

The Order of Things

- appropriating time and space in early guidebooks to Rome

Anna Blennow, University of Gothenburg / Istituto Svedese di Studi Classici a Roma

A friend of mine was recently about to go to Rome for the first time, and I as well as other friends had been giving her recommendations on what to do and what to see in such plenty that she finally said: 'Now I have so many travel tips on my list that I won't even need to go to Rome!'

Lists are an essential part of almost every guidebook. Lists of places, temples, hills, quarters, towers, popes, emperors, works of art, markets, restaurants and shops. But what do we do with these lists? How do we use them? How do we perform them? How are we going to transpose the totality of knowledge contained in them into our minds and into our cognitive system? How can we get close to, untangle and appreciate *the order of things*?

In the dawn of guidebook-like texts, in late Antiquity, **the regionary catalogues** of Rome, known under the titles *Curiosum* and *Notitia*, are in fact nothing but lists. In a sort of inventory of Rome, region by region, we learn all we need to know about the buildings and other sites of the city.¹ Region seven, for example, *Via Lata* ('Broad street', the via del Corso of today), contains, as we are informed, 'fountain of Ganymede, first company of the city watch, new arch, fountain of Jupiter, shrine of the goat, field of Agrippa, temple of the Sun and barracks, porticoes of Vipsania and Constantine, equestrian statue of Tiridates the king of Armenia, forum of pigs [...] 3805 apartment blocks, 120 mansions, 25 public warehouses, 75 public baths, 76 public fountains, 16 public bakeries...' At the end of the catalogue, the text sums up: 'Libraries: 28, Obelisks: 6, Bridges: 8, Hills: 7, Fields: 8, Fora: 11, Baths: 11, Aqueducts: 18, and Roads: 29.'

Now, what are these lists? Are we meant to walk along the monuments in the order that they are listed? Are we meant to learn them by heart, as a periodical system or the multiplication table? How can we use the contents of the lists? Do we even need to be in Rome in order to do it?

The very number of everything contained in the city of Rome are a source of astonishment – scholars have even suggested that the numbers in many cases must be exaggerated.² Somehow, the lists are upgrading themselves to something more than a list, something more than a catalogue of rather anonymous buildings, to a state of seven wonders of the world, paired with a curiosity and peculiarity that precedes the anecdotal way of describing the monuments of Antiquity during the Middle Ages. The very existence of a Fountain of Ganymedes and a Shrine of the Goat is tickling our fantasy, and the vast number of buildings, ornaments and infrastructure makes us believe that Rome must be the mightiest and most powerful city on earth. Because what else could we do with the lists, but to be amazed? Why do we have to know that Rome has seven hills (although the city in fact has more than seven hills, and one can never remember which hills to count in), or exactly 18 aqueducts? Is the list a curiosity, meant

¹ The regionary catalogues are edited by H. Jordan in his *Topographie der Stadt Rom im Alterthum* II, Berlin 1871, pp. 539–574.

² As does N. Morley in *Metropolis and Hinterland – the City of Rome and the Italian Economy 200 BC–AD 200*, Cambridge 1996, p. 2.

to always fill us with astonishment and awe, disguised in a cloak of correctness, adequateness and objectivity? Or is the list purely symbolic, and in that case, for what?

When looking into the history and development of the genre of the guidebook, it turns out that a very important predecessor to the proper guidebooks, except for the regionary catalogues, and other topographic literature from Ancient Greece and Rome, are calendars. In ancient Rome, there were several kinds of calendars for public use, *fasti*, often displayed in grandiose marble inscriptions, in the form of lists.³ The consular *fasti* listed the names of the consuls for each year – this was the Roman way of counting years: 'during the consulate of so-and-so' – the triumphal *fasti* listed the generals that were responsible for triumphs in war, and the dates and place for each triumph; there were calendars for market days, and calendars proper, showing the days in a vertical row, month by month, marking out the *dies fasti* and *dies nefasti*, the days on which it was allowed or not to perform certain public acts. Here, we have the lists in their purest form – but instead of listing physical objects, as the regionary catalogues, they list time itself, and also transform the persons and events listed in the consular or triumphal lists into time.

In Late Antiquity – the same period as when the regionary catalogues were compiled – also manuscript calendars were produced, in a much more elaborated way than the *fasti* concept. The so-called Calendar of 354 is an exclusive, illuminated manuscript produced for a certain Valentinus (preserved in copies from Carolingian times and later).⁴ It contains images of the planets with a calendar of the hours, the signs of the Zodiac, a complete calendar with reference to the birthdays of important persons (among which Jesus Christ is mentioned), lists of consuls, calculations of the dates of Easter, lists of city prefects of Rome, lists of the popes, lists of commemoration dates of martyrs, a description of the regions of the city, and chronicles of the Bible and of the city of Rome and its rulers.

A century later, the author Polemius Silvius wrote another calendar (produced for Eucherius, the bishop of Lyon), combining the Roman festivals with the Christian liturgical year.⁵ Here, we find several instructive lists: emperors, Roman provinces, animal names, tables for calculating Easter and the phases of the moon, a section called *Quae sint Romae*, with the now familiar way of reporting: 'seven hills, eight fields, nine bridges...', then some fables, a bit on Roman history, animal voices, weights and measures, meters of poetry and a survey of philosophical sects.

These late antique calendars are, thus, not only guides to time, but also to space, to history and to religion, just as a guidebook today, although an interwoven narrative nowadays has softened the rigidity of the lists. Importantly, they are also dedicated to, and written for, wealthy and powerful persons – we must not imagine that Valentinus used his list of city prefects or popes each and every day, or that bishop Eucherius went around to each hill and each field in Rome when he visited the city. No, these lists and compilations signify something else. The moment they are handed over to their noble receiver, they tell him not the number of aqueducts or the dates for next Easter, but convey this message: Time and space belong to you. History belongs to you, not because you know it by heart, but because you own the description of it. Rome belongs to you, not because you know every street and every bridge of it, but because you own its

³ See for example *New Pauly* online, s.v. (referenceworks.brillonline.com).

⁴ H. Stern, *Le Calendrier de 354: étude sur son texte et ses illustrations*, Paris 1953.

⁵ Text in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* AA 9, 511–551. Not all parts of the work are extant.

inventory list. And if you own time, and own Rome, who could then be more powerful than you?

It may be that the lists are not at all about knowledge, but about appropriation. Like English noblemen of the eighteenth century, we are able to proceed through our curiosity cabinets, where our dominion of all the parts of the world are displayed in the form of ordered objects, and the existence of inventory lists serves to show the invited guests and spectators that all this is ours and ours only. It is not the objects themselves, but the accumulated mass of them that forms the message. The objects are perhaps not even meant for us – we do not need to know them, talk about them, or use them – we only need to own them.

When we buy our *Blue Guide*, *Rough Guide* or *Whatever Guide* to Rome a couple of weeks before getting on the plane, we have taken the first step towards an appropriation of Rome, just as generations before us have done, whether on the road to pilgrimage or pillage. We may come as humble devotees in search of blessings, indulgences, and relics to touch and perhaps bring home, or as colonial masters without understanding or respect, and with only our own commodity in sight, but when we go somewhere – it could be argued – it is because we want to own something of this particular spot of the earth. We want to lay our hands on experiences, on beauty, on sunsets, on jewellery and bags and sandals cheaper than the ones at home. We want to add something to what we already own, and the essence of traveling is perhaps to create your own list, which you then can duplicate and divide with friends and relatives: This is *my Rome!* Let me show you *my Rome!* – and of course putting some things on the Secret List, which you will only give to the select few, because we do not want to share lists unconditionally, we do not want to copy them slavishly, no, we want to add our own things, and not only walk in somebody else's footsteps. Thus, the lists are always acting in a system of transmitting, transforming, developing; the objects are changing meaning, climbing on the top-list; objects are exchanged, and as the city changes, our lists must always be updated. It is the act of making a list, or owning a list, that is important and that states something.

Thus, the *order* of things in a guidebook list is in fact (to push the theory a bit) necessary mainly for the reputation and reliability of the guidebook author. Who would walk through the Vatican Museums, room by room, checking off each and every object from the guidebook description? Rather, they convey a sense of space – almost 40 pages in the Blue Guide is a lot – and could of course also in that aspect be useful to navigate from (I am now standing next to the *Apollo del Belvedere*, so which direction should I take to get out of here?). Who would slavishly route the monuments, one by one, in each one of the regions of Rome? It is not the order, but the mass of things that is the message. You have the book, the catalogue, so you know, without actually knowing, what there is, and what you have got. The ingenious device of the guidebook, of the inventory list, is that you do not need to see all these things, not even know them, to be sure that they are there. You only need to hold the book in your hand. The cover of the book is enough to signify to yourself and to the world in general that you are in control of place, of space, of time. You will be comfortable in the feeling that the author of the guidebook has created chronological, topographical and typological order in the universe that is this city, and thus made your existence here meaningful. It will be the backdrop against which you venture out into the unknown to make you very own list.