

## DE PUELLA ROMAE REPERTA - A RENAISSANCE POEM

INSPIRED BY A REMARKABLE FIND IN THE YEAR 1485 A.D.

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For the day of April 16, 1485, the secretary of the city of Rome (*senatus populi Romani scriba*), Stephanus Infessura, wrote the following lengthy entry in his diary: "On this day the brethren of the monastery of S. Maria Nuova ordered an excavation on a piece of ground belonging to them which is situated on the Via Appia approximately five or six miles outside the Porta Appia. After they had totally destroyed a funeral monument<sup>1</sup> situated near the road, they found deep inside the foundations a marble coffin covered with a marble lid and sealed with molten lead. When they had opened the coffin they found the intact body of a woman<sup>2</sup> covered with an aromatic substance, and wearing a kind of golden cap or fillet on her head which was surrounded by blonde hair. Her cheeks had the rosy colour of flesh as if she were still alive, the eyes and also the mouth were slightly opened and one could pull the tongue out of the mouth and watch it return to its previous position. The nails of the hands and feet were hard and white and the arms could be moved up and down as if she had only just died. She was kept many days in the Palace of the Conservatori<sup>2</sup> where, as a result of exposure to the air, the colour of her face turned black. Nevertheless neither the fat nor the flesh of the body putrefied. The Conservatori had placed the body in its own sarcophagus on a place near the cistern<sup>3</sup> in the cloister of the building. Pope Innocentius ordered them, however, to remove it by night and carry it to an unknown place outside not far from the Porta Pinciana, where a pit had been dug, and to bury it there. The body was believed to be that of Iulia, daughter of Cicero. During those first days when she had been found and transported to the Conservatori Palace, such a large number of people anxious to see her converged on the Capitol that all over the square on the top sellers of oils and other articles were plying their trade.<sup>4</sup> According to what was told the strongly smelling mixture with which she had been covered had been made of myrrh and olive oil or, according to others, of aloe and oil of turpentine, which has a very strong odour by which one can become slightly drugged. Many people believed that a great

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<sup>1</sup> The excavation was aimed at finding remains of Roman buildings, not for preservation but to re-use the material or, in the case of marble, to burn it in lime kilns for the production of mortar and plaster. For this deplorable abuse of their heritage by the Romans of the Middle Ages and later times see *Akroterion* 32.3/4, 99-108, 1987: The statues of Rome - their fate under the Christians (A.V. van Stekelenburg). See further note 12 for the actual time of the destruction of the upper structure of the tomb.

<sup>2</sup> The present museum of the same name on the Capitoline Hill. The Conservatori were the municipal governors of Rome.

<sup>3</sup> Obviously to make it easier for the many people who came to see the girl to file past and around her.

<sup>4</sup> The sellers of oils were apparently cashing in on the proven merits of related substances used by those who had embalmed the Roman girl.

quantity of gold, silver and precious stones had been found. This was concluded from the fact that the persons who had done the excavation as well as their supervisor were never seen again. The age of the girl, as one could see for oneself, was 12 or 13 years. She was so beautiful and well-built that one could hardly describe it, and if one were to try to do so for readers who have not seen her themselves they would never believe it.<sup>5</sup> Many came from far away to see her or to depict her beauty in drawings or paintings but could not see her because, as has been said earlier, she had been removed to a secret place. These people therefore had to return home disappointed. The marble sarcophagus in which she had been found was returned to the cloister of the Palace of the Conservatori."<sup>6</sup>

This entry in the diary of Rome's city scribe is only one of several descriptions by contemporary residents of Rome and others of that remarkable discovery during April 1485.<sup>7</sup> The reports do not all agree in each detail. Even the date of the find varies by a few days, though it did undoubtedly occur in or shortly after mid-April.

Some authors add irrelevant detail such as to mention that the workmen who made the find were Lombardians. The remarks of others often add to what we learn from Infessura. Daniele da San Sebastiano for instance mentions that the coating of ointments was removed from her face after the discovery, an act which undoubtedly set the process of decay in motion. Laurentius Pehem describes the girl's hair style as "in the fashion now popular among the Hungarians", namely with a knot on the back of the head. Her headdress he and others describe as a cap of woven gold, tied with golden strings. It was, according to him, stolen by the finders together with a ring the girl was wearing on the second finger of the left hand. None of our sources had been eyewitnesses of the actual discovery and therefore Da San Sebastiano's description of the stolen headdress may be either correct or wrong but it comes close to that of Infessura. A different source (Francesco Matarazza) describes the stolen headdress as a diadem set with many precious stones. This version may easily have resulted from unfounded rumours just as Infessura's story about other fantastic riches found and stolen by the workmen.

No mention is made of any dress which the girl was wearing and it seems that she was buried naked and that the coating of ointments - two inches thick according to Pehem and others - was applied *in situ*, much of it covering the bottom of the sarcophagus.<sup>8</sup> This also

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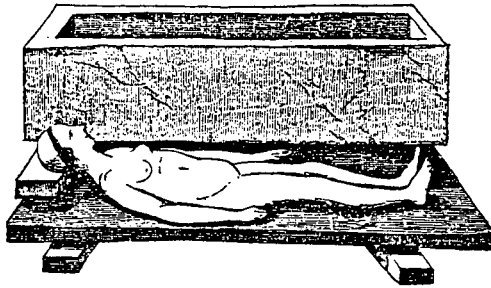
<sup>5</sup> Jacob Burckhardt in his *Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, 1860. III.2 (English translation, Phaidon Press, 1944:112) presents the sobering thought that these evaluations did probably rest less on fact than on the firm prejudice prevailing during the Renaissance that the antique body, which was now for the first time being revealed, had by definition to be more beautiful than anything alive.

<sup>6</sup> The Latin text of this passage from Infessura's diary, together with a translation in German, can be found in Henry Thode, 1883:75-91.

<sup>7</sup> Thode gives the text and translation of two others, one from the diary of a certain Nantiporto and the other from the Perugian Chronicle of Francesco Maturazzo. More can be found in Christian Hülsen, 1883:433-449 and in Roberto Lanciani, 1897:294-301. Lanciani provides a list of the contemporary reports on p.295. The quotations and remarks referred to hereafter can all be found in Thode, Lanciani and/or Hülsen, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>8</sup> Bartholomaeus Fontius (Fonzio) states in a letter to Franciscus Saxettus (Sazetto) that the whole inside of the coffin was lined with the ointment and that the girl was lying face down in it. The complete Latin text of Fontius' letter can be found in Fontius, Bartholomaeus, *Epistolarum Libri III* - Bibliotheca scriptorum Medii Recentisque Aevorum. Saecula xv-xvi; ed. L. Juhász, Budapest (Szeged), 1931, 32f.

appears from a contemporary sketch which shows the body on display in the Conservatori Palace (see illustration).<sup>9</sup>



Da San Sebastiano remarks that by pressing the flesh of the girl's cheeks the rosy colour which Infessura had also noticed, would disappear as in a living body. The poor corpse was certainly not treated with respect. The same tests on elasticity which Infessura mentions as having been conducted on the tongue, Da San Sebastiano describes with regard to the ears and nose, and with the same results.

According to Celio Rodigino the first symptoms of corruption were noticed on the third day. The reasons for the pope's order that the body be removed from the Capitol was, according to one source, not so much a result of the state of decay it was entering as an attempt to put an end to the excitement that had gripped the populace, and the superstitious stories resulting from it. Another source claims that the body was not re-buried at all but simply thrown into the Tiber. As the girl in question had obviously not been a Christian, nobody seems to have had any qualms about the way her body was disposed of.

Despite all the interest in the discovery the true identity of the girl has remained unknown till today. Antonio di Vasali reports in his diary that "much care has been taken in searching the tomb in which the corpse was found, in the hope of discovering the epitaph with her name", but he names none. The city secretary Infessura, we have seen, reports that many believed the body to be that of Iulia, Cicero's daughter. As Cicero had only one daughter, whose name was Tullia - the Tulliola of his letters - this conclusion is rather strange. The age of the girl, which Infessura gives as 12 or 13 years old, would also contradict this identification, because Tulliola died in childbirth at the age of thirty-two. Nevertheless other sources agree with Infessura, among them Da San Sebastiano and Pehem, the latter claiming to have seen a tombstone nearby with the name of Marcus Tullius on it. Also, according to Pehem, Cicero was known to have owned land in the neighbourhood. Even Pomponius Leto, the leading archaeologist of that time, reckoned with the possibility that the girl was indeed Tulliola, disregarding her age and the lack of evidence that Cicero had indeed owned land or a family vault near the fifth milestone on the Via Appia.

Even more strange is that the epigraphic evidence brought forward by Pehem and others to support their belief that the girl was a daughter of Cicero named Iulia, flatly denies this. The inscription which they claim could be read on the sarcophagus is a genuine one and reads as follows in the Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum:

<sup>9</sup> Ashburnham Codex 1174, folio 134. The illustration appearing on this page is taken from Lanciani, 1897:298 and is based on the original sketch.

IVLIA · L · L · PRISCA  
VIX · ANN · XXVI · M · I · D · I  
Q · CLODIUS · HILARUS  
VIX · ANN · XXXXVI  
NIHIL · VMQVAM · PECCAVIT  
NISI · QVOD · MORTVA · EST<sup>10</sup>

The relationship between Iulia Prisca and Q Clodius Hilarus cannot be established. One must, however, overlook quite a number of facts if one wants to believe that the Iulia of this epitaph is Cicero's daughter Tulliola who died at the age of 32. In the late fifteenth century, however, this seems to have caused no problem for some.

Just as serious a warning about the way epigraphical material could be handled during these early days of classical scholarship is the deduction one can make from the fact, duly recorded in the C I L, that the inscription which Pehem and others claim could be read on the coffin that was discovered for the first time in 1485, had actually been recovered from an unknown place more than twenty years earlier by Felix Felicianus of Verona!<sup>11</sup>

This means that the inscription which Pehem and others accepted unquestioningly as the one on the girl's coffin could never have been seen in that context by anyone. Maybe the coffin had no epitaph at all, as Fontius says, and as was often the case.<sup>12</sup>

Capping it all is the epitaph concocted for the hapless girl by Georges of Spalato: "Here lies my only daughter Tulliola, who has committed no offence, except to die. Marcus Tullius Cicero, her unhappy father, has raised this memorial" (Lanciani, 1897:301).

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The news of the discovery of April 1485 was carried all over Europe through letters from Roman residents to their friends elsewhere. The letters of Fontius, Pehem and Da San Sebastiano are among those that have survived. The Roman girl was also celebrated in the arts. As the city scribe Infessura relates, many came to paint or draw her, often arriving too late. One or two portraits made then or shortly afterwards may, however, have survived (Thode, 1884).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> CIL VI, 20634; "To the infernal gods. (Here lie) Iulia Prisca, freedwoman of Lucius, (who) lived 26 years, one month, one day (and) Q Clodius Hilarus (who) lived 46 years. She never committed any wrong except to die." Maturazzo claims that the inscription read: *Iulia Claudi filia*; see Thode, 1883:85.

<sup>11</sup> See introduction to CIL VI, 20634 and Hülsen, 1883:433-449.

<sup>12</sup> Fontius says that the upper structure of the tomb had actually already been destroyed many years earlier, so that the workmen this time went only for the lower parts and the foundation. The inscription on the tomb itself, which could have revealed the name of the girl, would then have been lost together with the upper structure.

<sup>13</sup> On a wax-portrait in Lille and a drawing in Vienna. See also the illustration above on p.135 and note 9.

The major force behind humanism in central Europe at that time was Conradus Celtis (Konrad Pickel, 1459-1508), a German scholar of great energy. He had studied literature and theology in Cologne and in Heidelberg. His merit for the classics lies mainly in his discovery of the *Carta Peutingeriana* and in the many *sodalitates* of humanists which he founded in Poland, Hungary and Bohemia during his many travels. Celtis was also a renowned poet whose *Amores* and *Ars versificandi* were widely read. In 1487 Emperor Frederic III crowned him poet laureate and in 1497 he was nominated Professor of Poetry at Vienna, where he died 11 years later.

The news about the discovery of the Roman girl in the tomb on the Via Appia probably reached Celtis through a letter from one of his fellow humanists. It inspired him to write a poem *De puella Romae reperta* which became part of his collection of *Epigrammata* but remained unpublished until 1881. The full text<sup>14</sup> is as follows:

Annos mille super tumulo hoc conclusa iacebam;  
haec nunc Romanis extumulata loquar:  
non veteres video Romano more Quirites,  
iustitia insignes nec pietate viros,  
sed tantum magnas tristi cum mente ruinas       5  
conspicio, veterum iam monumenta virum.  
Si mihi post centum rursus revideberis annos,  
nomen Romanum vix superesse reor.

"More than a thousand years I lay imprisoned in this tomb; now, freed from my grave, I will direct these words to the people of Rome:

I do not see any ancient citizens of the Roman mould,  
men notable for their justice and piety,  
vast ruins is all I see to my despair,  
mere reminders of the men of yore.

If I were to see you once more in a hundred years' time,  
I think the Roman race will have all but disappeared."

Celtis' epigram, written in faultless classical Latin and in traditional elegiac distichs, may at first sight strike one as highly original as to content. A closer look, however, will reveal that it consists in fact of variations on traditional themes, some of them extremely old. The impression of originality results largely from the uniqueness of the occasion that gave rise to the composition of the poem: the discovery in 1485 of the Roman girl who is in this poem presented as the speaker.

Voices from the grave in the form of funerary inscriptions in which the living are addressed by the deceased go back to Greek tradition. One has only to think of the most famous of these, that of the Spartans fallen at Thermopylae. The type is also common among Roman funerary texts.<sup>15</sup> Celtis' poem is clearly connected to this genre, the most direct link being provided by the phrase *tumulo hoc conclusa*. Nevertheless the girl must clearly not be imagined as being inside her tomb, but outside, maybe standing next to it.

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<sup>14</sup> Epigr. III, 40. The *Epigrammata* were edited by K. Hartfelder in 1881 (Berlin). This epigram can also be found in Alexander Perosa and John Sparrow, 1979:417.

<sup>15</sup> F.i. *CIL* VI, 19747; 35887; VIII, 5030; IX, 2114; XI, 5860; XIII, 7070. See Richard Lattimore, 1962:230-237.

Also in a way she must be thought of as having temporarily returned to life.<sup>16</sup> Her exhumation has become a resurrection. This conceit was made possible by the many life-like qualities which her body reportedly had preserved: eyes and mouth slightly open, a blush on the cheeks, flexible limbs, and her tongue, ears and nose responding to manipulation.

In her address to the Romans of the 15th century the resurrected girl calls them "ruins" (*ruinas*) and "mere reminders" (*iam monumenta*)<sup>17</sup> of the Romans of her time (*veteres ... Quirites* (l.3) and *veterum ... virum* (l.6)). The difference she has noticed is in their moral qualities, the *iustitia* and *pietas* in which the ancient Romans excelled (*insignes ... viros*, (l.4)).

The inhabitants of Rome around 1500 A.D. did indeed not have a good reputation. Erasmus wrote after a visit to that city: *Roma vale! vidi, satis est vidisse; revertar / cum leno, meretrix, scurra, cinaedus ero*.<sup>18</sup> For the budding Reformation movement, having for its object the reforms of the doctrines and practices of the Church of Rome, the decadence of Rome, with emphasis on the excesses of the papal Curia, was an important rallying point. Criticism came, however, not only from outside. In the city itself and even within the Curia were many who insisted on reform. An influential curialist at the time of the discovery of the Roman girl in 1485 was Benedetto Maffei (1429-1494) who in 1483 wrote *De moribus nostrorum temporum*, followed by other works, the most important of which was *De Institutione Christiana*. According to Maffei men came to Rome for one of five reasons: *religio, quies, ambitio, avaritia* and *voluptas* (*De Institutione Christiana*, f.141r.).<sup>19</sup> While it was still possible for modest Christians to find *religio* and *quies*, the pursuers of *ambitio, avaritia* and *voluptas* had succeeded in corrupting most aspects of life in Rome: the Curia, the courts of justice, education, and family and employment relationships.<sup>20</sup> Supposedly religious men cared more for their pets than for the poor. Sexual licence went unchecked and brothels flourished.

Therefore, when the resurrected Roman girl of Celtis' poem criticises the morals of the Romans of the 15th century, she is expressing an attitude current at the time of her discovery. In the light of the lofty ideas which prevailed during the Renaissance with regard to Greek and Roman civilization, her negative comparison of the modern Romans with the ideal ones of yore is only to be expected and in accordance with the sentiments of the time. Maffei for instance compares the contemporary Christian rulers as defenders of public morality unfavourably with the Roman emperors (*De Institutione Christiana*, f.142v.). Such comparisons between the inhabitants of the Old, pagan, and the New, Christian, Rome did not, however, originate during the Renaissance. Already in the *Versus Romae*, an anonymous poem written in Verona somewhere between the seventh and tenth centuries, the arrogance and avarice of the modern Romans were contrasted with the noble

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<sup>16</sup> But only temporarily; the penultimate line seems to allude to her second interment.

<sup>17</sup> *Monumenta* is here used in its original sense of "things that remind".

<sup>18</sup> "Rome, farewell! I have seen you and the best part of that is that it is over; for sure I will be back: as soon as I have become a pimp, a whore, a scrounger, or a pervert".

<sup>19</sup> For recent discussions of Maffei's work against the background of his time see John F. D'Amico, 1983:220ff.; John W. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome*, Duke University Press, 1982: index.

<sup>20</sup> Servants avoid their duties and spend their time telling lewd stories. In his *De moribus nostrorum temporum* Maffei relates examples of children killing or defrauding their parents because of greed.

characters of their ancient ancestors, while similar criticisms occur in the *Carmina Burana*.<sup>21</sup>

The decline in morality of the New Rome was, of course, easily seen as a parallel to the physical decline of the city. In Celtis' poem the imagery reflects an equation between the physical collapse of ancient Rome and the moral degeneration of its inhabitants. The Romans of the fifteenth century are called *magnas ... ruinas ... (veterum) iam monumenta (virum)*, the imagery recalling the ruinous state of cities.

Through this choice of imagery Celtis' poem is linked to the very old genre of city laments, in which the previous glorious state of a town is compared to its present ruinous condition. The *Anthologia Palatina*, comprising poems dating from the third century B.C. till the sixth century A.D., already contains a number of such laments. Ruins mean different things to different civilizations and eras. Aesthetic enjoyment caused by the contemplation of ruins is something that only came about in the eighteenth century (Mortier, 1974:9ff.; Slits, 1990:175f). Before that time ruins were either seen as reminders (*monumenta*) of previous grandeur, power and beauty, or they served mankind as a *memento mori*, symbolising the transitoriness of everything.

A Medieval example of the first category is Hildebert de Lavardin's

Par tibi, Roma, nihil cum sis prope tota ruina;  
Quam magna fueris integra, fracta doces.

"To you, Rome, nothing is comparable, though you are almost totally in ruins. In your shattered state you still show how great you were before";

(*Carmina minora* 36, *De Roma*, ll.1-2.)

which he wrote shortly after 1100 A.D. The second category finds an even earlier representation in a poem of Alcuin, who was inspired by the destruction of Lindisfarne in 793 A.D. to meditate on the transitoriness of everything and found solace in the fall of Babylon, Jerusalem and Rome (*De Clade Lindisfarnensis Monasterii*, ll.31-54).

A third reflection occupying visitors to Rome who had come to admire her ancient grandeur, was the extent of destruction of the ancient buildings, making it difficult to visualise the original city. Hildebert de Lavardin makes Rome herself complain that she hardly recognises herself:

Vix scio qu(a)e fuerim, vix Rom(a)e Roma recordor.

"I hardly know who I was; I, Rome, hardly recognise Rome";  
(*Carmina minora* 38; *De Roma*, ll.7-8.)

A younger contemporary of Celtis, Janus Vitalis, having arrived in Rome from Sicily, knew this frustration of newcomers to the city and described it thus:

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<sup>21</sup> The complete text of the *Versus Romae* in Bernard Kytzler 1972:312ff. *Carmina Burana* 41 and 42 (Walter of Châtillon), 43, 189 (Kytzler, 1972:360-384). These negative poems contrast sharply with the positive views of Rome coming from ecclesiastical sources, starting with Prudentius (*Contra Symmachum* and *Peristephanon*). Christian Rome is presented by that side as the completion or perfection of the ancient city. See Kytzler, 1972 (1984):328ff.; Slits, 1990:179ff.

Qui Romam in media quaeris novus advena Roma,  
Et Romae in Roma nil reperis media ...

"Stranger, are you trying to find Rome in the middle of Rome,  
having just arrived?; and do you find nothing of Rome in Rome's  
centre?"

(*Haec sunt Roma*, ll.1-2.)

Just as Vitalis' stranger could not find Rome in Rome, so the hapless girl of Celtis' poem could find no Romans among the Romans, but only their ruins.

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