Early Rome is usually interpreted as a little ring of hilltop strongholds surrounding the valley that is today the Forum. But Rome has also been, from the very beginnings, a riverside community. No one doubts that the Tiber River introduced a commercial and strategic dimension to life in Rome: towns on navigable rivers, especially if they are near the river’s mouth, enjoy obvious advantages. But access to and control of river traffic is only one aspect of riparian power and responsibility.

This was not just a river town; it presided over the junction of a river and a highway. Adding to its importance is the fact that the river was a political and military boundary between Etruria and Latium, two cultural domains, which in early times were often at war. Rome’s beginnings were on the east bank of the Tiber River. The town’s importance as the crossroads of two highways, one terrestrial and the other nautical, led almost inevitably to an interest in securing and eventually settling the far shore of the river.1 Until the decline of Etruscan power in the early fourth century BC, however, the Transtiberim (modernday Trastevere, “Across the Tiber”) may have been little more than a fortress situated on the Janiculum, the hill that rises imposingly at the river’s west bank. Simple farms no doubt were precursors of the great villas that dotted the slopes and crest of the hill from the late Republic onward. Precisely when a truly suburban residential, industrial, and commercial quarter developed in the floodplain between the hill and the river is unknown; but eventually it became a bustling, heavily populated district. The original wooden highway bridge was eventually supplemented by a more permanent structure, and a series of bridges grew up to serve the residents of the metropolitan area. By late antiquity the river could be crossed on more bridges than existed at any other city in the known world. This article approaches several of Rome’s early bridges as markers of urban change. How did bridges influence the flux of humanity within and about the city? Conversely, how did the city’s development influence the planning and construction of bridges? The urbanistic implications of these questions are profound, for they concern not only the physical layout of the nurban area, but also the everyday and long-term movements of populations. Much of the subsequent commentary is founded upon published research, both by myself and by others.2