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Imagining a Nation's Capital: Project Narrative

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Abstract:

This study focuses on a collection of photographs taken between 1864 and 1879 under the direction of John Henry Parker, a British editor and dilettante archaeologist, to provide a multi-perspective panorama of Rome around the time the city became capital of Italy in 1870. Emblematic of the nineteenth-century impulse to collect, document, and catalogue information about contemporary society as well as the past, the Parker Collection has long been praised as a "valuable" illustration of the early history of Rome. Yet the value of this imagery as an illustration of Rome's modernity—the construction, demolition, beliefs, and ideals that accompanied the city's emergence as the Italian capital—has yet to be discovered. This interactive research platform and essay use digital technology to investigate the Parker Collection as a set of data about late nineteenth-century Italy, revealing not only the interests and ideologies that shaped Rome into a modern, capital city, but also how digital media can spark new approaches to art history.

Digital Humanities and Art History

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Imagining a Nation's Capital: Project Narrative

by Lindsay Harris

and Luke Hollis, with Emily Pugh, Lavinia Ciuffa, and Maria Sole Fabri

Project Narrative

Initial Concept

The project *Imagining a Nation's Capital* began with a question about the relationship between two nineteenth-century phenomena: how can photography represent national identity? From the onset, the project concentrated on Italy, where the emergence of photography as a widespread form of image-making dovetailed with national unification, first under the Savoy monarchy in 1861, and later, in 1870, with the annexation of the Papal States and the establishment of Rome as capital. At the center of the study were photographs of Rome taken between 1861 and 1870, when the city once central to the Roman Empire, the Papacy, and the Grand Tour took on its new role. What did photographers represent during this decade of profound transformation? Did they reproduce views that had long appealed to the city's tourists? Or did they eschew Rome's famous monuments to record street views, vernacular scenes, and signs of urbanization evolving to meet the needs of a modern nation's capital? Digital technology offered a new way to approach these questions and gain a fresh perspective on how the development of a capital city, charged with representing a nation and its common heritage and shared ideals, could be conveyed in visual terms through photography—or so I thought when the project was first conceived, with at best a rudimentary understanding of digital research tools and their ability to fuel new thinking about visual art.

Inspired in part by web features for exhibitions I was working on in the [Department of Photographs at the National Gallery of Art](#), the digital publication initially comprised three components in a virtual exhibition that users could search, organize, and view according to their own interests. The first component was a set of some five hundred photographs of Rome taken by a range of practitioners—professionals, amateurs, Italians, and foreigners—between 1861 and 1870. In addition to obtaining high-quality images of these works, I planned to compile information on the creation, distribution, and history of the photographs, including the photographer's name, nationality, life dates, and gender; dates of the negative and the print used for this project; and medium and provenance. These categories would then be tagged to allow users to search for specific elements and create their own image groups. The second component was a map of Rome: a high-resolution scan of the 1866 census map noting the major monuments, churches, roads, and inhabited areas at the time Rome acquired its new status. The final component was to be one or more essays on how mapping photographs of

Rome during this formative decade helps us understand what constitutes an image of Italian identity.

Virtual access to photographs in depth, digital mapping, data analysis, and a critical essay that assessed what could be gleaned from these investigations laid the groundwork for a digital, “choose-your-own-adventure” photography exhibition. No one web application included all of the elements I wished to incorporate, but, with guidance from [Emily Pugh](#), an architectural historian, web developer, and National Gallery colleague, I found several sites that featured aspects I hoped to incorporate into a new digital tool. These included in-depth access to the photographic image, as in the Museum of Modern Art's [Object:Photo](#) and [The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture 1839 to Today](#); the ability to chart works of art and their creation in geospatial terms, as in Yale University's [Photogrammar](#), the University of California, Berkeley's [Living New Deal](#), and Harvard University's [AfricaMap](#); and the use of digital mapping to gain insight into urban development, which the University of Oregon's [Imago:Urbis](#) modeled with a mapping project on visual art and urbanism in eighteenth-century Rome. *Imagining a Nation's Capital* aimed to build on these existing digital resources, as well as high-resolution scans of photographs that museums and archives had already gone to great pains and expense to digitize. With no digital technology know-how to speak of, I had little idea where to begin, except to find good people with complementary expertise to join the project.

Collaboration and New Directions

Soon after the project proposal was accepted, I started a yearlong fellowship at the [American Academy in Rome](#). One of the thirty interdisciplinary scholars and artists in residence with me was [Leigh Lieberman](#), a doctoral student in classical archaeology and data manager for the [American excavations at Morgantina, in Sicily](#). Thanks to Leigh and her network of emerging scholars and professionals using digital technology to break new ground in archaeology, I began to partner on *Imagining a Nation's Capital* with her colleague [Luke Hollis](#), a web developer and sole proprietor of [Archimedes Digital](#). Luke's fluency in a broad range of digital languages, software, and frameworks, and his experience working with archaeologists and other humanities scholars, gave the project a robust digital framework and the promise of a new, more feasible and provocative direction.

The Photographs

In Rome, I began to investigate the [Photographic Archive \(Fototeca\) of the American Academy in Rome](#). A sizable portion of its holdings had been digitized, and the staff had experience developing a virtual exhibition of its [photographs by Giuseppe Gatteschi](#). Alessandra Capodiferro, head of the Fototeca and a classical archaeologist, and her colleague Lavinia Ciuffa suggested I learn more about the academy's holdings of [photographs by John Henry Parker](#), a British historian and archaeology enthusiast who had worked with local photographers to document the early history of Rome between 1864 and 1879. This group of photographs was ideally suited to *Imagining a Nation's Capital*: it spanned the fifteen-year period during which Rome became capital of Italy, it included images by Italian and foreign photographers taken throughout Rome and its environs, and the Fototeca had already created digital images of its holdings of the 240 surviving glass plate negatives from the Parker archive.

Further, the project could grow to incorporate the complete Parker archive, which totals some thirty-three hundred photographs housed within the city among the [British School at Rome](#), the [Istituto Archeologico Germanico](#), the [Istituto Centrale per la Grafica](#), and the [Archivio Fotografico Comunale at the Archivio Capitolino](#). Typically studied as a visual record of archaeological discovery in Rome in the late nineteenth century, or for insight into the early history of the Eternal City, the Parker Collection now offered a rich, untapped resource for understanding the intricate relationships between the archaeological, photographic, political, social, and national histories of Rome. The photographs were also poised to help pioneer new research methods grounded in digital technology.

The Maps

Once the photographs were selected, the next task was to find a suitable map to chart Parker's images within a geospatial representation of late nineteenth-century Rome. Again, conversations with scholars in other disciplines at the American Academy proved essential to developing the project further. We needed a map that illustrated the confluence of archaeological discovery, modernization, and urban planning that transformed Rome during this period. Whether American, British, or Italian, the archaeologists who weighed in on the project agreed that the quintessential map to convey this information was the *Forma Urbis Romae*, published by Rodolfo Lanciani, one of the most prolific archaeologists of the period, between 1893 and 1901. Yet, despite the undisputed significance of this map for scholars of ancient Rome, obtaining or producing a digital image, with a resolution high enough to zoom in on the intricate details and layers of Rome's urban fabric, proved quite a challenge. Eventually we gained access to high-resolution scans of all forty-six plates of Lanciani's *Forma Urbis* thanks to the heroic efforts of [Rabun Taylor](#) at the University of Texas at Austin, Allan Ceen of [Studium Urbis](#), and [Mike and Ted O'Neill](#) of the Aqueduct Hunter, along with Rosanna Ciolina of the Biblioteca di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte in Rome.

Building the Web Application

With these tools in hand, my colleague Luke Hollis set out to develop the digital component of *Imagining a Nation's Capital* into a web application that could offer new perspectives on larger trends in the John Henry Parker Photography Collection. The aim was to emphasize usability and offer a streamlined interface that integrated archival scans from the Parker Collection with pertinent metadata such as year, photographer, subject, and object identification. Well-designed client and server applications would automatically facilitate creation of faceted and full text searches by offering a robust API to access and export data. The data model would thus be easily customizable for researchers to add and modify additional core data fields as the project grew and transformed, including the need to identify various new metadata facets for the Parker Collection photographs or photographs from other sources.

Accessing and sharing the application's georeferenced data was to be conducted through the use of GeoJSON and GeoJSON-LD, drawing on widely accepted schemas and field standards to export and publish linked data to make the Parker Collection's geospatial metadata interoperable across systems. This was particularly important in order to foster collaboration across disciplines and provide useful data to researchers in a format relevant to their context.

It also spoke to a larger goal: to simplify analysis of historic geospatial data and offer a comprehensive platform for creating, publishing, and sharing data. Thus, from the onset, it held potential for applications beyond the realm of art history.

Mapping the Photographs

A second map emerged along with a way to integrate photographs, maps, and analytical data that further honed the project. In a presentation at the American Academy in the fall of 2014, [John Maciuika](#), recipient of the Rome Prize in Historic Preservation, explained his research on reconstructions of the Eternal Palace in Berlin using a digital research platform developed at UCLA called [Hypercities Earth](#). The platform incorporates georeferenced historical maps; a window that allows users to create their own digital narratives based on texts, photographs, videos, and other maps; and, using Google Earth, the ability to orient the map to reproduce the perspective of the photographer, indicating what the photographer did and did not photograph. The potential to chart the sites represented in the Parker archive on a georeferenced, historical map of the period promised to reveal the parallel trajectories of archaeology, modernization, and photography in ways previously unimagined.

Eager to incorporate into our project the powerful mapping possibilities of Hypercities but in a way that would place greater emphasis on in-depth analysis of a photograph or work of art, we reached out to the Hypercities team. With their extremely helpful input, we developed the *Imagining a Nation's Capital* application and research tools to be compatible with Hypercities maps and data sources. In addition, Hypercities researchers Todd Presener and David Shepard graciously shared with us a second important map of Rome, published by John Murray to accompany his guidebook of the city in 1873. That year also marked the first official urban plan (*piano regolatore*) of Rome, published by Alessandro Viviani in response to the city's changing needs as the new capital of Italy. It was also the midpoint of Parker's photography project. The Murray map thus provided a second geospatial image of Rome that offered yet another layer to our project.

Writing and Digital Analysis

With the web application well under way, we began to see how mapping and analyzing Parker's photographs using these new tools shed light on the images' relationship to Rome and its urbanism as the city became a nation's capital. Though the new discoveries were quite compelling, the essay I began to write to convey them read as if it were intended for a traditional print publication. The question arose: as we develop new digital resources to study art history, how should art historical writing evolve to integrate these tools?

Once again, input from an interdisciplinary group of scholars and writers proved critical to brainstorming ideas for a new approach. The project's web application enables users to explore a set of data—the Parker Collection photographs—and come to myriad new conclusions about the data and its relationship to Rome's social, political, and urban development at the time. To use a phrase coined by Marsha Kinder, our web application enables multiple [database narratives](#), or new ways of recounting research results in a kaleidoscopic, rather than teleological, presentation. A scholarly essay based on our web application could emphasize

these new methods while demonstrating how to carry them out. I thus experimented with a new methodology, one that modeled how to use the web application and articulated conclusions about how photography helped visualize Rome's transformation in the late nineteenth century. The result is a new approach to writing for digital scholarship that integrates the web application analyzed in the text as closely as possible.

Future Development

Future development will open new opportunities for the geopublishing application used for *Imagining a Nation's Capital*, which will extend georeferencing of the archival photographic scans to eleven dimensions so that users may view the Parker Collection photographs from the exact perspective that each photographer had while taking the picture. This will enable new avenues of inquiry into close study of the photographers' techniques and micro-decisions, such as selecting and orienting the perspectives of their images. Development of the application codebase will continue so that it may be used as a simple and intuitive geopublishing platform relevant to several different fields of research to enhance future collaboration and partnerships between researchers across disciplines.

We also hope to partner with other institutions in Rome to develop *Imagining a Nation's Capital* into a shared web portal that includes the entire John Henry Parker Photography Collection and, eventually, other photographs of Rome at this turning point in the city's millennia-old history.

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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