

Prospero Podiani (ca. 1535-1615) and the Foundation of a City Library

Maria Alessandra Panzanelli Fratoni
Università degli Studi di Perugia

The City Library of Perugia, the Biblioteca Augusta, was officially opened in 1623. Its core holdings, however, derived from a large private donation presented to the City in 1582 by the scholar and bibliophile Prospero Podiani (ca. 1535-1615). The 'Biblioteca Augusta' represents one of the earliest public libraries to operate in Italy. According to the well-known list drawn up by Gabriel Naudé on 1627, there were only three libraries in Europe truly accessible to scholars at that time: the Bodleian in Oxford, the Ambrosiana in Milan and the Angelica in Rome. Other libraries remained all but inaccessible except to a few privileged *hommes des lettres*. The Biblioteca Augusta was not present in Naudé's list. It is a matter of pure speculation to try and establish why Naudé neglected to mention Perugia's City Library. The Biblioteca Augusta was not simply an open access library, but its founder, Prospero Podiani, put forward a powerful and prescient idea of public libraries. Even before the Library's official opening, Podiani, a true member of the *res publica litterarum*, had made his collection available to peers and fellow scholars.

Founded by the Umbrians, one of Italy's autochthon tribes, Perugia grew from the 6th century BC into one of the most important Etruscan towns before the Roman conquest. During the reign of Augustus Caesar, the City became known as the 'Augusta'. Following on, in the Middle Ages, Perugia thrived as one of the Italian city-states. The new ruling class - under a guild-based regime - were eager to enforce peace and order, conducive to commerce and other economic activities. Craftsmen and merchants, the new rich, were keen to show their wealth and acquire prestige by commissioning and financing magnificent monuments and public works, such as the Fontana Maggiore. Completed between 1278 and 1279 by the artists Nicola and Giovanni Pisano, the Fontana Maggiore represented the pinnacle of a major engineering achievement, bringing fresh flowing water into the city. The fountain and its decorative motifs have been described as an 'encyclopaedia carved in stone'.¹ The building of a further fountain was also commissioned to the sculptor Arnolfo di Cambio who, in his work, depicted two hieratic-looking men, seated with a large book

This article is based on a lecture presented at the *History of Libraries Research Seminars* organised by the Institute of English Studies - London, Senate House, 14 February, 2012.

¹ See John White, 'The Reconstruction of Nicola Pisano's Perugia Fountain', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 33 (1970), 70-83.

laid open across their legs, these figures representing the jurists, the referees of civic life.

It was at this time that the University of Perugia was founded. Established by the new City Statutes in 1306, it was formally recognized by Pope Clement V in 1308. During the 14th century the University acquired much prestige and recognition, especially for its renowned School of Law. Thriving intellectual and scholar activities favoured the early introduction of the printing press in 1471. Although book-production in Perugia was never a major business, the book-market flourished, as can be inferred from inventories of bookshops and libraries.

In the course of the 15th- and the 16th-century Perugia suffered due to political instability and unrest. The Baglioni, Perugia's dominant Family, were incapable of properly ruling the town as, for example, the Medici did in Florence. Perugia remained vulnerable to the strengthening power of the Pope, which had begun to augment during the 15th-century. In 1540 a war broke out between the City and Rome. Perugia suffered a decisive defeat. The Pontiff, Pope Paul III, to impose his authority and clench his victory, gave orders for an entire area of the city to be laid flat and a fortress - the still-standing Rocca Paolina - to be built on the ruins. The Pope forcefully imposed his sovereignty on a city which was part of the Papal dominions.²

By this time, the introduction of the printing press had profoundly changed the book market throughout the Italian states. Books became more readily available and their diffusion and circulation increased noticeably. The passion for books, both in their manuscript and printed format, became more pervasive. Book collections augmented in size: libraries which had previously housed only a few dozen codices became the repository of hundreds, even thousands, of volumes. Often, large libraries were part of private collections belonging to noblemen, cardinals, or princes. In Perugia, however, it was an ordinary man who put together one of the finest collections of the entire Italian peninsula: Prospero Podiani.

Podiani was born in Perugia around 1535 and not much is known about his early education. He belonged to a family of civil servants and, most likely, was privately educated. Prospero was particularly influenced by his uncle, Lucalberto Podiani, a physician and Chancellor of Perugia for several years.

² See Christopher F. Black 'The Baglioni as Tyrants of Perugia', *The English Historical Review*, 85 (1970), 245-81 and 'Perugia and Papal Absolutism in the Sixteenth Century', *The English Historical Review*, 96 (1981), 509-39.

From his childhood, Prospero developed a sincere passion for books and learning. He started collecting books at an early age, spending energy and money on them, and showing a resolute conviction they represented a possession to treasure. Within a few years he had put together a notable collection, but in need of a suitable accommodation. He came up with the idea of an institutional library, in which his collection would be appreciated and put to good use.

Podiani presented his thoughts in a dedicatory letter addressed to a cardinal, whose name remains unspecified. The letter was written as an introduction to a lengthy treatise on how to establish a library entitled *De Bibliothecis instituendis, disponendis et informandis*.³ The addressee can be identified by some indirect references, made by Podiani, as being Cardinal Fulvio Della Cornia (1517-1583), nephew of Pope Julius III (1487-1555). In his letter, Podiani mentioned an oak tree, also depicted in the emblem of the Della Cornia Family (*Quercus Cornea* being the Latin name of an oak tree), and the Jesuits, an order which had received support from the Cardinal. Fulvio Della Cornia became Bishop of Perugia in 1550 and Cardinal in 1551 and asserted his authority and influence over the City's political life during the crucial years which followed the conclusion of the Council of Trent.

In his letter Podiani referred to the need of promoting learned and cultural activities in Perugia, especially the production of printed books,⁴ and in Cardinal Della Cornia, Podiani saw a patron who could appreciate and support his project: the foundation of a public library comprising the most significant works from all disciplines. Podiani believed that the Cardinal would recognise the value of his proposal. It was an ambitious project, but one which could give lasting fame to its advocate. This, for example, had happened in case of Lorenzo de' Medici, the Dukes of Urbino (both Federico di Montefeltro and Francesco Maria della Rovere), Francis I, King of France, the Függer Family and Gian Vincenzo Pinelli, just to cite a few.

³ Perugia, Biblioteca comunale Augusta, ms I 104. This text was brought to prominence by Jeanne Bignami Odier who defined it a handbook of Librarianship. See Jeanne Bignami Odier, 'Des manuscrits de Prospero Podiani à la Bibliothèque Vaticane', *Studi di Bibliografia e Storia in onore di Tammaro De Marinis*, vol. 1, 1964, pp. 91-134: p. 101.

⁴ '... mi è parso ricorrere à V.S.R., come à protettore, et amatore de' virtuosi e di qual si voglia scientia (come ne appare per tanti bellissimi et utilissimi libri dati in luce sotto la sua protezione)' (f. 11v). I also think that the letter was written during the second bishopric of Fulvio Della Cornia, when Pope Julius III had already died and Podiani could express his wishes to the cardinal to become pontiff very soon. If so, the letter and the treatise were written around 1570, Podiani being about 35 years old at the time.

Podiani showed a striking awareness with the finest libraries of his time and was inspired by them. Some of his assertions are particularly interesting since they anticipate those written, years later, by Gabriel Naudé. Podiani claimed that the foundation of a library was the best way for a nobleman, or even a prince, to obtain fame and admiration.⁵ On this matter Naudé wrote: 'il n'y avoit aucun moyen plus honneste et asseuré pour s'acquérir une grande renommée parmy les peuples, que de dresser de belles et magnifiques Bibliothèques, pour puis après les vouer et consacrer à l'usage du public'.⁶

Strange to relate that, in his letter to Cardinal Della Cornia, Podiani did not actually mention the opening of the Library to the general public, but this would appear to have been implicit. There were two important aspects in Podiani's idea: a physical collection and an ideal library. His first objective was to find a suitable home for his library to be housed, since book collections needed to be valued and preserved. The second aspect, which interests me most, is the concept of an ideal library: how to establish a library, select books and arrange them. Podiani never received the sought after support from Cardinal Della Cornia and his treatise remained unpublished. He did not abandon the idea of founding a public library however.

In Podiani's conception, a library meant an environment conducive to the pursuit of virtues. Certainly influenced by classical authors - mainly Cicero - Podiani claimed that everyone should attempt to pursue virtuousness. Everything else in life, he pointed out, was transient and dependent on external circumstances. Virtue, by contrast, can be achieved and cultivated by abnegation and study: 'sola enim virtus est quae perpetua aeternaque permanet (cum caetera infirma, ac instabilia habeantur) ac bonarum doctrinarum institutio hominem beatum ac felicem reddit, ut nulla dubio procul felicitas'. A good education and continual learning can also lead to happiness and fulfilment. Here Podiani added an almost revolutionary consideration: virtues can be pursued and achieved by anyone, regardless their social status at birth: 'Nulli virtus est preclusa, omnibus patet omnes admittit, omnes invitat, ingenos, servos, reges et exules; non exigit donum, nec censum sed nudo homine contenta est'.

⁵ '[costituire una grande collezione] è impresa veramente da grandi signori e gran maestri, perché ce si consumano di molti e molti danari, bisognando cercare diversi paesi per ritrovare cose eccellenti, e rare, né so veramente in qualcosa un Sig.^{ro} possa meglio perpetuare il nome suo e doue possano essere meglio spese le facultà di chi che sia (non che di Sig.^{ri} e principi) quanto in queste sapendosi quanta lode ne habbino sempre riportata tutti quelli che di tal cosa si sono delettati' (f. 11r).

⁶ Gabriel Naudé, *Advis pour dresser une bibliothèque ... réimprimé sur la deuxième édition* (Paris, 1644), Alcide Bonneau, Paris, Isidore Liseux, 1876, chapter I, p. 9.

It is apparent that Podiani's project meant the opening of his Library to the general public. I would argue that Podiani envisaged the public library as a tool to progress and better oneself, as a way of reaching spiritual freedom. A controversial, almost dangerous idea to be advocated in Counter-Reformation Italy.

Yet, it would appear, that Podiani was unaware of, or preferred to dismiss the profound political changes which had taken place in Perugia, and continued to see himself and act as a citizen of a free city, which Perugia once was. His project - lacking the Cardinal's support - soon ran into difficulties and ground to a halt. Significantly, in his correspondence with the Cardinal, Podiani showed little respect for ceremonial rules, which had a paramount importance at the time. Further indication that to Podiani genuine wealth was to be found in knowledge and that social hierarchy lacked any value.

Around 1580, Podiani submitted a proposal to the local Perugia authorities, the *Priori delle Arti*, or chiefs of the guilds. He offered to donate his book collection to the City of Perugia with the clear intention to establish a public library. The *Priori's* power, however, was almost solely nominal and any decision had to be approved by the Pontiff's vicar. In 1582, an official agreement was nevertheless reached: Podiani was to donate his book collection (at that time comprising around 7,500 volumes), whilst the *Priori* would fund the building of a library. Podiani was entrusted with the office of librarian, but required to raise funds himself to cover initial costs as well as for maintenance and running of the library.

The Library was completed in 1590, the same year in which Podiani was elected as to the office of *Priore*. Two mural frescoes were painted to decorate the Library, the first, located above the main window, depicting a *Parnassus*, which could be seen from the entrance, the second, just above the door, depicting the *Dispute at the Temple*. An epigraph was inscribed at the base of each fresco. Both epigraphs include Podiani's name and, in the first, the name of a Perugia nobleman - Ascanio Montesperelli - who was in charge of the management of Library's finances: AVG(VSTAE) PERVSIÆ MVSEVM A PROSPERO PODIANO PVB(LICAE) COM(MODITATI) PARAT(VM) ILL.S A(SCANIVS) MONTISPERELLVS ET COLLEG(AE) CVR(AVERVNT). The second epigraph reads: PROSPER PODIANVS APOLLINI ET MVSIS DICAVIT.⁷

⁷ See Maria Alessandra Panzanelli Fratoni, 'Notizie sulla formazione culturale di Girolamo Tezi. Ragionando dei libri che egli ebbe a prestito da Prospero Podiani e delle origini della Biblioteca Augusta di Perugia', *Bollettino della Deputazione di storia patria per l'Umbria*, CVI (2009), fasc. 2, 171-242.



Perugia, Palazzo dei Priori, outer façade, inscription commemorating the foundation of the Museum.

Author's photograph - All rights reserved.

At this point, however, disorder followed, since Podiani no longer trusted the *Priori*, refused to give them the collection catalogue but at the same time welcomed scholars and others, almost at whim, to the Library. Around two-hundred extant letters and five book-notes show the intense lending activities of the Library - which was yet to be officially opened - and of Podiani himself acting as a 'reference librarian'.

Podiani died on 17th November 1615. In the following years, an inventory of the Library was completed by Fulvio Mariottelli, a learned priest and one of Podiani's closest friends. The books listed by Mariottelli however represented only a section of Podiani's library: many more volumes had been lent and not returned to the library. Some of these books were recovered, but not, for example, those contained in the fifty book-chests that Podiani had brought with him to Palazzo Altemps, in Rome, where he had lived for some time. Duke Altemps, in fact, refused to return them, considering them as a payment in kind for having given Podiani hospitality. Even so, the collection comprised around 10,000 books, including six-hundred manuscripts. Most importantly, it was a scholarly collection, composed by some of the finest editions printed in continental Europe - mainly Italy, France, Spain, Germany and the Low Countries. Podiani had also put together a subsidiary collection of almost five hundred titles, he should have disposed of, being prohibited texts listed on the Roman Indexes.

The Library was officially opened in 1623, yet in a different building. New premises had in fact been bought and a new hall was fitted and furnished to house the Biblioteca Augusta. Conceivably, it was the Pope, Urban VIII, who preferred not to leave the library in its original site, where Podiani's repute was still resounding. I do not believe that the Pontiff wished to consign Podiani's name to obscurity. He certainly wished to present the opening of the Library as his own doing however.

The Biblioteca Augusta was opened in a building facing the City University, the *Studium perusinum*. Only two years later the same Pope, Urban VIII, became the main advocate of a University reform aimed at precluding to the city rulers any form of control over the *Studium*.

Urban VIII had studied in Perugia, where he also joined a literary academy - the *Accademia degli Insensati*. He was familiar with the city life and, possibly, was aware of Podiani's project. He was and remained, however, a 'Roman' pontiff and a shrewd politician, able to recognise a noteworthy project and the best way to promote it. He did support many projects but all favouring Rome and its *grandeur*.

The same applies to the Biblioteca Augusta, which Urban VIII eventually opened, yet not in the spirit of freedom that had inspired its founder, Prospero Podiani.

ISLG

Italian Studies Library Group

**Join the Italian Studies Library Group and get involved
with their activities**

**Individuals may become members for as little as £10.00 per annum; £ 15.00
for institutions**

**Members of the Italian Studies Library Group receive the printed ISLG
Bulletin as part of their subscription**

For further information please contact:

Clare Hills-Nova (Secretary)
Email: e.clare.hills-nova@bodleian.ox.ac.uk

or

Hélène Fernandes (Treasurer)
Email: hk225@cam.ac.uk