

THE STEPHEN INSTONE TRAVEL AWARD 2019

A journey through Latium and Campania

By Valentino Gargano

When I first applied for the Stephen Instone Travel Award and proposed the first draft of a possible journey in Italy, I realised that many could -quite fairly- object to my proposal and question my logic. Why would an Italian student possibly use funds and scholarships in order to visit the same places that he saw surrounding himself in his life? This question arises in first place, and would probably be corroborated by hearing that the *iter* designed would not even comprehend Rome, yet that it would pass through the ancient sites and museums of Lazio and Campania, where I have spent all of my life before moving to London, in an uneventful small provincial town called Gaeta.

Yet the answer is simple and plain. I have lived enough in Italy and have enough grown as a classicist through the years spent there so as to notice how underrated is the historic relevance of these places and how dangerously this ignorance jeopardised the surviving and maintenance of such realities. It seemed unfair to me that places of the greatest importance for a classicist (the tomb of Cicero is the most blatant instance) should live in a state of negligence and remain unacknowledged and covered in dust. Perhaps the Coliseum may appear more appealing for the average tourist, but that is the point. If given an opportunity to speak to classicists – and therefore not to average tourists- why not exploiting this possibility to shed light on the existence of such sites? One side of me, I confess, was probably also endeavouring to find a connection between two parts of my life, radically different, one in a small provincial Italian town, and the other in a modern and gigantic metropolis as London. Diverging in the environment, opposite in customs, different in my acquaintances, these two sides of me were compelled by my own self to be reunited, logically connected and integrated. And when this possibility was granted to me, this is what happened.

2nd September 2019

I begin my travels perhaps at the least interesting site, but the most appealing to me. Gaeta (in Latin *Cajeta*) lies surrounded by the Aurunci Mountains and the gulf which inherited the name of the town. Exactly midway between Rome and Naples, this is where I have moved to when I was a child, and where I have spent all of my life ever since before London. After falling into Rome's dominion in 345 BC as part of the so called *Latium adjectum*, Gaeta's relevance grew stronger and stronger as it developed both as a harbour and a fashionable residence for wealthy patricians. The greatest testimony may be found in the villa and mausoleum of Lucius Munatius Plancus located in the highest point of the town on a hill called Monte Orlando. Probably one of Cicero's pupils, L. M. Plancus became one of the most influential political figures in Rome in the first century BC thanks to his engagement in military affairs alongside with Caesar in Gaul and during the Civil War. He founded colonies such as Lugdunum and Raurica (Basel and Lyon) and supported Octavian in his political ascension to the extent that it was Plancus who proposed to the Senate that Octavian should be named 'Augustus', as Suetonius reports. Some references to this brilliant career can be seen in the epigraph above the Mausoleum door.



“L(ucius) MVNATIVS L(ucii) F(ilius) L(ucii) N(epos) L(ucii) PRON(epos) PLANCVS CO(n)S(ul) CENS(or) IMP(erator) ITER(um) VII VIR EPVLON(um) TRIVMP(hator) EX RAETIS AEDEM SATVRNI FECIT DE MANIBIS AGROS DIVISIT IN ITALIA BENEVENTI IN GALLIA COLONIAS DEDVXIT LVGDVNVM ET RAVRICAM”

“Lucius Munatius Plancus, son of Lucius, grandson of Lucius, and great-grandson of Lucius, consul, censor, twice victorious general, member of the priestly college of the epulones, he triumphed over the Raeti, built the temple of Saturn from the spoils of war, and divided lands in Italy at Beneventum. In Gaul he founded the colonies of Lugdunum and Raurica”



The Mausoleum, with its circular cylindrical body, covered in ancient times by a mound of earth and internally consisting of four rectangular cells for Plancus and his family, perfectly epitomises wealth and

power, as well as a certain Horatian strife to be eternally remembered and become *aere perennius*.



It is tragically ironic that such a monument, inspired by the same magnificence and shape of Augustus' tomb, should be instead left pray to oblivion and decay. Having been opened just a couple of years ago, this was my first time visiting the mausoleum, despite having spent most of my life in Gaeta. This left me wondering what immortality meant for the ancients and to what extent this idea passed over to us, whose forgetfulness managed to let the fame of one of the most powerful men of the ancient world fade and almost be annihilated.

Immortality seems to modern men to be somehow subject to conditions and situations. Plancus would perhaps think of his last dwelling as the most effective means through which he would obtain eternal fame, yet this form of memory seems not to perfectly line up with our idea of memory. Cicero's tomb in Formia, which I visited on the same day, appears to demonstrate this thesis. Surely it is not due to this monument that Cicero obtained everlasting glory (the tomb has been closed for ages and still opens only a few days in the year), but through his writings and works. Is literature then more powerful and effective than art?



This is where Cicero (allegedly) rests alongside his daughter Tulliola, whose tomb lies next to her father's. Here, in Formia, Cicero was unfortunately (or fortunately, if you are one of Cicero's detractors) reached by Mark Antony's goons in response to his opposition to the Second Triumvirate and as the immediate effect of his proscription. Here, as Plutarch reports, Cicero was murdered, his hands and head cut off and brought to Rome, where they were nailed to the *Rostra*. Once again, Formiae acquired such ominous fame and reputation not thanks to this quite magniloquent work of art, Cicero's tomb, but rather thanks to Plutarch's literary artistry.

On top of that, Formia holds other significant evidence to this 'inequality in treatment' between figurative art and literature. Some classicists surely remember a certain *Formiana villa*, which Catullus deprecated as the favourite place where Mamurra, one of the richest and most powerful of Caesar's men, would devote himself to debauchery and profligacy.

One might remember the famous *mentula*, the 'affectionate' epithet that Catullus would employ quite often to refer to him, or his accusations to be essentially a *pathicus* or *cinaedus*. Perhaps more useful than knowing Mamurra's sexual habits would be being aware of the fact that this villa was one of the firsts to be entirely clad in marble; this shows to which extent was the military class becoming more and more opulent, and in which ways prestige was being acquired and displayed in Rome. Augustus himself will indeed praise his own work and authority by boasting 'having found Rome a city of bricks and left it a city of marble'.



3rd September 2019

On the following day visiting Sperlonga has induced new thoughts and perspectives in my personal speculation about preserving memory and history. Lying a few kilometres far from Gaeta, Sperlonga (from Latin *spelunca*, 'cave') owns the prestige of having hosted the villa of one of the most famous emperors of all times, Tiberius. Here Tiberius spent time away from the hustle in the Urbs and enjoyed all the amenities typical of such villas in Latium and Campania: the sea, the calm, and, obviously, the parties. It was during one of his banquets in his famous grotto that a landslide killed some of the guests and allegedly put the emperor's life itself in danger. Such an accident compelled Tiberius to leave Sperlonga and never come back, thus preferring spending his otium in his other, more famous villa in Capri.



Although this site was neglected for centuries too, the story of its surviving is quite striking. When the grotto and the villa were found, back in the 20th century, a relatively considerable amount of people from Sperlonga (which is and was at that time a very small provincial town) gathered outside the site and defended what they claimed was 'their treasure' and that was allegedly being taken away from them to go enrich another museum in Rome. The defence carried out by these provincial men from humble social strata was effective. They surprisingly recognised the historic relevance of the discovery and related it as well to probable economic profit that would derive from it, thus managing to fight for its permanence in the town and pushing for the creation of a museum, which is now the beautiful museum of Sperlonga.

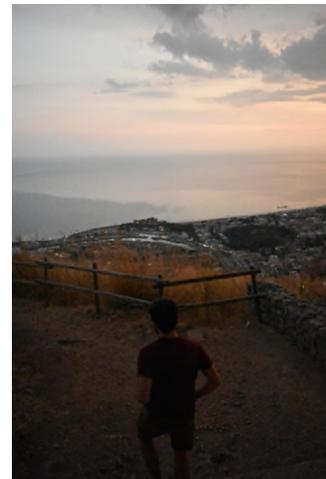


Just a few of the renowned statues in the museum, most likely to be the works of the famous Greek sculptors Agesander, Athenodoros, and Polydorus (many might be familiar with the Laocoön Group in the Vatican).



The anecdote seems to me be significantly poignant if compared to much recent controversy and discussion about artistic legitimacy and ownership and about the art trade in general. Without lingering on the former, I have to say that the latter speculation enlightened me about the distance between the lowest strata of society or the most provincial areas of a country and culture or art. I strongly believe, after hearing this story, that no man is absolutely unreachable by these, whatever their background is. All people can have a say in art, all people can endeavour to defend culture, all people can acknowledge beauty and its significance both in practical and more abstract terms. As much as I can understand, this applies to me as well and to some of my insecurities in first year, as a foreigner and provincial 18-years-old who was about to cross the threshold of the metropolis, full of big names and Cyclopic figures. The impediment, I realise, was thoroughly mental, and here I find myself in 2nd year approaching another year that cannot but appear exciting and thrilling to me both on a social and intellectual level.

The evening visit in Terracina provided me and my friends who came with me with a breath-taking view that left us all speechless. Although the remains of the major temple of Juppiter Anxur lie in a state of general consumption, the impressiveness and significance of the place could be perfectly inferred by the shape and the position of the temple, as well as by the presence of a cryptoporticus which possibly hosted the cavern of an oracle.



4th September 2019

What's even more scandalous than Mamurra's debauchery and Tiberius' sumptuous feasting? Lulia Augusta, clearly. On September the 4th we head to her last and most infamous dwellings, the villa in the island of Ventotene where she was exiled by her father Augustus in response to her immoral and wanton conduct. It was probably in the same situation and in the same political and social climate that Ovid was relegated due to his *carmen et error*. The old marina is the only surviving and working Roman harbour in the world. Both the sites have been particularly rich and fortunate in findings, which are now preserved in the Museo Archeologico di Ventotene.



Iulia's villa in Punta Eolo,
Ventotene

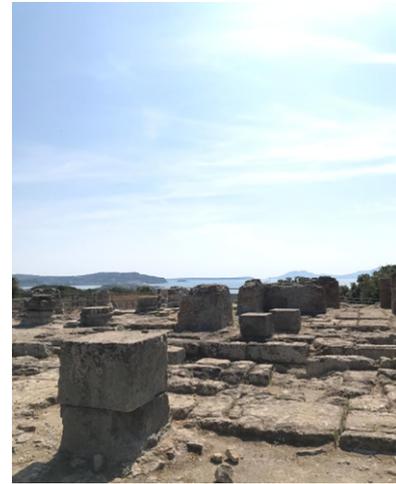


5th September 2019

Time to bid farewell to Latium and dive in the luxurious and sun-kissed landscape of Campania. Our first stop is the archaeological site and museum of Minturnae, on the right bank of the river Liris, which became a Roman colony in 296 BC and was conceived as a strategic place for commercial purposes. Here the consul Caius Marius hid to escape Sulla's goons, his political rival, in 88 BC, and it was also here that the famous Garigliano bowl was found, an impasto bowl inscribed with one of the earliest Latin inscriptions which seems to be in a form of Greek alphabet as well. The fact that I have lived nearby and never heard anyone speaking about the Garigliano bowl, not even when I worked and volunteered in the excavations in Minturnae two years ago, but was rather made aware of it when studying History of the Latin Language here at UCL made me realise how underrated and unpromoted this site is.



Three sites have my attention as I become closer to Naples. Baiae, a fashionable destination for wealthy Romans, is mentioned in a famous poem by Propertius (I, XI), who boils in jealousy for Cynthia and exhorts her to leave the *corruptas Baias*, that place of sexual corruption which might undermine her *pudor* and upset their love. Cumae, one of the oldest Greek colonies and the most loyal Roman *municipia*, holds the dwelling of the renown Sybil too. It is around these places that Vergil imagined how Aeneas would consult the prophetess and find his way to the underworld in his legendary *nekyia*. The Temple of Apollo, mentioned in book 6 of the Aeneid as built by Daedalus, is still visible.



Puteoli is our third destination. Born as a Roman colony in 194 BC to serve both military and commercial purposes, it became the real sea-port of Rome, open to foreigners too, especially eastern communities with whom Rome had commercial dealings. This cultural contact in the so-called 'Delos Minor' results evident in the syncretism that characterised Puteoli, as the presence of the cult of Serapis demonstrates. The Flavian Amphitheatre in Puteoli, the third-largest in the world, seems to have witnessed the martyrdom of the most worshipped sacred figure in Naples, Saint Januarius.



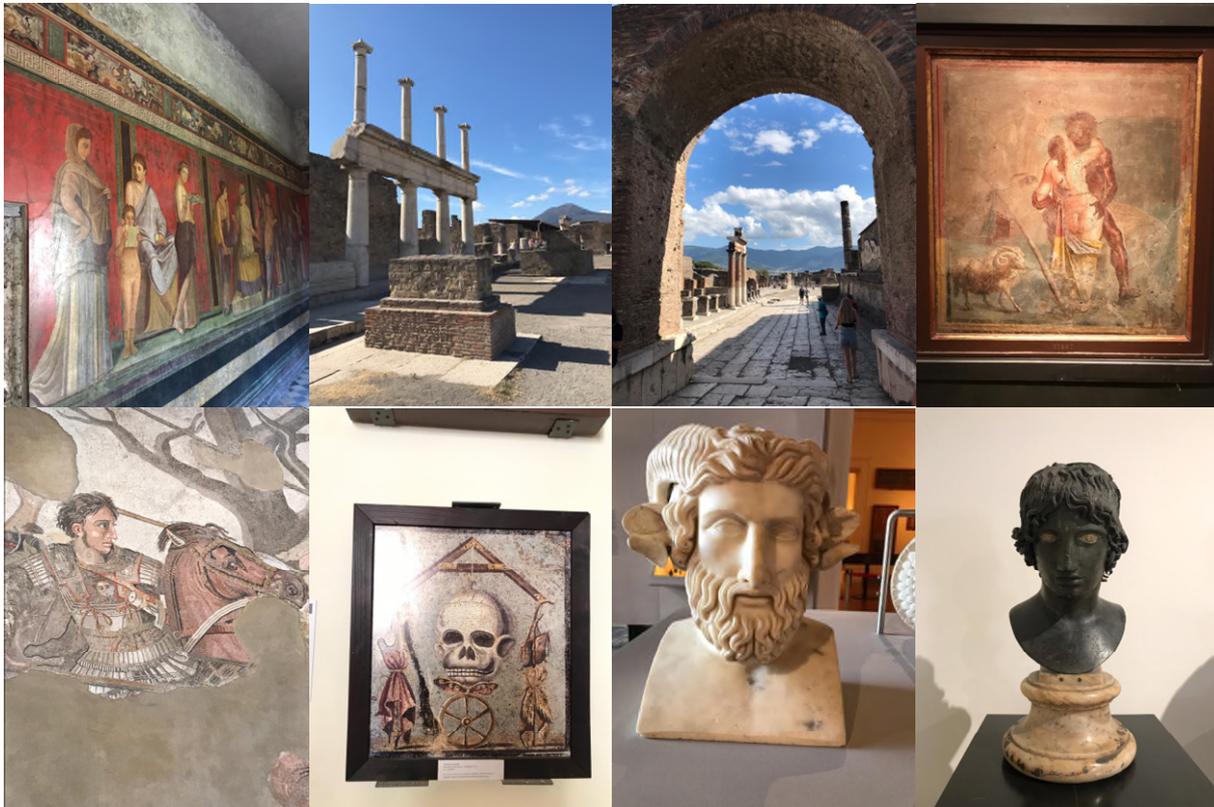
Just some of the statues preserved in the beautiful museum of Puteoli (now Pozzuoli).

From left to right: statue of Asclepius, statue of Venus, statue of Serapis.



7th September 2019

The last day is reserved to a not-so-unknown destination, that nevertheless shared with the other sites its destiny of being neglected and forgotten: Pompeii. Here our journey ends, on the vestiges of a city that is now famous worldwide.



I believe this place to be the perfect destination for our journey. Nothing is more eloquent than Pompeii in matters of memory and neglect. When the Pompeians in 79 AD saw dark clouds of ashes, debris, and lapilli spreading into the sky and onto their houses, it never occurred to them, not even for a second, that that day was going to grant them and their city immortality and eternal fame. Indeed, the topography of Pompeii was so radically changed by the eruption of the Vesuvius that the poet Statius would bitterly state after the catastrophe: 'Will men believe that people and cities lie beneath?'. The hyperbolic question results to be not so hyperbolic if compared to the sad reality that for centuries Pompeii remained covered and concealed under the ground. Even when it was discovered in the 18th century, this anthropological, historical, archaeological complex of

treasures underwent ignorance and oblivion. Just in 2010, the Casa dei Gladiatori suffered great damage with the collapse of the roof due to the accumulation of rain, mud and other substances. The *Schola Armatorum* has nevertheless reopened in 2018, demonstrating not only how fragile is the nature of such marvels and how their memory is often insulted by negligence or insufficiency of funds, but also how it is possible to restore fame and history when an effort is made to preserve them.



As I tread the paths trodden by these men and women of Pompeii, intrude into their private rooms and family spaces, look upon the Vesuvius as they have before ceasing existing, I almost sense what they sensed and feel drawn back to 79 AD. How can such a great amount of time be ridiculed and mocked by memory? Perhaps, I think, this distance is only apparent and the abyss is an illusion. In fact, it is curious and bizarre enough to remember that the pugilistic attitude, the involuntary pose that each plaster-cast body in Pompeii has assumed in the instant of their death is exactly identical to the Neutral Body Posture. The NBP is defined by NASA as the posture a human in zero gravity conditions. Whether this is assumed to be irrelevant or not, I believe it to point out at least the relativity of the abyss that appears to discriminate any of us from each other, be it in space or in time. What is for sure, nevertheless, is that without preserving memory I would not even be speculating about the past. In fact, I could not even do that, because the past would not exist anymore. Yet, would we at that point really know the present without knowing the past? Would we really know ourselves?



We have finally come to the end of this journey. From Gaeta to Pompeii, every single step of the path has been food for thought and has enabled me to reflect on past and present times, modernity and antiquity. This would have not been possible without the UCL department of Greek and Latin and Stephen Instone's family, which I thank wholeheartedly for having granted me this possibility to grow as a classicist and as a person.

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