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The Time of the Myth: Situating Representations of the Roman Empire within Italian Colonialism, 1911–1940

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This article traces aesthetic operations of the Italian state, both in the Liberal and the Fascist Era, to spread certain representations of Italian colonialism. In particular, it highlights how a 'mythologized' idea of the Roman Empire was used to valorize the image of Italy as a colonial power to a domestic and an international public. Two case studies are presented, the Italian section at the *Exposition Coloniale Internationale* held in Paris in 1931 as well as representations of and archaeological efforts to restore the so-called Marco Aurelio's Arch in Tripoli. Their analysis points out how the Italian state propagandized its imperialist efforts by relating them to the glorious Roman past as a model for the contemporary Italian state. Both cases are interpreted as examples of ambientation, a technique to display historical remains according to the presumed taste of a distant past. The article concludes that ambientation was used as a means to turn Marco Aurelio's Arch in Tripoli's urban space and the Italian presence on the international stage of the colonialist exhibition into political symbols. They were supposed to support Italy's demands for a colonial empire as an appropriate contemporary expression of the country's assumed past.

Introduction

This paper highlights how the myth of the Roman Empire was used by Italian governments, both Fascist and Liberal, to valorise the image of Italy as a colonial power to a domestic and an international public. The period taken into consideration lasts from the beginning of the twentieth century until 1940. Thereby, this study deals with *Italia Liberale*—'Liberal Italy'—which describes the Italian state and government following the unification of Italy in 1861 in consequence of the so-called *Risorgimento* movement but still pays special attention to the period of Italian Fascism, beginning with Mussolini's take-over of power in 1922.

Throughout the period in question, the legacy of ancient Rome was continuously evoked to strengthen the national identity of Italy but also to assert Italy's position in Europe. Indeed, references to ancient Rome formed a key tenet and theme

in the creation of the unified Italian state during the *Risorgimento* period:[1] the government as well as intellectuals and artists appealed to the Roman past, appropriating it as a source of political and cultural legitimacy. An aspect of this appeal was the drive towards a renewal of the (colonial) Italian empire. Especially the strive for a colony in Libya, which began in 1911, took on symbolic importance for Italian nationalists who imagined it to be the starting point for a new dawn for Italy. After the rupture of World War I, the aspiration of Italian nationalists to turn Italy into a capable modern state and empire via a determined expansionist foreign policy intensified further. This nationalist aspiration went hand in hand with criticism of the Liberal government that was deemed incapable of providing the political leadership which the nationalists demanded. The Fascist movement had been committed to these demands since its founding days in 1919. The myth of ancient Rome was utilised by the Fascist movement to legitimise a more universal mission for Italy and their claims regarding the supremacy of Italian values.[2] The cult of Rome was not only the most effective rallying cry in the Fascist effort to popularize imperial ambitions and push for an aggressive foreign policy, but it became a fundamental part of Fascist ideology.[3] To Mussolini, the glorious Roman tradition represented a model and a source of inspiration. For the Fascists, the claim to the myth of Rome thus constituted the foundation on which to build the future: it was not seen as an abstract admiration or a nostalgic reference but rather as an important base from which to construct a dynamic Italian identity.[4]

In the present paper, it is my goal to highlight how the glorification of ancient Rome joined the political programme to promote and valorise Italian colonialism from the 1911 to 1940. To do so, I will explore two case studies: the first one is concerned with the lengthy debate about the preservation of the Marco Aurelio's Arch in Tripoli, while the second concerns the Italian sections at the *Exposition Coloniale Internationale* held in Paris in 1931. In the first case, the need to preserve and restore archaeological remains blends with processes of re-writing and re-reading the past. In the case of the Italian pavilions at the colonial exhibition in Paris, the myth of ancient Rome is considered by the Italian committee as a source from which to draw the image of a strong and powerful nation. Ultimately, a creative version of the Roman past is claimed by the regime in both cases.

The theme of ambientation connects these two cases. Ambientation refers to a specific display practice, namely the planning and organisation of displays according to a presumed view of the past, and was used for permanent or tempo-

[1] Jan Nelis, "Imperialismo e Mito della Romanità nella Terza Roma Mussoliniana," *Forum Romanum Belgicum* 2 (2012).
[2] Simonetta Falasca Zamponi, *Lo Spettacolo del Fascismo* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino Editore, 2003), 144–152.
[3] Dino Piovan, "Il Fascismo e la Storia Greca," in *Eredità Classica e Costruzione delle Identità Nazionali nel Novecento*, ed. Jacopo Bassi and Gianluca Canè, (Milano: Edizioni Unicopli, 2014), 25.
[4] Zamponi, *Spettacolo*, 144–152.

rary museum exhibitions from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1920s and 1930s. It is possible to find examples of this kind of display technique in Italy, Germany, France and in the United States.[5] The resulting displays are also known as 'period rooms.' Especially ateliers of artists were frequently recreated using this method. As a technique, ambientation had the potential to manipulate the perception of time and space for the visitor—an argument that will be developed in analysing the two case studies.[6] In Italy, ambientation as a cultural technique benefitted from the presence of a significant monumental architectural and artistic heritage within the nation, exalting the national identity as well as regional and cultural polycentric traditions of which Italians had become more aware during the *Risorgimento*. In the historicist cultural climate of the time, these 'ambientated' displays suggested the original context from which single works were drawn, thereby synthetically reconstructing an epoch and recreating an idea of its atmosphere.[7] Ambientation was therefore similar to a play: curators staged settings reproducing specific historical moments in order to entice the public, while visitors could embrace the nostalgia and marvel at the timeless reproductions.[8]

The Historical Context of Italian Colonialism

In order to adequately analyse the two case studies, it is necessary to first briefly contextualise the Italian imperialist policy of the Fascist era within the broader history of Italian colonialism. The Italian scramble for African colonies started later than in other European countries: in 1869, thanks to a deal with the Italian government, the Rubattino shipping company bought a strip of land near the Assab Bay in today's Eritrea from the Egyptian-Ottoman authorities. The transfer of this land to the Italian state in 1882 marked the beginning of state-led Italian colonialism. The Italian government sought to pursue a colonialist foreign policy in order to alleviate its domestic problems (such as government overspending or Italy's economic stagnation) and instead present the image of a strong and powerful nation to the world.

Colonial expansion continued with the conquest of the Red Sea port of Massawa in 1885 which was supposed to be the first step in the takeover of the Ethiopian inland and the creation of a protectorate over the Abyssinian Empire. However, there was considerable public opposition to Italian colonial policies, with the Italian public generally opposed to substantial financial and economic commitment

[5] Nadia Barrella, *I "Cocci" in Rolls-Royce. Carlo Giovene di Girasole e i Musei d'Ambientazione nella Napoli degli Anni Venti* (Napoli: Luciano Editore, 2015).
[6] Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Anno X: La Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista del 1932* (Roma: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 2003); Zamponi, *Spettacolo*, 12–31.
[7] Sandra Costa et al., *The Period Rooms: Allestimenti Storici tra Arte, Collezionismo e Museologia* (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2016).
[8] Patrizia Dragoni, *Processo al Museo: Sessant'anni di Dibattito sulla Valorizzazione Museale in Italia* (Firenze: Edifir, 2010), 19.

to colonial operations in Africa that could potentially end in failure. Indeed, the Italian forces were defeated by Abyssinian armies in Dogali (1887) and in Adwa (1896).[9] The Adwa defeat left a deep mark on Italian nationalist memory as it was the first time that a regular European army was defeated by an African one. The attempt to present Italy as a powerful European state to the international public now seemed futile. Four decades later, in 1935, when the Fascist regime decided to attack Ethiopia again, it would therefore publicly exploit its military success as evidence of Fascist strength in contrast to Liberal weakness. In contrast to its Eritrean campaigns, Italy gained control over parts of today's Somalia thanks to economic treaties in 1889 that led to the territories being officially declared an Italian colony in 1905. However, this territory proved to be as unprofitable as the Eritrean colony.[10]

In 1911, Italy finally issued an ultimatum to the Ottoman Empire to obtain Libya, consisting of the two greatly different regions of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Libya was publicly presented as an extension of the Italian national territory due to its past as a part of the Roman Empire. This myth of the 'Fourth Shore' also pointed to Libya as a new place for Italians to settle. This possibility tapped into domestic Italian politics: the right wing used it to suggest a way to ease class conflicts that had intensified because of the country's strong industrial development during the first decade of the century. Moreover, the right wing also asked for an expansionist colonial policy in Libya as politics of prestige to uplift public opinion. The invasion of Libya in the same year represented the zenith of this strategy in which the mobilization of the press, as well as poets and writers played an important role. Newspapers sent their correspondents to Libya to write about it as a rich and prosperous country in order to manipulate public opinion at home by suggesting that the conquest would have great economic benefits and that Libya would become the ideal home for Italians settlers. Later, these themes would also be taken up by Fascist propaganda.

In spite of Libya's official annexation in 1911, the resistance of the local population was hard to break but suppressed violently by the Italian army. The Italian army never achieved full military control before Mussolini's take-over of power.[11] Local soldiers had been recruited and the army's equipment had improved already in the last months of 'Liberal Italy' but only the Fascist regime's brutal warfare between 1923 and 1925 secured uncontested rule over the colony.[12]

The Fascist regime equally sought to finally turn the Abyssinian Empire into a protectorate. However, as Ethiopia had been a member state of the League of

[9] Haggai Erlich, "Alula 'The son of Qubi': A King's Man in Ethiopia 1875–1897," *The Journal of African History* 15 no.2 (1974): 261–274.
[10] Michele Pandolfo, "La Somalia Coloniale: una Storia ai Margini della Memoria Italiana," *Diacronie Studi di Storia Contemporanea* 13 no.2 (2013): https://diacronie.revues.org/272#tocto1n2.
[11] Giorgio Rochat, *Il Colonialismo Italiano* (Torino: Loescher, 1973), 64.
[12] Rochat, *Colonialismo*, 98.

Nations since 1923, the military attack by Mussolini's forces in 1935 caused a severe diplomatic crisis. Italy was subjected to international sanctions of the League of Nations, causing an exacerbation of nationalist propaganda within Italy, but Ethiopia was still defeated. Mussolini used this victory to proclaim the birth of a 'proper' Italian Empire and King Vittorio Emanuele III received the crown of the Abyssinian Empire. This moment marked the highest watermark of Italian imperialism and the moment in which the Fascist regime enjoyed its greatest public approval ever.[13]

The First Case Study: Marco Aurelio's Arch in Tripoli

The first case study concerns an arch erected in 165 CE in Tripoli, named after the Roman emperor Marco Aurelio. As outlined above, Libya was pictured by the press and propaganda as a natural extension of the Italian territory, the so called 'Fourth Shore.' In contrast to the colonies at the Horn of Africa, Libya was in fact part of the ancient Roman Empire, the legacy of which could be demonstrated by a great number of archaeological remains. Therefore, the conquest of this territory was presented as a homecoming of the legitimate heirs to their own land. The events surrounding Marco Aurelio's Arch as a significant Roman remain in the urban context of Tripoli make clear that this idea was present constantly both during the Liberal and the Fascist periods. The importance of this idea also helps us to understand why the ancient Roman vestiges were continuously represented in works of art.

Giovanni Varvelli's painting (**Figure 1**) is an early example of a depiction of the arch from the time preceding the Italian conquest of Libya. In 1904, the engineer, who was passionate about painting,[14] made a tempera on paper in which a scene of daily life in Tripoli is portrayed. Some characters can be distinguished, namely two Arabs, a monk and a few travellers accompanied by a local guide. Yet it is only the European tourists who admire the ancient monument—the locals seem not to care at all. Thereby, Varvelli used a theme deeply embedded in orientalist paintings, according to which the indigenous populations are indifferent to the legacies of ancient times since they do not want to or cannot recognize their importance.[15] This lack of appreciation constitutes another common argument supporting the idea of the Italians' legitimate homecoming.

[13] For further contextualisation of Italian colonialism, see: Giorgio Rochat, *Il Colonialismo Italiano* (Torino: Loescher, 1973); Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare: Storia dell'Espansione Coloniale Italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002); Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale* (Roma: Laterza, 1985).

[14] According to Marina Sorbello, Varvelli was an engineer from Rome who worked in colonial administration in Tripoli. There are no other known works by Varvelli. Marina Sorbello et al., "Biografie degli Artisti", in *Dipinti, Sculture e Grafica delle Collezioni del Museo Africano,* ed. Mariastella Margozzi (Roma: Istituto per l'Africa Orientale, 2005), 294.

[15] Marco Rinaldi, "Immagini d'Oltremare: Archeologia e Opere Pubbliche fra Retorica e Reportage," in *Dipinti, Sculture e Grafica delle Collezioni del Museo Africano,* ed. M.

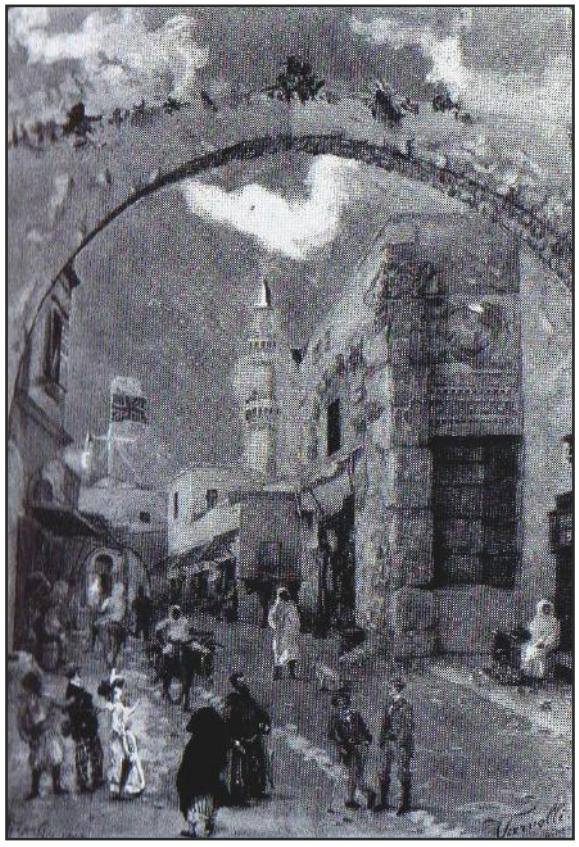

FIGURE 1: Giovanni Varvelli: *Tripoli, Arco di Marco Aurelio,* 1904. Roma: Istituto per l'Africa Orientale.

The arch is also represented in an etching made by Laurenzio Laurenzi (**Figure 2**), an Italian artist who visited many Mediterranean countries and dealt with archaeological topics several times during his career.[16] In his work of 1935, the arch is represented from a low perspective and stands in the 'necessary solitude' that Mussolini demanded for Roman vestiges. One of Mussolini's motivations for his extensive modifications to the urban texture of Rome, was to provide this 'necessary solitude' to the ancient monuments and let them stand alone and loom large, without any distraction by surrounding modern architecture.[17] This architectural goal is projected in Laurenzi's etching through its transfiguration of the urban context: the buildings around the monument are removed and no people are depicted. The buildings of Tripoli, including the silhouette of the Bastioni Mosque, retreat into the background. Lastly, the artist decided to add a palm tree and greenery to the scene which are not present in period photos.

Margozzi (Roma: Istituto per l'Africa Orientale, 2005), 43.

[16] Laurenzio Laurenzi was commissioned to produce 80 etchings of ancient monuments all around the Mediterranean Sea. His journey resulted in an exhibition in Rome dedicated to this project. Agostino M. Comanducci, *Dizionario Illustrato dei Pittori, Disegnatori e Incisori Italiani Moderni e Contemporanei* (Milano: Leonilde M. Patuzzi Editore, 1972); Marco Rinaldi, "Immagini d'Oltremare," 42.

[17] Giorgio Ciucci, *Gli Architetti e il Fascismo: Architettura e Città 1922–1944* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002).

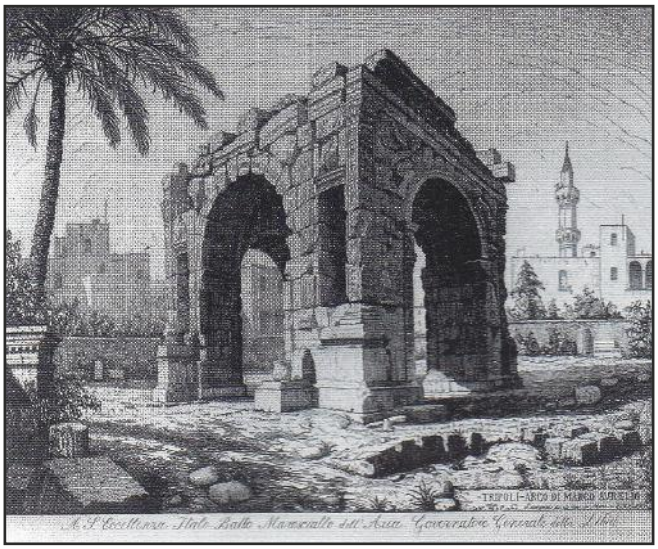

FIGURE 2: Laurenzio Laurenzi: *Tripoli, Arco di Marco Aurelio*, 1935. Roma: Istituto per l'Africa Orientale.

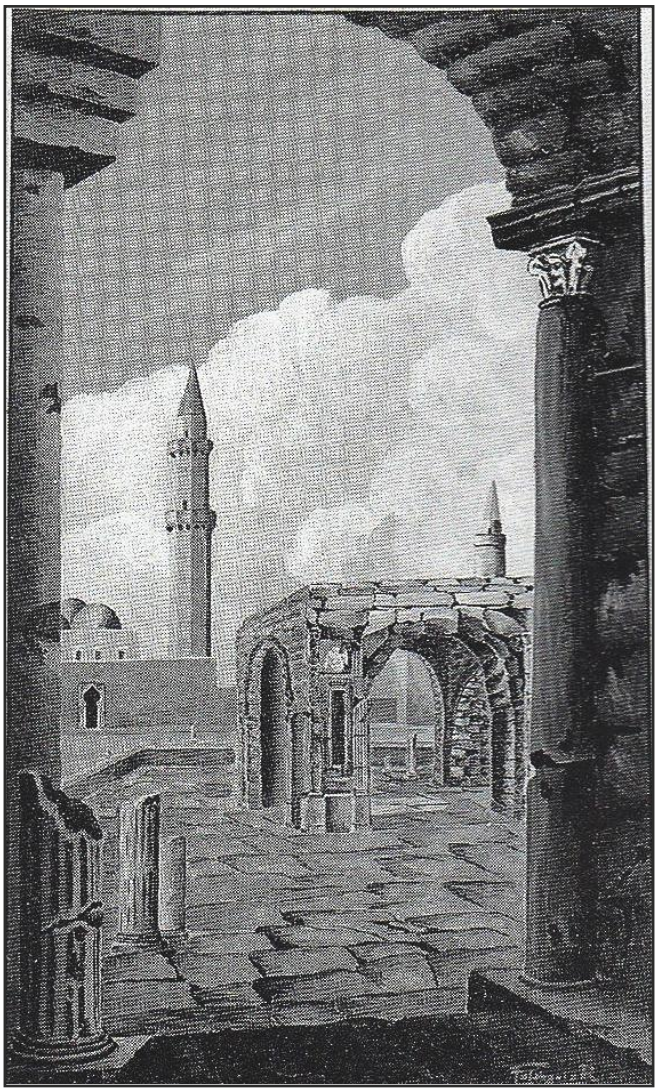

FIGURE 3: Raul Falangola: *Tripoli '42. Zona Arco Marco Aurelio e rovine*, 1942. Roma: Istituto per l'Africa Orientale.

A later example from 1942 is a watercolour by Raul Falangola (**Figure 3**), a soldier passionate about art, who chose to represent the ancient arch avoiding the low point of view and restoring the regular proportion between the subject and the surrounding space.[18] In this work, the arch is not alone in the centre of the scene but Falangola decided instead to place some ancient columns in the lower left corner—a stereotype indeed.[19] There is no trace of greenery nor human presence but again the urban context is evoked by the Bastioni Mosque in the background. The mosque is, however, not shown at its exact position in Tripoli's urban topography but merely as a reference, pointing out the proximity of the two monuments. The mosque is indeed present in all three pieces of art, speaking of the necessity to characterise the place in which the arch is found as "different" and "exotic."[20]

These three examples of artworks highlight how the ancient monument became a symbol of the 'Fourth Shore' in the popular imagination under the Liberal government as well as the Fascist regime. The paintings contributed to a portrayal of Libya as a territory in which the traces of ancient Rome were present despite foreign domination over millennia. They stipulated the idea that Italians would proudly rediscover these lands as legitimate heirs. In this context, the presence of the Bastioni Mosque can be interpreted as the dialectical counterpart to the Italian heritage and the symbol of foreign domination, as will be explained in the conclusion.

After the Italian conquest of Libya, the future of the arch was debated by Italian archeologists who were tasked with any potential restoration efforts. It was at this time that questions about the surrounding areas and the issue of ambientation arose. Before the restoration, the roof of the arch was covered with modern tiles, many buildings encroached upon it, and it stood three meters below the level of the surrounding buildings.

In 1912, the archaeologist Salvatore Aurigemma published an article in the literary journal *Il Marzocco*,[21] in which he followed the history of Marco Aurelio's Arch from its erection to its "extreme degradation"[22] after it had been declared alienable property by the Ottoman authorities in Libya and later acquired by a merchant from Constantinople. Commenting on this perceived neglect, Aurigemma states: "It took remedial action […] at this time that we got back on our ances-

[18] Falangola presumably was an Italian soldier and amateur painter. Ancient monuments were his favourite subject. Marina Sorbello et al., "Biografie degli Artisti," in *Dipinti, Sculture e Grafica Delle Collezioni del Museo Africano,* ed. Mariastella Margozzi (Roma: Istituto per l'Africa Orientale, 2005), 280.

[19] Rinaldi, "Immagini d'Oltremare,"46.

[20] Alida Moltedo Mapelli, ed. *Tra Oriente e Occidente Stampe Italiane della Prima Metà del Novecento* (Roma, Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica, 2006).

[21] "Il Marzocco," Enciclopedia Treccani, accessed September 18, 2017, http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/il-marzocco/.

[22] Salvatore Aurigemma, "L'Arco di Marco Aurelio in Tripoli," *Il Marzocco*, June 16, 1912: 2. All following translations or descriptions of Italian terms are my own; "Estremo avvilimento."

tors' path, as Italy has embraced its weapons once again."[23] Aurigemma clearly states his perception that the monument has been irresponsibly and disrespectfully neglected in the absence of its Italian 'caretakers.' It seems necessary to him that the Italian state takes up weapons to avoid the elimination of ancient monuments metaphorically standing in for the Roman tradition. The statement of Aurigemma from 1912 therefore clearly exemplifies a continuity of ideas concerning the meaning of the legacy of ancient Rome to their 'proper heirs' from the Liberal era to the Fascist regime.

In 1915, Giacomo Boni[24] and Lucio Mariani,[25] two leading Italian archaeologists at the time, published an article in *Notiziario Archeologico del Ministero delle Colonie*, informing the public of the progress of the arch's restauration that had been started in 1912 under Aurigemma's guidance (**Figure 4**).[26] They particularly stressed the need to "set the arch free from filthy hovels"[27] surrounding it, thereby raising the question of how the urban environment should be dealt with. The authors recommended a programme of large-scale expropriation and the demolition of buildings close to the arch in order to carry out topographical studies in the area and verify the presence of further archaeological remains. The two professors particularly referred to the roof that lacked its original octagonal dome, a fact that had been discovered when the modern roofing was removed. They hoped to discover the original roof through further archaeological excavations. These suggestions implied a need for extensive changes to the urban environment without any concern for the social impacts of such efforts and displayed a disregard for local architecture.

In 1933, another article was published by architect Michele Marelli in the Colonial Ministry's magazine *Africa Italiana Rivista di Storia e d'Arte a Cura del Ministero delle Colonie*.[28] Whereas Boni and Mariani had proposed to place the arch in the centre of a square and in front of an appropriate background through demolition, Marelli had different ideas: in his opinion, the aim of the restauration of Marco Aurelio's Arch was to allow the ancient monument to "breathe" with-

[23] "Ci voleva una riparazione. […] Era tempo che noi venissimo a ritrovar le ombre dei nostri grandi, ora che la Patria […] ha imbracciato nuovamente lo scudo e impugnato sulla destra la lucida asta possente." Aurigemma, "L'Arco di Marco Aurelio," 2.

[24] Giacomo Boni (1859–1925) was an Italian archaeologist and architect. He was one of the first archaeologists to use the stratigraphic method. Eva Tea, *Giacomo Boni nella Vita del suo Tempo* (Milano: Ceschina, 1932).

[25] Lucio Mariani (1865–1924) was an Italian archaeologist, university professor and museum director. He was one of the founders of the Società Italiana di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte. Massimiliano Munzi, *L'Epica del Ritorno: Archeologia e Politica nella Tripolitania Italiana* (Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2001).

[26] Giacomo Boni and Lucio Mariani, "Relazione Intorno al Consolidamento ed al Ripristino dell'Arco di M. Aurelio in Tripoli," *Notiziario Archeologico del Ministero delle Colonie* 1 (1915): 15–34.

[27] "Liberazione e isolamento dell'edificio, cui si addossavano catapecchie e nel quale si annidavano luride botteghe." Boni and Mariani, "Arco in Tripoli:" 15.

[28] Ciucci, *Gli architetti.*

out destroying the surrounding buildings which he considered a "gentle frame."[29] Marelli believed that those typical buildings could provide a contrast and help highlight the arch's magnificence, provided some rearrangements were carried out. After the demolition of some nearby storehouses, the humble appearance of the neighbourhood around the arch would emphasize the monument and give it a touch of "local colour."[30] Marelli further suggested to plant oleanders trees, creeper and succulent plants all around the arch in order to isolate the archaeological remains and monuments from the contemporary buildings. Marelli's project promised to maximise the visibility of the arch as a prominent monument within the urban landscape of Tripoli, despite its position three meters below ground level, by creating a "decent and proportionate space."[31]

FIGURE 4: Arch after initial Restoration, *Bollettino d'Arte*, 1926, 555. Roma: Direzione Generale Archeologia (Authorisation No. 26754).

The quintessence of Marelli's plan was the use of local architecture as an 'exotic' element. Instead of seeing Marco Aurelio's Arch as unique in the neighbourhood's architectural context, Marelli chose to overturn the perspective and consider the ancient monument typical but all the surrounding buildings atypical or 'exotic.' Both standpoints, the suggestions of Boni and Mariani as well as that of Marelli, remained ethno-centric, supporting the assumption that Italian architects and city planners were authorised to disrupt urban topography. In this context, the

[29] "Cornice gentile," Michele Marelli, "Relazione al Progetto di Sistemazione dell'Arco di Marco Aurelio in Tripoli e di Restauro dei Fonduchi Arabi," *Africa Italiana: Rivista di Storia e d'Arte a Cura del Ministero delle Colonie* 12 (1933): 169.
[30] "Colore locale." Marelli, "Arco di Marco Aurelio," 163.
[31] "Ambiente degno e proporzionato," ibid., 166.

"filthy hovels" had to be dismantled in order restore the finest example of ancient glory and by extension the myth of Rome itself.

The final results emerging from the debate are presented in 1940 by the *Libia* magazine in 1940 published by the *Istituto Poligrafico editoriale Maggi*. The caption of the article reads: "Marco Aurelio's Arch restored and placed in its urban environment."[32] A featured photo (**Figure 5)** shows the arch as well as the surrounding area of white buildings, the Bastioni Mosque in the background and some pedestrians. In front of the arch, there is a walkway decorated with plants and archaeological remains.

The ancient monument is set apart from the surrounding area and it is clear how the photographic frame sought to exclude the neighbourhood, thereby emphasising the arch's presence. The empty roads and the meticulous care used to organise the scene reflect a will to control the urban pattern as one aspect of the more encompassing colonial project of controlling territories and the lives of the people within them. Thereby, the restoration of Marco Aurelio's Arch emerges as a project reflecting Italian colonialism more generally and the restoration should be seen as typical of an Italian colonialist logic. This logic also introduced racial laws regulating the private and sexual lives of the colonized in their relations to the colonizers, supported racialized and racist anthropological and ethnographical knowledge systems and, more concretely, attempted to reconstruct Addis Abeba as a racially segregated city.

FIGURE 5: Marco Aurelio´s Arch after Restauration, *Libia*, 1940, 45. Roma: Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale.

[32] "L'Arco di Marco Aurelio restaurato e ambientato urbanisticamente," Giacomo Caputo, "I Grandi Monumenti della Romanità Risuscitati da Balbo," *Libia: Rivista Mensile Illustrata* 4 (1940): 45.

The Second Case Study: Italy at the International Colonial Exhibition in Paris

The second case study deals with the Italian section at the *Exposition Coloniale Internationale* held in Paris in 1931. The concept of the exhibition is rooted in the colonial sections staged at universal or international exhibitions in Europe, the United States and Australia since the nineteenth century. The International Colonial Exhibition of 1931, the first to be held in Paris (although there had previously been colonial exhibitions elsewhere in France), was planned as an opportunity to demonstrate France's wealth, strengthen relations with other European empires and reaffirm the civilizing mission as the main source of legitimacy for European colonialism.[33] The exhibition was directed by Marshal Louis H. G. Lyautey, a former governor of French Morocco,[34] and strongly reflected his personal preferences as well as his views on colonialism.[35] Each country that participated in the exhibition presented itself in country pavilions. Those pavilions were arranged along an elliptical path so that each tour through the exhibition began and ended at the modern *Porte Dorée* ('Golden Porte') through which visitors were allowed entrance. The distribution of pavilions was not meant to represent a political or geographical order but was ethno-anthropological: the more 'exotic' a pavilion's architectural style was, the further from civilisation the presented colony was considered.

The Italian section at the *Exposition* comprised three pavilions of a particular architectural lexicon. The first one was a reproduction of the famous basilica at Leptis Magna, Libya, planned by Armando Brasini, an Italian architect;[36] the second was dedicated to the conquest of Rhodes and the other Aegean islands that were annexed from the Ottoman Empire in 1912. The third pavilion, called *Italia*, represented the progressive architectural style of Futurism (**Figure 6**).[37]

[33] Maddalena Carli, "Ri/produrre l'Africa Romana: I Padiglioni Italiani all'*Exhibition Coloniale Internationale*, Parigi 1931," *Memoria e Ricerca* 17 (2004): 213; Patricia A. Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000); *Guide Officiel de la Section Italienne à l'Exhibition Coloniale* (Paris: Publicité de Rosa, 1931).

[34] Bernett Singer et al., *Cultured Forces: Makers and Defenders of the French Colonial Empire* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 181–217.

[35] Carli, "Ri/produrre l'Africa Romana," 211–17; Ettore Sessa, "L'Exhibition Coloniale Internationale de Paris 1931," in *La Città dei Prodotti. Imprenditoria, Architettura e Arte nelle Grandi Esposizioni*, ed. Eliana Mauro et al. (Palermo: Grafill, 2009), 279.

[36] Armando Brasini (1879–1965) was an architect known for his majestic buildings inspired by an eclectic lexicon. "Armando Brasini," Enciclopedia Treccani, accessed September 18, 2017, http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/armando-brasini_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/; Luca Brasini, *L'Opera Architettonica e Urbanistica di Armando Brasini: dall'Urbe Massima al Ponte sullo Stretto di Messina* (Corigliano Calabro: Arti Grafiche Joniche, 1979); Paolo Portoghesi, *I Grandi Architetti del Novecento: una Nuova Storia dell'Architettura Contemporanea Attraverso le Personalità e le Opere dei Protagonisti* (Roma: Newton & Compton, 1999).

[37] *Guide Officiel de la Section Italienne*

In analysing the first pavilion planned by Armando Brasini it is necessary to introduce the model it was based on, the Leptis Magna Basilica, one of the most famous ancient monuments of Libya. The construction of the basilica began in 209 CE, commissioned by Roman emperor Septimius Severus, and was completed under his son and successor Caracalla six years later.[38] It was dedicated to Hercules and Dionysus, *dii patrii* of Leptis, but also to the emperor's ancestors.[39] The basilica consisted of three naves and a colonnaded hall with two apses. Flanking the apses were ornately sculpted pilasters depicting the life of Dionysus and the twelve Labours of Hercules.

At the Parisian exhibition of 1931, the facade of the basilica's reproduction was painted in red to evoke Libyan architectural traditions and 22 columns were painted to imitate *cipollino* marble. The interior of the basilica (**Figure 7**) was divided into three naves and two superimposed planes like the original one but it also contained a covered pool and two rooms designed in Renaissance style.[40] An exhibition of archaeological finds, raw materials and native handicrafts was shown inside the pavilion. Information panels presented the results of the Fascist 'modernisation' campaign in the Italian colonies. Copies of some of the most relevant classical artworks found in Cyrene and Leptis Magna, namely statues, epigraphs and bas-reliefs were presented in the main hall of the pavilion. Another exhibition was dedicated to the military and a more general one. This exhibition presented information about the geography and administration of the colonies, using dioramas, different kinds of models and boards. Finally, an anthropological exhibition of costumes as well as an anthropometric collection were intended to provide proof of the physiological diversity of African races.[41]

The Leptis Magna basilica was reproduced with evocative intent. The decision to use the Roman architectural lexicon enriched by Renaissance details was part of the Italian committee's program to re-write and re-interpret history. The Fascist government chose to present the African war campaign not as a conquest but as a homecoming to legitimise their imperialism by reaffirming their supposed right to recover something stolen. At the same time, the Italian section at the exhibition was supposed to claim the common origin of European imperialism in the glorious Roman past and present the Fascist Italian state as its heir, underlining its role as a legitimate European empire of the twentieth century. Reference to this programme can, for example, be found in the official guide booklet to the exhibition (quoted below).

[38] Orietta Dora Cordovana, "Between History and Myth: Septimius Severus and Leptis Magna," *Greece and Rome* 59 (2012): 56, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017383511000246.
[39] Cordovana, "Between History and Myth," 73.
[40] Bruno M. Apolloni, "Il Foro e la Basilica Severiana di Leptis Magna," *I Monumenti Italiani* no.8–9 (1936): 1–8.
[41] Carli, "Ri/produrre l'Africa Romana," 225–26.

FIGURE 6: Futurist pavilion *Italia*, *Guide Officiel de la Section Italienne*, 1931. Roma: Polo Museale del Lazio.

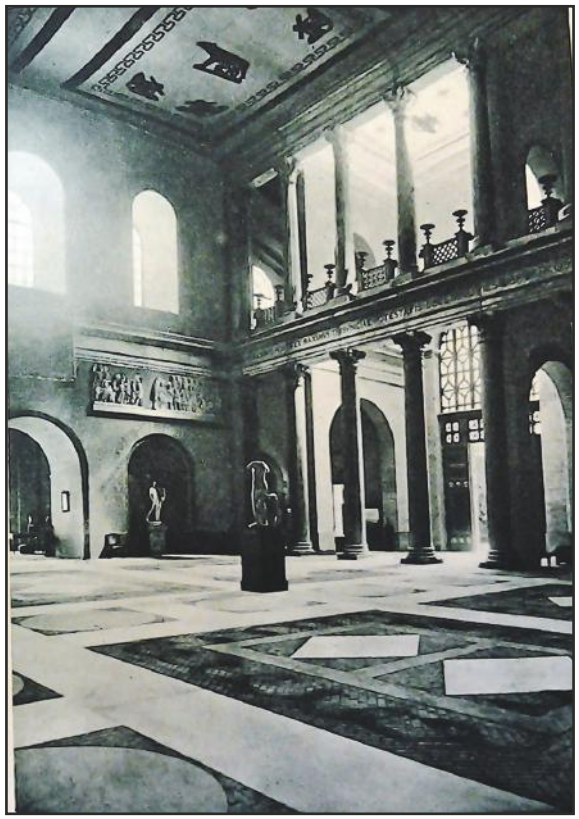

FIGURE 7: Replica of Leptis Magna, *Guide Officiel de la Section Italienne*, 1931. Roma: Polo Museale del Lazio.

Through the recourse to ambientation, this system of re-interpreting history goes along with its revitalisation that gave visitors of the pavilions the chance to experience manifested history themselves. The 33 million visitors[42] would have had the opportunity to recognise the majesty of a past to which the Fascist regime declared itself heir on the one hand and to retrace a bond between ancient Rome's past and the modern Fascist present on the other hand. Metaphorically, this manipulation of space and time could transform the exhibition into a majestic 'time-machine' through the representation of the perpetuity between a mythologised past and an unreal present. It is accurate to speak of the 'manipulation' of time and space coordinates rather than their 're-presentation' due to two elements: firstly, the Leptis Magna reconstruction was not conceived as an exact replica but as a highly symbolic interpretation. Italy wanted to present itself to the international audience of fellow colonising nations at the exhibition as an 'eternal' coloniser and therefore as an important colonial power to be reckoned with in the present. The official programme booklet of the Italian section reiterated this viewpoint by locating the source of the very idea of colonisation in ancient Rome and linking Rome to "universal" values and their dissemination:

> In Rome we greet not only the noble Italian country but also the universal genius thanks to which humanity has progressed after Athens. […] To Rome, we owe the concept of the protectorate which is a great lesson of tolerance, respect of local traditions and customs.[43]

Furthermore, it is possible to talk about the 'manipulation' of time and space because the arrangement of the Italian section's pavilions enabled the visitor to spontaneously move through different moments in time. Apart from the Leptis Magna basilica there were two other pavilions, one representing the Aegean islands that Italy had annexed in 1912 and one showcasing an example of Futurist architecture. The presence of this third pavilion, used mostly as a restaurant, was important because it symbolized the connection between past and present, between the Roman legacy and contemporary artistic and architectonic expressions, confirming their continuity and projecting future development. Moving through the Italian exhibition space, the visitors were supposed to return to the past, thereby disrupting the passage of time, to eventually witness the very origins of the colonising efforts in ancient Rome and to become aware of its (Fascist) trajectory.

[42] Sessa, "L'Exhibition Coloniale," 280.

[43] "En Rome, nous saluons non seulement la noble terre italienne, mais le génie universel par qui, après Athènes, la Grèce, l'Humanité a progressé. […] C'est à Rome que nous devons cette conception […] du régime du protectorat, cette grande leçon de tolerance, de respect des traditions, des coutumes…," *Guide Officiel de la Section Italienne*, 6.

Conclusion

The Italian section at the Parisian exhibition of 1931 and the restoration of Marco Aurelio's Arch should both be seen as attempts to create immersive spaces. They were a structured operation in which monuments became symbols of the relationship between 'Liberal Italy' and the Italian Fascist regime on the one hand and the nation's past on the other. As such, both cases were part of a conscious effort to reinterpret history. The cases show how the myth of ancient Rome was manipulated for imperialist purposes, highlighting striking continuities between the cultural attitudes and approaches of the Liberal and Fascist regimes.

By reproducing the Leptis Magna Basilica in Paris, the Italian committee wanted to date the starting point of Italian colonial history back to the Roman Empire, consequently creating a bond between the past and the present and increasing the prestige of the Fascist regime's policies. An international exhibition was the perfect context for this operation (and the investigation in this article) because these events were stages for all participating countries to negotiate their real existence with ideal conceptions right from the very beginning.

In the case of Marco Aurelio's Arch, these confrontations developed on a larger stage, namely the urban context of a city with existing architectural stratifications and a long history. After the conquering of Tripoli, the ambientation of the arch was focused on an affirmation of Italian power. One means to this end seemed to be the elimination of any structure limiting the arch's effect. Looking back on the works of art depicting the arch, the recurring presence of the Bastioni Mosque stands out and it becomes clear that the mosque was even shown in the wrong position in order to include it in the painting. This points to the fact that the representation of the mosque seemed vital in order to mark the 'exoticism' of the arch's place, including the mosque as a 'touch of local colour.' Other buildings around the arch did not seem to have this quality as signifiers and, as a result, they were misrepresented in the paintings and later actually demolished in order to let the arch 'breathe again.' Considering the huge impact of such manipulation of the urban landscape on the lives of Tripolitans, the ambientation of the arch can be seen as a meaningful and violent act of the Italians' seizure of Libya as a colony.[44]

In the Parisian exhibition, ambientation was supposed to display to an international audience a level of Italian imperial power that did not actually exist. Faced with the need to present itself as a colonial power, the Fascists chose to look back to the glory of ancient Rome. In the case of Marco Aurelio's Arch, ambientation was directed towards the Italian public who came across artistic representations of the arch but equally towards the actual colonizers and colonized walking down Tripoli's streets. To them, the government hoped, ancient Rome's history and its

[44] Ludovica Scarpa, "Spazi Urbani e Stati Mentali: come lo Spazio Influenza la Mente," in *Il Paesaggio nell'Era del Mutamento un Problema Deontologico*, ed. Politechnico Milano (Milano: Trasporti e Cultura, 2007), 39–45.

bond to the Fascist regime would become personal and tightly connected with their own lives.[45]

In Homer's Iliad, Ulysses does not recognize his own land when he returns to Ithaca:

> So he jumped up and looked out at his native land. He groaned aloud and struck his thighs with both his palms, then expressed his grief, saying: 'Where am I now? Whose country have I come to this time?'[46]

Seeing the "filthy hovels" of a Tripoli re-conquered or founded anew, the archaeologist Salvatore Aurigemma demanded in the magazine *Il Marzocco* that "a remedial action must be undertaken,"[47] thereby portraying Italian colonialism in terms of a righteous choice of returning to Libya in order to care for its legacy after a long absence. This is why the arch was 'ambientated' and a timeless present of the Roman Empire restored. Here, ambientation ultimately became a way to relive history while providing the Italian colonial state with the tools to reinterpret history and to give symbolic importance to the use of space, both political and urban.

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[45] Marta Nezzo, "La Tutela come Esperienza Identitaria: una Campionatura tra Otto e Novecento," in *La Cultura del Restauro. Modelli di Ricezione per la Museologia e la Storia dell'Arte,* ed. M. B. Failla et al. (Roma: Campisano Editore, 2013), 279–90.

[46] Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Ian Johnston, vol. 13, verses 237–41, accessed September 30, 2017, https://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/homer/odyssey13.htm.

[47] Aurigemma, "L'Arco di Marco Aurelio," 2.