents of memory
In the study of ancient civilisations, religion has traditionally been examined through a philological perspective, especially with regard to cultures with a solid textual tradition of religious nature. More recently, however, the enhanced quality of archaeological data has led scholars to focus more on the material remains of religious rituals, considering their features, find context, and relationship with the architecture and spatial organization of the cult building / sacred area. This contextual analysis facilitates the attempt to reconstruct the meaning and purpose behind rituals, drawing on insights from post-processual archaeology, within which a phenomenological-cognitive perspective has been adopted that considers religion as an interconnected system of practices and beliefs. More specifically, recent studies on ancient ritual behaviour are focusing on the

relationship between individuals, their actions, feelings – beliefs, cognitions, emotions - and their material experiences when in sanctuaries/sacred areas. In fact, together with prescriptions and other forms of knowledge transmission, the agency of material entities such as objects and cult buildings played a significant role not only in defining ritual practices, but also in inspiring the intangible feelings mentioned above, which can therefore be considered on a par with material phenomena. Being relatively conservative in nature and endowed with a specific mnemonic weight, objects used in ritual behaviour as well as cult buildings acted decisively as agents of memory, contributing to its preservation/transmission.

By examining continuities / changes in ritual behaviour and the architecture of cult buildings / sacred areas in Rome during the late Orientalising and Archaic periods, this paper examines their incisiveness on memory and the gradual creation of a sacred cityscape, during a period of intense socio-political changes that, ultimately, shaped the emergence of an urban entity.

---

Organizers

Rubina Raja, Urban Network Evolutions, Aarhus University
Jörg Rüpke, Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formation, Erfurt University
Annemarie Schantor, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom

Cofinanced by
Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Director Ortwin Dally
Aarhus University
Max-Weber-Kolleg, Universität Erfurt
Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft