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A Walk with Purpose: The Guides of Medieval Rome

The Middle Ages were not a time of great flourishing for Rome. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the city itself became “a sad shadow of the city of the Caesars, withered and decayed”¹. But even without the power and glory of the Roman Empire, Rome remained an important city thanks to Christianity, which had chosen Rome as its center on earth. Thus, Rome became a popular destination for pilgrims and travelers, who were attracted both to the ruins of the ancient city and the Christian churches. Accounts were published detailing the attractions of the city, including the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* and Petrarch’s “Letter to Giovanni Colonna”. At first read, Petrarch’s letter seems to be simply an account of a walk through Rome with a friend. However, when compared with the *Mirabilia*, which was purposefully written as a guidebook for incoming pilgrims, it becomes apparent that Petrarch had a deeper intent behind his letter. While the *Mirabilia* shows Medieval Rome as a continuation of the classical fulfilled by Christianity, Petrarch consciously attempts to reestablish between the ancient and the modern this connection which had been broken in his time. By doing so, he attempts to further his humanist ideas and make an argument for the reestablishment of Rome as the center of Christianity.

¹ Hibbert, 97.

The *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, or “The Marvels of Rome”, was written by a canon in the 1150s². As travel guide for pilgrims, it aimed to inform the visiting travelers of both the pagan and Christian aspects of Rome. The writing of the *Mirabilia* took place during an era of political turmoil in Rome. Three centuries beforehand, Charlemagne had been crowned Holy Roman Emperor, a Christian continuation of the pagan Roman emperors³. In the following centuries, his successors to that position clashed with the Popes as the two offices vied for political and religious powers, leading to the sack of Rome in the late 11th century under the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV⁴. The end of these conflicts did not end strife within Rome; during the 12th century, at the time of the writing of the *Mirabilia*, the influential families of Rome had also rebelled against the power of the Pope⁵.

Despite the conflicts going on in the city during this time, Rome itself remained the center of Christianity and thus was an extremely popular and appropriate pilgrimage location. Though it was no longer the capital of a worldwide political empire, it was the capital of the worldwide religious Christian empire. In its role as a guide for pilgrims, the *Mirabilia* established Christian Rome as the continuation and fulfillment of Rome’s previous position as the political capital of the world. Just as Christians believed the New Testament to be not the replacement but the fulfillment of the Old Testament, the *Mirabilia* views the Christian elements of Rome as a redemption of Rome’s great classical elements.

² All Roads Lead to Rome Class Notes, 2/7/2017.

³ Hibbert, 79.

⁴ Hibbert, 87.

⁵ Hibbert, 90.

While listing the sites and sights of Rome, the *Mirabilia* names a mixture of pagan and Christian places then describes the stories and legends behind the more interesting locales, specifically naming the locations of the spots so that they could easily be found by the pilgrims unfamiliar with the city and its legends. For example, the long list of triumphal arches includes “the Arch of the Emperors Theodosius and Valentinian and Gratian at Sant’ Urso”⁶, referencing the classical monuments with a Christian church that might be more familiar to the pilgrims. “This representation of Rome as a visible superimposition of Christian over pagan sites does not erase the former sites but rather retains them as the allegorical grid from which the Christian city springs”⁷. In doing so, the *Mirabilia* shows that the Christian and the pagan are intermingled, with the Christian church built in a classically significant place as a continuation and betterment of the pagan.

Because the Christian city is a continuation of the classical, the classical and Christian legends are intermixed as well. In the legend of the Forum, the ancient Romans are spoken of as if they were contemporaries of the readers of the *Mirabilia*: “a certain noble knight” saves the city from disaster, not a noble centurion or a noble senator⁸. This anachronism shows that the author of the guide and his readers did not consider that the ancients would have been any different from themselves. The story of the Emperor Augustus’ vision foreshadowing the coming of Christ through the Virgin Mary is an even more obvious example of the *Mirabilia*’s marriage of pagan and Christian, connecting the Christian city with its classical heritage and

⁶ Nichols, 6.

⁷ Summit, 227.

⁸ Nichols, 41.

giving a Christian church pagan ties⁹. This combination of classical with Christian shows that the document is written not as a comparative history of different peoples, but as a different generation of the same people continued. All of history leads up to the coming of Christ, and so the pre-Christian classical world remains relevant to the Christian world.

Two centuries after the *Mirabilia*, the humanist author Petrarch faced an entirely different mindset regarding how Rome was viewed. The Papacy, again under political attack from Roman families and foreign powers, had moved from Rome to Avignon in 1308¹⁰. “The administrative center of Christendom no longer coincided with its historical center, and without the papacy Rome underwent a serious crisis of identity”¹¹. The Romans themselves were disconnected with their roots, forgetful of their heritage and the classical background from which their city had risen¹².

Petrarch was born in 1304, just four years before the exile of the papacy, and grew up in Avignon. In 1337, his life-long dream of visiting the Eternal City was fulfilled¹³. Petrarch, the founder of humanism, was at the beginning of a renewed interest in classical history and literature and thus was at the forefront of a movement to resurrect ancient values and practices as relevant to modernity¹⁴. He was the first significant editor of the Roman author and historian Livy, who documented life and politics in Rome. Petrarch himself was an avid writer, composing the majority of his corpus in Latin. Thus, it is not surprising that, sometime after his visit to Rome, Petrarch composed a letter in the tradition of the ancient Roman authors to his

⁹ Nichols, 17-18.

¹⁰ Hibbert, 96.

¹¹ Summit, 217.

¹² Petrarch, 293.

¹³ Hibbert, 97.

¹⁴ All Roads Lead to Rome Class Notes, 2/21/2017.

friend and patron, Giovanni Colonna, a letter later printed with other epistles in Petrarch's *Epistolae familiares*¹⁵.

Like the *Mirabilia*, the "Letter to Giovanni Colonna" purports to be a walk around Rome showcasing the important sites of the city. However, the divergences from the style and content of the *Mirabilia* demonstrate that Petrarch was aiming not to provide a guide for the city that showcases the fulfilment of the pagan by the Christian, but rather to reconstruct the broken bridge between the classical and the modern Christian. "Who are more ignorant about Roman affairs than the Roman citizens?" he laments. "I do not deplore only the ignorance involved... but the disappearance and exile of many virtues"¹⁶. Moreover, in recovering the lost appreciation for Rome's classical and Christian heritage, Petrarch hoped not only to advance his humanist ideology, but also to inspire the Pope to return to Rome and reestablish the city as the *caput mundi*.

Petrarch begins his letter with a justification of reading ancient, non-Christian philosophy, asking that the light of Christianity be kept in mind as illuminating the pagan, much as the *Mirabilia* viewed the Christian landmarks as redeeming the pagan: "Let us thus read philosophical, poetic, or historical writings so that the Gospel of Christ resounds always in the ear of our heart"¹⁷. Reading pre-Christian texts as a part of the corpus of truth united in Christ justifies ancient literature and thought that otherwise might be dismissed as pagan. Thus, Petrarch justifies the humanist interest in the classical schools of thought while at the same time establishing an intellectual tie between ancient Rome and his modern times.

¹⁵ All Roads Lead to Rome Class Notes, 2/21/2017.

¹⁶ Petrarch, 293.

¹⁷ Petrarch, 290-291.

The link between Rome's pagan and Christian aspects is not just intellectual, as shown by the next section of the letter to Colonna. Petrarch takes his reader along a topographical journey through Rome "to demonstrate the historical linkage between classical and Christian Rome on the basis of Roman topography itself"¹⁸, much as the *Miribilia* was able to do. However, unlike the *Miribilia*'s careful description of recognizable geographic markers, Petrarch seems to avoid outright naming the landmarks he describes. Rather, he speaks of the places in terms of epithets and classical literature, cultural, and historical references. Thus, the Lupercal cave at the foot of the Palatine is referred to as "the famous she-wolf and the fig tree of Rumina with the more apt surname of Romulus"¹⁹, the Temple to Juno at the Arx on the Capitoline becomes "the silver goose"²⁰, and the Basilica of Santa Maria in Ara Coeli assumes the description of "here, according to tradition, the old Augustus, following the Sibyl's advice, saw the Christ child"²¹, a tale which was outright named and told in the *Miribilia*. Petrarch's descriptions engage the reader because of their circumlocutions. All of the places are described in such a manner that only those knowledgeable about Rome's ancient history and culture would be able to understand what was being referred to. By avoiding the actual names or location of a majority of the places, Petrarch creates an interest in the uninformed reader to know exactly what he is talking about. This curiosity can only be satiated by delving into the classical literature of Rome, helping to further Petrarch's goal of reviving interest in the classics. Those who did not know the backgrounds of the places would be motivated by the intriguing accounts to find out to what place Petrarch was referring.

¹⁸Summit, 218.

¹⁹ Petrarch, 291.

²⁰ Petrarch, 292.

²¹ Petrarch, 293.

The reference to literary and historical backgrounds of the sites makes it easier to discern that the ordering of these many marvels is not geographical. For example, the murder site of Servius Tullus, described as the place where “there sitting in her carriage cruel Tulla crossed and made the street infamous because of her crime”²², took place on the Esquiline Hill. However, in the next sentence Petrarch mentions the Via Sacra in the Forum, and shortly thereafter jumps to the Campus Martius area. This ordering is not geographical; the sites that Petrarch lists all lie far apart from each other, “showing that Petrarch’s survey brings them together by thematic rather than geographical proximity”²³. But though this sequence is not organized by geography, it is not random. Rather than group the places by area, as if an actual walk were being taken, Petrarch arranges them according to a semi-historical timeline. Thus, the naming of the significant places follows for the most part a chronological timeline of the legends and history of Rome, beginning with the founding, going through the Republican and Imperial ages, and directly moving into Christian events. So it is appropriate that the naming of Julius Caesar’s burial place is quickly followed by a description of Santa Maria in Trastevere: “from here a stream of oil flowed into the Tiber”²⁴. The two are adjacent on a timeline, not on a map. The Christian is not seamlessly woven into the pagan as it was in the *Miribilia*, but sewn onto the end of the classical era, stitching back together Rome’s classical and Christian heritage. This connection supports Petrarch’s desire for Rome to be reinstated as the seat of the Christian Church on earth. The city, with all of its rich historical sites significant to the

²² Petrarch, 291.

²³ Summit, 221.

²⁴ Petrarch, 293.

beginnings of Christianity, is a much more apt location for the Pope than a little town in France that has none of Rome's significance.

In the last part of his letter, Petrarch describes conversation about history and philosophy between himself and the titular recipient of the letter, stating that these conversations took place in the Baths of Diocletian, "because only here could we enjoy the healthy air, the unimpeded view, silence and desired solitude"²⁵. The remnant of the ancient structure is the only place in which Petrarch can find appropriate condition for intellectual stimulation. This symbolizes that ancient Rome must be returned to in order for intellectual pursuits to flourish, much as Petrarch had established in the first section of the letter. This also paints Rome again as the suitable place for the Papacy to be, marking it as a desirable locale for getting work done.

The rhetorical effects that Petrarch uses in his letter to advance his humanist ideology and encourage a return to Rome as the center of Christianity are aimed at a larger audience than just Giovanni Colonna. This becomes particularly evident in the last part of the letter. Although Petrarch relates the shared conversations as if merely reminiscing with a friend, the section can be taken as evidence of the fact Petrarch knew he was writing to a larger audience than simply Giovanni. Giovanni is the one with whom Petrarch shared this experience, and yet he still recalls it to him in excruciating detail, seeming to indicate that he is self-conscious others will be reading his writing. He explains that his own explanation of history and philosophy to Giovanni "is neither the work of a single day nor a task for letters, it requires a

²⁵ Petrarch, 294.

book which I shall undertake”²⁶; thus, he hooks the audience with a desire to know what was expressly conversed about, and so creates anticipation for another work of writing.

Unlike the *Miribilia*, which seeks to provide a guidebook for pilgrims who would have no problem viewing Christian Rome as a continuation of the classical period, Petrarch’s “Letter to Colonna” works hard rhetorically and contextually to reestablish the ties between the ancient and the modern Christian. In recalling these ties, Petrarch hopes to promote a humanist ideology that emphasizes a return to classical literature and philosophy, as well as encourage the Pope to return to Rome from Avignon. Although Petrarch’s letter may have had some success in both of these areas, he never lived to see it: Pope Gregory XI returned to Rome two years after Petrarch’s death in 1376, and the Renaissance period, of which Petrarch’s humanism was a forerunner, did not truly start in Rome until the 15th century. Nevertheless, Petrarch’s letter remains a strong testament to the writing abilities of the man who is rightly called the father of humanism.

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²⁶ Petrarch, 295.

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