

Laudatio Fruin Prize academic year 2025-2026

The Fruin prize committee evaluating the best research MA essay handed in on time for this past academic year 2025-2026 was composed of Rebekka Grossmann, Soledad Valdivia Rivera, and yours truly Philippe Buc as Chair. We evaluated a dozen essays nominated by their promoters, the immense majority of which were fine research work, based on primary sources, the relevant historiography, and well-chosen theories. We had to rank, and did rank. Let me first present the two ex-aequo runner ups before going on to detail the winning essay.

Claudia Moreira Calzadilla's thesis, "Routes of Survival: Female Vagabonds, Mobility and Socio-Spatial Interactions in Leiden during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," offers an impressive, meticulously researched early modern micro-history with broad scholarly implications. The central research problem is clearly defined and well-embedded within relevant scholarly debates. Specifically, the study critically examines female agency, conceptualizing geographic mobility not simply as movement, but as a primary analytical lens and strategy for survival.

A particular strength of the thesis is its exceptional empirical foundation. Moreira Calzadilla works with a large, varied body of primary archival material, combining these sources effectively with insights from secondary literature. Moreira Calzadilla's construction of her primary dataset—compiled into a remarkable, standalone repository—stands out.

Furthermore, her work introduces an original spatial approach, successfully mapping "networks of mobility" and socio-spatial interactions to demonstrate how women utilized knowledge of Leiden's urban environment to their advantage.

Grounded in this rigorous analysis, the thesis presents a compelling argument regarding the conscious, albeit constrained, agency of female vagabonds. Moreira Calzadilla demonstrates

independent thinking by moving beyond merely applying existing scholarship to a new case study. For instance, the discussion of civil opposition to anti-vagabond policies offers a nuanced interpretation of popular attitudes toward poverty, showing that assistance to vagabonds was shaped by economic interests, fear, and Christian charity. Ultimately, this well-organized and thoroughly referenced essay demonstrates an excellent command of primary sources and a strong ability to substantiate original historical arguments.

Daniëlle de Kurver's thesis, "Who works, who cares: Gendered Redistribution in Dutch Parliamentary Debates on Paid and Unpaid Labour in the 1970s," offers a highly engaging, rigorously argued, and significant discussion of the gendered history of labour in the Netherlands. The study is guided by an original and thought-provoking research question: how did part-time work come to produce the opposite of what it was intended to achieve, failing to contribute to greater gender equality in the labour market? A particular strength of the work lies in its robust literature review, which effectively positions the study within existing scholarship, provides a compelling justification for the research, and explicitly underscores its relevance to contemporary debates.

Methodologically sophisticated, the thesis synthesizes diverse theoretical insights and offers a transparent, well-reasoned account of source selection. At the center of the analysis is a meticulous close reading of a large variety and number of parliamentary speeches and government proceedings. This continuous, dynamic dialogue between empirical sources and theoretical frameworks allows De Kurver to trace changing perceptions of both paid and unpaid domestic work. The analysis is enriched by the purposeful use of carefully selected quotations that bring the narrative to life, yielding insightful, theoretically grounded inferences.

Ludovica Luisa Berini's research MA thesis is entitled "The politics of *romanità* in Fascist Italy, 1932-1938". We are thus here when Mussolini decides to invade Ethiopia for the new Italian Empire, and at the tenth anniversary of the Fascist movement's rise to power. The latter was commemorated by the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution in Rome, a core event in Berini's essay. 1938 is evidently the eve of the Second World War, with the visit of Hitler to Rome. Berini identified a puzzle: how the call to *romanità* - the imperial Roman past - could have had traction in Mussolini's Italy during these seven years, and what fed an ideological dynamism that should have faltered between the 1922 March to Rome – the Fascist Putsch - and 1932. To explore this, she deploys two concepts: one is that of a "dual temporal structure" linking Imperial Rome as a revolutionary beginning and foundation, and Fascism as its enduring manifestation. The other conceptualization mediates between two famous positions in historiography, those respectively of Roger Griffin and Emilio Gentile.

The concept of a "dual temporal structure" is her analysis of how Italians could imagine a foundational moment that kept repeating itself in a slightly newer, actualized version; the 1922 March on Rome was thus ever present, and there was thus in the Fascist discourse no exhaustion – as Griffin would assume – of the revolutionary momentum. In parallel, Imperial Rome had been founded and kept being founded again and again by Fascism...

The second conceptualization takes us into the core of the essay. According to Griffin, consolidation would necessitate a perception of sustained crisis, which does not correspond with the relative political stability built around the figure of Mussolini. Conversely, Gentile's interpretation that fascism became institutionalized as a sacred political culture, while offering an explanation for this consolidation, fails to fully account for how the 'sacralization' was prevented from becoming routine, and actually how it could be more than propaganda. Gentile has been superb in explaining that ideology could be believed; Berini goes one step farther in

explaining how it was believed in. Imperial Rome. One actor was the deeply scholarly Istituto Nazionale di Studi Romani. Its network and modes of diffusion allowed the wide presence in Italy and beyond of a discourse that paired Imperial Rome and the new empire of Mussolini.

The culmination was perhaps the exhibit curated for anniversary of Augustan Rome in 1937.

Instituto Nazionale di Studi Romani was, we cite, "an institution that had internalized the connection between Roman scholarship and Italian imperial ambitions thoroughly".

The conclusion is particularly strong and provides a nuanced interpretation of the relationship between scholarship and fascist power. Berini convincingly challenges the tendency to understand the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Romani either simply as a propaganda instrument or, conversely, as an institution engaged in entirely disinterested scholarship. Instead, she demonstrates that genuine scholarship and political usefulness could coexist. The internal workings of the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Romani suggest that its scholars maintained a degree of institutional independence while simultaneously recognizing that their scholarly credibility was essential to their usefulness to the regime. This produces a more complex understanding of the relationship between knowledge production and fascist ideology and constitutes one of the thesis's most interesting contributions. In its combination of close engagement with historiography, an extensive range of primary sources, and a nuanced analysis of these sources the thesis results in a compelling account on the relationship between scholarship, cultural mythology, and political mobilization in Fascist Italy. A praiseworthy essay which we assume can be, like the two others, published in a good scholarly journal.