Book Reviews

Alessandro Pergoli Campanelli, *La nascita del restauro: Dall'antichità all'Alto Medioevo*. Milan: Jaca Book, 2015. Pp. 379. €22 (paper).

The conservation of material heritage, with its complex technical, ethical, juridical, and aesthetic aspects, is increasingly being studied and taught as an academic discipline. Knowledge that was in the hands of conservators, engineers, and lawmakers is now seen as an essential contribution to university departments of archaeology, art history, and heritage studies. This is evidently a symptom of the "material turn" that at present characterizes the humanities on conceptual and institutional levels.

The migration of knowledge from restorers' workshops to the academy is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is therefore unsurprising that the history of heritage conservation is one of the uncharted territories of the history of the humanities. The book under review, by Alessandro Pergoli Campanelli, maps out a large part of this territory.

Few histories of humanities disciplines can oversee such a wide temporal arc. *La nascita del restauro* starts no later than 7000 BC. Early evidence of human attempts at restoring material possessions dates from the Neolithic. Restorations in ancient Greek and Etruscan pottery, in Roman mosaic floors, and in stone sculpture provide evidence of ideals that are perfectly recognizable to present-day conservators, such as minimal intervention, preservation of the maker's signature, stylistic reconstruction, and replacements in a "neutral" material. As an interesting counterexample, Pergoli Campanelli points at a Japanese practice of around 2500 BC, which involved repairing broken ceramics in a purely cosmetic fashion, with a lacquer filler.

Such object-based research has its limitations, however, as later restorers have tended to remove or obscure earlier interventions in order to reconstruct an object's purported pristine appearance. The author therefore finds his first relevant written sources in ancient Rome. Some of this documentation is familiar to historians of the humanities, such as philological ideals of textual reconstruction and historical authenticity, which present parallels with the treatment of material heritage. But *La nascita del restauro* foregrounds two very different bodies of texts: Roman law and early Christian hagiography.

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As the author contends, a "typically Christian culture grafted on to the juridical structures of the Roman Empire" ensured a key characteristic of conservation in the West, namely, to see the material aspect of antiquities and buildings as the prime "repository of [their] historical as well as cultural values" (8). This stands in contrast to Asian traditions that tend to privilege traditional functions and locations above matter.

According to Pergoli Campanelli, the pedigree is as follows. Roman law was predicated on a form of autopsy: the scrutiny of a document, which was allotted the status of an authentic witness. When the category of document was increasingly confounded with that of monument, materials were seen as the carriers of authenticity. With the advent of Christendom, this attachment to the "real thing" was complemented with a notion of time proceeding in inexorably linear fashion, from a beginning point in Creation toward ultimate redemption. This meant that artifacts appeared as singular points on a time line rather than as fungible cultural goods. Man's actions toward these objects were supposedly judged in the face of eternity.

The seminal notion of the incarnation of the Word meant that literal traces of the peregrination of God's son and his first disciples were to be cherished, "being of value only because of their material authenticity" (11). Thus it is a (typically Western, to the author) combination of classical respect for the *res publica*, with Christian belief in animated matter, that resulted in the modern ideal of heritage conservation. The combination is nowhere so evident as in the Pantheon in Rome. This is the best preserved temple of Roman antiquity because, in AD 608, it was consecrated as a church, the resting place of the bones of hundreds of purported early Christian martyrs.

An interesting discussion relates to the civil servants who oversaw heritage conservation in antiquity. Plato envisioned that in his ideal state a professional group, the *astynomoi*, would be in charge of the upkeep of cities, temples, and public spaces. This ideal was put into practice by emperor Trajan. He appointed *curatores rei publicae* whose duties included overseeing the reconstruction and restoration of buildings. Roman law ensured that the conservation of the urban landscape was a matter of civic pride. Citizens could incriminate those who had let their own possessions go into disrepair and in so doing had diminished the beauty of the city—a public good. In the fourteenth century, Pope Martin V gave even greater weight to the role of the *magistri aedificiorum et stratarum*. This political tradition is the reason, according to Pergoli Campanelli, for the remarkable integrity and variety of so many Italian historic towns and cities up to the present day.

A major test case for the early Christian ideal of conservation was the first basilica of Saint Peter's in Rome, which was built on top of an ancient necropolis. The historical layer, literally speaking, was left intact and accessible. Ancient heritage was less

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safe when the danger of idolatry lurked. Lorenzo Ghiberti, for instance, lamented that so few pagan images had survived the advent of the new faith. Yet Christianity also brought about guidelines and laws for protecting Greek and Roman works. In the year 382 the devout Christian emperor Theodosius authorized the opening to the public of the temple of Edessa for the sake of the art objects it contained. Prudentius wrote that the classical statues should merely be "washed" of their pagan residues to become new "ornaments of the fatherland" (138). What is more, many Roman sculptures survive to the present day because someone arranged a hiding place, usually under the ground, safe from puritan iconoclasts.

The author contends that the Ostrogoth domination of Italy (493–553) was another essential period in heritage conservation. The Gothic rulers' attitude of toleration versus the pagan cults, and toward the artistic and architectural monuments that lay in ruins, resulted in a phase of "musealization" (as Flavio Biondo recognized, 191). Its protagonist was a senator at the Ostrogoth court in Rome, Flavius Cassiodorus (born in 484), who functioned as a "*trait d'union* between the legacies of the ancient world, the law, and the new Christian ethics" (378). In his remote Calabrian monastery, Cassiodorus adapted the philological principles of accurate copying to the accurate conservation of material heritage. In so doing he demonstrated his awareness of the distance to an antiquity that was by now extinct. A second figure worthy of note in this context was Saint Gregory the Great, who consistently advocated turning the temples of Italy into as many churches. Gregory's missionary project in England and Brittany extended this approach to dolmen and menhir stones. These objects were usually made "compatible" with Christian heritage just by adding a mark with the sign of the cross.

Four of six chapters in *La nascita del restauro* focus on Rome, and the book's conclusions should perhaps remain limited to the Eternal City rather than be extended to a European perspective. The volume is also unbalanced in terms of the chapters' different weight and depth, with the main narrative sometimes wandering off into obscure historical alleys. Yet by drawing so many different sources and unknown protagonists into the limelight, Pergoli Campanelli has written a highly original work. It is a firm stride on the road toward writing a history of conservation—and thus toward the further academic consolidation of this new discipline.

Thijs Weststeijn

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