



## Fossils in Rome: searching for sources of information

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**ABSTRACT** - A complex array of events, a plurality of characters, and a dense network of relationships have characterized the Roman scenario from an archeological, collecting, and museum perspective for at least four centuries. The wealth of information resulting from this is such that it allows for countless lines of research, based on the diverse characteristics of such a vast chronological span. Due to the different periods, it is indeed possible to aggregate data concerning the formation and dispersion of collections, the relationship with the contemporary public, the circulation of information, the origin and/or reorganization of museum collections, and the acquisition of information about the provenance of finds.

**Keywords:** archival data; *naturalia* collections Rome; 17<sup>th</sup> century collections with fossils.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The brief annotations contained in this contribution, intended as a preview of a study, focus on some examples of the increase in documentary evidence related to fossil remains, identified within the context of 17<sup>th</sup> century Roman collecting, a century marked by significant growth in *naturalia* collections. Rome in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, dominated by the personalities and choices of the twelve popes who succeeded one another, was the center of religious, political, and economic events of European significance and a meeting point for commercial and diplomatic networks. At the same time, the city thrived in art, science, and knowledge, as exemplified by the extraordinary flowering of Baroque culture. With over ten jubilees, both ordinary and extraordinary, organized by the pontiffs, Rome attracted not only pilgrims seeking indulgences but also many travelers, artists, scientists, and intellectuals. In this cosmopolitan city, they found numerous places of encounter and exchange, where a dense network of relationships facilitated the circulation of knowledge and various objects.

The quantity of these “places of culture,” for a city with a population of around 115,000 inhabitants, is highly relevant, comprising approximately a hundred institutions such as universities, colleges, academies, noble palaces, residences of wealthy individuals, artists’ homes, and printing presses.

The libraries, numbering over sixty, some open to everyone without state or census limitations, are mostly

situated within colleges, including the grandiose one at Collegio Romano. They can also be found in the residences of cardinal and noble families, with the library of Francesco Barberini being famous, second only to the Vatican Library. Many religious institutions also have their own libraries, such as the Biblioteca Vallicelliana and the Biblioteca Angelica. Similarly, notable book collections are found in non-noble residences and homes. The most significant aspect is precisely this: in the cultural context of that time, the access to and possession of a library is no longer restricted to the nobility and clergy but involves educated citizens, both more and less illustrious, and the middle classes (Spagnolo, 2011).

In the same way, in 17<sup>th</sup> century Rome, collections belonged to a diverse and multifaceted social and cultural sphere, ranging from the wool merchant to the prince, encompassing a wide range of merchants, lawyers, doctors, notaries, and intellectuals (Spezzaferro, 2003). This situation implies the presence of a rich and heterogeneous documentary material that can be investigated. In the case of fossil findings, the field of inquiry is limited to collections defined in contemporary texts as museums, cabinets of curiosities, or “natural, curious, or peregrine things,” which include these types of objects (Fig. 1).

### 2. COLLECTIONS OF INTEREST

The starting point for an analysis of Roman collections is the “*Nota delli Musei*” (Nota 1664), most likely compiled



Fig. 1 - Matteo Greuter, Plan of Rome in 1618 (<https://geoportale.cittametropolitanaroma.it/>).

by an informed connoisseur like the scholar and collector Giovan Pietro Bellori (1585-1655). This document provides a concise overview of the collections belonging to nobles, church princes, and non-high-ranking individuals. It pays special attention to libraries and does not overlook gardens with exotic and rare plants. In the opening two pages addressed to readers, Bellori justifies his work as a future testament to those “ornaments” that, disregarding honored memories, will be sold, and dispersed by thoughtless descendants and heirs.

In a study from about thirty years ago, the presence of collections dedicated to “products of nature” (Olmi, 1992) was excluded among those mentioned in the Note, a judgment reiterated in subsequent studies. However, a careful analysis conducted in recent years has completely changed the scenario, highlighting the presence of 11 collections of curiosities and natural finds, all designated as “Museo,” in the Nota of 1664. In the same research, the scholar added 50 more collections, bringing the total to about 60, where alongside the collections of prominent noble families, there are those belonging to middle-class individuals who collected more selectively, often due to limited resources (Guerrieri Borsoi, 2014). The economic value of naturalia, in fact, remains relatively modest, as indicated by comparing their estimated worth in collections from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century (Guerrieri Borsoi, 2004).

An example is the Museum of Curiosities of Cardinal Flavio Chigi (1631-1693), a high prelate and member of the well-known banking family, and the nephew of Pope

Alexander VII. His collection, described in the 1664 Note as a “museum of natural, ancient, and peregrine curiosities,” was a rich assembly of naturalistic specimens, ancient artifacts, and objects from distant lands. The term “curiosities” highlights the completeness of the specimens and their ability to arouse wonder and interest (Fig. 2).

Originally located in Formello and later transferred to Rome, the Museum was extensively mentioned in 17<sup>th</sup>-century “tourist” guides and various travel accounts about Italy (Incisa della Rocchetta, 1966). However, it had already been dispersed by the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In more recent times, a careful analysis of documentary sources has allowed the reconstruction and identification of the collection, including some of its contents (van Kampen 2018). Through a detailed analysis, it was found that the Museum of Curiosities of Cardinal Flavio Chigi consisted of approximately 50% peregrine curiosities, 20% ancient artifacts, and about 30% natural specimens, including 10% fossils (van Kampen, 2009). This last aspect is particularly relevant in investigating the presence of fossils in 17<sup>th</sup> century Roman collections.

It is worth noting that before its dispersion, the Flavio Chigi Museum may have been cataloged separately from other types of inventories, a hypothesis supported by examining the catalog of the Museum Barberinum. The booklet, comprising only fifteen pages, exclusively concerns the Museum of natural and pilgrim things owned by Cardinal Francesco Barberini, located in the Palazzo delle Quattro Fontane, adjacent to the famous Barberini Library (Panaroli, 1656).



Fig. 2 - Ferdinand Voet, Portrait of Cardinal Flavio Chigi (1631-1693) (@ wiki commons).

Compiled in 1656 by Domenico Panaroli, a Roman physician, while Cardinal Barberini was still alive, the brief text preceding the catalog clearly reflects the collector's vision, who had a clear sense of care, knowledge, and preservation of the extraordinary objects he possessed. The cardinal himself entrusted Panaroli with the task of organizing the specimens and producing a catalog that described the "most rare things of nature" preserved in the Museum. The following pages contain a dense list of hundreds of items described in Latin and immediately translated into Italian in cursive font. The transcription and organization of information present considerable difficulties since the only criterion employed by the compiler was alphabetical order, without attempting any further classification, even for larger categories. Nevertheless, it has been possible to identify a significant number of fossils among the listed items.

The second example concerns another Museum of Curiosities, whose history has been unveiled through extensive and rigorous research (Finocchiaro, 1999). It pertains to the collection of Virgilio Spada (1596-1662), a member of an important Roman family and religious belonging to the Oratory of St. Philip Neri at the Church of Santa Maria in Vallicella (Fig. 3).

Briefly described in the Nota of 1664 as the "Museum of medals and curiosities left by Monsignor Virgilio Spada" at the Vallicelliana Library, it is not mentioned in

the guides or travel accounts of Rome, unlike many other collections. This absence is notable, and it is compounded by the lack of a catalog or inventory of the collection in his will, which is surprising because, as explicitly stated in his last wishes, safeguarding the collection was a priority for Virgilio Spada.

Regarding the fossil records, valuable information is available from Spada's account books, indicating that as early as 1636, he was investing money to purchase fossils. It is reasonable to assume that by the time of his will, after more than thirty years, the collection of such records must have been substantial (Finocchiaro, 1999). Paradoxically, as Finocchiaro emphasizes, part of the collection, including the fossils, can be reconstructed through documents that record its division among various museum institutions in 1886. This unfortunate practice was common in the formation of state and university museums in post-unification Italy, particularly in Rome, in the decades following its proclamation as the capital of the Kingdom in 1870 (Magagnini 1998, 2005).

On January 28, 1886, "twelve fossil objects," described in a list compiled by Romolo Meli in 1881, with inventory numbers and, in some cases, provenance, were delivered to the Museo Geologico della Regia Università di Roma. Unfortunately, at the time of his research, Meli was unable to identify these findings (Finocchiaro, 1999).



Fig. 3 - Facade of the Oratorio dei Filippini, 1658 (@ wiki commons).

### 3. OTHER SOURCES: GUIDES AND DIARIES

The brief mention of the guides to Rome in relation to the Chigi and Spada collections provides an opportunity to introduce some considerations about two important sources: the guides themselves and the diaries. Besides the obvious utility of guides in providing information, it has been rightly observed that the selection of which characters or collections to include, particularly those of curiosities, is closely linked to the judgment of the observer (Guerrieri Borsoi, 2014). As a result, different authors may convey entirely different information, thus multiplying the number of collections known to us. Moreover, when placed in a broader context, guides serve as a tool for grasping the image of contemporary culture and society. The words addressed to readers in the introductory pages, the structure of the guide, and the order in which topics are presented all help to capture the mood of the time and guide further research. Therefore, a careful reading of the guides circulating in Rome during the 17<sup>th</sup> century is essential (Caldana, 2003, covering guides of Rome from various time periods, not limited to the 17<sup>th</sup> century).

In addition to guides, Diaries were also prevalent in the Roman scene. In diaries, the author is a direct witness, recording day by day what they see or experience, often accompanied by emotions and impressions (Platania, 2019). The narration in a diary allows us to gain insight into the perception of the “average person,” their reactions, disorientation, and curiosity in the face of events, monuments, and collections (Herklotz, 2017). An example, as suggested by Herklotz, is the handwritten diary of Giuseppe Gualdi, which in an appendix to the year 1651, describes Bernini’s Fontana dei quattro fiumi with meticulous and almost obsessive detail, along with the astonishment and wonder he feels before such an amazing sculpture. Suddenly, he interrupts his notes and leaves the page blank (Gualdi, 1651). Diaries, being direct, immediate, and anchored to the author’s personality, provide composite information that should not be underestimated, often shedding a unique light on historical events and the perception of the era.

### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to present one last example related to the minor collections, mostly owned by the middle class, which the Guerrieri Borsoi refers to as a “suggestive and eloquent showcase of the variety of specimens preserved in Baroque curiosity museums, bridging nature and art” (Guerrieri Borsoi, 2014).

By reading the cards dedicated by Guerrieri Borsoi to these minor collections, one can observe, on one hand, how the cross-referencing of sources and documents leads to significant research results, and on the other hand, the opportunities offered by the vast heritage of Roman archives.

It becomes evident that the study of individual cases

guides the research toward a complex and socially stratified reality, where individual objects or entire collections dynamically pass from one owner to another through exchanges, sales, donations, and testamentary bequests. This reality generates large quantities of documentary material, with a reservoir of data yet to be discovered.

The research on these collections allows for a deeper understanding of the cultural and social fabric of 17<sup>th</sup> century Rome, shedding light on the interconnectedness of individuals and their collections, and the fluidity with which these objects moved within society. The historical documentation available in Roman archives proves to be a valuable resource in piecing together the intricate puzzle of Rome’s cultural heritage during this period.

As scholars continue to delve into these sources and conduct further investigations, it is evident that there are still many hidden gems waiting to be uncovered, enriching our knowledge of the collections, their owners, and the fascinating world of curiosity museums in Baroque Rome.

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