

# Ruins and Vestiges in the Time of the Humanists

The Rediscovery of the Remains of Rome in the Fifteenth Century

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## Abstract

The study and representation of the remains of ancient Rome had a central role in the emergence of cultural and artistic models in Renaissance Europe. Beginning in the late fourteenth century, humanists developed a collection of scholarly methods (notably epigraphical and topographical) that founded a proto-archaeological approach to ruins. The “science of ruins” went hand in hand with an aesthetic fascination that had a lasting influence through the redefinition of the canons and subjects in artistic practice. Observation of ruins was one of the major inspirations in the creation of “classic” architecture, while ruins became a recurring motif in European painting beginning in the late fifteenth century. Finally, this rediscovery was anchored in a powerful imaginary that conferred memorial and political value on Roman ruins. Humanists in particular made ruins into a warning from History, and formulated a patrimonial ideology of which the pontifical power of the Quattrocento was the primary promoter.

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## Article

At the end of the Middle Ages, Rome was strewn with numerous fragments of its ancient past—remains of monuments (temples, tombs, *thermae*, palaces) including the Colosseum and the Pantheon, but also traces of its urban layout (ramparts, gates, bridges), ruins from secular artistic production (statues, columns), and inscriptions of all kinds. Beginning in the mid-twelfth century, the city’s primary ruins became the subject of learned descriptions intended for pilgrims, in the manner of the famous *The Marvels of Rome* (c. 1140-1143). Rooted in this tradition, the nascent humanism of the mid-fourteenth century placed study of Roman ruins at the heart of its reflections and references, and strove to redefine the meaning, knowledge and uses of the ancient heritage. It was as much a “taste” for ruins—as it was a science and a literature—that took form and inspired a central topic of Renaissance culture and art during the ensuing centuries.

## The Development of a Proto-Archaeology

This rediscovery was partially founded on the work of scholars who established methods for the historical study of ruins. It involved observing, listing and identifying what had been preserved, in a process similar to the philological approach to ancient texts, which was also promoted by the humanists. These were the beginnings of modern epigraphy and topography.

Giovanni Dondi dell’Orologio was considered a precursor in this domain with his *Iter romanum* (c. 1375), in which he describes the material aspect of ruins and records numerous inscriptions. Following his lead, Poggio Bracciolini began an epigraphical collection upon his arrival in Rome in 1403. Between 1431 and 1448, he wrote the book *The Ruins of Rome* (the first of four books *On the Vicissitudes of Fortune*), which contains a detailed analysis of ruins based on readings in literary and epigraphical sources. Poggio composed his text in the intellectual context of the humanist

environment at the papal court, which flourished under the pontificates of Martin V (1417-1431), Eugene IV (1431-1447) and Nicholas V (1447-1455). It was in this same context that Flavio Biondo and Leon Battista Alberti wrote *Rome Restored* (1444-1446) and *Delineation of the City of Rome* (ca. 1448-1455), respectively: Biondo offers a vast and systematic account of ancient ruins, and Alberti lays the foundations for a mathematical technique to establish their layout.

These scientific contributions helped develop a proto-archaeological literature that continued to grow in the following decades, sustained by the constitution of antiquarian collections. The epigraphic search continued most notably, and went beyond a strictly Roman setting, as in the collection of Greek and Latin inscriptions gathered by Fra Giovanni Giocondo, the first edition of which was addressed to Lorenzo de' Medici in 1489. Other disciplines appeared, such as numismatics, which was born with the *De Asse et partibus eius libri quinque* published by Guillaume Budé in 1515. At the same time, a number of major archaeological finds took place, especially during work on the Oppian hill in the early sixteenth century, which led to the fortuitous opening of Nero's *Domus aurea*.

## A Founding Aesthetic Model

The scholarly interest sparked by ruins went hand in hand with the aesthetic fascination exerted by these remains of ancient architecture and sculpture: they represented a canon of beauty that Renaissance architects and artists strove to reproduce. The trip to Rome, such as the one made by Filippo Brunelleschi and Donatello in the early 1400s, thus represented a decisive moment of learning.

In the field of architecture, techniques in surveys of buildings improved markedly. The drawings that were preserved grew increasingly varied and accurate, such as those gathered by Francesco di Giorgio Martini in his *Treatise on Architecture*, written in the last third of the fifteenth century. This stocktaking was the departure point for an overall stylistic redefinition. The proportions, forms and decorative elements of surviving monuments were so many examples to imitate: Filippo Brunelleschi thus drew inspiration from the Pantheon when he built the Duomo in Florence, which was finished in 1436. Leon Battista Alberti's *On The Art of Building*, completed in 1452 and published in 1485, marked a major turning point in this regard: in this work, the Florentine established the principles of a "classical" architecture by relying on direct observation of ruins, as well as on the rediscovery of the ancient treatise of Vitruvius. These first milestones opened the way for a reconfiguration of the language and techniques of architecture, which prospered throughout the sixteenth century, as demonstrated by Andrea Palladio's creations in Veneto, as well as by his *The Four Books of Architecture*, published in 1570.

Ruins were also an aesthetic model taken as such, with their fragmentary and deteriorated appearance. Painters gradually introduced the motif of partially-collapsed ancient buildings in their works, sometimes covered in vegetation, in imitation of existing monuments. The production of Andrea Mantegna is notably characterized by settings that included various arches, columns or bas-reliefs "in the ancient style," damaged by time. In the *Saint Sebastian* he painted in 1480 for the altarpiece of San Zeno di Verona, he represented the martyr tied to the sculpted column of a dilapidated arch, with the remains of an ancient city in the background. Beginning in the late fifteenth century, landscapes with Roman ruins became an emblematic element of the "Renaissance" artistic ideal that developed in Italy and spread very widely in Europe. Numerous foreign painters went to the Eternal City during the following decades to observe and depict ruins. Particularly active among them were the Flemish "Romanists," such as Maarten Van Heemskerck, who portrayed himself drawing the Colosseum in 1553.

## The Imaginary of Ruins and their Implications

The enthusiasm prompted by Roman ruins must be understood in light of their evocative power: evidence of a glorious and long-gone past, they were endowed with a memorial significance that was a lesson intended for the present. In this context, walks among ruins became a *topos* of humanist thought on the meaning of history. Petrarch's famous letter to his friend Giovanni Colonna, which recounted in 1341 their meanderings amid "Rome's remarkable locations," is the archetype. The poet engaged in an enthusiastic listing of illustrious sites, and then denounced the shameful ignorance of his contemporaries. Fascination and confusion coexisted: the ruins struck the imagination of humanists as much for what they suggested of ancient splendour as for the impression of decline they provoked, a sign of the precipitous decadence of the former *caput mundi*. Poggio's *The Ruins of Rome* opens with this contrast: while contemplating the panorama from the top of the Capitol with a friend, he presents their common amazement before the spectacle of a collapsed empire. The topic of ruins thus provided men of letters with the opportunity to deplore the degradation of the present, and to meditate on the fickleness of Fortune. A poetry of the *lamento* developed beginning in the late fifteenth century, notably including the collection *The Antiquities of Rome* by Joachim du Bellay, published in 1558.

If ruins were a warning from history (a "monument" in the original sense of the word), they were not only the memory of what had been lost, but also the means of restoring a golden age. The role of historical knowledge proved fundamental: "For who can doubt that Rome would rise again instantly if she began to know herself?" exclaimed Petrarch in the letter to Giovanni Colonna. Men of letters, architects and artists aspired through their work to protect and even to recreate a model that could be the inspiration for a virtuous emulation for both the present and future. In this fervour can be heard a call for the "rise" of Rome, Italy, and more broadly Europe. Such was the ambition of Flavio Biondo in his *Rome Restored*: it exalted the "renewal" Rome was undergoing during his time, under the leadership of the humanists and their protectors, especially Pope Eugene IV, to whom the book's preface was addressed.

We can thus make out the political aspect of this "imaginary of ruins," of which pontifical power was one of the primary beneficiaries and promoters. It was in such a context that the first measures of preservation were enacted: in 1462, for instance, Pius II issued the bull *Cum almam nostram urbem*, which condemned the degradation of any ancient building. In 1515, Leo X named Raphael as Superintendent of Antiquities of Rome, with the overall goal of preservation that the painter himself called for in a famous letter addressed to the pontiff in 1519. If these prescriptions remained largely theoretical at the time (especially due to the plundering undertaken for Saint Peter's Basilica), they nevertheless bear witness to the emergence of a far-reaching doctrine regarding heritage.

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## Links

[1] <https://ehne.fr/en/auteur/clemence-revest>