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Imagining a Nation’s Capital in the Digital Age: Rome and the John Henry Parker Photography Collection, 1864–1879

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Imagining a Nation’s Capital in the Digital Age: Rome and the John Henry Parker Photography Collection, 1864–1879
by Lindsay Harris

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The Research Application:
Mapping the John Henry Parker Photography Collection, 1864–1879, and Roma Capitale

A cache of tall, slender amphorae rests against a pile of rubble (fig. 1). Beyond, the matte surface of Rome’s Tiber River leads the eye toward a group of buildings on the horizon. Light rakes across the scene, bringing into relief the elongated form of the vessels, the uniform size and shape of the stones, and the flat, dusty earth along the riverbank. Beside the heap of ruins, at water’s edge, a view camera sits atop a tripod, its outstretched bellows poised to capture the scene on the opposite shore.
Figure 1 reproduces one of more than three thousand photographs that the editor and dilettante archaeologist John Henry Parker (1806–1884), of Oxford, England, took or commissioned between 1864 and 1879 for his multivolume series on the early history of Rome. Viewed in the context of Parker’s publication, this photograph conveys the role of commerce in ancient Rome. Centered within the composition, the group of transport amphorae, excavated at this site in 1868, attests to widespread trade in Rome during the Republican era. The large size and elongated shape of the vessels, necessary for stacking tip to toe in the hull of a ship, reflect Rome’s booming economy and growing population during the period, as does their location along this stretch of the Tiber. By the second century BCE, Rome’s original harbor at the Forum Boarium, beneath Aventine Hill, had become too small to accommodate the city’s increased commercial traffic. A new, larger fluvial port, Emporium, was constructed farther downstream, where flat, open land made it easy to transport goods by barge from the maritime harbor of Ostia to Rome. After two decades of activity, the wharf was paved using stones like those seen in the foreground of the photograph, which were all that remained of the ancient harbor when the picture was taken.

But what if we consider this photograph from a different perspective? What if it is approached not as a document of Rome’s early history but as one that tells us something about Rome in the nineteenth century, when the Eternal City became capital of Italy in 1870? More than a visual record of Republican transport amphorae or an 1868 excavation, Parker’s Emporium (Rome, Italy) Excavations offers an opportunity to learn more about modern Rome, its topography, and its political and social history. This knowledge is only enhanced when we look at the entire archive as a set of data ripe for digital research, allowing us to question the archive in new ways and draw new conclusions. Specifically, the Parker archive provides the basis for an innovative digital mapping project that maps the photographs not only geographically but also chronologically, typologically, and by photographer, revealing patterns in excavation activities and modern development that, in turn, provide insight into the political, social, cultural, and urban history of late nineteenth-century Rome.

On September 20, 1870, Garibaldi’s breach of Porta Pia wrested Rome from the Papacy and established the city, complete with its ancient remains, as the new nation’s capital. The many archaeological digs already under way, begun during the French occupation from 1809 to 1814,
took on new significance as Italy's government administration, now based in Rome, struggled to strike a balance between celebrating the city's ancient splendors and meeting the modern needs of a rapidly growing population. In the city center, new roads circled and crisscrossed the Roman Forum and Palatine Hill, sites brimming with ruins of antiquity long associated with the mythic origins of Rome and its empire. Consideration of medieval houses and churches fell by the wayside as officials sought to frame the storied monuments of ancient Rome with space and light, throwing into relief the accomplishments of the city’s ancient emperors—the ideological ancestors of Italy’s modern leadership. To a degree unprecedented in other European centers, archaeology and modernization, while strange bedfellows, shaped the development of Rome as capital of Italy.[2]

The city's new political status triggered not only changes to Rome's physical surroundings but also widespread interest in representing its new topography. Not since the mid-eighteenth century, when Giambattista Nolli published his *Pianta grande di Roma*, the first accurate map of Rome, in 1748, and Giuseppe Vasi issued his *Delle magnificenze di Roma*, a comprehensive documentation of the city and its monuments, from 1747 to 1761, had there been such enthusiasm for describing Rome in geospatial terms. In 1873, the city issued its first official *piano regolatore*, or urban plan, developed by Alessandro Viviani, who updated the plan in 1883 before Edmondo Sanjust di Teulada produced yet another version in 1909.[3] John Murray, author of the earliest English-language guidebooks to European cities, wrote a new handbook for Rome that included a richly detailed foldout map, also in 1873. Published at the same time that Parker and his colleagues documented the city, these maps provide ideal guides for charting the scope of this photographic endeavor.

Between 1893 and 1901, Rodolfo Lanciani, Parker's close associate and one of the most prolific archaeologists active in Rome at the time, published his groundbreaking *Forma Urbis Romae*, a map inspired by an ancient plan of the same name, known in English as the *Severan Marble Plan*, carved in marble between 203 and 211 CE and discovered by archaeologists in bits and pieces at the Roman Forum throughout the nineteenth century. Compiled of forty-six plates, Lanciani’s map represents three different strata of the city, in different colors: ancient Rome, as it was understood at the time (black); "modern" Rome, meaning the urban fabric constructed after the fall of the Roman Empire (red); and the contemporary city, based on the *piano regolatore* of 1883 (blue). The first map to represent ancient Rome with any sort of accuracy (however flawed we may now understand that representation to be), and the only one to integrate three perspectives of the city at the time Parker’s project was under way, the *Forma Urbis* provides another basis for orienting Parker's photographs within a contemporary view of Rome.

Lanciani also devised a system that offers a useful framework for interpreting the data discovered through the three-way digital mapping of the Parker photographs. In the introduction to his 1897 handbook on ancient Rome, Lanciani argued that Rome could be studied most efficiently "from three points of view—the chronological, the topographical, and the architectural."[4] Using these categories to structure our analysis, we can apply Lanciani’s three points of view not to the ruins of ancient Rome, which others have done with aplomb, but to Parker’s collection of photographs, a set of “big data” rich in visual, chronological, topographical, and typological information about Rome around the time the city became capital of Italy.
By adopting Lanciani’s methods to study Parker’s photographs using twenty-first-century tools—digitally mapping them on a georeferenced plan of the period—we can begin to chart the chronology and topography of late nineteenth-century Rome and the subjects of interest to Parker and his team of photographers (typology), as the city transformed into a modern-day capital. In the process, we see the Papacy slowly lose its grip on Rome as systems of patronage and the management of Rome’s cultural heritage shift into the hands of Italy’s newly formed secular government. We observe how the construction of new housing and infrastructure drives archaeological discovery as development of the foundations of modern Rome unearths the ruins of the ancient city. We witness the purported focus on documenting Rome’s early history, which was the initial aim of Parker’s endeavor, expand to satisfy a seemingly insatiable curiosity for signs of modern life—government buildings, public works, private moments—in the backgrounds and on the edges of Parker’s views. We watch as photographers of diverse nationalities record different aspects of Rome’s history for various reasons, opening our eyes to how the past provides an antidote to modernity, whether it is the impact of industry in England or the need to demonstrate physical evidence for a common heritage in a young nation such as Italy.

The new understanding gained by digitally mapping the Parker archive allows us to see individual photographs with new depth and breadth. Within a single image, details emerge that highlight the larger systems at play, from a photography collection and an archaeological excavation to ongoing modernization, political transformation, or social change.

Before we can apply this new knowledge to *Emporium (Rome, Italy) Excavations*, we must first understand the genesis of Parker’s collection in the late nineteenth century and how it has been perceived since. Parker was not a professional photographer. He was a bookseller who made his career writing and publishing catalogs on art, architecture, and archaeology from the 1830s through the 1850s. Yet, he was ensconced in the British Victorian culture of his day, which generated some of the earliest experimentation with photography. William Henry Fox Talbot, author of the first photogenic drawings; the Reverend Calvert Richard Jones, a pioneer of the calotype; and John Ruskin, champion of Gothic Revival in England, who, as early as 1845, drew from daguerreotypes of architectural details to illustrate his multivolume work *The Stones of Venice*, all were part of Parker’s circle. When Parker, weakened by fever, began wintering in Rome in 1864 to benefit from the warmer climate, he encountered a city brimming with recently excavated antiquities and eager for a new way to represent that history. Without missing a beat, Parker began canvassing Rome’s bookshops and print studios—the new media outlets of the day—in search of local photographers who could help him carry out his groundbreaking endeavor.

Over the years, varied critics and scholars have expounded on the merit of this imagery. Shortly after the collection was published in 1879, no less than Pope Pius IX and the Queen of England praised Parker for his “valuable photographs.” Parker himself touted the extraordinary “minute accuracy” with which his catalog illustrated Rome’s ancient and early Christian heritage, particularly for Britons who were unable to experience the sites firsthand.

Archaeologists of the period were less effusive about Parker’s endeavor. A founding member of the British Archaeological Society of Rome in 1865, which soon became the British and
American Archaeological Society of Rome, Parker had close ties to the city’s archaeologists, who granted him rare access to the most important discoveries of the period. Lanciani, Pietro Ercole Visconti, and Pietro Rosa, who were supervising the work at archaeological sites in different sections of the Roman Forum and Palatine Hill throughout the nineteenth century, called upon Parker to assist with their excavations and permitted him and his photographers to document their new finds.[8] Despite the apparent objectivity of his photographs—the sharp focus, intricate detail, and organizational logic exemplified in Parker’s river view from 1868—archaeologists grew skeptical of how Parker was interpreting the ancient remains that he or one of his colleagues had photographed. Too often for their liking, the clear, crisp appearance of his images masked inaccurate attributions of their subjects, whether he based them on ancient literary sources alone or neglected to consider the stratigraphy of the site in question. [9] In 1870, the year Rome became capital, the archaeologist and architect Luigi Canina revoked Parker’s permission to document the frescoes inside patrician houses on the Palatine, citing his concern not for the intense light of the cameras’ magnesium flash but for the dates Parker attributed to the paintings, which differed from the official Italian records.[10]

Though their accuracy as a record of archaeological discovery may be up for debate, Parker’s photographs have consistently appealed to historians of photography. Some have focused on the seven photographers Parker enlisted to help carry out the project, noting their individual careers and distinctive styles.[11] Others have investigated the extent to which Parker’s collection sheds light on a particular aspect of Roman history, such as its catacombs.[12] Still others align Parker with the impulse to collect, document, and catalog information about contemporary society and the past that flourished among photographers of the period, from the Alinari brothers’ photographs of Italy’s monuments, to Cesare Lombroso’s images of criminal types, to the widespread popularity of making and exchanging cartes-de-visite of family, friends, and celebrities.[13] More frequently, however, scholars have singled out Parker’s collection as a model of how photography raised awareness of Rome’s archaeology and helped define what the public knew about antiquity.[14] What scholars have not yet acknowledged is the remarkable timing of the Parker Collection, which, created between 1864 and 1879, spans the precise moment when Rome became the Italian capital in 1870. The complexity of the city’s transformation in these years—topographically, typologically, politically, socially, and from a foreign perspective—comes to the fore when Parker’s photographs are explored through this study’s digital web application.

Consider Emporium (Rome, Italy) Excavations with regard to the chronology of Parker’s endeavor (fig. 2). What can this image tell us about photography, archaeology, and modernism in Rome when digital applications are used to chart it within the temporal and geographic arc of Parker’s undertaking? Parker was four years into the project by the time he took this photograph in 1868. Initially, he had aimed to document Rome’s antiquities to support his theories about their dates and significance through photographic evidence, an approach that yielded a modest number of photographs each year. The subject of this particular image—Republican-era transport amphorae alongside a large-format camera—might be considered a reflection of Parker’s dual interest in ancient Rome and photography, which motivated his project in the first place. Yet, if we consider this image within the fifteen-year span of his project, a visible uptick in the number of photographs taken around 1868 suggests that Parker broadened the scope of his work during those years, signaling a new set of circumstances in Rome that prompted him to change course.
When he first published the complete catalog, Parker acknowledged the “unusual opportunities” he had been given regarding previously undocumented works of art that had made the project so extraordinary. He was not referring to the many ancient sites that Lanciani and other archaeologists had made available to him over the years. Rather, he was speaking of the sculpture collections of the Vatican Museums and the Torlonia noble family of Rome, which Parker was the first to photograph. Although he does not specify when this special permission was granted, the sheer number of photographs taken between roughly 1868 and 1872, visible through digital analysis of the project’s chronology, suggests that Parker aimed to take advantage of this “unusual” opportunity. But why would the Vatican and Prince Torlonia, one of the most powerful aristocrats in Rome, suddenly wish to publicize the splendor of their art through photography?

To answer this question, let us consider Emporium (Rome, Italy) Excavations within the topography of Parker’s oeuvre (fig. 3). Mapped and georeferenced within Lanciani’s Forma Urbis, the locations depicted in the photographs reveal the sites of particular interest in Rome from the mid-1860s through the 1870s. Clusters of images appear in places that are hardly surprising. The Colosseum, for example, in various states of ruination, had garnered the attention of artists and tourists since the Grand Tour in the seventeenth century, if not earlier. Yet, an equal if not greater number of photographs were made on sites beyond the Roman Forum, such as the one southeast of the city center, where Emporium (Rome, Italy) Excavations was taken.
The site in question, Emporium, was excavated in 1868, which explains Parker’s urgency to document the amphorae and other antiquities unearthed that year, at least in part. If we situate this photograph within Lanciani’s plan of the city, however, other circumstances come to light. At the time the photograph was taken, a dam was being built across the Tiber, a vital yet unruly river, just upstream from the ancient port. Archaeological discovery in the area was not deliberate but a by-product of the new infrastructure that was intended to help spare the modern city from constant flooding.

The flat, open land east of Emporium, attractive to Romans in antiquity for its potential to expand the city’s port, was also on the brink of transformation. Once designated as “fields for the people of Rome,” the area was earmarked in an edict of 1864 to become the city’s center of industry, complete with new housing and civic structures for the growing class of industrial workers.[16] Those who stood to reap the greatest financial benefit from the deal were the Torlonia family, who in the early nineteenth century had made a fortune in banking and had bought up much of the land in this part of the city. Alessandro Torlonia had also recently earned the moniker “Prince of Fucino” for funding a project to drain Lake Fucino, in the Abruzzi. While his efforts helped eradicate malaria from the region, which was still controlled by the Papal States in the 1860s, they also enabled noble landowners to increase their local farming capacity as well as their bank accounts. Loyal to Pius IX and keen, like the pope, to portray himself as a benefactor of Italy’s artistic heritage, Prince Torlonia allowed Parker to photograph his extraordinary collection of Roman sculpture for both Italian and foreign viewers to enjoy. [17] Thanks to the digital web application, we can understand Parker’s photograph in figure 1 as an illustration of Risorgimento politics, one that makes plain the power of patronage in a city on the brink of transformation.

If digital technology can help reveal the social forces behind Rome’s imminent seizure from the Papacy and inception as Italy’s capital, what can it tell us about the types of subjects in Parker’s oeuvre and how they are represented within this imagery? Once again, Parker’s Emporium (Rome, Italy) Excavations is instructive in this regard (fig. 4). Beyond the ruins and the camera in the foreground, and above the stretch of the river, a group of buildings rises from the embankment like a ship moored on the horizon. Massive in size and stately in structure, the monumental complex of San Michele di Ripa Grande, in Trastevere, was constructed in the late seventeenth century as an apostolic hospice for the poor; by the eighteenth century it had become a home for juvenile delinquents.

![Fig. 4, John Henry Parker, Emporium (Rome, Italy) Excavations, 1868, viewed in search by subject (typology).](larger image)
In 1871, three years after this photograph was taken and one year after Rome became capital, the building was taken over by the Commune to use as a women’s prison.[18] As Michel Foucault argued in his landmark study *Discipline and Punish*, imprisonment became the primary form of punishing criminals in the nineteenth century, and the situation after Unification was no different.[19] Large monasteries and hospices throughout Italy dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were repurposed to house the nation’s criminals, a social class of particular intrigue for the intellectual elite. The pioneering criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso, for example, used photography in the 1870s to identify and ferret out criminal types within Italian society.

Lombroso’s fascination with photography as a means to identify, document, and catalog degenerate behavior reflected a pervasive belief in positivism among intellectuals of the period, as well as a common compulsion to photograph and compile information by type.[20] Taking our cue from this practice, today we can use online databases to categorize and compare the types of subject represented in the foreground and background of Parker’s photographs, then map where and when those types appear within the city. The results reveal the growth rate and location of prisons and other civic structures, signs of ever-increasing systems of government control.

To Parker, the implications of new administrative buildings and residential neighborhoods that were already transforming the city might not have been apparent. For the photographers he hired to collaborate on his project, however, the stakes were somewhat higher.

Within Parker’s oeuvre, what differences can be observed among images taken by these photographers, and what might those differences indicate about national values in the late nineteenth century? Over the fifteen-year span of his endeavor, Parker is known to have worked with seven photographers: Adriano De Bonis, Giovanni Battista Colamedici, Filippo Lais, Francesco Sidoli, Carlo Baldassare Simelli (the most assiduous of Parker’s collaborators), Charles Smeaton (a Canadian photographer whom Parker had met in England and encouraged to join him in Rome), and Filippo Spina.[21] While earlier publications featuring selections of Parker’s imagery cite the photographer’s name, the complete catalog published the photographs anonymously. Attributions of images within the Parker collection have thus been difficult to establish, though great progress has been made in recent years.

Based on the data, it is possible to map Parker’s photographs on Lanciani’s *Forma Urbis* to reconstruct how the collection came into being—who made the image, when and where it was made, and what kind of subject. *Emporium (Rome, Italy) Excavations*, for example, is one of several photographs Parker took of recently excavated antiquities (fig. 5). His inclusion of a large-format camera in the foreground and a looming, late Renaissance structure on the horizon is unusual. More often, signs of the city’s development after the fall of the Roman Empire appear as an afterthought, a charming detail—a street lamp, a clothesline—at the edge of the composition, what Roland Barthes would call a *punctum*.[22] The layer of history conspicuously absent from this image, the medieval period, offers insight into the values associated with the past in the nineteenth century, particularly with regard to ideologies of nationalism.
When Parker made his first trip to Italy, in 1859, he set out to study and catalog mosaics and medieval art in Rome and Ravenna. A bookseller and editor in Oxford at the time, Parker was acquainted with the pioneers of the Arts and Crafts movement, including Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris, who were students at the University of Oxford. Inspired by the writings of John Ruskin, whom Parker also knew, Burne-Jones and Morris helped form a second iteration of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of artists and writers whose aesthetic and social vision rejected the brutality and bleakness of industrial society in favor of the handmade craft and workshop traditions of the Middle Ages. When Parker began spending extended periods in Rome in 1864, he brought with him a British appreciation of medieval culture as an antidote to the barbarity of industrial society. At the onset of his photographic project, he focused above all on documenting the churches and art of the Middle Ages and commissioned other photographers, notably Lais, Simelli, and Smeaton, to do the same.

By the time he photographed the amphorae at Emporium four years later, Parker's tastes had changed. Soon after Unification under the Savoy monarchy in 1861, excavations in Rome, carried out in fits and starts since Napoleon’s occupation in the first decade of the nineteenth century, gained new momentum.[23] This was particularly true for Palatine Hill and the Roman Forum, sites long associated with Rome’s mythic beginnings. Under the direction of Visconti, followed by Rosa and later Lanciani, these excavations did as much to uncover the Eternal City’s ancient origins as they did to demolish centuries of later accretions. The Middle Ages were the greatest casualty of Roman archaeology, an era "without any significant cultural value," as Parker himself wrote in 1874, whose houses and infrastructure only obstructed access to antiquity.[24] During the Risorgimento, ancient Rome, from its democratic republic to its formidable empire, offered the most compelling common heritage for the nascent Italian state. Medieval buildings erected on top of these ruins became subjects of photography before disappearing in the wake of continued digging for their ancient prototypes.

Why would Parker go to such effort to photograph traces of Rome’s early history such as this stand of travel amphorae and make the image available to a British audience? Why did this photograph and others like it hold such appeal in late nineteenth-century Britain? While Italy was in the throes of undermining the strength of the Papacy and forging its identity as a modern nation, England was at the height of its imperial conquest. As universal expositions showcased the triumphs of colonial expansion, the British Museum displayed unrivaled collections of Greek and Roman sculpture, presenting the British Empire as the modern
successor to the great cultures of antiquity. Parker’s *Emporium (Rome, Italy) Excavations* and other photographs helped make this association more tangible, putting images of Rome’s millennia-old accomplishments in the hands of the British everyman, whether in photographic catalogs at the nation’s libraries or in prints available at a local bookshop for a modest fee.

Ordinarily, a photograph like *Emporium (Rome, Italy) Excavations* would not prompt us to think about the history of medieval Rome, nor would it encourage us to consider different national perspectives of this history nearly a millennium later. We would not be inclined to see this photograph as a product of nineteenth-century urbanism, nor would we view it as a consequence of the political and social upheaval that accompanied Rome’s transformation as capital of a newly unified Italy. Yet, when viewed as visual data in a system of images that have been digitally charted onto a period map of Rome, this photograph reveals a far bigger picture that situates Parker’s archive within the archaeological, photographic, political, social, and national histories. Equipped with these new perspectives, we begin to ask different questions of this imagery. Rather than study it for insight into the history of early Rome, we question the modern circumstances that have shaped our perceptions of that history, and the ways in which new media—whether photography in the nineteenth century or digital technology today—encourages us to consider the past once again in contemporary terms.

Lindsay Harris is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor-in-Charge of the School of Classical Studies at the American Academy in Rome. Her publications and exhibitions explore how photographs both document and shape perceptions of modernity from the nineteenth century to today. These include, for example, her first book, currently underway, *Photography and the Myths of Primitivism in Italy, 1904–1954*; an exhibition she organized in 2014 at the American Academy in Rome, *History Recast: Photography and Roman Sculpture in Contemporary Art*, and her catalogue essay, “Before the Eyes of Thousands: The 54th Massachusetts Regiment and the Shaw Memorial in Twentieth Century Art,” for the National Gallery of Art exhibition, *Tell It with Pride: The 54th Massachusetts Regiment and Saint-Gaudens’ Shaw Memorial*, held in 2013. This study is part of her research at the American Academy in Rome, which investigates how interactive digital technology can fuel new approaches in art history.

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**Notes**


[6] Parker, Historical Photographs, iii.
[7] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[16] Insolera, Roma moderna, 73.
[17] Torlonia’s collection of Roman sculpture was originally amassed by the German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann while writing his most important book, Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums (The History of Ancient Art), first published in 1764. Parker, Historical Photographs, iii.
[18] In 1969, the Italian State acquired this building as the seat of the Direzione Generale Antichità e Belle Arti (now the Ministero per i Beni Attività Culturali). It currently serves as headquarters for the Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione, which, among its other responsibilities, runs a museum devoted to photography.
Illustrations

Fig. 1, John Henry Parker, *Emporium (Rome, Italy) Excavations, the Ancient Marble Wharf with Amphorae*, 1868. Albumen print. American Academy in Rome, Photographic Archive, Rome.

[return to text]

Fig. 2, John Henry Parker, *Emporium (Rome, Italy) Excavations*, 1868, viewed in search by chronology.

[return to text]
Fig. 3, John Henry Parker, *Emporium (Rome, Italy) Excavations*, 1868, viewed in search by topography.

Fig. 4, John Henry Parker, *Emporium (Rome, Italy) Excavations*, 1868, viewed in search by subject (typology).
Fig. 5, John Henry Parker, *Emporium (Rome, Italy) Excavations*, 1868, viewed in search by photographer.