

Summary

Topographies of Marvels: A Bestseller Rome Travel Guide from 1575 in the Hands of Authors, Publishers and Readers



Topographies of Marvels tells the story of a 16th-century bestseller *Le cose meravigliose dell'alma città di Roma*, the guidebook to Rome printed for the Jubilee of 1575—the first after the Council of Trent. Following the book through its full “communications circuit,” it shows how authors and compilers assembled it, how Roman printers rushed it to market, how sellers positioned it, and how real readers used and annotated it. The result is a portrait of a guidebook that was both a tool of devotion, a map of marvels, and a commercially made-to-sell item.

An introduction sets the scene, exploring the theology and ritual of the Jubilee, the social and devotional landscape of post-Tridentine Rome, and the practicalities of pilgrimage—from roads and lodgings to the activities visitors actually engaged in once they arrived. It also sketches the early modern book market so that *Le cose meravigliose* appears not as an isolated hit but as a clever product of a busy print economy.

Chapter 1 considers the 1575 compilation as a purposefully designed collection of nine texts aimed at meeting the diverse needs of the “pilgrim-reader.” Besides the main description of Roman churches, it includes an itinerary to ancient sites, a treatise on gaining indulgences in station churches, a summary of Roman antiquities and customs, a curious essay on ancient heating systems (*Dei fuochi degli antichi*), a pastoral letter by Charles Borromeo, and two practical lists: a chronological record of popes, emperors, and rulers, and a catalogue of postal stations along Europe’s routes to Rome. The chapter shows how each part serves a specific purpose—guiding prayer, supporting devotional practices, sparking antiquarian curiosity, and making the journey from A to B smoother for the reader.

Chapter 2 examines the print shop. By analysing typography, layout, formats, and paratexts, it reconstructs how Roman and Venetian publishers—working to

Jubilee deadlines—edited, abridged, recombined, and redesigned the material across fifteen known editions of 1575. The analysis explains how those choices influenced price, portability, and appeal, and why *Le cose meravigliose* became the most frequently reprinted Roman guidebook of its day.

Chapter 3 examines the book “in the wild”, analysing ownership inscriptions, marginal notes, and other copy-specific traces in thirty-seven surviving copies in Italy and Poland. These marks reveal who purchased the guidebook, how its readership varied by region and decade, and how its functions evolved over time—changing from a practical vade-mecum to a souvenir and to a scholarly source. The section concludes with a catalogue of provenance descriptions for all thirty-seven copies.

A concluding remarks ties together the themes, emphasising what *Le cose meravigliose* teaches about early printed guidebooks: how they mediated religious experience, organised urban wonder, and thrived as market objects—and where future research might take the story next.