

**Cities of the Grand Tour:
Changing Perceptions of Italian Cities in the long Eighteenth Century**
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Introduction

For most of those who undertook the Grand Tour in the eighteenth century the purpose of travel was to visit cities rather than to explore the countryside. In the second half of the century, it is true, travel in pursuit of picturesque scenery or sublime landscapes was becoming increasingly popular. In the context of the Grand Tour this was reflected in, for example, the growing popularity of exploring the Swiss Alps in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. But for most purposes the itinerary of the Grand Tour continued to be based around urban centres with people travelling *through* the countryside and staying *in* towns and cities. This is not to say, of course, that the countryside was without interest: indeed, observations on it -- the state of agriculture, the condition of the labouring population, the fertility of the soil, the existence of manufactures -- comprised an important element of many travellers' observations. But the main focus of the Grand Tour was undoubtedly urban. Most of those undertaking a tour of Europe did so in order to acquire cultivation and refinement; to improve their taste by studying the best collections of art antiquity and the finest specimens of architecture; and to participate in the leisure pursuits and sociability of polite, educated company in the different countries through which they passed. All these goals were pursued in the environment of towns and cities. The Grand Tour was both an urban and an urbane experience; its focal points were the cities of Europe, and in particular those of Italy.

It is only to be expected then, that the observations of travellers recorded in travel journals and letters home, and the information provided in travel literature, tends to concentrate heavily on particular cities. From this information it is possible to draw some general conclusions about the kind of criteria by which eighteenth-century travellers judged the cities through which they passed; the kinds of questions that most interested them; and how these changed over the course of the century. We can also build up a sense of *how* visitors viewed a new town or city. In certain cities visitors made much more extended stays of weeks, or even months, and here it is possible to arrive at a rather fuller picture of how these cities were perceived and represented by the British.

This essay will firstly consider how travellers described the cities which they encountered on the tour through Italy, and discuss some of the distinctive characteristics of the major cultural centres in which the grand tourists spent the majority of their time. Whilst the primary focus of the Grand Tour was always Rome, no tourist confined their visit to the Eternal City alone, a stay of days, weeks or even months in other centres was equally important. Florence, Rome, Naples and Venice -- the four major cities of the Italian tour -- had very different characters and this is reflected in the way in which travellers experienced and described them. Over the course of the century each acquired a particular image and set of associations for the British.

It is important to remember first the limitations of the historical record. The diaries, correspondence and published guides and tours contain descriptions of numerous places. But in many of these places travellers would have spent no more than a few hours for an overnight stay or a brief rest in order to change horses or procure a meal. Impressions were formed as quickly as those of the modern-day package tourist. Comments are therefore often laconic, superficial and remarkably similar. This is largely

because of the tourists' reliance on their local *valet de place* (guide) or the guidebook. They would frequently simply copy out information into their own notes. Such 'cut and paste' techniques mean that we find the same comments repeated time after time and it is often difficult to penetrate beyond the hackneyed commonplaces. But the larger cities, where longer stays were made, conventionally demanded rather more attention from their visitors and the comments are correspondingly richer: travellers described what they saw, what they did, what they learnt, and increasingly, recorded their own individual responses to the city. From these comments it is possible to derive a much stronger sense of place and to recover something of how the different cities were perceived and experienced.

We should remember also that travellers carried with them a number of preconceptions about what they would see. One of the purposes of travel was to survey and evaluate the different forms of government which existed across Europe with the aim of confirming belief in the superiority of the English constitution, as the earl of Corke and Orrery explained:

Let them travel abroad, not to see fashions, but states, not to taste different wines, but different governments; not to compare laces and velvets, but laws and politics. They will then return home perfectly convinced that England is possessed of more freedom, justice and happiness, than any other nation under heaven. With these advantages it will be our own fault if we sink into desolation and ruin.¹

One of the most important criteria by which different governments were assessed was through the prosperity and liberty enjoyed by the subjects. Italy was a geographical entity but not a united country and therefore offered a diverse and potentially edifying array of different constitutional systems for observation. Italian cities ranged from autonomous republics, such as Genoa or Venice, to the capitals of absolutist states, such as Florence or Rome. The political structures and traditions of government all had a bearing upon the way in which British visitors saw them and responded to them. The despotic rule of absolute government led to depopulation and economic decline: in the late seventeenth century Richard Chiswell admired the noble buildings in Florence, but noted that the city was thinly inhabited for its size, the consequence, he judged, of 'Intollerable Arbitrary Government'.² British travellers were particularly suspicious of the involvement of the Roman Catholic Church (the archetypal absolute monarchy) in secular affairs and they were quick to look for signs of economic malaise and physical decline in cities such as Ferrara which had fallen under Papal authority. Ferrara, according to Chiswell, was 'a lamentable spectacle of ecclesiastick Government'.³ It was a city where the grass grew up through the paving stones, where the streets were deserted and the buildings had fallen into decay. It was, wrote Andrew Mitchell, 'the most desolate city' he had ever seen.⁴ Judgements were also affected by the quality of the relationship between Britain and the ruling power: positive comments regarding Turin in the early eighteenth century, for example, were often coloured by the fact that diplomatic relationships with between Britain and Sardinia were close and the British were therefore well received.

¹ *Letters from Italy in the years 1754 and 1755 by the late right honourable John Earl of Corke and Orrerry*, ed. John Duncombe (London 1773), p. 246. See also fos 1-3 of Francis Drake's account of his travels Magdalen College, Oxford MS . MC F15.

² MS Don c 181 fol. 15, diary of Richard Chiswell, 9 May 1696.

³ *ibid* fol. 14 v 6 May 1696

⁴ BL Add MS 58316 fol. 14, travel journal of Andrew Mitchell.

Ferrara was simply one of many towns which were noted to be sadly depleted in population. The British were very conscious that Italian cities had formerly been far more prosperous before they submitted themselves to the rule of kings and princes. Since the sixteenth century their trade had fallen away, and by the eighteenth century commercial and manufacturing prosperity had migrated to Britain. Trade was almost always noted to be in decline; manufactures diminished. There were exceptions, however, such as Livorno, a free port established by the Dukes of Tuscany. Livorno, or Leghorn as it was known by English speaking travellers, was one of the few Italian cities that was praised for the state of its commerce and trade and the activity in its streets. Visitors attributed its evident bustle and prosperity to the fact that that it was a free port, to the invigorating presence of the 'English factory' (the community of British merchants) and to the religious tolerance extended to all regardless of nationality or religious belief. Leghorn, like Genoa and Venice, was a cosmopolitan city where different nations and religions mingled together in pursuit of trade and where the repressive influence of the Catholic Church and the exactions of arbitrary government held little sway. The tourists' itinerary in Leghorn consisted of visits to the synagogue, the Greek Orthodox and the Armenian Churches, the mole and the quay, rather than the more conventional round of palazzi and churches. British travellers commented on the contrast in atmosphere in Leghorn – one could almost imagine oneself in England, observed some – partly because of the presence of so many English merchants, but also because the air of hustle and bustle and commercial activity was a characteristic which they associated with English rather than Italian towns.⁵ 'Most cities in Italy', observed the Norwich merchant, Robert Harvey, 'are devoted to the dead by the quantity of antiquities and pictures etc in them but Leghorn is built in the land of the living and every thing is in perpetual movement'.⁶ As a merchant, Harvey might have been expected to have had a professional interest in commercial activity, but George Parker, who came from the landed rather than the mercantile elite, was similarly impressed in 1721: it was, he noted, extremely rich and full of merchants and 'as in most other towns in Italy the People one sees abroad (which in several towns are but few) are sauntering about, and have nothing to do, so on the contrary in this the streets are full of People, and one sees Business going on in every corner.'⁷

Leghorn also impressed visitors with its modern street plan. The broad straight streets with long vistas radiating out from squares or piazzas and lined with monumental buildings made a powerful impact on British visitors. Whilst some of these principles were beginning to influence urban design in Britain, aside from Bath and Edinburgh New Town, improvements to the urban environment were far more piecemeal. Even in London, after the Fire in 1666, the ambitious plans for rebuilding the city in a style to rival continental cities did not come off. Visitors were therefore impressed by the set pieces of baroque design, such as Turin, where the grid-iron plan was flanked with buildings constructed to give an impression of regularity, uniformity and symmetry: qualities which were regarded as essential to architectural beauty and which underpinned the principles of classical and neo-classical design. On a more practical level broad streets facilitated the passage of traffic, they encouraged the circulation of air, and allowed light to penetrate creating a more pleasant and healthy environment.

⁵ 'The streets are noisy and bustling, full of shops and people; put me so exactly in mind of Portsmouth, Plymouth, or any other seaport town in England, that I could not fancy myself in Italy' wrote Mary Berry. Lady Theresa Lewis (ed.), *Extracts of the Journals and Correspondence of Miss Berry from the Year 1783-1852*, 3 vols (London, 1865), i. p. 122.

⁶ Norfolk Record Office MS 20677 p. 130, travel journal of Robert Harvey.

⁷ BL Stowe MS 750 fol. 389.

Andrew Mitchell spoke approvingly of the seventeenth-century developments in Turin: the streets, he wrote 'are pretty and regular and are drawn with a line the houses of equal heights, the ornaments of architecture much the same in all of them....in short this town pleases by reason of the vast regularity with which it is built tho the buildings are by no means in the best taste'.⁸ By the end of the eighteenth century, however, a different aesthetic, governed by the principles of the picturesque, which placed more value on contrast, irregularity and evident antiquity was beginning to gain influence. Travellers, such as Whaley Armitage, recently graduated from Cambridge and travelling in 1790, found the regularity and uniformity of Turin unpleasing and oppressive.⁹

Whilst the broad streets of Turin's new town generally attracted admiration, the distinctive porticos of Bologna and Padua evoked a mixed response. Most found them dark, dank and gloomy. In Britain the emphasis in urban improvement was on removing overhanging houses and projections in order to open up the streets and maximise the light and air: the porticos went against this principle and seemed to make the streets darker and more confined. Travellers were also alert to the potential encouragement that they might give to crime: Padua had a reputation for being a place of violence, where students murdered each other with concealed stilettos. The dark shadows of the porticos, noted the British, provided the ideal circumstances in which to perpetrate such crimes. The problem was exacerbated by the absence of street lights – this being another criteria by which the civility and good governance and freedom of a town was judged. Illumination reduced the risk of crime and was also an indication that inhabitants could move about freely in the streets after dark. In many Italian towns, however, a curfew still operated, meaning that nocturnal movements outside were restricted. By comparison, in Britain the curfew had long since died out and the advent of effective street lighting since the late seventeenth century facilitated sociability and other activities after dark. No Italian city benefited from the kind of lighting to be found in London – where the street lamps were a frequent source of delighted comment by foreign visitors. Even Turin was found wanting in this respect.

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⁸ BL Add MS 58315 fol. 8v.

⁹ Trinity College Cambridge, Add MS a 226 37 (1), Journal of Whaley Armitage, unfoliated, diary entry for 27 Sept. 1790.