

The metropolisation of “Roma Capitale”: the view from the Tiber delta

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Far from the stereotype of the “sleeping beauty”, the Italian capital is the scene of an important and unique metropolisation process, the challenges of which Aurélien Delpirou and Dominique Rivière analyse here. How can urban and economic growth be reconciled with the historical legacies of the Eternal City?

On 21 December 2012, a few days before the fall of Mario Monti’s administration, the Italian government gave its approval for the extension of Rome Fiumicino international airport and released €2.5 billion for the launch of the project, including the creation of an additional runway and new terminals capable of handling no less than 100 million passengers annually by 2040. This decision, taken at a time of fiscal austerity, demonstrates the strategic importance of the site for Italy, its capital and its national airline, Alitalia. It also reflects recent changes on the outskirts of Rome, following metropolitan development that has taken on a new dimension since the 1990s.

These developments call into question a number of images attached to the Italian capital: long described as an unproductive and parasitic city, Rome is still often analysed through the prism of delays and sluggishness. The area around the Tiber delta, which includes the airport and several major strategic projects, is both an indicator and a test bed for this metropolisation, which has to take on the city’s various challenging legacies while at the same time raising, on the urban-planning front, the inevitable question of the links between different spatial scales and time frames.

Metropolisation in Rome: an oft-ignored reality

Rome occupies a unique place in terms of globalisation. On the one hand, it has an exceptional international sphere of influence as a religious and cultural centre, a major tourist hub (the third most popular destination in Europe after Paris and London), the capital of the Italian state and the location of the Vatican. On the other hand, its limited economic base – the legacy of political choices made both before and after unification in favour of an administrative city protected from industrialisation – has long contributed to Rome’s marginalisation in the global metropolitan system (Djament-Tran 2011; Delpirou *et al.* 2013). At national level, the functional division of responsibilities between Rome and Milan – which is home to half of the corporations in Italy, most company head offices and the most internationalised sectors of industry – remains unequal.¹

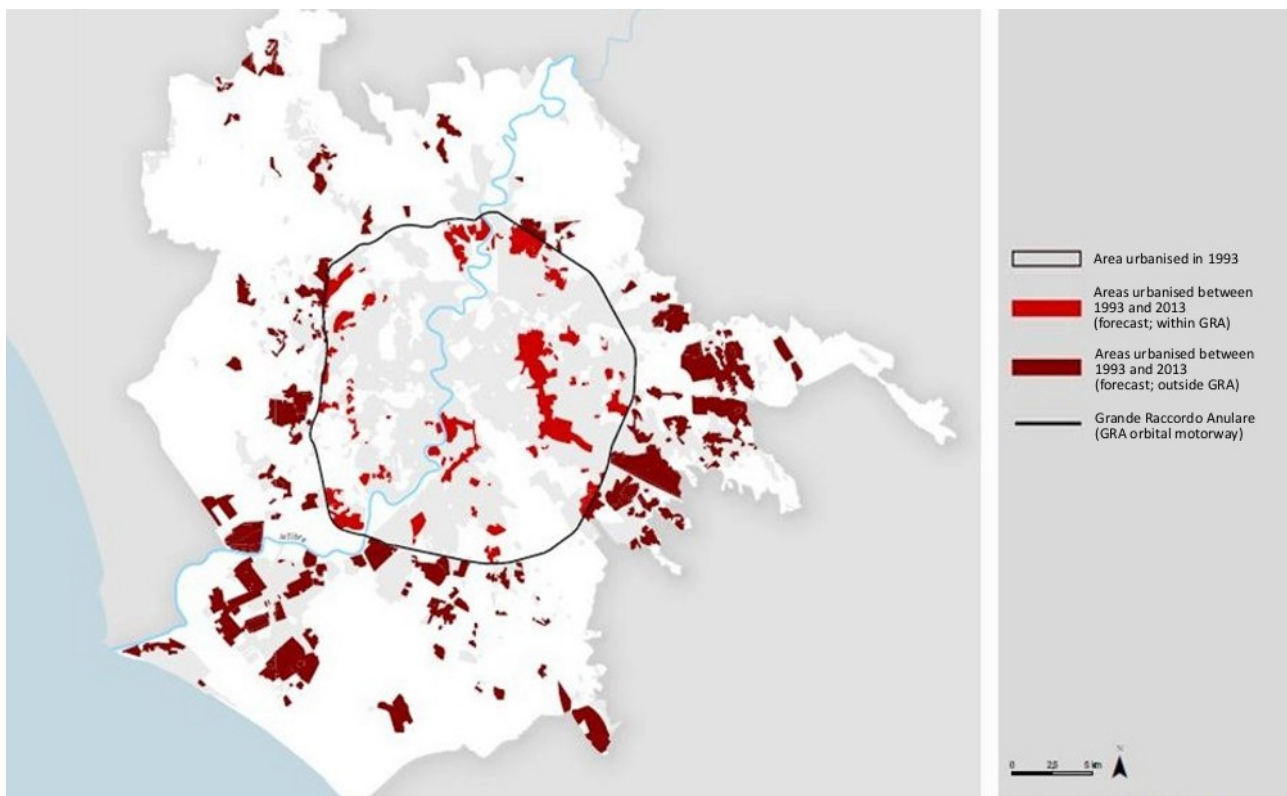
However, the old rivalry between the “economic capital” and the “unproductive political capital” is proving increasingly outdated (Rivière 2004). Indeed, over the past 20 years, the economy of Rome remained buoyant in a depressed national context. Between 2001 and 2008, GDP per capita in Lazio from €30,000 to €38,000 (€47,000 for the Île-de-France (Paris) region and €31,000 in Rhône-Alpes, the French region centred on Lyon), while the number of private enterprises has risen by almost 15%. The unemployment rate fell from 15% in 1993 to 5.8% in 2007. And although it

¹ This is despite the fact that both cities are quite similar in demographic terms: depending on the unit of comparison used, Rome’s population is 2.7 million (city boundaries), 2.5 million (continuously built-up area) and 4.1 million (province of Rome), while Milan’s is, respectively, 1.3 million, 3.1 million and 4.4 million (Rivière 2012).

rose to 10% in early 2013, it remains below the national average (11.4%). This “revolution of Rome’s economy” (Berdini 2008), part of a wider context of greater competition between European capitals (EU 2010), is based on the development of the in-place or “presential” economy² (real estate, tourism), but also technopolitan activities with high added value (management, design, IT, chemicals and pharmaceuticals). As a result, Rome has progressed significantly in international rankings (Halbert *et al.* 2012).

These dynamics are primarily found in the city’s suburbs: for example, company head offices in the EUR³ district, large out-of-town shopping centres, and the emergence of the Tiburtina Valley technology business incubator. The new municipal master plan, or PRG (*Piano Regolatore Generale*, literally “General Regulatory Plan”⁴), adopted in 2008 and openly inspired by the Barcelona’s Metropolitan Strategic Plan, seeks to support these developments by creating 18 new “peripheral centralities” focusing activities and services around key hubs. The growth and increasing complexity of mobility (Delpirou 2009), despite the area’s relative lack of transport infrastructures, bear witness to the new relationships that are developing between the centre and the outskirts that can no longer be analysed solely in terms of unregulated construction (Vallat 1995), car dependency (Tocci 2008) and socio-spatial marginalisation (Ferrarotti 1979).

Map 1: Areas of urban expansion planned in the 2008 PRG



Source: Delpirou 2009

² Translator’s note: this term is derived from the French neologism *économie présenteielle*, which describes an economy based on the population actually present in an area (which may vary rapidly, e.g. due to tourism) and which simultaneously generates both economic activity and service needs.

³ District planned and built by the Fascist regime in the 1930s as the site for the 1942 World’s Fair (which never took place owing to World War II), and which became the showcase for rationalist architecture in Rome. “EUR” stands for *Esposizione Universale Roma* (“World’s Fair Rome”).

⁴ The PRG, drawn up at municipal level, is the cornerstone of regulatory and operational urban planning in Italy.

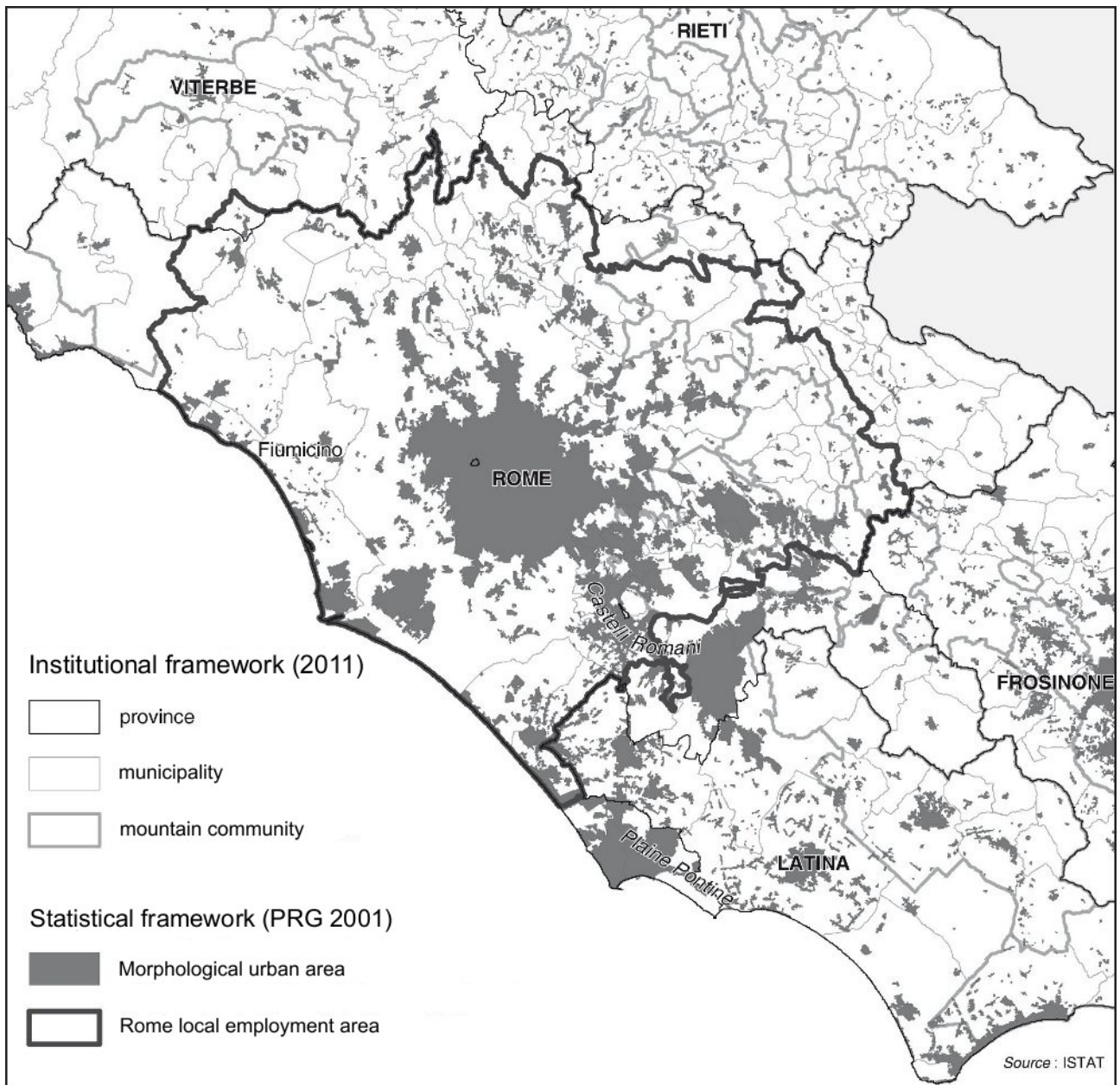
The ambivalent role of territorial legacies

And yet is Rome truly a city like any other? The reality is more complex, due to the ambivalent role played by the Eternal City's various legacies, which are often overlooked but essential to the metropolisation process.

On the one hand, in a context where cultural and recreational functions are a key driver of metropolitan competition (Halbert *et al.* 2012), Rome's suburbs are part of a heritage area that has been mistreated but is always present, far away from the typical opposition between the "museumified" centre and informally developed suburbs. For example, the 1,400 hectares (5.4 sq. mi.) over which Fiumicino Airport now extends are on the same scale of what was, in almost exactly the same place, the largest port complex in antiquity. The famous Ostia Antica site is the only part of the complex that is completely protected; by contrast, the monumental ruins of Portus, the harbour developed by the emperor Trajan, remain closed to the public after variously being home to a zoo and then an unofficial dumping ground; and another piece of imperial Rome, the Isola Sacra necropolis, is surrounded by an area of unregulated housing construction. Superimposed on this ancient heritage are more conventional landscape features. There is, of course, the Tiber – but, unlike the Seine, it is inaccessible from the post-unification embankments and therefore not especially enticing – as well as a few scraps of remaining countryside, but the major draw is the Tyrrhenian coast, which is a particularly attractive environment for both leisure and residential use.

On the other hand, the unique relationship between metropolisation and territorial legacies is, in the case of Rome, based on exceptionally wide-ranging institutional structures. Extending over the former "Roman desert", Rome has the largest municipal boundaries in Europe: at 1,280 km² (495 sq. mi.), its surface area is 13 times that of the city of Paris proper (Map 1). This has been a contributing factor in the isolation of the urban core from its outskirts: for a long time, only the Castelli Romani (17 municipalities located around 20 km/12 miles south-east of the Capitoline Hill) had real links with this "capital without suburbs" (Seronde-Babonnaux 1959). The situation is very different today, however, as residential and/or industrial uses have gradually encroached upon the Agro Pontino (Pontine Marshes) since in the 1970s (Rivière 1996), followed by all the other towns and villages in the area from the 1990s onwards (Cremaschi 2010). In this context, the debate on metropolitan management and planning structures currently under way among elites in major European cities (Vanier 2008; Reitel 2012) is expressed in more contrasting terms in Rome than elsewhere. As a result, the administrative status quo seems to suit most of those involved: indeed, the latest law concerning the creation of "Roma Capitale" – a special municipality with extended powers and extra state funding – was based on the current city boundaries (and its 2.7 million inhabitants). Furthermore, in opposition to trends observed elsewhere in Europe, two new municipalities have been created in recent years: Fiumicino (in 1992; formerly part of the city of Rome) and Ciampino (in 2004), both dominated by major airport infrastructures. Nevertheless, the question of links between the city and the wider metropolitan area (comprising over a hundred municipalities) remains as relevant and strategic as ever.

Map 2: Institutional and statistical structures in the Rome metropolitan area



Source: Rivière 2012

Lastly, at a finer scale, metropolitan development processes are conditioned by the legacies of the ancient *latifondi*⁵ and the somewhat patchy improvements/developments of these properties by the Fascist government (via land reclamations) and by Rome's great aristocratic families. One such development was the creation of Fiumicino Airport in the 1960s, built on part of the Torlonia family's immense estate; fifty years on, it is the vast agricultural estate of Maccarese, owned by the Benetton Group, that is to be used for the airport's extension. This land structure explains the major role played by the big landowners and developers (not just Torlonia, but also Aldobrandini, Caltagirone, etc.) in urban dynamics. It can be both a comparative advantage – by facilitating major metropolitan operations – and a challenge for public policy, faced with the speculative strategies of private interests (Insolera 1962; Tocci 2008; Delpirou 2009).

⁵ The term *latifondo* (plural *latifondi*) refers to the very large rural properties that were formerly a key feature of the Italian and Spanish agrarian systems.

The development of the delta: major projects and conflicts of use

The delta of the Tiber – in its broadest sense, the area between the river, the sea and the GRA (*Grande Raccordo Anulare*) orbital motorway – is one of the key fronts of Rome’s metropolitan development. Long neglected by urban policies (Seronde-Babonnaux 1980), the area has in the last two decades become home to shopping and recreational centres, administrative and hotel clusters, and large residential complexes, sometimes gated communities, offering tens of thousands of new apartments. The town of Fiumicino had one of the highest population growth rates in Italy between 1993 (42,000 inhabitants) and 2013 (74,000). Furthermore, the airport, with 36 million passengers in 2010 (the busiest airport in Italy; sixth in Europe) and 55 million expected in 2020, has grown steadily and is – despite the current crisis in air travel – one of Rome’s main assets in terms of international competition.

The delta is currently undergoing operations and projects that are functionally very disparate. On the one hand, the 2010 strategic plan seeks to reinforce the area’s interface function to make it Rome’s “second tourist hub”, complementing the historic centre. And, in addition to the extension of Fiumicino airport, the following operations are planned: the development of exhibition and convention facilities (Fiera di Roma), the creation of sports and leisure facilities (golf courses, theme parks), the modernisation of maritime infrastructures and inland water transport (pleasure ports of Ostia and Fiumicino; halt on the Tiber; new cruise port at Fiumicino). On the other hand, several initiatives demonstrate a growing recognition of local resources: protection of flora and fauna (with the creation of a national nature reserve), experimentation with new agricultural practices (Maccarese), and the as yet incomplete protection of archaeological heritage in the area (Portus).

The dominant impression is therefore one of a metropolitan periphery that has been urbanised by means of “large juxtaposed plates” (Cremaschi 2010), plagued by conflicts of use, and for which a strategic vision is lacking. While it is true that uncertainties linked to the financial crisis – which led to the abandonment of Rome’s application to host the 2020 Olympic Games – have played a significant role in the lack of consistency of projects undertaken, there is nevertheless a pressing need for a strategy that will ensure the integrated development of the area, in all its various geo-historical dimensions.

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Further reading:

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