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The Excavatory Intervention: Archaeology and the Chronopolitics of Roman Antiquity in Fascist Italy

In his diary entry for 19 July 1943, Piero Calamandrei recorded his impressions of an unprecedented event – the Allied bombing of Rome. More than outrage or empathy, the Florentine anti-Fascist felt a «sense of satisfaction, almost of relief»:«Rome is the centre of Fascist politics, of corporative bureaucracy, of party bosses, of profiteers, of [propaganda] films. This Rome of plaster and cardboard has been inflicted on us for twenty years in speeches, in terminology (the littorio, oh the littorio! And the Urbs, and the legionaries, and the centurions, and the Duce, and so on), in architecture, in the «Roman step». The legions, the solid legions...auff!»¹ Calamandrei’s antipathy toward Rome was typical of many critics of Mussolini’s regime. In their eyes, Italian Fascism’s invocation of the eternal spirit of Rome – romanità – epitomised its absurdity and artifice.² Benedetto Croce dismissed romanità as «a word whose virtue lay in their very vacuity»;³ to Paolo Nalli, it was «an incurable syphilis», a «relentless illness».⁴ The ghosts of Roman triumphs were blamed for seducing Italians into military adventures for which they were unprepared, leading to a catastrophic world war; the only remedy, according to Giovanni Mosca, was to forbid young people to visit the ancient city, and to «surround monuments with tall fences and large signs saying «Danger Zone». Only this way could future generations be disabused of the idea that «they [were] the direct heirs of a greatness that they [did] not possess».⁵

Such derision points both to the centrality of romanità in Fascist political culture and to the tendency to dismiss the so-called «cult of Rome» as the height of Mussolinian theatricality and pomposity.⁶ The latter has been extended in subsequent

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² I follow the convention of using the lower-case «fascism» to indicate the generic phenomenon, and upper-case «Fascism» in specifically referencing the Italian regime.
⁴ P. Nalli, Roma carcinoma, Milan 1945, 7–8.
⁵ G. Mosca, La gloriosa palla, Milan 1945, 25.
⁶ For a critical assessment of romanità and its institutionalisation, see J. Arthurs, Excavating Moder-
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7 For a definitional discussion of chronopolitics, see Fernando Esposito and Sven Reichardt’s introductory remarks to this volume.


10 For an analysis of the regime’s vision for a new order, see esp. E. Gentile, The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy, Cambridge, MA 1996.


12 «Extracts from a Resolution of the Third Enlarged Executive of the Communist International Plenum on Fascism», 1935, quoted in Griffin, Fascism, 262.

ect for modernity: its attempts to engineer a new man and a new order, regenerate and redeem the social body, and forge a new, transcendent historical era. Many have emphasised the influence of intellectual and artistic avant-gardes – such as the Futurists and the Vociani – whose palingenetic rhetoric of national renewal, purification and renovation underpinned Fascist aspirations for an «anthropological revolution».

Significantly, however, romanità has received relatively short shift from these studies. Despite their willingness to approach Fascist culture on its own terms, many scholars reiterate the anti-Fascist critiques of Rome discussed above. Analyses that define Fascism as a form of «conservative revolution» or «reactionary modernism» invariably cast romanità as the retrograde side of the Janus-face, in contrast to the regime’s embrace of modern aesthetics and technology. Some scholars see it as a concession to pre-Fascist conservatism and the reactionary right. Even those who emphasise the modernist orientation of Fascist culture tend to situate romanità as an expression of the «totalitarian turn» of the mid- to late 1930s, a function of the drive for empire in Ethiopia, the adoption of racist ideology, and the rapprochement with Nazi Germany. In this view, the cult of Rome represented the rejection of revolutionary modernism in favour of «deep-seated ethnocentrism and chauvinism» and an «imperial-militarist and [...] backward-looking self-image».

Such characterisations are problematic in several respects. Mussolini’s dalliance with Marinetti, Papini and other modernists was confined largely to Fascism’s formative years, and while these figures left a profound imprint, it should also be noted that most of them were marginalised well before Mussolini’s accession to power in 1922. By contrast, although Fascist culture was aesthetically pluralistic, romanità

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14 In addition to their contributions to this volume, see R. Griffin, Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler, New York 2007; C. Fogu, The Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy, Toronto 2003; R. Ben-Ghiat, Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945, Berkeley, CA 2001; and F. Esposito, Aviatik, Faschismus und die Sehnsucht nach Ordnung in Deutschland und Italien, Munich 2011.


19 As Robert Paxton argues, there is sometimes a tendency for intellectual historians to essentialise fascism based on its earliest articulations and influences, instead of seeing its ideology in a state of flux and transformation; see R. Paxton, The Anatomy of Fascism, New York 2004.
remained one of its central and consistent components from the earliest days of the movement to the collapse of the regime in 1943.\textsuperscript{20} Compared with Futurist art or Rationalist architecture, Rome was a far more constant and aggressive presence in both the regime’s political culture and the lives of ordinary Italians – in schools, rallies, visual propaganda, and especially, as we shall see, the refashioning of urban space. Indeed, it might be precisely because of its ubiquity and repetitiveness – from the «Roman salute» to the «Roman step», from the «Legionaries» of the Militia to the «Sons of the She-Wolf» – that romanità has so often been dismissed as Fascism at its most bombastic.

The Italian Fascist invocation of Rome cannot solely be reduced to conservative nostalgia for a distant «Golden Age». The underlying longing for an «eternal return» to sacred, mythic time should also be understood as a revolutionary discourse that expressed the regime’s aspirations and anxieties for modernity, providing a blueprint for the new man and the new Italy.\textsuperscript{21} Rome – a set of transcendent, eternal values as well as a tangible, mouldable physical space – was a dynamic, vital force to be enacted in the present, not just a venerable past to be recalled. This vision drew on historical referents rather different from the völkisch mythology of National Socialism, which celebrated the rootedness, primitivism and purity of Kultur over the technological materialism of (Latin) Zivilisation.\textsuperscript{22} Only after the «Racial Turn» of 1938 was romanità subsumed into a primordialist paradigm of racial origins; even then, the Urbs caput mundi – the quintessential imperial metropolis – hardly convinced as a myth of blood and soil.\textsuperscript{23}

The myth of Rome helped Fascism supersede both secular «clock time» and the progressive teleologies of liberalism and Marxism, but equally was marked by «an acute sense of discontinuity between past and future».\textsuperscript{24} To actualise the palingenetetic «revolution in the idea of Rome», the regime had to undertake what I term an «excavatory intervention» in the present. This intervention was both literal and figurative. In its most direct application, it meant the archaeological excavation and restoration of ancient monuments, a process that the regime construed as a spectacular transformation of time and space. In this sense, this excavatory intervention produced a rupture in time, breaking through historical strata to establish an unmedi-
ated, simultaneous experience of Roman past and Fascist present (and future). Excavation was also represented in terms of bonifica, an act of reclamation that was simultaneously historical, topographic, moral, hygienic and social. If Mussolini envisioned «a comprehensive modernisation strategy designed to make Italy unrecognisable to itself and to foreigners in ten years», this would be achieved in part through the excavation and valorisation of an ancient city. More broadly, the excavatory intervention was also a key rhetorical strategy for the regime. Through the transformation of space and the shaping of new Italians through exercise, education and discipline, the transcendent values of romanità would be freed from the vagaries of time and oblivion, and revived for the present and future.

1. Overcoming Time in Roma Mussolinea

Clearly, the epicentre of Fascism’s excavatory intervention was the Eternal City itself. Although it had been designated as the national capital in 1871, Rome remained problematic as a symbol of national unity and modernity, well into the twentieth century. Its twisting streets and crumbling ruins evoked memories of earlier eras, whether of medieval backwardness or Grand Tour Romanticism. Many of its most famous ancient sites, like the Capitoline Hill or the Forum Romanum, were either buried or incorporated into later structures. Apart from a few drab ministry buildings, some preliminary archaeological work and the unfinished monument to King Victor Emmanuel II, the liberal state had not succeeded in transforming Rome into a rival of Paris, Berlin or London. In part, then, the Fascist regime’s projects in Rome must be understood within the broader context of modernising and nationalising the city, of transforming it from a medieval backwater into Roma capitale.

From the outset, however, it was clear that Fascism sought to impose a radically new temporal and spatial order on the Eternal City. In a sense, its first «intervention» — this one ritualised and symbolic — occurred when black-shirted squads descended on the capital in October 1922. As an annexation of power, the March on Rome invoked both the revolutionary dynamism of the early Fascist movement and the memory of Italy’s sacrifices during the First World War; as Mussolini announced upon his arrival, the squadristi were representatives of the «Italy of Vittorio Veneto», come to rescue and redeem the nation. Their cleansing violence was to be directed at the source of the infection of the body politic – the parasitic, corrupt capital of the


27 On the impact of the First World War on Fascism’s urban vision, see P. Baxa, Roads and Ruins: The Symbolic Landscape of Fascist Rome, Toronto 2009.
liberal state, which would have to be «purified, disinfected of all the elements that corrupt and sully it».

In this way, it would be transformed into «the city of our [i.e. Fascism’s] spirit [...], the beating heart, the vigorous spirit of the imperial Italy of our dreams». The staging of the March on Rome, then, was itself an expression of *bonifica*, an act of usurpation, reclamation and resurrection.

The regime’s physical «purification» or «disinfection» of the city began in earnest in the mid-1920s, with a series of major archaeological projects in the historic centre. Between 1924 and 1930, the regime excavated the Republican temples at Torre Argentina, the Markets of Trajan, the Theatre of Marcellus and portions of the Capitoline Hill, the Forum Romanum and the Fora of Julius Caesar and Augustus. In every instance, the recovery and reconstruction of ancient sites went hand-in-hand with ambitious modernisation schemes, such as the construction of automobile-friendly roads like Via dell’Impero and Via del Mare (today’s Via dei Fori Imperiali and Via del Teatro di Marcello) and large squares like Piazzale Augusto Imperatore. It is worth noting that the vast majority of these initiatives were undertaken during the regime’s first decade, rather than after the «imperial» or «totalitarian» turn of the late 1930s. The only major project from this later period remains the Mausoleum of Augustus, planned in the early thirties but completed in 1938.

The sheer scale of these excavations had a major impact on both the physiognomy and the demography of Rome. The regime’s myopic focus on monumental remains from the imperial period necessitated the destruction of buildings from later eras, disrupting an urban landscape largely defined by the Middle Ages and Renaissance; it also meant that the traces of earlier periods were re-interred, chronologically «freezing» the recovered topography of the ancient city around the first century CE. The regime’s critics would later bemoan the overwhelming «sense of rhetorical bombast, [of] heavy official uniformity, stripped of local characteristics».

Ancient ruins had been «[more] beautiful when they were hidden under nettles, or incorporated into shacks in the popular neighbourhoods that grew around them, living on as their foundations. Today, [archaeologists] have tidied, isolated, scraped and cleaned them, and put them in a showcase; the asphalt streets make broad curves around four stones scrubbed of moss», complained Piero Calamandrei.

Familiar sights and spaces were rendered alien and disorienting, sterile and bureaucratic. This sense of dislocation was especially strong for the many residents
whose homes were demolished during these projects. One scholar estimates that
tens of thousands were displaced, mostly from working-class neighbourhoods, in
this «giant internal migration».\textsuperscript{35} For large numbers of ordinary Romans, then, Fascist chronopolitics cannot be reduced to «mere» rhetoric; rather, it heavily informed both the praxis of the regime and the lived experience of individuals, families and communities.

The destructiveness of the interventions in Rome has long been noted, and the
city bears their scars to this day. However, to dismiss such projects as a modern-day
«Sack of Rome» is to limit our understanding of Fascism’s attempt to colonise time and space.\textsuperscript{36} For the regime, archaeology provided both \textit{sites} – physically transformed spaces – and \textit{sights}, meaning the spectacular performance of urban transformation.\textsuperscript{37} Archaeology, argue Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, is «fundamentally expressive; it depends on a relation with an audience. \textit{[A]rchaeology is a practice producing its own objects – texts.}»\textsuperscript{38} It is creative, in that it recovers and reconstructs buried artefacts, as well as destructive, since it privileges certain historical strata over others. The result, argues Nadia Abu El-Haj, is the creation of new «facts on the ground»: new physical realities reflecting the reframing of temporal and spatial relationships.\textsuperscript{39}

Fascist propaganda and the Italian press alike emphasised this spectacular
dimension, providing the public with regular updates on archaeological work in
the capital. Reports highlighted the speed with which projects were being accom-
plished – often with the express purpose of coinciding with important anniversaries and holidays – as well as the scientific expertise being deployed by the regime’s officials. Newsreels and photography were used to highlight the successive phases of intervention. Prior to excavation, monuments appeared as faintly visible traces incorporated into dark, crowded quarters, surrounded by scenes of proletarian life: laundry hanging from marble columns, shops built under ancient arches. The piv-
otal moment of transformation was usually signalled by the arrival of Mussolini, Fascist dignitaries and archaeologists; the Duce, often with his jacket or shirt removed, would inaugurate the proceedings with a powerful blow of his pickaxe.\textsuperscript{40} Soon, in the words of one excited official, the area would resemble «a noisy con-
struction site, deafened by drilling machines, pneumatic hammers, pick-axes, and wagons which carried off piles of dirt and tufa».\textsuperscript{41} The final image, invariably, was a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Cederna, \textit{Mussolini}, ix.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Thanks to Peter Fritzsche for this turn of phrase.
\item \textsuperscript{40} See for example the newsreel marking the ex-
\item \textsuperscript{41} A. Muñoz, \textit{Via dei Monti e Via del Mare}, Rome 1933, 14.
\end{itemize}
panoramic view of the ancient structure, now disengaged from surrounding buildings and denuded of human activity.

The centrality of Mussolini in such scenes points to an important facet of Fascist excavation, namely the interconnection between romanità, the drive for aggressive intervention, and the cult of the Duce. In archaeology, as in so many other regime activities, Mussolini’s persona and physical presence were themselves embodiments of Fascist ideals. He might have been a modern Dux or a new Caesar, but by striking the first blow in the demolitions, he was also the agent of Rome’s renewal, the artifex of the new age. It was not accidental that propaganda usually referred to the transformed capital as Roma Mussolina, rather than Roma Fascista or Roma Italiana. Mussolini’s imprint on the city would be every bit as profound and enduring as those left by the previous rulers, from Augustus to Leo IV to Napoleon Bonaparte. «Nothing escapes his watchful eye», exclaimed Antonio Muñoz, the city’s Director of Antiquities, «he observes, supervises, corrects all; he intervenes in everything with such eager and precise vision that while it is challenging to follow him [...] it is at the same time a great joy to work under his orders.» The construction of the new Rome was thus represented as the expression of the will of a single individual, of modern man’s ability to master space and time. Mussolini would mould the urban fabric in his own image, as a masculine, disciplined and ordered space.

The rhetoric surrounding excavation was also imbued with modernist and modernising tropes. Inaugurating the excavation of the Mausoleum of Augustus in 1934, for example, Mussolini cited a «triple utility» for the project: «history and beauty, traffic, and hygiene». To these, he added a fourth, «three years of work for countless workers of every kind». Archaeology would serve as a palliative for a number of urban pathologies. The regime consistently described its task in medical terms, framing Rome as a diseased body in need of medical attention. The city had to be subjected to processes of sventramento (literally «disemboweling» or «gutting»), isolamento (isolation) and valorizzazione (valorisation); ancient monuments had to be rendered «naked», cleared of the layers of excrescence, and like a patient allowed to sit in «silence», «breathing space» and «necessary solitude». Correspondingly, archaeologists had to «see themselves as surgeons» saving «the beloved body of a mother» with their «implements». The «cancers» or «parasites» afflicting the urban body were diverse, though in the eyes of the regime they were all manifesta-
tions of a single infection. The neighbourhoods slated for demolition were almost invariably dense working-class slums; the «isolation» of classical remains would therefore entail the carving-out of open spaces, bringing air and sunlight to the city centre. Mussolini justified the «liberation» of the Mausoleum of Augustus by noting that «the homes being destroyed present a serious backwardness with regard to hygiene».

The lead architect, Vittorio Morpurgo, similarly claimed that in addition to uncovering the emperor's tomb, the project would «[sanitise] a central part of the city, where there is a density of houses and shacks, devoid of any historical or artistic interest and anti-hygienic».

Such arguments drew substantially on social-hygienic theories that had dominated European urban planning since the Haussmannisation of Paris. At the same time, however, they also bore the influence of Futurism, with its language of creative destruction and regenerative violence. In a seemingly paradoxical way, the regime's archaeological interventions echoed Marinetti's anti-passatism, his hostility toward the cult of history. The past itself was a «tumour» to be excised from the urban body; however, the «past» in question referred not to antiquity, but to the centuries intervening between classical Rome and the Fascist present. Above all, the regime's anathema was the most recent layer of the city's stratigraphy. The principal target of the piccone risanatore (the «sanitising pickaxe») was the picturesque and decadent Rome of the Grand Tour, of Piranesi etchings, «the sleepy little provincial city of Goethe, Chateaubriand, Massimo d'Azeglio and Stendhal [...], [of] little streets, modest hovels around the massive palaces of nobles and cardinals, large deserted squares; great ruins next to sordid dumps, like filthy stains on a purple mantle». These sights were troubling reminders of «local colour», in this context meaning backwardness and parochialism; of Italians’ forgetfulness and neglect of their grand historical inheritance, and of the condescension of foreigners revelling in the city’s faded glory. The few voices that did challenge the gutting of the city centre were roundly dismissed as pathological, as incurable nostalgics who «attribute artistic or picturesque qualities to things which do not possess them».

Directed against the reminders of the recent past, archaeological excavation could thus be presented as a form of bonifica storica (historical reclamation). By removing shacks, cleaning the façades of ancient monuments, and thereby erasing reminders of past weakness and disunity, the regime was signalling a new historical consciousness, the desire to master and harness the city's millennial past for Fascism's anthropological revolution. The newly «liberated» sites of the ancient city were fully compatible with the exigencies of contemporary life, in aesthetic, hygienic, and ideological terms; far from being an open-air museum, the excavated city would

50 Mussolini, Opera, vol. 26, 368.
54 Ibid., 73–74.
be «resplendent in a new beauty, made of simplicity, youthful freshness, clean, airy, fast, linear». Already, wrote one newspaper in 1937, the Rome described in Baedeker guides no longer corresponded to reality. Foreigners no longer mused about the power of time as they gazed at the moonlit Colosseum, or caroused with strolling mandolin-players; instead, they came to marvel at «that sense of order and discipline that distinguishes [Rome] from other capitals [...], that renewed sense of classicism which, restored to life by Fascism, lives on today like the purest flame in the hearts of Italians».

Roma Mussolina, in short, can be understood as a concrete projection of Fascism's anti-historicist chronopolitics. The regime's excavatory intervention was in no way an act of historical preservation, protecting fragile remains from the incursions of modern life. In fact, the opposite held true: it reflected the restless, aggressive desire to produce a rupture, erase the passage of time from the face of the Eternal City, and blur the spatial and temporal boundaries between Roman antiquity and Fascist modernity. While these interventions might have bewildered or alienated many inhabitants, for the regime's functionaries the «valorised» ancient city both reflected and effected a psychological transformation in the Italian people. Writing in 1933, Antonio Muñoz acknowledged that he could no longer recall the appearance of central Rome from only a few years prior: «Now, it is amusing to listen to the folks who today stop on the new Via dell’Impero and recall that «in the old days, there was a barber-shop there». And «the old days» refer to barely two or three months ago! But compared to the vast vision of this new imperial road, these recent memories now seem ancient, relics of a seemingly distant epoch.» The events and ideas of recent decades «may not have been distant chronologically [but are] very far from our taste and mentality», their traces «already withered and faded». One journalist similarly reflected that in Mussolini’s Rome, «one really feels as though they are living in another political and moral atmosphere, thinking with another brain, feeling with another heart, seeing with other eyes, than those of the past». In Rome, at least, the regime had succeeded in making Italy unrecognisable to itself. The distant past had occurred only a few years earlier, its vanishing traces to be preserved in photo albums, museums and archives; by contrast, the unencumbered monuments of classical antiquity were signs of the nation's renewal (hygienic, moral, aesthetic) and its glorious future. These sights would inspire modern Italians to become disciplined members of the body politic, bastions of order at home and conquerors abroad.

55 Ibid., 96.
57 Muñoz, Via, 35.
58 A. Muñoz, L’isolamento del colle capitolino, Rome 1943, 6.
2. Excavating Empire in Libya

While Rome remained the centrepiece of the regime’s efforts to reframe space and time, Fascism’s excavatory interventions extended beyond the Italian peninsula. Archaeological projects were initiated in Italian-occupied Albania and Greece, but many of the most important sites were in the North African colonies of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (contemporary Libya).

Like many colonial powers before them, the Italians used archaeology as «evidence» of their historical right to territory. Roman ruins – especially the well-preserved remains at Leptis Magna and Sabratha – substantiated the inherent Italianness of the Libyan landscape and could be contrasted with the more recent (and more modest) built record of local populations. As Mia Fuller has noted, the very presence of deliberate, planned architecture – as opposed to primitive, haphazard «building» – demonstrated the civilisational superiority of the colonisers (both ancient and modern).

In a similar vein, archaeologists also emphasised the monumental pre-eminence of the Romans over the Greeks and Carthaginians who had previously occupied the territory but failed to leave an enduring legacy. Only Rome, wrote the archaeologist Pietro Romanelli, had «vigorously left its imprint and to her alone are due the many conspicuous ruins that remain in the country today».

In many respects, the regime’s approach to archaeology in the colonies was strikingly similar to its domestic policies. In Tripoli, as in Rome, excavation was used to «sanitise» the urban landscape; in this case, the reclamation of classical sites would counteract the «most miserable appearance of the Arab and Turkish city».

Unfortunately, however, the locals’ insensitivity to history meant that few traces of the ancient city remained; «the many fragments of columns, capitals, architectonic pieces of all kinds» had long since been pillaged for building materials. Only the Arch of Marcus Aurelius remained standing, though it had only survived over the centuries because it had been used as a dwelling. As they had done in Rome with the Mausoleum of Augustus and the Capitoline Hill in Rome, Italian archaeologists...
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«disengaged» and «redeemed» the monument, «isolating» it from a crowded and chaotic urban environment. In this way, they tried to render an exotic colonial environment «legible» to Western eyes, inserting an Oriental space into the grand sweep of European history.\(^67\)

Ancient ruins were more plentiful in the Libyan desert, where feats of Roman engineering became evidence of the Empire's «civilising mission» and its ability to turn wastelands into fertile farmland. In 1929, for example, colonial administrators ordered a comprehensive study of ancient water provision systems as a model for contemporary development.\(^68\) The results confirmed that under Roman administration, Libya had been rich in olive groves and fertile fields; it would therefore be possible to develop the land after centuries of neglect. «It is obvious», wrote the journal *L'Italia Coloniale*, «that where the agriculture of Roman colonists once prospered, so too can our new venture prosper, given that the conditions of the terrain and climate have not changed. [...] [F]rom [the archaeological remains], beyond an eloquent illustration of the past, we should derive useful advice for present-day agriculture, facilitating the task of restoring the fertility and productivity to the Libyan colony that it had in the era of Roman rule.»\(^69\) As in Rome, then, archaeology in the colonies was construed both in terms of *bonifica* – as a project of architectural, historical, agricultural and civilisational reclamation – and *Aufbruch*, since rediscovered Roman traces heralded the dawn of a new era, the rebirth of civilisation in the sands of the Libyan desert.\(^70\)

The excavation and restoration of ancient sites was also used to contrast the temporal sensibilities of colonisers and colonised. Italians approached the Libyan built environment as a «historic» and «aesthetic» space, using scientific and intellectual expertise to recover and protect traces of the past.\(^71\) Conversely, the peoples of Libya were portrayed as lacking any form of historical consciousness and trapped in a permanent state of primitive inertia.\(^72\) Arabs – relative «newcomers», since they had only migrated to North Africa in the seventh century – apparently showed no comprehension of the region's archaeological heritage. With their arrival, «all the civilisation and riches that Rome had brought were miserably destroyed, and not replaced».\(^73\) It was no accident, wrote one official, that the areas in which they settled were almost completely devoid of ancient structures. His description of an abandoned Roman colony in the Nafusa Mountains evokes the destruction wrought by both nature and human neglect: «[El Ghorria] is completely abandoned, mostly

\(^{67}\) Fuller, *Moderns*, 79–82.

\(^{68}\) V. Varriale, *Romani in Tripolitania*, Naples 1940.


\(^{71}\) Again, see Fuller, *Moderns*, 79–82.


taken over by sand and stones. In the past, there was an oasis with gardens and a large village, but now the only things left from the oasis are tufts of shoots from the palms, which grew from the ancient roots of elegant plants that were cut down. Of the gardens, only traces of the dividing walls remain, while the fields, once fertile, have been invaded by asphodels, shrubs and other plants from the Libyan steppe. Vast ruins of the village can be spotted everywhere.»

While Arabs were cast as destructive and ignorant, the autochthonous Berber population had a different relationship with the past – one of ahistorical tradition. Ruins in the desert had become the stuff of native legend: since their distant ancestors had experienced the beneficence of Roman rule, they now «felt a superstitious sense of respect for these ruins, populating them with marvellous legends of spirits and goblins. These fantastic stories, many of which have a historical foundation, serve to keep the natives away from the ruins and, through fear, to make them respect the remains of the Roman past.» Indeed, by protecting many sites, such local superstitions made the work of archaeologists possible.

Fascist chronopolitics, then, underpinned Italy’s colonial mission in North Africa, and as it had done in Rome, the regime undertook an excavatory intervention both methodologically and rhetorically. As in the capital, the built environment of the colonies would be redeemed, regenerated and modernised through the exhumation of the buried past. At the same time, there were important distinctions to be made between the domestic and colonial «historical imaginaries». The sventramenti and isolamenti in Rome were aimed at de-historicising the urban landscape, collapsing the span of centuries and accelerating the temporal convergence between Roman eternity and Fascist revolution. Conversely, the «re»-imposition of the Roman presence in Libya was meant to transform a primitive, Oriental and ahistorical space into one that was legibly civilised, European and historical. «Knowing», codifying and administering the Libyan past became a key modality of Italian colonial control.

3. Violence, Revolution and Eternity

This brief overview of the regime’s archaeological initiatives has argued for alternative ways of «reading» Fascism’s relationship to the Roman past and, more broadly, its chronopolitical orientation. These insights – and those of other contributors to this volume – help provide a more nuanced understanding of fascism’s ideological core, both in its Italian manifestation and as a pan-European phenomenon. Yet, as...
Robert Paxton reminds us, «what fascists did tells us at least as much as what they said». Put differently, a discursive analysis of fascism should not be hermetically isolated from contexts, policies, actions and experiences.

In this spirit, it is important to recognise the extent to which the excavatory intervention points to a profound current of violence pervading Fascist rhetoric and practice. In Rome, the aggressive refashioning of space and time was made possible by a coercive state that held scant regard for the claims of individuals, communities or civil society. While one should be cautious about conflating archaeology with the more brutal aspects of the regime, there can be little doubt that they drew on a common wellspring: the fervent belief in the transformative potential of struggle, virility and force. In Mussolini’s own words, this social engineering was «the war that we prefer». Similarly, in the colonies, archaeological exploration was an important weapon in the larger arsenal of colonial domination. By «recovering» ancient ruins, Italians were remaking the Libyan landscape in their own image, in a manner not entirely unrelated to the contemporaneous «pacification» scheme that murdered and displaced untold numbers.

Of course, Italy’s abysmal failures in the Second World War extinguished the Fascist «revolution», and, in the West at least, the defeat of the Axis shattered utopian visions for social (and temporal) transformation. The project of creating a new man, of breaking open a new era and instilling a new order, has been thoroughly delegitimised and relegated to the fringes of political life. Strikingly, though, important reminders of Fascist chronopolitics remain – above all in the physical spaces reshaped by the excavatory intervention. Mussolini’s regime left a double imprint: the persistent traces of Roma Mussolinea, as manifested in the many inscriptions, statues and fasci littori that adorn the city; and, in places like Via dei Fori Imperiali and Piazzale Augusto Imperatore, the unmediated juxtaposition between classical antiquity and the flow of contemporary life. Time has also demonstrated the folly and ineptitude of Fascism’s historical vision – one need only cite the condition of the Colosseum, degraded by automobile exhaust from the Via dell’Impero, or the Mausoleum of Augustus, recently described as «a large pile of earth and rock [...]. The area around the base now serves mainly as a toilet for dogs.» For all its failures, the
Fascist Ventennio continues to condition our experience of the Eternal City’s multiple pasts. Recent events have also demonstrated the lingering impact of the excavatory intervention in Libya. In 1933, Mussolini’s regime installed a statue of the emperor Septimius Severus in Tripoli’s main square. During the Gaddafi years, this imperial presence became a thorn in the side of the Libyan dictatorship, serving as «the mouthpiece of the opposition, because he was the only thing Qaddafi couldn’t punish». The statue was eventually removed from the city and hidden from public view, but re-emerged following the upheavals of 2011. Ironically, a reminder of Italy’s imperial mission and its eternal «right» to territory was recast as a symbol of Libya’s struggle for freedom.

Ultimately, though, the continued resonance of Roman ruins in Italy and Libya points not so much to the resilience of Fascism’s excavatory intervention as to its failure. The goal of these initiatives had never been archaeological, in the sense of restoring the fragile remnants of history for future generations. Rather, it had been explicitly anti-historicist, part of a revolutionary project to reframe past, present and future. Today, however, the monuments of romanità function once again as ruins, as traces of distant eras. What had once been conceived as revolution – as a dramatic rupture in time – eventually gave way to persistence, to eternity.


**ABSTRACT**

The Excavatory Intervention: Archaeology and the Chronopolitics of Roman Antiquity in Fascist Italy

Romanità – the invocation of the «eternal Roman spirit» – has long been recognised as a core component of Italian Fascist ideology and political culture. However, the «cult of Rome» is typically seen as an expression of the regime’s theatricality, its retrograde tendencies and its hostility to modernity. This contribution argues that, on the contrary, romanità was part of Fascism’s revolutionary vision of modernity. In particular, the article highlights the regime’s use of archaeological excavation, both in Rome and in North Africa, as an instrument of spatial and temporal rupture, used to forge an unmediated relationship between Roman antiquity and Mussolini’s New Italy.

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