

Moving ideas: The British School at Rome, 2009–2017

Christopher Smith reveals how the movement of people and ideas across the centuries has been studied through the work of the BSR



Christopher Smith is Professor of Ancient History at the University of St Andrews, and Director of the British School at Rome (2009–2017). In 2017 he was awarded the Premio 'Cultori di Roma'.

The British School at Rome (BSR) was founded in 1901 to support UK and Commonwealth research on Italy and the western Mediterranean. We host a world-class specialist library of 110,000 volumes, and make a substantial annual investment from our own and British Academy funds to support residencies for over 30 artists and scholars a year, in subjects ranging from antiquity to contemporary art practice, prehistoric archaeology to the post-colonial novel, medieval manuscripts to postmodern architecture, and most stops in between. This makes the BSR Britain's largest and intellectually most broadly based research institute overseas. Since 2009, the BSR has hosted nearly 500 lectures, conferences and exhibitions, and welcomed nearly 5000 residential

visitors. BSR staff, research fellows and award-holders have since 2010 produced over 400 publications, of which there are 100 monographs or edited volumes, including several under our own imprint. And we are part of the largest network of foreign academies in any city in the world, as well as the network of British International Research Institutes.

There are so many themes one could choose to illustrate this work, but at the heart of what the BSR does is the facilitation of the meeting of minds – and a reflection on how we have discussed the movement of people and ideas may be an appropriate way of illustrating what we do best.

'Orientalising'

How do we trace movement in a world before written records? Over the past 18 months, with the German and

French academies at Rome, and the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, we have been looking at the transmission of ideas from and about the East to the western Mediterranean in the 8th to 6th centuries BC. The culmination was a conference which focused on Italy. The painstaking work of tracing artistic influence in everything from decorative motifs that spread almost virally, to highly wrought gilt silver Ugaritic plates with royal imagery that are found in a handful of Italian tombs, has to be understood within a broader paradigm of the movement of people and the movement of ideas, in which the East was as much conceptual as geographic. Highlights included Stéphane Verger's brilliant reconstruction of the complex decorative schemes in a Gallic chieftain's hoard of bronze vessels, many highly individual reconstructions of Etruscan and Greek motifs, and Corinna Riva's challenging analysis of the inequalities between the parties engaged in exchange activity in the Mediterranean, part of a wider discussion throughout the conference on the mechanisms of the flow of objects, people and ideas.

The beginnings of empire

The last major conference on the transformation of central Italy from 400 to 200 BC was 40 years ago, and the pace of archaeological discovery since then has been rapid. Rome's rise to power was a military and political phenomenon, but its expression was in a flourishing of artistic and architectural innovation.

Two conferences organised this year in collaboration with the University of La Sapienza and with the Rome and Lazio archaeological Superintendencies represent the most significant re-engagement with this theme for many years, and the quantity of new material presented at these events has been truly astonishing. The highlight of the first conference was the first public presentation of a new stretch of the Aqua Appia, constructed in the

4th century BC, and discovered as part of the work on the new Rome underground. Some 18 metres of perfectly preserved aqueduct in ashlar masonry mark the extraordinary capacity of Rome's structural engineers. As we are discovering, it is the fecund combination of skills and ideas, many from the Greek world, but others mediated through Italy, which challenges the idea of a Rome-centred world. Rome's absorptive capacity remains at the heart of any explanation of her success.

This leads us to one of the BSR's own projects at Segni, where a polychrome mosaic of stunning quality (discovered in 2012), and a nymphaeum – delicately decorated with sea shells, and bearing the unique signature of a Greek architect with a Roman name, Q. Mucius – are revealing the richly cosmopolitan culture in 2nd – and 1st-century BC Segni.

Transformations of the Roman world

As the Roman empire expanded, it was transformed by the forces of wealth, its own global reach, and the fragilities of extended power. As a case study in globalisation, the Roman empire is beginning to attract more attention. Our own contributions include the major project at Portus, conducted with the University of Southampton, and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the European Research Council. Our Research Professor in Archaeology Simon Keay FBA began the project at the BSR,¹ and he puts its success down to the strength of the collaboration we have been able to build. The outreach is astonishing – 4 million viewers of BBC programmes on Portus, 30,000 participants in a Southampton MOOC, and adverts all over the nearby Fiumicino airport, where 38 million passengers a year see photographs of the evocative ruins, and have increasing opportunities to visit the area.

But the intellectual interest in this extraordinary site arises from its position as the hub of an enormous inter-

national trade network, a network of ports and capital cities. Apart from the archaeological excavations, we have supported restoration and conservation, a detailed GIS model of the lower Tiber Valley, and the first major conference on port epigraphy, to be published in the BSR's series with Cambridge University Press.

The transformations wrought by the economic power that Portus vividly symbolises are visible everywhere – in settlement patterns across the Suburbium of Rome, first revealed by BSR Director John Ward-Perkins in the BSR's South Etruria Survey in the 1950s to 1970s, and in our geophysical and archaeological investigations of the burgeoning urban infrastructures of the Tiber Valley and beyond. Yet, as the exceptional work conducted by my predecessor Andrew Wallace-Hadrill FBA at Herculaneum has shown, much of this population was immigrant. High levels of slavery fuelled the economy and changed society. We also vividly see transformations in our work with Ian Haynes of Newcastle University and the Vatican authorities underneath San Giovanni in Laterano, where Roman houses were destroyed by Septimius Severus' 3rd-century AD cavalry barracks, to be replaced in the early 4th century by Constantine's great basilica church – the change from domestic to military to religion maps changing mechanisms of power and influence.

Our next step will be to join the data from our own surveys with that of the survey by La Sapienza of the Suburbium of Rome and Groningen University's Pontine Region Project, to produce one of the largest archaeological survey databases for the Roman world, with immensely detailed information over the whole of the Roman Campagna.

Endings

Did it all come to an end in AD 410? Sixteen hundred years later, in 2010, scholars from across the world met in conferences organised by the BSR, and the Swiss and German institutes in Rome. This was a case study in the understanding of crisis, of the nature of collapse and the perception of collapse. The reality in Rome in AD 410 was less significant than the impact on those observing from outside, such as Augustine in North Africa, who was inspired to write *The City of God* in response to the disaster. Yet we now know from Portus and Ostia that Roman trade networks continued – the world did not end. But crisis and rupture, as perhaps we are witnessing now, can be cultural as well as economic or political. When the real consequences of the perceived crisis of the Roman empire set in, the result was a catastrophe for Italy and for Europe as a whole. We see it in our survey evidence, in excavations in Rome, in signs of malnutrition in skeletal evidence in areas that had been prosperous, in the collapse of systems of communication. What happened when Rome fell was that people stopped moving.



The impressive late Republican polychrome mosaic at Segni, found in the BSR's excavation which has also located the medieval cathedral. PHOTO: COURTESY OF SEGNI PROJECT.

1. See Simon Keay, 'Scientific Approaches to the Study of Roman Ports', *British Academy Review*, 14 (November 2009), 25–7.

Beginning again

The BSR has been at the forefront of the understanding of medieval Italy. David Whitehouse and Richard Hodges as BSR Directors carried forward Ward-Perkins' interest in the medieval world, practically inventing the field of medieval archaeology with their Italian colleagues. The process whereby Italy begins again after the fall of Rome has been the topic of several events at the BSR. Two sites epitomise this.

We published the last volume of Richard Hodges' excavation at San Vincenzo al Volturno in 2013. Founded in 731, the monastery's location in the central Apennines was highly strategic. In 848, the abbey was damaged by an earthquake, and in 881, the Saracens burned and raided the monastery, and the surviving monks fled to Capua. The monastery was later built on a new site, but whilst the vivid evidence of the earthquake and fire damage has captured attention, the study of the monastic workshops shows exchange and new connections across the Adriatic and into northern Europe being forged as a new economy sparks into life.

Contemporaneously, the church of S. Maria Antiqua at Rome was going through rapid changes, which we can trace in the extraordinary palimpsest of frescoes, recently restored. The subject of an exemplary article by our first



The famous palimpsest wall at the church of S. Maria Antiqua, Rome, described shortly after discovery by the BSR's first Director, and now the subject of a forthcoming publication. PHOTO: CREATIVE COMMONS.

Director, Gordon Rushforth, in the first *Papers of the British School at Rome* (1902), we marked the opening of the restored church with a major conference, also in 2013, in collaboration with the Rome Superintendency and the World Monuments Fund. S. Maria Antiqua's frescoes reveal Rome's use of the cults of eastern saints, some from Syria. The flow of ideas had now resumed, and Rome was once again part of an international world.

Worlds of images

Four successive Assistant Directors at the BSR in my time have studied the way that images track movement of ideas in the early modern world. Stefania Gerevini's work on the use of rock crystal in Byzantine-influenced Venice; Joanna Kostylo's research into the movement of medical ideas through the new medium of print; Tom True's work on the networks of patronage of Renaissance cardinals across Italy; and Sue Russell's work extending from Pietro da Cortona to Herman van Swanevelt, and recently into the Grand Tour – these are all part of the BSR's strong tradition of art historical research.

Apart from their huge contribution to the community at the BSR, the scholarship of all four reflects on the mobility of the visual image, its capacity to move across space and time. Rome is a laboratory for this study, and our access to normally closed parts of Rome has allowed BSR scholars to explore medieval churches, Renaissance villas, baroque palaces and 18th-century collections. We have also been in the Roman sewers, experimented with incense, visited quarries, carved marble and painted frescoes. The deep engagement with materiality that characterises the best art history, the understanding of the mechanisms of making, is visible throughout BSR research, and also in exhibitions, such as the 2017 blockbuster *Sebastiano del Piombo and Michaelangelo*, which involved former BSR award-holder Piers Baker-Bates. There is no doubt that the vital combination of art historians and practising artists is one reason why we have such a strong record of international curatorial practice.

We live in a deeply visual age, but the capacity to look with attention is attenuated by the deluge of imagery. We may not be the first to experience this; the sensory overload of the baroque has been a regular topic of our lectures and conferences. Tracking the shifts of style and technique across the visual arts is not simply a matter of attribution however; it is a cartography of the imaginary, and our most recent work, a conference organised with the Rome Art History Network, with proceedings edited by Tom True, focuses on the movement of artists. To give just one other example, Clare Robertson's acclaimed volume *Rome 1600* (Yale, 2016), written at the BSR, gives a riveting picture of what was at the time perhaps the most international city in the world.

Radical and marginal lives

Nineteenth-century Italy was a place of radicalism and revolution; Garibaldi was the first hero of the print newspaper age, and his exploits were followed across the



'Beyond Borders: Transnational Italy' exhibition, arising from the 'Transnationalizing Modern Languages' project, held at the British School at Rome in October and November 2016. PHOTO: A. PALMIERI.

world – he was an early example of a cult hero, as former BSR award-holder Lucy Riall's biography has shown. Italian radicals were everywhere; Mazzini and Cavour were international figures, and it was an Italian, Panizzi, who built the British Library's famous Reading Room, where Marx wrote.

Italy continued to be a city of radical ideas; futurism, fascism and fashion; cinema and literature; art and the *dolce vita* – all of which have been studied at the BSR. For much of the 20th century Rome exported ideas and people, and Charles Burdett's brilliant AHRC project 'Transnationalizing Modern Languages: Mobility, Identity and Translation in Modern Italian Cultures' culminated in a wonderful exhibition at the BSR (opened by our President, HRH Princess Alexandra). It illustrated the impact of Italian culture globally, and used the Italian situation as a template from which to develop a renewed model for the work of Modern Languages and its applications in the 21st century, which was presented in a lecture at the British Academy in November 2016.

But Italy recently has also been an importer of cultures and, perhaps more controversially, of people. Situated as lightning rod between the north and south Mediterranean, the flow of migrants into Italy, and far too often their death en route, has been the subject of repeated investigation, for instance in David Forgacs' BSR project *Italy's Margins: Social Exclusion and Nation Formation since 1861*,² or in a collaborative project with the British Council on frontiers. For me, some of the most moving have been by our artists, for instance Zed Nelson's prize-winning Channel 4 documentary on Lampedusa, and Paul Gomes' beautiful film of the community of Bangladeshis who scrape a tiny living from selling flowers and trinkets to tourists.

Still moving

The BSR continues to be at the forefront of new ideas and approaches to the world. As these fragments of the wider picture of BSR research and practice show, to study Rome is to study the world, and by bringing artists, architects, writers, historians and archaeologists together, the BSR creates a laboratory of the humanities in which the most challenging questions of our times are reconsidered in the context of deep time and across all disciplines, science, social science, humanities and the arts. It is the movement of people, the coming together of minds, which stimulates and provokes a truly interdisciplinary response, for instance to the critical challenge posed by mobility and its absence, and by the porosity or hardness of borders, physical, cultural and intellectual. As a fundamentally international institution, forging links between the United Kingdom and the world, and inspiring creative research, in one of the world's greatest cities, the BSR has never been more relevant or necessary. ■

British International Research Institutes

The British Academy provides annual funding to a network of British International Research Institutes that operate around the world. They conduct research, collaborate with overseas and UK-based partners, and provide facilities, training and financial, academic and logistical support to researchers. They also run events programmes, held in the UK and overseas. All the research institutes operate as autonomous bodies. A list of the institutes can be found at www.britishacademy.ac.uk/biri.

2. See David Forgacs, 'The "other" in Italy', *British Academy Review*, 16 (October 2010), 27–9.