The modern visitor to Rome is confronted with a cityscape altogether different from the one that greeted visitors in antiquity. One of the most dramatic features of the ancient urban landscape was the curvaceous Tiber River, which occupied a central position in the city and served as an important boundary and a passageway from Rome’s earliest foundation through the imperial period. However, today’s visitor might not perceive any of this. At the end of the nineteenth century the city of Rome surrounded both embankments of the Tiber River with two enormous protective walls intended to mitigate the effects of frequent inundations and often disastrous floods in the city. While high waters have indeed been kept out since that time, the relationship between the city and her river has suffered. Today’s Rome has been effectively separated from the river that gave her life; however, such disconnection was not always the case, particularly in ancient Rome.

Historians, anthropologists, and architects have long recognized the role that physical space and landscape boundaries, such as rivers and natural formations, play in the formation of national identity.¹ I have argued elsewhere that the familiar central Italic landscape of hills and rivers united with various architectural monuments on the banks of the Tiber in the Forum Boarium to tell a uniquely Roman story of origins, passageways, and foundation.² In addition to the topographic and visual impact of the Tiber River on ancient Rome’s architectural geography, there were other visual and conceptual expressions of synergy between the Tiber and ancient Roman identity. In this essay I focus on Tiberinus, the divine river personified who appears in Roman art and literature.

¹ For example, see J. Armstrong, Nations before Nationalism (Chapel Hill, 1982). C. Norberg-Schulz, Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture (New York, 1980).
near the end of the first century B.C., as one such expression. I begin by briefly surveying the visual and literary evidence for the Roman image of Tiberinus. Next, I orient Tiberinus among other river gods by examining Greek and Etruscan precedents for river god imagery. Finally, by contextualizing the earliest Roman examples of Tiberinus imagery I suggest that the image of the Tiber river god, as he appears at the end of the Republic and early Empire, united both native and international associations and typified Rome’s identity as she emerged as the multicultural capital of the Mediterranean.

The image of Father Tiber, or Tiberinus, is perhaps most well-known for his soothing prophecy to an anxious Aeneas at the beginning of Book VIII of Vergil’s Aeneid (VIII.31–78). Later he appears on the reverses of Neronian, Flavian, Trajanic, Hadrianic and Antonine coins. Today visitors to the Louvre can see a colossal image of him, which was most likely part of an ensemble that also included the famous Vatican Nile, both dating to the second century A.D. and found in the vicinity of the Temple of Isis in the Campus Martius (figure 1). The French historian, Joel Le Gall, who has written extensively on both the history of the Tiber River and the figure of Tiberinus, credits these Nile and Tiber sculptures with immense iconographic influence on the portrayal of rivers in Early Modern and modern art. However, despite his acknowledged visual prevalence from the early Empire into modern times, little attention has been paid to the emergence of the image of Tiberinus and its original associations.

In Roman art and literature Tiberinus is depicted as a bearded old man, generally with a bare chest and reclining on a rock or stream. He wears a crown of vegetation. He is associated with the cornucopia, however, this cannot be considered his primary attribute as he does not always have one, and is also shown with the canna palustre. He frequently carries an instrument of navigation, such as an oar or a prow. Certainly from the point of view of iconography, Tiberinus is a recognizable type among water deities, but deviations in his appearance do exist. His poetic appearance in the Aeneid is a good example. At the

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3 Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae, s.v. Tiberis, Tiberinus. See also, Joel Le Gall, Recherches sur le culte du Tibre (Paris, 1953), pp. 28–30.
4 Le Gall, p. 3.
6 Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae, s.v. Tiberis, Tiberinus.