In their articulation of the Sabbath Boundary rules (teḥum Shabbat), the rabbis permit Jews to change the area permissible for walking on this holy day at the last minute if Romans march on the city (Palestinian Talmud, Eruvin 3:5, 21b). Nevertheless, these Sabbath Boundary rules themselves seem to have been formed in close correspondence with Roman practices pertaining to urban boundaries. In comparing the rabbinic teḥum Shabbat system with Roman land survey and urban planning, I argue that the correspondence between the two cultures challenges our misconceptions of Jews and Romans as entirely distinct from and antagonistic toward one another.

The Roman constitution of imperial territory through urban boundaries expressed Rome's power over its provinces. Rome's conquered land was its own to divide and distribute—a strictly imperial prerogative. What does it mean, then, that the rabbis take for themselves this prerogative and divide the empire's territories in their institution of Jewish ritual space? Furthermore, what does it mean that they do so in specifically Roman ways?

In this study, I compare various iterations of tractate Eruvin in the Mishnah, Tosefta, and Palestinian Talmud (produced in Roman Palestine) with works by the Roman architect Vitruvius, as well as the illustrated manuals of Roman land surveyors. The latter were written in Latin between the first and fifth centuries CE and collected in what came to be called the Corpus Agrimensorum Romanorum. Hence, these Roman and rabbinic texts are roughly contemporaneous. As revealed in the urban layouts of cities such as Tiberias and Sepphoris, known as major rabbinic centers, Roman land survey techniques were applied in Palestine.

Rabbinic sources also mention sages using Greco-Roman land survey devices such as the dioptra and a rope for determining the Sabbath Boundary, giving instructions for their
The urban territory of the Sabbath Boundary, left, from the Vilna edition of the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Eruvin, closely resembles a centuriated urban territory, right, from the Roman land survey manuals of the Corpus Agrimensorum Romanorum.

use that resemble those given in the Corpus Agrimensorum Romanorum. The Babylonian Talmud refers to the sage Rav Ada as a land surveyor and reports his specific advice on matters concerning the Sabbath Boundary. The possibility that the rabbis knew the Roman techniques of land survey through professional expertise is, therefore, highly plausible. However, the embeddedness of Roman spatial traditions in the urban and rural landscape of Palestine suggests that imperial practices of organizing space were available and visible to the rabbis in various forms and sites.

The rabbinic Sabbath Boundary system is based on the biblical injunction from Ex 16:29, “...Let everyone remain where he is; let no one leave his place on the Seventh Day.” What, then, is one’s place? The answer, according to the rabbis, depends on where one is at the time of the Sabbath.

When one is away from a structure or a place of settlement, one has only four cubits to dwell in during the Sabbath. The Tosefta describes this measurement as deriving from the human body, stating that “the full extent of his height in addition to his stretched arms, lo, an area of four [cubits]...” (Tosefta, Eruvin 3:11). Interestingly, the Roman architect Vitruvius offers a similar formulation of the body’s dimensions and the square or circular outlines in which it may be inscribed (Vitruvius, De Arch., III.1.3). The dimensions of the human body also form the basis for the imperial set of measurements for distance and area. By accepting this set of measurements, the rabbis seem to have taken for granted a geometry that governs both rabbinic and Roman bodies.

The next scale on which the tehum Shabbat operates is that of the city. For the rabbis, the individual’s corporeal place on the Sabbath fuses with the architectural body of a building or a city. Once one is within a structure or a settlement, one must remain there for the duration of the Sabbath. This urban space must be enclosed, according to the rabbis, within a square limit (Mishnah, Eruvin 5:1). When examined in the context of Roman spatial traditions, this squaring (ribu’a) of the city strongly suggests a correspondence with the practices of urban planning and land survey, such as centuriatio or limitatio—the institution of an orthogonal matrix of boundaries whose procedures are detailed in the Corpus Agrimensorum Romanorum.

In both Roman and rabbinic texts, the squaring of cities can present a challenge. Tosefta, Eruvin 4:4, for example, describes how irregular cities should be enclosed within a square. Similar problems are discussed in the texts of the Roman land surveyors, in which almost identical urban outlines are mentioned as “centuriated,” that is, as subject to the squaring procedure (Hyginus [1], De Condicionibus Agrorum, C 82. 1–5, ed. Campbell).
An additional feature of Roman land survey and urban foundation that is shared by the Sabbath Boundary system is the orientation of the urban square. According to the Tosefta and the Palestinian Talmud, the square limit of the city should be constituted as a universal square—ribu’a olam—that is, it must be oriented toward the cardinal directions. Both these sources give clear instructions on how to determine the cardinal directions by following the course of the sun during the equinoxes and solstices (Tosefta, Eruvin 4:6; Palestinian Talmud, Eruvin 5:1, 22c). Similarly, Roman surveyors describe the process of orienting the orthogonal grid of centuriation by following the sun’s movement on the same days (Julius Frontinus, De Limitibus, C 10.27–33; Hyginus[2], Constitutio Limitum, C 136.18–21).

The rabbinic Sabbath Boundary’s final stage is the institution of the 2,000-cubit strip around the city’s square urban limit. This extension, which proportionally enlarges the square territory beyond its limit, allows one to walk farther from the city on the Sabbath, up to a distance of one Roman mile. Hence, like the city’s limit, this boundary follows the same geometry and territorial definition as the Roman urban grid.

It is now possible to understand, even with this quick review, the implications of the rabbinic correspondence with the traditions and practices of Roman urban planning and land survey in the Sabbath Boundary system. The rabbis’ utilization of Roman geometry and territorial techniques allowed them to employ a familiar and well-established spatial structure as part of their reinterpretation of the biblical place of the Sabbath. In defining the notion of individual and communal space, the rabbis thus copied and repurposed a system that came complete with technical and social vocabulary. We may therefore see this operation as both appropriative and mimetic. This, however, is only part of the story. Rabbinic engagement with Roman mechanisms of spatial control also had a subversive dimension. By imitating and appropriating the Roman system, the rabbis effectively assumed for themselves a fundamental imperial prerogative, acting, at least in their imagination, as the lords of the land. Moreover, they did so for the purpose of constituting a religious and national Jewish space.

Tractate Eruvin may therefore be seen in view of the recent move in the field of Roman studies away from the notion of Romanization (a forceful, centrally organized, one-directional process whereby the subjects of the empire simply submit to the power of its well-defined elites, or rebel against it) to the notion of hybridity (involving complex negotiations and a play of changing identities between imperial elites and provincial subjects). The case of the Sabbath Boundary and Roman land survey suggests that rabbinic appropriation, imitation, and subversion of imperial spatial mechanisms blur the boundary between rabbis and Romans. Rome’s spatial apparatus was sufficiently flexible and open-ended to allow not only for the settlement of communities as peculiar as Jews, but also for the religious and social reinterpretation of thinkers as creative as the rabbis. The space analyzed here is not the architecturally imposing monumental landscape that advertised the empire loudly and often attracted the resentment of groups such as Jews and Christians. Although its authority was clear, this space consisted of a subtle network of boundaries marked by stones and pathways. In this sense, the rabbis here exemplify the notion of hybridity—they could easily occupy this space and become its masters precisely because they were occupied by it. As the products of Roman space, they were perhaps its best producers.