

Cultural Heritage Protection and Management in Post-Unification Rome

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Abstract:

After Italy was finally unified in 1861 the rise of liberal principles in defense of the individual liberty to buy and sell everything that was in his possession prevented Parliament from approving strict legislation on the sale and export of art objects and antiquities. Since the Government was struggling to approve a general law on the protection of cultural heritage, the right to buy and sell private property was also extended to private art objects and antiquities.

The annexation of Rome to the Kingdom of Italy led to the urgency of taking measures for stemming the effects of this lack of legislation. The construction policy after 1870 was proved to be disastrous for the antiquities of Rome: with the construction of new districts, ministries and large infrastructures were the earthworks that shook the ancient topography and brought to light an enormous amount of archaeological objects. It was not easy to manage and control the numerous construction sites across the city, the accidental archaeological finds and the illegal archaeological excavations. In this social landscape, archaeology became a battleground between conservative values and progressive ideas. In those years Archaeology represented the discipline that more than any other was granted special recognition and specific autonomy. The privileged position of the archaeology sector was linked to the importance of monumental heritage in quantitative terms but also to the solid scientific and technical knowledge on

which the discipline was grounded and to the numerous remarkable personalities that represented archaeology.

The necessity to control the fast-spreading phenomenon of the sale of works of art abroad belonging to private collections that would then be broken up or to one of the numerous excavation sites, was the main incentive that prompted the Ministry of Public Education to attempt, on many occasions, to draw up a bill on the preservation of cultural heritage. However, an effective law was not approved until 1909 and subsequently the export of artworks and antiquities remained an unregulated sector until then.

Taking advantage of the lacking legislation many foreigners museums and collectors built their collections in Italy at that time. During the last two decades of the Nineteenth century the American collections of antiquities were being built. In this first stage, the Americans timidly approached the Italian market, starting to purchase small objects thanks to the intermediation of occasional intermediaries. A few years later, at the beginning of Twentieth century, a vast amount of private funds and donations reached museums and university departments. This new philanthropic activity made it possible for the American museums' curators to buy archaeological objects of great value which flooded into the Roman antiquity market. The era of big acquisitions meant that the great American museums such as the Metropolitan in New York or the Fine Arts in Boston could compete with their European counterparts.

It was only in 1939 that the Italian Government could finally established that the the property of the subsoil was public and, as a consequence, that all the archaeological objects and monuments still hidden underground were property of the State. However, it took the Parliament more than seventy-eight years to win the vigorous battle between the right to private property and the public interest in protecting archaeological evidences. During this period occurred one of the most irreparable and severe instances of damage to Italian historical and artistic heritage in the country's history.