

Between low-status ruin and cornerstone of modern Rome An heritage history of Termini

Review of: Arthur Weststeijn & Frederick Whitling, *Termini. Cornerstone of Modern Rome*, Papers of the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome Vol. 65, Roma, Edizioni Quasar, 2017, 168 p., ill., ISBN: 9788871408132, € 38,00.

Milou van Hout

It is likely that the contemporary traveler to Rome will enter the city through a daze of passing commuters, trolleys, screaming neon signs, a labyrinth of shops and fast food chains at Termini station. He will then unknowingly pass the fourth century BCE city wall that once made Rome into a proud city. Most travelers disappear as soon as possible into the Roman city center in search of iconic spectacles of classic remains. Yet the reader of *Termini. Cornerstone of Modern Rome* will stand still in the hectic hall of Termini station. What most visitors to Rome do not know is that the classical heritage of the city is already embedded in the design of this modern eclectic train station. The building's past functions as retrospective of how the city has dealt with its classical heritage. The first in its sort that is accessible to an English readership, *Termini. Cornerstone of Modern Rome* forms an urban scenography of Termini. The fate of the Servian wall – named after the sixth Roman king Servius Tullius – at the modern train station forms the basis for a broader reflection on the question of how material remains of the classical past have been appropriated in the making of modern Rome and the Italian nation state in the period 1860-1950.

The result is a smoothly written and accessible study – the authors name their project an ‘heritageography’ – of the development of the Roman Termini station and the remains of the Servian city wall. Part of the richly and beautifully illustrated Papers of the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome series, this volume allows the reader to follow the development of, and ideas about, Termini in color print, photography, and maps. Authors of the book are Arthur Weststeijn, who until 2017 acted as director of historical studies at the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome before picking up his current position as assistant professor of Italian history at Utrecht University, and Frederick Whitling, associated with the Swedish Institute in Rome and co-director of The International Interdisciplinary Institute. Years in the eternal city has led the two authors towards what they call ‘low-status ruins’, the forgotten hidden remnants of Rome’s classical tradition (the Servian wall) and modern historical buildings such as Termini. The book starts with an exploration of the ancient history of the Termini area which was then still a rural hill. From the 17th and 18th centuries the area became subject to both rationalist and Romantic reflections of Grandtourists and of the papal

urge to build villas and collect art. In four chronological chapters, the reader is then led into the Roman debates and intrigues of the first train station by the papacy, to the attempts to assign a national memory to both the station and the classical heritage around the building. The authors discuss thereafter the plans for Fascist renovation of the station as well as the current design of Termini in the 1950s.

The question of how classical heritage was perceived, evaluated and debated in 1860-1950 Rome, appears from this book to be driven by struggles over power and identity by several individuals in Roman and Italian heritage conservation. Popes, architects, nationalists, archeologists, the Fascist regime, and post-war 'democratic' politicians all expressed different interests in the classical remains upon which the Termini station was built. Part of the Servian wall was eventually saved from destruction by Termini's architects and became the symbol of the oldest proof of an urban protecting shield. Strikingly, already in the late 19th century, the Servian wall had to be fenced and guarded, since the remains were used as urban urinary. The authors consider this as the moment during which the wall becomes an archaeological site in its own right (75). This monumentalisation of the old city wall was the sign for turning the Termini area into a memorial battleground for competing nationalist, imperial, post-colonial, and also clerical visions, a process that is explained in detail on basis of extensive archival material. In deciphering and describing this process, Weststeijn and Whitling introduce the concept of *heritageography* that helps them to provide a historical contextualisation in which classical heritage in Rome receives its meaning (15). It is a useful approach, probably inspired by Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge's *A Geography of Heritage* (2000).¹ Given the limited introduction of this interesting key concept, a more thorough discussion of the geographical and spatial aspects in the authors' conceptualization of heritage would have offered a welcome addition to the study.

The book brings forward a tension between two visions on how heritage is perceived by scholars and heritage practitioners. On the one hand, heritage is a tangible object that must be preserved by authorities as well as possible and eventually exhibited. On the other hand, heritage is seen as the result of a dissonant and intangible process of negotiation between people and their environment through which identity, power, and knowledge structures are negotiated. Heritage, in this last vision – often referred to as 'critical heritage studies' – tells us more about the present than about the past.² The authors explicitly state that they aim to do justice to both. In their aim to prevent the classical tradition from deflating, they write, 'they will critically challenge the many tangible and intangible layers and dimensions of the "classical", thereby considering the classical as a project of "retrospective self-perception"' (17). Their twofold approach succeeds to a certain extent: In their conclusion, the disgust towards the contemporary state of the Servian wall eventually wins from the initial retrospection. The ancient wall sealed off by a fence and relocated to the interior of the McDonalds restaurant cannot count on the authors' appreciation. Instead of an ironic postmodern vision on heritage conservation, Weststeijn and Whitling read this relocation to the basement of Termini as a decay of Rome's cultural values.

¹ B. Graham, G.J. Ashworth & J.E. Tunbridge, *A geography of heritage. Power, culture and economy*, London, Arnold, 2000.

² For discussions of views and approaches of 'critical heritage studies' see: R. Harrison, *Heritage: Critical approaches*, New York, Routledge, 2013; T. Winter, 'Clarifying the critical in critical heritage studies', in: *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 19, 6 (2013), pp. 532-545; A. Witcomb & K. Buckley, 'Engaging with the future of "critical heritage studies": looking back in order to look forward', in: *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 19, 6 (2013), pp. 562-578.

Strikingly, however, at the moment of publication of this book, the Servian wall received a new role in the Termini area (because of the time span therefore out of the book's scope). Unknown to most Roman visitors is Termini's hidden nighttime scenery when the last trains have departed and the station turns into a refugee shelter. Yet during daytime, the attentive passer-by will notice that the remnants of the Servian wall serve as one of the main places of get-together by these people who mayor Raggi rather hides away from her classical city. The ancient wall is one of the few places at Termini with good functioning Wi-Fi. The current situation at Termini shows that 'low-status ruins' contain an important meaning in itself, as remnants being used in everyday practices – far away from high culture values that we so often try to project upon our classical heritage.

Termini is a building that has always served as a cornerstone of Rome's and Italy's pressing issues in society. *Termini* – the book – is a thorough and by its focused selection on Termini fascinating study about classical heritage perception in modern Rome, in an accessible writing style and provided with beautiful illustrations. The secret of a good book, I believe, is moreover enclosed in the possibility for the interested traveler to take this volume at heart as a travel guide. Rome's classical heritage is not deflated but ironically preserved in the fume of hamburger odor. Amidst the postmodern hectic of the station, the reader with this book under the arm will look around in astonishment.

Milou van Hout

Amsterdam School for Regional, Transnational and European Studies (ARTES)
University of Amsterdam
Kloveniersburgwal 48
1012 CX Amsterdam (The Netherlands)
m.p.vanhout@uva.nl