



institut
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ÉCOLE FRANÇAISE
DE ROME
Storia, Archeologia, Scienze sociali



UNIVERSITÉ TOULOUSE
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Patrimoine,
Littérature, Histoire

Call for papers

“Rencontres d’histoire de la République Romaine” 2026

Toulouse (France), 3-4 September 2026

Rome and the sea during the Republic

The Romans are well known to have been farmers, land-based and ignorant of maritime matters. One need only think of the legend regarding the creation of their first navy: it was by copying a stranded Carthaginian ship that they succeeded, during the First Punic War (264-241 BCE), in building a fleet that enabled them to stand up to their adversaries (Polybius, I, 20, 15-16). In the same vein, the praise for Rome’s location, at short distance from the coast, yet not directly on the sea-coast, also illustrates the Romans’ supposed reluctance to sail and, more generally, their anxious and cautious relationship with the sea. One might think here of Camillus’ speech after the capture of Rome by the Gauls (390 BCE) or Cicero’s reflections on this topic in *De Re Publica*:

Liv. 5.54: *Non sine causa di hominesque hunc urbi condendae locum elegerunt, saluberrimos colles, flumen opportunum, quo ex mediterraneis locis fruges deuehantur, quo maritimi commeatus accipientur, mari uicinum ad commoditates nec expositum nimia propinquitate ad pericula classium externarum, regionum Italiae medium, ad incrementum urbis natum unice locum.*

Not without cause did gods and men select this for establishing our City - with its healthful hills; its convenient river, by which crops may be floated down from the midland regions and foreign commodities brought up; its sea, near enough for use, yet not exposing us, by too great propinquity, to peril from foreign fleets; a situation in the heart of Italy - a spot, in short, of a nature uniquely adapted for the expansion of the a city. (trans. LCL)

Cic. rep. 2.3: *Urbi autem locum, quod est ei, qui diuturnam rem publicam serere conatur, diligentissime providendum, incredibili oportunitate delegit. Neque enim ad mare admovit, quod ei fuit illa manu copiisque facilissimum, ut in agrum Rutulorum Aboriginumque procederet, aut in ostio Tiberino, quem in locum multis post annis rex Ancus coloniam deduxit, urbem ipse conderet, sed hoc vir excellenti providentia sensit ac vidit, non esse oportunissimos situs maritimos urbibus eis, quae ad spem diuturnitatis conderentur atque imperii.*

As regards the site of his city - a matter which calls for the most careful foresight on the part of one who hopes to plant a commonwealth that will endure - he made an incredibly wise choice. For he did not build it down by the sea, though it would have been very easy for him, with the men and resources at his command, to invade the territory of the Rutuli and the Aborigines, or he might have founded his city on the mouth of the Tiber, where King Ancus planted a colony many years later. But with remarkable foresight our founder perceived that a site on the sea-coast is not the most desirable for cities founded in the hope of a long life and extended dominion. (transl. LCL)

Xavier Lafon, however, already questioned an apparent paradox at the opening of his book on coastal villas in Roman Italy: how can we understand that the Romans, whose literature constantly extolled the land, valued so highly this type of dwelling, viz. the *villa maritima* (Lafon 2001, p. 3)? Long before him, Theodor Mommsen himself stated in his *Römische Geschichte*: “It was indeed a maritime city by nature and, in its heyday, never strayed so far from its ancient traditions as to neglect its navy entirely, nor was it ever so foolish as to aspire to be merely a continental power” (Mommsen 1976 [1854-1856], p. 428). Be that as it may, literary and archaeological sources bear witness to the undoubted activity of the Romans on the Italian coasts and in Mediterranean waters as of the 4th century BC, one of the most visible forms of which was undoubtedly -

though not the only one - the so-called maritime colonies, inaugurated in 338 BC according to literary tradition. Similarly, Rome was able to confront Carthage at sea from the beginning of the first Punic War. The very idea of a city fundamentally averse to maritime ventures and reluctant to turn to the sea has thus been challenged by numerous studies that have shown that the Romans' relationship with the sea was in fact, in many respects, much deeper and more complex than is often portrayed, as well as older.

This subject undoubtedly still deserves our attention. Since the pioneering studies by J. H. Thiel (Thiel 1946 and 1954), scientific literature has often focused on the development of the navy and military issues (e.g. Wallinga 1956, Reddé 1986, Morrison 1996, Steinby 2007). This has been accompanied by numerous in-depth reflections on the technical aspects of navigation (see in particular Pomey 1997, Pomey and Rieth 2005), international relations in the Mediterranean basin and the fight against piracy (in addition to the classic Ormerod 1924, see Gianfrotta 2014 and Sintès 2016) in connection with the birth of Roman imperialism. The Roman navy (its origins, development and logistics) is obviously a key element in any reflection on Roman expansion in the Mediterranean basin, but there's more to add to this topic. As an area of military and political power struggles, the sea has also been scrutinised for the past thirty years through the lens of other human endeavours that made it a place of exchange, movement and commercial activities (Andreau and Virlouvet 2002, Damian and Wilson 2011, Schäfer 2016 ed.), in the context of drafting a specific law (Fiori 2010, Candy 2019 and 2020, Chevreau 2021). These wide-ranged approaches, which owe much to the development of archaeological research and are still very much ongoing today. They includes the study of ports as specific urban and commercial spaces (Ostia-Portus, Antium, Puteoli, cf. Zaccaria 2001, or Bruun 2025, for example, or research projects on *Portus*, cf. Keay 2016), and the analysis of goods flows of and population movements across the Mediterranean and beyond (Tchernia 1986, Tchernia 2011, Botte 2009, Olcese (ed.) 2013, Marin and Virlouvet 2016, Schneider 2019, Bernal-Casasola et al. 2021, Rico 2022), the question of shipping routes and geography (Arnaud 2005), the exploration of coastlines as places of resort and exploitation of maritime resources (Lafon 2001), as interfaces, or the study of coastal sanctuaries (Jaia and Molinari 2012; Michetti 2016). More recently, environmental history and archaeology, the history of representations, and cultural history have continued to enrich our knowledge of ancient society's relationship with maritime spaces (e.g. Kosmin 2024). Complex, changing, multifaceted: understanding these different facets of maritime spaces and how they are evolving would benefit from a dialogue between these approaches, which sometimes evolve in isolation albeit they have much in common. It would therefore be particularly beneficial not to treat economic and commercial issues on the one hand and the military dimension on the other as separate issues. It is well known that military expansion had a significant impact on trade, and the Romans may have been forced to take up arms to defend their trade routes or to seize new ones. Cross-referencing themes based on the common thread of the relationship with the sea allows for innovative analyses, as has already been demonstrated in certain areas (see Bertrand, Botte and Jelinčić 2022).

This symposium therefore aims at revisiting the Romans' relationship with the sea in all its dimensions. The call for papers is open to researchers, young researchers, doctoral students and PhD graduates working in the following disciplines: history, archaeology, art history, historical anthropology and classical literature. Proposals for contributions must be based on original research and may fall within one of the following themes:

1. The sea as part of discourse and the imagination (poetry, philosophy, geography, historical works).
This may also concern large-scale maritime expeditions and the Romans' knowledge of these spaces: scientific and geographical knowledge, for example.
2. Exploring, controlling, dominating: this could involve looking at the reality of the first Roman maritime ventures, the stages in the development of a navy, in connection with the stages and methods of Roman control over the coasts and islands.
3. Investing in the coastlines: how can these specific territories be developed? What are the difficulties?
4. The economy of the sea or the sea as an economic space, crossed by a number of trade flows.

5. The history of Rome through the lens of the sea, viz. asking whether and how the sea played a specific role in the construction of the Roman Republic, in Rome's relations with its Italian neighbours, and in the challenges of conquest across the peninsula.

Proposals should fit into these perspectives (which are not exhaustive) and should not hesitate to combine them. They should include a brief summary of the project (500 words maximum), accompanied by a brief CV (one page maximum) for PhD and post-doctoral students, and be sent by 13th March 2026 at the latest to: Audrey Bertrand (dirant@efrome.it) and Thibaud Lanfranchi (thibaud.lanfranchi@univ-tlse2.fr).

Responses will be sent no later than 31st March 2026.

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