The Elegant Science of Antiquity: Ersilia Caetani-Lovatelli, Archaeology, and Travel Writing in Fin-de-Siècle Italy

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Even though Rome was perhaps the most important destination for travellers on their Grand Tours since the early seventeenth century, many touristic sites in the Eternal City were not particularly well described until late into the nineteenth century. Famous writers and other visitors of Rome had given vivid descriptions of the city and its culture before, but it was only during the fin-de-siècle that, as a result of the professionalization of archaeology as a science and a discipline, many of the ancient Roman ruins were explored and described in detail. The nineteenth century witnessed innovations in excavation methods and the initiation of many excavations in and around Rome. These resulted in a considerable number of academic studies. For the rising international tourist industry and the related emergence of tourist guides these academic studies were a great, if somewhat remote inspiration.

Scholars have long been interested in the development of tourism culture in Italy, from its beginnings in the Grand Tour to its later incarnations. They have also thoroughly studied the attraction of the city of Rome and its ancient heritage, and its reception in travel literature. Recently, the relationship between travel literature and archaeology has gained some attention as well. Barbara Ann Naddeo has argued that already during the eighteenth century visitors to Rome were helped by native guides who understood the importance of many recently excavated ancient sites (Naddeo 183–99). Other scholars have noted how the accounts of travellers changed from the eighteenth century through the Romantic and Victorian periods. Paolo Varvaro has indicated that during the nineteenth century interest in Italy’s archaeological heritage led to an enormous amount of travel journals and travel guides (Varvaro, “European travellers in Italy” 165–66). Were these new types of travel literature influenced
by the increase of archaeological knowledge? In his Travellers to the Antique Land: The History and Literature of Travel to Greece (1991), Robert Eisner has argued that the rise of archaeology as a professional science greatly influenced travel guides about Greece (71–130). In a related study, Rosemary Sweet has argued that the same applied to Italy. She states that the content of topographical guides on Rome changed because of the early eighteenth-century excavations that had been carried out in Pompeii and Rome (Sweet 121–23). Whereas until then visitors had almost exclusively contemplated Rome as an illustration to famous episodes from ancient history and literature, their interest in the cultural heritage of the city was now more comprehensive. Sweet uses Edwards Burton’s A Description of the Antiquities and other Curiosities of Rome as evidence, a travel guide that was first published in 1821 and that contained expositions of the history of specific classical monuments.

Even though recent historical scholarship has thus uncovered how the rise of archaeology affected travel literature, some major questions remain. Many studies have focused on the period between 1800 and 1850, approximately, when modern tourism gradually started to supplant the tradition of the Grand Tour, and when archaeology began to professionalize. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have received less attention, which is unfortunate since 1870 marked the conclusion of Italian unification, making the peninsula more accessible and thus more attractive to tourists. Moreover, the fin-de-siècle saw many new excavations and archaeological discoveries; an important question is whether and how these discoveries were incorporated into travel guides. A more fundamental problem of the existing historiography is that it has tended to interpret the connection between archaeology and travel literature as a case of one-way traffic, only focusing on the influence of archaeology on travel literature without paying due attention to the way that the culture of travel shaped archaeology.¹

In this essay, I will analyse the reciprocal interaction between nineteenth-century archaeology and travel literature by focusing on the life and works of the Roman countess and archaeologist Ersilia Caetani-Lovatelli (1840–1925). Caetani-Lovatelli became an archaeologist, participating in excavations and writing many scientific articles and monographs. As she was a famous salonnière as well, who opened the doors of her Palazzo Lovatelli to the Italian and European intellectual and cultural elites, she understood the importance of presenting her guests with some knowledge of her own discipline. Having dedicated herself to hard science early on, from 1888 onwards she decided to focus on making her science more accessible to a general readership. Since Italy was a very young nation-state, most Italians had little knowledge of their own country and its first city (Varvaro, “Italians don’t remember their own history” 165–172), so in her later publications Caetani-Lovatelli described her own city and its rich history. Her works were so popular that translations in German were made from 1889 onwards, and were used by
both Ersilia’s friends and many other visitors from outside Italy as well. This essay makes a case for the importance of situating Caetani-Lovatelli’s writings in both archaeological discourse and travel writing traditions.

**Ersilia Caetani-Lovatelli: An illustrious heritage and education**

Ersilia Caetani was born in Rome on October 12, 1840. Her father, Michelangelo (1804–1882), was a descendant from the famous Caetani clan, one of the most prestigious Roman noble families—it had produced two popes during the Middle Ages—but he had gradually proclaimed himself supportive of liberalism. Michelangelo followed the footsteps of his ancestors, accepting a position within Rome’s urban politics; as such, he was confronted with the expanding call for Italian unification, the so-called Risorgimento (Meens 77–108). Besides his political career, Michelangelo was active as an artist and as an amateur scholar, which made him a member of many of Rome’s scientific academies (Gubernatis 9–45). Last but not least, Caetani’s wide interest brought him into contact with the European cultural and political elite. From the late 1830s onwards the Duke hosted a famous and unique salon (Bartoccini 113–27). Palazzo Caetani attracted distinguished foreign visitors who admired Rome, and who walked through the city armed with travel books that had flourished since antiquity (Polezzi 629–33). Many of them had bought John Chetwode Eustace’s influential *A Classical Tour Through Italy*, the very personal account of this Anglo-Irish Catholic priest and antiquarian, which had first appeared in 1813. It is interesting to note that many of Caetani’s guests wrote and sometimes published their own travel tales as well, which were, just like Eustace’s travelogue, personal reflections on the city and the peninsula they so deeply loved and longed for. Caetani functioning as an informal *cicerone* connects him to this early-nineteenth–century efflorescence of travel writings on Rome. For instance, the German diplomat and scholar Alfred von Reumont used Michelangelo’s knowledge of the Eternal City when he wrote his *Römische Briefe von einem Florentiner* (1840–1844), while the French historian and philosopher Hippolyte Taine did the same when he composed his *Voyage en Italie* (1866) (Meens 147).

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the popularizing of Rome and its (ancient) history was an important theme in the life of Ersilia Caetani. From a very young age, she showed a profound interest in her city of birth. Her desire to study Rome’s exceptional history and then publish about it was not, however, a plausible goal for a nineteenth-century Italian woman (Robustelli 3–19). Most women were brought up to be good mothers and wives, and most received only a very basic education (Malantrucco 202–07). However, Ersilia came from a family known for its strong and energetic women. Her grandmother, Teresa De’Rossi (1781–1842), was an amateur antiquarian who carried
out excavations in and near Rome. Ersilia’s mother, the Polish Countess Calista Rzewuska (1810–1842), was an excellent composer and a *salonnière* (Meens 51–65). She died at the young age of 32 though, leaving Michelangelo responsible for the upbringing of Ersilia and her younger brother Onorato. Given the customs of the time, Caetani was generous, providing both of his children with a comprehensive education. Ersilia learned several modern European languages, as well as Latin and Greek. She also benefited from attending the cultural receptions in Palazzo Caetani. She absorbed the many conversations about the city of Rome, its history and cultural depth (Rizzo 3–8). One of her father’s best friends, the archaeologist Giovanni Battista de Rossi, gave her a special edition of Cardinal Nicolas Wiseman’s novel *Fabiola*, a literary representation of the persecutions of Christians during the reign of Diocletian. It seems Wiseman’s story, with its references to the Catacombs of ancient Rome, was just the encouragement Ersilia needed to dedicate her life to the classical world, and to the city of Rome’s antique heritage in particular (Rizzo 9–11). With the support of her father, who was interested in this topic himself, and under the guidance of some members from his wide cultural network, Ersilia then studied the basic principles of ancient history and archaeology, including the technique of excavating and studying archaeological sites layer by layer, which she learned from Giuseppe Fiorelli, an Italian archaeologist famous for his work in Pompeii. Because of her special interest in epigraphy, the study of inscriptions, Ersilia also studied Sanskrit, an exceptional achievement, and certainly not only for a woman. The German antiquarian Theodor Mommsen once stated there were few people able to compete with her in the knowledge and command of Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit (Wickert 14).

**The emergence of a female archaeologist**

Because Ersilia’s father had many international contacts, it was possible for her to make the acquaintance and join the ranks of several learned societies as well. In 1864, for example, Ersilia became a member of the Instituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica (Wehgartner 267–79). This academy had been founded in 1829 by a group of German and Danish scholars and diplomats who shared a love for antiquity and an interest in excavating its remains. During the course of the nineteenth century the Instituto would influence the professionalization of archaeology. Many members were in favor of separating archaeology from art history and philology, while some of them, like the previously mentioned Giuseppe Fiorelli, introduced new and more sustainable excavation methods as well. These would gradually replace the practices of dilettantes that had defined archaeological interest since Renaissance (Dyson 1–20). Amateur scholars had always been interested in finding precious treasures and creating large collections, but they had shown less concern for the
systematic detection, analysis, and interpretation of remnants from the ancient past. During the nineteenth century, and all over the Italian peninsula, but especially in Rome, excavation projects were initiated that had a more professional character. Obviously, because of the number of archaeological sites and the huge volume of objects found, these professional archeologists needed more places and spaces to present their work. From 1850 onwards, various academies were founded, as well as many academic journals (Hallamore Cesair & Romani 1–8). The Instituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica remained important though, as it united the most influential archaeologists from all over Europe with a new generation of upcoming scholars.

Ersilia’s admittance to the Instituto was a turning point in her career. With the support and professional backing of the Instituto the countess was able to write and publish her first article in 1878 in the Bullettino della Commissione archeologica comunale di Roma, the journal of the archaeological commission of the city of Rome (Meens 211–24). In this article, entitled “La iscrizione di Crescente auriga circense” (“The inscription of Crescens, the circus charioteer”), Ersilia interprets an inscription carved on a grave pillar that was excavated in 1872 at the Via della Pace in Rome. Following the academic approach of her teachers, the Countess begins with a precise description of the tomb pillar that carries the inscription, before announcing she will focus on the story behind the inscription: “The grave pillar is made of Greek marble, 0.49 m. high and 0.28 ½ wide, and is dedicated to a circus charioteer called Crescens” (Caetani-Lovatelli, “La iscrizione di Crescente auriga circense” 5). More than the typology or stylistic features of the monument, Ersilia uses it to offer some insight into the Roman world. She explains that the inscription is about a charioteer, who lived in West Africa at the time of second century Emperor Hadrian. Although he died young, he enjoyed a successful career, scoring 47 victories and receiving some deserved fame. In fact, the pillar tomb and the inscription are only the starting point of Lovatelli’s true theme: the chariot races and Roman circus games at the time of Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius.

As the archaeologist Giulio Emanuele Rizzo remarked in the In Memoriam he published after Caetani-Lovatelli’s death in 1925, her first article already contained the main characteristics of the first phase of her working life, which lasted from 1878 until 1888 (Rizzo 5–10). During this period Ersilia published approximately fifteen works that were always related to a monument that was recently excavated in Rome or elsewhere in Italy. In these works, she gives a clear description of the archaeological find(s) and then explores the main theme that becomes apparent on the basis of the inscription(s). In addition, revealing her knowledge of antique culture, she cites and paraphrases from works of ancient philosophy and literature. She vivifies her argument by adding some images of the monument(s) and also of the excavation site itself.
How did Caetani-Lovatelli’s contemporaries, and especially her male colleagues, receive these works? Many of them read Ersilia’s publications and reflected on them. Most of the responses sent to her were encouraging. The philologist and semanticist Michel Bréal (1832–1915), for instance, wrote: “I have just finished reading your fine work on the inscription of Crescens and I cannot wait to offer you my sincere compliments. Your explanation is very enjoyable to read. One can constantly admire the richness and diversity of your erudition, the sharp judgment, the elegant clarity of exposition” (Rizzo 17). The archaeologist Ariodante Fabretti (1816–1894) added: “Now that you have publicly entered the literary arena, you have taken on the task, which will certainly be accomplished, to continue the glorious Roman archaeological tradition” (Rizzo 22). Most colleagues not only stressed that Ersilia’s work was in accordance with the rules of the archaeological tradition in Rome, but also noted that she had succeeded in a field traditionally dominated by men. Ersilia’s dear friend, the German historian Ferdinand Gregorovius (1821–1891) even stated that erudition, in his view, was a quality that normally could merely be ascribed to men; women read serials in the newspapers and dedicated themselves to terribly bad novels. Ersilia, according to Gregorovius, clearly possessed a “male intelligence,” a remark that she was to take as a compliment (Rizzo 22).

These commendations created even more opportunities for Ersilia. She was asked to participate at several excavations as an epigrapher. This enabled her to publish more articles, in which, time and again, Caetani-Lovatelli not only interprets new finds, but uses them to disclose parts of the ancient culture that were still unknown to a wide audience. For instance, in “Di un vaso cinerario con rappresentanze relative ai misteri di Eleusi” (1879) she describes an urn that was excavated near the Porta Portese. After characterizing the precise location, the countess explains to her readers that the story behind the artefact is more interesting than the object itself, even if it has a real beauty:

But more than the prettiness of the work, it is remarkable for the subject of the composition, which certainly refers to the mysteries of Eleusis; this not only increases the value of the monument, but also greatly increases the difficulty of interpretation. Because even in ancient times, the meaning of such mystical representations was perhaps partly obscure; and the attempts made by modern science to lift the veil that hides the true meaning of them has not yet achieved any significant result. (6)

Subsequently, divagating from the object, Ersilia informs her readers that the Eleusinian mysteries were initiations held every year in the ancient Greek town of Eleusis, that they were related to the cult of Demeter and Persephone, and that they left their mark on Roman culture.
Ersilia’s choice of analyzing and describing the world behind the object becomes manifest in almost every article from this first phase of her publishing career. In “Di un antico musaico rappresentante una scena circense” (1879), for example, the countess expatiates about the Roman circuses by introducing a mosaic dug up at the Via Flaminia. In “Le nozze di Elena e Paride rappresentate di bassorilievo in un cratere dell’Esquilino” (1880) Ersilia uses a relief excavated at the monastery of Sant’Antonio Abate at the Esquiline Hill to make her readers familiar with the story of Helen and Paris and its significance in ancient Rome. Eventually all of these publications were compiled in different volumes: Antichi monumenti illustrati (1889), Miscellanea archeologica (1891), and Ricerche archeologiche (1903).

Even though Ersilia did not diverge from their scientific method, thematically her works differed from those of her male colleagues. Most of their publications were structured according to a set pattern: they gave precise typological analyses of artefacts, dated them, and described their style and function. Also, they paid attention to the exact location of the excavation, which sometimes included an explication of other objects that were found in the same layer at the same location. Because they aimed at developing archaeology into an independent and professional science, their works were characterized by a comparatively dry, rational, academic style (Díaz-Andreu 199). Most of their publications were not geared towards lay readers; they were written in Latin or French, by and for those with knowledge of the field and literacy in ancient languages. Ersilia gave precise academic analyses of archaeological finds too, but she used them to open up several surprising and fascinating aspects of the classical world to her readers. She thereby introduced various places across the Mediterranean, many of these located in Rome and not particularly well known to a broad public at that time. In contrast to her colleagues, during this first stage of her career Caetani-Lovatelli tried to involve a broader reading public by sticking to her native language and by writing in a rather more accessible style. She managed to translate complicated concepts and histories into intelligible content for lay readers by using often beautiful quotations from ancient texts in her relation of what would otherwise have been esoteric or dry information.

Ersilia’s success led to invitations of several of the famous learned bodies of Rome and Italy (Meens 241–58). Her membership of the Accademia dei Lincei in 1879—probably Italy’s most prestigious national academy—had a special significance. Not only was Ersilia the first woman to enter the Lincei, the academy also provided her the financial support to publish a first monograph, Thanatos (1888), in which the Countess traced the meaning of death during antiquity. This publication had a major influence on Caetani-Lovatelli’s career. Since it was a monograph, Ersilia could somewhat unchain herself from the strict academic rules imposed by the scientific journals. The structure of her book therefore differs from her earlier articles. In Thanatos
Ersilia’s starting point is not a recently excavated monument, but several quotations and paraphrases from modern texts, including Heinrich Heine’s Die Nordsee: “Tell me, what signifies men? // Whence does he come? Whither does he go?” (Thanatos 5; original in German). Using such quotations, Ersilia introduces her readers to her main theme: the significance of death in human life and culture. She then leads her readers through many other texts, including works from ancient Greece and Rome, Cervantes’ Don Quixote, and Shakespeare’s Hamlet.

Thanatos first featured elements that would characterize much of Ersilia’s future work. It has a free, almost associative structure, for it gallops between various periods of time and places. It captives the reader’s attention because of its emotional themes and quotations of beautiful literary passages. Last but not least, like Ersilia’s former publications, it provides readers with simply formulated academic information about many texts and locations that they might not have read or seen themselves.

Even if her male colleagues still noted the scientific value of Ersilia’s works, they now all acknowledged that its biggest strength was its ability to inform a wide public about Rome and the classical world; Ersilia’s descriptions were so lively, so full of passion that it was easy to get involved emotionally. Her style was simply perfect: “she writes without the undue display of erudition, in a pleasant and bright style, often poetic and with an undeniable talent,” the Frenchman Auguste Audollent noted (Audollent 222). The Italian poet and Noble Prize winner Giosuè Carducci confirmed: “bored by this rhetoric that nowadays is called poetry and by this way of writing, which is called prose, and tired of the effort of things or people who keep alive but [actually] are dead, I feel envy, pure envy of you and your elegant science of antiquity” (Valgimigli 73).

**A female archaeologist and the popularizing of Rome**

Ersilia eventually came to understand her own capabilities as well. After the publication of Thanatos in 1888, she took a new approach to her publications. Although she continued to write specialized studies for scientific journals, by using the contacts with editors and publishers in her salon the Countess now also tried to reach a larger readership that she could interest in the classical world and the (ancient) history of Rome in particular. This quest for a new and larger audience has to be seen within the broader context of Caetani-Lovatelli’s own life, as well as the political and cultural developments in Italy and the rest of Europe.

During the late nineteenth century, Italian publications on Rome and other cities lacked detailed information on excavations, archaeological finds, and ancient heritage. Because of the relatively late unification of Italy, after 1870 there were few popular-scientific descriptions of the country,
its history, or its culture written in Italian (Koshar 323–40). At the same time there was a strong need for these kinds of publications, since the Italian government had not succeeded in culturally unifying the nation. Most Italians were still focused on their own region more than on their country. Most of the local dialects were still in use, while the official national language was spoken only by a small minority. Moreover, there were differences between the developed, rich, and industrialized North, and the underdeveloped, poor, and agricultural South (Cavazza 69–92). Many of Italy’s new politicians understood they needed to implement a policy to solve these problems and culturally unify Italians (Deales & Biagini 79–80). References to Italy’s glorious, ancient Roman past were extremely useful in creating a strong tie between the Italian nation-state and its citizens. Thus archaeology soon became a political instrument. The Italians began or continued excavations all over the peninsula, but especially in and near Rome (Grandazzi 92–108; Colini 113–17). Important sites of cultural heritage were uncovered, for instance at the Roman Forum and the Palatine. The rapid increase of the amount of excavations also led to a spurt in the number of museums, academies, and scholarly publications (Dyson 95–105). Most archaeologists still only published for a small audience of professional colleagues, though. While some were simply uninterested in communicating with a wider public, others did not possess the skill to do so (Díaz-Andreu & Stig Sørensen 1–28). Because of their style and form, their academic studies were of little use in accomplishing the Italian government’s wish of informing as many Italians as they could about their national past. Between 1870 and 1915, however, a large number of non-academic publishing houses, journals, and newspapers were founded all over Italy that could serve the national cultural policy (Ceasar and Romani 1–8). Popular cultural journals like Nuova Antologia and Fanfulla della Domenica were read by a large reading public. The Nuova Antologia was established in Florence in 1866 by Francesco Protonotari (1836–1888), but its editorial board was moved to Rome in 1878. The journal targeted a broad middle class public, including the new national intellectual and cultural elite. Although the journal initially kept a conservative nationalist course, at the turn of the century it became important in the spread of modernism (Ricorda 88). Likewise, the Fanfulla della Domenica, a modernist journal that was founded in Rome in 1879, presented itself as the most important agent of culture in Italy. The editorial board was disappointed with the political developments of the young Italian Kingdom that barely resembled the ideals of the Risorgimento-patriots (Greende 539–42).

Both journals thus invited authors to show readers the glorious past of the Italian nation and to thereby revive it. Women writers were asked in particular, since the editors believed they possessed the ability to create exemplary works that could educate the new Italians (Vignuzzi, ‘Towards a New
Professionalism” 153–70). They also believed that women were better in popularizing the latest academic insights because they had a more sensitive approach and writing style (Casalena, xix–xv). Most of these women authors published short pieces about the Risorgimento, its heroes and heroines (Vignuzzi, *La partecipazione femminile* 203–12). For the editorial boards it was a lot harder to find women who were able to write sensitively about antiquity, simply because most of them did not have the necessary academic knowledge.

Ersilia knew that this gap offered her the opportunity of reaching the broader public that she was after. By 1880 she had welcomed many of these editors, as well as their directors and publishers, into the salon that she had hosted since her father withdrew from public life in 1870. Ersilia’s salon became the most highly regarded in Rome between 1870 and 1915 and many representatives from the world of publishing were honored to be invited. During some of the salon conversations Ersilia specifically endorsed the goals of the journals in which she dreamed of publishing. The directors, publishers, and their editors all seem to have agreed that Caetani-Lovatelli’s beautifully written contributions about archaeology and the classical history of Rome would fit their bill (Meens 225–27).

Urged by the editorial boards of the *Nuova Antologia* and the *Fanfulla della Domenica*, as well as by her male archaeologist colleagues, Ersilia began providing her fellow nationals with detailed, yet lively and accessible accounts of Rome and Italy’s classical past and its remains. The second phase of Ersilia’s working life that lasted between 1888 and 1914 had begun. The articles that she published in both journals differed greatly from her academic publications. Ersilia took inspiration from the travelogues that she knew well, not only because her father had introduced her to those written by his own foreign friends, but also because she collected them in her own library (Gabrieli 28–29). Just like the authors of these travelogues Ersilia in her popularizing articles describes her own feelings about the city of Rome, sometimes by referring to famous visitors of the Eternal City from the past including Stendhal and Chateaubriand. She also quotes from their literary reflections freely; her article “I giardini degli Acilii,” for example, opens with a phrase from Goethe’s Roman elegies: “Yes, Rome, you are a world indeed” (64).

Ersilia not only literally referred to travel literature in these new articles, she also used it as an inspiration for the topics and the structure of her own texts. She decided not to construct her publications around recently excavated artefacts any more, but to focus on unique and particular places in Rome instead. For example, in the second article that Caetani-Lovatelli published in the *Nuova Antologia*, “Tramonto Romano” (1888), she accurately describes the appearance and the history of the the Villa Celimontana on the Caelian Hill, where Rome’s second king, Numa Pompilius, according
to the tradition, met up with the nymph Egeria, who offered him some help in establishing his authority. As she did in *Thanatos*, Ersilia starts with a quotation from contemporary literature—"Sweet Hour of delight," from Lord Byron’s *Don Juan*—before introducing her readers to the specific location that her article deals with: "If on a beautiful day in May, at the hour so poetically and mysteriously sung by Dante and Byron, one happens to be on the hills of the Celio, amongst the old marbles and the fragrant roses of the Villa Mattei, how many thoughts and how many dreams then crowd one’s imagination, hidden behind classical memories of the past and the wonderful views of nature" (70). This quote shows Ersilia experimenting with narrative points of view that were different from any that she had used in her earlier works. Just like the modern international tourist guides that now began to appear, she now used the perspective of a modern-day visitor of Rome.

After her introduction, Ersilia associatively describes the wonderful monuments that are visible in and around the Villa at the Celio, continuously switching between various locations and historical periods, just like she had in *Thanatos*. For instance, when she draws the reader’s attention to the remnants of an obelisk, she writes: “Other works of art were found around the Villa Celimontana (…). Today, apart from the two aforementioned pedestals, very few is left and of little importance, in between which dominates, in the middle of cypress trees and rose brushes, the obelisk fragment, restored, as you nowadays see it, by Ciriaco Mattei. Originating from the Capitoline square, where it stood since ancient times, it will have belonged to the temple of the Egyptian Isis, whose existence on the Capitol Hill, together with that of a college of priests for Isis, one deduces from Tacitus and Suetonius” (“Tramonto Romano” 73). Finally, Ersilia takes her reader to the garden of the Villa and portrays its view of Rome, including the Basilica di Santa Balbina on the Aventine Hill, and the tomb of Caecilia Metella. Like the authors of travelogues, here she gives space to her own feelings and thoughts that are evoked when beholding Rome. She muses, almost like Proust:

And in front of us, the ruins of temples, thermal baths, aqueducts, arches and tombs, in the diffuse light of the sunset, between the oaks, aloe and rose from the villa. If the erudite mind of the archaeologist reconstructs the spirit of an ancient world, and that of the philosopher sees the futility of human greatness, then the spirit of the poet insists on the other hand, wandering into a sweet ecstasy, through the gate of ivory in the world of dreams and illusions. In that context, it pleases me to notice how some places, like certain melodies and certain special scents of flowers, can make the soul revive memories about things seen and pleasures and affections which one does not know where or when one felt them; mysterious nostalgia for other times and other lives, indefinable feelings that almost urge us to take for granted the Orphic and Platonic theories of the past. (“Tramonto Romano” 73)
Caetani-Lovatelli certainly gained success with these new articles. The editors of the journals asked her for new contributions again and again. Between 1888 and 1914 she published some 45 articles. The Countess wrote about the Villa Campana, the Giardini di Adone, the Porta Magica on the Esquiline Hill, the Bocca della Verità, San Paolo fuori le mura, the palace of Nero, the columbaria in the Vineyard of the Codini family, the gardens of Lucullus, the Tiber Island, Torpignattara, the gardens on the Pincio, San Sebastiano fuori le mura, the theatre of Marcellus, the Circus Flaminius, the Lacus Curtius, Santa Maria del buon aiuto nell’Anfiteatro Castrense, the Pyramid of Cestius and the Abbazia delle Tre Fontane (Rizzo 20–25). In all of these she addressed Italians who might never have been in Rome, describing their capital in a pleasant style and with a narration borrowed from travel guides. Ersilia also took into account the reader that might desire profound, up-to-date academic information about the historical backgrounds of all places that she included in her stories, relying on her knowledge of Rome, its ancient history, and heritage. Thus Ersilia enabled her readers to connect with certain places and times, which were important within their national history and identity (Nicotra 29–46). By adding photographs, paintings and drawings, especially of the Eternal City’s places that were still unknown to many of her readers, Ersilia also encouraged them to visit these places themselves.

An analysis of Ersilia’s articles further confirms their similarities with travel guides. The title of one of them, “Una gita a Tor Pignattara” (“A trip to Tor Pignattara”), suggests precisely what the article intends to do, namely, provide the reader with notes for a walking tour. Specifically, the article takes the reader along all of the monuments within the Roman city zone Tor Pignattara, just eastwards from the antique heart of the city. Recognizing that many of her readers had never visited Rome before, Caetani-Lovatelli offered detailed walking instructions, as we can see in the introduction to this particular article: “When at the Porta Maggiore and one takes the way to the right, the antique Labicana, which is now called Casilina, after only just three kilometers, one encounters a large tomb known for centuries by its popular name of Tor Pignattara” (Una gita a Tor Pignattara” 580). Ersilia describes the appearance and the history of this Mausoleum of Helena before drawing the reader’s attention to the surroundings:

Moreover, it is important to know that all the gardens and reserves, which stretch from the church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme until Centocele, such as the orchards of Epafrodiziani, the Torquaziani, built afterwards by the Variani, the Epagaziani, the Daduchiani and others, in the fourth century were all one and immense latifundium that belonged to the imperial heritage. The same Basilica of Santa Croce, and what has been mentioned in passing, was nothing at that time unless one of the main halls of the Sessoriano palace or Sessorium, where Elena, as
has been clearly demonstrated by many authoritative writers, had her own home and in the atrium of which honorary statues were erected.” (582–83)

Here, Ersilia in a couple of footnotes refers to recent academic publications that offer some details into these specific locations. At the end of the article, Ersilia again reveals her own feelings and impressions as she sighs: “No noise at present disturbs the highest silence, except for the rustling of lizards among the fragrant herbs, and the slow sound of bells sadly announcing the dying of the day. Some fortress, the last remnant of feudal arrogance of the Middle Ages, some tombs here and there, and the crumbling arches of the ancient aqueducts lifting up at intervals in the lonely countryside, are a reminder of the strange and varied events of the centuries that once were; while in the distance the view of Tusculum and its villas, in the green of the vines and olive trees, breaks the monotony of those places, once so flourishing and populous” (“Una gita a Tor Pignattara” 597). These quotations clearly show that Ersilia combined the practical information so characteristic of travel guides, and the personal touch and stylistic subtlety of travel journals, with the academic knowledge that before was reserved to archaeological publications.

By assembling the best features of these three genres, Ersilia’s works were applauded even by male colleagues who preached a strict scientific approach and believed that the practice of archaeology was men’s work. With her new approach Ersilia seems to have forced her peers to adjust their principles. They all cheered because of the great attention that their field of study now enjoyed, but Ersilia’s success also made them realize that their traditional view on science was not sufficient. The public, after all, had little access to or only slightly appreciated their often dry, impersonal and—for a tourist—impractical descriptions of archaeological finds. Ersilia’s publications proved to some of her fellow archaeologists that style was as essential as content. As the Frenchman Louis Duchesne wrote to his Italian colleague Giovanni Battista De Rossi, Ersilia, unlike many of the male archaeologists of the time, managed to find a tone that matched perfectly with the matter she described: “I always enjoy archeology in this charming pen. If other deserving women follow her example, we, my dear sir, must hide. In our work there is often a lack of delicate touch and sublime feeling. They would reduce us to workers, to facchini [drudges]” (Saint-Roch 670). To Ersilia Duchesne wrote: “How happy archaeology is to count you among its active cultores [performers]. The archaeologists are all delighted. Our studies seem less dry . . . and the sun shines brighter” (Rizzo 20).

Ersilia’s contributions ultimately stirred Italian interest in antiquity and excavations. The journals’ editors informed the countess that their readers, men and women alike, appreciated her unique works (Meens 225–40). The popularity of Caetani-Lovatelli resulted in several editions of her travel-
book–styled works. In 1898, *Scritti vari* was published, followed by *Varia* in 1903, and by *Aurea Roma* in 1915. Perhaps even more important was *Passeggiate nella Roma antica* in 1909, whose title ("Passages though antique Rome") again shows its conformity with travel literature. These volumes did not contain new material, though, but bundled the 45 articles that Ersilia had published in the popularizing periodicals.

**A female archaeologist and a world of international tourists**

Although Caetani-Lovatelli’s articles belonged to the first works that described the ancient city of Rome to an Italian reading public, in the late nineteenth century there were already international tourist guides of the Eternal City available. Before the nineteenth century, of course, Rome had been visited by countless travelers, especially by aristocrats during the Grand Tour, by politicians and clergymen who wanted to meet the Pope or certain cardinals, and by intellectuals and artists who had dreamed about the Eternal City and used it as a source of inspiration. During the nineteenth century, and for a variety of reasons, the number of foreign visitors in Rome increased (Polezzi 629–33). The old travel journals and travelogues did not offer enough practical guidance for these new travelers, and, like the novels, poems, paintings, and photographs that created and captured images of the Eternal City, they lacked information about the latest scientific discoveries and insights (Dyson 95).

Europe’s premier publishers of travel guides had responded to the modern visitor’s needs. In 1843, for example, the London publisher John Murray printed Octavian Blewitt’s *Handbook for travellers in central Italy*, that would later partly be incorporated within his more specific *A handbook of Rome and its environs* (1864). As Loredana Polezzi has argued, these guidebooks provided information on art and visiting sights, especially from antiquity and the Renaissance (Polezzi 629–33). Even if many of the works on archaeological excavations were clearly written for a learned public, knowledge about the ancient world and its cultural heritage was increasingly reflected within these travel guides as well. They offered substantial information about classical remains or places, sometimes revived by quotations from the works of Virgil and Ovid. In contrast to the travel journals, these new travel guides also mentioned new archaeological finds or insights. Murray’s account of central Italy, for instance, provides information about several excavations in and near Rome, including the one that Ersilia’s grandmother Teresa de’Rossi had carried out at Monterone in 1838, and the exposition of the Arch of Septimius Severus that had been commissioned by pope Pius VII in 1804 (Blewitt, *Handbook for travellers* 168–70, 74).

These travel guides were not written by archaeological specialists, however; also, they did not possess the personal style of many of the ‘old’ travel journals. Ersilia understood that her articles could fill this gap and that
they could interest an international reading public as well. In her salon she was surrounded by many of the foreign visitors of the Eternal City, including Ferdinand Gregorovius, Theodor Mommsen, Ernest Renan, Franz Liszt, Émile Zola, and Romain Rolland. Like her father she invited her guests on walking tours, showing them the city and its classical remains in particular. During these ‘pranzi archeologici’ (archaeological lunches) Ersilia discovered the lack of detailed information in the guidebooks that her guests were using. Franz Liszt and Émile Zola were surprised by the amount of knowledge on Rome’s classical heritage the Countess could provide them and by her style of doing so (Hamburger 239–65; Ternois 512–42).

Thus, Ersilia knew she could enlarge her audience further by including these foreign travelers who would certainly have interest in a paper version of her detailed expositions on Rome. Soon after she had published some of her popular-scientific works her German friends Gregorovius and Eugen Petersen asked if she could approve a German translation. This confirms Nils Büttner’s observation that late-nineteenth–century German tourists longed for information on the latest archaeological developments (Büttner 586–95). German readers had been prepared for such writing by Karl Baedeker’s 1866 Italien: Handbuch für Reisende and its late-nineteenth–and early-twentieth–century revisions, which mentioned archaeological sites and developments, but Caetani-Lovatelli offered something different and she was happy to accommodate her friends’ request.

Already in 1889, the Leipzig-based publisher Freund had printed a German edition of Ersilia’s most important scientific articles: Antike Denkmäler und Gebräuche (translated from Italian by Clara Schomer). Now, in 1891, Freund’s colleague-publisher from Leipzig, Reissner, provided a German popular-scientific edition under the title of Römische Essays. A certain Fraulein Höpfner, who died before the volume was printed, was in charge of the translation. In his introduction, Petersen wrote: “But why an introduction? At least by the archaeologists, including outside Italy, the author of these essays has been known for a long time” (Römische Essays v). The German translator made a clear choice and omitted Ersilia’s scholarly publications for this new edition: “From the archaeological essays in the narrow sense, that were written mostly on request of the publisher to explain the newly excavated monuments in the Journal of the Archaeological Commission of Rome, not one is included here” (Römische Essays viii). Römische Essays therefore only contains translations of Ersilia’s most important popularizing articles, such as “Sonnenuntergang in Rom”, the German version of the aforementioned “Tramonto Romano.”

Sadly, we do not know how many German readers bought or read this volume. It is probable that Ersilia’s reputation in Germany grew because of this translation, however. She would go on to gain access to institutions like the Alterthums-Gesellschaft in Königsberg. She was presented with an honorary doctorate at the
University of Halle (both in 1894); and she was appointed a member of the Austrian Archaeological Institute in Rome (Meens 435–40). That Caetani-Lovatelli would be considered both an expert provider of sophisticated archaeological knowledge while simultaneously recognized as the ideal source of information for a broad, lay audience bespeaks her value to the growth and development of archaeological writing in her time, both at home in Italy and in Germany as well.

**Conclusion: Between archaeology and travel writing**

The Italian writer Eugenia Codronchi Argeli in 1928 joked that the Roman tour guides during their walks compared Ersilia to the classical monuments they showed to tourists: “With the tip of his long baton, he pointed to the monuments . . . ‘This is the Colosseum, this is the Roman Forum, over there is the Palatine . . . and that is the countess Lovatelli’” (Sfinge 241). Codronchi’s remark indicates the profound connectedness Ersilia had with her city of birth, its ancient history, and the archaeological science that could uncover its heritage. Even if Codronchi meant to be funny, her statement forces us to consider Ersilia’s position as a mediator between the study of archaeology and the world of travel, and to rethink the reciprocal relationship between travel, its literary genres, and archaeology in general.

Having been nurtured in a lively cultural and intellectual environment, Ersilia encountered many foreign travelers who visited Rome. At the same time, she developed into a highly competent archaeologist. Writing several technical archaeological studies, she used the travel accounts of many of the well-known visitors of the Eternal City. By constructing studies that were not only scientifically watertight, but also pleasant to read, Ersilia distinguished herself from her male colleagues, which we might surmise she was able to do precisely because, as a woman, she could take liberties with her style that orthodox, male archaeologists could or would not. In communicating the most recent findings in archaeology with her uniquely appealing literary style, Ersilia created a new sub-genre, one that combined the best of academic archaeological writing with the old tradition of travel journals and the emerging category of travel guides. In a simple, but evocative language, narrated from the visitor’s point of view, the Countess did more than express personal feelings about Rome; she also explained the classical history of her city, described its best visiting sites, and offered new insights gained by her own profound archaeological research and knowledge. Consequently, Ersilia was influential in incorporating archaeology into travel guides, the legacy of which can be identified in the pages of any modern travel guide to Rome. Indeed, from the 1890s onwards, travel guides like the German Baedekers paid even more attention to
archaeology than before (Müller 176), to such a degree that some tourists had a good laugh at the high frequency of technical archaeological terms (Büttner 592). At the same time, Ersilia seduced her fellow archaeologists to get inspired by travel literature, thus positively influencing the image of their new science.

Notes

1. An exception would be Tapati Guha-Thakurta’s remark that in the late twentieth century many archaeologists appeal to lay readers by turning their academic work into glossy books or tourist guides (355).
2. All translations in this article are by the author.

Works cited


