JOSEPH CONNORS

PIRANESI AND THE CAMPUS MARTIUS: THE MISSING CORSO

Topography and Archaeology in Eighteenth-Century Rome

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with Preface by WALTER GEERTS, Introduction by LOUISE RICE,
and a Bio-bibliography of the Author

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Prefazione di WALTER GEERTS, Introduzione di LOUISE RICE,
e una Bio-bibliografia dell’Autore

UNIONE INTERNAZIONALE DEGLI ISTITUTI DI ARCHEOLOGIA
STORIA E STORIA DELL’ARTE IN ROMA

Jaca Book
Dedicated to
John Wilton-Ely
PREFAE

During my two decades at Columbia University, from 1980 to 2001, I had the privilege of consulting the rare book room of Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library with some frequency. My work was on the architecture of Francesco Borromini and the urban history of Rome in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, but I was often tempted to glance forward to the eighteenth century and examine the library’s holdings of Piranesi. From its foundation Avery already had one of the finest collections of Piranesi material in America, and this was enriched still further in 1971 by the donation of Dr. and Mrs. Arthur M. Sackler in memory of Rudolf Wittkower (1901-71), which included a pristine early copy of the Antichità romane and the celebrated drawings for rebuilding the choir of San Giovanni in Laterano. In 1992, at the end of my term as director of the American Academy in Rome, John Wilton-Ely and I organized a small exhibition of material on the Lateran, including drawings by Borromini from the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, generously lent by the prefect, Rev. Leonard Boyle, O.P., and the Piranesi drawings from Avery. After I returned from Rome to Columbia in 1992 I was asked by Adolf Plazcek, the genial director emeritus of Avery, to write the entries on Piranesi for a volume commemorating the centenary of the library. The invitation offered the opportunity to study the Antichità romane and the great map of ancient Rome, the Ichnographia, over an extended period of time; the seed of the present essay was planted in preparing those short entries.

The invitation to deliver the annual lecture of the Unione Internazionale degli Istituti di Archeologia Storia e Storia dell’Arte in Roma coincided with my return to Italy in 2002 as director of the Harvard Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Florence, Villa I Tatti. As anyone who has run an institute will
know, it was only *inter multiplicis curas* that I was able to steal
time for further research on the subject. The delay, borne
patiently by the Unione, allowed me to take into account the
abundant literature on Piranesi that has appeared in the first
decade of the twenty-first century, especially the excellent work
of Mario Bevilacqua and Lola Kantor-Kasovsky. Extended study
of the *Ichnographia*, for hundreds of hours, would not have been
possible in Florence except for Elena Fumagalli’s gift of the
1975 facsimile of the *Campus Martius*, and to her I remain most
grateful. All this has meant that the English version of the essay
has grown to triple the original length, but the Italian version
retains more or less the dimensions of the original lecture.

For me the *Ichnographia* evokes, with a sensory power akin
to Proust’s madeleine, the reading room of Avery Library,
presided over by the gentle, shy curator of rare books, Herbert
Mitchell (1924-2008). Although years might pass between my
expression of an interest and his reply with a reference, he gradu-
tually revealed, as a reward for patience, the treasures of the
library’s inner sanctum. It was he who acquired, for example,
the manuscript of the first French guidebook to Rome, written
in 1677 but left anonymous and unfinished, which Louise Rice
and I published in 2001 with the title *Specchio di Roma barocca.*
I also think with fondness of the late Enzo Crea (1927-2007),
the spirited and elegant publisher of that work.

At the American Academy I would like to thank Lester Lit-
tle for his hospitality on the occasion of the lecture, Pina Pas-
quantonio for welcome over many years, and Carmela Vircillo
Franklin for welcome over the past lustrum. My thanks to
Dawn Carelli for expert editing of the English text and to Marco
Cupellaro for his elegant translation. The staff of Houghton
Library showed me the Harvard copy of the *Ichnographia* and
generously provided excellent digital imaging, which can now be
viewed at high resolution at http://ids.lib.harvard.edu/ids/view/
14729372?buttons=y, as did Valerie Scott of the British School
at Rome for the Pirro Ligorio map. I was able to present the
material to students in Venice, Pisa, and Florence thanks to the
kindness of Giovanna Curcio, Antonio Pinelli, Mario Bevilac-
quia, Amedeo Belluzzi, and Barbara Deimling. My warmest
thanks go to Paolo Vian for his patient encouragement over the
years and expert editing, and to Walter Geerts, President of the Unione.

The scholar who has always been my guide to Piranesi is John Wilton-Ely, who offered his collaboration on the exhibition of 1992 and his learned advice ever since. I owe much of what I know about Piranesi to his extraordinarily illuminating book of 1978, as well as his subsequent books and essays. In admiration and friendship I dedicate this lecture to him.

Florence, May 2010

JOSEPH CONNORS

Books Mentioned in the Preface


INTRODUCTION

In “The Missing Corso”, Joseph Connors dons his scholarly deerstalker and takes out his magnifying glass to investigate the mystery of the disappearing thoroughfare. The Corso, the great straight street that runs from the foot of the Capitoline Hill to the Porta Flaminia at the northern edge of the city, is not where it should be in Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s ambitious reconstruction of the Campus Martius, published in 1762. Piranesi knew as much about the topography of ancient Rome as anyone in his day and was aware of the conventional view, supported by archaeological evidence, that the ancient Corso followed much the same route as the modern one. Nevertheless, speculating that the Roman emperors had grander ideas for this northernmost region of the city, he terminated the Via Lata (as the street was known in antiquity) near its southern point of origin, redirecting the flow of traffic eastward, past the Horti Sallustiani, across the Pincian hill, and out through the city walls to rejoin the established path of the Via Flaminia well to the north of Rome. The absence of the familiar Corso in Piranesi’s Campus Martius is both the puzzle at the heart of Connors’s essay and a vital clue to larger questions touching on the artist’s methods and goals. Like the dog that did not bark in Conan Doyle’s classic story, the street that is not there becomes, in Connors’s hands, a potent narrative device, one he deftly employs to lead us on an imaginative passeggiata across space and time to that place in Piranesi’s creative world where erudition, invention, and unbridled fantasy converge.

The essay typifies Connors’s stylish brand of scholarship: lively, learned, and informed by his life-long study of the city of Rome. One of the leading architectural historians of his generation and a scholar of rare intelligence and subtlety, Connors has done much to expand our understanding of the architecture and
urban development of Baroque Rome. His work focuses on the way buildings embody and express the complex power relationships that shaped early modern society. He studies the built environment for what it reveals about the social, cultural, and political aspirations of those who created it. The language of architecture is, of course, rooted in its materiality; it speaks through drawings and ground plans, bricks and mortar. What distinguishes Connors is his sensitivity to the nuances of that language. He has a knack for spotting the telling detail and finding meaning in even the smallest feature of a building's design. Whatever his topic and however broad the range of his historical inquiry, he remains true to the principal that the eye is the primary research tool of the architectural historian and close observation and analysis of the visual evidence the most constructive methodology.

Already as a graduate student at Harvard University, where he wrote his dissertation under the direction of James Ackerman, Connors was drawn to the architecture of Francesco Borromini. His first book, published in 1980, is a masterly study of Borromini's Oratory of the Filippini. This huge building, which together with the Chiesa Nuova takes up a whole city block at the heart of Rome's centro storico, is, in Connors’s words, “at once modest and sumptuous, pedestrian and elegant, functional and courtly, familial and aulic”. Connors shows how the paradoxical nature of the building’s design reflects the particularities of the community that commissioned it (an aristocratic congregation of priests and lay-brothers who lived together but took no vows and who required a residence that expressed both monastic simplicity and worldly status) and demonstrates Borromini’s ingenuity in dealing with the demands of his patrons and in circumventing the restrictions they imposed on him. With hindsight, we may detect a certain parallel between the book’s protagonist and its author. Just as, for Borromini, the Oratory was “the great prize of his early career [and] the building that launched him in the public eye”, so too, for Connors, Borromini and the Roman Oratory established his reputation and, incidentally, earned him the Richard Krautheimer medal, awarded by the Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art for distinguished scholarship in the history of architecture (1984).
In the thirty years since the publication of *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, Connors has broadened and deepened his investigation of this most inventive and original of Baroque architects and of the world in which he lived and worked. Among his many publications on Borrominian topics are important studies of individual buildings as well as an edition of Borromini’s *Opus architectonicum*, handsomely produced by Edizioni il Polifilo in Milan (1998). When his long-awaited *magnum opus* – a two-volume monograph on the life and work of Francesco Borromini – finally sees the light of day, it will represent the culmination and distillation of three decades of continuous research and deep thought on the subject.

Not that Connors's research interests have ever been limited to Borromini. His first teaching appointment took this native New Yorker to Chicago, where he turned his attention to the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. His book on that most elegant of Wright's early creations, the Robie House, reflects the profound admiration for the architect he developed during his years in the midwest. In 1980, Connors moved back to New York City and took up a post at Columbia University, where he was to spend the greater part of his teaching career. Columbia's Department of Art History and Archaeology was at that time the best in the country for the study of Italian Baroque art and architecture and he was proud to follow in the footsteps of such distinguished predecessors as Rudolf Wittkower, Milton Lewine, and Howard Hibbard. A gifted teacher, Connors captivated undergraduate and graduate students alike with his beautifully crafted lectures and rather more free-form seminars. His undergraduate survey of Western architecture was a particularly popular course, and the enthusiastic appreciation of his students earned him, in 2001, Columbia's highest honor, the President's Award for Outstanding Teaching.

While at Columbia, he took full advantage of Avery Library's rich holdings in architectural history. The library had recently acquired a manuscript guidebook to Rome, written by an anonymous Frenchman who visited the city in the 1670s and recorded his observations about the buildings and streets, the colorful personalities, and the customs and rituals that shaped the daily life of the Baroque city. Connors involved me in that project
(I was, at the time, completing a Columbia dissertation) and together we edited the text and published it under the title *Specchio di Roma barocca* (1991). Avery also has in its possession the single most important collection of Piranesiana anywhere in the world, and it was his exploration of this rich *fondo* that whetted his interest in the architect-etcher; indeed, a framed impression of the *Campus Martius* plan hangs in plain view in one of the library's reading rooms, where no doubt he studied and mulled over it at his leisure, laying down the groundwork for the present essay. In 1992, at the American Academy in Rome, Connors organized and co-curated a small but significant exhibition of Piranesi drawings, including the famous series of twenty-three large presentation drawings for the Lateran apse, among Avery's most prized possessions. The show gave him the opportunity to juxtapose Piranesi's Lateran drawings with a selection of Borromini's drawings for the same church, thereby drawing attention to the parallel sensibilities of the two architects and to Piranesi's insightful admiration for Borromini, whose navel design was Piranesi's point of departure and the theme on which he developed his series of variations. One can readily understand how a scholar of Borromini might recognize in Piranesi a kindred intelligence and be drawn to the imaginary Rome of his invention.

In his all work, Connors makes use of a wide range of visual, archival, and historical sources. He has a particularly strong interest in maps and *vedute*, and in the coded information they contain about the social dynamics of urban development. In his seminal article "Alliance and Enmity in Roman Baroque Urbanism" (first published in the *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana* in 1989 and reissued in an expanded Italian translation in 2005), he uses maps and plans of various kinds to show how the city was shaped as much by obstruction and suppression as by construction and expansion. Monumental buildings impose themselves on their immediate surroundings and wherever these engines of local urbanism meet, tensions result that shape the space in unexpected and creative ways. As he puts it, "to walk through Rome is to navigate across fields of influence generated by palaces and monasteries. Where these fields of influence come into contact with each other, they generate streets and piazzas, which are either symmetrical and harmo-
nious if the products of alliance, or irregular and misshapen if
the products of enmity". Connors evokes a Darwinian city
where larger residences devour smaller ones and where "the
windowless side walls and the toothed edges of the façades are
signs of the fundamental unneighborliness of Roman buildings".
This is a study that alters the very way one perceives the city and
no one who has read it can ever again walk past the great mon-
uments of the Baroque without noticing how they elbow their
way onto the scene, snatching sunlight and health-giving breezes
from their neighbors and generally stamping their presence on
the urban landscape.

A lively spirit of curiosity permeates Connors's scholarship,
and, indeed, the "culture of curiosity" (to use Krzysztof Po-
mian's phrase) is the subject of several of his articles. Working
on the houses and inventories of seventeenth-century architects
he noted that they often included cabinets of curiosities, com-
bining rarities of art with wonders of nature; he found architects
collecting coins and seashells, studying botany, grinding lenses
and testing telescopes. The buildings they designed reflect the
intellectual preoccupations and fascinations of the era, revealing
a knowledge both of antiquity in all its richness and complexity
and of nature as seen through a baroque lens. Two suggestive
articles probe the links between architecture and wonder: one
on Roman architects in the age of Cassiano dal Pozzo, and the
other on the lathe and the marvelous chalices and towers of
ivory turned by skilled hands on this archetypally baroque tool.
It is not only the objects produced by the turners, but the larger
mentality of the age that he pursues, finding in seventeenth-cen-
tury treatises on the lathe an articulate theory of creativity
expressed in complex forms.

Connors has spent twelve years of his career as director, in
succession, of America's two most prestigious research institutes
in Italy, the American Academy in Rome and Villa I Tatti in Flo-
rence. Administering these complex and delicate institutions has
been extraordinarily demanding but also infinitely rewarding. At
the American Academy, he came into contact with the dynamic
world of Roman archaeology and topography, an encounter
which now bears fruit in his work on Piranesi. At I Tatti he had
the opportunity to deepen his love of Renaissance art and music
in ways that would not have been possible had he remained in New York. The concert series *Early Music at I Tatti*, which he founded in 2002, has just finished its eighth successful year. (An interest in early music also surfaces in his scholarly work. He studied the spaces of early oratorio in his first book, and in a recent article he turned to the phenomenon of echo in architecture, poetry, and music.) He presided over major building campaigns at both institutions and thus had the chance to experience first-hand the frustrations and the fascinations of architecture *in cantiere*. It seems fitting that both in Rome and in Florence it fell to him to oversee the restoration and expansion of distinguished libraries, for he has long been interested in library history and was able to bring an historical perspective to the very contemporary and practical problems of library construction.

Curiosity and originality in the broadest sense, as mirrored in the virtuoso architecture of Baroque Rome, are concepts to which Connors returns again and again. He has taken to heart in his own work Borromini's memorable remark, “I would never have entered this profession only to become a copyist”. The role of imagination in design, but also in archaeology and antiquarianism, is a perennial theme in his writing and manifests itself once again in his study of Piranesi's *Campus Martius*.

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PIRANESI AND THE CAMPUS MARTIUS:
THE MISSING CORSO

TOPOGRAPHY AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ROME

JOSEPH CONNORS
1. The Missing Corso

With the publication of Piranesi's *Campus Martius* in 1762, the learned world was greeted with a surprise. In the most elaborate and erudite reconstruction of ancient Rome ever undertaken, the Via Lata was missing. This was no small loss. The Via Lata was the oldest street of ancient Rome to have left any trace on the modern city, running, as most thought before Piranesi, about five meters under the surface of the modern Via del Corso. Previous reconstructions of the Campus Martius had clearly shown it. Two triumphal arches that once spanned it were known. To ignore the consensus of antiquarians on one of the few unquestioned matters of ancient topography was a radical move.

The Corso was the name given in the Renaissance to the stretch of the Via Flaminia between the Republican city and the Aurelian Wall.¹ Laid out by the censor C. Flaminius in 220 B.C., the street had always been thought to start from Porta Fontinalis on the Capitol, approximately where the equestrian monument of Victor Emmanuel II now stands, and to run in a straight line to the Ponte Milvio three miles to the north, after which it continued to the upper Tiber valley. In 275 A.D., the first mile of the Via Flaminia was enclosed by the Aurelian Wall and the road was spanned by a new gate, the Porta Flaminia. Inside the Aurelian Wall, the Via Flaminia became known as the Via Lata, a name echoed in the titulus of several early Christian churches. The custom of using the

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intra-urban stretch of the street for carnival races of boys, Jews, prostitutes, and, from 1466, horses, gave it a new name, the Via del Corso. Two popes made the street the object of special attention: Paul III Farnese (r. 1534-49), who enjoyed the view down the Corso from his tower-villa on the Capitoline, and Alexander VII Chigi (r. 1655-67), who thought of the Corso as the “hippodrome of the festive city”, and had Pietro da Cortona erect a belvedere in the form of a kathisma, or imperial viewing box, on top of the facade of Santa Maria in Via Lata.

Yet this venerable street is suppressed for most of its length in Piranesi’s Campus Martius. It is shown neither in the Scenographia, with which the book opens, nor in the famous plan, the Ichnographia.

The Scenographia (Fig. 13) shows the flood plain of the Tiber from a great height above the Capitoline Hill. The ruins of the major monuments are unencumbered by later urban growth as

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though, instead of the medieval rehabilitation after the fall of the empire, desertification had set in and Rome had become another Palmyra. From far above we see the lonely ruins of Hadrian’s tomb and bridge, the Stadium of Domitian ("Circus of Alexander Severus"), the Theater of Pompey, the Pantheon flanked by various baths, the Tiber Island bridges, and the nearby Theater of Marcellus, with the Portico of Octavia to its left and, nearby, the ruins under Monte Cenci ("Theater of Balbus"). We see the Column of Marcus Aurelius. But next to it there is no Via Lata, nor is the street shown near the Mausoleum of Augustus, both places where Piranesi’s contemporaries would expect to find it.

In the Ichnographia (Fig. 1), or plan, we would have appreciated the straight line of the Corso to help us get our bearings in the immense clutter of buildings. However, here too it is missing, or rather, on closer inspection, we see that the street has not been omitted entirely, but is present in severely truncated form, for only a few hundred meters at its southern end. Beginning at the bottom of the map, near a gate in the Capitoline fortifications that Piranesi labels "Porta Catularia", a straight, narrow "Via Lata" runs between a massive portico and a pair of large courtyards set at an angle to it. The distance traversed would be equal, in modern Rome, to that between Piazza Venezia and Via del Corso at the north corner of the Colosseum. Then Piranesi’s Via Lata turns sharply to the right and follows the arches of an aqueduct, the Aqua Virgo, as far as Trevi. There it changes its name to Via Flaminia and continues to wind its way up the Pincian Hill along the route of the modern Via Capo le Case and Via di Porta Pinciana. Once it has skirted the great enclosure of the Gardens of Sallust, or Horti Sallustiani, Piranesi imagines the Via Flaminia leaving the city and running over the hills of Parioli. He argues his case in a note four thousand words long and produces a veduta

showing ancient paving blocks in this region that he thought he could associate with the Via Lata. Then he has the road descend to the valley of the Tiber and, in one last contrarian assertion, he has it cross the river not on the Ponte Molle (generally considered to be the site of the ancient Pons Mulvius) but on a hitherto unknown ancient bridge a short distance upstream, the ruins of which he examined personally and reproduces in a veduta. This, for Piranesi, was the real Pons Mulvius, while the famous Ponte Molle was, he claims, merely a medieval bridge. It is only when the road is across the bridge and safely on the far side of the Tiber that he allows it to rejoin the normally accepted route of the Via Flaminia.

Piranesi’s radical rearrangement of ancient topography did not go unnoticed. Shortly after the publication of the Campus Martius in 1762, the disappearance of the Via Lata was noted by the Scottish antiquarian Andrew Lumisdens (1720-1801). Lumisdens and Piranesi were exact contemporaries. The two men met when both were thirty and remained friends for the two decades Lumisdens lived in Rome, from 1750 to 1769. The Scot was an ardent admirer of the fiery Italian, but a critical one. After he moved to Paris in 1769, he began to compile his Remarks on the Antiquities of Rome and Its Environs, in which he refers to Piranesi fifty-four times, and to Piranesi’s plates one hundred and fifty times. Usually complimentary, he nevertheless found the twists and turns of the rerouted Via Lata too much to take:

But Piranesi places the Pons Milvius above a mile higher up the river, opposite to the Tor di Quinto, and makes the Via Flaminia to have passed through the Porta Pinciana, and from thence, by many turnings, to have reached the Pons Milvius. The reasons offered by Piranesi to support his singular opinion do not seem satisfactory. The Romans never made their consular roads in winding lines, but in cases of absolute necessity, which cannot be pleaded here.6

Lumisdens goes on to reaffirm the familiar straight route of the Via Lata and its continuation in the Via Flaminia. When Luigi Ca-

nina (1795-1856) published his plan of ancient Rome in 1832, the Via Lata was put safely back in the middle of the Campus Martius. Since then, no antiquarian has been tempted to move it.

The question of Piranesi’s reliability is raised by his removal of the Via Lata from the Campus Martius. This one gesture alone would seem to put him squarely into the camp of fantastical recreators of an antiquity that never was. Yet, when we examine the texts Piranesi composed to accompany his *Campus Martius*, we constantly return to the theme of autopsy, the need to look at the ruins with one’s own eyes. Piranesi claims that the book is based on “molti anni di infaticabili esatissime osservazioni, scavi, e ricerche”. He often went down into the ruins to perform spot excavations, such as in the substructures under Santa Maria in Via Lata, across from his first house, or under Sant’Agnese and Palazzo Pamphilij in Piazza Navona. We find him rummaging around antique remains of the Quirinal in the Barberini gardens and the Pamphilij villa at Magnanapoli. The antiquarian Nardini had said there were no significant remains of the Theater of Pompey. “I take no heed of Nardini”, writes Piranesi, “a man more fond of writing than of doing exacting research on site”. He went down into the cellars of Campo de’ Fiori, measured the remains himself, and used the results to correct Nolli, who had poorly oriented the theater on his plan (Fig. 20). There are many other instances of his correcting the standard handbooks on the basis of his own inspection of the ruins. In the index to one of the plates of the *Campus Martius*, he numbers 312 ruins in the city or along its walls, a list composed from firsthand knowledge. Not until Rodolfo Lanciani will we find anyone quicker to arrive at a building site to examine whatever remains might come to light.


8 *Campus Martius*, pp. vii–x, referring to pl. III, “Topographia Vestigiorum Veteris Urbis et Campi Martii”.

9 A spirited defense of Piranesi’s firsthand knowledge of Roman ruins and
Aside from looking with his own eyes, Piranesi used the eyes of others, sometimes men of long memory. He tells us the names of the vine-keepers who helped him find traces of ancient walls or remembered masonry that had since disappeared. He sent a small boy to explore the drainage system under San Giorgio in Velabro where the space was too tight for a man of his girth. To determine whether Montecitorio was an artificial or a natural hill, he sought out an old workman who, as a boy fifty years before, had dug the foundations of the casa of the Padri della Missione next to Carlo Fontana’s Montecitorio. This man remembered finding fragments of marble steps of the seating tiers, leading Piranesi to the conclusion that this was the Amphitheater of Statilius Taurus.  

Clearly imagination and close observation were not considered incompatible by Piranesi, or indeed by his contemporaries. For example, the antiquarian Tommaso Temanza (1705-1789), while exploring the Augustan remains at Rimini in 1741, offered a new interpretation of the famous Arch of Augustus, which he claimed was not a triumphal arch at all, but rather a monument commemorating the start of the Via Flaminia. He gives a glimpse of his method:

The most useful study for an architect is to “anatomize” ancient structures, an exercise that trains the creative faculties in noble ideas and renders the imagination fertile ...

[Lo studio più utile, che far possa un’Architetto si è quello di anatomizzare, per dir così, gli antichi edifiz; mentre con questo mezzo avvezza la fantasia a nobilissime idee, rende feconda la immaginazione ...].


10 Campus Martius, pp. 15f., note a, naming among his sources one Rondelli, architect of the Padri della Missione.

To clarify the paradox of the *Campus Martius*, we will have to accustom ourselves to the partnership between observation and imagination implied in the concept of “anatomizing” the ruins. If Piranesi left the Via Lata out, we must suppose that he did so in order to embrace a greater archaeological vision, one revealed to the imagination after autopsy had done all it could to ascertain the truth. The task of this essay is to uncover that greater vision, and then to chronicle its triumph and its eventual downfall.

2. The *Antichità romane* (1756-57) and the *Campus Martius* (1762)

Let us turn now to the publication of which the *Campus Martius* is a part, namely, the *Antichità romane*. This book marks Piranesi’s transition, at age thirty-six, from the world of the veduta to that of reconstructive archaeology. More than a decade in preparation, it appeared in four volumes in 1756-57, with the *Campus Martius* appearing in 1762 as the delayed fifth volume.\(^{12}\) Lola Kantor-Kazovsky has recently studied the genesis of this complex book.\(^{13}\) In a nutshell, it started out as a single volume dedicated to tombs. To this was added a visual commentary on Frontinus’s book on aqueducts. All of this was then completed with a study of the great works of Roman architectural engineering. Although the constituent books are not assembled in the order of composition and each contains prints that do not fit the general schema, the basic sequence holds good: tombs (now Books II and III), aqueducts (I), and great works of Roman engineering (IV).

Piranesi had already made a first venture into tombs in a slender volume of circa 1750 entitled *Le Camere Sepolcrali degli Antichi Romani le quali Esistono dentro e fuori di Roma*, which exists in a very few copies.\(^{14}\) Then in 1753-55 he began a more ambitious

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\(^{13}\) Kantor-Kazovsky, *Piranesi*, pp. 59-118.

\(^{14}\) *Le Camere Sepolcrali degli Antichi Romani le quali esistono dentro e fuori di Roma*, c. 1750. The copy in Sir John Soane’s Museum has five plates by Piranesi himself and six taken from the etchings of Girolamo Rossi and Antonio Buonamici.
book, *I Sepolcri Antichi*, or *Monumenta Sepulcralia Antiqua*, conceived both in emulation of and in rivalry with the great collection of tomb studies of 1697, *Gli Antichi Sepolcri*, published by the late-baroque printmaker Pietro Santi Bartoli. Bartoli had been exploring tombs since his arrival in Rome as a teenager, when he was involved in excavations of the tombs found under the Casino Belvedere of Villa Pamphilj. From a lifetime of research he knew the tombs along the consular highways extremely well. Under the influence of his friend Giovanni Pietro Bellori, Bartoli had seen the “school of the sepulchres” as a place where artists could draw inspiration, treasure fantasy, and learn the pleasures of transgression. All this appealed to Piranesi, who saw so much creativity in the decorative detail of tombs that he wondered if modern man could ever equal it.

As a printmaker, however, Piranesi knew he could easily surpass Bartoli. When both artists illustrate the same tomb, Piranesi always shows greater flair. For example, in the view of the so-called


16 *Le antichità romane*, II, pl. LXIII: “Di si fatti Capitelli come ancora deformati con altre capricciosi, e varie fantasie, infiniti se ne veggono per la città di Roma, e per li suoi contorni: talmente che sembra, che gli Antichi non abbiano lasciato a Posteri alcun luogo di poterne inventare de’ nuovi.”
Tomb of Nero on the Via Cassia, Bartoli imparts information, but Piranesi drama and inspiration. Bartoli shows the tomb somewhat larger than life, while Piranesi makes it colossal, especially in comparison to the wretched goatherds clambering over it. Bartoli shows the lid closed, Piranesi shows it pried open, symbol of the devastation of the ages. Both show the crude medieval relief of a griffon on the side of the sarcophagus, but Piranesi renders this detail in drypoint, not etching, so that the ink seems to sear the paper.  

The first step beyond the collection of tombs was to add a number of prints devoted to the aqueducts of Rome, culminating in a giant print, a meter tall, showing the aqueducts and major monuments of Rome. Often called the Tavola degli Acquedotti, it in fact has a more specific caption: "Tavola Topografica di Roma in cui si dimostrano gli andamenti degli antichi acquedotti riferiti nel commentario Frontiniano la circonferenza delle antiche regioni e le antiche vie" (Fig. 15). The prints were thus meant to be a visual if not a verbal commentary on the classic text of Frontinus, De aquis urbis Romae, written under Nerva and completed under Trajan. Piranesi claimed that this one print took him six months to make and that it was meant to correct the mistakes of all his predecessors. His principal predecessor was Raffaele Fabretti (1618-1700), whose book on the aqueducts appeared in 1680. Piranesi knew he could never compete with Fabretti’s lifelong research on the channels of the aqueducts in the campagna. However, he could render more accurately their course inside the Aurelian Wall, and he could

17 The two views (Bartoli, Gli antichi sepoleri, pl. 19, and Piranesi, Le antichità romane, III, pl. 14) are juxtaposed in Kantor-Kazovsky, Piranesi, pls. 10-11.

18 Le antichità romane, I, pl. XXXVIII; Wilton-Ely, Mind and Art, p. 50, fig. 73.

combine this with a plan of the major roads and the contours of the fourteen regions of Augustan Rome, all of which are shown on the Tavola Topografica. The text at this point refers to a still more ambitious plan: "una gran Pianta iconografica dell’antica Roma, che fra poco darò alla luce". At first sight this seems to imply a plan of the entire city, something like the Tavola Topografica but greatly enlarged and fully fleshed out. No trace of this great plan remains, or Piranesi is simply referring over-enthusiastically to the Ichnotagographia of the Campus Martius, on which he was working when Robert Adam visited him in April 1757.

Volume IV of the Antichità romane deals with public architecture, such as bridges, theaters, and porticoes. Here, in etchings of unforgettable grandeur, Piranesi shows the substructures of the Tiber bridges, of Castel Sant’Angelo, and of the Theater of Marcellus. Powerless modern men clamber over foundations of pharaonic majesty. These impossibly great masses rest on a platform of oak piles, hammered deep into the clay beneath the Tiber bed. Here we see the structural imagination of an architect raised in watery Venice, where all buildings are built on piles sunk beneath the mud of the lagoon.

Prints of the tomb of Cecilia Metella added to the end of Book III show the same fascination with the rugged engineering of the Romans. Here Piranesi reinvents the huge tackle needed to hoist up the massive blocks "che sembrano fatte piu dalla Natura, che dall’arte". Rustication became for Piranesi a symbol of the animal-like ferocity of Roman architecture which, strangely, could coexist with beautiful ornament. In a plate showing the podium of the Temple of Divus Claudius on the Coelian Hill near Santi Giovanni e Paolo, Piranesi identifies this half-buried example of Claudian rustication as a holding pen built by Domitian for the beasts of the Colosseum:

The remarkable thing about this building is the way in which the rough and the precise work together in elegant harmony, with an artful

20 Le antichità romane, I, pl. XXXVIII, Spiegazione, p. I.
21 This is the interpretation of Kantor-Kazovsky, Piranesi, p. 103.
22 Le antichità romane, IV, pls. IV-XII, XVIII-XXIII, XXV-XXXII.
23 Ibid., II, pl. XLIX-LIV, with quotation from pl. LIII; see the fine analysis in Peter Miller, "Piranesi and the Antiquarian Imagination", in Piranesi as Designer, exh. cat., ed. Sarah Lawrence and John Wilton-Ely, New York and Haarlem, 2007, pp. 123-37.
inequality of lines and an apparent carelessness that expresses the function of the building and at the same time give it gravity and majesty.

[Quel ch’è rimarchevole in questa fabbrica, è il rozzo che accorda elegante men col pulito lavorato con un’artificiale disuguaglianza di linee, per la qual negligenza ella si rende grave e maestosa, ed esprime insieme l’uso al qual’era stata destinata].

The *Antichità romane* thus grew from a single book on tombs to four thick volumes with 218 plates, regally priced at fifteen zecchini or thirty scudi. In the early phases of the book’s gestation, a munificent patron appeared on the scene in the person of the wealthy young Irish peer James Caulfield, the first Lord Charlemont. Charlemont had embarked on an eight-year Grand Tour in 1746, and after four years in Greece and three in Italy, he finally installed himself in Rome in 1753-54. In 1753, Piranesi offered him the dedication of what then seemed to be a single volume on tombs. Charlemont agreed, but he then suddenly decamped for Ireland, leaving negotiations in the hands of his not completely honest agent, Henry Parker. As the *Antichità romane* grew, Charlemont’s commitment shrank. In the course of a painful correspondence between 1756 and 1758, it became clear that Charlemont wanted the dedication of all four volumes but had no interest in paying adequately for it. Seventy copies of the *Antichità romane* had already been published with the dedication to Charlemont when negotiations finally broke down and Piranesi decided to take his revenge. On the title page of the copies published after 1757, Piranesi carried out a *damnatio memoriae*, made into a tour de force by the virtuosity of his etching technique (Fig. 14). The earl’s arms are shown smashed and, reusing letters of the original inscription, the book is now dedicated to “public utility”. In a small volume of 1757, Piranesi published his correspondence with the parsimonious earl, and in etchings of smaller format, he damned Charlemont’s memory all over again.

24 *Le antichità romane*, IV, pl. LIII.
25 At the end of volume IV of the Sackler copy of the *Antichità romane* in the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library of Columbia University, the full set is said to consist of “218 tavole in foglio atlantico”; Bevilacqua, *Piranesi: Taccuini di Modena*, 1, p. 274, puts the number of plates at 252, noting that some were added in 1757.
26 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Lettere di giustificazione scritte a Milord Charlemont e a di lui agente di Roma dal Signor Piranesi, Socio della Real Società degli
The Campus Martius owes its existence as a separate volume of the Antichità romane to the vanity of the young Scots architect Robert Adam. Adam had arrived in Rome in February 1755. He would stay twenty-six months in all, during which time he became an admirer and friend of Piranesi, eight years his senior. In June 1755 Adam went with Piranesi, Charles-Louis Clérisseau, Laurent Pécheux, and others to visit the Baths of Caracalla and the Via Appia, "where we will be very merry with Piranesi, who is always Brisk, always allegro". In the same month we find him writing to his brother James,

Piranesi who is I think the most extraordinary fellow I ever saw is becoming immensely intimate with me and as he imagined at first that I was like the other English who had a love of antiques without knowledge, upon seeing some of my sketches, and drawings, was so highly delighted that he almost ran quite distracted, and said I have more genius for the true noble Architecture than any Englishman ever was in Italy.

It was also in June 1755 that Piranesi playfully "threatened" to dedicate the plan of the Campus Martius to Adam instead of relying on Charlemont, who was fast receding from the picture, or finding a sympathetic cardinal with sufficient funds. It was not a disinterested move for either party. Adam knew that a dedication would cost him money. He reckoned that he would have to buy eighty or a hundred copies for later resale in England and Scotland. How-


28 Fleming, Robert Adam, pp. 165f. and 230f.
ever, to avoid being overshadowed by Charlemont, to whom the main volumes of the Antichità romane were still to be dedicated, Adam urged Piranesi to make the plan of the Campus Martius into a separate book. Piranesi told Adam how much he appreciated his encouragement:

I remember how energetically you researched each of the surviving ancient monuments when we were together a few years ago in Rome, and how you studied the magnificence and the form, [and] especially when we came to the Campus Martius, you pressed me to draw and etch the remains that were to be found in such a famous part of Rome, and to bring out a plan of the Campus Martius made in such a way that it could be taken in with a single glance.

[... ben mi sovviene, allora che alcuni anni sono ci ritrovavamo insieme in Roma, con quale impegno da Voi si ricercava ciascun edificio di que' tanti monumenti, che tuttavia avanzano, e fra voi stesso ne contemplavate la magnificenza, e la forma, massime quando venimmo nel Campo Marzio; facendomi voi spesso premura di disegnare ed incidere gli avanzi degli edifici, che in un luogo si celebre di Roma si ritrovassero, e di dare alla luce una pianta si fatta di tutto il Campo, da vedersi in un sol colpo d'occhio].

Adam, though sometimes exasperated by the fantastic streak in Piranesi, saw his genius as well:

... so amazing and ingenious fancies as he has produced in the different plans of the Temples, Baths and Palaces and other buildings I never saw, and are the greatest fund for inspiring and instilling invention in any lover of architecture that can be imagined.

As he was finishing the frontispieces to Volume II, he inscribed Adam's name as well as Allan Ramsay's on tombs of his phantasmagoric Via Appia. On April 9, 1757, after two years of friendship and joint exploration, Adam came to bid farewell to Piranesi in his house on the Via del Boschetto. He found him at work on the dedicatory tablet of the Ichnographia. Let us stop to look for a moment at the plate Piranesi was etching.

The tablet is full of bellicose ornament befitting the tutelary deity of the Campus Martius (Fig. 2). A pseudo-antique relief shows the Temple of Mars and in front of it the sacrifice of a pig, a sheep,

29 Preface to the Campus Martius, quoted in Zamboni, "Il Campo Marzio", p. 45.
30 Fleming, Robert Adam, p. 167.
and a bull (a rite known as a *suovetaurilia*), which marked the rededication of the campus to the god of war after it was retrieved from the rapacious Tarquins.\(^{31}\) There are two medallions. The one on the left shows Architecture with her rod, compass, and drawing, and is inscribed,

Robert Adam Fellow of the Academies of St. Luke, of Florence and of Bologna, in Rome 1757 [the date of Adam’s farewell visit]


The medallion on the right shows the two friends in profile, in the fashion of *duumviri*:

Io. Bap[t] Piranesi / Robertus Adam / Architecti

The dedicatory inscription reads,

Giovanni Battista Piranesi gives donates dedicates the Ichnographia of the Campus Martius to Robert Adam of Britain, Devotee of Architecture, as a testimony of his love.


In small type it continues,

The Topography of Rome Showing the Length of the Campus Martius all the way to Ponte Milvio.

[Topographia Romae Longitudinem Campi Martii Adusque Pontem Milvium Demonstrans]

Adam left Rome in 1757 for Venice and eventually Spalato in Dalmatia, taking Charles-Louis Clérisseau with him as his draftsman. Relations with Piranesi remained cordial long after that, and Adam even hoped that Piranesi might be able to etch the frontispiece for the book that would result from this expedition.\(^{32}\) But the promised Piranesi volumes were slow in coming. Piranesi had domestic worries, as we learn in a letter of James Adam of January 1762, claiming that the artist was working

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\(^{31}\) Livy I.43.13.

\(^{32}\) Robert Adam, *Ruins of the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalatro in Dalmatia*, London, 1764.
as fast as the distrest situation of his private affairs will allow him, being at present extremely distressed with the irregular conduct of his wife, who as we say in Scotland has been too great with another man, and so he has put her in a convent for her amusement.  

In 1761 Piranesi moved from the Via del Boschettto, the place where Adam came to meet him, to the Palazzo Tomati, number 48 Strada Felice. On 16 June 1761, the *Campus Martius* finally received official approval, though the publication was further delayed and it did not appear until 1762.

Before leaving the dedicatory plate of the *Ichnographia*, let us dwell for a moment on one of its inscriptions:

Topography of Rome Showing the Length of the Campus Martius all the way to the Ponte Milvio

[Topographia Romae Longitudinem Campi Martii Adusque Pontem Milvium Demonstrans]

The word *longitudinem* encapsulates Piranesi’s iconoclastic idea, which might be described, in a nutshell, as the “long Campus Martius”. Although antiquarians were divided on the extent of the site, no one thought it was anywhere near as long as Piranesi made it. In the narrowest construction it stopped short of the Mausoleum of Augustus, which is placed outside the Campus proper, although it was meant to dominate it from the north. Agrippa’s Aqua Virgo, coinciding with the facade of Sant’Ignazio and the portico of the Pantheon, would have been the northern limit of the built-up area, with grassy fields beyond. Larger reconstructions of the ancient Campus include that of the Quattrocento antiquarian Flavio Biondo, who extended it to all the land lying between the Tiber and the Pincio, past the Mausoleum as far as the Porta Flaminia. Piranesi summarizes this debate in the first chapter of his text, but clearly sides with the proponents of a long Campus. In fact, he pro-

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34 T.P. Wiseman, “Campus Martius”, in *Lexicon Topographicum*, I, pp. 220-24, excludes several areas from the Campus proper: on the north, the riverbank downstream from Ponte Vittorio Emanuele and the Mausoleum; on the south, the Circus Flaminius and Theater of Marcellus; and on the east, everything east of Via Lata. He describes the Campus as an irregular quadrilateral, the corners of which are marked by Palazzo Venezia (SE), San Carlo al Corso (NE), Ponte Vittorio Emanuele (NW), and Piazza Cairoli (SW).
poses a Campus twice as long as that of even his most expansive predecessors.\textsuperscript{35} Since the Campus had begun as land seized by Tarquin the Proud, and since Tarquin was a tyrant with unlimited power, it had to be large—"un gran podere dei tiranni".\textsuperscript{36} When Tarquin fell and the grain harvested from his campus was thrown into the Tiber, there was enough of it to form the Tiber Island; we cannot believe that it was a small estate. Piranesi also needed room for the many buildings that he knew from texts had been there. And many of these would need vast and elaborate settings, on the scale of the great thermal complexes and indeed of Hadrian’s Villa. The word \textit{longitudo} thus prepares us for a Campus Martius of unparalleled extent.

\textit{Campus Martius: Scenographia}

The most eloquent ancient description of the Campus Martius is in Strabo’s \textit{Geography}. For all Piranesi’s wide reading in the ancients, Strabo remains his master text.\textsuperscript{37} Indeed, he took pains to reproduce Strabo’s Greek in an elegant cursive font.\textsuperscript{38} Strabo speaks of two plains, one grassy and reserved for sports, the other full of magnificent buildings, so many that it seemed another city. Here he saw three theaters (which he does not name but which are always

\textsuperscript{35} Flavio Biondo (\textit{Roma triumphant}, Book VI, p. 128) had extended the Campus to the flat land under the Pincian, but Donati pulled it back to the region of the Pantheon, while Nardini is more restrictive still. According to Angelo Mari Bandini, in \textit{De Obelisco Caesaris Augusti et Campi Martii Ruderibus nuper eratis Commentarius: Dell’obelisco di Cesare Augusto scavato dalle rovine del Campo Marzio}, commentario, Rome, 1750, p. 40, n. 9, many authors had written on the extent of the Campus, especially one Giovanni Vignoli, in \textit{De Columna Imperatoris Antonini Pii dissertatio}, Rome, 1705, chap. II.

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ichnographia}, p. 4.


\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Le antichità romane}, I, p. viii.