In cultures across all times, the act of founding bridges has been invested with specific meaning and reserved to high-placed persons with shamanic powers and expert knowledge of the realm of the Gods. To the ancient Romans, water was sacred: the very crossing of a stream demanded ritual purging and offerings to the deities. Since bridges obstruct the free flow of water, their construction was invested with a number of taboos and demanded expert knowledge. From this follows the exceptionally prominent status of the pontifices maximus, literally ‘supreme bridge-builders’, in ancient Roman society, responsible for maintaining the pax deorum needed for the well-being of society.

This paper is about a renaissance pontifex maximus, Pope Sixtus IV della Rovere (r. 1471–1484) and his act of founding a bridge, the very first that was built in Rome since Antiquity. Founded in 1473, the pope proudly named the bridge after himself, ponte Sisto. Humanist networks in Rome were well aware of the meaning and implications of the founding of the new bridge. During the Sistine pontificate, the bridge was celebrated in an abundance of artistic forms, such as fresco programs, manuscript illuminations, encomiastic poetry and portrait medals.

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In his *The Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade claimed that every ritual has at its roots a divine model, or archetype. Originally performed by gods or mythological ancestors, the act is then repeated time and again by human beings. This way, the founding of ponte Sisto was emblematic for a far bigger entity, in this case nothing less than the ambitious *Renovatio Urbis*, the refounding of Rome during of the Sistine pontificate. Now that the papacy had effectively re-established its control over Rome after the humiliating exile in Avignon, Sixtus IV was determined to restore Rome’s status as capital of Christianity and residence of the popes. In view of the Jubilee of 1475, he issued various bulls and edicts, among them *Etsi Universis* of January 1474, obliging cardinals and noble families to restore the churches and palaces of Rome. Many churches in Rome were repaired, among them SS. Vito e Modesto and S. Maria del Popolo. The Cloaca Maxima, one of the world’s earliest sewer systems, was cleaned, and both the Lateran and Capitol were established as important centers. Sixtus also instituted the office of the *Maestri delle Strade*, responsible for improving condition of the streets and the supply of water. And the pope had success: the population of Rome soared in this period to 40,000, the same as Florence. This contribution examines how the foundation of the new bridge was effectively turned into an emblem of the ambitious urban and institutional *Renovatio Urbis*, as it was pursued by Pope Sixtus IV and his humanist courtiers, and in which ways the identity of Sixtus IV as benefactor, indeed refounder, of Rome was put forward.

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