
Digging dilettanti: the first Dutch excavation in Italy, 1952–58

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What determines the possibility of an archaeological excavation abroad and its success? In September 1952, when two Dutch archaeologists with little experience on the ground started digging underneath the Santa Prisca church on the Aventine hill in Rome, this seemingly trivial question loomed large over their pioneering efforts. For decades, Rome had been the obvious centre of all archaeological attention worldwide – but the Eternal City was essentially off limits for non-Italian campaigns. Ever since the unification of Italy, with Rome becoming the new nation's capital in 1871, large-scale fieldwork projects in the city had been effectively restricted to Italian experts, the likes of Rodolfo Lanciani, Giacomo Boni and Alfonso Bartoli. But after the collapse of the Fascist regime and with the nascent process of European collaboration in the aftermath of the Second World War, Italy gradually opened up its rich soil to archaeologists from abroad. The Dutch were among the first to profit from this opportunity; their fieldwork project at Santa Prisca, though minor in scale, can be seen as the first foreign campaign in Rome since the famous French excavations on the Palatine hill during the reign of Napoleon III in the 1860s. How did this project emerge, and what circumstances made it possible?

In this chapter we take the largely unknown but highly significant example of the Dutch excavation at Santa Prisca to offer an historical contextualisation of the networks (personal, professional and political) that impact upon archaeological practice in an international setting.¹ We thereby aim to show how archaeological knowledge is produced through the interaction of individual and collective processes of networking that develop within specific geographies of knowledge (in our

case the particular institutional setting of foreign institutes in Rome) and through both structured collaborations and informal conversations between archaeologists and non-archaeological actors. The data we present especially reveal to what extent scholarly concerns about archaeological inexperience can be overridden by political interventions based upon such institutional–informal networking.

The two protagonists of our story are the Dutch archaeologist Carel Claudius van Essen (1899–1963) and his colleague and compatriot Maarten Vermaseren (1918–85). For about a decade, from 1952 to 1958 and again from 1964 to 1966, they carried out fieldwork underneath and in the area surrounding the Santa Prisca under the aegis of the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome (KNIR) (see Figure 4.1). While other nations competed for access to large-scale excavation sites in Italy such as Greek colonies, Etruscan settlements and Roman provincial towns, the Dutch started digging under a humble *titulus* located in the heart of the Eternal City. On the Aventine hill, they succeeded in establishing a fruitful and harmonious collaboration with the Italian archaeological services, which resulted in important findings, especially in the famous third to fourth century *mithraeum* and parts of a Roman habitation from the imperial period underneath the church. The results of the first phase of the excavations were extensively published in 1965 (Vermaseren and Van Essen, 1965), while the findings of the second phase of the fieldwork (1964–6) that concentrated on the garden of the church have recently been investigated afresh in an analysis of the excavation's legacy data (Armellini and Taviani, 2017; Kruijer, Hilbrants, Pelgrom and Taviani, 2018). These data include Vermaseren's personal archive, containing around forty notebooks with field reports, architectural and stratigraphic descriptions, sketches and more than a thousand photos, as well as the complementary archive of Rome's archaeological service, which contains a rich collection of institutional correspondence, maps and decrees related to the Santa Prisca excavations.² These archives not only allow for a thorough reconstruction of the two phases of the excavation, but also hold the key to the understanding of the dynamics of the social, cultural and political contexts within which Dutch archaeological fieldwork abroad took wing in the 1950s.

Our approach to these diverse legacy data starts from the perspective that they contain information about the historical development of archaeological practice, thus making the non-archaeological context of the excavation itself into a subject of investigation. Recent work on the evolution of archaeology into an independent scientific discipline has covered many approaches to studying the histories of archaeological knowledge production, resulting in biographies of discoverers, genealogies of discoveries and historical analyses of the institutional contexts



4.1 Maarten Vermaseren (left) and Carel Claudius van Essen studying the portrait of Serapis, found in the *mithraeum*. Vermaseren archive, Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome. Copyright © Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

in which archaeological knowledge is produced (Murray and Evans, eds, 2008; Murray, 2012). Apart from the many hagiographies of great archaeologists, particular attention has been paid recently to the political dimensions of archaeology and the manifold ways in which archaeology

has been used for political, especially nationalist, purposes (David, 2002; Dyson, 2006; de Haan, Eickhoff and Schwegman, eds, 2008). In the context of Italian archaeology, a clear example of this trend is the increasing focus on the use of archaeology during the Fascist regime as a political tool and as an instrument of *romanità* (Arthurs, 2012, 2015).

Much less is known, however, about the post-war period, in which the nationalist perspective on the past gradually gave way to a more internationalist practice of archaeological fieldwork on Italian territory. In this chapter, we focus on this crucial period, zooming in on the Dutch excavation at Santa Prisca to tell a larger story of the disciplinary infrastructure and the social, cultural and political contexts in which archaeological practice developed in Italy after the fall of Fascism. The Santa Prisca case is especially interesting because it shows how two archaeologists from a small country with little personal field experience managed to undertake and accomplish a difficult excavation campaign in the centre of Rome, the heartland of antiquity. We apply actor-network-theory (Latour, 1996, 2005) to argue that their relative success in doing so can be explained through the various formal, informal and institutional networks within which they operated, which resulted in attracting significant private and public funding as well as effective archaeological valorisation. Specific attention is paid to the combination of individual and institutional networking, which reveals the agency of single archaeologists and non-archaeological actors (such as politicians) as well as that of institutions. In this context, we use insights based on the geography of knowledge (Naylor, 2002, 2005) to show how the local environment of foreign institutes in Rome provided a favourable institutional framework that determined the possibility and success of this particular archaeological excavation outside the home country.³

Before the excavation: institutes and individuals in the opening up of Italian archaeology

From the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the end of the Second World War, Italian Classical archaeology went hand in hand with a clear nationalist agenda. The young Italian state, crowned with the conquest of Rome in 1870, established new ministerial bodies that organised a hierarchical regulatory framework for archaeological practice and preservation throughout the peninsula. Under the directives of the central Direzione Generale delle Antichità e Belle Arti (Directorate-General for Antiquities and Fine Arts), a subsidiary of the Ministry of Education, large-scale excavation campaigns were organised in Rome and elsewhere, progressively excluding foreign archaeologists in the practice of archaeological fieldwork. This *de facto* boycott of non-Italian

archaeologists remained in force for decades and was further intensified during the Fascist regime, when archaeology became one of the main vehicles of Mussolini's pretended rebirth of the Roman Empire (Bourdin and Nicoud, 2013; *cf.* Palombi, 2006).

With the fall of the regime in 1943 and the subsequent liberation of Italy in 1945, this attitude started to change. In the years following the war, many members of the Italian intellectual and academic community turned their back on the ideological and practical remnants of Fascism, and Italian Classical archaeologists (many of whom had served under Fascism) looked for new approaches to avoid the mixing of politics and archaeology. As a result, much emphasis was placed on technical studies that carried no ideological connotations (Barbanera, 1998). From an international perspective, the overall post-war spirit was one of international collaboration, illustrated by the opening moves of European collaboration and the *rapprochement* with the United States of America that culminated in the Marshall Plan. In the archaeological community in Rome, this spirit of international collaboration had an especially profound impact upon the institutional framework of the foreign schools, the various academies and institutes of non-Italian academic communities that had been established in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in the context of the nationalist competition over Rome and antiquity. Immediately after the end of the Second World War, two important organisations were created that instead focused deliberately on collaboration and shared international interests. In 1945, the Associazione Internazionale di Archaeologia Classica (AIAC) was founded, with a leading role for Erik Sjöqvist, the director of the Swedish Institute in Rome. The AIAC expressly aimed to exchange and disseminate archaeological discoveries in Italy, and it was entrusted with the restitution to Rome of the four German libraries which had been shipped back to Germany during the war. A year later, in the same collaborative spirit as the AIAC, the Unione degli Istituti di Archeologia, Storia e Storia dell'Arte (Unione) was established, which likewise meant to strengthen the relationship between the foreign schools (Whitling, 2018; *cf.* Rietbergen, 2012).

In this climate of scientific exchange and international collaboration, the Italian government gradually became more hospitable to foreign archaeology on Italian territory. The establishment of organisations such as the AIAC and the Unione strengthened the perception of the cultural relevance of Classical archaeology amongst Italians and other nationals alike. Meanwhile, after decades of exclusion of non-Italian archaeologists, the foreign schools were eager to take advantage of the sudden increase of archaeological opportunities; despite the spirit of international collaboration, a large-scale fieldwork project was still essentially

seen as a matter of national academic prestige. In the immediate post-war years most of the foreign schools (and their respective national governments) were ill prepared to fund archaeological fieldwork, but soon the big players took advantage of Italy's renewed hospitality, with the French starting an excavation at Bolsena in 1946 and the Americans in 1948 at the Roman colony of Cosa. The next year, Belgium also received permission to excavate the site of Alba Fucens. Even small countries now joined the hunt for prestigious archaeological fieldwork projects in Italy (Linde, ed., 2012b; Bourdin and Nicoud, 2013).

The KNIR followed this general trend. The Institute had been established in 1904, mainly as an institutional home for Dutch historians coming to Rome to study the Vatican archives. Before long, the Institute also embraced other scholars from different disciplines, and in 1920 Hendrik Leopold (1877–1950) was appointed as an archaeological assistant. Trained as a journalist, Leopold reported archaeological developments and discoveries to the academic community affiliated to the Institute and the general Dutch public via various newspapers (Cools and De Valk, 2004: 55–6).⁴ But Leopold was a trained archaeologist himself, having been a member of the pioneering excavation team of the Dutch archaeologist Carl Wilhelm Vollgraff (1876–1967) in Argos, Greece at the beginning of the twentieth century. During Easter 1932, at the invitation of the palaeontologist Ugo Rellini Leopold was even allowed to join the Italian excavation in Northern Apulia for a few days (Heres, 1989: 82). A Dutch-led dig in Italy, however, was not possible until after the Second World War.

With the retirement of Leopold in 1942, the long-standing director of the KNIR, Godfried Hoogewerff (1884–1963), started looking for a new archaeologist who could also fill the role of vice-director. At the recommendation of Gerard van Hoorn (1881–1969), who taught archaeology at the University of Utrecht, Hoogewerff appointed Carel Claudius van Essen. After his graduation in Classical Languages in 1921, Van Essen had participated in excavation projects in The Netherlands and he worked as an assistant curator in the archaeological museum of Constant Willem Lunsingh Scheurleer (later appointed as professor in Greek Archaeology at Leiden University).⁵ The Scheurleer family went bankrupt in the crisis of the 1930s and the museum had to close, but this experience made Van Essen an important member of the burgeoning archaeological intellectual community in The Netherlands.⁶ Moreover, Van Essen was very familiar with Rome, having been granted scholarships from the Netherlands Institute several times during his studies. These research visits allowed him to start building a professional network in Rome, including the well-known Italian Etruscologist Antonio Minto and his student Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli. Encouraged by

Hendrik Bolkenstein, a specialist in ancient religion at the University of Utrecht, Van Essen finished his dissertation on Etruscan tomb painting in 1927 (Cools and De Valk, 2004: 93–5).

In 1947 Van Essen returned to Rome for good as archaeologist and vice-director at the KNIR, having survived the war years fighting in the anti-German resistance. Soon after his arrival in Rome, he was determined to build new personal and institutional ties that could strengthen the position of the Institute through informal as well as institutional platforms for knowledge creation. As early as July 1947, for two weeks Van Essen joined the excavation at the Etruscan site of Bolsena with the *École française de Rome* (Heres, 1989: 82). A year later, he joined the board of the AIAC, together with the retired Leopold; he consequently attended its meetings and also became a member of the editorial board of *Fasti Archeologici*, *Annual Bulletin of Classical Archaeology*, the association's journal. During this period, his interests shifted from Etruscology to topographical and architectonic studies related to early Christian and Byzantine history and archaeology (Van Essen, 1950).

The post-war spirit of international collaboration (for the sake of national prestige) was also shared by Hoogewerff, who as director served as the Dutch representative on the board of the Unione. After the war, Hoogewerff seized the opportunity presented by changing circumstances to increase the cultural and professional reputation of the KNIR. To this end, he standardised the allocation of scholarships for researchers, and one of the first people to be granted a scholarship, in 1946, was Maarten Vermaseren. Like Van Essen trained as a Classicist, Vermaseren was a disciple of the famous Belgian scholar Franz Cumont (1868–1947), under whose direction he studied the sanctuaries of the Roman Mithras cult – *mithraea* – in Rome and Ostia. In 1947, while Vermaseren was still in Rome, Cumont died, and his pupil was regarded as the rightful person to succeed Cumont in continuing the studies of ancient 'oriental' religion in the Mediterranean (Roos, 1950–51).⁷

With the more or less simultaneous appointment of Van Essen and rise of Vermaseren in 1947, the Netherlands Institute in Rome suddenly increased its archaeological standing and potential. Meanwhile, diplomatic ties between Italy and The Netherlands were strengthened in a general climate of west European reconciliation. The young Catholic historian Jan Poelhekke (1913–85), the Institute's new director from 1950 onwards, played a key role in this process. In 1951, Poelhekke was appointed cultural attaché to the Dutch Embassy in Rome with the task of serving Dutch cultural interests in Italy, and in the same year a cultural treaty was signed between The Netherlands and Italy. Poelhekke, in his double role as director of the KNIR and cultural attaché to the Embassy, became the spider in the web of this nascent

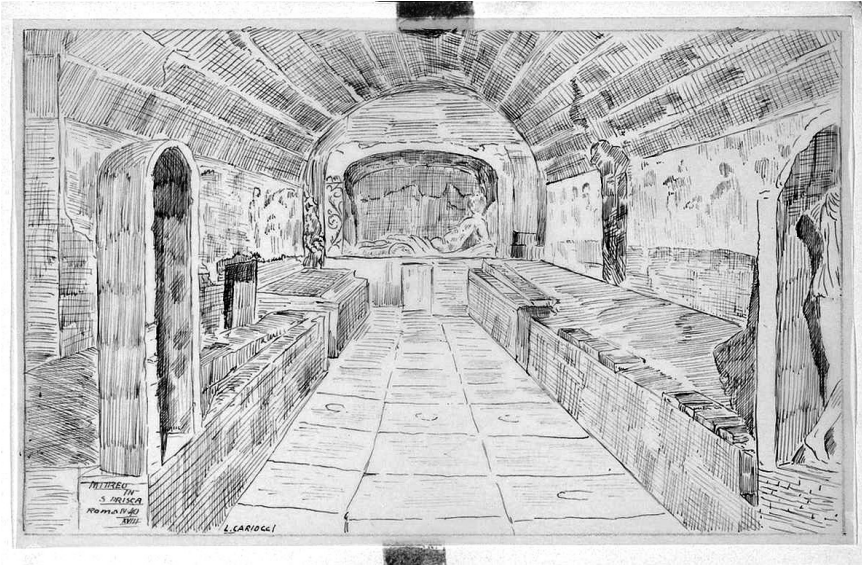
Italo-Dutch cultural collaboration (Cools and De Valk, 2004: 88–96). The conditions for starting a Dutch excavation in Italy, academic as well as political, had never been this favourable.

Starting an excavation abroad: academic diplomacy between Rome and The Hague

On 6 March 1947, Vermaseren guided a small Dutch delegation through the rooms of the *mithraeum* underneath the Santa Prisca church on the Aventine hill (*Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome* (MNIR) [26] 1950: xx). The cult site for the deity Mithras had been partly excavated in the 1930s by the Augustinian friars of the church;



4.2 The cult niche of the *mithraeum* of the Santa Prisca with Mithras killing a bull (*tauroctony*). Vermaseren archive, Allard Pierson Museum (Amsterdam). Copyright © Allard Pierson Museum (Amsterdam). All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.



4.3 In 1948 Maarten Vermaseren commissioned the Italian architect L. Cartocci to sketch the *mithraeum* of the Santa Prisca. Vermaseren archive, Allard Pierson Museum (Amsterdam). Copyright © Allard Pierson Museum (Amsterdam). All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

their efforts had brought to light a cult-niche with a unique stucco decoration of the sun god Mithras as well as remarkable frescoes and inscriptions related to the cult in the *spelaeum*, the central room of the *mithraeum* (see Figure 4.2) (Ferrua, 1940a, 1940b). During the tour and in a subsequent report published in the MNIR, the publication series of the KNIR, Vermaseren could not resist expressing his concerns about the state of conservation of the frescoes in the damp rooms under the Santa Prisca. He argued: '[b]ecause of the deterioration of the frescoes, it would be desirable to photograph them in colour print, but it is necessary to clear the surrounding areas from their filling' (MNIR [26] 1950: lxxii). This statement is the first indication of Vermaseren's interest not only in safeguarding the frescoes, but also in further exploring the surrounding areas of the *mithraeum* (see Figure 4.3).

The Italian authorities shared that interest. In September 1943, a few years before Vermaseren's tour of the Santa Prisca, Bianca Maria Felletti-Maj, an assistant at the Italian archaeological service, had also noticed the deterioration of the frescoes. Her inspection of the *mithraeum* resulted in a list of suggestions to preserve and restore the archaeological site, emphasising the importance of conservation of the frescoes, which were degenerating because of humidity and the bad state of the rooms of

the *mithraeum* (ASSAR, busta 40.6). Felletti-Maj wrote her report days after the German occupation of Rome, and because of the war there was no practical follow-up to her alerting memo. But eventually the issue was brought up again in October 1951 in an internal report of the Italian archaeological service by Carlo Cecchelli, professor of Christian archaeology at the University of Rome (and one of the many local academics who had vividly supported Fascism in their earlier career). In his report, Cecchelli stated that the *mithraeum* and the adjacent structures of an imperial habitation should be further examined, for which a specialist was needed with knowledge and experience in Classical and late Roman archaeology. One of the expressed aims of the conservation of the *mithraeum* was that the archaeological site could be exploited for tourism (ASSAR, busta 417.8, 1c).

Now was the moment for Vermaseren and Van Essen to act. Their cooperation in the matter came naturally, as they shared a similar academic background in Classical languages and the same interests in late ancient history and archaeology, especially in the field of late Roman religion. From a practical point of view, Vermaseren's professed ambition to start an excavation underneath the Santa Prisca church was much easier to realise under the aegis of an institutional infrastructure in the person of Van Essen as vice-director of the KNIR. Accordingly, the two archaeologists joined forces and decided to take up Cecchelli's suggestion that the site be excavated and restored, which had probably been advertised in the circles of the AIAC and the Unione. In March 1952, some five years after Vermaseren's first tour of the Santa Prisca and almost a year after he obtained his PhD, the Direzione Generale delle Antichità e Belle Arti received an official letter from Van Essen, who proffered himself and Vermaseren as the best candidates for safeguarding (by detachment) the frescoes of the *mithraeum* and for excavating the surrounding areas of the cult site (ASSAR, busta 417.8, 1c).

The Dutch proposal entered the maelstrom of bureaucratic negotiations between different Italian ministries and the archaeological service, which had to decide whether Van Essen and Vermaseren were suited for the job. After a few weeks, Salvatore Aurigemma, the head of the archaeological service, gave his authoritative verdict on the matter, writing to the Ministry of Education that he 'recommends welcoming the proposal very favourably'. However, Aurigemma could not hide his concern about the expertise of the Dutch team, adding with academic understatement that he 'was not aware of the specific technical knowledge on the matter of Vermaseren, to whom the Netherlands Institute intends to give the direction and the responsibility for the enterprise' (ASSAR, busta 275.4). Apparently, this concern was not seen as decisive, and in June 1952 Van Essen and Vermaseren received official permission

to start the first Dutch excavation on Italian soil, under the condition that the Istituto Centrale del Restauro and the Italian archaeological service would supervise the restoration and the fieldwork (ASSAR, busta 275.4).

The swiftly made decision to entrust the excavation under the Santa Prisca to Vermaseren and Van Essen betrays the extent to which the post-war climate of collaboration and cultural exchange, recently decreed in a cultural treaty between Italy and The Netherlands, prevailed over concerns relating to scholarly expertise and experience. Indeed, Van Essen and Vermaseren had been trained as Classicists, and although they had gained some know-how in earlier fieldwork projects, they did not have any experience in directing a challenging excavation in the midst of the stratigraphic complexity of Rome. Clearly, the overriding factor was the academic prestige of Van Essen and Vermaseren, both respected scholars with a broad international network in the archaeological community in Rome. This prestige was strengthened further by the institutional backing of the Netherlands Institute and its director Poelhekke. Also on a higher diplomatic level, the excavation was born under a lucky star: the new Dutch ambassador in Italy appointed that year, Han Boon (1911–91), was an historian by training, with a PhD from Leiden University (supervised by Johan Huizinga) and a genuine interest in archaeology. Together with Alexander Byvanck, professor of Classical Archaeology at Leiden, Boon founded a small committee that supported the Dutch fieldwork at Santa Prisca among Dutch governmental and academic circles in order to stimulate financial aid (*cf.* Boon, 1989).

The Dutch initiative to start digging in Rome, then, was soon endorsed institutionally and politically. But before the project could take off, another difficulty had to be solved: funding. In recent years, shortage of funding had been one of the major reasons why the Dutch had not yet been able to initiate a costly archaeological campaign in Italy (*Nieuwe Leidsche Courant*, 13 November 1954: 13). Excavating urban archaeological sites such as the *mithraeum* beneath the Santa Prisca obviously costs time and money, as well as demanding a large workforce with expertise in complex stratigraphy and diverse material. Substantial sums were required for personnel and for the complex techniques and tools needed to detach the frescoes and remove the filling of the surrounding areas of the *mithraeum*. But again, private prestige and networks could be mobilised to cover these costs. Given the swiftness of the Italian authorities in permitting the excavation, the Dutch had to operate fast in creating a financial infrastructure to embark upon the project. In order to get extensive funding in a relatively short time, Van Essen and the committee of Boon and Byvanck approached private capital. Buoyed up by their broad social network, they found J.M. Hondius

and Ada Hondius-Crone, a wealthy couple from Amsterdam interested in oriental and ancient religions, willing to donate a large sum that allowed a first campaign to begin.

The preparations for that campaign took off in September 1952 and, supported by the promising results, Van Essen and Vermaseren successfully applied for subsequent funding from the Dutch government. Arguing that the Santa Prisca *mithraeum* was ‘a wholly unique sanctuary and certainly the most important of all Mithras sanctuaries in the world’, they convinced the board of the Netherlands Organisation for Pure Scientific Research (ZWO), which had been established two years before as the national research council that subsidised Dutch research (Archive NWO/ZWO: inv. nr. 31). During this formative period, one of the board members of the organisation was Hendrik van Wagenvoort (1886–1974), a Latinist with a special interest in archaeology and in particular in ancient Roman religion. Van Wagenvoort was a personal friend of Vermaseren and his formal supportive role was crucial for the continuation of the Santa Prisca campaign: from 1953 onwards, Van Essen and Vermaseren could count on substantial and systematic funding provided by ZWO. Moreover, in the heart of political decision-making in The Hague, the team received even more prominent backing from Jo Cals, who was Minister of Education, Culture and Sciences for the Catholic People’s Party from 1952 to 1963. Cals was a close friend of the Catholic priest and historian Reinier Post (1894–1968), who in the 1930s had been a member of the scientific staff of the KNIR. On the fiftieth anniversary of the Institute in 1954, Cals attended the celebrations in Rome, honouring the requests of Poelhekke and Post to give further ministerial support to the Institute. From the Roman side, those present at the celebrations included numerous church officials as well as the Italian president Luigi Einaudi (Cools and De Valk, 2004: 80, 92, 99). The Santa Prisca excavation greatly profited from this intensified academic diplomacy (with strong Christian Democratic overtones) between Rome and The Hague. Pivoting on such characters as Van Essen, Boon, Poelhekke, Byvanck, van Wagenvoort, Post and Cals, this was an old boys network if ever there was one.

Valorising an excavation abroad: preservation, founding a museum and media campaign

Once the excavations underneath the Santa Prisca had started and the funding for the project was secured, the real challenge began. For Van Essen and Vermaseren, dealing with a highly complex archaeological stratigraphy in an urban setting was something completely new. By trial and error, they managed to excavate the rooms adjacent to the



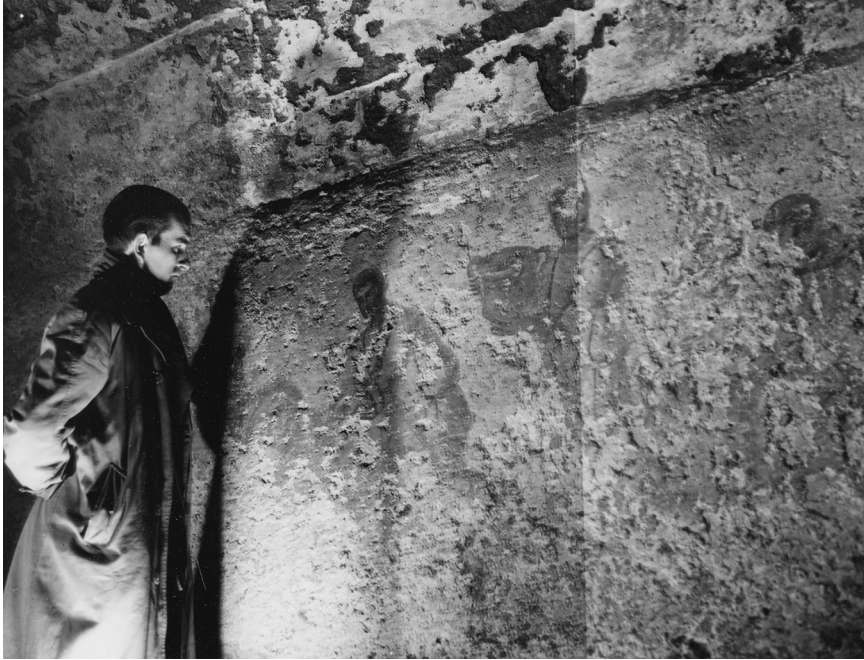
4.4 A harmonious cooperation. From left to right: the Italian front man Moreschini, Van Essen, Vermaseren, O. Testa (assistant at Soprintendenza Roma I) and on the right the son of Moreschini (picture by W. van den Enden). Vermaseren archive, Allard Pierson Museum (Amsterdam). Copyright © Allard Pierson Museum (Amsterdam). All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

mithraeum, assisted by local workmen (and the occasional Dutch student) who performed the hard work. In the process the workforce unearthed many older structures relating to a late-first century habitation on the site, which had been substantially altered in the third century. Given this stratigraphic complexity, Van Essen and Vermaseren succeeded remarkably well in their efforts to make sense of the archaeological data (Vermaseren and Van Essen, 1965).⁸ An important factor in that success was the smooth collaboration with Italian specialists in the archaeological service, who had much more experience on the ground (see Figure 4.4). Whilst Vermaseren progressively took the lead in coordinating the

campaign, Van Essen employed his personal network and prestige to create a favourable working environment. Significantly, his networking also involved the church authorities: in 1953, Van Essen was present at the ceremony in the Santa Prisca when the titular church was assigned to Cardinal-Priest Angelo Roncalli (MNIR [29] 1957: 10). On that occasion, Roncalli explicitly expressed his support for the Dutch excavations under his *titulus*. His leading role in the church hierarchy was sealed with his election in 1958 as Pope John XXIII.

In this favourable setting, the fieldwork at Santa Prisca advanced. The initial aim of the excavations was the safeguarding of the frescoes, for which the adjacent rooms of the *mithraeum* had to be cleared. Accordingly, the conservation and preservation of the site became the main concern in the correspondence between the Dutch scholars and the Italian authorities. As early as the first investigative campaign in 1952–3, it became clear that detaching the frescoes was a very technical and difficult task. An internal memo of the Direzione Generale delle Antichità e Belle Arti to Pietro Romanelli, the new head of the archaeological service, stated that the humidity should be controlled in the spaces of the *mithraeum*, or else mechanical tools would have to be used under the supervision of a specialist to detach the frescoes. The memo was forwarded to Van Essen, but the advice proved easier given than acted-on (see Figure 4.5) (ASSAR, busta 417.8, 1c). At the end of May 1953, one of the arches collapsed in the rooms that Van Essen and Vermaseren had excavated. Instead of detaching the frescoes from the walls, the first priority now became preserving the existing structures *in situ* so far as possible. Vermaseren told Romanelli that the various possibilities for cleaning the frescoes would be explored as well (ASSAR, busta 417.8, 1c). He started to pay particular attention to the conservation and restoration of the excavated areas and of the *mithraeum* itself, and the field reports, photos and drawings in the Vermaseren archive reveal that his main concern increasingly lay with the architectonic structures of the excavation. The team's objectives were supported by the new influx of Dutch funding from ZWO in the spring of 1953, which permitted fieldwork to continue in the subsequent months and again in the summers of 1954, 1955 and 1956, concluding with a final campaign in the autumn of 1957.

Throughout the excavations, heritage preservation and valorisation remained the priority for the Dutch team and the Italian archaeological service alike. As early as 1953, Vermaseren and Romanelli discussed the possibility of establishing a small *antiquarium*, a modest museum of findings, in the excavated *nymphaeum* of the site (see Figure 4.6). Proposing such a long-term collaborative effort at on-site valorisation exemplified the spirit of Italian-Dutch cultural cooperation that had made



4.5 Maarten Vermaseren studying the state and subject matter of the frescoes in the *mithraeum*. Vermaseren archive, Allard Pierson Museum (Amsterdam). Copyright © Allard Pierson Museum (Amsterdam). All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

the excavation possible in the first place. Moreover, the small museum of Santa Prisca also revealed the successful private-public partnership that had accompanied the campaign from the start. The eventual establishment and furnishing of the museum was made possible by several donors in The Netherlands and Italy, including private companies such as Philips (which unsurprisingly funded the lighting for the museum) and, curiously, the Milanese branch of Berkel, a Dutch manufacturer of meat-slicing machines. Once again, van Wagenvoort and the committee of Boon and Byvanck played a leading role in the fund-raising, appealing to the generosity of ‘all those who grant our Fatherland an honourable place in the world on a cultural level’ (Vermaseren archive: note dated March 1957). At the entrance of the site beneath the Santa Prisca, the financial support of all donors is still commemorated on a marble plaque that celebrates, with a faint hint of such national pomposity, ‘the first Dutch excavations in Roman soil’.

The museum was officially inaugurated on 21 May 1958, signalling the Italian-Dutch collaboration over the years and the shared desire to make the site available for tourism and valorisation. In the presence of



4.6 Glimpse of the *antiquarium* presenting the most important finds of the Santa Prisca excavations. Photo collection Anton von Munster, Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome. Copyright © Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

a Dutch delegation (which included the Hondius couple as well as van Wagenvoort and other members of the ZWO), the museum and the site were formally handed back to the Italian authorities by ambassador Boon (see Figure 4.7). The year before, the Treaty of Rome had given birth to far-reaching economic integration in western Europe, and the ceremony at the Santa Prisca testified to the rising tide of international cooperation and exchange on the continent. The first Dutch excavation in Italy formally came to an end, and the direct responsibility for the maintenance of the site and the *antiquarium* was returned to the rightful owners of the property, the Augustinian friars of the church, under the supervision of the Italian archaeological service.



4.7 The wife of the Dutch ambassador in Italy, Han Boon, inaugurates the *antiquarium*, revealing the marble slab with the various donors to the Santa Prisca excavations. The marble slab can still be seen in the *nymphaeum* of the *mithraeum*. Vermaseren archive, Allard Pierson Museum (Amsterdam). Copyright © Allard Pierson Museum (Amsterdam). All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

But with the conclusion of the archaeological campaign, the campaign for publicity was not yet over. From the very start of the excavations, the network of Van Essen at the KNIR had been mobilised to gain attention for the *mithraeum* in the Dutch and international media. In October 1952, Adriaan Luijdjens, the leading Dutch correspondent in Rome who had worked for many years at the Institute as Hoogewerff's private secretary, published an article on the excavations on the front page of the *Algemeen Handelsblad*, one of the most important newspapers in The

Netherlands, heralding the significance of this first Dutch excavation in Italy ([Luijdjens], 1952; cf. Haitsma Mulier, 1991). More articles by his hand followed, and in 1958, on the occasion of the inauguration of the museum, Luijdjens wrote a final piece in which he lauded the Dutch campaign not only for its scientific results, but especially for the way the excavation was valorised for future visitors. Luijdjens made it adamantly clear that an archaeological excavation in Rome was not only of academic interest: what was truly at stake was the Dutch national interest, ‘waving the cultural flag at the highest level’ ([Luijdjens], 1958).

That message was not lost on Vermaseren, who took the lead in the gradual national and international media campaign for the Santa Prisca excavation. Upon leaving for Rome in 1952, he had already written a leaflet on the excavations to inform a wider audience in The Netherlands about the plans for subsequent years. Noticing how ‘students of different nations bask in Rome at the cultural hearth of Western European civilisation’, he eulogised the KNIR as a ‘spiritual ambassador between the fatherland and Roman civilisation’. These remarks betrayed how the post-war climate of international collaboration set the scene for competition between nations – with Rome being both the main arena and the ultimate prize. For Vermaseren, the excavations at Santa Prisca meant that the Dutch had finally joined the game, and that ‘our nation, following other countries, could now help to uncover part of the veil of Roman civilisation’ (Vermaseren, 1953: 1–2). Rome, the Eternal City, was seen as the matchless marker of universality, a *città madre* for the West; a claim on the city on behalf of the ‘fatherland’ proved that one’s country was a worthy member of Western civilisation and a reliable partner in European unification.

To make clear that the Dutch had become serious players in Roman archaeology, frequent tours were organised during the excavations for colleagues from the other international institutes in Rome. Moreover, an unexpected opportunity to boost international attention for the Santa Prisca site arose with the discovery in 1954 of a comparable *mithraeum* in the centre of London at Walbrook. In *The Illustrated London News*, Vermaseren published an article about its pendant beneath the Santa Prisca, thus intensifying publicity for the Dutch excavations (Vermaseren, 1955; cf. Vermaseren and Van Essen, 1955–6 and Vermaseren, 1957). Once the campaigns were finished and the site was handed back to the Italian authorities, other media were also mobilised to keep the general public in The Netherlands informed. In 1959, Vermaseren authored a short, popularising book on the Mithras cult, which proved to be very successful and was translated into various languages (Vermaseren, 1959; translated as Vermaseren, 1963). In the winter of 1960–61, the Dutch cinematographer Anton van Munster, then a student at Rome’s

film school, took a series of somewhat romanticised, ethereal photographs of the site of Santa Prisca (see Figure 4.7); the next year, a Dutch TV crew came to Rome for a short broadcast (Heres, 1989: 87).⁹ The scientific results of the excavations were eventually published in 1965, on the occasion of which Vermaseren once more reiterated his claim that ‘the *Mithraeum* under and behind S. Prisca on the Aventine is without doubt the most important sanctuary of the Persian god in Rome; it may be the most interesting *Mithraeum* in the world’ (Vermaseren and Van Essen, 1965: ix).

But Vermaseren was not yet satisfied. In December 1962, he had requested permission, again with the institutional backing of Van Essen, to start a new excavation in the garden south of the church of Santa Prisca. The permission was duly granted by the archaeological service in Rome, and a concurrent application for funding from ZWO was also successful. The new campaign started in 1964 and lasted for three years, but in this case resulted in few significant finds and only one short publication by Vermaseren some ten years later (Vermaseren, 1975; cf. Kruijer, Hilbrants, Pelgrom and Taviani, 2018). His evident disillusionment is understandable, for the excavations did not yield what he and his team expected. But another explanation for the failure of that second campaign at Santa Prisca is that the academic and political network which had so strongly favoured the first campaign in the 1950s had largely disappeared by the mid-1960s. Van Essen himself had died quite suddenly in 1963; director Poelhekke left the Netherlands Institute two years later for a professorship in Nijmegen. Ambassador Boon had already left Rome in 1958, and in The Hague, Cals left the Ministry for Culture after eleven years in 1963. With the academic and political winds changing, the Netherlands Institute in Rome came increasingly under threat, and was almost shut down by the government in the early 1970s. The favourable conditions for a successful Dutch archaeological excavation in Rome had passed. It might be seen as a sign of the times that the museum at Santa Prisca eventually had to close after a burglary, while the frescoes in the *mithraeum* progressively deteriorated – to Vermaseren’s lifelong dismay. The bad state of the site in a way symbolised the ultimate fate of the Santa Prisca campaign. After decades of relative neglect, only recently have new efforts been made on behalf of the archaeological service to revitalise the site and its historical legacy.

Conclusion

The success (and eventual failure) of the first Dutch excavation in Italy give remarkable insight into the dynamics of archaeological practice in an international setting. Trained as Classicists, Van Essen and Vermaseren

were dilettanti, archaeologically speaking, but nonetheless they succeeded in starting and carrying out a difficult excavation campaign in the highly complex stratigraphy of Rome. One of the factors in their success was the informal networks and therefore smooth collaboration they could establish with Italian specialists. This collaboration could materialise thanks to the spirit of international cooperation in Italy in the post-war years, which opened up Italian archaeology to foreigners after decades of *de facto* exclusion. At the same time, the academic and diplomatic networks of the Netherlands Institute in Rome, which extended to the Italian archaeological service, policy-makers in The Hague, as well as private donors, church authorities and the occasional journalist, created a favourable setting in which the Santa Prisca excavation could thrive. Within these networks, a crucial role was played by seemingly secondary and informal connections, such as with ambassador Boon or ZWO board member Van Wagenvoort, who worked hard behind the scenes to generate political, academic and financial momentum for Dutch archaeology to take wing in Rome. The history of archaeology, then, is not only a history of the big men involved in large-scale excavations, but also of the lesser known, personal connections and non-archaeological characters populating the networks that surround archaeological practice.

In the case of the Santa Prisca excavation, the result of the mobilisation of these networks was not only a successful excavation campaign as such, but also, if not especially, a successful campaign for private-public fund-raising and valorisation. The Santa Prisca excavation in a way embodied the gradual development of state-funded research in the 1950s, first approaching private capital to enable a publicly funded project over a longer term. In a period in which there is increasing uncertainty about the availability of state funding for academic research, the history of the Santa Prisca excavation might serve as an example of successful private-public partnerships. Moreover, the Santa Prisca team also understood the need to disseminate the results of their campaign to a general audience through a range of media, not least by establishing an on-site museum. That strategy of valorisation, shared by the Italian archaeological service, can equally serve as inspiration for today's archaeologists. Yet what is also striking about the Santa Prisca excavation is that the rationale for starting and publicising the campaign was very much couched in nationalist terms, as the fulfilment of a Dutch cultural claim on Rome and Western civilisation. Despite the internationalist climate after the Second World War, such a national appropriation of antiquity and archaeology remained *en vogue* long after the fall of Fascism. The resulting paradox of nationalist internationalism proved difficult to maintain, at least in the case of Santa Prisca: before

long, the *mithraeum* and its museum were closed to the public, and the pioneering Dutch excavation in Italy became largely forgotten. Its spirit lived on only in the private sphere of Vermaseren's home in Amsterdam. Far away from the Eternal City, Vermaseren kept alive his fascination by constructing, in his own living room, a full-size Roman *mithraeum*.

Notes

- 1 The chapter is one of the outcomes of the Santa Prisca Project, developed in the autumn of 2015 at the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome (KNIR). Following the initiative of the Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma (SSBAR) to map and make public all archaeological remains on the Aventine hill, the KNIR and the SSBAR decided to join forces to study and make accessible the information concerning the Santa Prisca excavations. The Santa Prisca Project was directed by Jeremia Pelgrom (KNIR) and Miriam Taviani (SSBAR). We are particularly grateful to Luigia Attilia (SSBAR) for her advice on the SSBAR archive (ASSAR), and we would also like to thank Lennart Kruijer, Jord Hilbrants and Janet Mente (KNIR). For more info, see <http://romearcheomedia.fub.it/aventino/>, accessed 22/06/16.
- 2 Vermaseren's personal archive of the excavations was made available to the KNIR by his friend and colleague Joop Derksen (1938–2018); it can be consulted in the KNIR's library, Rome. The general archive of Vermaseren was recently obtained by the Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam. ASSAR is located in Palazzo Altemps, Rome; most of the documents relating to the first phase of the Santa Prisca excavation are in busta 417, fascicolo 8, vecchia segnatura 9/27 ('Roma. S. Prisca. Lavori di scavo e restauro eseguiti dall'Ist. Storico Olandese (1953–59)'). Complementary archives that were consulted for this research include the archive of the Associazione Internazionale di Archæologia Classica (AIAC) at Palazzo Altemps, Rome; the Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome; the archive of NWO/ZWO in the Nationaal Archief, The Hague; and the archive of M.N. van Lansdorp, who worked as architectural assistant to Vermaseren, in the Stadsarchief, Amsterdam.
- 3 On Dutch archaeology outside The Netherlands more generally, see Linde, 2012a and Dries, Slappendel and Linde, 2010. For the contemporary and somewhat comparable context in Greece, see Wagemakers, 2015.
- 4 In the fall of 1906 Leopold started his career as a correspondent in Rome for the *Algemeen Handelsblad*. He published extensive reports in the publication series of the KNIR, *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome (MNIR)*, but also reached a wider public with his weekly column 'Uit de leerschool van de spade' in *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* (1923–34).
- 5 Constant Willem Lunsingh Scheurleer (1881–1941) came from a rich banker's family. He had a great interest in Greek ancient culture and was a passionate collector of ancient Greek artefacts. In 1924, he opened his Archeologisch Museum at Carnegielaan 12 in The Hague. After the museum closed, the archaeological collection of Scheurleer was bought by the Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam.

- 6 One of the initiatives of this period that strengthened the bonds in the archaeological community in the Netherlands was the periodical *Bulletin Antieke Beschaving* (now *Babesch*). Van Essen was involved in this journal from the start.
- 7 See also the correspondence between Cumont and Vermaseren in the library of the Academia Belgica, Rome and in the Vermaseren archive in the Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam.
- 8 Van Essen and Vermaseren hypothesised that the rooms they excavated around the *mithraeum* belonged to a private habitation of Trajan, the so-called *Privata Trajani* (their interpretation was challenged by subsequent scholars: see Sangiorgi, 1968; Salomonson, 1969). They concluded that the *mithraeum* had been created in this *domus* around 200 AD and that it was plundered two centuries later and eventually filled up with earth to serve as foundation for the church of Santa Prisca.
- 9 Van Munster's photographs have been published digitally by the KNIR: https://issuu.com/knirlibrary/docs/santa_prisca_catalogue_final_2/1, accessed 22/06/16).