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(RE-)UNITING CITY AND COUNTRY

New Research on Urban and Suburban Socio-Topographical Structures

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1. Comunità urbane. Italia antica

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Introduction

This volume intends to offer food for thought about the relationship between cities and the land that surrounds them. When this relationship became a focus of attention, it was typically thought of in binary oppositions: city vs. country, centre vs. periphery, urban vs. rural, etc.[1] Such conceptualisation appeared to be in tune with ancient thinking, which does indeed present city and country as distinct and contrasting entities, often conceived of in moral terms.[2] As is often the case with binary oppositions, they help raise awareness of characteristic differences and dynamics between these opposites. For instance, in the case of Roman cities, scholars have explored the distinction between urban *domus* and sub-urban or rural villas as places of *otium* vs. *negotium*.[3] Economic historians have created the hierarchical model of the 'consumer city' that siphons off taxes and produce from the surrounding land in a quasi-colonialist process.[4]

Criticism of this binary thinking is not new and has come from both theoretical and empirical angles. In 1990, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill noted that 'the current tendency is to undo the separation of town and country and reunite the town with its non-urban environment', among other things pointing to the fact that the Greek term *polis* refers to both the urban centre and the entire territory belonging to it.[5] The boom of survey archaeology, and of landscape archaeology more broadly, since the 1960s, as well as new, non-invasive technologies and the reconstruction of the ancient natural environment have greatly enhanced our knowledge of the countryside, allowing us to think more deeply about its relationship with the cities. And yet, at a disciplinary level, to the extent to which survey and landscape archaeology were set against the traditional study of cities in terms of their monumental centres, the dichotomy was quietly perpetuated,[6] and critical and nuanced discussions of the 'consumer city' have by no means discarded this model altogether. While there was a new focus on the countryside, the dichotomy was frequently maintained.[7]

More recently, however, and in tune with rising scepticism against the binary world of structuralist thinking, the city-country dichotomy has been called into question – or at

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[1] On core-periphery models, see e.g. Isaac 2017, 99-121.

[2] Goodman 2007, 9-11; Zuiderhoek 2016, 41-3, for overviews.

[3] E.g. Wallace-Hadrill 1988; Bodel 1997.

[4] The concept ultimately goes back to Max Weber's characterisation of the Medieval city, first published posthumously as Weber 1921, on which see Bruhns 2020; for influential revivals, see Finley 1981, 3-23; Hopkins 1978.

[5] Rich, Wallace-Hadrill 1990, ix.

[6] But see, for instance, Salomon et al. 2018, for a better understanding of the relationship between city and country through geoarchaeology.

[7] Ditto e.g. Van Oyen 2019; de Haas 2025, 321-2; and Witcher in this volume.

least its hierarchical conception has. Already in 1996, Neville Morley and David Mattingly demonstrated that the relationship between city and countryside was not a one-way road, but that it was bi-directional and symbiotic.[8] These observations have been further developed in socio-ecological models of various forms that strongly focus on the interdependency and interaction between nature, human action and 'culture'.[9] An explicit aim of this model's proponents is to bridge the gap (once more) between sciences and humanities and to avoid the one-sided approaches of New Archaeology with its determinism as well as the contrasting model of Henri Lefebvre, who downplayed the significance of the natural environment to a background against which space is conceptualised as the creation of human mind and practice.[10] Yet the extent to which social and cultural factors feature in the actual case studies varies significantly. In this context, the originally Marxian concept of 'social metabolism' has seen a revival in various incarnations that sometimes focus mainly on aspects of consumption/appropriation (of what nature provides under input of labour), and of excretion (the release of waste back into the environment), but now often stress the equal importance of cultural aspects to avoid overly deterministic models and account for a fuller spectrum of what makes up human life.[11]

Not least in light of these debates, the centre-periphery model has also received a major overhaul in that the centrality of central places is now established empirically and deductively based on 'the relative concentration of interaction' in various fields of activity rather than on predetermined calculations of spatial parameters.[12] It often integrates the metabolism model but adapts it to the needs and potential of landscape archaeology and pays particular attention to topographical aspects.[13] This is the key underlying model of a project under the egis of the German Archaeological Institute at Istanbul directed by Felix Pirson, Brigitta Schütt and Thekla Schulz, who have more recently introduced the concept of Micro-Regions 'as spaces of socio-ecological interaction', as one book title has it.[14] The concept is still somewhat fuzzy with some scholars focusing primarily on the economic aspects and interaction between humans and the environment while others want to include

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[8] Morley 1996; Mattingly 1997; for a more recent, balanced discussion, see e.g. Erdkamp 2001.

[9] Fischer-Kowalski, Mayer, Schaffartzik 2023; de Haas 2025.

[10] Lefebvre 1974; cf. Napoletano, Foster, Clark 2022, who stress, though, that Lefebvre did not reduce nature 'to a mere social category or an assemblage of hybrids', as some have presented him to do. More recent sociologies of space allow for a more active role of the physical environment: see e.g. Löw 2016; Pérez Hernáiz 2002.

[11] These debates originate in modern socio-ecology: see e.g. González de Molina, Toledo 2014; González de Molina, Toledo 2023; Fischer-Kowalski, Mayer, Schaffartzik 2023, all with bibl. For some recent applications of this model to the Greco-Roman world, see e.g. Daems et al. 2021; various papers in Pirson, Schütt, Schulz 2024; Boogers, Beaujean, Poblome 2025.

[12] Knitter, Nakoinz 2018; cf. also de Haas 2025, 322, for a definition of cities as 'hubs in networks of social, cultural, political, and economic interactions'.

[13] Pirson, Schütt, Schulz 2024, with figs 5-6; Daems et al. 2021.

[14] Pirson, Schütt, Schulz 2024. This publication and research strand is linked to the TransPergMicro project directed by the editors of the volume: www.dainst.blog/transpergmikro/ (accessed 11.08.2025). Their concept of micro-region is thus different from that proposed by Horden, Purcell 2000, who stress the geographical factors defining and shaping their regions. For a social ecological approach, see also Knitter, Schier, Schütt 2021.

also human interaction beyond the economy, approaches that can result in rather different extensions of the micro-region.[15]

Less theory-concerned, empirical studies have equally opened up the view to a more inclusive assessment of the city-country relationship. Villas were found to bring an element of *urbanitas* into the countryside, both in architectural terms and in terms of activities taking place there. *Horti*, which started to be established by the rich and powerful in the first century BCE on the fringes of Rome's city centre, were explored as liminal areas, spilling across Rome's fourth-century city walls, or lying just beyond them or on the other side of the Tiber. They offered a lifestyle that included elements of both traditionally urban and rural character.[16] Nero's Domus Aurea that comprised a luxury residential part, extensive gardens and parks, and even a lake, is perhaps the most extreme attempt to bring the rural into the urban, and it can be viewed as both an example of a general tendency to blur traditional boundaries and, considering the reactions to his bold move, the (partial) persistence of and insistence on these boundaries.[17]

With regard to Rome, Nicholas Purcell started to explore the fuzziness of boundaries already in the late 1980s,[18] and the *suburbium* became a new focus of attention beginning in the 1990s and especially in the new millennium.[19] While it was generally viewed as a transitional belt around cities that was neither fully urban nor fully rural, many publications considered the *suburbium* as a separate and distinct entity. Yet some scholars deliberately aimed to break down these new boundaries describing their shifting nature and permeability and the gradual transition from more densely inhabited and built-up areas to the more rural countryside. Robert Witcher in particular has argued forcefully that these areas were not only inseparable from the cities, that they formed extensions of the cities in the widest range of practical terms, but also not subordinate to them,[20] while Simon Malmberg and Hans Bjur proposed that the *suburbium* of Rome even surpassed the centre in importance between around 200 and 500 CE.[21] If we agree with the majority of scholars that the population of Rome had reached 750,000 to 1 million by the first century BCE, the inevitable conclusion must be that a major part of it lived outside the *continentia*, as also Malmberg in this volume demonstrates.[22]

In 2007, Penelope Goodman was the first to make the 'urban periphery' the subject of a monograph.[23] Based mainly on empirical evidence, she disqualified once and for all any simplistic, contrasting characterisations of city and country, urban and rural, describing the full range of activities that characterise these peri-urban areas and looking not only at Rome but at

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[15] Cf. F. Pirson in Pirson, Schütt, Schulz 2024, 233-8, for the state of the debate. The exploration of this concept is ongoing, with two conferences organized by the German Archaeological Institutes in Istanbul and Madrid in 2025 that will be published in due course.

[16] Carandini 1985; Purcell 1996; Cima, La Rocca 1998; Purcell 2007.

[17] Purcell 1987, 198-203; Moormann 2020.

[18] Purcell 1987; Purcell 1995, 177; and many later papers.

[19] Publications are too numerous to mention, but for Rome, *LTURS*, Santangeli Valenzani, Volpe 2003, and Jolivet 2009 stand out. For the Greek world, see Darcque, Étienne, Guimier-Sorbets 2013, on the *proasteion*, the equivalent to the Latin *suburbium*; see also Neuenfeld, this volume.

[20] Witcher 2005; see also Patterson, Witcher, Di Giuseppe 2020; Witcher 2013.

[21] Malmberg, Bjur 2009.

[22] For an attempt at calculating the suburban percentage of Rome's population, see also Witcher 2005.

[23] Goodman 2007.

larger and smaller cities in Gaul. While her focus was on the urban periphery, she did not lose sight of the interdependency between this area and the city, arguing that it was the increasing urbanisation of growing centres by the elite that pushed more modest people into peri-urban areas. A second monograph on urban peripheries – here called 'suburbs' –, this time focusing on the Italian peninsula, was published 13 years later by Allison Emmerson.[24] It equally aimed at a holistic view of activities taking place there and argued against a binary opposition between urban periphery and city, yet with a less hierarchical outlook. Her urban periphery is not the result of accidental circumstances, nor of pragmatic necessities, but of specific social desires and needs and deliberate decisions.

In fact, the struggle for an appropriate vocabulary for describing the relationship between cities and their surroundings reflects the dilemmas involved. While all can probably agree that there are spaces that are not 'city', finding an appropriate terminology for these spaces that also accounts for their varied characteristics has proven difficult.[25] Tymon de Haas rightly points out that the problems already begin with defining what should count as a city.[26] The term *suburbium*, while ancient, was actually used very rarely and primarily in Rome.[27] Moreover, mostly attested in its adjectival form, it typically designates the lifestyle of private villas and is thus a very reductionist and elite concept. Modern studies that recognise the diversity of activities in cities' surroundings consider the *suburbium* as the area that is 'neither fully urban nor fully rural in character' and give the term a new, etic definition that serves well modern empirical enquiries.[28] However, scholars have objected that the linguistic similarity with the modern term 'suburb' carries too much unreflected-upon baggage so that both terms should be avoided. Alternative terms such as 'peri-urban' or 'urban periphery' are preferred by an increasing number of scholars,[29] while Saskia Stevens prefers to speak of 'borderscapes' as a term that suggests connections and interaction between two different areas that meet in these hybrid zones, here urban and rural populations.[30] Others again favour a more detailed zoning model. Matthew Mandich, for instance, proposes for Rome five suburban zones depending on travel time and distance from the *continentia*, and on social and agricultural activities performed: the Urban Fringe, the Daily Zone, the Peri-Urban Zone, the Functional Urban Area, and the Rural Hinterland (starting at ca. km 80).[31] There are difficulties with all of these terms, not least because they are bound up with concepts and scientific approaches that may not be shared by everyone.

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[24] Emmerson 2020.

[25] For discussions, see e.g. Royo 2018; Volpe 2000.

[26] de Haas 2025; cf. already e.g. Osborne, Wallace-Hadrill 2013. Criteria include the level of architectural urbanisation, administration, juridical definitions, economic role, size etc., and the choice of criteria results in strikingly different calculations of the number of cities in the Roman empire or in the Italian peninsula (cf. e.g. de Ligt 2012; Hanson 2016; and Sewell, Witcher 2015). Morley 2011, 147, observes that most cities in Roman Italy, when defined on a political and legal basis, would not be counted as 'urban'.

[27] Champlin 1982; Annibaletto 2010, 21-4, 172-300, for the most comprehensive collection and study of sources. Cf. Goodman 2007, 1-6, 19-28; Emmerson 2020, 8-10.

[28] Goodman 2007, 1, who uses, however, the term 'urban periphery'; cf. Vega 1994, 143.

[29] E.g. Goodman 2007, 2-4; Vega, here n. 28; Emmerson 2020, 8-10.

[30] Stevens 2020; a similar picture of Rome's *suburbium* and hinterland painted already by Marazzi 2001.

[31] Mandich 2015.

A second difficulty is the spatial definition of the areas concerned. The various city boundaries – walls, the *pomerium*, tax borders, the *continentia* etc. – have been discussed extensively, especially for the case of Rome.[32] Yet boundaries were permeable, and legal concerns are only one aspect of ancient life. They could be re-defined, and the *de-facto* use of land could differ widely, disregarding sacred borders or city walls. With the extension of the *pomerium* and/or the *continentia*, tombs that were once outside of the *pomerium* were suddenly located within, and with authorisation, burial could take place inside the city anyway.[33] The ancient term *continentia* (*aedificia*) was coined for the spread of urban architecture and related activities beyond the traditional urban boundaries.[34] Moreover, abstract zoning models such as von Thünen's and its derivatives,[35] even when based on ancient terms such as *ager* (land, fields)*, saltus* (grazing land) or *silva* (woodlands), are hard to map onto ancient topographies given that the use of land depends on a large number of parameters such as topography and soil suitability, water supply, road systems, religious concerns and other socially determined factors.[36]

Accordingly, there is also no agreement on the exact extension of the *suburbium* even in ancient authors, and modern uses of this and alternative terms vary widely, according to convenience or definitions of these spaces' character.[37] This uncertainty refers to both its distinction from the city, the 'urban',[38] and from the wider rural countryside.[39] Defining the *suburbium* of Rome as the area up to 50 km from the centre not only includes what others would describe as rural (as opposed to the *suburbium* or borderscape), but also multiple minor centres that may well be called cities and urban depending on definition.[40]

This brief overview of the state of the debate, by no means comprehensive and arguably with a bias towards Rome, has shown how much the argument is still in flux. It is acknowledged in most contributions that the project of integrating city and country is still at its beginnings, and that more research and thought needs to go into both empirical studies and theoretical conceptualisation to adequately describe and understand the lived experience of topographical organisation and structures. It has also not gone unnoticed that the integration of 'cultural' and socio-economic and socio-ecological aspects is still a challenge.[41] The present volume intends to contribute to these debates. It does not start from any particular model or concept

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[32] E.g. Panciera 1999; most recently, esp. Dubbini 2019; Goodman 2007, 13-18 (for physical markers of the urban border); Stevens 2020; Dally, Fless 2023; Buongiorno in this volume.

[33] E.g. Volpe 2019.

[34] Goodman 2007,14-16; Emmerson 2020, 5-8; now Buongiorno in this volume with some qualifications.

[35] Thünen 1910.

[36] The same goes for 'Central Place Theory', as again Mandich 2015, 84-85, and de Haas 2025, 324, note. More sophisticated versions are isochronic distance mapping (measuring the time it takes to travel the distance between locations), or accessibility and cost maps that also take into account the effort needed to cover a certain distance. On these, see Mandich 2015, 88-90 with bibl.

[37] For instance, *LTURS* sets the limit at about the ninth mile of the ancient roads, while Witcher 2005, 121, argues for an extension up to 50 km from the centre. For ancient views, see Mandich 2015, 82, and passim for a discussion of approaches.

[38] E.g. Goodman 2007, 59-68.

[39] Stevens 2020, stresses the shifting and unstable nature of the borderscape.

[40] Smith 2020, for an overview and bibl.

[41] E.g. F. Pirson in Pirson, Schütt, Schulz 2024, 234.

to test or promote it. Its only premise is the need for a re-unification of city and country, metropolis and hinterland, centre and periphery, urban and non-urban, and of 'culture', nature and economy (with the latter perhaps more an aspect of 'culture' than is often acknowledged). Ultimately, these integrations will lead to a more holistic understanding of the ancient world, that is also concerned about the lived experience of societies studied.

The conference, on which this volume is based, and the volume itself, which includes two additional papers not delivered at the conference, form part of and contribute to the project 'IN-ROME – The INscribed city: urban structures and interaction in imperial ROME', funded by an ERC Advanced Grant (GA 101054143). Its aim is to map a range of activities as wide as possible from the first century BCE to the third century CE outside the fourth-century city walls up to about the ninth mile of the consular roads, and to integrate them with the conditions provided by the natural environment. It thus bridges the disciplinary divide between research on the area within and outside the third-century Aurelian Wall, re-uniting the urban with its surrounding area. Its ultimate aim is to translate topographical patterns into social relations and to better understand the reasons behind the choices from which these patterns result.[42] We wanted to learn from other projects' insights and bring together approaches of very different nature that are hoped to advance our thinking precisely because they vary between more theoretical and conceptual and more empirical studies.

The volume is divided into three sections. The first section is dedicated to general methodological considerations and opens with a paper by Pierangelo Buongiorno, who provides an in-depth review of legal sources on defining key terms and concepts of spatial organisation such as *urbs*, *oppidum*, *continentia aedificia*, *suburbium* etc. The following papers demonstrate the limited relevance and impact of boundaries on daily life. Penelope Goodman discusses three examples of localised encroachment and dismantling of city walls in the Roman world, while Emlyn Dodd shows how the distinction between town and country is blurred by agricultural activities inside the city walls. In turn, Nicole Neuenfeld draws attention to the temporal dimension of our question and uses the case of Pergamon in Asia Minor for a diachronic perspective on the dynamic changes in activities over time. Adopting Stevens' concept of borderscape for discussing the north-eastern part of the city's hill, she shows that even within a city as defined by its walls there can be urban peripheries while urban activities may spill across the city wall at other times. Robert Witcher then explores many of the questions raised above from a theoretical viewpoint before turning the conventional perspective around and challenging us to consider 'what suburbs "did" for rural populations' in the wider hinterland. Günther Schörner follows suit in presenting the Hispanic case study of Regina Turdulorum as a place where the *suburbium* was the centre of people's daily activities while the town consisted almost exclusively of public buildings and was the true marginal space as far as lived experience was concerned. In the final paper of this section, Nicolas Solonakis proposes new parameters for modelling the interdependence between urban growth and rural agricultural production.

The remainder of the volume is organised topographically. Section two focuses on Rome and opens with a paper by Simon Malmberg, who explores the implications of the assumption that Rome's population counted 750,000 to 1 million inhabitants. In whichever way we

[42] For instance, we will compare the agricultural potential of Rome's surrounding area with the activities actually taking place there to highlight the extent to which the environment did or did not shape patterns of activities.

distribute these people in Rome's territory, the intricate link between city and country becomes apparent. The following paper by Paolo Carafa and Maria Teresa D'Alessio takes a long view of the history of Rome and its *suburbium* from the tenth century BCE to the seventh century CE. They explore the changes in the spatial distribution of people and activities demonstrating also two methodological points, the difference in results produced by modern surveys and by legacy data, and the power of a GIS database that has been in the making for over three decades. Mirella Serlorenzi and Paolo Rosati then illustrate the potential of the archaeological WebGIS SITAR of the Soprintendenza Speciale Archeologia Belle Arti e Paesaggio di Roma in conjunction with data for the natural environment and scientific analyses of bore hole samples. Their particular focus is on the reconstruction of Rome's ancient suburban landscape as a predictive tool that aids in modern space and heritage management. Rita Volpe offers an overview of the methodological difficulties in identifying precisely those activities that must have dominated the areas outside the *continentia*, different kinds of agricultural production, and thus reminds us to consider archaeological visibility in our topographical studies. Finally, Mary-Evelyn Farrior explores how inscriptions, when restored to their original display contexts, contribute to our questions. Focusing on Greek dedicatory inscriptions, she demonstrates that the Greek language was deliberately employed for different purposes by different social groups in Rome's inner city and its periphery.

The third section is dedicated to case studies from Italy. Fabio Fabiani, Stefano Genovesi, Antonio Campus and Alberto Caroti examine the fluidity of the boundary depending on both natural and socio-economic circumstances in the medium-sized city of Pisa in Etruria. Similarly, using their long-term field project at Interamna Lirenas as an example, Alessandro Launaro, Ninetta Leone and Lieven Verdonck demonstrate in concrete terms what a floating and permeable borderline between city and *suburbium* looks like. Allison Emmerson uses the case of Pompeii to show how the natural environment and the port outside its walls substantially shaped the urban area and its economy inside the walls, providing an example of the dangers of studying city and country separately. Anna-Katharina Rieger in turn takes a look at the religious landscape of the Clitumnus valley in Umbria and argues that activities related to religious cult outside city centres must not be forgotten when assessing the relationship between city and country.

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