

## Rome Fusion City

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“Now let us, by a flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychological entity ... —an entity ... in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one.”

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*<sup>1</sup>

Rome is a palimpsest. It is a city built, razed, then reconstructed. New monuments are built on top of ancient ones, often with stones pillaged from other ancient sites. Physically, the city is an amalgam of pagan temples, Christian churches, imperial palaces, Egyptian columns, and fallen stones. Cerebrally, the city is an amalgam of myth, history, legends, and fantasy. The twelfth century guidebook to Rome, the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, and Fra Paolino da Venezia’s 1320 map of Rome<sup>2</sup> [figure 1] are surprisingly successful at representing this composite Rome.



Figure 1: Fra Paolino da Venezia map of Rome

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York / London: W.W. Norton, 2010), 32.

<sup>2</sup> Images of the map are from Tanja Michalsky’s article “Grata pictura and mapa duplex: Paolino Minorita’s Late Medieval Map of Rome as an Epistemological Instrument of a Historiographer,” published on <https://www.academia.edu/>.

A traveler to Rome today, with the *Mirabilia* and Paolino's map in hand, is likely to navigate her way through the ancient ruins in the modern city without much problem, provided she uses her imagination and is willing to wander the streets without the aid of longitudes and latitudes. These two complementary documents, the text of the *Mirabilia* and the graphic image of Paolino's map, are portrayals of Rome, works of imagination. As proto-humanist artifices produced on the eve of Rome's renaissance, they reflect an individual's empirical relationship with Rome. But, like any portrait, they contain only a likeness of Rome, not exactitude.

The *Mirabilia* is a tourist guidebook written by a clergy named Benedict from Saint Peter's in Rome at around 1143.<sup>3</sup> The book begins with a list of major monuments and famous sites, then it recounts the pagan and Christian legends and myths. It finishes with a section called "A Perambulation of the City"—a city walk for a vigorous urban flâneur.

Intent on guiding the gaze of the traveler to the time before the adoption of Abrahamic religions in Rome, the "perambulation" begins by situating the wanderer in the Temple of Apollo that was "within the palace of Nero,"<sup>4</sup> which is today's Vatican and Saint Peter's. The *Mirabilia* informs the traveler Vatican comes from the word "*Vates*, or priests, [who] sang their offices before the Temple of Apollo," and, by the way, Caesar's memorial nearby is worth checking out, especially the Latin and

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Morgan Nichols, ed., *The Marvels of Rome*, (New York: Italica Press, 1986), xi-xix.

<sup>4</sup> Nichols, *Marvels*, 33.

Greek epitaphs etched on the obelisk.<sup>5</sup> With brevity and economy—simply by quoting the inscriptions on the stone that evoke the once great world of Caesar—the *Mirabilia* arouses nostalgic sentiments for Rome’s ancient past in the wanderer’s mind. The urban walker is then asked to look closely at the “marvelous stones” on the pavements of Saint Peter’s and the steps leading up to Castel Sant’Angelo.<sup>6</sup> Through the sense of sight (the faint sparkles) and the sense of touch (the pebble-like pavement under the feet), the magnificent “marvels” are humanized; the imposing edifices become intimate objects of antiquity within reach. It is small wonder why *Mirabilia* has been so popular since the twelfth century. While longing for the bygone greatness of Rome, a fourteenth century wanderer could temporarily forget the dismal present moment where the papacy has emigrated to Avignon, leaving Rome an empty, ruined city. This guidebook has fashioned a sense of greatness from the dilapidation and the wreckage of Rome by evoking the intimate experience a traveler may create by recalling past glories with the ancient stones of Rome.

After a few twists, loops, and zigzags, the wanderer, having visited all the major sites such as the Capitoline, the forum, the colosseum, the Palatine, the Circus Maximus, and the Coelian and the Esquiline hills, arrives at the *Schola Graeca*, the Greek quarter, where he (a wanderer from the fourteenth century would most likely be a man) is instructed to use his imagination to conjure up a long list of ancient

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<sup>5</sup> Nichols, *Marvels*, 33-4.

<sup>6</sup> Nichols, *Marvels*, 35.

temples that once stood there: the Temples of Bacchus, the Temple of Lentulus, the Temple of Sun, the Temple of Faunus, the Temple of Cicero, and “a temple called *Holovitream*, made of glass and gold by mathematical craft.”<sup>7</sup> The walk ends outside the city gate by the Tiber in Trastevere.

Unlike a modern guidebook, the *Mirabilia* does not instruct the wanderer which streets to walk on or which cardinal direction to march toward throughout his promenade. It relies on the wanderer’s intuition and imagination to experience the layers of history that is the city of Rome.

Before making his map in 1320, the Venetian friar Paolino likely read the *Mirabilia* and visited Rome. His map shows Rome enclosed in a wall with twelve gates just as the *Mirabilia* says. Within the wall are the many monuments listed in the guidebook. His map is a good companion to the *Mirabilia* because it makes visible on parchment a similar vision of the city. Neither the *Mirabilia* or Paolino’s map presents an accurate representation of Rome at the time. Paolino’s map of Rome is not measured or paced or topographically factual, while the *Mirabilia* includes ruins that may have existed only in the author’s mind. Yet both give the wanderer an impression of Rome.

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<sup>7</sup> Nichols, *Marvels*, 45.

The *Mirabilia* narrates the city of Rome by marveling at the city’s “wall, gates, arches, hills, baths, palaces, theaters, bridges, pillars, cemeteries and holy places,”<sup>8</sup> and Paolino’s map displays many of them. On Paolino’s map the colosseum is shown with a dome. According to the *Mirabilia*, it was once the Temple of Sun with many vaulted chambers.<sup>9</sup> In his map, Paolino renders the colosseum not in its present state but from its mythological past with an arched roof [figure 2]. Just



Figure 2: Colosseum with a dome!

above the colosseum, slightly to the right, are two

drawings, the head of Constantine and Marcus Aurelius on a horse [figure 3].

According to the *Mirabilia*, the “certain bronze horse called Constantine’s Horse [at the Lateran]... is not so.”<sup>10</sup> Placing the two images side by side, Paolino gives the viewer the physical reality of the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius and the legend



Figure 3: Head of Constantine and Marcus Aurelius on a horse

of the Constantine’s bronze horse, which according to the *Mirabilia* does not exist.

The map captures the complex symbolism of Rome as seen in the *Mirabilia* as well as the Roman identity through the synthesis of image, words, and memory.

<sup>8</sup> Nichols, *Marvels*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Nichols, *Marvels*, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Nichols, *Marvels*, 19.

Measured accuracy is not the concern for Paolino. His map is a cityscape, drawn at a human scale. It is not carefully calculated cartography, but rather a map of a living city, an urban landscape with navigable streets littered with statues, monuments, towered palaces, arches, stones, aqueducts, and plaques.

Paolino's map shows Rome not as a rigidly oriented city, but one born from fluid construction. Paolino resists the metaphorical, iconic, schematic, or stylistic demands by avoiding using pictograms as symbols for monuments. He colors the hills red and includes streets and neighborhoods in



Figure 4: Streets

the form of clusters of houses [figure 4]. His map resembles a drawing composed from memory by someone who has actually been to Rome, walked the streets, and roamed among the ruins. It is from the perspective of a traveler on the ground, from the empirical experiences and heuristics. It is not a view of Rome from an omniscient, bird's-eye-view. Although the map is marked with "*oriens*" on top, indicating its east orientation,<sup>11</sup> it can easily be rotated this way or that way to suit a wanderer's needs. It is a humanist map made for a wanderer perhaps by a wanderer, where all the houses face into the street and the streets meander [figure 4].

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<sup>11</sup> Philip Jacks, *The Antiquarian and the Myth of Antiquity: The Origins of Rome in Renaissance Thought*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993,) 45.

Like the *Mirabilia*, the map displays Rome as an urban space layered with the ancient past, the recent past, and the imagined past, a city with the natural geography



Figure 5: Vatican as playground for hunters and animals

of a river and hills, the artificial geography of arches and palaces and bridges and aqueduct.

But it also shows a city devoid of inhabitants and

the papacy. There is no commerce, no shops or boats transporting goods on the Tiber. Although the map lacks true resemblance to the physical reality of Rome (for example, the Vatican and Saint Peter's appear as a playground for hunters and animals [figure 5]), the city is recognizable as an urban space that is integrated, cohesive, and connected—even the water barrel is connected to the aqueduct [figure 6].

These two artifacts, the *Mirabilia* and Paolino's map, attest to the fact that Rome is a perfect locale for rejuvenation and renaissance; it is a city full of ruins that can be reimagined, reawakened, and repurposed. The golden age is always within reach, either in the past or in the future. Rome is at once mortal and immortal, ancient and new, pagan and Christian. It is an eternal city.



Figure 6: Water barrel and the aqueduct

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