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# TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

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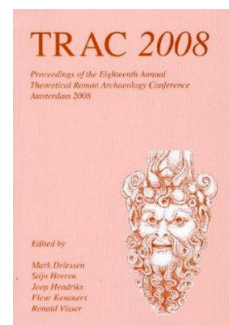
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# Finding Your Way in the Subura

*Simon Malmberg*

## *Introduction*

The main idea behind this article is to discuss how one navigated a Roman urban environment. The analysis will benefit from the use of the theoretical model promoted by the urban planner Kevin Lynch (Lynch 1960), who has already inspired several scholars on the ancient city (Corlàita 1979; MacDonald 1986; Zanker 1987; Yegül 1994; Dyson and Prior 1995; Wharton 1995; Favro 1996; Bayliss 1999). Lynch's theories on how people perceive and organize spatial information as they navigate through cities were based upon five years work in Boston, Jersey City and Los Angeles. Working from field reconnaissance and interviews Lynch developed a model of how people understood their surroundings in consistent and predictable ways, forming mental maps. These mental representations contain many unique elements, which are defined by Lynch as a network of paths, districts, landmarks, edges and nodes. The model has some shortfalls: in this kind of visual method you can never reach an objective conclusion since it is based on a person's or group's perceptions of the city. The method is more intuitive than, for example, space syntax, where a structural analysis explains functional use. Moreover, the five elements of the method reduce its usefulness to the activity of movement. Another weakness is its limited use of social context, acknowledging a difference between inhabitants and visitors, but ignoring social stratification. All this makes Lynch's method more descriptive than analytical, but bearing these limitations in mind it is still a useful tool in helping to identify and address problems and assets in urban movement networks.

This article hopes to contribute to this field by applying the theories of Lynch on an analysis of the Clivus Suburanus and Argiletum, the main arteries through the Subura District in Rome (Fig. 1), using archaeological and literary sources and a third-century marble plan of Rome. The Subura is of course a very well-known area to Roman topographers. This article, however, intends to stress the factor of movement more strongly than in the past, especially the question of navigation, its social implications and its influence on the use of space. The method developed by Lynch is well suited for this, and his five elements provide categories into which different physical characteristics along the road can be ordered and understood. The idea is to underscore a monument's use not only as a piece of art or commemoration, but also as having a prime function for city movement, neighbourhood identity and daily social use.

This article is the product of the interdisciplinary Via Tiburtina Project at the Swedish Institute of Classical Studies in Rome. The project has gathered eleven scholars from classical archaeology, ancient history, art history, architecture, urban planning, conservation and heritage management. It covers the development and function of the Via Tiburtina, from the Forum Boarium to Tivoli, from its earliest days as a transhumance route to its role as an axis of development in contemporary Rome.

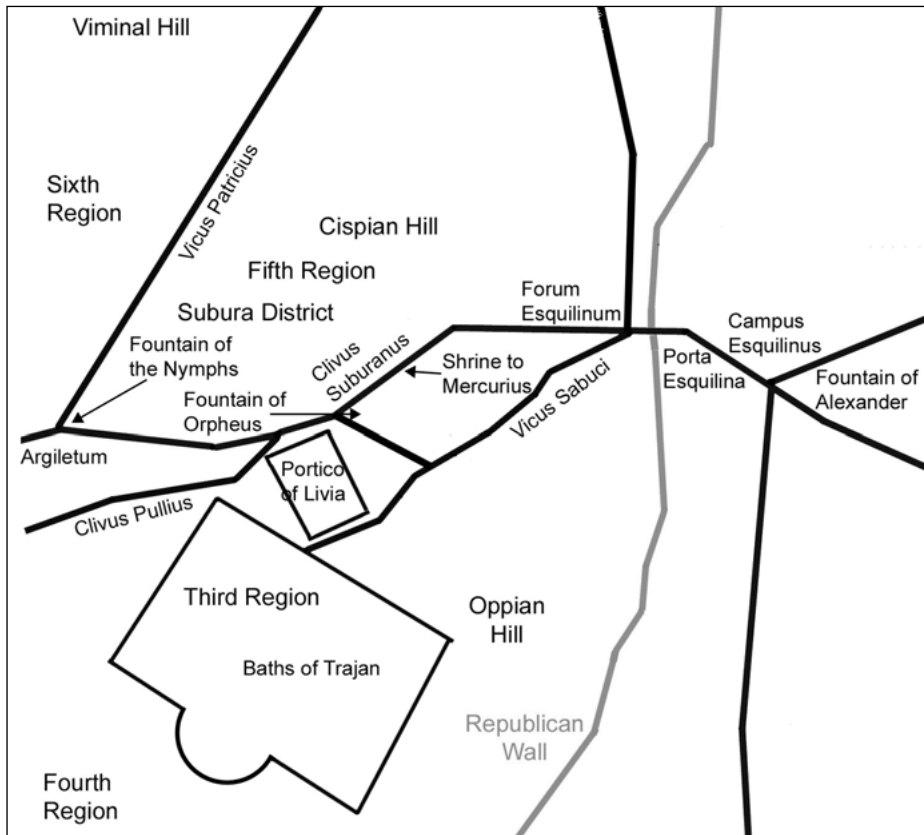


Figure 1: The Subura District in Rome (by author).

### Path

The Clivus Suburanus, or Subura Slope, was a path, one of the main channels people use when moving through a city. Paths with clear and well-known origins and destinations have stronger identities, such as the Clivus Suburanus which led straight from the Forum to the city gate. It is natural to follow the stream of traffic, which makes trusting the main, wide street automatic (Lynch 1960: 47, 50–51, 111). If this is true of the modern city, it is all the more so of the ancient one. Outside the few public, relatively broad thoroughfares, Rome must have felt like a labyrinthine maze to the outsider. It is interesting to note that the laws on street maintenance and regulations only deal with public roads (*Digest* 43.8.2.21; *Digest* 43.10.3; *Tabula Heracleensis* 32-5; Strabo 5.3.7; Suetonius, *Augustus* 89; Tacitus, *Annals* 15.43.1; Saliou 1994; Zaccaria Ruggiu 1995). So private roads were left to the whim of their owners, which may explain the windings and narrowness of many side-streets, comparable to British mews. This was also an expression of social formation, creating a defended neighbourhood, hard for outsiders to penetrate (Lynch 1960: 130; Schwirian 1977; Wallace-Hadrill 2001 and 2003; Macauley 2002; Lott 2004: 19–20).

### *District*

Along the Argiletum Street you moved from the official Forum area to the district of the Subura through the so-called Subura Gate. This was probably the arch that led from the Forum Transitorium to the Porticus Absidata. You immediately entered a busy commercial district, dominated by cobblers, leatherworkers and booksellers (Martial 2.17; *LTUR* 1.286–287; Stambaugh 1978: 587; Bauer 1983; Tortorici 1991).

Districts in a city are areas with a common, identifying character. The Subura possessed a strong identity as a district, characterised by the Roman upper-class as a sordid commercial area, riddled with violence and prostitution, but actual urban zoning in the modern sense did not precede the nineteenth century (Laurence 1994: 17; Laurence 1995: 65; Favro 1996: 44). The image of the Subura was probably exaggerated, but the location of the district, at the bottom of a valley, plagued by the annual inundation of the Tiber, probably gave it a proportionately large plebeian population. This topographical circumstance may indeed have promoted the communal identity of the Subura, since, by the concavity of its site, it was easily visible as a whole (Lynch 1960: 47, 103–104; Aldrete 2007).

Typical physical characteristics of a district are the use and texture of buildings, street activity, noise and smells, inhabitants and topography. To many people the district is the basic element of the city image. People with the *least* knowledge of a city tend to think in terms of topography or district when navigating. Those *most* familiar with the city recognize the social importance of districts, but tend to rely on small landmarks for orientation (Lynch 1960: 49, 67–68; Cullen 1971: 31).

The smallest urban district was the *vicus*, which may be translated roughly as an urban neighbourhood, corresponding to a single street and its adjoining houses (Festus 19 *vici*; Varro, *Latin language* 5.145; Isidorus, *Etymologies* 15.2). It was these small districts that provided the social cohesion in the city. Larger streets, districts and gates at Rome usually had names, but since there were no signs or house numbers, that was not much of a help to a stranger (Dilke 1985: 103–107; Ling 1990a). Instead, the *vici* became very important for urban navigation, and were often used for directions. It was quite natural for *collegia* to give their addresses according to *vicus* (e.g. *CIL* 2.365; 5.4488; 5.7923). Inhabitants naturally identified very closely with their own *vicus*, and sometimes even inscribed its name on their tombs (e.g. *CIL* 6.9976).

### *Landmark*

After following the Argiletum for a few hundred metres, one reached the foot of the Cispan Hill (Fig. 1). Here the road forked; to the left the Vicus Patricius went up the valley between the Viminal and Cispan, while to the right was the Clivus Suburanus between the Cispan and Oppian Hills (Fig. 2). This was surely a very important junction. It may be here that the house of the second-century consul Stella was situated. The house had a monumental fountain towards the street in the form of a grotto with representations of Hercules and the Nymphs (Stadius, *Silvae* 1.2.71–72; Martial 6.21, 6.47, 7.15, 7.50; *LTUR* 1.39–40). It probably gave its name to the whole surrounding district, *ad Nymphas*, attested in the third century (e.g. *CIL* 6.9526). The fountain was still in use in late antiquity, since it was restored by the city prefect around 400 (*CIL* 6.1728a–b) and was perhaps identical with the Fountain of the Shepherd (*Lacus Pastoris*) attested in the fourth-century regionary catalogues.



Figure 2: The Argiletum Street forks at today's Piazza della Suburra with Vicus Patricius, the modern Via Urbana, to the left and Clivus Suburanus, the modern Via in Selci, to the right (by author).

The Fountain of the Nymphs was a prime example of a landmark. Landmarks are objects, characterised by singularity, a clear form, a contrast with their background and prominence of spatial location. Some landmarks are distant ones, seen over the tops of roofs, and often used as navigational tools for people not that familiar with the city. For those familiar with the city, *local* landmarks are more important, only visible from certain approaches. A sequential series of landmarks appear to be the standard way in which people travel through the city. They work as trigger clues in turning decisions and give the distance to the final destination. (Lynch 1960: 48, 78, 81–83).

Often sounds and smells reinforce visual landmarks, for instance the reek from the fish market at the Porta Esquilina was probably a landmark in itself. Landmarks were often used when giving directions. Especially common were trees. Martial referred to himself as living near the Pear-tree (*ad Pirum*) (Martial 1.117.6; cf. DeRose Evans 1992: 75–78), and a road in the Subura was called the Vicus Sabuci, which means the Street of the Elder-Tree (Zimmer 1976). Otherwise, many *vici* were named after fountains, city gates, statues or crafts. Martial also said that he lived near the Travertine Column, and a vicus of the city was known as that of the Wooden Column, both landmarks surely singled out because of their height (Martial 5.22.2–4; *CIL* 6.975).

### *Edge*

The street junction was a place where probably four urban regions converged. It was very common, almost inevitable, to use the main thoroughfares of Rome as limits between regions, because of the chaotic state of the private streets in between (Dio Cassius 55.8; Robinson 1992: 9). It is also telling that several regions were named after their main streets (Palmer 1975: 654; Rodriguez-Almeida 1983). Based on the listing of monuments in the regionary catalogues, it is possible to conjecture the boundaries in the Subura. The Argiletum Street formed the limit between the sixth and fourth regions. When it forked, the northern road, Vicus Patricius, constituted the

boundary between the sixth and fifth regions, while the southern Clivus Suburanus separated the fifth and third regions (Fig. 1).

Earlier, the Clivus Suburanus was characterised as a path, but one sees here how it also could act as an edge, a boundary in the city. The strongest kinds of edges are those that are visually prominent but also continuous and impenetrable, such as a city wall. However, an edge could also work as a *seam*, along which different districts of the city could be joined, which is the case here.



Figure 3: The slope of the modern Via in Selci follows the ancient Clivus Suburanus (by Hans Bjur).

### *Entering the Marble Plan*

Shortly after the bifurcation at the Fountain of the Nymphs the street started to climb towards the Esquiline Plateau (Fig. 3), entering an area covered by the third-century marble plan (Fig. 4). The most accessible information on the plan can be found on the homepage of the Stanford Digital Forma Urbis Romae Project (*SDFURP*), which has been consulted extensively. The marble plan shows the Clivus Suburanus as a wide street lined with small tabernae, probably working as shops (Staccioli 1959). The entrances to shops were often covered in advertisements and gossipy graffiti, which provided dashes of colour in the urban environment. Martial complained that the impudent bars had taken over all of Rome, blocking streets with their furniture and hanging wine bottles in every portico, probably as signboards (Martial 1.117.10–12, 7.61; cf. Armstrong 2007; Wilber 1942). Apart from these *ad hoc* signboards, shops could also have proper ones. The *Digest* (50.16.245) speaks about ‘pictures attached by chains or fixed to a wall, or lamps similarly fixed’, and several brick plaques, figurative or geometric, have been found in Pompeii and Ostia, advertising different trades and crafts (Ling 1990a; Ling 1990b; Butterworth and Laurence 2005: 55, 110). These could surely work as small landmarks, guiding the traveller (Figs. 5–6).

Returning to the Marble Plan (Fig. 4), this area was an important road junction, where two side streets joined the Suburanus. The street to the right, identified as the Clivus Pullius, shop-crammed and arcaded on one side, climbed sharply up the precipitous Oppian Hill, from

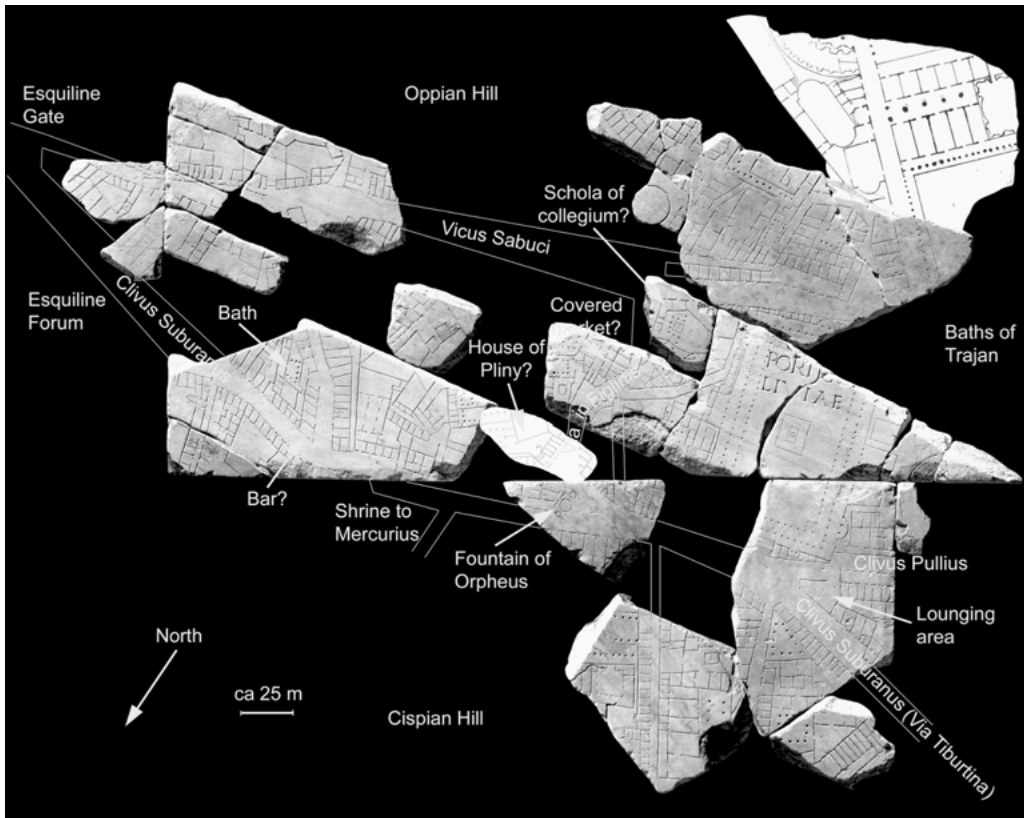


Figure 4: Fragments of the Marble Plan showing the Clivus Suburanus area (courtesy of the Sovraintendenza ai Beni Culturali del Comune di Roma and the Stanford Digital Forma Urbis Romae Project, adapted by the author).

the crest of which the large Baths of Trajan looked down from their artificial platform (*LTUR* 1.284–285; *SDFURP* fr. 11a). At the corner between the Suburanus and Pullius streets there was an interesting element: a triangular area partially enclosed by a wall, and probably open to the sky. It seems to be a perfect place for lounging, and see people coming and going. Continuing uphill, the Suburanus pointed straight towards a monumental staircase in two landings, flanked by tiny shops. As with the enclosed area at the junction, the monumental steps were also perfect for lounging, as well as a place for beggars and vendors. This was the main entrance to the Portico of Livia, a huge portico with double rows of columns built upon an artificial platform on the Oppian slope. It was built by Augustus, and was dedicated to matrimonial love, somewhat ironic in an area known for its prostitution (Pliny the Elder, *Natural history* 14.11; Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 1.5.8–9; *LTUR* 4.127–129; *SDFURP* fr. 10opqr, 11a; Boudreau Flory 1984; Panella 1987). It also probably had an important social function, and the large exedras along its outer walls could be used for meetings. But the Portico was also an important architecture of passage, which tied together many different levels of the neighbourhood, most importantly

the Clivus Suburanus, in the valley, and the Vicus Sabuci, which ran along the crest of the Oppian Hill.

### *Node*

Continuing up the Suburanus Slope one immediately laid eyes on a monumental fountain, consisting of three large, circular basins, located where the road forked again (Fig. 4; *SDFURP* fr. 11c). Paths should not have too sudden changes in direction. If they maintain a satisfactory degree of continuity they are seen as dependable. The Clivus Suburanus was by no means a straight street, but it still maintained a directional quality. Indeed, its organic form allowed the street space to be subdivided into a series of revelations, or a *serial vision*, which gives the street a stronger impact than a monotonous straight road (Cullen 1971: 9; MacDonald 1986: 107). The serial vision also allows a series of landmarks and nodes to be inserted along the way, which enables one to sense one's position along the total length of the path. The path then becomes *scaled*, marking identifiable points, so that the mover feels that he is in the right direction (Lynch 1960: 55, 97).

Martial (10.19) provides a description of the fountain: 'when you have crossed the Subura in breasting the steep path; there you will at once notice Orpheus, spray-sprinkled, crowning his drenched audience'. The fountain can be identified with the Fountain of Orpheus, mentioned in the regionary catalogues, and the house behind it probably worked as an ornamented backdrop, like for example the Fontana di Trevi (*LTUR* 3.171; Rodriguez-Almeida 1970–1971; Rodriguez-Almeida 1975–1976; Wallace-Hadrill 2001). The Fountain of Orpheus gave identity to an important junction along the road, in fact it named the whole neighbouring district. In an inscription of the 370s we hear a group of inhabitants called *orfenses* (*CIL* 6.31893), and the early sixth-century *Liber Pontificalis* (1.171, 178) twice mentions a '*domus in regione Orfea intra urbem*'.

The Argiletum and Suburanus streets were obviously the centre of activity in the Subura, and worked as a linear node of the district. A node is defined by Lynch as an intensive focus in the city, and if a node is the focus of a district it is a *core*. Moreover, along the Clivus Suburanus were important junctions which also worked as nodes in their own right, such as the one just described. Often approach to such a node seems to come from a particular side, a directional quality shown in the description by Martial. It may be confusing to the traveller when many paths converge, especially if they do it at a non-perpendicular angle. But the character of such a node may be made clearer by a heightened *physical* character (Lynch 1960: 47, 58, 72–76). The fountain and the portico thereby made navigation along the Clivus Suburanus easier.

The Marble plan shows that an informal, triangular square formed around the junction, which was crowded with shops in different sizes. A few of these can still be seen, now forming



Figure 5: Geometric pattern on house façade in Pompeii (by author).





Figure 6: Figurative terracotta plaque on house façade in Ostia (by author).

part of the monastery of Santa Lucia in Orfea. They consist of travertine pillars which support brick arches (Fig. 7; *LTUR* 3.191).

The road that branched off the Tiburtina to the right at the Fountain of Orpheus has been hypothetically identified with the Via in Figlinis (Potters' Street), mentioned by Varro (*Latin language* 5.50) and probably forming the limit between the third and fifth urban regions (*LTUR* 1.263–265, 2.171, 252–253; *SDFURP* fr. 10opqr). The Via in Figlinis climbed the Oppian Hill towards Vicus Sabuci (Fig. 4). At the corner where the Figlinis reached the Vicus Sabuci, behind a row of tabernae, there was a columned open space around a rectangular element. This was probably a meeting hall (*schola*) of the club (*collegium*) in the vicus. Almost next door to this building was found a dedication to Vulcan by the *magistri vici Sabuci* (*CIL* 6.801), and it is possible that the rectangular element was an altar or statue dedicated to that god (*SDFURP* fr. 10n, 10lm; cf. Staccioli 1968). The location of the possible *schola*, close to Via in Figlinis and the Portico of Livia, both offering passage between two of the main arteries of the Subura, also demonstrates the area's importance as a core of the Subura district.

Past the Fountain of Orpheus one continued up the last part of the Subura Slope. After only a few metres a side street went to the left. At the crossroads there was a shrine to Mercurius, uncovered in 1888 (Fig. 4). It consisted of an open paved plaza with a raised, rectangular platform covered in marble. On the platform were an altar and an inscribed base for the statue of Mercurius, donated by Augustus. Since Mercurius was the patron god of commerce, he attests to the commercial character of the area. Moreover, he was the father of the neighbourhood Lares (Ovid, *Fasti* 2.610–616; *LTUR* 1.265; Combet-Farnoux 1980; Gatti 1888; Sartorio 1988; Palmer 1997: 80–103; Lott 2004: 76–79). Thus the shrine probably had connections with the crossroads cult, which was so important to the vici. In fact, the shrine may have formed the centre of a hypothetical 'Vicus Orphei'.

Continuing up the Clivus Suburanus, it was still crammed with shops. However, in this area the central part of the blocks seems to have lacked structures, which suggests a somewhat lower population density. This was even more marked along the Vicus Sabuci (*SDFURP* fr. 10Aab, 10abcde, 10g) (Fig. 4). When leaving the part of the Subura Slope covered by the Marble Plan,



Figure 7: Ancient travertine pillars and brick arches at the Via in Selci (by author).

one may discern that the street will join with Vicus Sabuci at an acute angle just off the map, just inside the Porta Esquilina (*SDFURP* fr. 10Aab). One then reached the Esquiline Plateau and the Forum Esquilinum, just inside the Republican Wall. Looking out through the arch in the wall, the Porta Esquilina (Figs. 1 and 8), one can imagine the bustling market square of the Campus Esquilinus on the other side of the gate (Strabo 5.3.9; *CIL* 6.9974, 33870). Just outside the gate, the road forked. At this junction there was another of those monumental street fountains, probably built by Augustus. In the early 220s it was replaced by the much larger Fountain of Alexander, which may very well have been inspired by the Fountain of Orpheus downhill (*LTUR* 2.171, 3.351–352). This fountain too was used to identify the surrounding district, known in the 370s as *ad nymf(eum) Alexandri* (*CIL* 6.31893).

### Conclusions

This study has tried to show how the Romans navigated and perceived their urban environment, using the analytical tools of path, district, landmark, edge and node promoted by Kevin Lynch. An analysis of *paths* showed how people trust the main thoroughfare and avoid the maze outside. These main paths also worked as *edges*, in this case limits between urban regions. This highlights the importance of the Clivus Suburbanus in new ways, and merits a closer analysis of its location, different stretches and atmosphere. The article has also brought in new examples of architecture of passage, such as the Portico of Livia. The concept of *district* has been used to explain the strong identity of the Subura through its location, and its use for movement. Its social cohesion may be understood by looking at its sub-districts, such as the *vici*. *Landmarks*, on the other hand, are often seen mainly as facilitating navigation through a directional quality and by providing turning clues. This has also been demonstrated here, with crossroads fountains as a prime example. However, this article also wants to stress their importance, together with paths and edges, for local identity, giving their name to small districts and their inhabitants.



Figure 8: *The Porta Esquilina with the Fountain of Alexander seen through the archway (after Vasi 1756: plate 126).*

They also take many different forms, ranging from the monumental to trees, graffiti and small brick plaques. In this context the role of paths and crossroads as *nodes* of districts has been explored, which gives them a heightened physical character and identity. The aspect of daily social use has also been addressed, where articulations of the street space, such as fountains, crossroads and colonnades could be used for lounging, markets and as meeting places. The Portico of Livia once more comes across as a prime example, being a place for encounters, commerce and passage. In short, the article wants to stress the factors of movement and urban identity in studying the street network of the ancient city, in order to get a more multi-faceted view of Roman society.

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