

Forum Novum–Vescovio: Studying urbanism in the Tiber valley

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with contributions by

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Introduction, by H. Patterson

The Roman town of Forum Novum lies in the Sabine hills to the northeast of Rome. Its study forms part of the British School at Rome's Tiber Valley Project, a collaborative research initiative¹ which studies the Tiber valley as the hinterland of Rome, tracing the impact of Rome's development on the history of its settlement, economy, and cultural identity from 1000 B.C. to A.D. 1300 (Patterson and Millett 1999; Patterson *et al.* 2000) (fig. 1). The project draws on the extensive work carried out in this area to produce a new, material-based history of the valley. While the project seeks to re-evaluate past survey material, a vital contrast is provided by the development of new field projects to fill the gaps in settlement knowledge. Three main lacunae have been identified: the study of urban centres; the dearth of data from the E bank of the Tiber; and the poor understanding of the late-antique and early Mediaeval landscape. Forum Novum offers an opportunity to address all these lacunae.

Urbanism forms a key research theme for the Tiber Valley Project. In marked contrast to the intensity of archaeological work on rural settlement in this area, there has been little systematic research on towns. Study has tended to concentrate on the excavation of monumental structures or, more rarely, the investigation of single and exceptional towns such as Ostia and Rome itself. Surprisingly little is known of the organization of the smaller towns and knowledge of their history is based largely on the epigraphic and documentary evidence.

At Forum Novum a range of surface survey techniques are being combined with excavation to examine the extent and organization of a Roman town, its development through time, and its relationship with the surrounding territory. The research aims to provide a detailed study of a specific form of urbanism — the small settlements defined by Roman law as 'fora' — which, as R. Laurence (1999) has stressed, has been much neglected in studies of Roman urban history. It complements other urban studies being carried out as part of the Tiber Valley Project, in particular that of S. Keay and M. Millett which applies surface-survey techniques to a range of urban sites, from small roadside settlements to major cities, to examine their topography and internal organization (Keay and Millett 2000, 1; Keay *et al.* forthcoming). Lastly, the continuity of occupation at Forum Novum from Roman town to early Mediaeval bishopric offers the opportunity to examine this poorly understood period of transition.

Forum Novum was a new Roman foundation established at the head of valley of the river Aia which leads into the Tiber. During the Republican period it probably developed as a forum or market centre,² benefiting from good communication links with the Via Salaria on the east and the Via Flaminia on the west (Reggiani 1980, 7; Migliario 1988, 13), and linked by the Aia to the Tiber itself. A series of mausolea, still visible today, indicates the alignment of at least two roads converging on the town, one of which in part borders the modern road known as the *strada Romana vecchia*. By the early 1st c. A.D., Forum Novum had been elevated to the status of *municipium*, appearing as such in Pliny's list of towns. M. Torelli has suggested to us that in this period the forum was rebuilt on a larger scale and probably on a different orientation.

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- 1 The larger project involves 12 British universities and institutions, as well as a number of Italian scholars and institutions.
 - 2 As J. Linderski comments (*JRA* 11 [1998] 473), this area was probably assigned *viritim* to Roman citizens in the first part of the 3rd c. B.C. ... Its name of Forum Novum betrays [its] Roman (and not native) origin."