

The Origin of Cities

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This podcast on the origin of cities combines accounts from Fustel de Coulanges' *The Ancient City*, Paul Wheatley's *The Pivot of the Four Quarters*, and Aldo Rossi's fable of the foundation of the Forum Romanum in his *Architecture of the City*. Giambattista Vico provides literary evidence of the nature of Cyclopean societies and the beginning of family religions centered around the hearth—worship of the ancestral dead. Clues about city foundation rituals come from Frazier's *The Golden Bough* and other sources.

1. This is an attempt to show how metaphor's transferability and latency play a central and critical role in architecture. To keep it short, we have to accept some generalities on face value. We will imagine an idealized site modeled after Rome, where seven separate and uncommunicative tribes occupied the fabled seven hills and the marshland at the base of the Palatine Hill was mythically if not actually a place of burial. The story of Curtius's self-sacrifice to return a liquified Forum to solid terrain may be a condensation of many stories about the repurposing of a forbidden central zone to a civic space superior to the surrounding hills and their occupants.
2. The first cultures were "cyclopean," in that their religions centered around the household hearth and their "laws" extended no further than the family/clan and dependents. Each hearth was law unto itself. The Greek legends about the Cyclopes as a race of primitives is somewhat instructive, but the description of giants with one eye is a misnomer. The "eye" refers to the hearth/altar around which early cultures were centered. Each family had "one eye," meaning one source of authority, tended by the female members of household, counted as "priestesses of Hestia" (goddess of the hearth). The divine eye was the flame of the hearth, kept burning on the pain of death. While the flame was not the lightning or thunder of the sky—god Jove, it was local and immediate, a tangible presence and force over and against darkness.

The hearth was the point of communication with the ancestral dead (called the *manes* in Latin), who continued to offer advice and bestow good luck (or curses, if not tended properly) on the living members of the family. The *manes* were collective, but their preservation depended on the memory of their individual names. A deceased family member was declared to be a god (= *manes*) when the flesh had permanently decayed ("desiccated") and only bone was left.

The *manes* were both fed fats from the hearth and asked for favors. If, however, a daughter married, the manes were tricked into thinking that she had defected from her duties involuntarily. Either she had been raped or abducted, a motif retained in the modern custom of carrying the bride over the threshold to indicate that she is unwilling to cross on her own.

3. The priestesses of Hestia (= household women) were “married to the flame” of the hearth. The flame-as-law was carried over to post-Cyclopean times with the idea of a collective civic flame, preserved (in Rome) by the College of Vestals and (in the Greek world) the *prætaneum*, basically a good-old-boy’s club, where women were prohibited following the conversion of political affiliations following the disastrous civil wars.

Dis Manibus, or DM, “To the *manes*” is the standard inscription on Roman era tombstones, a different kind of R.I.P. In Republican and later times, the *lares* and *penates* were distinguished as portable and non-portable types of *manes*, those that went along with the family if they relocated, others that stayed on the site, but in reality the split itself was the nature of the *manes*’ relation to the earth, first as substance, which could be made portable, and as location, which was unique. Roman military camps authenticated their locations with foundation rites by an agrimensor who re-established an idealized Rome in whatever remote location the army chanced to find itself.

Hestia and Hermes have been thought to represent inside and outside space, meeting at the domestic threshold, but this may be the result of their placement in sculptures, particularly pediment friezes, in calendar order. Hestia is central because of her relation to the hearth, and Hermes is associated with crossroad trading points far from towns, but generally their only proven proximity is in marble. There was no stable binary between the outdoors and the household interior, whose hearth represented a radical exterior connecting directly to *Hades*, although there are many rituals associated with crossing thresholds. However, see Jean Robert’s defense of this in “Autonomy and Heteronomy in Architecture Theory: Part II,” *The International Journal of Illich Studies* (2000). The rural crossroads trading points associated with Hermes were, in contrast, as central as any crossroads where gifts are thought to appear out of nowhere. It would more accurate to say that Hestia and Hermes are equal and opposite cases of “extimity,” the cases of the intimate externality or the external intimacy. Lacan coined the term *éxtimité* to describe the objectivity of the Other that took up its place at the center of the subject; it would be easy to justify an equal and opposite subjective exteriority in the crossroad trading-points of Hermes. Compare for example the prohibition of allowing strangers to directly view the hearth to the “silence” (equivalent to invisibility) of silent trade. See Norman O. Brown, *Hermes the Thief: The Evolution of a Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969). For a review of Lacan’s idea of extimity, see Jacques-Alain Miller, “Extimity,” *The Symptom 9*, Journal of lacan.com. <https://www.lacan.com/symptom/extimity.html>.

4. Because the women of the household were technically wedded to the flame rather than the father, a problem arose when a daughter was to be married. In effect, she would be defecting from her father’s hearth to attend the hearth of her new husband. The *manes*’ response would be disastrous. The family would suffer bad luck or complete collapse. A work-around was devised. The prospective bride was made to look as if she was opposed to the marriage, and that her husband was abducting and raping her. This pretended violence would prove the daughter’s innocence to the watchful *manes*. The “official story” was that a stranger had taken the family’s daughter away against everyone’s wishes. We retain a trace of this trick in the modern marriage custom of carrying the bride across the threshold, although we don’t think of it as a demonstration of the bride’s resistance. In some cultures, the bride’s family dance around the bride at the end of the wedding festivities, forcing the groom to break in and fight to gain her reluctant release.

This demonstration drew on an earlier tradition of divination. In securing the auspices, signs at the hearth, it was important to show that all signs were from the gods, not the humans who were officiating. This is equivalent to the need of casinos to demonstrate the objectivity of croupiers and card-dealers to avoid contaminating the role of pure chance; or, more religiously, to the Catholic priest's detachment from the transformation of the host at communion. This is called "instrumental cause," the reduction of an action to the pure instrumentality of the forces invoked to produce signs. Instrumental cause guaranteed that no contamination would take place, that the message would be pure and true. Just so, the bride could not show any complicity with her future husband's plans to re-locate her. Instrumental cause, purification of the auspices, and the rape of the would-be bride are all different aspects of the same need to keep the *manes* happy.

5. We can see the same logic at work in the geographically opposite case of the remote crossroads, the sites of "silent trade," where objects left at a crossroads anonymously would be taken by the next passing stranger, who left something of comparable value that would be picked up by yet another passing stranger. Without the need for any face-to-face contact, the silent-trade market evolved as a stable, self-regulating interface, where exchanges were thought to be protected by Hermes, the god of both commerce and thievery (also erotic seduction). The name "herm" originally designated simply "a pile of stones."

Remember that, in cyclopean society, each family group had its own ecological zone to exploit. Each zone required specialized skills and led to surplus production. To enjoy the benefits of the larger region, these surpluses could be exchanged for the surplus goods of other groups. The problem was, however, the same as in the case of marriage. The cyclopean rule of isolation had to be violated. The spirits of the dead could not witness any defection from the hearth that was their unique point of worship. Just as the bride had to give proof of her obedience to the rule of instrumental cause, trading surplus goods would have to be instrumentalized.

The intention to trade, and the donation and acceptance and re-donation of surplus goods would have to be given over to mechanism, and this mechanism was the system by which a value would magically emerge to enforce each exchange and stabilize the market of the crossroads. Of course, this was all in the "unconscious logic" that no one could talk about or directly recognize. It was a form of *kenosis*, "what you don't know that you know." On the surface, you know that you must avoid contact with strangers, that strangers bring disease and bad luck. Strangers piss off your ancestors. But, at the same time, you are tired of your surplus goods, your specialized exploitation of your ecotone. You need variety that only trading with strangers can provide. Like the bride wanting to marry, you need to blind the ancestors temporarily to the fact that you have a trading relationship with strangers. We see this conflict in the Latin word, *hostes*, which means both hospitality and hostility. To avoid infection and/or violence, the trade had to be governed by instrumental cause. No trader

could be guilty of intentional involvement. All would have to like brides, appearing to be forcefully abducted and raped.

6. Something geometric happened. Instead of “lateral” relations that would have required trade to cross a boundary, a “vertical” supply line was imagined. The delay between leaving a trade object and replacing it meant that no trader saw his trading partner, but of course the *manes*, who were always watching, did. But, the *manes* were in Hades, “the invisible.” The invisible would have to convert into “the blind.” Then, the goods left at the crossroads would be *literally* from this invisibility function, *literally* from Hades. The instrumental cause of silent trade would be a rotation from the actual lateral relations of human traders to the vertical functionality of Hades, the invisible. Because the *manes* were also the source of laws, the market’s unseen hand was magically enforced. By *not knowing* each other, the traders were guaranteeing a perfect coincidence of values — a lawful, stable market.
7. We have another carry-over in the custom of leaving milk and cookies in exchange for gifts left beneath the tree or at the hearth-side at Christmas. Children are told that Santa Claus is “invisible,” and not to be mistrusted; that the meagre gifts, combined with their good behavior and kindness to others will be sufficient for the trade to work. The instrumental cause in this case is, again, associated with surveillance, although here there is not attempt to get around the system by blinding Hermes to the occasional swindle. The principle of give-and-take allows for delayed correction of inequity. As long as all parties continue to be “mistaken” about the exact value of goods, an emergent balance occurs.

The principle of the self-stabilizing market, guided by an “unseen hand,” arose with the discovery of the precision of average guesses made by participants of a raffle of an ox at an English country fair. Sir Frances Galton discovered in 1906 that, although no one entrant correctly guessed the weight of the cow, the average of all entries was precise, within 0.08% of the actual weight. Many college psychology classes use a jar of jelly beans to prove the uncanny accuracy of the *vox populi*, a knowing-without-knowing that depends on the collectivity of misunderstanding. This proves, if anything, the persistence of *kenosis* as an uncanny preservation of past knowledge, as in the county courthouse’s three-part design, keeping step with Vico’s ideal eternal history. We must introduce the idea of a *palintropos harmoniē* (dynamic symmetry) leading to an emergent *palintonos harmoniē* (a fixed, lawful relationship). This was modernized by Jung’s term, “enantiodromia,” where each idea eventually runs into its opposite. Carl Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 72.

8. Silent trade and marriage work-arounds were the fundamentals that allowed cyclopean society to work well. Each system was self-correcting and stable. Laws were local, peace was the norm. Families kept to themselves; disease contagion and strife were kept to a minimum. As a settlement system, however, the cyclops were vulnerable to external threat, which called for cooperation and a unified response, and the occasional outbreak of clan warfare, which required independent mediation.

Our speculative model imagines that the interior marshland was managed by undertakers who accepted corpses from all seven groups. This may actually have been the case, based on archaeological evidence that the forum was originally a burial ground. If that is the case,

then it's reasonable to think that a specialized group took over the tasks of tending the marshy area, keeping records and preventing vandalism. As classic middle-men, these undertakers would have spoken the separate dialects of the seven clans, developed a financial system to settle debts, record details of rituals and offerings, and in short taken over the functions of Hermes that had formerly been located on the outskirts of town.

Because of their dealings with the dead, the undertakers extended Hermes' jobs to include sign-interpretation that began to replace the hearth-based divination of individual clans. A system of writing developed around the need to offer prayers and ritual protections. They were, in short, ready to take over both the functions of the *interior* family hearths and the *exterior* crossroads. In the undertakers, we see the functions of Hestia and Hermes combined.

Look at the pattern that emerged with the function of the central burial ground. The geographer-historian Paul Wheatley has pointed out that the origins of cities in all seven of the world's areas of early urban forms began this way. Because every isolated cyclopean tribe had to communicate individually with the undertakers, centralization got started around the practices of burial and reverence, the same practices that used to be limited to the individual family hearth. The transactions with the spirits of the dead, the *manes*, was the repressed signifier that allowed the dispersed cyclopean households to transition to an bicycle-wheel form that was an exact opposite, a hub with multiple spokes. The metaphor here worked at a collective level, like silent trade had worked. "Latency" in silent trade was the way the collection of gifts left at a crossroads established a constant value that emerged from multiple transactions. But, there was a second form of latency, the emergence of centralized power from the multiple transactions involving burial and the maintenance of relations with the dead. It was as if X and $1/X$ cancelled each other out. The latency of trade was "manifest," a signifying function the cyclopes encountered in everyday experience. It was a "first," but it required a logical presupposition that had to be already in place for this "first" to work. Each time a trade was made, this principle was attached to it retroactively. This was the idea of *Hades*, the place where the gifts of the crossroads came from and the surveillance that was imagined to magically regulate each trade.

But, Hades was no more than "the invisible," as the etymology of the word reveals. In other words, it was a latent signifier that retroactively made trading possible. As "the invisible," it was automatically latent, so that when the undertakers began to centralize relations with the dead, they were the agents of latency, and the second, centralized practices were able to replace the dispersed rural practices. This is the way geography played out the metaphoric logic of latency and replacement. All that was needed was a crisis — some equivalent to Vico's loud thunder — to push the system from its cyclopean form into a civic mode, for actually cyclopien and civic cultures were two sides of the same coin!

The role of emergence is critical. In silent trade, it is the symmetry that allows each trader to be the other's

Hermes, an imagined Other with god-like powers to exact revenge if the trader cheats. Because the trade is “played on” to a third trader, then a fourth, etc., the system expanded by replacing the former with a generic “next trader.” This is the temporal logic of metaphor. What comes first in experience is actually second, the result of something that is, logically, first. The retroactive loop back to a prior logical structure re-sets the system to be activated by another player (the next), who seems to be “a first” but whose presence again activates the retroactive logic, continuing the cycle and accumulating trades, just as each rock of the pile designating the crossroads as a trading-point had collectively contributed to the emergence of a magical portal to the underworld.

9. Eventually, a crisis did occur, although the actual historical details were obscured by a “cover story,” that reversed a few details. The myth of Curtius, a knight on horseback who saved the forum after it became a marshland, made it seem that the forum was originally solid land. The area of the forum in fact had to be drained to allow the creation of the civic forum, and very likely the land was used before as a cemetery. The problem was how to turn something spooky into something public, how to

This was called the Curtian Lake, named after the hero of the story, Curtius, a knight on horseback. The story is a Steven King style ghost story. In the story, the solid Forum has “liquified.” In reality, it was a swamp originally, but the story treats the draining of the swamp as a “return to normal.” Soothsayers advised that “Rome” could be saved (although it didn’t exist yet) if only it would give up that which was most valuable to it. No one knew what this meant, but suddenly from the back of the crowd, a knight named Curtius shouted, “I have the answer!” He mounted his horse and announced, “Rome’s most valuable possession is a citizen willing to die for it,” and thereupon he rode headlong into the marsh. Suddenly the Forum solidified above him.

10. What really happened? The seven Tribes were probably forced, by fear of some external threat, to unify. Their center however was not just a marshland but a burial ground, which had to be de-commissioned (architecturally exorcised) before it could be used civically. Naturally, sacrifices would have to be made. Then, the individual flames from the hearths of each of the seven families was consolidated and protected within the College of the Vestals, appointed-for-life “priestesses of Hestia,” who through their outward virginity preserved their role as brides of the flame. Thus, all the family manes could be consolidated as well, within a civic religion that drew from the Olympian gods tradition.

Note that the move from Cyclopean society to civic society is an inside-out spatial conversion. The hearths (“eyes”) that were dispersed were concentrated. The burial site, which was radically external to the tribes’ settlements, was flipped without moving. It converted from void to solid, but a solid that retained a void-like quality in its preservation of the flame and the Curtian Lake marking the portal to the underworld taken by Curtius in his self-sacrifice.

This topological flipflop was facilitated by the versatility of the undertaker class that had been previously “untouchable.” Useful with trade, fluent in multiple languages, good with

figures, and “sacral” in, first, their handling of the dead but second in their administration of state religion, they were human contronyms who embodied the double meaning of the world sacer, as both despised and (later) revered.

It is easy to generalize our way to connecting themes of transferability and latency, qualities of metaphor (as distinct from analogy), to this historical, architectural, and civic situation. (a) Without latency, the properties needed for Rome’s emergence as a city would not have accumulated, until, “at just the right moment,” a crisis precipitated conversion. (b) Without transferability, the customs of the Cyclopean tribes living on separate hills could not have slid easily into the new forms of a unified Rome. The individual flames would have resisted consolidation, the clans would have fought interminably. The metaphor itself, what is that exactly? If we consider the Curtius story as the metaphor, we can see that the latent signifier is “the dead man,” namely Curtius as a living knight but, since “dead man” originally was designated by the term “hero,” Rome became a “heroic republic,” thanks to the idea that one who died could now be a citizen and not just a corpse. The difference made by sacrifice was the thing of value specified by the prophecy. Without having to say what this thing was, Curtius was able to act, and his act was the foundation rite giving birth to the city, centered around a Forum covering over numerous, anonymous Latent Signifiers, namely the ancestral dead who had been, up that time, ceremoniously buried in the mud.

11. Topological inversion of the independent cyclopean settlement to the inside–out civic version required the literal desiccation of a piece of land. The earth was treated as flesh. Once it became bone–like, it was god–like, just as the human corpse at death had to be desiccated to allow for the journey of the soul between literal death and symbolic death. In some ways, however, the flip–flop changed very little. The association of the forum with the ancestors could shift from the hearth flame to stone statues. It was a place for heroes, and the streets and plazas were designed to be a theater for the moving stage–like procession of triumphant generals showing off their captives and stolen booty. The spectacles of the forum became phantasmagorical duplication of scenes imagined to take place in Hades, which was the source of all wealth and wisdom. With the outside on the inside, the civic universe curved in on itself. It was a continuous self–intersecting surface that, like the Möbius band, allowed for conditions of inversion at any point. This was a geometry and a metaphoric system at the same time. The gates of the city took over the role of the crossroads. As places where strangers met, they also became markets, places to find goods and services.

The physical hills were now inside the city walls. Their residual dedication to the *manes* easily transferred to the temples that now were built over the once–sacred family hearths. And, of course, in the Forum itself, it was only natural to top off former graves with new temples to collective gods representing all families, now considered as citizens rather than clans.

The spookiness of the remote sites of silent trade was domesticated into places for activities prohibited inside the city walls. This was where athletes and soldiers could practice their arts, and where prostitutes could legally offer their services. Armies and red-light districts go together, an alliance represented by the pairing of Venus and Mars. Contests and games involved a bit of both, and raceways and theaters were also kept outside the walls. Although the Forum was set up for spectacle, the intention was specifically civic. Outside the walls, entertainment was less serious, less regulated, and geared to keeping the lower class happy.

12. Desiccation plays a role in all cultures' ideas of what happens between the first "literal" death and a death that is imagined to take place later, after the soul has been judged, a second symbolic death. In most cultures, the period of mourning (between death 1 and death 2) is determined by the time it takes for the corpse to dry out. Desiccation can be sped up by fire, air, exposure to carrion-eating animals, or lime. In the Curtius story of Rome's foundation, desiccation applies to the landscape and is a condition for establishing the city's center. A kind of metonymy allows the land that had contained dead bodies to operate as an indicator of the status of the interval between the two deaths. The transition from the (wet) cemetery to the (dry) Forum Romanum was a symbolic one requiring ritual attention. The deconsecration of the cemetery was required for the re-consecration of the civic space. One could say that the city center was itself a model of the metaphor's use of a latent signifier. The dead were literally latent, allowing the transfer of the use of the land and a topological conversion from the cemetery as an "internal" exterior to the Forum as an "exterior" inside, a model replicated at the household level with the use of interior courtyards.
13. This is not exclusively an ancient idea. Central Park in New York is, for example, an external semi-wild domain that is topologically converted into the center of the city. A trip around the park is topologically equivalent to a circumnavigation of the city's outside boundary. Inside-out and outside-in conversions have been used throughout history, in all three of Vico's historical phases.
14. Another word about Vico's frontispiece, the *dipintura*. You see a divine eye whose rays radiate outward. This is called "extromission," and ancient traditions and folklore cite the eye's ability to "shine." Even modern terms seem to suggest that the eye can cast out glances or direct forceful gazes. This is also a case of a topological inversion. The eye looking out at the starry sky, turned around, is an eye that compresses the power of the stars, redirecting it inward. This is the same logic that the first humans used to metaphorize the sky as something that would then be able to see them perfectly, from all angles and at all times. Extromission shows how things that seem to be completely unrelated, such as the foundation of a city and optics, can find common ground in the mirror-logic of metaphor. Just as the first humans saw Jove as a larger, more powerful version of their own fierceness, they also gave him the power of looking back, but the topology of the situation made Jove's vision "panoptical" — coming in from all angles and at all times.

Extromission turns out to be the basis of Vico's thinking about the way the writer gives over control to the reader. We think of the reader as passive, but Vico turns this around 180° to make the reader the active element. The reader's *eyes* now radiate on to the idea of *The New Science* and animate it with an imaginative energy. The flip between receiving ideas and energizing them is the same thing, I claim, as the flip between the dispersed Cyclopean worship of the *manes* and the centralized civic worship of the collective flame. Vico is asking us to use the logic of the thing we are interested to understand. He is asking us to experience something as a proof of its value, not to take his word for it. This is a new theory of reading and looking, and the *dipintura* is the experimental lab where we are able to have this experience of truth. Vico's famous slogan, that the true and the made can be exchanged, is demonstrated. We don't have to think about it. Like the ancient humans, who made the transition from the age of the gods and their hearths to the age of the heroes and their cities, we act out our truths, we make them to test their truth.

There is much more to Vico's theory of the metaphoric unconscious. I recommend Donald Verene's book, *Vico's Science of Imagination* and Giuseppe Mazzotta's *The New Map of the World*. My own book *Thought and Place: The Architecture of Eternal Places in the Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* can still be found on Amazon, but I recommend my revised text, <http://art3idea.psu.edu/locus/thoughtplace.pdf>; or my article, "The Big Architectural Adventure of Giambattista Vico," published in *Built Environment* 31, 1 (2005); or another article-length review, "Vichianism after Vico," http://www.art3idea.psu.edu/locus/Vico_revisited.pdf, published in *The International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, ed. Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift (London: Elsevier, 2009). For insider friends, I have a step-by-step introduction to Vico's very unusual concepts, http://art3idea.psu.edu/locus/vico_lessons.pdf. There is more to say about the specific structure of metaphor, but save this for another time. The key is to realize that ALL LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT, for Vico, is METAPHORIC, not just the "poetically sensitive constructs" made in literature and poetry. This means that there is no such thing as literal meaning. If this is so, then architecture must know that it, too, draws from the resources of latency and transfer, the void and the approach to the void, that make architecture able to be meaningful without being limited through specific limited definitions. There is no such thing as "literal meaning." Look for the latent signifiers!