

The Use of Classicism in Fascist Italy's "Roman Empire"

The use of the Classical motif and identification with ancient Rome abroad during the reign of Italy's fascist government was not only important to the fascist ideological message of creating a Second Roman Empire, but also imperative to justify military actions leading into World War II via "the use of Ancient Roman examples to create a new sense of discipline, militarism and order."¹ By using Ancient Rome as an exalted example of perceived discipline, militarism, and order, Mussolini was able to subjugate lands that were not inherently part of his dominion, yet that he could justify claiming due to previous Roman occupation.

But what did the promotion of "*romanita*" or "romaness" have to do with the development of the classical motif abroad? Mussolini created the term "*romanita*" as a general "catch-all" for his right to the lands previously occupied by the original Roman Empire, under such leaders as Augustus and Julius Caesar. While many agree with Visser's assessment of "*romanita*" as an "opportunistic choice of Roman catchwords and symbols, lacking any substantial ideological coherence and with no intellectual coherence and with no intellectual background of any standing,"² others describe it as, "akin to Roman culture."³ Perhaps in the case of Mussolini, the most apt description is that it "signified the greatness of ancient Roman civilization and its uninterrupted manifestation throughout the centuries."⁴

This spread of "*romanita*" was probably demonstrated most prominently both at home and abroad by "*la parola al piccino*," or "the discourse of the pick-ax," whose effects were widespread. This was the fascist government's use of classical archaeology for the promotion of ideologies by presenting themselves as the second coming of the Roman Empire through the ultimate reconstruction of it. The use of classical archaeology was felt both at home and abroad, through a combination of continuing to promote the idea of "*romanita*" in contrast to the archaeological style of "*modernita*" or modernity.

This Romanization of the colonies stood "on top of the Fascist political agenda."⁵ Mussolini and the Fascists meant to align themselves with Classical Rome and consequently

¹ Stephen L. Dyson, *In Pursuit of Ancient Pasts: A History of Classical Archaeology in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 179.

² R. Visser, "Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the Romanita." *Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 27, no. 1 (1992), 5.

³ Claudia Lazzaro and Roger J. Crum, *Donatello among the Blackshirts: History and Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 14.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Dyson, 177.

have ready justification for their imperial movements and growth of their Second Roman Empire. By proving that a Roman past existed in the countries they invaded, Mussolini was able to plead an ancestral right to any lands previously contained in the original Roman Empire, and in the process re-incarnating himself as a modern-day Julius Caesar. Mussolini had learned the importance of using archaeology “as propaganda in North Africa from the French”, employing “classical archaeology as a tool for justifying modern colonialism.”⁶ In following imperialistic and nationalistic policies, Mussolini was able to integrate and consequently justify these policies by removing any doubt as to whether Italy was meant to possess these lands by pointing to Ancient Rome’s military achievements. However, many questioned this logic from the start; if Italy was to truly mirror the Ancient Roman Empire, Germany and parts of Britain would also by default be incorporated into Mussolini’s “divine right” scheme of imperialism. Nevertheless, the government “financed exhibitions [in North Africa]” and created museums “that highlighted the new discoveries... strengthen[ing] the connection between “*romanità*” and fascist policy.”⁷ Any archaeological discoveries were used as immediate justification of Italian presence.⁸

The Classical motif image Mussolini used not only aided him in promoting his expansionist ideals abroad, but also improved the image of the dictator himself, connecting him to the classically heroic image of strength and ability associated with a great historical past. Mussolini saw himself as the next Caesar, whom he admired greatly, creating his entire foreign policy around this cult of personality:

The murder of Caesar was a disgrace for humanity... I love Caesar. He was the only one who united in himself the will of the warrior and the genius of the wise man. In the end he was a philosopher, who contemplated everything *sub specie aeternitatis*. Yes, he loved glory, but his pride didn’t divide him from humanity.⁹

Despite using this questionable ideology as justification for his private and public beliefs, Mussolini’s excavation of the ancient world was for the most part met with foreign approval from other first-world countries’ intellectual circles. In fact, “as classical archaeologists they could not help but be excited.”¹⁰

⁶ Ibid. 182.

⁷ Ibid. 177.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jan Nelis, “Constructing Fascist Identity: Benito Mussolini and the Myth of Romanità,” *Classical World* vol. 100, no.4 (2007), 406.

¹⁰ Dyson 182.

This "reconstruction" of the Roman Empire first began in Libya. Despite having been seized in 1911 from the Ottoman Empire, the Greek, Punic, and Roman sites had yet to be excavated at the rate Mussolini desired after his ascent to power in 1923.¹¹ A second foreign annexation occurred a year after Libya with the seizure of the Dodecanese Islands in 1912. Both locations were rife with classical archaeological influences for the new Roman Empire, though Libya in particular was considered significant:

In the course of the Italian North African excavations, entire cities, with their theatres, baths, *fora* and elegant houses were unearthed. Museums were created and guidebooks published.... The civilizing accomplishments of the Romans were made visible, both to the new Italian colonists transplanted to Cyrene and to the nationalists at home... The Italians sent into Libya [were meant to] find inspiration in the Roman ruins as they worked to create a new *imperium romanum* on African shores.¹²

Although Italian colonialism had begun far earlier than the actual reign of Mussolini, it was he who first proclaimed the existence of the Italian Empire on the ninth of May 1936, whose territories included Libya, Eritrea, Somalia, and parts of Ethiopia (annexed by force through the Second Italo-Abyssinian war in 1935). All new colonial additions were under strict policies to introduce rapid Italianization and Romanization into each region:

An antiquities administration modeled on that of Italy was imposed. Foreign archaeologists were allowed no place in either country. The Americans were forced out of Libya, and the Danes had to abandon their excavations at Lindos on Rhodes.¹³

The only excavations to unearth any antiquities were done solely under Italian and Italian-approved supervision. Museums and academic journals were founded to support Italy's basis to be a present force in each and every country they invaded. They sought to overturn the local culture and eventually stamp out any local beliefs and replace them with Italian "*romanita*," which is evident even today in areas such as Rhodes, the historic region of Tripolitania in Libya, Harah, Jimma, and Gondar in Ethiopia, as well as the capital of Libya itself, Tripoli.

Colonialism was Mussolini's vehicle to show the rest of the world the single-handed

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. 183.

¹³ Ibid. 182.

might that the Italians could exhibit as an upcoming world power. The planning and construction on the outskirts of their “Roman Empire” proved no exception, especially in Libya. As Stephen Dyson writes, “the [Libyan and Italian] authorities sought to learn from the Roman use of land and water as they established new settlements.”¹⁴ Examples of this would be the transportation of water based on an entirely Roman system, and the use of silt in the desert sand as a basis for strong and supposedly indestructible building materials to use in the development of impressive architecture.¹⁵ By unifying both architecture and design as new points of power in Mussolini’s ever-expanding empire, the spreading of Italian values based upon the ancient Romans themselves could not only be a philosophical ideal, but also an actual reality. The Fascists then managed to put into place the same policies they had used to Romanize Africa into Rome and Italy itself. Old monuments, having fallen into disrepair, were rebuilt, revitalized, and restructured. Italy was meant to return to the same grandeur of the Roman era, complete with autarky and a “romanticized rurality.”¹⁶

However, the architectural and infrastructural goal of creating the perfect Second Empire in Libya did not only focus on structural design but also on urban planning as well. Towns and cities were constructed in the style of traditional Roman cities; courtyards dominated the middle of towns, leading to several smaller buildings, in stark contrast to the Arabic style of having a private space for each individual family, or a courtyard on the interior of the home. However, to say that all architecture built in Libya at the time was solely based on Roman influences would be untrue; the Fascists also wanted to create a dichotomy between moving forward (the movement of “*modernità*”) and Italian classical architecture. The use of architecture was vitally important to the Italians because it was a constant reminder to the rest of the world of the cultural ambitions passed to them from their ancestors. This had always been an Italian mentality, ever since the unification of Italy in 1871. As the renowned Minister of Foreign Affairs Francesco Crispi stated in 1889, “our fathers cleared the path to new civilization... we would be failing our country if we did not enlarge our field of activity.”¹⁷

Libya had also been famed for its fertility in the ancient world, and the fascist colonialists “supported their belief in Libya’s great promise of wealth with frequent reference to Greek and Roman classics.”¹⁸ In order to return to this classical belief, the

¹⁴ Ibid. 183

¹⁵ Mia Fuller, “Building Power: Italy’s Colonial Architecture and Urbanism, 1923-1940,” *Cultural Anthropology* vol. 3, no.4 (1988), 457.

¹⁶ Ibid. 472.

¹⁷ Ibid. 456.

¹⁸ Ibid. 459.

Fascists in turn believed they needed to populate Libya with "*brava gente*," or good Fascist families ready to work and rebuild the Italian Empire. Consequently, the Governor General of Libya, Italo Balbo, organized the relocation of the "*ventimilia*," (twenty thousand) settlers relocated from impoverished Southern Italy (also a solution to population overgrowth). This population was meant to prove the success of the Second Roman Empire abroad, by "converting desert lands to their former Roman glory, but along modern lines."¹⁹

To move this new colonial acquisition away from its "nomadic and slothful population," symbols of Italy's former glory were placed throughout Libya.²⁰ Examples of such architecture would include the "*Pavilion of the Governatorato di Roma*" at the *Fiera di Tripoli*, the triumphal arch by the architect Rava (built in Tripoli in 1931), as well as many other locations in Italian East Africa.²¹ Somalia also provided many of its own architectural developments, with architectural designs by Rava present in its triumphal arches and the parliamentary buildings in Mogadishu, built in the style of a classical Roman forum. Another suitable example would be the Temple of Zeus in Cyrene, Libya; it was excavated before the reign of Mussolini (1917-1922), yet it was still used to "promote the idea of Italian East Africa as Italy's 'fourth shore' of its Empire."²²

However, Italy's foreign policy was also concerned with the maintenance of Roman "blood," and discouraged any Italian settlers in East Africa from consummating sexual relationships with the local population; or as Mussolini put it, "creat[ing] a nation of half-castes."²³ To uphold this racial segregation, the cities of the new Roman Empire were built to enforce this, and to allow only for the minimum interaction between the local population and Italian immigrants, the city was divided according to race, religion, and class, despite the fact that all people under the Italian jurisdiction were technically "Roman." Other demonstrations of this movement towards the Roman "elite" were more prominent:

Italian planners frequently laid out boulevards that joined a significant new building representing the Fascist empire to an iconic historical structure representing the Abyssinian empire. Parades on these roads always began at the older site, symbolically reinforcing the transfer of Imperial power. A similar appropriation of historic structures appears in the places set aside for

¹⁹ Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism* (London: Routledge, 2007), 60.

²⁰ Fuller 1988, 457.

²¹ Ibid. 463.

²² Fuller 2007, 6.

²³ Esmonde Robertson, "Race as a Factor in Mussolini's Policy in Africa and Europe," *Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 23, no.1 (1988), 40.

“*adunate*” (political rallies)... where the assembled masses symbolically reenacted the seizure of Italy’s African possessions... Italian urban designers carefully used zoning and landscape to further construct social identities by segregating colonial cities.²⁴

Italian Fascist architects, who claimed that Libyan architecture was really born of Roman origin and inspiration, also essentially stripped Libya of any national identity. “The true tradition of Rome, the unerasable...imprint of its dominion” was said to be prominent, even in “primitive Berber architecture.”²⁵ The importance of this distinction cannot be underemphasized. By classifying Libyan architecture as “Roman,” the Mussolini regime was able to borrow both materials and ideas from local indigenous architecture without suggesting that they were compromising on ideals. Additionally, by labeling Libya as “Roman”, the Italians would then be met in their vision of a “Roman Empire” by gaining a newly constructed history and the right to these lands by ignoring the other multitudes of racial groups who had been present there beforehand, such as the Ottomans.

In essence, “Libya was denied history, identity, culture; it was the repository of modern Italy’s roots”.²⁶ By classifying modern architecture in Libya under a new term, “Mediterranean,” it effectively bridged the gap between African and Italian, “*modernita*” and “*romanita*.”²⁷ Instead, the primary focus for the Roman Empire abroad continued to be segregation and race. The “new” Ethiopian cities continued to highlight this class distinction and the separation between white and black. For all the constructed cities such as Addis Ababa, Gondar, Jimma, and Dessyise, traffic and pedestrian flow was constructed to allow for as little interaction between the two races as possible. The local population would have “restricted access to the Italian market,” although it would have frequent commerce with it.²⁸ “Indigenous quarters” were planned to allow whites easier access to central civic buildings without having to interact with the native population.²⁹ All this was intended to highlight the ruling power of the more “Roman” class over the “primitive” peoples of Libya:

It will be possible to plan concentric cities with urban zoning plans

²⁴ David Rifkind, *Principles of Italian Colonial Urbanism* (Poster: Florida International University).

²⁵ Fuller 1988, 472.

²⁶ Ibid. 473.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 479.

²⁹ Ibid.

centered around a knoll or spur, where, as though it were an acropolis, the building of Government, the element of conquest and domination will constitute the urban hierarchy of the city which should formally make evident the predominance of white over black, and usually admonish that every piazza seeks our supremacy over the infantile, primitive, indigenous population.³⁰

This focus on designing a "white core" of the city with "black" outskirts was the key in designing new Roman cities abroad. While "the true Negro city" was described as "the unhappy result of the incapacity that blacks on the whole and Ethiopians especially have [for organization]," categories prominent in planning for non-indigenous zones were listed as "service, industrial, military, residential, schools, sports complexes, markets, hospitals and hotels."³¹ Planning was judged in its relation to the center/acropolis and its "quality of triumph".³² This Roman planning of cities and countries continued until well into the Second World War.

However, Italian East Africa and a greater Africa itself was not the only opportunity for the Italian fascists to display their connection to their glorious past. Another example of architectural use of propaganda and Italianization of local populations was evident in the Dodecanese Islands, in particular Rhodes, where over eighty percent of Italians who immigrated to the isles lived. However, Rhodes did not openly offer the sort of "pro-Roman propaganda that North Africa did, in particular Libya."³³ While Libya's great classical heritage could be seen to be Roman, Rhodes' heritage was in fact Greek. Nevertheless, Italian archaeologists were able to uncover sites to suit their purposes.³⁴

One of the main points that the Fascists leapt on was the connection to the West as a Christian bastion against the March of Islam in the Middle Ages. Buildings such as the former headquarters of the knights of Rhodes were restored and used as museums, with Italian archaeologists using "all their skills at historical restoration learned on the buildings of Rome."³⁵ And while Rhodes as a whole offered few possibilities for new colonial foundations, the archaeological scene on the island was organized and streamlined for maximum efficiency:

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. 481.

³² Ibid.

³³ Dyson, 184.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

The archaeologist most closely associated with Rhodes was Amadeo Maiuri (1886-1963), who was even better than others at surviving in prefascist, fascist, and post-fascist Italy... In 1914 he was sent to Rhodes, where he found a chaotic archaeological scene with poor administration and a lively trade in antiquities. He remained for ten years, excavating, working with the architect Giuseppe Gerola to restore buildings, and found[ed] the archaeological museum at Rhodes.³⁶

Maiuri continued to plan throughout Mussolini's reign, while other nationalities such as the Danes were forced to leave Rhodes in favor of Italian archaeologists who would rebuild and redefine their finds if needed. While the outbreak of war effectively ended the archaeological operations in Rhodes, much was accomplished before the retreat occurred.³⁷

Mussolini in particular saw Rhodes and the Dodecanese islands as a prime location to enforce Italianization and to make Rhodes a "transportation hub" that could aid in the spread of Italian culture through Greece and the Mediterranean.³⁸ Italian schools were opened on the islands, and modernization was made a priority. Malaria was eradicated from the local population, and aqueducts, hospitals, and power plants were constructed. Architecture was rebuilt in an effort to connect the Roman Empire with Rhodes' Christian and Western past. A prime example of this would be the citadel of Rhodes itself.

Nevertheless, the reconstruction of architecture on the city of Rhodes under the fascists was not in any way entirely positive. Following the example of "*la parola al piccino*" at home, many non-classical architectural structures belonging to the Ottoman Period of Rhodes were destroyed as a result of fervent Italianization. Jewish and Ottoman cemeteries were also turned into "green zones," while other architecture of what they deemed to be "minor importance" was destroyed.³⁹ The appointment of Cesare Maria De Vecchi as governor of the Aegean Islands in 1936 only resulted in a further program of forced "*rominita*," stopped only by the country's entry into World War Two.

The "restoration" of Rhodes under the Fascists and their policy of "*la parola al piccino*" are heavily criticized today, despite the reinvention of many prominent architectural pieces on the island, as well as their social policies of "*romanita*" and Italianization. Italian was made the compulsory language on the island, and incentives were given to those who rejected Greek language and culture and who instead adopted Italian mannerisms. One

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid. 208.

³⁸ Fuller 2007, 63.

³⁹ Lazzaro 23.

of the primary examples of this would be the construction of the town of Portolago, later renamed Lakki. The Greek Orthodox religion was strongly discouraged, and resulted in a large amount of number of Greek Orthodox practitioners leaving the island, in comparison to the influx of Italians arriving on it.

Yet still, much of the great architecture that exists today is the direct consequence of the Italians' attempt to preserve it. Portolago itself was built in typical "*modernita*" Italian deco style. Using almost exclusively "free" local labor, the Italians restored examples that marked the unity of the island with Rome, such as the Filerimos Monastery and the Saint Francisco church.

Mussolini's goal in highlighting these architectural achievements was to create a common historical identity based not in blood, but in heritage. Still, a hierarchy existed based on race. Fascist Italians still saw themselves as "Romans" who brought civilization to "savage" populations on the outskirts of their Roman Empire. Despite Mussolini's dream of re-instating Italy's glorious history of Roman domination, in practice, his policies were bound to fail. Despite the staunch imperialism he attempted to enforce, and his attempts to create an internal unity within his empire, his inherently aggressive policies were not conducive to long term-success. His process of Italianization and "*romanita*" perhaps should not have been based so much on Julius Caesar, but rather on his adopted son Augustus. For while Augustus did conquer other regions, he never overstepped his boundaries into something that he could not control or that would upset the general population. When Mussolini attacked Ethiopia, an acknowledged member of the League of Nations, it was the beginning of the end, as it attracted widespread international hostility. The "Scramble for Africa" had long since been over, and the attempted creation of superpowers such as Germany or Italy only resulted in World War II, the East Africa Campaign, and the end of Fascist Italy and Mussolini himself, as well as the returning off all lands to their respective parties.

Still, the testament to Mussolini's vision of a Second Roman Empire still remains, most prominently through architecture and city urban planning. Although much of the architecture and the culture of each of these respective countries was lost due to Fascist Italy's Romanization policies, much was restored as well. Therefore, it seems that Mussolini's policy of "*romanita*" is destined to go down in history as disputed and criticized as the man who established and promoted it.

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