

REVIEW

Rome Lost and Found. A Review of *Piranesi and the Campus Martius: The Missing Corso — Topography and Archaeology in Eighteenth-Century Rome/Piranesi e il Campo Marzio: Il corso che non c'era — Topografia e archeologia nella Roma del XVIII secolo*

Piranesi and the Campus Martius: The Missing Corso — Topography and Archaeology in Eighteenth-Century Rome/Piranesi e il Campo Marzio: Il corso che non c'era — Topografia e archeologia nella Roma del XVIII secolo, Joseph Connors, Milano: Jaca Book, 167 pages, 29 b/w illustrations, 2011, ISBN 9788816411401

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Originally presented as a lecture for the Unione internazionale degli istituti di archeologia, storia e storia dell'arte in Rome in 2002, Joseph Connors' study of Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Campus Martius* (1762) is a lively and wide-ranging study in a small package. Connors' primary focus is the centerpiece of Piranesi's volume: his famous *Ichnographia* or plan-map of the Campus Martius, the low-lying ancient Roman district nestled in the curves of the Tiber River. Piranesi's grand and intricate foldout etching has fascinated scholars from John Wilton-Ely to Manfredo Tafuri (Wilton-Ely 1983; Tafuri 1987). The *Ichnographia* has also drawn polarized reactions almost since the time of its publication. Observers have framed it variously as an outrageous miscarriage of archaeological method — full of glittering architectural fiction posing as factual reconstruction — or as the foremost statement of Piranesi's visionary genius for design and printmaking. Connors paints a subtler picture, defending Piranesi's reputation as an interpreter of Rome's ancient monuments without discounting his eccentric brilliance and flights of invention. In sum, Connors outlines a process by which personal observation and archaeological research fed Piranesi's imagination rather than being at odds with it. Along the way, Connors gives a singular glimpse into the mind and thought process of this most alluring of paper architects.

Surprisingly, the *Ichnographia* and the larger *Campus Martius* volume of which it forms part have not previously been the target of such an in-depth interpretive study. This state of affairs stands in striking contrast to the attention that has recently been lavished on Giovanni Battista Nolli's large plan of Rome (1748), the complement and inverse of Piranesi's *Ichnographia* in its sober,

documentary focus on the existing built environment of the eighteenth-century city (Bevilacqua 1998, esp. bibliography). That said, admittedly there is no shortage of scholarship on Piranesi. Countless volumes, exhibition catalogues, and essay collections have been devoted to him, many of which include entries on the *Ichnographia* and the *Campus Martius* — and Connors rightly singles out the excellent work of Mario Bevilacqua in placing Piranesi alongside his contemporaries and competitors Nolli and Giuseppe Vasi — but the contextualization that Connors provides has until now been lacking (Bevilacqua 2004). His study is rich yet compact: the expanded English text is approximately one hundred pages, while the Italian version, which is closer to the original lecture in breadth, is shorter, at roughly forty pages (this review thus primarily concerns the former, although the dual-language edition is commendable).

Connors' ostensible point of departure is an incongruously narrow problem: Piranesi's unorthodox and ultimately misguided redrawing of the ancient Via Lata — today's Via del Corso — which in the *Ichnographia* winds a strange, jerking path toward the Trevi Fountain and up the Pincio Hill, not the direct march from the Capitoline north to the Porta del Popolo that it did in his own day. The Corso was one of the only intramural ancient thoroughfares that still survived in recognizable form, and it was the spine of Renaissance and Baroque Rome. To observers both in Piranesi's time and now, the route he outlined must have seemed implausible at best, arbitrary and ignorant at worst, but Connors engages in his own reconstructive project, retracing the steps by which Piranesi arrived at this configuration.

That said, on the map, the Corso is inconspicuous, its wanderings all but lost in the welter of surrounding architectural marvels. The *Ichnographia* is really not *about* streets, and in a sense this is Connors' point. The map is

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the quintessential product of an architect, and it privileges buildings above all else. As Connors demonstrates, Piranesi diverted the path of the Corso in part so it would skirt the sprawling architectural complexes that he fabricated from ingenious readings of archaeological evidence combined with imaginative conjecture. Through case studies of some of the most prominent and outlandish of these vast complexes, such as the Septa Julia and Bustum Caesaris, Connors shows that Piranesi was indeed motivated by an impressive store of antiquarian and archaeological knowledge. But he took license with that knowledge, shaping it – like the Corso – to serve his own ‘grand vision’.

The Lost Corso examines the *Ichnographia* in the larger context of the *Campus Martius* volume – plates as well as text – and situates the whole within the long tradition of reconstructing the ancient city. Connors provides a comprehensive survey of Piranesi’s precedents from the early Renaissance to his own time, and one of the book’s concluding sections brings this history up to the late twentieth century. Many surprises emerge from Connors’ narrative. This reader, for one, was entirely unaware that Piranesi’s glorious archaeological fictions were ever taken seriously. In the dedication of his *Campus Martius* to Scottish architect Robert Adam, Piranesi himself wrote, ‘I am rather afraid that some parts of the Campus which I describe should seem figments of the imagination and not based on any evidence... [but] perhaps it is part of human nature to demand some license in creative expression as in other things’ (from the introduction by John Wilton-Ely, in Piranesi 2002: 27–30). One does wonder just how much of his *Ichnographia* Piranesi expected to be received as concrete archaeological hypothesis, how much as testament to his own powers of invention. Yet Connors shows many of Piranesi’s clever ‘figments’ to have retained some influence on archaeologists well into modern times – at least, they were influential enough to merit discounting.

Connors’ discussion of the twentieth-century reception of the *Campus Martius* and *Ichnographia* is one of the highlights of his book, addressing some of the more recent successors to Piranesi and others who tried to reconstruct the ancient city, including Luigi Canina, Rodolfo Lanciani, Christian Hülsen, and Guglielmo Gatti. The latter emerges as a secondary protagonist (or perhaps foremost antagonist) of *The Lost Corso*, for Connors devotes a full ten pages

to this ‘Samson who would knock down the last pillars’ of Piranesi’s *Ichnographia*. Thus this book, which begins as an intriguing mystery – what has happened to a missing street? – ultimately embraces a half-millennium of scholarship and imagery dedicated to the ancient Roman cityscape, along the way tracing changing approaches to antiquity, archaeology, and invention. Indeed, one of Connors’ most valuable contributions here is to demonstrate once and for all that Piranesi, more than a solitary genius indulging in his own proto-Romantic imaginings, was participating in a centuries-long dialogue.

If there is any fault to be found in *The Lost Corso*, it is that the illustrations do not always keep pace with Connors’ text. The *Ichnographia* is well represented, of course, but some comparative material is not reproduced, such as Francesco Bianchini’s 1738 reconstruction of the Palatine – a work the reader longs to see after Connors describes it in such vivid terms. This is a minor point. Other technical details are impeccable, from the thoroughgoing footnotes to the ‘bio-bibliography’ of the author. As engagingly written as it is illuminating, *The Lost Corso* is – as Connors recounts in his preface – the product of decades of meditations on Piranesi, much as Piranesi’s *Ichnographia* resulted from a lifetime of ruminations on Rome itself.

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