City Foundations: Perspectives from Archaeology and History of Religion

Jörg Rüpke

Abstract

In this article, I propose a new reading of different types of historical artifacts and traditions around the idea of a city's foundation. Rather than taking such stories at face value or to look for dim historical traditions behind them, I start by suggesting to take them seriously as an expression of what is introduced as "urbanity" at the beginning of the article as well as strategies of place-making. Across continents and periods, the importance of one's own city seems to dictate that this place should also have a significant founding figure, a founding narrative, and a founding ritual. From early on, urbanites have wanted to live not only in places of importance but in a place that belongs to a special, indeed the highest class of places, that is, in "cities" or their equivalents. In order to plausible this hermeneutic approach, narratives about founders of cities and about rituals to found sacred center of such cities, a city-temple, or even the city as a whole, are analyzed. They cover ideas about founding cities in the Indian Arthashastra and the Roman architectural treatise by Vitruvius, the Gilgamesh narrative for the foundation of Mesopotamian Uruk, and the late 1ˢᵗ millennium BCE foundation narrative of Rome, a ritual ascribed to the twins Romulus and Remus.

Keywords: urbanity, founders, urban founding narratives, Mesopotamia, subcontinent, Uruk, Rome.

In few other topics of archaeology and history of religion is the necessity of cooperation between disciplines based on material and textual evidence as important as in the question of city foundations. Trying to reconstruct such even events by reading textual and archaeological data as mutually supporting misses the crucial role of imagined foundations for urban imaginations. In this article, I propose a new reading of different types of historical artifacts and traditions around the idea of a city's foundation. I suggest to carefully historicize any related evidence. What is necessary is not the completion of urban actors' endeavors to create a foundational

history for themselves but to analyze this very desire. In reviewing the topics of city foundation, foundational narratives, and founding rituals, I propose to interpret such evidence as a product of urban discourses and practices to create a difference of one's own urbanity against a supposed lack of historicity in rural settlements. In employing the concept of urbanity, I draw on an ancient Mediterranean conceptual tradition, even if in modern English urbanity is often narrowed to urbane wittiness. Following conceptual research done within a research group based at Erfurt, urbanity has been profiled as a concept that is based on the production, experience of, and reflection on the urban as a form of living together that is different from other ways. It is urbanity that renders a settlement urban – and not *vice versa*.[1]

1. City founders

The typical actor of a city foundation is a person who founds a place in his or her domain or for the extension of his or her domain, or who upgrades a place by granting it the status of a city in order to make it particularly attractive. The large settlements in Ukraine and Mesopotamia of the 4th and in the Indus plain as in Nubia of the 3rd millennium BCE or Jenne-Jeno at the Niger, which existed over about one thousand five hundred years, were in all probability not subject to such power structures (on Harappa, Jennings 2016: 387, 433; on Jenne-Jeno ibid., 445). In Mesopotamia, it can be observed how gradually different ruling practices and forms of authority, from the temporary role of an army commander to the permanent guarantee of urban and mercantile norms of behavior or simply weights, means of payment, and commodity standards, can condense into the role of a king. The role played by the administration of the city and the urban supply seems to have varied greatly; in many cases, this may have owed more to the "entrepreneurial" activity of others (Smith et al. 2015). Only from the abstraction of such activities and roles did notions of rule and sovereignty then emerge (Smith 2020).

If future cities were often not dependent on the grace of rulers, they were dependent on favorable circumstances. Despite all the coincidences and climatic differences, sufficient water supplies and connections to transport

routes were central. Rivers offered both in combination, especially when they could be crossed in a ford or be easily bridged (exemplary for East Central Europe, Szende 2022: 586). Even a low hill could offer protection against floods. If necessary, it could also be used for defensive purposes.

However, landscape conditions of this kind did not only attract agricultural settlements or markets. Individual large farmers with their dependents as well as so-called "princes", who also maintained long-range contacts and thus acquired further distinction (on such role changes around urbanizing regions see for example Van de Mieroop 2016: 39-40 on northern Mesopotamia; Rüpke 2018: 38-39 for central Italy), also settled in such places and, if they tolerated it, could become nuclei of further settlement, either in continuous development or in the vicinity. Places of worship of dispersed groups, tombs included, could also be established at such sites and possibly become nuclei of settlement in subsequent times. For Varanasi, such considerations - a sun cult as a nucleus for migrating Aryan groups, the later dominant worship of Shiva in the subsequent period - have been brought into play (Singh 2009: 51-53).

Is a sanctuary that distinguishes a concrete place as special and endows it with a cosmic dimension not even the ideal nucleus of an urban development? Paul Wheatley, generalizing on the basis of findings from incipient nucleation and urbanization in the Chinese flood plains, , has emphasized the effect of *ceremonial centers* as innovation sites for social change. New ideas and political models could have been developed and legitimized here. In this respect, they were more important than trade or warfare and brought people together - either directly or via the intermediate stage of merging independent settlements - to form urban numbers and density. The central position of the sanctuary remained intact even through secularization processes (Wheatley 1971; secularization: 312).

Does the history of the many "temple cities" redeem these assumptions? Does it show a clear connection from a temple foundation to later growth and urbanity? Amritsar, to choose an example from South Asia, did not form gradually around the golden temple of the Sikhs, but was probably from the beginning the foundation of an urban society, Rāmdāspur, which, however, stimulated economic immigration precisely through its religious attractiveness (Kaur 2024). A precise sequence of the individual phases of the city's development, however, cannot be discerned from the tradition determined by the founding motif itself.

In the early medieval development of European cities in the Carolingian empire, the presence of churches and, above all, bishoprics

proved to be important, however, not as a founding moment, but as a guarantor of the continuity of settlements that already existed in the Roman period as settlements with an urban character (e.g., McKitterick 1979. On the canonical impetus for this Sydow 1974: 35-37). It is an image of what a city should and could be that is thus transmitted.

That we must not assume any self-driven mechanism, which would lead from big temples to big cities, is shown by the example of Tibetan Lhasa, today a city of millions. According to the tradition about its early history, the main actor was King Songtsen Gampos (c. 633-649 CE). A few years after his accession to the throne, he moved the seat of his rule to the Kyichu Valley, at an altitude of about 3670 meters, and founded a Buddhist monastery (Ramoche) about fifteen kilometers away, and from 642, five hundred meters away, a temple as a central sanctuary, called the "Magically Emerged Cathedral of Rasa" (the original place name before it was called *Lha-sa*, God-Earth, "place of the gods").[2] The prestige of this sanctuary was based on the preservation of a statue brought in marriage the year before by the king's second wife, Wencheng, probably daughter of the Chinese emperor of the Tang dynasty Taizong: a portrait made during the lifetime of the Buddha *(Jobo Shakyamuni).*

A sustainable development was not granted to the settlement complex, although Tibet rose in the following hundred years (and for another century) to a great power, which even conquered the Chinese imperial seat Chang'an. A new phase started when the monk and reformer Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) revisited the ancient shrine and made it the ritual and intellectual center (1408/9) for his Gelugpa school (the "Yellow Caps") through two new teaching centers, Drepung and Sera, a few miles away (on Tsongkhapa and the yellow caps Loseries 2016: 292-304). But it was not until the fifth Dalai Lama (the first was appointed in 1578), Nawang Lobsang Gyatso (1617-1682), that we might look for articulation of urbanity. Acting from Drepung, he set urbanization in motion by further monumentalizing Lhasa. In 1642, Lhasa was declared the capital of Tibet. According to Gyatso's plans, an enormous palace was built in fifty years starting from 1645, the Potala, with about thirteen hectares of interior space, thirteen floors with a facade three hundred and sixty meters wide, dominating a hill one hundred and ten meters high. Since 1649, government

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[2] Bronger 2001: 6; on the following 6-19 with quotations from the travelogues. On the foundation and the temporally associated introduction of a Tibetan script, Loseries 2016, 247-9.

business was conducted from the White Palace, which was completed here. If in an engraving of 1661 not the urban core of Lhasa, but the Potala mountain fortress appears, which was surrounded only at the foot by a chain of walls and buildings, we need to wait for another half a century. In 1716/17 the Jesuit Ippolito Desideri describes the city as - probably measured against his impressions in the Italian Pistoia and Rome - "populous" with a central all-day occupied marketplace, which one can hardly cross in the afternoon hours due to the large number of people. He describes the population as cosmopolitan with merchants from Moscow to China living here. The two nearby monastery "universities" appear to him as cities in their own right because of the number of students, walls, streets, squares and the size and quality of the houses.

Reports from the 19th century confirm the impression of a scattered settlement complex, but also of an identifiable town center, formerly surrounded by a wall. The settlement at some distance from the Potala and the monasteries was characterized by trade and - as an eyewitness from 1900/1 makes explicit – by a high proportion of women. It is reasonable to assume that it was distinguished by its own urbanity. It exists in close symbiosis with the religious and political nuclei around it and is itself networked across the entire continent. The continuous built-up space set apart from the other nuclei is important to notice. In addition, the generosity towards beggars (highlighted in the report of the two travelers from the Lazarist Order in 1846, Huc and Gabet) indicates an institutionalized solidarity that makes the settlement appear urban.

The example of Lhasa shows not only how random, protracted and how dependent on individual decisions, which could also have been different, urbanization processes can be. They also show how, in several stages, a religiously charged landscape can influence the choice of location for religious practices of a different kind - teaching instead of or in addition to worship - or for practices of domination - and *vice versa.* A space becomes a "landscape" designed by humans through conscious "foundations", but these are often sufficient as arguments for further place designs, which then do not necessarily require their own, ritually charged foundations.

2. City-foundation as a specific case of place-making

Anthropologically and archaeologically, ritual foundations of permanently inhabited spaces are widespread. City-foundations are rather a special case in a broad range of ritual place-making. People take root somewhere by

consciously starting even smaller buildings. They found houses not only with pragmatic actions, by digging a cellar or ramming in posts. They also employ symbolic actions aiming at the durability of the physical structure. Or they pursue communicative actions that are aiming at connecting people to one another via such a building. This might be one's own group, a family, for example, or a house community that is constituted by the common building. But it can also be, vertically, the ancestors or other deities who become involved in the building: *stakeholders,* shareholders and interested parties, to whom a lasting interest in its preservation is thus attributed. Religious action consists precisely in the attribution of agency to other, superhuman figures, thus creating divine actors who can bestow special power on their worshippers or relieve them of any responsibility of their own (Rüpke 2015). This ambivalent gain in reach takes on a special form in such foundations. We need to take a closer look at them.

When we speak of foundation, what we have in mind is an initial event such as "foundation sacrifices" or "foundation pits".[3] But long used buildings, whether houses of men or houses of gods or houses of rulers (which in many languages are not as distinguished as the words "temple" and "palace" suggest in English), always need massive interventions. Even if no extensions or conversions are targeted, wear and tear, deterioration of materials, or catastrophes such as fires or floods must be compensated. Restoration and re-foundation are two different perspectives on the same event rather than qualitatively and quantitatively clearly separated courses of action (Witschel 1992). Again and again, in some domestic traditions, the dead are buried under the clay floor; Buddhist monuments (Lewis 1993: 317) like Roman temples have their "birthdays"*,* Christian churches have their respective patrons' anniversaries, annually commemorating the foundation.

In this perspective, foundation rituals are only special cases of building-related rituals. And such rituals are only special cases of practices of rooting oneself, of *place-making*, in which individuals or groups appropriate certain spaces and make them "their" place (on place-making see Lätzer-Lasar 2022; see also Richards 2017, Ferri 2021). This can be permanent and exclusive or only consist in occasional use and in the knowledge of alternative uses, for example when it is about the place for a market stall, a political demonstration or religious procession. It is precisely under the conditions of urban scarcity of space that the inclusion of

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[3] On the problem of the concept of a construction victim, Wells 1988.

powerful institutions or the inclusion of superhuman actors to whom competing power is attributed makes sense. And it is precisely by involving both groups in this way that they maintain their power.

These considerations have consequences for cities. The adscription of an urban character to a settlement, urbanity, does not require an act of founding a city. As a rule, none of the later inhabitants would have participated in it anyway. Surely, cities witnessed other forms of foundation. House foundations were more important precisely where parts of the population saw themselves as house-based groups, as "house societies" (Naglak 2021). Larger assemblages of people and buildings than houses were possible. Pre-modern cities in particular often lack spatial segregation of social classes. Here, the less fortunate or people without family ties lived as dependents in certain rooms of those building complexes in which the better-off had their spacious apartments. The *insulae* ("islands") of Roman cities, separated from one another by streets, are an example of this, as are the districts of the cities of the Indus culture, separated from one another by walls but comparable in terms of social structure, or those of Mesoamerican cities. Larger quarters often had political functions that were expressed in assemblies for which larger spaces or squares were built or set aside in the respective district.[4] Whether these places had primarily, or secondarily religious functions must remain open (for Mohenjo-daro see Petrie 2013: 89; see also 92 on polycentric structures). Founding rituals or memories could also have been associated with such places. Cross-group cohesion and ideas of togetherness then had to find other opportunities, practices and media.

The tradition of early cities in particular is dominated by rituals to define the location of other structures, namely sanctuaries. While foundation stones or pits with special objects have rarely been found, the textual tradition is all the richer. Obviously, it was important to the actors to record these rituals as precisely as possible. In the form of small clay tablets among the Hittites in Asia Minor, this might have served as a memory aid for the actors themselves and their successors, and might have been preserved in archives, or in the form of publicly visible inscriptions. Reading such texts out to a smaller or larger group of people could at least potentially create a public sphere of its own, lasting far beyond the ritual

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[4] On the "great halls" of Harappa, Jennings 2016, 433; on the plazas of individual neighbourhoods in Old Mexico, Carballo 2015, 212 (using La Laguna, Cantona, and Tlalancaleca as examples; see also 207 on differentiated house size).

itself. Thus, the founding act of a building that was an important part of urban identity could be repeatedly remembered. As far as the rituals themselves (and their memory) was concerned, the intention was not performing some standard ritual and thus accessing the class of "urban settlements". Rather, as the very different, consistently fragmentary Hittite texts show, each one is concerned with its own religious and political constellations, which were addressed with corresponding rituals.

Expected seems the interest in the durability of the construction. A text from the time of the Hittite great empire (about 1350-1200 BCE) begins with the statement that under the foundation stones as well as under the central column in the construction pit, copper plates are fastened by bronze nails with an iron hammer. This is accompanied in each case by the statement: "As this copper is protected and furthermore eternal, may this temple likewise be protected and may it be eternal upon the Dark Earth!" Miniature stones or pillars each of silver, gold, lapis lazuli, quartz, alabaster, iron, copper, bronze and diorite are placed under the cornerstones and the four pillars. It is emphasized that these come from a variety of places and even, in the form of meteoritic iron ore, from heaven. The gods, not humans, would have built this new structure - so the deity, the new inhabitant, is assured.[5] A text of middle Hittite time (late 15th–late 14th century BCE) describes in great detail the production of the deity herself, that is, her statue, her jewelry and her clothing, for example, made of wool of various colors (Beckman 2010: 81, text 6 = Laroche, Catalogue des textes hittites no 481). What is important to the author(s) is the relationship of the new "deity of the night" to the already existing deity of the same name and its temple. Other texts emphasize the dreams and omens that accompanied the planning phase or triggered it in the first place; always important is the origin of the deity from other temples or places, but also the involvement of very different specialists and groups of people.

Here the potential of the religious shifting of responsibility becomes apparent. What all these and comparable texts try to conceal is the human arbitrariness to create a new god or a new goddess - single and gender differentiated as a rule - and to make it existent and permanently present with a building. To this end, the building is overdetermined. It is made into a place that forms a central node simultaneously in social, geographic-

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[5] Laroche, Catalogue des textes hittites no 413, after Beckman 2010, 85-87 (text 7). - In Khafajeh near Babylon a building pit was made with purified sand (I owe the hint to prof. Laerke Recht, Graz).

political, economic, material, and ideological-religious systems of reference. The precarious existence of the deity is cast in concrete - translated into a modern image - and internationalized through its materiality and the witnesses invited, it is funded top-down by the ruling family figuring large in all these documents and bottom up by contributions of urban inhabitants, as the surviving texts show.[6] This offers countless points of reference across many groups of the large settlement.

Even though religious practices, instruments and specialists seem to be the actors, their actions are driven by, and their ritual instruments are the products of larger technological, social, and diplomatic developments and spatial constellations. This is hidden by the texts' focus on the initiators - in the case of the Hittite texts as well as in older Mesopotamian texts, it is regularly the members of the royal family – and by the texts' stressing that it were the divine and the religious communications that had led to the founding initiative. In fact, the latest inventions in weaponry - the Iron Age is dawning - must be reflected in cult devices, local industry must be reflected in offerings, the constellation of gods must do justice to the actual or dreamed expansion of the empire. Only in this way can relevant parts of the population be "taken along". And at the same time - people like to experiment! - norms can be tried out, for example - not in all details understandable to us – with regards to clothing: "one high waisted garment, one trimmed tunic, one hood, one cap, one petticoat, one tuhapšu-tunic, (and) one gold fibula - (all) this for a female (deity); one garment, one shirt, one Hurrian shirt, one trimmed and decorated sash, one trimmed tunic, one BAR.TE-garment, one šaturratu-garment, one tuhapšu-tunic, one bow, one quiver, one axe, (and) one knife - (all) this for a male (deity)."[7]

All this serves urbanity, the meaning of the city as a whole. From Uruk to Amritsar, from Hattuša to Lhasa, from Rome to Jerusalem, in many places one can trace the central role of temple foundations for an urban sense of life. The latter two places provide further variations on this historical theme, which is important for early as well as contemporary history.[8] From late 1st century CE Rome, we possess an eyewitness account of the rebuilding of the temple of the city's chief god, the Capitoline Iuppiter. Tacitus, in his "Histories", describes the phase of laying the

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[6] See the previous note, text n. 6.
[7] Ibid., 81 (text n. 6, § 8).
[8] One needs only to consider the role of monumental mosques in contemporary Central Asian capitals (Moser 2013).

foundation stone and emphasizes how many people made their personal contribution by pulling along together on ropes fastened around a monstrously large stone. United, judges the Roman historian, was the population present to a large extent in their joy and zeal (Tacitus, *Histories* 4.53). And, of course, independent religious specialists, namely Etruscan haruspices, had demanded that the new temple be rebuilt only within the footprint of the old one - a concern they shared with their counterparts from 1st millennium BCE Mesopotamia (Ambos 2010). Only in height did the Roman builders allow themselves to add anything.

In the stories of the Hebrew Bible, David conquers the already existing city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites.[9] Accordingly, a foundation story is omitted. In its place, however, is the story of the building of the temple under his successor Solomon. Despite all understanding for the necessity of a stone foundation, it is the cypress and cedar trees of Lebanon, which have to be imported from far away, that make the temple special and require gigantic logistics of felling in the far north and transport. Artful bronze is added. Also described in detail in this fictional text is the dedication ritual associated with the introduction of the Ark of the Covenant, a non-anthropomorphic representation of god, in place of a cult statue. Gathered is the whole people of the country or at least its representatives. But even Solomon, in his speech and dedicatory prayer, cannot avoid emphasizing the urban character of the sanctuary, which requires that the people pray again and again "turned toward the city which you have chosen". Solomon's decision to build the temple, which he justified at the beginning of the preparations as his gratitude to the God who helped him to victory, is also divinely sanctioned at the end, after the celebration, and confirmed with the promise of its constant presence. It is this temple that, after its destruction at the beginning of the 6th century BCE, was rebuilt after the return from exile in Persian times under Ezra. But above all, it is this first temple, precisely undocumented in its details, that serves as a point of contact for urban and social utopias in the period that follows. The book of Exodus projects such thoughts as a "tent" back into the time of the desert migration; the prophet Ezekiel imagines a new temple in geometric precision as the basis of an urban society based on the division of labor. "The circumference of the city is 18,000 cubits. And the name of the city shall be from this day forth: Here is the Lord." So reads the final sentence of the Book of Prophets. Here the building fantasy becomes a

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[9] 2 Samuel 5:6-11. temple building: 1 Kings 5:15-9:9, quotation: 8:44.

discourse on urbanity it all its ambivalence of social stratification as well as inclusion. Fictitious reports on architectural beginnings depict what a city should be, stones stand in for humans.[10]

3. Fantasies of founding

New temple buildings or temple restorations, especially if they were intended or acted as urban community projects, could obviously connect more easily with founding rituals than cities. If cities had already been growing for a long time, it was obviously too late for such a ritual. If cities existed only on the drawing board, the most important actors, the residents, were mostly not yet present and available. In that case, the foundation could be declared elsewhere, in a royal palace, a princely house, a company headquarters or even in a parliament. However, more meaningful alternatives to these pragmatic solutions, simply to separate the act of proclamation from the place itself, existed. Such alternatives were known in Rome and Jerusalem. The normative systematization of what allegedly has always been the case from the urban beginnings is one of them. The other is the fictitious descriptive, that is, the much later invented narrative of a foundation. Both strategies, it will quickly become clear, were not points of origin of urbanity, but for their part presupposed a highly developed discourse of urbanity into which they sought to prescriptively intervene.

The wave of urbanization in the subcontinent since the first half of the 1st millennium BCE, initially concentrated in the Gangetic plain, created that reality which was formulated as a norm in the manual of politics and administration called *Arthasthastra* ("Political Science") and written in Sanskrit. If the author of the text rediscovered in the early 20th century (after fifteen centuries of oblivion), Kautilya or Vishnugupta, is identical with the polymath Chanakya (first half of the 4th century–283 BCE), the text would have been written in the environment of the first ruler of the Maurya Empire, Chandragupta (c. 320-298 BCE). The text does not contain a separate treatise on cities among its fifteen books. But in several places in the second book on the duties of ministers ("government superintendents" in the first English translation by Rudapratna Shamasastry), it deals with large settlements and their problems. "Cities" do not appear as a separate category; the "villages" consisting of one hundred to five hundred Shudra

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[10] Exodus 25:1-31:17; Ezekiel 40-48; quotation 48:35 (Standard Translation).

families form the basis of the empire (2:1,2). But there are, often in the context of the fortresses assigned to groups of such villages, phenomena and regulatory needs that indicate a different quality of settlements. These include the presence of people acting, dancing, singing, making music, clowning, or reciting legends; they include the presence of areas or buildings designed to facilitate sports or performances – all of which are to be excluded from villages (2:1, 33–34). Urban cores are also represented by the great fortifications, which are said to have twelve gates and to be connected by roads to gardens, groves, and forests (and especially those for elephants), among other things. These, as they are called later in the text, fortified cities *(nagara)* enclose houses with people of all four estates and grant space to all kinds of specialists, royal teachers, priests and ministers, but also, in the north, iron smiths, gemstone workers, Brahmins and - named at the top of this group - the royal patron deity of the city. In the center of the city, the houses of other deities are to be situated in front of the palace (Olivelle 2013: 506 ad loc). Examples are offered by the deities Aparájita, Apratihata, Jayanta, Vaijayanta, Siva, Vaisravana, and the equestrian twins of the Ashvins, Śrī and Madirā (2,4,17). Guardian deities stand watch at the corners, as they do in the individual quarters. A circle of sanctuaries and pilgrimage places and groves, at least one hundred and eighty meters from the moat, wraps around the city. Cemeteries and cremation places are also located in a semicircle around the city, leaving out the west side, that is, the wind side. This semicircle is also where the ascetic religious groups *(páshanda)* and the families in charge of relevant tasks *(candālas)* must live (2,2,20-23).[11]

The urbanity developed in the *Arthashastra* is one of regulated diversity, order, and productivity. Some contemporary urban practices are mentioned only in negative contexts, such as theaters, which are not supposed to exist in villages but can be used by spies or *agents provocateurs* as places to sow discord in certain corporations, along with inns (11:1). The founding of villages and towns is merely the abstract figure of thought of a society ordered in mathematical ratios; neither as a practice nor as a past does it play a role for the author.

The Maurya Empire liquidated the Nanda Empire, which had been attacked by Alexander the Great, at the very time when the earliest layers of the *Arthashastra* were created and inherited its conflict with the Greek

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[11] Olivelle 2013: 507, considers this exclusion of deviants from a brahmanical point of view, which is not otherwise documented in the text, to be a later interpolation.

satrapies. At the other end of the Hellenistic empire-building, we again find texts that systematically dealt with city. At the end of the 1st century BCE, the architect Vitruvius in *De architectura* presents a sophisticated foundational fantasy. The architectural manual is written in the tone of the expert who, from systematic knowledge and from knowledge of many places, makes building regulations that he dedicates to the conqueror of "the circle of the earth" Augustus. Before dealing with detailed regulations on the choice of materials and the stable and aesthetic construction of sacred buildings, public and private buildings, water infrastructure and, finally, machinery in books two to ten, Vitruvius offers a systematics of architecture. The city does not actually form an object of its own but is simply the self-evident framework of all architecture. This is the only reason why the text quickly comes to the fundamental question of the choice of location for the largest architectural ensemble in this implicit sense, namely the city: Health, unspoiled air, sunlight, fertile land, land routes and waterways qualify a place for such an endeavor. From here, the treatise turns to details of the layout of the defensive wall and the orientation of the streets, so that no harmful wind blows into it.

The first book closes rather surprisingly and with fundamental considerations on the disposition of a city (1.7.1-2):

> "Once the alleys and streets (of the city) are determined, it remains to design the choice of locations for the convenience and common use of the citizenry *(civitas)*: for the sacred buildings, for the forum and for other buildings used in common. If the walls *(moenia)* are by the sea, the forum should be near the harbor; if it is inland, it should be in the center of the city *(oppidum)*. The sacred houses [that is, the temples] of those deities in whose protection the citizenry especially lies, those of Juppiter, Juno, and Minerva, should be on a towering hill overlooking most of the walls. (The temple) for Mercury [god of commerce] should be located either in the marketplace or, like the temple for Isis and Serapis, in a large public square. The temples for Apollo and for Bacchus Pater near the theater. If there are neither sports facilities nor amphitheaters in citizenries, the temple of Hercules should be located near the circus. The temple of Mars should be outside the city *(urbs)* facing the field, the temple of Venus also outside, but near a gate. According to the regulations of the Etruscan haruspices, the sanctuaries *(fana)* of Venus, Vulcan, and Mars were to be obligatorily located *(dedicata)* outside the city wall

(murus) in such a way that the temple of Venus does not instill erotic desire in adolescents and married women in the city, and the violence of Vulcan [fire] was so taken out of the walls by religious ideas and practices that the buildings seemed to be freed from the fear of fires. As the divine power *(divinitas)* of Mars has been obligatorily located outside the walls, there will be no armed conflict among the citizens, but it will keep them defended from enemies and thus freed from the danger of war. (2) The temple for Ceres shall be in a place outside the city, to which not all must go constantly, but at most for a sacrifice, because this very place must be protected reverently, purely, and with irreproachable conduct. For the other deities, too, suitable locations must be assigned for the respective cult" (my translation).

In this passage, Vitruvius is not so much concerned with offering a religiously coherent view of a city, but with creating an image of urban space and urban coexistence: an urbanity suitable for the imperial age, with that added value of life that Vitruvius calls "convenience" *(opportunitas)*, stressing its temporal use when needed, but that we would rather classify as permanent "infrastructures". The instrument for achieving this is his interpretation of certain deities, associating them with certain buildings or dangers and benefits. Mercury as god of merchants, Apollo and Bacchus as gods of dramatic performances, Ceres is associated with the *plebs* and riots and thus relegated to a more inaccessible place. The final sentence once again conceals the political or already rather police perspective by referring to ritual requirements - requirements that just did not play a role before. The design of urbanity regulated in this way is projected into space - similar to the *Arthashastra* - relative to the city walls, not according to cardinal points. Unlike in the North Indian text, however, space is not organized from the location of a palace, but through spatial collocations of sanctuaries and public institutions. For both, the imagined city wall is central as an organizing boundary, even if this precisely does not enclose the entirety of the urban structures.

In contrast to Jewish and Christian fantasies about heavenly Jerusalem and early modern European urban utopias influenced by them, the Vitruvian handbook's account is much more sober. Religious practices and their deities do not represent the lawgivers but are themselves the subject or instruments of regulations that seek to justify and systematize, thus pursuing a rationalizing line of argument. It is technicians in

architecture and administration who have designed these cityscapes. In contrast to the *Arthashastra*, for which we have no evidence of actual implementation in buildings, the only architectural treatise that has survived from Greco-Roman antiquity has repeatedly served as a point of reference for the architecture of certain buildings since its dissemination by the Carolingian knowledge institutions of the 8th century and especially since the Renaissance (Hänsli 2007). Due to the replacement of the Roman world of divinities by Christian theology, this did not apply to the passage presented. Nevertheless, these texts have held great fascination for later urban planners, but also for historiography and modern academic research, and continue to provide patterns of interpretation that archaeological or cultural-historical researchers with their fragmentary sources are only too happy to follow in order to place the latter in a larger framework. This also applies to the second strategy of replacing real city foundations.

4. Founding narratives

Numerous foundation narratives must also be read as self-interpretations of urban life, as evidence of discourses on urbanity, and not as historical accounts of urban beginnings. The religious element with which "beginnings" are justified as models of urban life is even more prominent in them.

The oldest - measured by the earliest attainable text stages - narration about a city foundation concerns the perhaps oldest city at all, Uruk. It is the Gilgamesh Epic, which has become known in more and more fragments since 1872. The oldest reliable textual evidence dates from the end of the 3rd millennium, but the material was disseminated in writing only since the beginning of the following millennium, when it became the training material for professional scribes, first in Babylon - not in Uruk![12] In the last third of the 2nd millennium BCE, various narratives were brought into a self-contained metrical narrative that filled eleven clay tablets (a shorter but older narrative variant fills the twelfth). Each contained some two hundred fifty to three hundred verses in Babylonian language and cuneiform, creating coherent units by clear changes of time (night or morning) or place at the beginning and end of each tablet text. By repeating

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[12] On the earliest layers, George 2010, 7-24.

the opening verses 1:18-23 at the very end of the text (11:323-328), a ring composition with an unambiguous ending was created. [13]

The text is not about the foundation of the city in the sense of an absolute beginning. The city itself, according to the Sumerian king list compiled not before the end of the 3rd millennium BCE, was already several tens of thousands of years old when Gilgamesh ruled it. King Gilgamesh is the one who restored the mounds, the sanctuaries, and the rituals after the destruction and cultural rupture caused by a Flood (1:11-21; see also 43-44) (and it was the close parallels to the biblical Flood narrative surrounding Noah that first aroused the interest of European and American scholars in this text):

> "He built the wall of Uruk, the hurdle,
> that of the holy Eanna, the pure treasure house.
> Look at its wall, *shining like copper!*
> Look at their bulwark, which no one knows how to reproduce!
> Why don't you take the stairs that have been there for ages!
> Come near Eanna, the abode of Ishtar,
> that no future king will be able to replicate,
> nor any other human being!
> Climb up and walk on the wall of Uruk!
> Inspect the foundations and check the brickwork:
> whether their brickwork is not (made of) brick
> and whether the Seven Wise Men themselves did not lay their foundations [before the Flood, JR]!
> One (whole) square mile [about 390 ha] is city,
> a (whole) square mile is garden land,
> one (whole) square mile is floodplain [i.e. pits of clay][14]
> half a square mile is the temple of Ishtar.
> Three square miles and a half, that's Uruk, those are the measurements!"

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[13] Verse counts and quotations translated from the German translation by Maul 2020; cf. Helle 2021, who in l. 13 interprets "white like wool". Maul's italicization of unclear textual meanings has been adopted. On the tablet structure also Sallaberger 2008, 19, who rather emphasizes the open ending of the cantos (as I would call the units in reference to Greek epics).

[14] Here I follow the interpretation by Röllig 2009, 33, and Sallaberger 2008, 23: "lowlands" for clay extraction (after flooding) and possibly arable farming; Helle 2021, 4 translates "for the pits of clay".

But even these undertakings are not narrated themselves. Rather, their knowledge is presupposed. But the city is not only the setting for large parts of the epic, but also in many places its subject: urban institutions and urban life are not only mentioned in passing in the most varied forms but are explicitly thematized. It is precisely the contrast between the "civilized" townspeople and the "cultureless" dwellers in wilderness that provides an opportunity to praise urban institutions (and in some instances also to curse them). The real theme of the epic is Gilgamesh's (and others') awareness of death and his own mortality as a result of and from the consequences of the way of life associated with the achievement of urban culture. The trigger for the whole drama of the narrative is the wantonness of the young and handsome king of the populous city,[15] who keeps the young men from productive or reproductive work in his own family by ball games and the young women by rape ("he is their bull, and they are the cows," 1:73). It is primarily on the women's complaint that the cultureless Enkidu is created, first adversary, then friend of Gilgamesh, and first of the two to suffer death. The central achievement of the city, through reference to which Enkidu can be moved to Uruk, are the sanctuaries of Anum and Ishtar (i.e., Eannu, the "heavenly house") with the female sex-workers and the feasts and nocturnal debauchery marked by them and their drumming (1:209–232). Although the women engaging in sex-work are institutionally assigned to the temple of Ishtar (3:122–128; 42), the cursing by the "trapper" (the prototypical inhabitant of the wilderness) as well as the counter-cursing by the now civilized Enkidu show them active everywhere in the city: They offer themselves outside the city wall[16] and, if successful, enter every bedroom (7:102–123; 151–161).

Bathing as a cleansing of the body is of comparable prominence. Bathing is the first and most important thing that initiates the return from the wilderness to the city, whether at the beginning of the sixth song (6:1–5) or still outside before the final return to Uruk in the eleventh song (11:250–270). Valuable and colorful clothing completes the change of clothes (see 2,227 and 11,261. 270).

The text, which solicits attention with the figure of a city builder and re-founder, completely skips the act of building. What the text does create,

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[15] This is how I understand Maul's translation in 1:70: "king of countless people."

[16] This motif is already part of one of the oldest probable pre-cursors of the epic (George 2010, 11); yet, the cursing and blessing are attested only in the late standard Babylonian version (ibid., 23).

however, is a sharply contoured image of ancient Babylonian urbanity of the 2nd millennium BCE, projected back to a Sumerian city foundation and received by writers and certainly listeners from southern Mesopotamia to Hittite Hattusha, where there is even evidence of a translation (Maul 2020: 14). Building for, living with, and dying through the gods is central to this. Even if praise of the urban achievements prevails, some dark sides of urban life and its ambivalence, are highlighted, too.

5. Foundation Rituals

Rituals of foundation could also become forms of expression or commemoration of the founding process - about which, once again, we have learned nothing in the Gilgamesh epic. And again, it is not difficult to recognize that some of these rituals are merely fictions of rituals and to understand them as part of a self-assurance of the authors as well as of the recipients.

In Rome in a long line, literary testimonies agree in their ideas about the foundation of their city, indeed about how cities should be founded in the first place.[17] This began in the city itself in the 2nd century BCE and goes all the way to Bishop Isidore of Seville, writing in Spain, in the 7th century CE. A team of bull and cow plows a circular line in such a way that the excavation falls inward, the furrow is called "the very first furrow", the whole process an "Etruscan rite," thus investing the fiction with the prestige of this ancient and wise Italic people (for details, Rüpke 2023. On the classification of the rite, Prescendi 2023). The gates are left out. At them the plow is carried over the piece in question. Thus, the line created, or more precisely the material excavated, is interpreted as the future course of the wall. Subsequently, the literary descriptions may even have served as the basis of imperial practice: a stele from Capua in Italy from the Augustan period bears the inscription "Where the plow was pulled by order of the emperor"; a coin of Hadrian shows such a scene.[18]

In the earliest literary attestation, in the first half of the 2nd century BCE in Cato's *Origines,* the ritual drawing of the wall line is seen as a long-gone practice; this very fact speaks for an "invented tradition". There are indications that it was carried out only from a period in which wall building

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[17] On such an „urbigony" replacing a cosmogony, Bettini 2011, who, however, does not adequately stress the conceptual plurality and repetitiveness of the practice.
[18] *ILLRP* 482; coin: Hendin 810.

in Italy declined sharply, in the first century BCE. The assumption is that in the colonization-laden 1st century BCE, when so many veterans had to be settled, the unnecessary real demarcation of boundaries was replaced by a symbolic one.

Alignments of city axes with the cardinal points defined by the sun's course are widespread. There can be no doubt that this is about more than healthy air circulation, as the text of the Roman architectural theorist Vitruvius might suggest.

The use of astrologers in the subcontinent, divinatory specialists in Japan, or priests in the Roman Empire shows that the specific choice of location is also aimed at a cosmological frame of reference that can be thought of in different ways. The precise religious design may foreground more abstract orders or more personal divine desires. But this is true in many cases of choice of place or choice of time. In contrast, the preoccupation with the physical boundary line, the wall, and the enactment of the transformation of farmland into urban infrastructure are specific to urban foundational imaginaries. In both cases, the narratives are not content with the precise performance of rituals, as if religious techniques were all that mattered. Narratively enacted is how precarious the choices thus set are. The female self-sacrifice or the death of a twin remain permanently in memory. They bring excess and guilt into play. They seem to highlight and keep present the difficult balance between legitimate and illegitimate power, between the powerful and the powerless (for Rome, Badura 2022), enjoyment and exploitation (as in the case of Gilgamesh) in the dense assemblage of humans, animals, and objects in urban space. This pervasive ambivalence of the urban and the religious (see Raja, Rüpke 2024) is, however, mitigated in the foundation narratives. With regard to female roles, for instance, the scope of action is only used for voluntary self-submission. Evidently, urban realities are much more grim, up to the exploitation of women in poorly paid home or factory work of the present.[19]

6. Conclusions

Obviously, the importance of one's own city dictates that it should also have a significant founding figure, founding narrative, founding ritual. Somebody responsible is being looked for, if (?) only to divert their responsibility. The name component "founder" *(ktistes)* for Greek deities

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[19] For this - like many other hints - I thank our daughter Irene Rüpke.

was applied only to male gods (Heller 2020); gender hierarchies were converted into levels of importance. Urbanites want to live not only in places of importance but in a place that belongs to a special, indeed the highest class of places: "cities" or their equivalent. For this, I suggest, yet another strategy comes into play: the choice of founding figures who were not only important or, if possible, even deities, but who also guaranteed a place in the family tree of urbanization, or, employing another image: on the genealogical path of urbanization.

What we have come to know in the Gilgamesh Epic in relation to the wall-founders Gilgamesh and before him the "Seven Sages" was usual practice in the Greeks' urban network. The spectrum ranged from gods and mythological heroes to historically close and tangible people. In the heyday of city foundation preference was given to prominent divine figures and miraculous beginnings.[20] The veneration as "founders" found its religious expression in a permanent cult at the tomb of this founder, which was centrally located in the city. Here, too, the appropriate view is from hindsight: the urbanity of the settlement manifested itself in the identification of an actual or supposed tomb as that of the city's founder(s) (see above for Rome and again Helas 2021). Such a common ancestral figure allowed for the foundation of a community of descent for the inhabitants.

Through distant founders, who also appeared as actors in regional or supra-regional myths, relationships could also be forged with other cities: Shared founder figures or kinship between the respective founders allowed rival Greek cities to find bridges to each other, even to forge alliances. These were not warlike constellations that were defused by such means, but above all rivalries for prestige and favor within the framework of accepted suzerainties such as the Hellenistic kingdoms or the Roman Empire (Scheer 1993). And it was above all the claim to belong: to be recognized as a fundamentally equal formation, as a "polis," and here in the sense of a city, belonging to a shared cultural world. This was not only a linguistic regulation, but an interpretation – and if necessary: reinterpretation – of one's own religious practice, a modified framework of understanding the ritually addressed deities driven by the need for urbanity.

In the growing Roman sphere and in the urbanization process of the imperial era, political and cultural elites continued this language game, and the

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[20] Leschhorn 1984; on foundation legends 115-7; catalogue: 360-386. A group of seven heroes is invoked in Athens (Plutarch, *Aristides* 11.3-4).

practices linked to it: Roman authors anchored their city in the network of the Greek world not only by retelling Greek myths. They made the protagonists (and, if they were goddesses, also female protagonists) founders of their city, even across complicated genealogical constructions. The Roman emperor, in turn, could be won over as an actual or supposed new founder: In view of his de facto power *and* distance, the boundaries between human and divine agency became blurred. Here, too, it was possible to fall back on traditions of the Hellenistic period and the numerous city foundations by Alexander the Great. This applied to his expansionist campaigns as well as to the attempts of his successors to penetrate the diadochic empires by founding cities and filling them with an abundance of settlements named Alexandreias or Seleukias deep into Central Asia. Yet, as in the foundation narratives considered earlier, it is the interaction of the ruler and a local deity that leads to the success of the foundation and the transformation of any pre-existing settlements at the respective foundation sites into a proper city (Dimitru 2016). Urbanity is something shared within urban networks, but it needs also to be the characteristic urbanity of one's own place.

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