

The Lost Gateway of Early Modern Rome:

The Port of Ripa Grande from the 16th to the 18th century

Dr. Nikolaos Karydis, Senior Lecturer, University of Kent

Report for the Papers of the British School of Rome on the research undertaken during my
Balsdon Fellowship

The research project I worked on during my Balsdon Fellowship focuses on the port of Ripa Grande. This was the main river port of Rome from the middle ages to its destruction in the late-nineteenth century.¹ During my documentation of the bibliography of the port in Rome's libraries, I found that despite the social, economic and topographical importance of Ripa Grande and the impressive scale of its Baroque remodelling, the design of this port has not been sufficiently investigated. Indeed, general studies of the urban development of Rome make brief references to the Ripa Grande but do not address sufficiently the transformation of its spaces through time.² Studies of the Tiber often include brief sections on the history and topography of the port, but seldom analyse its architectural and spatial characteristics.³ Some references to the architecture and layout of the Ripa Grande are typically found in publications focusing on the development of the Ospizio di San Michele, the enormous institutional building that dominated the 18th-century port.⁴ Still, these publications examine the 'Ospizio' in isolation and overlook its impact on the development of the port and its urban context. Due to these

¹ The ancient port at Testaccio was known as "Emporium" and "Marmorata". For a recent paper on the development of this port during the Imperial period, see Simon Malmberg, "Ships are Seen Gliding along the Sacred Tiber", in *The Moving City, Processions, Passages and promenades in Ancient Rome*, ed. Ida Östenberg, Simon Malmberg, Jonas Bjornebye (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 187-202, esp. 192. For the move of the port from the "Marmorata" to the "Ripa Romea", which was later called "Ripa Grande", see Annalisa Marsico, *Il Tevere e Roma nell'Alto Medioevo: Alcuni Aspetti del Rapporto tra il Fiume e la Città* (Rome: Società alla Biblioteca Vallicelliana, 2018), 116.

² See Simoncini, *Roma, Le Trasformazioni Urbane nel Quattrocento* I, 22.

³ See D'Onofrio, *Il Tevere e Roma*, 89-93, 238-252; Cesare D'Onofrio, *Il Tevere, L'Isola Tiberina, le inondazioni, i molini, i porti, le rive, i muraglioni, i ponti di Roma* (Rome: Romana Società Editrice, 1980), 288-299. These books included numerous illustrations of the port, but only cover a small portion of its history. D'Onofrio, *Il Tevere* states that until 1980, "no one had addressed the difficult historical and topographical survey of this port, despite its relevance for the social, economic and political history of the city of Rome and its relations with the outside world". Part of this lacuna was filled by Anna Lepre, Dario Busolini and Luciano Palermo. See Anna Lepre "Aspetti Sociali di Trastevere nel Seicento", 331-351; Anna Lepre "Agricoltura e Manifattura in un Rione di Roma nel Seicento e nel Settecento", *Studi Romani* 25/3 (1977): 353-370; Luciano Palermo, *Il Porto di Roma nel XIV e XV secolo*; Dario Busolini, "Il Porto di Ripa Grande a Roma durante la prima metà del XVII secolo", *Studi Romani*, 42/3 (1994), 249-273. Lepre, Palermo and Busolini focused on the economic activities and administration of the port from the 14th to the 17th century, but provide limited information about the design and form of the port.

⁴ The history of this building was examined by Giulio Tirincanti (1969), at a time when the complex lay abandoned and ruined. See Giulio Tirincanti, "Il San Michele, Passato e Avenire", *Capitolium* Anno XLIV, 6-7 (1969), 9-89. The subsequent restoration of this building complex provided new material for understanding the evolution of its design through time. This informed the work of Francesco de Tomaso and Patrizia Marchetti, "Le Fasi Costruttive del Complesso Monumentale e il Restauro", in *San Michele a Ripa, Storia e Restauro*, ed. Elena Andreozzi, Francesco de Tomaso and Patrizia Marchetti (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1983), 42-142. The early phases of the "Ospizio" were re-examined by Hellmut Hager (1975; 1977), who made interesting hypotheses about the origins of Carlo Fontana's original but unexecuted design. See Hellmut Hager, "Carlo Fontana e l'ingradimento dell'Ospizio di San Michele. Contributo allo sviluppo architettonico di una istituzione caritative del Tardo-Barocco romano", *Commentari* Anno XXVI, Fascicolo III-IV (1975), 344-360; Hellmut Hager and Allan Braham, *Carlo Fontana, the Drawings at Windsor Castle* (London: A. Zwemmer, 1977), 137-149.

limitations we know little about the form of the port of Ripa Grande and its development through time.

During the first weeks of my residency at the BSR, I tried to fill these lacunae through the study of little-known historic views and maps of the port. Working at the archive of Accademia di San Luca and the Archivio di Stato, I identified unpublished surveys of the Ripa Grande. These helped me to document unknown phases of the port and understand its transformations during the Early Modern period. Information from these sources was synthesised in a series of new reconstructed plans and axonometric drawings (Figure 1). These drawings helped to investigate the spatial organisation of the port and the design principles that informed its remodelling in the eighteenth century. The reconstruction drawings I carried out also revealed the original context of key port buildings, such as the Ospizio di San Michele.

This methodology is shedding new light on a highly significant aspect of the urban development of Rome in the Early Modern period. By recapturing the form of the lost port of Ripa Grande, this project improves our understanding of those spaces that linked city and water. Challenging the received idea according to which Rome always 'turned its back on the river', the project reinterprets the relationship between Rome and the Tiber during the Early Modern period.

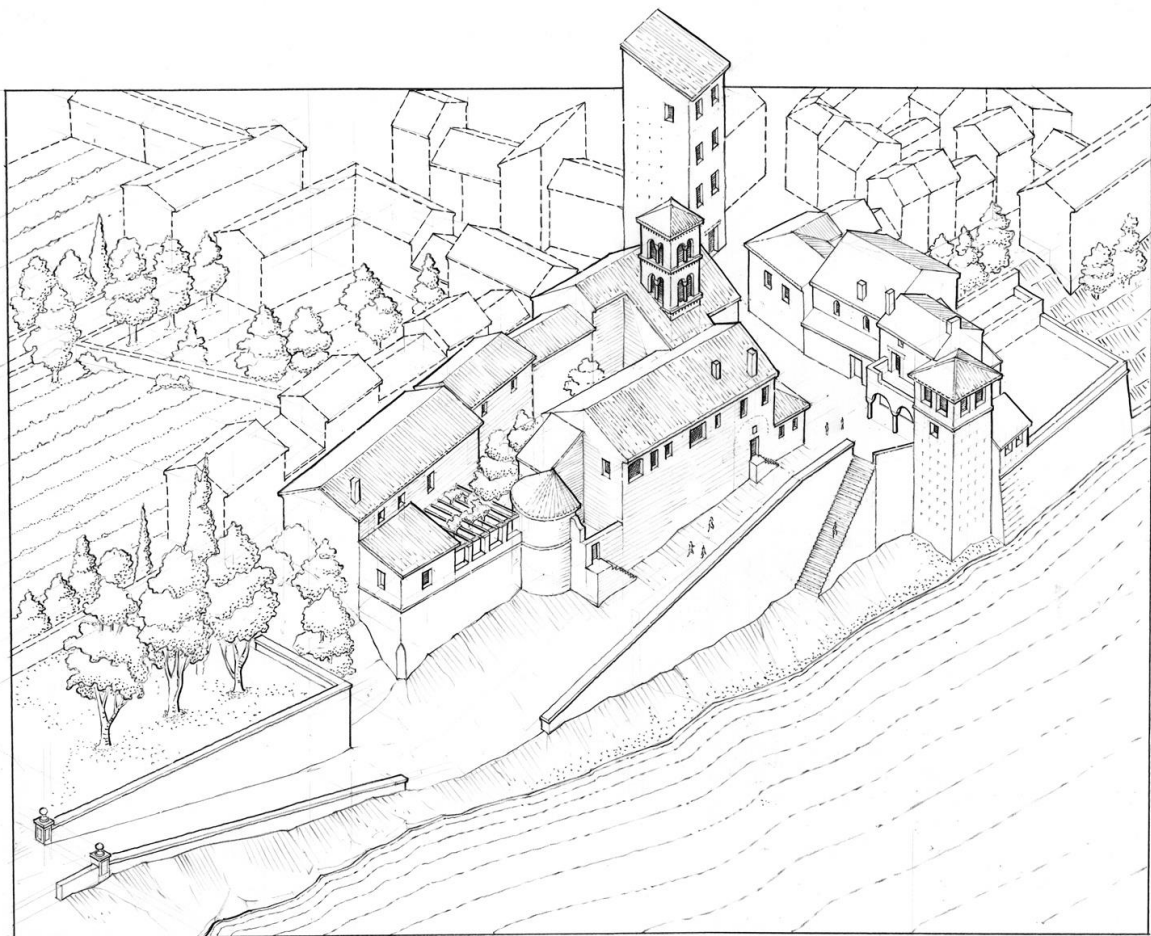


Figure 1. The Port of Ripa Grande in the late-seventeenth century. Reconstructed axonometric, Nikolaos Karydis, 2017.