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FLUID CITY

RIVER GODS IN ROME AND CONTESTED TOPOGRAPHY

Charles Burroughs

Introduction: Blurred Boundaries—Conceptual and Topographical

Few major cities have undergone so thorough a transformation as early modern Rome, where a shrunken "gigantic cadaver" became a paradigmatic early modern theater of architectural magnificence, worthy of its ancient predecessor. No single site better exemplifies this transformation than the Campidoglio, the ancient Capitoline Hill, surmounted by a grand piazza bordered on three sides by palaces but open to the city on the fourth side where St. Peter's dome, designed by Michelangelo for Pope Paul III (r. 1534–49), rises above the distant skyline. The same architect and patron played key roles in the sixteenth-century remodeling of the Campidoglio (Fig. 1), though the only building actually erected on the hill by the pope was not part of Michelangelo's Capitoline ensemble. Early in his long pontificate, Paul saw to the construction of the Torre Farnese (or Paolina), a fortified residence designed with an eye to defense and domination, certainly not aesthetics. Until its demolition to make way for the Victor Emmanuel Monument (1885), the Torre Farnese was a looming presence on the hill, overlooking a city where by now numerous palaces exemplified the classicizing, formal language of the Renaissance, of which it showed hardly a trace.

Nor could there be a stronger contrast with Michelangelo's highly innovative and allusive designs for the civic palaces on the Campidoglio, though these were not realized until long after Paul's death (the date of the design is a different issue, as noted below), or indeed with the same architect's work, from 1546, on Paul's own family palace, the Palazzo Farnese. It has recently been suggested that we should see the rustic character of the Torre Farnese, traditionally sometimes referred to as a villa, in a more positive light, and as
Figure 1. “The Roman Campidoglio ideally completed according to Michelangelo’s design,” Stefano Duperac (Etienne DuPérac), etching 1569, included in the Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae, published by Antoine Lafreri. Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 41.72(1.14). Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

qualifying not just the traditional image of Rome but also prevailing notions of an urban/rural disjunction. This may be too large a claim for so undistinguished a building, but I will argue that it is applicable, in principle, to the remodeling of the Campidoglio, whatever the contrast in formal terms. If so, Michelangelo’s Campidoglio both drew on and helped to shape a wider setting—Rome itself—that already defied such binary stereotyping.

A related indeterminacy exists, moreover, in the visual rhetoric of the Campidoglio, embracing both the architectural framework and, emphatically, a number of sculptures prominently installed on the hill. I will focus especially on statues of river gods, specifically on a motif expressive of both stability (the river as enduring topographic identifier) and fluidity (the allusions to flowing hair
and water). Though such contradictions apply to all images of river gods, in the light of the complex history of this pair of statues they constitute a special case: one statue underwent a radical change of iconography, and both were subjected to a drastic shift of location and, presumably, meaning. The introduction of statues or related objects into a site as fraught with historical and political associations as the Campidoglio is certainly evidence of existing prestige, but they inevitably take on new significance, especially when integrated—as happened with the river gods—into a newly designed configuration likely to be expressive of current agendas. With its associations with ancient authority and ritual, as well as the municipal government in the city of the popes, the Campidoglio was a place of memory, or rather conflicting memories; as Kathleen Christian has eloquently pointed out, it was a site where civic and papal concerns and claims—sometimes competing, sometimes in balance—affect the course and nature of architectural or sculptural elaboration. Christian discusses an earlier period, but her characterization also applies to the sixteenth-century Campidoglio, seat of the medieval city republic, now increasingly hollowed out in the face of papal authority.

As completed in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Campidoglio is a paragon of classicizing architecture and spatial design, with sculpture in an auxiliary but crucial role. Even in such a setting, however, certain oppositional currents come to the surface, whether in the material fabric or, more often, in responses to it, difficult though these are to determine. Most importantly, recent studies have shown that sixteenth-century viewers were often slow or reluctant to assign definitive identity or meaning even to important statues. The same was surely true of architecture, especially in a complex and layered urban environment in which architectural designs often echoed other buildings, ancient or contemporary. Moreover, antiquity itself is a source of suggestive ambiguities. In these discussions I will emphasize literary references, authored in an earlier time of monumental redefinition of the city, to Rome as a place imagined as layered over unstable topographic conditions and hydrological flux. In the sixteenth century, the often-obsessive exploration of the subterranean resources and treasures of the city was driven, as Leonard Barkan has described, by enthusiasm for the antiquarian study of the ancient world. No less significant for many Romans was the inexorable growth of the power of the Renaissance papacy at the expense of the autonomy and authority of the medieval
city republic. Few studies of early modern Rome fail to cite Freud’s famous comparison of the buried strata of the city to the human psyche;\(^9\) in the case of the Campidoglio, the resonances of a distant antiquity are obvious, but repressed memories of medieval politics and practices are no less important.

**The Capitoline: Fabric, Function, Symbolism**

For early fifteenth-century visitors to Rome, the former Capitol fully embodied the fallen state of the city.\(^{10}\) Seeing a hill “golden once, now neglected, crammed with thorns and brambles,” humanists reversed Virgil’s evocation, in the eighth book of the *Aeneid*, of a primitive, rural Capitol unimaginably different from the temple-laden hill, “golden now,” of his own time.\(^{11}\) The realization of Michelangelo’s vision for the hill, in contrast, produced an island of architectural coherence and unified spatial organization, setting a triumphant classicism, associated with the papal regime, literally above the still unruly city. Of course, the idea of the Renaissance as triumphing over medieval values has lost ground in recent scholarship on the Campidoglio, as it has in general.\(^{12}\) As we will see, moreover, an extraordinary feature of Michelangelo’s design for the palace façades on the Campidoglio is a remarkable synthesis of medieval and classical motifs expressing a reconciliation of the building’s divergent functions and symbolism.

The two palaces on the hill at the time of Michelangelo’s initial involvement housed the major institutions of the late-medieval city republic. The Palazzo Senatorio, the much-modified ancient Record Office (*Tabularium*), housed the city’s main courts of justice as well as the senator himself, recruited from elsewhere to preside over the judicial system. The fifteenth-century Palazzo dei Conservatori, the city hall, was the official seat of the municipal government (led by the *conservatori*), as well as the more important of two city councils. As usual in medieval town halls,\(^{13}\) the business of government was transacted on the upper floor, above a space accommodating more mundane functions. The ground floor housed the offices of guilds, which opened onto a portico stretching the length of the building and sheltering legal transactions and cases pertaining to commercial activity in the market (this was moved in 1477 to the Piazza Navona).\(^{14}\) The honesty of merchants was tested by stone measures
for such commodities as grain, salt, and oil.\textsuperscript{15} For the most part, Michelangelo’s project incorporated the fabric and functions of both palaces, while famously maintaining the obtuse angle between them as a determining feature of the overall layout.

A crucial period for the municipal institutions located on the Campidoglio was the fourteenth-century absence of the papacy in Avignon; the Romans were able to join the wave of political innovation, long established in most of Italy, involving the emergence of city republics, or communes. Rome’s municipal government was dominated by the city’s leading households, which were often dependent on the exploitation of rural resources, the economic basis of a marked rustic local culture.\textsuperscript{16} For members of this civic elite, the increasing papal control of municipal affairs, once the papacy was again resident in Rome, provoked considerable resentment, and sometimes resistance. Especially in the rather anarchic period following the death of a pope (the \textit{sede vacante}),\textsuperscript{17} the \textit{popolo Romano} demonstrated, sometimes violently, its attachment to traditional rights and privileges.

In general, needless to say, the popes exercised relatively unchallenged authority, at the same time benefiting from services provided by the municipal administration. Thus, the \textit{maestri di strada}, civic officials in charge of the maintenance of the urban environment, played a key role in papal schemes of urban improvement such as the famous transformation of the Roman Forum into a kind of archaeological park, a suitable route for the triumphal entry of Emperor Charles V into Rome in 1536.\textsuperscript{18} As Charles rode through a Forum cleared of the residential and commercial buildings that had obscured many of the relics of ancient splendor, one of the \textit{maestri di strada} rode beside him explaining the significance of the monuments.\textsuperscript{19}

No doubt the Habsburg eagle was displayed along Charles’s route. Totemic animals were a standard feature of the heraldic self-representation of medieval dynasties as well as cities.\textsuperscript{20} Rome’s two heraldic beasts had different, sometimes conflicting, symbolic significance. The wolf connected the city to its legendary foundation and to the glorious ancient past.\textsuperscript{21} A bronze statue of a she-wolf, thought to be ancient (now considered to be medieval), was among the antiquities presented to the Roman people by Pope Sixtus IV in 1471; it was prominently mounted over the entrance of the Palazzo dei Conservatori.\textsuperscript{22} A statue of a river god reclining on the wolf with her twins is an important element of the double stair designed by
Michelangelo to link the main entrance of the Palazzo Senatorio with the much lower piazza in front of it. I discuss this statue below. The second totemic animal was the lion, the heraldic beast specifically of the Roman commune. Lion imagery was ubiquitous on the Campidoglio, where a live lion was also kept. A battered ancient statue of a lion attacking a horse, positioned from long before Sixtus’s donation outside the Palazzo Senatorio, was an instrument as well as symbol of judicial authority: it served as a kind of pillory to which malefactors were fastened to face public humiliation, or worse. Less dramatically, lion heads distinguished the stone measures, mentioned above, which ensured fair exchange in the market. Finally, the idea was current in late medieval Rome that the city itself was built in the shape of a lion with a raised tail, with Ghibelline or anti-papal associations. Alive or carved from stone, lions in Rome were invested with powerful symbolism.

**Place Making and Architecture**

In the course of the Renaissance, as we have seen, the Campidoglio came to house an impressive array of statues. Important though many of them were, a signal feature of Michelangelo’s design was the relative subordination of sculpture to architecture, as in the case of the river gods. For all their ideological significance, there was no place in the exterior design for the wolf and the lion, and they ended up in interior spaces. The bronze equestrian monument of Marcus Aurelius, on the other hand, famously became the central motif of the remodeled Campidoglio. Brought in 1538 from its previous site near the papal palace of the Lateran, the Marcus Aurelius was set up at the Campidoglio on a plinth, designed by Michelangelo, dominating a space as yet neither level nor unified. This marked a new stage in the history of the hill, where construction was underway encompassing an area designated as a piazza as well as a palace, presumably the Palazzo dei Conservatori. From 1537, the work was overseen by a commission of eminent citizens, but the palace had already undergone improvement work around 1530, when a square and level courtyard was laid out around an elaborate and at least partly antique wellhead; the rear wall was articulated by one and possibly by more arched niches. This was perhaps the model for the initial plan for the area—the piazza—on which the palace fronted;
in particular, both the palace courtyard and the piazza were centered on a conspicuous ancient monument within a geometrically organized space. The wall containing one or more arched niches limiting the palace courtyard at the back was echoed across the piazza by a plan for a portico and later by an executed retaining wall containing a single niche, which still exists in the Palazzo Nuovo, the pendant to the Palazzo dei Conservatori.\textsuperscript{30}

The progress of construction, and indeed of design work, on the hill is a complex subject and cannot be addressed here in detail.\textsuperscript{31} In 1568, an engraving of Michelangelo’s overall design for the site, including the two existing palaces and the additional palace, was published (Fig. 1).\textsuperscript{32} Construction work on the remodeling of the Palazzo dei Conservatori did not start before 1563; probably, however, the design for the distinctive colossal pilasters of its new façade predated that for similar, less striking elements designed by Michelangelo for St. Peter’s, following his appointment in 1546 as chief architect.\textsuperscript{33} The double stair of the Palazzo Senatorio, fixing the longitudinal axis of the piazza, was in place by around 1550; by now, assuredly, the main features of the design had been determined. When Michelangelo first designed a base for the equestrian statue (he later adapted it), however, he was surely already giving thought to the wider challenge of the disorderly condition of the Capitoline Hill. An important further consideration is the recent award of Roman citizenship to Michelangelo, who had already embarked on a close friendship with Tommaso de’ Cavalieri, a member of a leading citizen family; by now, consequently, Michelangelo’s attachment to the Capitoline project was not only professional, but also personal, with political overtones.\textsuperscript{34}

The transfer of the Marcus Aurelius statue raised issues of its spatial relation to existing or proposed buildings, perhaps already in the context of an overall design for the area; there were surely also related discussions about the disposition of the statues on the hill. We can assume that a key figure in such discussions was Latino Manetti, who had supervised the clearances in the Roman forum and served as Charles V’s \textit{cicerone} during his controversial visit of 1536 (Charles’s troops had been responsible for the terrible Sack of Rome of 1527).\textsuperscript{35} Manetti was a successful intermediary between the papal court and the civic world, not least as a long-term \textit{maestro di strada} and as a connoisseur of ancient art; his collection of antique statues is recorded in Ulisse Aldrovandi’s pioneer guidebook to Roman statue
collections, published in 1556. Manetti was also a member of the commission appointed in 1537, as noted above, to oversee the planning for the "palace and piazza"; his colleagues included Pietro dei Massimi, builder of the innovative and conspicuously sited Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne, a likely model for the façade of the Palazzo dei Conservatori. Clearly, such men could speak with authority on design issues raised by the Campidoglio project.

In spite of his support for the transfer of the statue of Marcus Aurelius, Pope Paul was strikingly indifferent to the Campidoglio project, which remained underfunded even after a dramatic improvement in the pope's financial situation in 1538. Instead, Paul committed funds to renewed work on St. Peter's basilica and to his other favored projects, such as the expansion of his family palace and improvements in the Vatican garden. Even a plan to improve the city's water supply came to nothing. In its crucial early years, therefore, the Campidoglio project was effectively a civic undertaking, perhaps to an extent a monument to civic concerns and ideology, though certainly respectful of papal concerns and authority.

River Gods: Location and Significance

In accordance with a long tradition, the paired statues of river gods on the Campidoglio are represented as older, half-naked men, with full beards and flowing hair, and grasping horns of plenty (Fig. 2). Their symbolic importance is clear from the prominence of the locations in which they were successively placed. In about 1550, they were set into the triangular fields formed by Michelangelo's double stair. Following their arrival on the hill in 1517, however, they were located at the edge of the portico of the Palazzo dei Conservatori, as is documented by some of the Dutch artist Maarten van Heemskerck's celebrated drawings of Roman scenes in the 1530s (Fig. 3). Here, they marked out and guaranteed the separateness and solemnity required of spaces used for legal business, and they symbolized—with their cornucopias—the abundance generated by the city's trades. Accordingly, the river gods complemented the symbolism of the statue of the lion and horse, which in Heemskerck's drawing appears across the piazza on the steps of the Palazzo Senatorio.

The river gods also drew attention to the offices of the city guilds, which adjoined the portico. The Palazzo dei Conservatori
was structured by a hierarchical stacking of functionally distinct spaces; the lower story accommodated the conduct and regulation of commerce, and the grander spaces above housed government offices, where the virtue of Romanitas was celebrated by lectures and readings on Rome’s ancient history.\textsuperscript{45} Michelangelo’s design for the remodeled building retained this contrast of stories (subsequently enhanced through the presence of artworks and frescoes of Roman history), and he expressed it, on the façade, through an extraordinary
juxtaposition of architectural orders (Fig. 1, on the right), although the colossal pilasters, rising through two stories, perhaps evoke the considerable overlap between guild and civic personnel and functions.46 There was no place in the design for autonomous statues such as the river gods.

The twin statues were not the first river gods on the hill. At a pageant held in 1513 to celebrate the award of Roman citizenship to the nephews of the new pope, Leo X de’ Medici (r. 1513–21),47 the decoration on a temporary wooden theater included personifications of the rivers Tiber and Arno, the poles of Medici authority, which were also embodied by human actors. Leo was still pope in 1517 when the Capitoline statues of river gods were brought from the Quirinal (Monte Cavallo), a relocation of especially large statues that was presumably connected to the events
of 1513. It is all the more remarkable that, for many years, ideas about the identity of the statues fluctuated; indeed, in the fifteenth century they were not even recognized as river gods. In Francesco Albertini’s guidebook of 1510 they appear as “Neptunes,” though in 1480 the eminent humanist Pomponio Leto had already identified them as generic river gods. Finally, in his important antiquarian work *Antiquitates Urbis* (1527), Andrea Fulvio identified them as the Nile and the Tigris, instead of the Danube and Achelous, as he had in 1513. At some point, however, the “Tigris” became a “Tiber,” perhaps in conjunction with its proximity to the seat of Roman civic government.

Fulvio’s identification of the “Tigris” was based on the figure of a feline on which the river god reclined. As Antonio Giuliano has shown, however, in or soon after 1517 the river gods were adapted for display on the Campidoglio. Giuliano suggests that a figure of a lion already on the hill (he relates it formally and functionally to the measures ornamented with lion heads) was incorporated at this time into one of the statues, making it already a Tiber, even if Fulvio misidentified the feline in question as a tiger. Later, a wolf was substituted for the lion, perhaps as a more accepted symbol of Rome, or to associate the Capitoline river gods with celebrated counterparts in the papal collection housed in a garden setting in the Vatican. By about 1550, around the time of the completion of the double stair, the energetic engraver Nicolas Beatrizet issued prints of the Vatican pair, which surely enhanced the association between the two pairs of statues, and even a connection, which I explore later, between the two sites.

**Ligorio’s Objection and Its Implications**

For reasons that are not well documented, an objection to the installation of the Capitoline river gods in the double stair came from the antiquarian and architect Pirro Ligorio. This was consistent with his critical attitude toward Michelangelo, whom he succeeded as chief architect at St. Peter’s until he was fired for not following Michelangelo’s designs. Ligorio also criticized the installation, attributed to Michelangelo, of the ancient consular Fasti, discovered in 1546 and one of the great archaeological finds of the period, in the Conservatori courtyard. For Ligorio, in this case, antiquarian
accuracy apparently trumped design considerations. A similar principle perhaps motivated Ligorio’s reaction to the disposition of the Capitoline river god as part of Michelangelo’s developing architectural vision for the Campidoglio, in which sculpture was subordinate to architecture, and even important antique objects reduced to ornaments of architecture. There was by now, however, a tendency, especially in gardens, to incorporate statues into larger configurations. Thus, Michelangelo had designed an environment for a third famous river god, repurposed as the “Arno,” in the Vatican. Ligorio himself planned the Villa d’Este gardens at Tivoli, starting in the 1550s, in which complex iconographical patterns absorbed diverse ancient objects (Fig. 4).

The print shows the garden and palace as ideally completed. The towers framing the palace, echoing the Palazzo Senatorio on the Campidoglio, were not built, nor was the Fountain of Neptune on the righthand edge of the garden, below the Fountain of Rome.

Ligorio may have been motivated by ideological concerns. The transfer circa 1550 of the Capitoline Nile and Tiber and the radical alteration in the physical substance of the “Tiber” inevitably brought about a change of meaning. As for the date of the substitution of a wolf for a lion, a Heemskerck drawing of the mid-1530s provides a terminus post quem; here, the Tiber leans on a markedly snub-nosed, un-wolfish lion. In view of the timeframe and the ideological resonances of lion imagery in Rome, as noted above, there are questions about the link between two disappearing lion images. The construction of Michelangelo’s stair entailed the removal of the statue of the lion and horse from its position on the previous stair of the palace. At least for a while, however, the statue remained visible, even conspicuous, in the Capitoline piazza. A plan to place it on a platform in front of the stair came to nothing, and it was instead shifted to the side in an indication of continuing symbolic power. Only in 1592 was the lion statue relegated, presumably not entirely for aesthetic reasons, to the courtyard of the Palazzo dei Conservatori.67

Ambiguous Statues and Protean Undercurrents

The question arises, therefore, of the connection between the fate of lion imagery on the Campidoglio and the larger shift to a centralized and autocratic political and cultural environment that developed in a paradigmatic way in papal Rome, and with particular intensity with the onset of the Counter-Reformation from the later 1540s. At first sight, other prominent Capitoline statues appear to embody such a shift, in addition to the Marcus Aurelius with its prominent gesture of command. In 1560 a pair of statues of young men restraining spirited horses was brought to the Campidoglio and placed on the balustrade, framing the entrance to the piazza.68 In this prominent position, these so-called Horse Tamers, probably a representation of the Dioscuri (Heavenly Twins), took the place of the famous pair of statues of the Horse Tamers that still stand on the Monte Cavallo, the part of the Quirinal Hill named after them. Paul III had already considered moving the Horse Tamers from Monte Cavallo to the Campidoglio, no doubt as an image of autocratic control, but also because of the common identification of the statues as Alexander the Great, with his celebrated horse Bucephalus.69 Alessandro Farnese, who took the name Pau
III at his accession as pope, favored imagery connecting himself to Alexander the Great, founder of an intercontinental empire dwarfed, as well as echoed, by the global reach of the sixteenth-century Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{60} Paul was never able to implement his plan to move the statues to the Campidoglio, thereby fixing their meaning and identity, as he surely hoped, in a way congenial to him.\textsuperscript{61} As we will see, however, even in cases of triumphal imagery apparently redolent of absolutist values, alternate interpretations remained possible.

On at least one occasion, a statue installed on the Campidoglio was targeted for its association with papal control. A statue of the especially unpopular Pope Paul IV (r. 1555–59) was located during his lifetime in the main hall of the Palazzo dei Conservatori; at his death, a mob invaded the palace, dismembered the statue, and, in an ancient gesture of dishonor, threw the head and other pieces into the river.\textsuperscript{62} Such violence against papal imagery was rare, suggesting that Paul had overstepped a line in his policies toward and treatment of the local population; moreover, it was the pope’s actions, not his statue, that provoked the crowd. Other, less destructive outlets for dissident views were available in Rome, including another statue, the famous antique remnant known as Pasquino. As the most prominent of Rome’s speaking statues, Pasquino appeared as a character in broadsheets and plays throughout the Renaissance, often in scurrilous dialogue with the statue known as Marforio, which until the late sixteenth century reclined, in the standard pose of a river god, in the Roman Forum just beneath the Campidoglio.\textsuperscript{63}

Though obviously anomalous in many respects, Pasquino illustrates a key aspect of a highly agonistic culture of collecting.\textsuperscript{64} Not only were ancient statues invariably removed from the location of their discovery, they were also placed in new settings, though these were usually designed to celebrate the owner rather than provide an opportunity for satire. Whereas the Capitoline Tiber was twice fixed in place and identity, as we saw, Pasquino was the subject, or even imaginary author, of verses in which he took on successive personae.\textsuperscript{65} In one passage, Pasquino even compares himself to Proteus, the shape-shifting sea god.\textsuperscript{66}

As we have seen, the Capitoline hill remained, deep into the sixteenth century, a space of contested or at least at least ambivalent symbolism.\textsuperscript{67} Even statues most expressive of papal power were vulnerable to Protean insurrection. James Ackerman, for example,
ascribes republican associations to the so-called Trophies of Marius, celebrations of military triumph set on the Capitoline balustrade in 1592 during an especially authoritarian era.\(^6\) Henning Wrede has found republican associations adhering even to the Horse Tamers and the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius itself.\(^6\) Similar ideas may be conveyed by tensions incorporated in the design of the Palazzo dei Conservatori façade.\(^7\) In such cases, the range of plausible interpretations rules out any straightforward absolutist reading.\(^7\)

It is natural, on the other hand, to see the installation of the Capitoline river gods in Michelangelo's double stair as restricting their semiotic potential, as if they belonged in a different category from the statues mentioned above. Such a view would seem to be confirmed by the correspondence between the Vatican and Capitoline river gods, though a closer glance at the Vatican statues produces surprising results. The Vatican (now Louvre) "Tiber" and Nile are each identified by companion creatures. The Tiber has a companion wolf; surrounding the Nile statue, sixteen children represent the ideal number of cubits reached during inundation, assuring fertility, as symbolized both by the children and the figure's cornucopia, while emphasizing the vigor of the river's flow and the multiplicity of its effects. The lively subsidiary scenes on the relief panels on all four sides of each statue, as well as in the margins of Beatrizet's prints, do far more than merely confirm the rivers' identities. Work and leisure along the river frame the "Tiber," perhaps alluding to its economic and social role; on the other hand, the Nile reliefs emphasize the interpenetration of land, river, and seawater in the Delta, a fluid landscape associated in antiquity with Proteus, the oracular sea god identified, already by Homer, as ruler in or of the Delta.\(^7\) At first sight, the difference between the two sets of images is absolute; we will see, however, that the Protean elusiveness of objects operates even here.

Proteus, already cited as an avatar of Pasquino, is a key figure in sixteenth-century culture, notwithstanding an important tendency in the period, which was marked, as John Manning has noted, by a "fetishistic need to catalogue, compile, and classify."\(^7\) Handbooks oriented artists and others in the complex world of ancient mythology, as well as that of personifications (river gods fall into both categories). I have already noted Aldrovandi's mid-century guide to the statues of Rome; soon he would achieve considerable fame as a natural scientist, collecting and classifying naturalia.\(^7\) However
the taxonomic impulse was balanced by enthusiasm for motifs and material that stimulated the imagination to engage with sometimes mysterious content or, in the case of the fashionable "grotesque" imagery, no apparent content at all. The vogue for emblems in particular privileged a hybrid format in which meaning emerged from varying combinations of text and image. A degree of indeterminacy was part of the game.

A crucial text in sixteenth-century intellectual culture was the Metamorphoses of Ovid, which is, in Paul Barolosky's formulation, a Protean storehouse of mythological figures and stories that inspired literary and artistic creation over centuries, not least because of illustrated editions. Medieval allegorizing ("moralized") versions that offered Christian allegories for ancient myths retained popularity deep into the sixteenth century, informing the major mythographic handbooks, in spite of the availability of printed versions of the authentic Latin text. The cultural context of the Capitoline river gods certainly encompassed a lively interest in Ovid's stories, in which personified rivers are prominent, even though specific links with the Capitoline statues are lacking. This may not be surprising; indeed, in a somewhat exasperated passage of his book on the reception as well as collection of ancient art, Barkan laments that Renaissance antiquarians, though certainly acquainted with the relevant texts, did not explicitly connect a recently discovered sculpture with passages directly relevant to its interpretation.

**Ovidian Presences in the Imaginary and the Environment**

Ubiquitous in the medieval and early modern imaginary, the figure of the river god was also marked by ambivalence between the anthropomorphic symbolization of topographic or geomorphic fixity and a capacity to evade settled boundaries and wreak destruction. At times, river gods provide background color for mythological and literary narratives; in particular, they inhabit the rustic or downright wild settings that recur in Ovid's Metamorphoses, often evoking, with a degree of irony, pastoral and Arcadian traditions and motifs. At times, however, they play a markedly active role, as exemplified by Achelous, the river god par excellence of ancient Greece who was considered by a Renaissance antiquarian, as we saw, to be embodied in one of the Capitoline river gods.
In the *Metamorphoses* (8.547–49), we first meet Achelous as a physical river. The hero Theseus is on his way from the dark forest where he and his companions overcame the ferocious Caledonian boar. On reaching the Achelous he can go no further, blocked by the raging river in spate. Taking human form, Achelous invites Theseus to wait out the flood in his luxurious yet natural cavern (565–72), in which sixteenth-century readers would have recognized a prototypical nymphaeum, a fashionable garden motif. Here nymphs serve a banquet while the diners exchange stories. Achelous recounts his combat with an even more powerful force of nature, the hero Hercules, whom he vainly resists by taking successively the forms of a man, a snake, and a bull. Hercules marks his victory over Achelous, now in the form of a bull, by ripping a horn from his head. In Ovid’s account (*Met.* 8.882–84; 9.1–97), the lost horn becomes the original cornucopia, thus entering a long history as a symbol of plenty and fertility often associated with river gods, such as the Capitoline statues. Indeed, at the conclusion of Achelous’s story, a cornucopia laden with fruits and delicacies makes an appearance at the banquet. Beyond its festive associations, the horn of plenty evokes the frequent representation of rivers as bulls or bull-headed, alluding to the destructive power embodied by Achelous himself in the *Metamorphoses* or indeed in Italy by the River Po, also described as horned (*corniger*) by Virgil (*Georgics* 4.371). A river’s horn, then, has contradictory connotations, which nevertheless coexist in certain situations.

Shortly before the tale of Hercules and Achelous, another banqueter tells of Philemon and Baucis, the aged couple whose hospitality to Jupiter and Mercury, disguised as mortals, saves them from a flood about to devastate their countryside. As a reward for their hospitality, the old couple’s humble cottage escapes destruction and, recalling Vitruvius’s account of the origin of monumental architecture (*De architectura* 8.679–724), becomes a magnificent temple designed or at least approved by Jupiter himself. In a work featuring innumerable metamorphoses, this passage is notable for presenting metamorphosis itself as the subject of a brief analysis (8.827–30): Ovid represents Achelous as distinguishing between a limited type of metamorphosis that occurs just once, producing a fixed identity, and a potentially infinite process. As the ultimate metamorphic exemplar, Achelous cites the ability of the sea-god Proteus to take range of shapes, culminating in a flowing river or a flame. Inserti
a further degree of ambiguity, the river god addresses Proteus in the second person, as if he were present (8.731–37).

Proteus’s presence in Renaissance intellectual culture is deeply marked by Ovidian, not to speak of Lucretian, ideas about instability and flux at the deepest level. As a literary and philosophical motif, the river is readily associated with the slippery quality of meaning, challenging attempts to halt the flow of sense. This was especially a characteristic of the emblematic formats that were so pervasive in the Renaissance, with their characteristic, often deliberately mysterious combination of image and textual motto and verse. A pioneer effort to define “the emblem” and bring order to the burgeoning field was made by a leading intellectual at the papal court under Paul III, Paolo Giovio, whose treatise on imprese was first printed in 1555, shortly after the author’s death in 1552 (it subsequently saw numerous illustrated editions). Modern scholarship emphasizes, however, the fluidity and variety of emblematic forms; for good reason, one of the more successful emblem books—it was compiled in the early seventeenth century by the Dutch lawyer and popular author Jacob Cats—bore the title Proteus. In short, both the concern to assign identity in various contexts and a resistance to this fixed meaning belong to a cultural moment in which Ovidian notions—what Barkan has called his “proteanism”—were especially important.

**Rome’s River as Dramatis Personae**

Technically, the statue of the Tiber is a personification, although we might rather see it as a portrayal of the river god Tiberinus, a key figure in the eighth book of the Aeneid in which Virgil imagines Aeneas’s arrival in the Tiber valley and his excursion to the future site of Rome (Aeneid 8.26–85). Tiberinus appears to Aeneas in a vision and gives him an optimistic but far from accurate prophecy of easy conquest of a new territory; this is not ambiguity so much as downright “dissimulation.” Virgil represents the landscape through which the Tiber flows as already ancient; Aeneas’s guide, the Greek settler Evander, points out the setting of Hercules’s conflict with the monstrous Cacus. By founding the Ara Maxima on this spot, Hercules established his own local cult and Roman cult practice in general. Though not a popular subject in Renaissance art, Hercules’s defeat of Cacus was famously coopted by the Medici to symbolize their subjection of
unruly Florence. In 1534, shortly after the definitive return of the Medici to power (and the year Michelangelo abandoned Florence), a statue of Hercules overcoming Cacus was prominently set up in the main square. In Rome, on the other hand, Hercules was especially associated with the civic elite, notably through the presence in the Palazzo dei Conservatori of the bronze cult statue of the victorious Hercules from the temple he founded himself.

In riverine form, the Tiber makes an appearance in the story of Hercules and Cacus; approaching the site of Rome with cattle taken from Geryon, Hercules drives them along, or rather in, the river (8.200–205). Michel Serres notes Hercules's effective theft of the cattle, to which he had no better claim than Cacus. What he has is a better ploy: Cacus pulls cattle backward to reverse their hoofprints, but Hercules uses flowing water to cancel any tracks. Serres emphasizes his ambiguity: "Hercules is a thief, he is a murderer, he is just, he is an ordinary shepherd, he is a god." Though, in the Renaissance, Hercules was subject to multiple interpretations (e.g., as patron deity of Tivoli and the Villa d'Este), I know of no relevant comment on this passage by readers of Aeneid 8 in sixteenth-century Rome, where in view of the subject matter the text was surely well known. It is also striking that Virgil sets the defeat of Cacus in a "mountain," within which the monster's cave lies hidden; this is often assumed to be the Capitoline Hill.

Though Rome's seven hills are emblematic of the city, a very different image of Rome, perhaps not only in a primeval moment, emerges from the sources. In the Fasti (6.395–414), Ovid describes a chance meeting, in the area of the Forum, with an old woman who tells of an earlier Rome sited in an oozing, marshy landscape in which land and water (the overflowing Tiber) merge and lose their substance, as if invalidating the familiar contrast between the Nile and Tiber. Indeed, Latin authors asserted a concordance between the seven streams of Rome, flowing from the seven hills into the Cloaca Maxima, the famous great drain (Pliny, NH 36.26.104), and the seven mouths of the Nile. Ovid had witnessed the building campaigns that under Julius and Augustus Caesar transformed the Forum into a showpiece of monumental architecture, evoked by the Renaissance Campidoglio; both are visible in the Dupéral print (Fig. 1), where the Forum appears in the background. However, the shrine of Venus Cloacina, goddess of the drain and of purity, remained to remind passersby of the plumbing that made the magnificence possible.
For Pliny, indeed, Rome is an *urbs pensilis*, raised above the channels excavated beneath the hills.

Remarkably, Ovid’s old woman seems to claim some memory of an older watery world, an ancient place of *suburbanae aquae*, though when the river was in flood, as described by Horace (*Odes* 1.1.13), the backwash from the drain could still submerge even the most sacred sites, even engulfing the Temple of Vesta. But Ovid at very least implies that the old, barefoot woman is engaged in a ritual observance that evokes the legendary flooded topography in which the infants Romulus and Remus floated in a basket until their fortuitous rescue. All the more remarkable, then (this is perhaps Ovid’s point), is the transformation—later, of course, than the flooding described by Horace—of the same swampy area into the monumental heart of the city, with defined streets and grand Augustan architecture. However, Ovid credits the initial transformation to a god, the rustic deity Vertumnus, who owes his name to the achievement of turning back the river (*verte re* is “to turn” in Latin).\(^89\) For all the efforts of Vertumnus as well as a host of engineers and administrators, however, both ancient and Renaissance Romans continued to experience the river in flood.\(^90\) Following a serious inundation in 1530, the even worse flood of 1557, as a contemporary noted, “in a few hours made most of Rome navigable.”\(^91\) Temporarily the city merged with the Tiber.

**Garden and/as City: River Gods in Ovidian Landscapes**

Virgil’s Tiberinus episode underscores the ambivalent character of this or any river god, and raises questions about possible interconnections of streams of literary and antiquarian interest. A privileged space existed in which such interaction is documented: by the middle of the century, the fashion for gardens organized according to an iconographic program was in full force, and there were important earlier examples.\(^92\) Such gardens featured itineraries stocked with ancient or classicizing artworks; beyond the references to motifs from such literary sources as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the garden as a classically inspired *locus amoenus* included flowing water, perhaps evoking the ancient parallel between the literal current of a stream or river and the flow of a poetic text.\(^93\) Indeed, the especially elaborate garden of the Villa d’Este includes a central axis, the “Avenue
of a Hundred Fountains,” associating a line of panels with no longer legible scenes from the *Metamorphoses* with a triple stream of water and an array of small jets. Here, around 1565, the integration of poem and garden was complete.

A key early example of a literary garden was that of the Roman Del Bufalo family. The garden, near the site of the Trevi Fountain, was founded or at least enhanced by Angelo del Bufalo (d.1530), a glamorous and cultivated man about town who passed his mistress, the famous courtesan Imperia, to Agostino Chigi, the pope’s banker, though in the end, some said, she killed herself for love of Angelo. The garden was demolished in 1885, but frescoes executed in the early 1520s on two small pavilions in part survive, though detached from their original site. Records also exist of the fine collection of ancient sculptures, many still extant, once housed in the garden.

The garden was famous and elaborate enough to elicit detailed descriptions, as in Aldrovandi’s catalogue of sculpture collections written in 1553. An artificial mountain representing Mount Helicon, home of the Muses, was also a fountain, with water seeping from the hoofprints of Pegasus, who, by striking the ground, had caused the sacred spring to flow. The imagery on the pavilions was closely based on Ovid’s account (*Met. 4.663–764*) of the Perseus legend, including a Danae (Perseus’s mother, no doubt with Jupiter in fluid form) and Atlas transformed into a mountain. The Ovidian references were localized through the presence of Mars and Venus, tutelary gods of Rome, and the representation in the Danae fresco of an ancient arch, part of an aqueduct traversing the property. Finally, a fresco of Perseus among the Hesperides unexpectedly included a river god, reinforcing the emphasis on water, if not fluidity as such.

Del Bufalo’s career brings us back to the Campidoglio; before his death in 1530, he was active in municipal affairs, for example in the office of *maestro di strada*. This role apparently passed to another Del Bufalo, active along with Pietro Massimi and Latino Manetti in the 1537 commission overseeing development on the Capitoline Hill, and providing a human link between a major sculpture collection, artfully disposed in a garden environment, and at least the early stages of planning for the Capitoline Hill. In an important discussion of Roman sculpture gardens, Henning Wrede’s inclusion of the Campidoglio implies that, even as fully remodeled, it belongs in a larger context of garden design.
We have noted the rusticity and informality of the early sixteenth-century Campidoglio, enhanced in the 1530s by the construction of the tower, or villa, of Paul III. Even if Michelangelo brought a high degree of formality to the hill, an important model for his design, I submit, was a prominent ancient site, as well as a major early sixteenth-century construction inspired by it. By the end of the 1540s, Michelangelo had contrived for the Capitoline Hill a monumental sequence of elements—a ramp, piazza, and double stair with an elaborate landing—that provided a terraced axial access toward a focal building as well as spaces for gathering. In typological rather than strictly formal terms, this project echoes the carefully managed transitions from one level to another at the Belvedere Courtyard at the Vatican (begun 1504), which in turn drew on the hillside shrine of Fortuna Primigenia at Palestrina, located, not far from Rome, within a larger rural landscape. As a republican complex, this perhaps balanced the connotations of the papal Belvedere courtyard.

The Belvedere courtyard was effectively destroyed by Sixtus V, but as initially envisioned it provided an access route from the papal apartments to the great sculpture collection, including the Tiber and Nile, and it served as a model for later multilevel garden architecture, including the Villa d’Este, which in turn borrowed motifs from the Campidoglio. A pseudo-antique fresco, probably from Paul III’s apartment in the Torre Farnese, represents, as James Ackerman surmised, the courtyard itself “as a classical Villa” in a state of ruin, though observed, as Denis Riboullaut points out, by modern onlookers, including a pope. Both through its imagery and its location on the Capitoline Hill, the fresco points to an affinity between the Campidoglio and the hillside complexes of Palestrina and the Vatican Belvedere Court, all featuring the ancient or all’antica integration of landscape and monumental urban design. Significantly, Ackerman dates the fresco to 1545–48, shortly before the completion at the Campidoglio of Michelangelo’s double stair, the celebratory apex of an axis stepping up from the city streets.

The Campidoglio as Theater and Designed Landscape

A prominent feature of the Belvedere Courtyard, until mutilated by Sixtus V in 1587–88, was a nymphaeum, an artificial grotto centered in the set of stairs and ramps that provided access from one
level to another, on the way to the statue collection that included a famous sleeping nymph, the so-called Cleopatra. Associated with flowing water, nymphs were standard elements of Renaissance gardens, often in a fountain setting or nymphaeum that evoked literary models and dramatized the importance of hydraulic engineering in a city in which successive papal governments sought to emulate the ancient aqueduct builders in the provision of water.

Until the mid-1520s, the city’s intellectuals met to discuss ancient poetry in the renowned garden of the noted humanist Johannes Goritz, located partly on the Capitoline Hill. Like most Roman gardens, Goritz’s *vigna* contained a shaded grotto with a fountain and the imagined presence of a nymph. This was not the only cave in the vicinity; until its collapse later in the century, there was also a cave within the Capitoline Hill containing the sculpted image of a bull. This cave is now identified as a mithraeum and the statue as Mithras sacrificing the bull, but for a sixteenth-century observer it represented the rape of Europa. The story was best known from Ovid’s account (*Met.* 2.846–975, 6.103–5) of Jupiter’s transformation into a bull to seduce a nymph whom he finds in a rustic meadow and carries off across the sea. In other words, the cave was understood as a nymphaeum, perhaps evoking its counterpart on the Vatican Hill, as well as an Ovidian tale of metamorphosis set in a rustic landscape.

The Capitoline Hill was better known, needless to say, as the site of Jupiter’s great temple, in the foundations of which was found the eponymous human head, *caput*, an omen of future world domination (Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.55.5). Conceptualizing the city as a kind of body, ancient Romans contrasted the Capitoline, the head of the city, with the intestine, the Cloaca Maxima, which carried away effluent. The latter, however, was also recognized as a foundational engineering achievement, uniting the seven streams of Rome in a single great channel. Jupiter himself could become fluid, as in the Danae story, and the early-sixteenth-century restoration, noted above, of the courtyard of the Palazzo dei Conservatori included the construction or repair of a wellhead carrying an inscription addressed to Jupiter not only as patron of the hill, but as a rain god. When he planned to set a statue of Jupiter in the central niche of the Palazzo Senatorio stair, as the centerpiece of the two river gods (the space was later taken by a figure repurposed as a “Rome”), Michelangelo perhaps foresaw an association of the greatest of the gods with the fluidity and indeterminacy of his riverine companions.
Though it is certainly a model urban piazza, we can nonetheless locate the Campidoglio in the evolution of garden design. Some confirmation of this view may be provided by a visual document often included in discussions of the Campidoglio, but without recognition of its oddity. Around 1549, the prolific operator of a printing business in Antwerp, Hieronymus Cock, published what is usually described as an engraved view of the Campidoglio under construction (Fig. 5). The print is now thought to incorporate drawings made at different times in the late 1540s by other artists (Cock himself seems never to have visited Rome); it shows a single river god next to the portico of the Palazzo dei Conservatori, and another reclining figure in front of the unfinished lefthand stair of the Palazzo Senatorio. On

closer inspection, the second figure is clearly a reclining female with an attendant youth; this is surely Venus, accompanied by Cupid. The other statue, the "Tiber," is emphatically corniciger, endowed with horns; he holds aloft his cornucopia and looks back toward "Venus." The print implies a narrative scene from some mythological pageant, perhaps with erotic overtones; images of Venus as goddess of love were standard features of Renaissance gardens, as in that of the Del Bufalo. Or perhaps she is the patron goddess of the Romans, reproached by the river for shifting her topographical if not ideological position; if so, the engraving may draw on the tradition of speaking statues, adding two new characters to the company of Pasquino and his cronies.

The print shows the Palazzo dei Conservatori before Michelangelo's remodeling was begun; a colossal head of Constantine appears in the portico, in the righthand bay.

As a designed landscape, finally, the Campidoglio may have inspired the stepped landscaping of other Roman hills. Cardinal Ippolito d'Este, patron of the celebrated garden at Tivoli, created a terraced garden on the slope of the Quirinal in the 1550s; the Farnese Gardens on the Palatine Hill stepped down to the Forum, making it, by the late 1560s, a kind of forecourt; and by 1561, at the latest, there was interest in the ancient Pincian Hill as a terraced landscape. More generally, the many gardens in and around Rome gave the city the markedly rustic character that lasted until the later nineteenth century.

**Conclusion**

A potent if in some ways fluid symbol of Rome, the Capitoline statue of the Tiber was circumscribed by insertion into a powerful architectural framework, perhaps to align it with emerging conceptions of the political climate of the city, where an "early modern" absolutist regime displaced lingering nostalgia for a "medieval" model of republican rule. That such a transformation occurred is beyond doubt, but there is also evidence for a continuing openness of response and interpretation, even in the face of apparent symbols of absolutist rule, such as the Horse Tamers installed on the Capitoline balustrade in 1560. The Tiber statue was certainly incorporated into a fixed architectural surround, losing its previous sculptural "autonomy," but we should perhaps focus on the conspicuous place given it by Michelangelo within
an environment still associated with local political authority. More generally, any definitive determination of an artifact’s meaning, especially in relation to such slippery figures as river gods, ran counter to the contemporary taste, discussed above, for deferring such determination, and for inserting statues into new iconographic itineraries compromising any supposed inherent meaning.

In Virgil’s poetic account, as Gretchen Meyers has pointed out, the “multivalent image” of Tiberinus “becomes a visible manifestation of a shifting sense of Roman identity.” In early modern Rome, an ongoing process of self-definition—different from, but perhaps informed by that of Augustan Rome—involved at least an implicit recognition of the city’s special spatial character, as an urban-rural continuum including, for centuries, some districts of dense settlement as well as expansive green spaces, the medieval disabitato, extending well within the city wall. An elision of the opposition of city and country in socioeconomic terms, moreover, was an important factor in the world of the Roman citizen elite, with extensive landholdings and business interests in the rural hinterland. As new monumental buildings and public spaces were added to the expanding city in the course of the long Renaissance, they joined a loose and variegated topographical patchwork interspersed with gardens and vineyards.

Against this background, a conscious transcendence of the rural/urban binary became fashionable in Rome, not least, if not especially, in architecture at the highest social level, that of papal patronage. A symptomatic case was the courtyard of Pope Paul III’s Palazzo Farnese (where Michelangelo was architect from 1546 to 1549), which was initially open in the rear to a view, framed by sculptures, across the river to a villa garden and more distant hills; this visual axis, blocked by later construction, created an exemplary blend of city and “country.” Later in the sixteenth century, moreover, Rome became a city of fountains and flowing water, in which effects of water and light counterbalance the solidity of stone and stucco, mixing monumentality and the ephemeral. On the Campidoglio itself, Michelangelo’s famous oval pavement, built before an aqueduct brought water to the hill, already suggested waves radiating out from the statue at its center, and in or shortly before 1585, Sixtus V’s fontanone was installed in front of the river gods. With its grand architecture atop an uncouth rock, Rome’s Campidoglio was an example or even paradigm for a surrounding city of contradictions,
at the same time stable yet markedly unstable, defined and yet undefined, dense yet open, real and unreal.

—Rochester, New York

NOTES


5. For a slightly earlier period, when the Capitoline sculptures were first placed there, see Christian, *Empire without End*, 103–16.


27. The literature on Sixtus’s donation and its significance for the history of museums is enormous; see note 4 above.


29. Bedon, *Il Campidoglio*, 43, notes that the resulting space was perfectly square; she suggests there were several niches in the rear wall, but only one is documented.


31. For the progress of construction and design work on the site, see Bedon, *Il Campidoglio*.

32. In 1568 and 1569, Stefano Duperac published two versions of *Il Campidoglio*; Christopher L. C. E. Witcomb...


36. Ulisse Aldrovandi, Di tutte le statue antiche, che per tutta Roma...si vegono, was printed as an appendix to Lucio Mauro, Le antichità de la città di Roma, 1556; William Stenhouse, "Visitors, Display, and Reception in the Antiquity Collections of Late-Renaissance Rome," Renaissance Quarterly 58, no. 2 (2005): 397.


42. For a circa 1535 view from across the piazza, see Ackerman, Architecture of Michelangelo, 142 no. 61.
43. On the authority conferred by the site of a legal transaction, see Charles Burroughs, "Spaces of Arbitration and the Organization of Space in Late-Medieval Italian Cities," in Medieval Practices of Space, ed. Barbara Hanawalt and Michal Kobialka (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 64–199.


45. Ibid., 100.


49. Antonio Giuliano, "Antiqua statua Tygridis fluvii marmorea," in idem, Studi normanni e federiciani (Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2003), 225–28. Giuliano connects the lion with the Jubilee of Boniface VIII in 1300 (it is in a private collection but I have not been able to trace it).


53. Bernadine A. Barnes, Michelangelo in Print: Reproductions as Response in the Sixteenth Century (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 54, 138; Coffin, Pirro Ligorio, 11–12.


57. Bedon, Il Campidoglio, 88 and 118 n.105.


64. Stenhouse, “Visitors,” 400.


71. Aikin, “Roma and Captives,” 586–87, notes the addition around the end of the sixteenth century of captives to a figure of “Rome” installed in the central
niche of the double stair. He notes the triumphalist tone and the probable association with Pope Sixtus V, the "terrible pope." However, the identity of the captives is not fixed.


87. Barkan, *Unearthing the Past*, 24, suggests that the “mountain” is the Capitoline.


89. Ovid, *Fasti* 6.410: Vertumnus turned back the river (*averso amne*).


102. Coffin, *Gardens*, 78, identifies an Antonio Del Bufalo as the garden’s founder.


120. Ibid., 69–70, 74.


