University of St Andrews

Learning & Teaching Case Study

School of History: History Class Trip to Rome 2013

The honours module MO3043: Early Modern Rome, 1300-1667 specifically explored how the city of Rome was rebuilt in the 15th-17th centuries in response to political and religious changes throughout Europe. Students planned (and executed) a trip that would allow them to see these changes directly.

When students asked, early in the term, whether a trip was possible, I made it clear that it was up to them: if the trip was to happen, students needed to organize logistics and funding as well as content. They found tickets and funding, with some contributions from a dedicated school fund for teaching. (In other modules students have organized bake sales and tag sales for these purposes.) They also researched opening times and fees, and found accommodation. My role was to suggest dates when I was free, stipulate a few necessary sites, and provide extra background reading – and push them to keep going when their energy flagged in Rome.

Over two and a half days we viewed key churches (particularly the Gesù and Trinità dei Monti), the Ghetto museum, and the Palazzo Barberini, a museum which encapsulates the changes in papal politics in the late 16th century. When not in these sites, we walked the length and breadth of the city center in order to get a sense of its layers and accretions. The final day was spent at the Vatican, with the basilica in the morning and the museum in the afternoon. One particular challenge was balancing the desire to see generally important Roman sites, such as the Pantheon, with lesser-known sites more specific to our module, such as the Cancelleria and the Chiesa Nuova. More broadly this meant accommodating the students who had never been to Rome before while others were much more experienced.

**Benefits/impact on students/staff:** The benefit to the students was that they could connect concrete images with broad themes of the semester: urban renewal, post-Reformation glorification of Catholicism as a world religion, the city and the papacy as both an international center and the province of a few competing powerful families. The first benefit to me was, first of all, the chance to see the familiar city – and these themes -- through their eyes; I watched a student who had never been to the Vatican before come to understand, in her exhaustion and her cramped neck, the immensity of the message that the early modern Popes were trying to convey and its global scope. Personally, I also found new specific examples of these themes in parts of the city I had not previously known well. I understood the artist and architect Bernini in a whole new way when I saw his intimate portrait of his friend and patron, Pope Urban
VIII (Barberini), in the Palazzo Barberini, and I was struck by the allegorical fresco of Divine Wisdom first painted for Urban VIII and later recopied for the Chigi family with the Barberini-related astrology removed. Had I not been teaching the module at the time, the pedagogical relevance of these images would not have been so clear to me, and had I not accompanied my students to Rome, I would never have found them.

**Student feedback:** This is a brief write-up of the trip by the students involved:

‘From the very moment we arrived in Rome, the extraordinary depth of history that echoed through the streets, from every cobblestone to marble pillar, flooded us with amazement. The pulse of the city, like a steady heartbeat, held within it the story of all who came before us, making the spirit of the city inescapable. To see with our own eyes, these ‘sermons in stone’, this ‘eternal city’, the home of so much history, which we had been studying all semester, was profoundly humbling and inspiring. The themes of our module came to life—the lavish palazzi, the enchanting church iconography, the organic coming together of the ancient and the modern—hours of research in the library could not hold up to one moment in the streets of Rome. A strong connection to all that we had learned was extraordinarily prevalent.’

‘It was amazing to see Rome today, so in tune with its own history, and to feel as though, despite its ever-growing and ever-changing nature, that an integral character of the city has lived on throughout the ages. Walking the same streets, as did the Popes, scholars, artists and noblemen from the pages of our history books, one could imagine the city as it was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There was no moment in which this was greater felt than when Dr. Michelson took us to the top of the Janiculum Hill. Gazing upon the glory that was the Roman skyline, ‘Roma Caput Mundi’ was declared in every spire, dome, and tower.’

‘The entire experience was one that left us constantly amazed and overwhelmed. The Palazzo Barberini, now the home of the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica was filled with rooms of artistic treasures. Each portrait revealed an underlying tale of personal ambition and political manoeuvring, each Bernini sculpture was inconceivably majestic (with its marble folds and tresses as dynamic as though it were real), and each frescoed ceiling left us speechless. Grappling with the scope of one fresco, Pietro da Cortona’s ‘Glorification of the Reign of Urban VIII’, we lay on our backs, to the chagrin of the museum people (and the jealousy of the other museum-goers), and pointed out different elements of the massive work, interpreting the characters, stories, and meanings from what we had learned in class. No computer screen or art history book could have given such a monumental piece any appropriate amount of justice.’
‘The pinnacle of our awe-inspiring experience was when we visited St. Peter’s Basilica. From the moment Bernini’s colonnades ‘embrace’ us in the main piazza, to the view of the emblazoned Cathedra Petri seen from a distance through the colossal Baldachinno, we were transported to an alternate reality, where it was easy to lose touch with a sense of scale and proportion. Even now that we have returned from Rome, we still haven't finished processing the magnitude of St. Peter’s and all of the marvels contained within its walls!’

**Contact:** Emily Michelson, School of History [email: edm21@st-andrews.ac.uk]
**Date submitted:** June 2014