If people understood how many indulgences could be obtained in the church of St John Lateran, they would not undertake the sea voyage to visit the Holy Sepulchre, nor would they travel to St James’s shrine in Galicia.¹

These words appear in an early printed version of the very popular *Indulgentiae ecclesiarum Urbis*, *(The Indulgences of the Churches of the City [of Rome]*)⁴, a slim, untitled, undated, anonymous volume which was produced in Rome around 1473. The *Indulgentiae* and another work, the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, also usually anonymous, were the two principal guidebooks to Rome from before the advent of printing. They often appeared together and their content remained virtually unchanged until well into the Cinquecento. My focus in this article will be on the

Indulgentiae, which have been less widely discussed than the Mirabilia. For the modern reader, the Indulgentiae seem excruciatingly dull on first approach. On closer inspection, however, they reward us with some important insights into the social, political, and economic life of Renaissance Rome.

The quotation above points to two of the main factors that shaped both the form and the content of the Indulgentiae genre. I shall begin by examining the first of these: the doctrine of indulgences and the way the demand for indulgences affected pilgrimage to Rome in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. I shall then examine the use of indulgences and the medium of print by the Church authorities and other powerful institutions as a means of furthering their own agendas and of prioritizing Rome as a pilgrimage centre.

Pilgrims and the doctrine of indulgences

Let us deal firstly with the readers of the Indulgentiae and the way their expectations influenced the genre. Perhaps the most striking feature of these guidebooks for us today is the emphasis on the spiritual, as opposed to the physical, welfare of the pilgrim to Renaissance Rome. Indeed, these guides offered pilgrims no more than an unadorned list of the churches in the Eternal City, together with the relics or miracle-working images they contained, and the indulgences available on certain feast days.

The motivations for setting out on a pilgrimage to Rome must have been many and varied, but the most pressing of these would surely have been the perceived need to obtain indulgences. This desire for indulgences would also have provided the subsequent driving force behind a pilgrim’s progress from church to church once in the city. The Church taught that if you died before you had been able to atone for your sins, you would continue to do so in Purgatory. This temporary and necessarily unpleasant home of souls not damned was a place of preparation for entry into heaven, described by Dante as a ‘realm which purifies man’s spirit of its soilure’. Most mortals were expected to spend some time in this place of torment and the length of the soul’s stay was dictated by the number of sins that still required reparation on death. Only those who had led saintly lives could anticipate going directly to heaven.

The faithful would doubtless have found comfort in the conviction that indulgences, which were measured in units of time, could reduce their term of confinement in Purgatory. They could obtain indulgences by attending designated Christian shrines at given times or, in some instances, by paying the ecclesiastical authorities. Thus the fact that the
Indulgentiae gave no information about accommodation or other such practical matters was irrelevant: they were performing a much more significant service, that of enabling a pilgrim to locate and procure indulgences, and ultimately an easier path to heaven.

As the opening quote suggests, people would embark on lengthy and difficult journeys to the most hallowed sites in Christendom to garner the indulgences on offer. The further you travelled to obtain the indulgences, the greater your reward. This is emphasized in another passage from the c. 1473 version of the Indulgentiae which states that those who travel to Rome from 'afar' and visit St Peter's at the appointed time are granted twice as many indulgences as those who come from the surroundings of Rome, and three times as many as those who come from Rome itself. This is also repeated in Andrea Palladio's later version of the Indulgentiae, first published in 1554, entitled Descritione de le chiese stationi, indulgenze & reliquie de Corpi Sancti, che sono in la città de Roma (Description of the Churches, Stations of the Cross, Indulgences, and relics of the Bodies of Saints in the City of Rome).

Since the Indulgentiae were intended for the widest possible readership, and the majority of the population of Europe at this time would have had only poor literacy skills, the language and style of the text had to be simple and straightforward. A clear and reassuringly repetitious format was established whereby the seven principal churches of Rome (St John Lateran, St Peter's, S. Paolo fuori le mura, S. Maria Maggiore, San Lorenzo fuori le mura, S. Sebastiano, and S. Croce in Gerusalemme) were listed first. These were then followed, in early editions, by a section containing an additional seven churches. This latter section was extended from the 1480s onwards to include new or recently renovated churches in the city. Eventually, as in Palladio’s 1554 text, the section covered a total of 112 different churches.

Another feature of the genre of the Indulgentiae from c. 1480 onwards was a catalogue of the ‘Station’ churches and their indulgences, which was to be found after the main body of the text. Various Roman churches had been designated as Station churches, which meant that on days when a papal mass had traditionally been celebrated there they attracted indulgences and the Stations of the Cross were observed. Before the exile of the papacy in Avignon, the popes would have processed from St Peter’s to each of these churches to say mass on prescribed feast days, notably during Lent or Holy Week. However, by the mid-fifteenth century most of these churches had fallen into a state of disrepair so that the popes held the mass in the choir of St Peter’s or the capella magna instead. The indulgences, however, remained available to pilgrims at the designated sites. Palladio's Descritione includes a separate section devoted to the ‘Stations of the Cross, Indulgences and Spiritual Graces that can be had at the churches of
However, he also insists on the importance of both the Stations of the Cross and the indulgences available in each church in the body of his text. These items are thus covered first in the entries for the various churches and are then followed by an inventory of the relics and images. This emphasis on the Stations and indulgences, it can be supposed, reflects what Palladio considered to be his readers’ priorities when purchasing and using such a guide.

It would appear that concerns for his readers and possibly an acknowledgement of their growing power as consumers prompted Palladio to instigate the first significant innovation to the genre of the *Indulgentiae* since the initial publication eighty years before. This innovation involved grouping all the churches, other than the seven principal basilicas, into four distinct itineraries. These new itineraries would have made obtaining indulgences much more efficient as pilgrims could be sure to have exhausted the supply in one area before moving on to the next. However, it was not only the readers that would have benefited from Palladio’s innovation. The ecclesiastical authorities must have realized that the itineraries promised a more organized flow of human traffic around the city, whilst the printers would have recognized that the overhaul of the *Indulgentiae* was in the interests of their customers and the authorities alike, and would therefore have a positive impact on their business.

In addition to being accessible and conveniently structured, the *Indulgentiae* also needed to be readily available to pilgrims and easy to carry on the journey around the city. In order to maximize sales, printers usually sold their books from stalls set up in the street outside their printing works. This meant that they could attract even passing trade. Books such as the *Indulgentiae* were generally sold unbound in a pocket size format, which made them not only less expensive, but also lighter and therefore more portable as well.

For roughly eighty years from the 1470s onwards the interests of pilgrims, the Church authorities, and the printers converged to produce a uniform, accessible, and conveniently structured text that was readily available. The remarkable stability of the genre during this time attests to the success of the *Indulgentiae*.

The role of print as a medium and the Church’s agenda

The introduction of printing was fundamental in defining and preserving the genre of the *Indulgentiae*. As we shall see, it was in the interests of the printers and the ecclesiastical authorities alike that the text of the *Indulgentiae* was standardized and stable, and printing by its very nature enabled this to happen as it imposed uniformity on the copies produced.
In the first few decades following the introduction of printing in Rome, printers were acutely aware of the disastrous consequences of unsold stock. They would therefore have wanted to produce books with a ready market and a good track record of sales. In this, the *Indulgentiae* appear to have provided them with a winning formula. Stinger states that forty-four Latin editions of the text were printed between 1475 and 1523, as well as twenty German editions and copies in French, Spanish, and Flemish. Crucially though, as Calanda affirms, other than some minor embellishments in the Flemish version, these editions of the *Indulgentiae* remain faithful to the original Latin text. The numerous impressions of these books appear to reflect both the success of the genre and the continuing presence of large numbers of pilgrims to Rome throughout the early Renaissance.

For the Church of Rome, the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were particularly turbulent, but the authorities were able to harness the potential of printing to energetically promote a message of unity and obedience to papal rule. Thus the relatively uniform content of the *Indulgentiae* in all languages purveyed a consistent message, whilst the relentless reiterating of the indulgences available in Rome can be seen as not only continuing to create a demand for them but also as showing defiance in the face of the censure of the doctrine by Luther and other reformers.

In addition to doctrinal unity, the Renaissance papacy worked hard to reestablish Rome as its power base in order to achieve some kind of stability for the church. The fabric of the city had decayed drastically while the papacy was in exile in Avignon during the days of the Great Schism when several people concurrently claimed to be pope. Funds were now required to repair Rome’s infrastructure, making it a more worthy papal seat, and also less vulnerable to attack by the Ottoman army, a fate which had befallen Constantinople in 1453. Enticing pilgrims to Rome with the promise of easily obtainable indulgences through the medium of the *Indulgentiae* would have provided a source of much needed revenue for the city. Alms boxes set up outside churches for pilgrim donations would also have helped with the rebuilding or repair of many different shrines. Rome was thus promoted as the most prestigious Christian site of all in competition with other holy cities such as St James at Compostella or indeed Jerusalem itself.

At the turn of the sixteenth century, it was believed that a powerful centralized papacy based in Rome would promote stability within the Christian community by overshadowing and suppressing the various heretical movements which flourished in northern Europe. Later in the century, a strong papacy was seen as essential in countering the threat from the Reformation and the authorities demanded unswerving allegiance from those who remained faithful to the Church of Rome.
Thus as the sixteenth century progressed, material printed and sold in Rome came increasingly under papal scrutiny, and around the 1540s books were censored before publication or banned if they fell foul of the desired message.\(^\text{15}\) The *Indulgentiae* provided, in their seemingly unchanging subject matter, an idea of continuity, a bulwark against heresy.

Another aspect of the sense of continuity communicated by the *Indulgentiae* was an appeal to the idea of an enduring Christian tradition in Rome. The insistence on innumerable relics (bodies, bones, clothing), portraits, and a myriad of other items touched by the saints, kept the lives of these holy men and women present in the minds of the faithful, and provided a vivid reminder of the early days of Christianity in which Rome figured so prominently. The lengthy lists of indulgences, relics, and images also created a cumulative effect which generated the idea of the city as a profoundly sacred environment. The rigidity of the genre also helped to create a sense of eternity and therefore of truth.

The theme of Rome as a perpetually sacred city is a persistent feature of the genre of the *Indulgentiae*. An edition of c. 1473 begins with a reference to St Sylvester, who, it says, wrote in his chronicle that there were once 1500 churches in Rome.\(^\text{16}\) The reference to St Sylvester, the pope who supposedly baptized Constantine, the first Christian Roman emperor, establishes a link with the early Church and a supposedly golden age of spirituality. A book of *Indulgentiae* from 1500 goes one step further, explaining in its introduction that the text will trace the history of Rome, and by implication the Church, from Romulus and Remus, the legendary founders of Rome, through to Emperor Constantine. The mention of Rome’s pagan past might seem incongruous here, but to a Renaissance audience the ancient Roman empire was believed to prefigure the new Christian empire centred on Rome. The legends of the ancients added to the seemingly unbroken sacred history and mystique of the site.

The 1500 edition of the *Indulgentiae* clearly sets out to establish the idea of Rome as the centre of Christianity with the papacy at its helm. The fourth printed page is divided into two sections. The upper half shows three shields: the one on the left that of the Holy Roman Emperor; the one on the right that of the city of Rome; and in the controlling position at the centre sits the shield of the pope at that time, Alexander VI. The first line of text states ‘Rome, the holy city: *caput mundi*.\(^\text{17}\) It then follows the well trodden path of describing Rome’s legendary beginnings. An edition of the *Indulgentiae* from 1520 continues in this vein, but it is more strident in asserting papal power by dispensing with the shields of the Emperor and the city to leave only that of the pope, in this case Leo X.\(^\text{18}\) This edition would have been printed at the time Leo was wrestling with the consequences of Martin Luther’s defiant stance...
against the Holy See and the doctrine of indulgences, a doctrine which Luther fervently disputed.\textsuperscript{19} Palladio builds on the text of the 1520 edition of the \textit{Indulgentiae} in his \textit{Descritione}, but he does not tamper with the essential narrative. In his ‘Address to the Reader’,\textsuperscript{20} he claims that there were originally 3,000 churches in early Christian Rome thereby doubling the number reported in the \textit{Indulgentiae} of c.1473 and thus increasing the prestige of the site. Palladio then continues in his introduction with an account of the founding of Rome and a detailed description of Constantine’s conversion to Christianity.\textsuperscript{21} Palladio published the \textit{Descritione} shortly after his \textit{L'antichità di Roma (The Antiquities of Rome)}.\textsuperscript{22} \textit{L'antichità} deals with the ancient city and its remains and thereby complements the \textit{Descritione}: one volume focuses on the ancient glories of the city and the other on its contemporary glories. Palladio is keen to emphasize in the \textit{Descritione}, however, that although Rome was great in ancient times, it is now ‘much more worthy of reverence for the many sacred things that are there and for which it became the capital and rightful seat of the true Christian religion’\textsuperscript{23}.

The \textit{Indulgentiae} also contributed to the successful reestablishment of Petrine supremacy, a strategy designed to strengthen papal autocracy in the latter half of the fifteenth century. Nicholas V (1447–1455) initiated this project by transferring the papal residence to the Vatican, a move completed under Sixtus IV (1471–1484). This radical change was intended to provide better protection for the popes, as the Vatican was more easily defensible than the Lateran. It was also intended to associate the popes more closely with St Peter in the minds of the faithful as the Vatican encompassed St Peter’s basilica, the burial site of the saint.

In the \textit{Indulgentiae} of c.1473, the focus is most definitely on the church of St John Lateran, the episcopal seat of the popes. Here the Lateran is described as the ‘sacrosanct Lateran’ and ‘head of the world and the city [of Rome]’.\textsuperscript{24} The 1500 edition, however, contains several innovations which subtly attest to the change in emphasis from the Lateran to the Vatican. The first printed page features an illustration of Christ giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St Peter. In case the reader is in any doubt as to what is happening, the words ‘I give you the keys to my kingdom’ are inscribed on a ribbon which issues from Christ’s mouth.\textsuperscript{25} In addition, a new section inserted before the information on the seven churches can be seen as an unabashed promotion of St Peter’s and its relics. This section comprises three pages.\textsuperscript{26} The first page, an illustration, shows, in a decorated frame, the exhibition to the faithful of Rome’s most precious relic, the Veronica. The Veronica, housed in St Peter’s, was reputedly the image of Christ’s face, miraculously imprinted on a cloth during his Passion. We see the relic being displayed from the Loggia of Benediction in front of St Peter’s to a huge crowd of pilgrims whose heads are covered and who are kneeling in reverence. On the
second and third pages of the new section a prayer is printed in honour of the Veronica, attesting to the belief that it would not only absolve sins because of the number of indulgences it attracted, but that it would also act to destroy heretics.  

Around the latter half of the fifteenth century, the reputation of the Veronica, with the aid of the Indulgentiae, was so potent that it came to replace the horse of Constantine as the emblem of Rome on pilgrim badges. The promotion of the Veronica and St Peter himself by the ecclesiastical authorities in the Indulgentiae helped to define St Peter’s basilica as the focal point of pilgrimage to Rome and underline papal spiritual authority.  

Another apparently minor transformation to the genre, but one which again underscores the presence of the popes at the heart of the Church appears in editions of the Indulgentiae from 1489 onwards. This transformation constituted a new section of the book which gave the names and dates of the pontiffs in chronological order, sometimes accompanied by portraits. Although this was only a list, it served, like the lists of churches, relics, and indulgences, to reiterate what was believed to be the most important information for any pilgrim to Rome.  

Palladio, in his Descritione, updates the text relating to both the Lateran and St Peter’s by recording contemporary papal interventions in the fabric of both buildings, thus highlighting positive papal actions. Martin V and Eugenius IV are referred to as instigating the repainting of the church and laying new paving stones on the floor because the basilica had been ‘ruined by the heretics’. The bronze doors Eugenius IV had commissioned for St Peter’s are also mentioned. Palladio also adds a few lines to the information about the Lateran and St Peter’s, which essentially forms a list of gifts by popes and emperors of liturgical furnishings to both churches. Each item is assigned its weight in pounds, as if to emphasize the opulence and expense of the gifts. These lists must have acted as yet another inducement to pilgrims to visit the basilicas – the marvellous sight of hundreds of sacred objects set in almost unimaginable splendour. Palladio makes some other minor adjustments such as crediting Titus, and not Titus and Vespasian as in previous editions, with bringing back Moses and Aaron’s rod to Rome. Otherwise, he makes no serious change to the text of the seven churches as found in the 1520 edition of the Indulgentiae.  

Palladio may have adjusted the information about Vespasian because he believed that it was wrong in the light of the new humanistic scholarship that was being brought to bear on ancient Rome. However, it seems at first inexplicable that Palladio, a well-educated man, well-versed in humanistic thought, should choose to include an uncritical account of the Donation of Constantine in his introduction. The Donation, a document probably composed in the eighth century,
represented the cornerstone on which papal temporal power had been constructed. Supposedly addressed to Pope Sylvester I (314–335) by Emperor Constantine, it granted the pope and his successors imperial status, an income and the right to bear imperial insignia and regalia. Constantine also accorded to the popes the Lateran Palace, the city of Rome, the Italian peninsula and ‘western regions’ and removed himself and his court from Rome to set up the imperial capital of the East, Constantinople.\(^\text{34}\) Constantine’s Donation therefore stressed the papacy’s claims to absolute power and to dominion over Rome in particular.

Lorenzo Valla had already proved this document to be a forgery in 1440, but the vehement dismissal of Valla’s arguments by the Church authorities lessened the impact of his work.\(^\text{35}\) Even if Palladio had wanted to, leaving the Donation out of his text could have jeopardized its publication. The Donation thus continued to appear in guidebooks throughout the sixteenth century. It should be noted here that Palladio’s choice of printer for the Descrizione, Vincentino Lucrino, may well have been dictated by the fact that Lucrino had good relations with the Church authorities and could thus more easily obtain approval for Palladio’s work.\(^\text{36}\)

The influence of other powerful institutions

Other forces can also be detected at work in shaping the early guidebooks to Rome. An instance of this can be seen if we look briefly at how the miracle-working or venerated images of the Madonna feature in the text of the Indulgentiae during our given time frame. Out of the many venerable images of the Virgin which existed in the city at the time, the edition of the Indulgentiae printed in c.1473 mentions only the one housed in the church of S. Maria in Ara Coeli on the Capitoline Hill. Even the much venerated Salus Populi Romani image of S. Maria Maggiore is overlooked. A clue to the choice of the Ara Coeli image in preference to others comes in the text devoted to the Lateran where Pope Nicholas IV (1288–1292) is credited with rebuilding the church from its foundations. Nicholas is described as ‘the son of the blessed Franciscans’ and he was, indeed, the first Franciscan pope.\(^\text{37}\) Considering, however, that the church burnt down and was rebuilt several times under different popes, and that Nicholas probably had nothing to do with rebuilding the Lateran in any case, it seems strange that only he, of all popes, is mentioned in the text. But the fact that the text emphasizes Nicholas’s membership of the Franciscan Order ties in with the importance given to the church of the Ara Coeli in the Indulgentiae. The church had been controlled by the Franciscans since the eleventh century and it seems likely that the Order may have exerted
some influence over the content of the genre.\textsuperscript{38} Sixtus IV, pope in 1473, had been Minister General of the Franciscan Order before being created a cardinal. Although he was to rebuild S. Maria del Popolo which boasted its own miraculous image of Mary, the reconstruction of this church had only just begun in 1473. Sixtus may well, therefore, not have been averse to allowing some propaganda for the principal church of the Franciscan Order in Rome which was also the parish church of the city.

By 1554 when Palladio’s \textit{Descritione} was published, however, the Ara Coeli image is mentioned, in a perfunctory way along with many others. ‘There is an image of the Virgin Mary standing in the pose she took at the foot of the Cross, painted by Saint Luke.’ This suggests that other power brokers were influencing the text at this juncture. If we contrast the Ara Coeli entry in Palladio’s \textit{Descritione} with, for example, the way he deals with S. Maria della Consolazione this becomes more evident: ‘In this church there is an image of the Virgin Mary that is the source of a great deal of grace.’ The Consolazione image was believed to have begun performing miracles in the mid-fifteenth century and, at the time Palladio was writing, the fame of the image must have been considerable, possibly overshadowing that of an older image such as that in the Ara Coeli.\textsuperscript{39} The image was also associated with one of the principal hospitals in Rome, a hospital which was administered by a powerful confraternity that would no doubt have been keen to promote devotion to this image and thus enhance charitable donations to its coffers.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The development of the highly successful genre of the \textit{Indulgentiae} was fuelled above all by the desire for and provision of indulgences. At the same time, the robust and stable format of the text, which a well-defined genre allowed, served as a platform on which other narratives such as the status and dignity of the Church, unity in a time of crisis, and obedience to papal rule could be effectively played out. The success of the genre, then, may be attributed to the happy interface of form and function, and to the fact that it represented a convergence of the needs and interests of consumer and producer alike.

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\textbf{Notes}

1. \textit{Indulgentiae ecclesiarum Urbis} [British Library Catalogue, shelfmark IA 17593], c.1473, fols 1–2 \textit{[Si hominess feirent indulgentias ecclesie Lateranen non opus esset op homi\'i\'s irent per mare]
For more about the Madonna of the Consolazione, see Da Riese Pio X, *S. Maria della Consolazione*, in the series *Le chiese di Roma illustrate* 98, Ponte della Priula (TV, 1999).
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