

“Papa Grigorio a li scavi”: Giovanni Montiroli’s watercolors of Porta Maggiore

Claire L. Lyons

In 1837, a project was launched to liberate Rome’s Porta Maggiore from centuries of overbuilding. Since late antiquity, entry into the city at this busy juncture was confined to a single thoroughfare encumbered by fortifications, private buildings, and earthen embankments. Refurbishing the monumental double arch erected by Claudius was one of the major urban renewal initiatives of Pope Gregory XVI, who carried out several important archaeological programs during his 23-year pontificate. Motivated both by the desire to beautify the city and to generate gainful employment for poor laborers, excavations conducted during June and July of 1838 unexpectedly brought to light an intact Roman tomb. With its unconventional design and sculptured friezes depicting scenes of a bakery, the curious structure caused a sensation, overshadowing the unveiling of the grand Claudian façade. The Pope visited the novel monument, identified as the Tomb of Eurysaces, twice that summer.

An album of finely executed watercolor vignettes depicts the papal inspection and the excavations.¹ Bearing the gilt-stamped arms of Gregory XVI, the volume is titled “Porta Gregoriana al monumento dell’Acqua Claudia aperta il VI Febbraio MDCCCXXXX”. February 6, 1840, marked Gregory’s anniversary, when a new passage in the Claudian arch (the Porta Prenestina) was officially inaugurated and renamed “Porta Gregoriana” in recognition of the Pontiff’s patronage. The celebratory event was illustrated for posterity by a young Umbrian architect, Giovanni Montiroli, whose signature appears below each of the illustrations. Giuseppe De Fabris, sculptor and member of the Antiquities and Fine Arts Commission, supplied a one-page preface dedicated to the “Beatissimo Padre”.

Progress on dismantling the accretion of later structures around Porta Maggiore can be tracked through reports submitted by Fabris, Luigi Grifi, and fellow archaeologists. Archival documentation of the three-year operation has now been studied comprehensively by R. Coates-Stephens.² Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces erected his distinctive tomb in the mid-1st c. B.C. Subsequently, it was concealed in the fabric of the Aurelian Walls. Although this construction damaged its E façade, the funeral monument was preserved largely intact and eventually saw the light of day once the tower that encased it was demolished. Despite the idiosyncratic decoration of Eurysaces’s tomb and majestic stature of the Porta Maggiore, these remarkable monuments of Imperial Rome were published only cursorily at the time.

Supplementing written accounts, the watercolors record the state of the buildings at the termination of the restoration project. They comprise a pair of topographical plans showing how the zone was to be reconfigured by the architect Giuseppe Valadier. Six *vedute* next depict Gregory’s arrival and appraisal of the site, accompanied by two views of Porta Maggiore as it appeared prior to excavation. Studies of the tomb architecture, relief friezes, and portraits are shown on two following leaves (fig. 1). The volume concludes with three plates illustrating contiguous archaeological features and various artifacts that were most likely associated with tombs in the vicinity.

Montiroli’s watercolors bear witness to the baker’s tomb and the Claudian aqueduct arch — centerpieces in Valadier’s proposal for an harmonious entry into Rome — before the inexorable pace of urbanization again altered the physical surroundings. Although abundant topographi-

-
- 1 Giuseppe De Fabris, “Porta Gregoriana al Monumento dell’Acqua Claudia ...” (Rome 1840); Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, acc. 900013*. One color plate is reproduced in M. Roth, C. Lyons and C. Merewether, *Irresistible decay: ruins reclaimed* (Los Angeles 1997) 61, and another on the website www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/digitized_collections/virtual/id/
 - 2 R. Coates-Stephens, *Porta Maggiore: monument and landscape. Archaeology and topography of the southern Esquiline from the Late Republican period to the present* (BullCom Suppl. 12, Rome 2004).