

**“A Mysterious Revival of Roman Passion”:  
Mussolini’s Ambiguous and Opportunistic Conception of *Romanità***

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first came up with the topic for this thesis when I visited Rome for the first time in March of 2008. I was studying abroad for the spring semester in Milan, and my six-month experience in Italy undoubtedly influenced the outcome of this thesis. In Milan, I grew to love everything about Italy – the language, the culture, the food, the people, and the history. During this time, I traveled throughout all of Italian peninsula and, without the support of my parents, this tremendous experience would not have been possible. For that, I thank them sincerely.

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## Introduction

In The Doctrine of Fascism, Benito Mussolini, fascist dictator of Italy from 1922 to 1943, wrote: “In the Fascist conception of history, man is man only by virtue of the spiritual process to which he contributes as a member of the family, the social group, the nation, and in function of history to which all nations bring their contribution.”<sup>1</sup> In defining what it meant to be a true fascist man, *Il Duce* outlined the significance of a nation’s history. As Mussolini constantly strove to remind everyone around him during his twenty years in power, the history to which he referred, the history of fascist Italy, was inextricably linked to ancient Rome, the Rome of Aeneas, Romulus, Scipio Africanus, the Gracchi brothers, and, of course, the Caesars.

Throughout the *Ventennio*, the name usually given to his twenty years in power, Mussolini made the link between his own Italy and ancient Rome a cornerstone of his rhetoric and propaganda. In his autobiography, Mussolini touched on the seriousness with which he approached this connection:

I have never, with closed eyes, accepted the thoughts of others when they were estimating events and realities either in the normal course of things or when the situation appeared exceptional. I have searched, to be sure, with a spirit of analysis the whole ancient and modern history of my country. I have drawn parallels because I wanted to explore to the depths, on the basis of historical fact, the profound sources of our national life and of our character, and to compare our capacities with those of other people.<sup>2</sup>

This emphasis on all things Roman, known as *romanità* (literally translated as “Romanness”), was crucial in Mussolini’s quest to achieve a solid unifying body within Italy. One must recall that when *Il Duce* marched on Rome on October 27, 1922, Italy still was a relatively young

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<sup>1</sup> Benito Mussolini, The Doctrine of Fascism, trans. E. Cope (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1936) 9 – 10.

<sup>2</sup> Benito Mussolini, My Rise and Fall, eds. Max Ascoli, Richard Washburn Child, and Richard Lamb (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998) 22 – 23.

country. Italian Unification (*il Risorgimento*) did not finalize until the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 when Giuseppe Garibaldi and Victor Emmanuel II united all the Italian states. Before this point, the Italian peninsula had remained fractured essentially since the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476. Nearly 1,400 years of political chaos and disarray had left their stamp on the Italian people.

Therefore, the notion of one Italian people was not shared by everyone. The smaller states that had developed throughout the peninsula after the fall of the Western Roman Empire created serious divides amongst the people. When Benito Mussolini came to power, he faced the seemingly impossible task of uniting a people that, in some respects, did not consider itself a nation. For the past 1,400 years, the Italian people had had no one independent unifying body. The Spanish, the Hapsburgs, and Napoleon all at some point had claims over the Italian peninsula. Though Italy may have been unified politically during these periods, they never were so culturally. Naturally, Benito Mussolini, just like the leaders of the *Risorgimento*, turned to the civilization of the Caesars as a unifying force. He hoped that the Italian people could come together in their Roman past. One could be both Roman and Italian. *Il Duce* once wrote: “I am desperately Italian. I believe in the function of Latinity.”<sup>3</sup> What better civilization than the Roman one, a civilization that united the Mediterranean and most of Europe for hundreds of years, to bring together a divided people?

Early on in his regime, Mussolini comprehended the crucial role that *romanità* could play in his consolidation of power. In fact, already in the late 1920s, he had begun several plans to transform the city of Rome into a “showplace of Fascism.”<sup>4</sup> *Il Duce* made it his goal to return the city of Rome and the entire Italian country to greatness. He set out to rebuild the Eternal City

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<sup>3</sup> Benito Mussolini, My Rise and Fall 25. “Latinity” (*Latinità*) is synonymous with *romanità*.

<sup>4</sup> Borden W. Painter, Mussolini’s Rome: Rebuilding the Eternal City (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 7.

and renovate the ancient Roman ruins, symbols of pride. As he wrote in his autobiography, “By isolating the monuments of ancient Rome, the relationship between the ancient Romans and the Italians is made more beautiful and suggestive.”<sup>5</sup> It was not just in the restoration of monuments of ancient Rome that Mussolini sought to emphasize this parallel. The fascist period of Italy saw a massive outpouring of all types of propaganda – speeches by Mussolini, postcards, posters, wall paintings, and exhibitions – that highlighted the connections between the Rome of antiquity and the Rome of modernity. Ancient Rome was great; so too would Mussolini’s Italy.

Throughout the *Ventennio*, Mussolini ruled the Italian nation under the banner of Fascism. What exactly Fascism meant, however, changed drastically over time. Any reading of The Doctrine of Fascism, the movement’s manifesto written by *Il Duce* himself and first published in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* in 1932, leaves its reader wholly confused and unsure. Indeed, this is far from surprising. An analysis of Italian Fascism from its conception to its demise suggests that the movement had no coherent definition. In fact, the best way to understand it is as whatever Mussolini wanted it to be at any given point in time. Mussolini’s fascist ideology initially was centered on the idea of corporatism when the fascist dictator hoped to bring Italy to economic prominence by focusing on domestic reform and strengthening its resources. However, Fascism gradually developed into an ideology marked largely by totalitarianism and imperialism, much more aggressively orientated outwards rather than inwards.<sup>6</sup> He initially sought success on the domestic front and, having failed, turned to the international.

After Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, Italy became undeniably imperialistic. Just as Mussolini’s notion of Fascism was complex, so too was his notion of imperialism. In his first

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<sup>5</sup> Benito Mussolini, My Rise and Fall 295.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Morgan, Italian Fascism, 1919 – 1945 (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995) 143.

few years as Prime Minister of Italy, the relative restraint with which he addressed imperialistic topics is remarkable. Although there are some instances in which he gave fiery and imperialistic speeches during his early years in power, over all, *Il Duce* tried his best to remain peace-minded and not provoke the anger of other Western European nations, specifically Great Britain and France. In fact, he often went out of his way to express that he was anti-imperialistic and peaceful; in one such instance, on May 26, 1926, he remarked: “I must declare . . . to the world, to the entire world, the Fascist government follows and can only follow a policy of peace.”<sup>7</sup> If one considers Italy’s militaristic aggression in the latter half of the 1930s, Mussolini’s contention that Fascism by definition should follow peace is incorrect. *Il Duce* was never one to fear contradictions.

Ambiguity, contradiction, and opportunism marked the whole regime and, thus, also the propaganda of *romanità*. Even though one may suspect this *romanità* rhetoric, which continued through the regime, to be consistent, here too one finds Mussolini’s opportunism. By looking closely at these shifts and inconsistency in *romanità* propaganda, it becomes apparent that the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935 – 1936) fundamentally transformed the fascist regime.

On May 9, 1936, following the victory of Italian troops in Ethiopia, *Il Duce* triumphantly declared to a crowd of rejoicing Italian citizens: “Italy has an Empire at last . . . a Fascist Empire.”<sup>8</sup> Mussolini sought peace before the invasion; he sought Empire after it. Accordingly, this transformation had immense repercussions for the fascist regime’s conception of *romanità*. In the early years of the *Ventennio*, Mussolini spoke of *romanità* with restraint – just as he had done in speaking of imperialism. In these same years, the Roman Empire, its famous leaders

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in: Alexander De Grand, “Mussolini’s Follies: Fascism in its Imperial and Racist Phase: 1935 – 1940,” *Contemporary European History* 13 (2004): 130.

<sup>8</sup> Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini* eds. Edoardo and Duilio Sumsel, vol. 27 (Florence: La Fenice, 1951 – 1963) 268.

(such as Julius Caesar and Augustus), and the Roman race were objects of praise in his own eyes; he rarely took his rhetoric beyond mere admiration. He was more than careful not to declare himself a Caesar or Italy a new Roman Empire. The Rome of the past was simply a source of pride for Italians. The specific aspects of Roman culture he chose to emphasize reflected his desire that Italy remain peaceful and restrained in the eyes of his European and world onlookers. It is within this context, therefore, that his “Declaration of Empire” in May of 1936 is even more striking.

This paper will set out to prove that the Second Italo-Ethiopian War marked the beginning of a drastic change in the way in which Mussolini directed his foreign and domestic policy and in the way he viewed *romanità* as a political tool. It will focus on a variety of different propaganda produced by Mussolini and the fascist regime during this period – speeches, postcards, posters, wall paintings, and exhibitions – in order to demonstrate this quasi revolution in fascist ideology.

Chapter I will begin with a brief discussion of the fascist dictator himself and investigate the impact his personality had on his fascist policies, specifically regarding his conception of *romanità*. The chapter will also provide more detail into the definition of *romanità* and the general ways in which *Il Duce* emphasized Roman culture. Chapter II will offer a more in depth account of Mussolini’s vision of *romanità* from the beginning of his regime in 1922 to the eve of the Ethiopian campaign in 1935. It will specifically deal with the Bimillennial Birthday Celebration of Virgil in 1930 and with Mussolini’s relationship with Julius Caesar – both of which will demonstrate *Il Duce*’s subdued vision of *romanità* during this period. The following chapter, Chapter III, will provide a discussion of why Mussolini finally decided to invade Ethiopia and will end with a brief summary of the war itself. Chapter IV will begin with the

“Declaration of Empire” on May 9 and will investigate the impact this watershed moment had upon on fascist *romanità* policy. It will highlight the maps on the Basilica of Maxentius and the Bimillennial Birthday Celebration of Augustus Caesar and analyze how they both reflected this changed notion of *romanità*.

Though Mussolini may very well have felt strongly about the connections between his own Rome and the Rome of the past from the moment he first became Prime Minister, it was not until his “Declaration of Empire” that he began to convey these views openly to the Italian public. How, then, can we explain this transformation? On the eve of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, Mussolini needed a strong ideology to bring his people together in difficult times. The prospect of a conflict with Ethiopia provided the Italian dictator with such an opportunity. Fascism, as noted above, lacked a concrete ideology; it always seemed to be in flux. The only guiding force in Mussolini’s political career was opportunism. To Mussolini in his later years, imperialism was to be the perfect ideology behind which Fascism could rally. Rome of the past was to be the model for his new Italian Empire; the Italian people were to be the true and worthy descendants of the Roman race. In these ideas, Mussolini seemed to have found the ideal facilitator for his quest for Italian and personal greatness.

## **Chapter I:** **Mussolini and the Power of Words**

To understand the ways in which Benito Mussolini propagated the myth of *romanità*, one must consider the man himself. Throughout his twenty years in power, *Il Duce* demonstrated a keen appreciation for the power of propaganda. In this tool, he saw a capacity to influence the masses and maintain loyalty within a splintered country. In a clear and deliberate reference to himself, Benito Mussolini once stated, “The power of speech has a priceless value for he who governs.”<sup>1</sup> The fascist dictator’s remarkable ability to communicate with the masses throughout his political career was fundamental in his consolidation of power. Interestingly, this was a man who said he cared little for public opinion and who looked quite disparagingly upon the masses.

In an interview with *Il Duce*, Emil Ludwig, a German reporter, began to question him about his unique relationship with the masses. Referring to past instances in which Mussolini harshly criticized them, Ludwig asked Mussolini, “But if the masses give you no revelation, how can they have any effect on you?”<sup>2</sup> As Ludwig noted in his reflections on the interview, Mussolini took his time to gather his thoughts and answer the question. The question evidently made *Il Duce* rather uncomfortable. How could he confess a disdain for the people of Italy, the people responsible for his rise to power? Ludwig articulated the fascist dictator’s reflections: “[Mussolini] seemed to be pondering some generalization that would serve in place of a direct answer, for there was a pause before he slowly began to explain his thought.”<sup>3</sup> The length of his deliberation suggests that Mussolini was more than aware of the importance inherent in word choice. For a man of such stature, every word in every sentence could have immense

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in: Laura Ricci, La Lingua dell’Impero: Comunicazione, Letteratura e Propaganda nell’Età del Colonialismo Italiano (Roma: Carocci, 2005) 33. All future Italian translations will be done by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Emil Ludwig, Talks with Mussolini (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1933) 119.

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig 120.

repercussions; each had to be chosen wisely. His careful response exhibited this understanding.

He remarked:

For me the masses are nothing but a herd of sheep, so long as they are unorganized. I am nowise antagonistic to them. All that I deny is that they are capable of ruling themselves. But if you would lead them, you must guide them by two reins, enthusiasm and interest.<sup>4</sup>

With such a response, Mussolini quite brilliantly turned a question potentially meant to incriminate him into a response in which he indicated his own most noteworthy quality: the capacity to inspire enthusiasm and passion.

In such a response, *Il Duce* implied that he, a man who guided the people, surely had mastered the reins of enthusiasm and passion. Through this brief exchange with Ludwig, Mussolini offered two insights pivotal to understanding him and his actions. The first is that, while Mussolini considered himself superior to the masses, he still recognized that, if they could be influenced and controlled, they could take on a tremendously powerful role in his regime. Propaganda made this role possible. The second insight is that Mussolini was never one to shy away from complimenting himself. In fact, he did so on innumerable occasions. In this same interview with Emil Ludwig, *Il Duce* exclaimed: “In Milan I could empty the streets!”<sup>5</sup> That Mussolini was a self-confident man, though, is far from surprising. Therefore, when one analyzes the rhetoric and propaganda of *Il Duce*, one must never forget his arrogance. Excessive self-confidence, as we will see later on, can easily lead to delusion.

The impact that the writings of the French philosopher Gustave Le Bon had upon Mussolini similarly explain his appreciation for the power of words. Mussolini considered Le Bon to be one of his greatest influences and one of the greatest men he had ever studied. In 1926, he boasted: “I have read all Le Bon’s works, and I do not know how many times I have re-

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<sup>4</sup> Ludwig 120.

<sup>5</sup> Ludwig 121.

read his *Psychologie des foules*.<sup>6</sup> His mention of his admiration for *Psychologie des foules*, first published in 1865, sheds some interesting light on Mussolini's character. Throughout this work, Le Bon emphasizes that a great leader – a leader who can attract and influence the masses – must act as a Caesar. Considering Mussolini's infatuation with the Caesars (something to which I will give a great deal of attention later), specifically Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar, it is not difficult to imagine why Mussolini valued Le Bon's writings so highly. Julius and Augustus Caesar were both rhetorical masterminds, more than capable of manipulating the opinions of the plebs. In making the Caesars role models in his eyes, Mussolini hoped to be able to do the same. Furthermore, according to Le Bon, the leader-orator must always improvise during his speeches according to the whims and emotions of the crowd. The skilled orator gives the crowd what it wants.<sup>7</sup> True to the teachings of Le Bon, Mussolini frequently played to the crowd during his speeches for further rhetorical effect.

Mussolini's early experiences in journalism also played a major role in his development as a leader. Early on in his career, he wrote for the socialist newspaper *Avanti* and, following his service in World War I, became editor in chief of a new paper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*. Denis Mack Smith, a widely respected scholar on Mussolini, remarked: ". . . it can be claimed that journalism and public relations were the most essential of all professional activities under fascism."<sup>8</sup> Journalism and public relations were fundamental to the fascist regime (just as they are important in every suppressive and totalitarian regime) in the sense that both needed to be effectively controlled. Power over journalism and public relations enhanced the regime's ability to crush any subversive opinion and to influence the people on a mass level through propaganda.

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<sup>6</sup> Piero Melograni, "The Cult of the Duce in Mussolini's Italy," *Journal of Contemporary History* 11 (1976): 227. The English translation of the book is *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*.

<sup>7</sup> Melograni 227 – 228.

<sup>8</sup> Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (New York: Viking Press, 1976) viii.

Mussolini recognized this very early on as head of the Italian nation; in July of 1923, through a decree, he subjugated nearly the entire Italian press to his control. As a result, the fascist government was entitled to warn or censor any publications that incited the people “to class hatred or to disobedience of the laws and orders of the authorities.”<sup>9</sup> The intentionally vague language of this declaration enabled Mussolini and his fascist regime to interfere in almost any journalistic activity.

Despite all of Mussolini’s efforts to create an extensive propaganda system, his resources were, for the most part, severely limited. This was not necessarily his fault, as the problems his regime faced were reflections of the state of Italy during this period. Overall, Italy was still a relatively poor country. Other Western European countries, such as Great Britain and France, were well ahead of the Italians in terms of industrialization. Although northern Italy may have experienced mild industrial growth in cities like Milan and Turin, the South lagged far behind. In 1921, fifty-six per cent of the working population remained in the agricultural sector. Furthermore, nearly one-third of the entire population was illiterate and the vast majority of the population was only semi-literate.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, just as the Italian people lived a relatively backwards life in comparison to other more developed Western European nations, so too was the political life. Universal suffrage had only been granted in 1913. In contrast, France had already granted universal suffrage on two separate occasions (1792 and then 1848) before Italy had done so. Considering the backwardness of everyday Italian life and the political scene, it is even more remarkable how Benito Mussolini was able to influence the Italian masses on such a wide scale.

Because of these limitations that Mussolini and his fascist regime faced, the fascist dictator needed easy, clear themes for propaganda. *Romanità*, in itself not new to rulers (and

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<sup>9</sup> Melograni 226.

<sup>10</sup> Melograni 226.

specifically Italian rulers), was a handy, almost ready-made set of images and themes that could be deployed. Many Italians still lived alongside physical remnants of the Roman past, so Roman images were more than familiar to them. Thus, *romanità* provided the easiest method to match Mussolini's ambitions. Because he was such an opportunist, *Il Duce* constantly changed his methods and beliefs in pursuing these ambitions. And what did he want? Above all, Mussolini wanted to make Italy great again, as great as the Roman Empire. However, this was not enough. As fervent as his desire was to see Italy as a leader in the world once again, his desire to be the *one* who carried it to this new level was even stronger. *Il Duce* wanted to be an eternal national hero. With this bold goal in mind, it seems natural that Mussolini would place such a great emphasis on *romanità*, the embodiment of a culture he hoped to surpass.

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### **The Fascist Emphasis on *Romanità***

Although *Il Duce* used a wide variety of means to influence the Italian people, the promotion of *romanità* was arguably the most important. Before discussing the ways in which he approached this issue, it is best to give some indication of what exactly *romanità* means. Its direct translation into English, “Romanness”, is hardly adequate. The *Enciclopedia Italiana* yields some interesting insights on the subject. The first edition of the *Enciclopedia* was published between 1925 and 1936 under fascist supervision. Because of its heavy fascist influence, after the regime fell, the new Italian government purged the document of its overtly fascist entries. The section on Benito Mussolini, for example, only briefly outlines the events of his life, with no mention of anything controversial. However, the article that is most pertinent to

*romanità*, an entry full of controversial references to Fascism, must have slipped through the cracks.

Although there is no entry specifically labeled *romanità*, the section for Rome, specifically the “Idea of Rome”, proves to be quite valuable. It reads: “Rome, the first unifier of all the Italian people and ruler of the world, is in itself the synthesis of a great historical concept and a great ideal; through the ruins of the Forum and the surviving arches, it beams forth prophetically as a vision of Italian greatness.”<sup>11</sup> As this entry suggests, the “Idea of Rome” – perhaps the best translation of *romanità* – implies a strong connection between the exalted Roman people of the past and the Italian people of modern times. The city of Rome is an everlasting symbol of Italian fame (after all, it is called the Eternal City for a reason). The *Enciclopedia* continues:

. . . the prophecy of a new and great Rome, which finally became the true center of the spiritual life of Italy, the true capital and no longer a simple seat of government, rebuilt as conscious and prideful of its imperial mission, sees itself as renewed, by virtue of Fascism, in an attitude of perfect modernity, the union of nationalism and universalism – a union embedded through the thousand-year tradition in Augustus’ own name.<sup>12</sup>

The connection between the greatness of Rome and Fascism is exceptionally striking. According to this definition, the culmination of *romanità* occurred during Fascism, a time in which Rome once again regained its imperial and universal mission. Though there is no specific reference to Mussolini in the section (the *Enciclopedia Italiana*, as referenced above, was extensively censured), by emphasizing Fascism’s principal role in a “new and great Rome”, the entry implies that *Il Duce*, the creator and leader of Fascism, was indispensable in the quest for this goal.

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<sup>11</sup> Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti vol. 29 (Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana Fondata da Giovanni Treccani, 1949) 925.

<sup>12</sup> Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti 29. 925.

Throughout his twenty years in power, Mussolini consistently strove to make *romanità* an essential part of his various policies. Although the manner and degree to which he emphasized the connections between the Rome of the past and his own Rome varied according to his own discretion, a strong emphasis on Roman values persisted in his rhetoric and propaganda. By pointing to Rome's past achievements, Mussolini hoped to create a new state to potentially rival the Roman Empire. It must be noted, however, that Mussolini's active promotion of *romanità* was far from original. Geoffrey T. Garratt, a historian of the 1930s, was able to perceive exactly what Mussolini intended with his *romanità* rhetoric. In his critical account of Mussolini, titled Mussolini's Roman Empire, he wrote: "There is nothing original in the idea that modern Italy should found an empire as great and as powerful as that of which the decline and fall plunged Europe into the dark ages. It did not spring full-fledged from Signor Mussolini's active brain."<sup>13</sup> Though Garratt's words may seem harsh and caustic, he did have a point.

The glorification of the Roman past was a phenomenon used quite often throughout Italy and even in other European states well before Mussolini and fascism were born.<sup>14</sup> The leaders of the Risorgimento – the political movement that unified all of the Italian states together in the late nineteenth century – often invoked the Roman Empire of Augustus to legitimize their political goals. Interestingly enough, however, Mussolini and his fascist regime looked upon the Risorgimento and Italy from 1870 to 1922 as a period of "failure, a time of decadence . . ."<sup>15</sup> Mussolini wanted to rectify Italy's recent failures and use Rome's illustrious past as the guiding

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<sup>13</sup> Geoffrey T. Garratt, Mussolini's Roman Empire (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1938) 11.

<sup>14</sup> For a more in depth discussion on the exploitation of the myth of Rome both before and after Fascism, see: Peter Bondanella, The Eternal City: Roman Images in the Modern World (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Painter 3.

light for Italy's future greatness.<sup>16</sup> In his own fascist Italy, Mussolini hoped to do what the Risorgimento was unable to do and finally make Italy's Roman ancestors proud.

Thus, when Mussolini and his band of Black Shirts marched on Rome on October 27, 1922, *romanità* came to the center of the regime. Those intellectuals and politicians who sought influence within the regime optimized their chances of achieving such a goal by focusing on *romanità* in their works, published in magazines and periodicals. Two such examples were Franco Ciarlantini's Augustea (1928) and Edmondo Rossoni's La Stirpe (1929), both of which stressed the new Italian state as the chief rival against the American Empire. Both called for the creation of a New Roman Empire under Mussolini.<sup>17</sup> Though those around Mussolini, such as Ciarlantini and Rossoni, demanded Empire, *Il Duce* avoided such declarations during the first years of his regime.

In recent decades, several scholars have focused on the importance of *romanità* in Mussolini's regime but have done so from a variety of angles, such as an emphasis on buildings, speeches, urban planning, or education. Although there may be disagreements about how and why the cult of *romanità* became so popular when Mussolini was in power, the vast majority of scholars agree, at the very least, that Mussolini skillfully used the idea of *romanità* to his advantage. Many historians who wrote of the fascist regime immediately after its fall often only considered this cult of *romanità* as mere propaganda and rhetoric. However, in later decades, others, Emilio Gentile among the first, broke from such a tradition and posited that there was something more than simple rhetoric. Gentile, famous for his portrayal of Fascism as a new religion and Mussolini as its god, suggested that Mussolini's exploitation of Rome's past served

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<sup>16</sup> Painter 5.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, Mussolini's Roman Empire 27.

as a powerful ideology to bring together both intellectuals and the Italian people.<sup>18</sup> The political utility of such an ideology, according to Gentile as well as other Italian scholars such as Luciano Canfora and Mariella Cagnetta (both writing in the late 1970s), should not be underestimated.<sup>19</sup> Touching on the same notion, more recent historians, including Denis Mack Smith and Peter Bondanella, began to draw comparisons between the ideological cults of Hitler and of Mussolini. Bondanella asserted that, “When *Lebensraum* was used to justify the imperialism of Nazi Germany in eastern Europe, Mussolini’s regime cited the history of imperial Rome as a precedent for its adventures in the Mediterranean and in Africa.”<sup>20</sup> Italy’s Roman past, according to many historians, became the basis for Mussolini’s territorial expansion.

Some scholars, such as Spiro Kostof and Borden W. Painter, have focused on the connection between *romanità* and building projects. They argue that it was during the second decade of the fascist era (1932 – 1942) that such a promotion of ideology reached its peak. At this time, Mussolini ordered the construction of more and more public works that coincided with an increase in public speeches and writings illuminating the seemingly crucial bonds between the Roman race of the past and the Italian people of the twentieth century. Painter places considerable emphasis on the *Mostra Augustea* of 1937 as a way for Mussolini to draw comparisons between himself and Augustus.<sup>21</sup>

Laura Ricci, approaching Mussolini’s program of *romanità* from a more linguistic angle, provides valuable insights. In her book La Lingua dell’Impero, she investigates in great detail “the relationship between the language and the culture of Rome” in Mussolini’s agenda.<sup>22</sup> More specifically, she pays particular attention to Mussolini’s frequent usage of Latin words in his

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, Mussolini’s Roman Empire 5.

<sup>19</sup> Romke Visser, “Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of Romanità,” Journal of Contemporary History 27 (Jan.1992): 5.

<sup>20</sup> Bondanella 183 – 184.

<sup>21</sup> Bondanella 181; Painter 77. Chapter IV will deal a great deal with the *Mostra Augustea*.

<sup>22</sup> Ricci 47.

own speeches and writings. This, she argues, galvanized the support of both Italian intellectuals, rooted in their classical education, as well as the malleable Italian population – a belief that echoes the previously discussed thesis of Emilio Gentile.<sup>23</sup>

In the *romanità* tradition, Mussolini saw a way to bring together all the Italian people and create the consensus necessary for the stability of his regime. Romke Visser argues that Mussolini's *romanità* campaign was not just an “opportunistic choice of ‘Roman’ catchwords and symbols, lacking any substantial ideological coherence and with no intellectual background of any standing.”<sup>24</sup> He then claims that, considering the historical training of Italian elites rooted in *Weltanschauung*, an education in which Roman history was considered the national history of Italy, “the thesis that fascism used the existing cultic and patriotic approach of the *romanità* to attract intellectuals to its doctrinal causes” becomes quite appealing.<sup>25</sup> Visser also contends that *romanità* was at least partially responsible for maintaining Mussolini's coalition between fascists, reactionaries, monarchists, and conservative Catholics – a coalition absolutely necessary to effectively rule a unified Italy.<sup>26</sup> It is not difficult to imagine that a message like *romanità* would be able to resonate among so many different groups. What Italians would not be proud of their ancestors' glorious achievements? As the secondary literature on *romanità* suggests, by continually emphasizing the connections between the Roman race of the past and the Italian race of Benito Mussolini, the fascist regime found a useful tool to maintain its control.

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<sup>23</sup> Ricci 51.

<sup>24</sup> Visser 5.

<sup>25</sup> Visser 6.

<sup>26</sup> Visser 17 – 18..

## **General Program of *Romanità* Propaganda**

Although the specific aspects of Roman culture that Mussolini chose to highlight changed according to what he considered more useful at the time, the fascist dictator always kept an eye to the ancient past as he led Italy into the future. He used almost every opportunity to reiterate the greatness of the Roman Empire with the implication that modern Italy too would be great. In a speech before the Senate on March 18, 1932, *Il Duce* proudly said to his fellow fascists, “I do not need to say to you all what Rome means in the history of the world and the history of Italy. It is enough to think that without the pages of Roman history, all of universal history would be terribly mutilated and a great part of the modern world would be incomprehensible.”<sup>27</sup> Rome left an indelible impact on the history of the world. As Mussolini’s *romanità* propaganda insinuated, so too would his own Italy.

Even during his earliest days in power, Mussolini stressed *romanità*. On the one-year anniversary of his infamous March on Rome, speaking before the people of Milan, he said that, within the crowd and the Italian people as a whole, he felt a “mysterious revival of Roman passion.”<sup>28</sup> It is safe to say that, in this instance, Mussolini was not supernaturally able to feel Roman passion. Rather, his speech before the Milanese indicates that, even in his first year in power, Mussolini deliberately attempted to instill in the Italian psyche not only a sense of pride regarding their Roman ancestors but also the prospect that one day, with *Il Duce* as the guiding light, they could be the resurrection of the great Roman race.

In a speech before the people of Turin on October 22, 1932, Mussolini made public his beliefs on what it meant to be Roman; he declared:

Turin is a Roman city, not only because it was built by Julius Caesar, but it is Roman because of its tenacity; it is Roman because of the value it has shown

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<sup>27</sup> *Opera Omnia* 25. 85.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in: Melograni 229.

throughout the centuries in sieges and memorable battles; it is Roman because it gave flame and blood to the unification of the fatherland.<sup>29</sup>

“Roman” here takes on a militaristic connotation. Turin, according to Mussolini, is Roman because of its achievements in battle. It is implied in this speech, then, that the people of Turin once again must prove their worth as Romans on the battlefield.

This militaristic interpretation was not the only way in which Mussolini wanted Rome to be seen. In fact, he often spoke of the Universal Mission of Rome (*La Missione Universale di Roma*). In the same October of 1932, Mussolini published a document with such a title that said: “Already many times has Rome made itself the median and equilibrium of universal ideas between East and West . . . today Rome has the same idea.”<sup>30</sup> Mussolini conceived of Rome as an ideal necessary for the constitution of the world. Ancient Rome had an impact upon the entire world as a universal guiding force; Mussolini hoped that his new Rome, still the universal median between East and West, would do the same.

Mussolini’s own title, *Il Duce*, served as a constant reminder of the link between the Rome of antiquity and the Rome of modernity. *Duce*, the Italian word for commander, comes directly from the Latin word *dux*, meaning leader. Mussolini often tried to emphasize the Latin roots of his nickname, demonstrated in Figure A on the next page. In this particular postcard, produced and distributed in 1939, one is able to note several Roman qualities. The writing of “DVX” in such a manner mimics the script of Roman inscriptions. Although only a limited number of the Italian population could read and write Latin, almost all would have been familiar with such a script; ruins from Roman times with similar inscriptions still remained throughout Italy. The ordinary Italian citizen would have made the connection between “DVX” and the Rome of antiquity. Furthermore, the main part of the postcard, the bust of Mussolini, would

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<sup>29</sup> Opera Omnia 25. 141.

<sup>30</sup> Opera Omnia 25. 152.

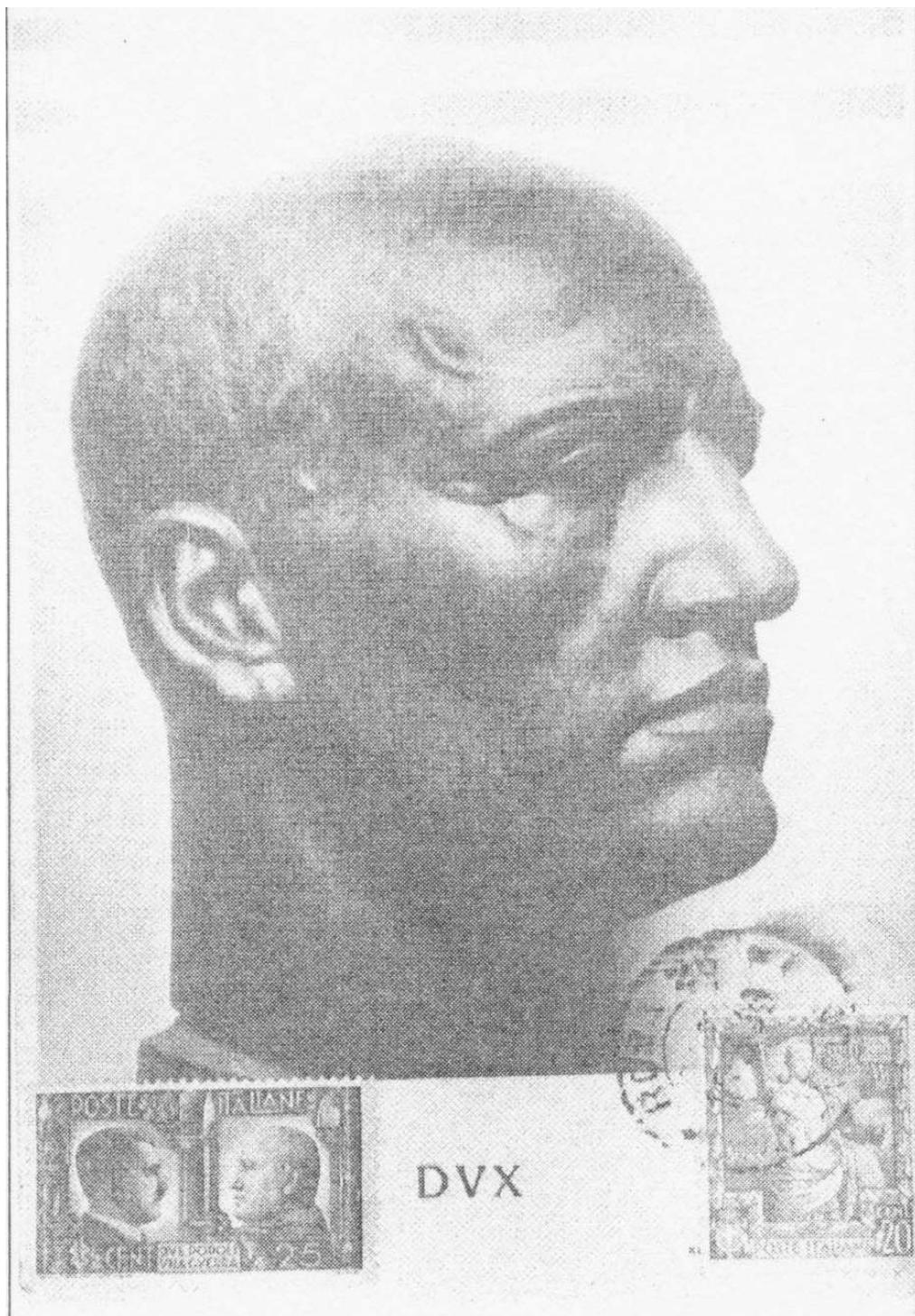


Figure A<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Enrico Sturani, Otto Milioni di Cartoline per il Duce (Torino: Centro Scientifico Editore, 1995) 233.

have also conjured up images of Roman times. The depiction of Mussolini in such a fashion quite intentionally mirrors the busts of the Caesars mad during the Roman Empire.

Given our use of Figure A, a brief note on fascist postcards in general is in order. Strictly speaking, postcards were not a direct form of propaganda. Except for a few exceptions, it was not until the World War II years that postcards became official entities of the fascist government. Instead, they were products of private individuals who recognized that they could benefit greatly from selling them to Italian citizens. We must remember that postcards needed to be bought and then sent; inherent in this process is a choice – the choice to *buy* a particular postcard. People buy what is most appealing to them. Because postcard producers, like any businessmen, wanted to make money, they made postcards that reflected the taste of the Italian people at the time. Throughout his rule, Mussolini and his regime bombarded the Italian populace with a wide variety of propaganda that conveyed their messages. The fascist government attempted to mold the people's preferences. As a result, the content and theme of many private postcards during this period reflected this particular taste that the fascist government had implanted in the Italian mindset. In this sense, Mussolini and his fascist ministers had indirect control over the postcard industry. With this in mind, a more in depth investigation of other propaganda must follow.

Mussolini, as mentioned in the previous section, was never afraid of self-praise. Figure B (listed on the next page), a postcard from 1925 showing *Il Duce* himself dressed in a Roman toga, illustrates how highly he thought of himself. Above his left shoulder is the image of the Roman she-wolf, responsible for raising Romulus and Remus, the mythical twin founders of the Roman state. The buildings over his right shoulder suggest that *Il Duce* stands in the ancient Roman Forum, a constant reminder of Roman civilized life. Standing in a serious pose with a

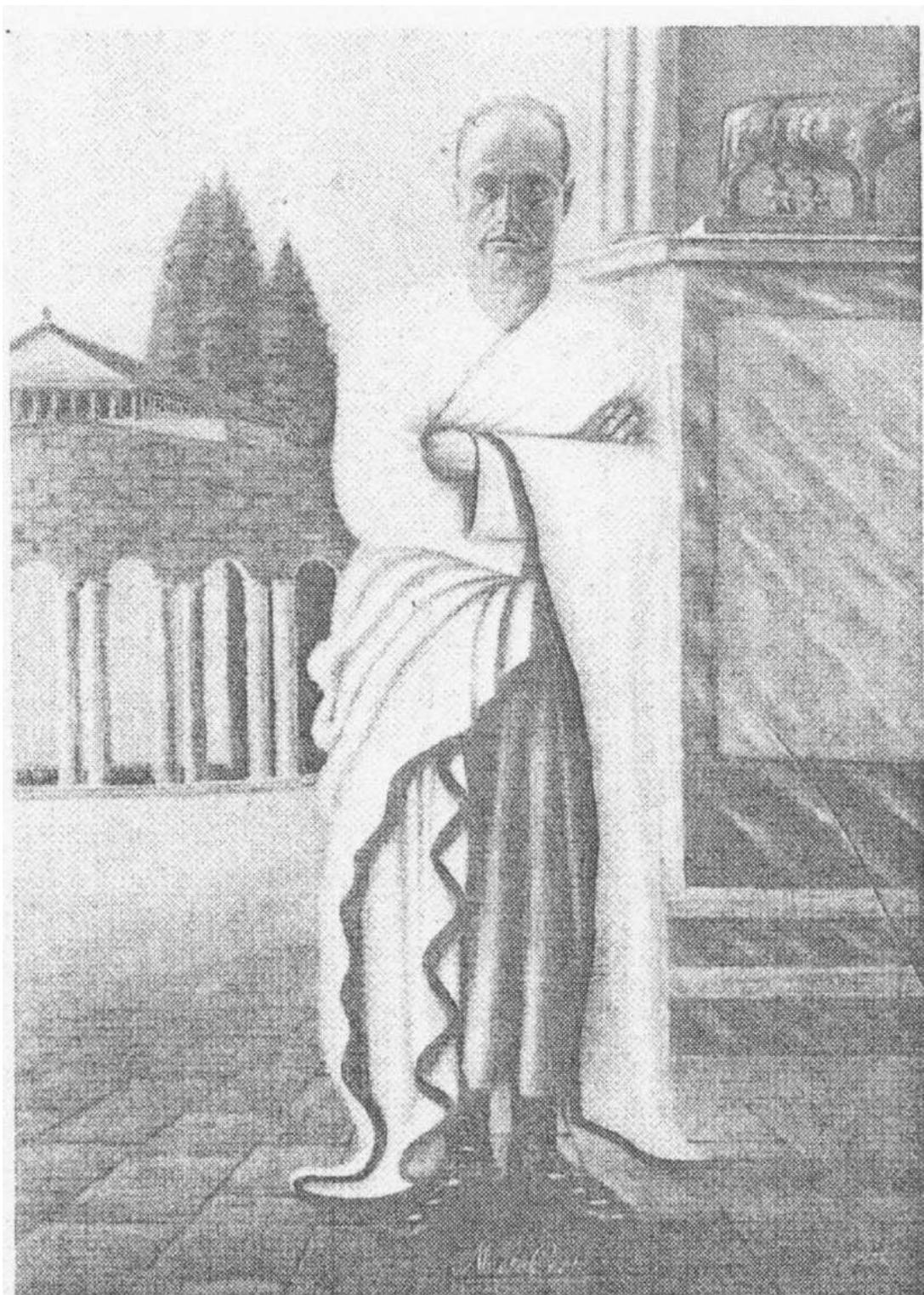


Figure B<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Sturani 290.

stern face, *Il Duce* seems to exude his power through physical boundaries of the postcard.

Looking at *Il Duce* in such a pose, it would have been almost impossible to not immediately think of the great leaders of the Roman Empire. Mussolini carefully projected onto his subjects the image of himself as a new Caesar.

The lictoral *fasces* (literally meaning a bundle of rods in Latin) also played a significant role in the myth of *romanità*. Anyone who had studied Roman history would have recognized the importance of the *fasces*, the symbols of consular authority in Ancient Rome. Keeping this in mind, Mussolini introduced the *fasces* as an integral part of fascist authority, making these ancient rods (*fascio littorio*) a symbol of fascist power and unity. In The Doctrine of Fascism, Mussolini addressed the correlation between the *fasces* and Fascism: “. . . [Fascism] enforces discipline and uses authority, entering into the soul and ruling with undisputed sway. There it has chosen as its emblem the Lictor’s rods, the symbol of unity, strength, and justice.”<sup>33</sup> The very name of Fascism derives from *fasces*. Even membership cards for the P.N.F. (*Partito Nazionale Fascista*) bore the symbol of the *fasces* (see Figure C below). The constant use of the *fasces* showed that Mussolini wanted Italy to think of itself as an authority in the world once again.

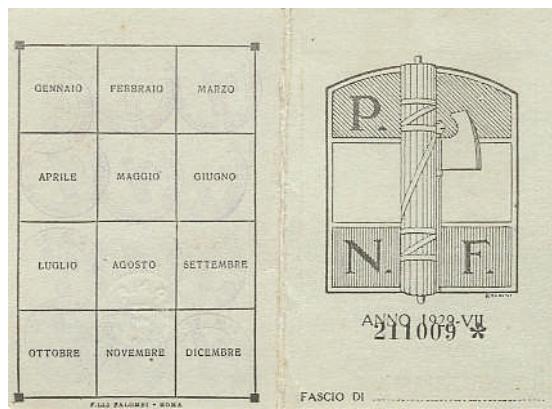


Figure C<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Benito Mussolini, The Doctrine of Fascism 14.

<sup>34</sup> Image provided by Tomasso Astarita.

Another example of Mussolini's emphasis on *romanità* is Figure D (listed on the next page), in which one reads: "Gird your temples! The ancient Ausonian light comes to Rome." In the bottom of this postcard, published in 1922, one can see *Il Duce* situated right next to the *fasces*, covered in garlands. In ancient Rome, garland wreaths, placed on the heads of its triumphant rulers, were symbols of prestige, victory, and sometimes even divinity. The phrase "Gird your temples!" (*Cinge tempora*) refers to when the Roman elite placed these garland wreaths on their foreheads in celebration, often for a triumph.<sup>35</sup> By referring to such an act, this piece of propaganda implies that the new Rome, the Rome of Mussolini, will soon have a triumph of its own to celebrate. The ancient Ausonian light – Ausonia was the ancient Latin name for Italy – returns once again to the Italian peninsula. The child in the middle of the postcard carries with it a certain significance. Offering the Roman Salute, the child stands with a tower on his head, the symbol of Italy, and carries a garland leaf in his left hand. A look at this postcard, either a superficial glance or a profound gaze, would have evoked in its Italian observer a tremendous sense of pride for his or her ancestors.

Mussolini carried over his enthusiasm for antiquity into his own army. Just like the Roman army, the fascist military was divided into legions, cohorts, *centurie*, and maniples.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the fascist volunteer militia translated many of its slogans into Latin in order to make enlistment seem more appealing. Instead of joining the Italian army, it seemed as though an enlisted man had an opportunity to join the Roman legions, reborn with all their glory. Each soldier was no longer referred to as a *soldato* (the old word for an Italian soldier) but as *milite*, coming from the Latin word for soldier, *miles*.<sup>37</sup> Just as the *fasces* were used as symbols of

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<sup>35</sup> A Roman triumph was a public celebration of a general's achievement in battle. A triumph usually consisted of a procession of the army along with their spoils from war.

<sup>36</sup> Melograni 229 – 230.

<sup>37</sup> Theodore Ziolkowski, Virgil and the Moderns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 15.



Figure D<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Sturani 224.

power, so too were the Roman eagles (symbols of Rome's military prowess) and the Roman she-wolf, whose significance was discussed above. *Romanità*, far from confined to Mussolini's rhetoric, spilled over into all aspects of fascist life.

The impact of *romanità* was distinctly evident in fascist education. Beginning with the education reform put forth by Giovanni Gentile in 1923 (*Riforma Gentile*), an emphasis on ancient Rome began to infiltrate all levels of education. On the elementary level, children were placed into groups according to their age; the youngest schoolboys were referred to as the "Sons of the She-Wolf" (*figli della lupa*) in a clear reference to the Roman she-wolf. Furthermore, one of the first measures enacted in the fascist educational reform was the mandatory study of Latin as well as Roman history. In their daily Latin grammar drills, the young fascist students often practiced with sentences relating to *romanità* themes. In a lesson regarding the Latin conditionals, one such example read: "If Italians were not worthy heirs of Roman *virtus*, we would not have won the great fame of which Fascist Italy today is proud, and we could not have created the new *imperium*."<sup>39</sup> Other grammatical drills involved translating Mussolini's speeches into Latin and responding to Latin questions regarding current events; one such drill read: "Why were the Ethiopians well-disposed toward Italian soldiers?"<sup>40</sup> Even at an early age, the fascist youth was heavily exposed to Roman culture.

The compulsory study of Roman history equally reflected the fascist regime's efforts to illuminate the achievements of ancient Rome. Italian history books produced during this period depicted the history of Italy as a direct continuation of Rome (never mind the discontinuity of 1,400 years in between). They stressed that all Italians had a duty to help Mussolini achieve a new Roman Empire. In particular, the Gracchi brothers played a significant role throughout the

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<sup>39</sup> Ziolkowski 15 – 16.

<sup>40</sup> Ziolkowski 16.

textbooks.<sup>41</sup> The Gracchi are best known in Roman history for their attempts as tribunes of the plebs, during the second century B.C.E., to institute a significant land reform program. Though they ultimately failed in their struggle, Julius Caesar later took up their cause when he finally came to power less than one hundred years later. Why the fascist regime would chose to emphasize the Gracchi brothers may seem a bit perplexing. However, Mussolini shared similar agrarian aims in the first decade of his rule. He put tremendous effort into a land and agrarian reform of his own, known as the *Battaglia del Grano* (Battle for Wheat), aimed at increasing Italy's agricultural self-sufficiency. Through an emphasis on Roman history, fascist education was able to subtly impose its beliefs onto young fascists.

Mussolini astutely understood how important *romanità* could be in his regime. He hoped to reflect a Roman image of himself and a Roman image of the country he ruled onto his subjects. As he remarked to Emil Ludwig in his interview, “I, likewise, am Roman above all.”<sup>42</sup> It is unclear what exactly *Il Duce* meant by such a significant statement – yet this was exactly the point. While there are many instances in which Mussolini defined a few Roman qualities, the most fascinating part is that these instances often contradicted each other. Almost anyone could find something to admire in Roman history, yet this is the exact reason why *romanità* has always been such a useful tool for politicians. The Romans, after all, were a contradictory people. The mythic founding of Rome is based on two brothers, Romulus and Remus, being nursed by a she-wolf, a metaphor for a prostitute in Roman times. The actual city is not even founded until Romulus kills his own brother, Remus. When Rome, in its earliest stages, was on the verge of extinction because of a lack of female population, it was only when Romulus ordered the rape of the Sabine women that Rome survived. Rome developed and flourished through a prostitute,

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<sup>41</sup> Palmiro Togliatti, “Storia Romana in Scuola Fascista,” *Quaderni di Storia* 3 (1976): 184.

<sup>42</sup> Ludwig 205.

fratricide, and rape. For a mighty empire and a mighty people, these events – events that their own legend perpetuated and carried on in tradition – seem to demean their civilization.

However, these seemingly terrible acts could always be twisted into praise. Being raised by wolves showed toughness; killing one's own brother showed ruthlessness; the rape of the Sabine women showed survival. The Romans were masters at twisting the events of their people's history to suit their needs at the time. It is fitting, then, that Benito Mussolini, a man who considered himself "Roman above all", was equally a master of the same art.

## **Chapter II:** **The Restrained Side of Mussolini's *Romanità***

In the first phase of his fascist regime, from his March on Rome in 1922 to his invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, Benito Mussolini gave the myth of *romanità* a principal role in his propaganda campaign, intended to garner support among the Italian population. During these years, Mussolini saw his popularity reach its peak. His emphasis on all things Roman was a success. In the years after the invasion of Ethiopia, *Il Duce*'s stress on *romanità* persisted, though with an entirely different tone. Before the "Declaration of Empire" in 1936, Mussolini's conception of *romanità* – as his interview with Emil Ludwig, the bimillennial birthday celebration of Virgil, and his relationship with Julius Caesar during this time all will demonstrate – remained subdued and non-militaristic, especially in comparison with the version after 1936. As this chapter will argue, Mussolini's opportunism was the guiding force in how he accentuated *romanità*.

To the modern observer, Mussolini was unmistakably militaristic and imperialistic. The Ethiopian War, the conquest of Albania, and his intervention in World War II make a strong case for this conclusion. However, this claim ignores the thirteen years of Mussolini's rule before the invasion of Ethiopia. Thus, it is overly simplistic to label Mussolini entirely as an imperialist or entirely as a militarist. In fact, early in his political career, he often spoke out against imperialism. When the Italian government began incursions into Libya in the early twentieth century, Mussolini and his socialist colleagues spoke out against the Italian liberals in power at the time. They criticized the government's atrocities and irresponsible fiscal policies in the colonial war. The Libyan War (1911), according to Mussolini, was nothing but an attempt by

Italian liberals to augment their prestige and remove the focus from domestic troubles.<sup>1</sup> His opposition to the war made him widely known throughout Italy; he was even sent to jail briefly for apparently subversive criticism of the state. He condemned the Italian government for its “violation of the homeland of others in order to extend to it [Italy’s] own pauperism.”<sup>2</sup> Though his ardent anti-imperialism softened after he came to power in October of 1922, *Il Duce* was extremely careful not to commit himself regarding imperialistic policies.

In his interview with the German reporter Emil Ludwig in 1933, the fascist dictator displayed how he wanted others to view him in terms of imperialism, yet he offered little insight into how he actually felt about the subject. Because he often changed his public statements on imperialism (as well as countless other beliefs) throughout his reign, one must be careful not to base a judgment on Mussolini’s character on just one quotation. What *Il Duce* says, in the interview for example, tells us little about what he actually believed; instead, it reveals what he wanted his audience to believe. In his discussion of imperialism with Ludwig, Mussolini, speaking in deliberately vague terms, refused to offer his own definition; he claimed: “There are a half dozen different kinds of imperialism.” He then described imperialism simultaneously as dangerous and as “one of the elementary trends of human nature, an expression of the will to power.”<sup>3</sup> He cleverly seemed neither his anti-imperialistic self of the 1910s nor his imperialistic self of 1935 and onwards. It is unlikely that the head of the fascist state was having an identity crisis at this point in time. At this moment, rather, Mussolini exhibited his opportunistic identity. In 1933 (the time of the interview), he needed to be perceived as neither anti-imperialist nor imperialist. As I have mentioned before, Mussolini was focused on improving Italy on the

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Mussolini's Roman Empire 32.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in: James Dugan and Laurence Lafore, Days of Emperor and Clown: The Italo-Ethiopian War 1935 – 1936 (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1973) 65.

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig 60 – 61.

domestic front. If he were to project an imperialistic image of himself onto the rest of the world, he would be forced to also deal with the international front. Mussolini considered it wise to focus on one front at a time.

Later in the conversation, Ludwig questioned *Il Duce* regarding his past statements about Libya, a colony that had belonged to classical Rome. With such a question, Ludwig had hoped that Mussolini would address the notion of a new Roman Empire, led by himself of course. Mussolini, always the clever politician, refused to go into such a discussion, as he called his previous statements “only a literary flourish.” He even went so far as to dismiss the notion of a New Roman Empire as something entirely improbable: “If the government in modern Rome wanted to claim the territory colonized by classical Rome, it would have to demand the return of Portugal, Switzerland, Glasgow [sic], Pannonia, and, indeed, all western, central, and southern Europe, to the Italian flag.”<sup>4</sup> By describing a New Roman Empire as almost laughable, Mussolini intended to deflect any possible opinions that he shared imperialistic ideas. However, in 1935 (as I will address in Chapter IV), Mussolini declared that Italy once again had achieved this Empire. As we will later see, the opportunism of Mussolini at that point had led him in a far different direction.

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Just as Mussolini’s relationship with imperialism was highly ambiguous, so too was his relationship with the concept of *romanità*. Always the opportunist, Mussolini continually molded his conception of *romanità* to what was most suitable for the times in which he found himself. In the first half of his reign – from his March on Rome on October 27, 1922 to the Ethiopian invasion in 1935 – Mussolini regularly emphasized a more subdued vision of

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<sup>4</sup> Ludwig 78.

*romanità*. Though during this period Mussolini frequently elucidated his respect for Italy's Roman ancestors and their values, rarely did he overtly draw direct parallels between the Roman people and his own. Rather, the Romans stood as an example of greatness that one day he hoped his people could achieve. *Romanità* propaganda focused predominantly on more peaceful elements of Roman life.

Throughout his conversation with Ludwig, Mussolini spoke of the Romans and their Empire in particularly proud terms. In one particular instance when Ludwig and Mussolini discussed the correlations between dictatorships and progress, Mussolini argued that the success of the Roman Empire under the Caesars served as undeniable proof that life under dictatorships could flourish. To prove his argument's validity, Mussolini pulled out a sheet of paper on which there was a list citing how many public baths and drinking fountains were built in Rome during the third century C.E.<sup>5</sup> The implication of Mussolini's lesson here is this: just as Rome excelled and improved under dictatorships for hundreds of years, so too will Italy under Mussolini's control, a new dictatorship.

Moreover, it is particularly strange that Mussolini chose to emphasize massive building projects as signs of progress. After all, public baths and drinking fountains do not exactly exude progress. Nonetheless, large-scale building projects – public baths and drinking fountains included – are peaceful things. They were methods by which Mussolini could increase the prestige of his fascist regime without seeming too aggressive to his international neighbors. Throughout the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, Roman leaders always sought to garner the support of the populace and intimidate their enemies through the construction of temples, amphitheaters, monuments, and other massive structures. Mussolini, too, had this agenda in mind when he called for the renovation of Roman ruins all across the Italian nation and for the

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<sup>5</sup> Ludwig 127.

construction of new monuments as symbols of Italy's newfound prestige. One such example is the Milan Central Station (*Stazione Centrale di Milano* – see Figure E below). The construction of the station began in 1912, but, due to the burdensome costs of World War I, the Italian government stopped it. In 1925, Mussolini started over its creation with a fascist twist. The Central Station finally opened on July 1, 1931. Through the construction of such an impressive and massive structure, Mussolini hoped to project the message that Italy was prepared once again to take her place as a world leader, though in a peaceful way.



Figure E<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> From Barron Private Collection, January 2008.

Borden W. Painter, in his book Mussolini's Rome: Rebuilding the Eternal City, gives a thorough account of the building projects embarked upon by Mussolini during his time as head of the Italian state. Painter argues: "Fascism transformed Rome." Beyond projects in the historic center of the Eternal City, Mussolini and his fascist bureaucracy produced whole areas or "cities" as symbols of their prestige. Examples of such projects include the *Foro Mussolini* (now *Foro Italico*), the city for sports and physical education, the *Città Universitaria* (University City) of Rome, the *Cinecittà* for cinema, and the EUR (*Esposizione Universale di Roma*), the fascist produced city that Mussolini hoped would carry Italy into the future.<sup>7</sup> The impact of Fascism on Italian cities can also be seen on a smaller level, evident in the production of streets, schools, post offices, apartment complexes, and other structures of daily Italian life.<sup>8</sup> Thus, fascist building projects, on both a large and small scale, directly affected the life of ordinary Italian citizens.

Although the construction of colossal structures such as the Milan Central Station and the reconstruction of Roman ruins certainly hinted that Mussolini wanted a new Roman Empire of which, of course, he would be the supreme ruler, the Roman dictator was careful to never blatantly express these desires. Indeed, in the years before he declared a New Roman Empire on May 9, 1936, he only referred to the Empire and its people as personifications of certain values that he deemed praiseworthy. His interview with Emil Ludwig is an excellent source of these sentiments. At one point, Ludwig brought up the notion of the English as the Romans of modern times, and, in this question, he referred to *Il Duce* as a "modern Roman."<sup>9</sup> Almost immediately, Mussolini shut down this idea. Nonetheless, he conceded that "[the English] have some of the qualities that were characteristic of the ancient Romans: a genius for empire; tenacity;

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<sup>7</sup> Painter xv.

<sup>8</sup> Painter xvii.

<sup>9</sup> Ludwig 154.

patience.”<sup>10</sup> Considering that the fascist dictator later in this very interview described himself as “Roman above all”, one can safely assume that these “Roman” qualities that he attributed to the English – genius for empire, tenacity, and patience – were also components of his fully Roman character. The importance in this conversation, then, is not so much that Mussolini thought that he possessed these Roman attributes but more so that he refused to acknowledge this belief openly. A thorough analysis of Mussolini yields such insights, but to the unlearned listener, Mussolini appeared a restrained, pensive, and composed leader – exactly how the fascist dictator wished to be perceived.

The most important lesson that must be taken from Mussolini’s conversations with Ludwig is the lack of any explicitly militaristic and imperialistic notion of *romanità*. Though he quite often referenced the Romans, the Roman state, and the Roman civilization, the moderate context in which he does so suggests that, even as late as 1933 (the time of the Ludwig interview), Mussolini did not yet wish the world to consider him a new Roman Caesar.

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## Mussolini and Virgil

The bimillennial birthday celebration in 1930 of the famous Roman poet Publius Vergilius Maro, more commonly known as Virgil, presented Mussolini with a unique opportunity for his *romanità* agenda. Commissioned by Maecenas<sup>11</sup> during the times of Augustus, Virgil’s pastoral poetry, the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*, seemed a perfect fit for Mussolini. It touched on similar themes that Mussolini had stressed earlier in his regime. His famous Battle for Wheat (*La Battaglia del Grano*), a program initiated by the fascist regime in

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<sup>10</sup> Ludwig 154.

<sup>11</sup> Gaius Maecenas was an important advisor for Caesar Augustus and specifically dealt with the cultivation of Roman poets who would praise the deeds of the *princeps*.

1925 and continued throughout the decade that aimed to make Italy self-sufficient in grain production, best demonstrates this claim. Policy wise, Mussolini, believing that Italy should provide for its own grain and even have some left over for exports, imposed extremely high import taxes on grain. Though many economists insisted that, given the economic climate, the plan was highly irresponsible, Mussolini continued with the Battle because he felt a personal connection with it. In fact, according to Denis Mack Smith, *Il Duce* even wrote a poem about *La Battaglia*.<sup>12</sup> The pastoral poetry of Virgil, the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*, served as his inspiration. Virgil, like Mussolini had done with his own poem, wrote these two works during a time in which Augustus and Maecenas, as a part of their “back to the farm” movement, hoped to make agriculture and country life more attractive to Roman citizens.<sup>13</sup> Nearly two thousand years later, Mussolini too recruited Virgil for his own agrarian aims.

Even before the celebration in 1930, Mussolini had initiated a propaganda campaign in which he emphasized the connections between his own agricultural agenda and the ancient Roman appreciation for the countryside. Leonetto Cappiello’s painting from 1926, “National Competition for the Victory of the Wheat” (Figure F), is one example of art commissioned by Mussolini during this period with the goal of popularizing his agricultural campaign. In this particular painting, the juxtaposition of the shirtless Italian farmer with the Roman man dressed in a toga immediately makes the observer think of the connections between Mussolini’s Italy and Rome’s Italy. It is within this context that the abundance of grain featured throughout the painting takes on its significance. The painting suggests that Mussolini’s agricultural plans for his country will undoubtedly be successful. The Roman leader in the background, with garland

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<sup>12</sup> Denis Mack Smith, Mussolini (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982) 121.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Scott, “Mussolini and the Roman Empire,” The Classical Association of the Middle West and South 27 (June 1932): 650.

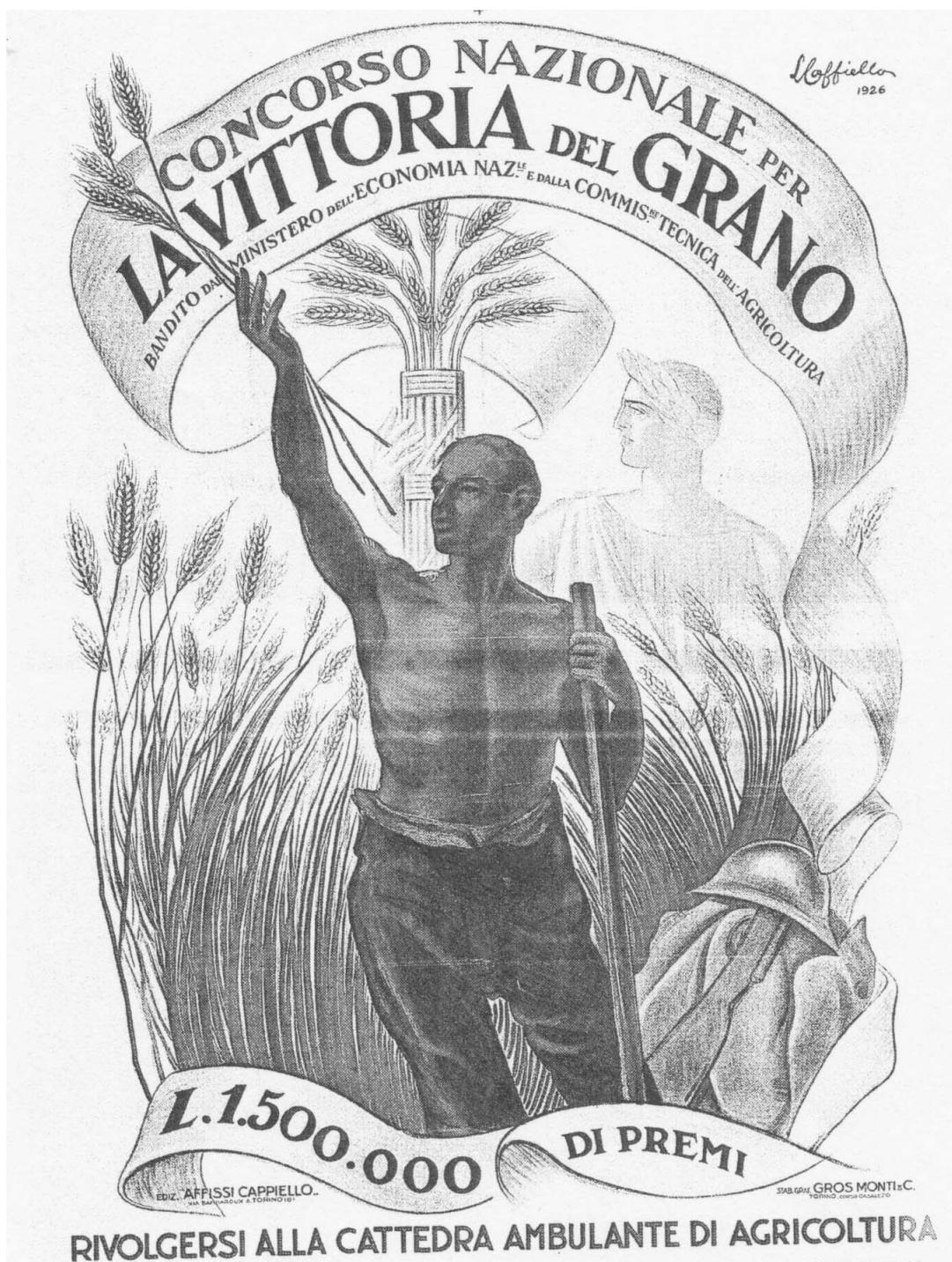


Figure F<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Under Mussolini : Decorative and Propaganda Arts of the Twenties and Thirties from the Wolfson Collection, Genoa : Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, eds. Silvia Barisione, Matteo Fochessati, Gianni Franzone. (Milano: Mazzotta, 2002) 58.

wreathed around his head, will guide his offspring, the modern Italians, to success. With their Roman ancestors watching over them, how could the Italians not return to prominence? The *fasces*, a symbol of fascist authority, in the middle of the work plays a principal role. With grain sprouting outwards, the image hints that Fascism will usher in a new era of abundant grain. The image of a helmet leaning on a gun, in the bottom right corner of the work, must also be noted. Though its position within the work suggests that its role is not primary, the image implies that Italy's military might is intrinsically linked to agricultural power. Just as in Roman times, the new Italian man must always be both a farmer and a soldier.

In reality, the *Battaglia del Grano* did not come close to achieving the economic success that Cappiello prophesizes in his art. Though it did increase overall grain production, the program drastically reduced the profitability of agriculture, the industry that had long dominated the Italian economy. As a result of the high import taxes on grain, high-cost production and inefficient methods remained in use. While the *Battaglia* originally had hoped to give more property to Italian peasants, in reality, it had the opposite effect. Rich land owners became even richer at the expense of the vast majority of the poor.<sup>15</sup> In strictly economic terms, Mussolini's agricultural program damaged Italy far more than it benefited it.

Nonetheless, the success of *La Battaglia del Grano* in terms of garnering public support for Mussolini's regime was unequivocal. The year 1930 marked the moment of Mussolini's highest stability and consensus. Aware of this success, Mussolini addressed the Italian people in the Teatro Argentina on December 10, 1929: "The year 1930, oh my fellow farmers, will be the year of Virgil, the poet of Empire and of fields. We will celebrate him 'fascistly', to work and with work . . ."<sup>16</sup> Mussolini knew 1930 was the perfect year for this celebration. Thanks to *La*

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<sup>15</sup> Smith, Mussolini 121 – 122.

<sup>16</sup> Opera Omnia 24. 178.

*Battaglia del Grano*, agricultural and rural life in Italy grew to embody, according to *L'Enciclopedia Virgiliana*<sup>17</sup>, “the value of an antidote specific to fascist Italy, entrenched in the increase in value of agriculture; and Virgil, the poet of the *Georgics*, became the symbol of exit from the economic crisis.”<sup>18</sup> In Virgil, Mussolini found the most useful aspect of Roman history to underscore at the time.

The celebration, which lasted almost the entire year, saw an outpouring of scholarly publications from all across the world. Many of these works were done with an eye to objectivity; however, a vast amount of publications in Italy during this time were overflowing with fascist-promoted propaganda in which Virgil was a model for the fascist government.<sup>19</sup> The lesson was clear: just as Virgil recognized the importance of the countryside, so too should the Italian people. Furthermore, because of Virgil’s universal praise, another goal of the celebration was to create a more favorable attitude towards Italian Fascism in the rest of the world.<sup>20</sup> By exalting the virtues of Virgil – virtues that scholars and leaders throughout the world could easily admire – Mussolini and his fascist leadership strove to show the world that Italian Fascism, far from threatening, would usher in a new age of Virgilian success.

Moreover, the celebration was not just limited to the city of Rome but was diffused all across the Italian countryside. To commemorate the events, Mussolini ordered the large-scale production of Virgilian stamps; the Vatican and the Republic of San Marino followed suit. Figure G, shown on the next page, displays a small collection of the stamps distributed during

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<sup>17</sup> The *Enciclopedia Virgiliana* is not a primary source, as it was published first in 1984. Its entry on the Virgilian birthday celebration is based on several primary sources that were unavailable. Nonetheless, it remains the best source for this section.

<sup>18</sup> Enciclopedia Virgiliana vol. 2 (Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1984 – 1991) 469.

<sup>19</sup> Clive Foss, “Augustus and the Poets in Mussolini’s Rome,” Style and Tradition: Studies in Honor of Wendell Clausen, eds. Clive Foss and P. Knox (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1998): 308.

<sup>20</sup> Enciclopedia Virgiliana 2. 470.



Figure G<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Enciclopedia Virgiliana 2, 475.

the year. The three at the bottom of Figure G are particularly interesting because of the Roman, pastoral themes. The left image of a Roman flutist in the countryside symbolizes the *Eclogues*, the middle image of Aeneas in his war garb the *Aeneid*, and the right image of a Roman shepherd the *Georgics*. As these stamps spread throughout all of Italy, the celebration of Virgil and the values he embodied became a widespread phenomenon.

Throughout the year of celebration, *Il Duce* relentlessly preached the fundamental connections between land and Virgil. On one such occasion, in a speech in Rome before the members of the government on October 27, 1930, he reminded his fellow fascists: “Many of those who talk today about Virgil forget one very important detail: that Virgil was born in a furrow because his mother, Magia, gave birth in the fields and she did not get to her home.”<sup>22</sup> Although the events about which Mussolini spoke are almost certainly myth, the ways in which he used this myth to garner support is quite striking. By relating such a story, Mussolini hoped to show that Virgil, the greatest Roman poet, was forever linked to the earth, the land that brought him into the world. Later in this speech, he took his rhetoric one step further and confessed the great pride with which he thought of his Roman ancestors: “How can it not make us proud, how can it not make us shake with fervor, thinking that we were the light, when everyone around us were darkness; that we were civilized, when everyone around us were barbarians?”<sup>23</sup> By using such diction in a speech wholly devoted to the greatness of Virgil, Mussolini insinuated that Virgil was the leading light in the civilized world of Rome. It was Mussolini’s subtle message that if his Italian subjects were to follow the Virgilian values – as the bimillennial celebration suggested, values that called for a rural, pastoral, and agricultural life of

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<sup>22</sup> Opera Omnia 24. 287.

<sup>23</sup> Opera Omnia 24. 288.

simplicity – the Italian nation, the Roman Empire’s true ancestors, would once again be the light in a world of barbarians.

However, largely ignored throughout the entire celebration was the imperialistic side of Virgil’s works. The Roman poet’s most famous work, the *Aeneid*, tells the story of a Trojan prince, Aeneas, who leads his surviving Trojan countrymen, utterly destroyed by the Greek invasion, on an epic journey throughout the entire Mediterranean. In the end, Aeneas, according to his prophecy, settles in Italy, and his descendants establish the Roman state. Virgil’s epic poem is undoubtedly imperialistic in nature. While the *Aeneid* received attention throughout the celebration, its imperialistic themes on the whole were ignored. In this sense, Virgil epitomizes the contradictory and ambiguous nature of the Roman legacy. As I described earlier in this thesis, the Roman people had such a wide array of values that they could justify nearly anything that they did. Virgil, the poet of the countryside but also the poet of Empire, could easily symbolize different value systems. In 1930, the glorification of the countryside was the most beneficial to Mussolini’s mission of building a consensus among the Italian populace. The themes of Empire would serve their purpose at a later time.

Mussolini was an opportunist. The celebration of Virgil was the perfect supplement to *La Battaglia del Grano*. Agriculture, the countryside, and pacifism – embodied in the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* – were the themes of the times. On the other hand, the language of Empire – embodied in the *Aeneid* – had no place in Mussolini’s rhetoric and propaganda. As a result, the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*, rather than the *Aeneid*, were the centerpiece of the celebration.

The significance of Virgil’s bimillennial birthday celebration is magnified by comparison to the bimillennial birthday celebration of Augustus Caesar, seven years later in 1937. Though the imperialistic and militaristic side of Virgil may have been without a patron in 1930, it

without a doubt found one in 1937. Later in this thesis, I will treat Augustus' celebration in more detail; for now, however, the main emphasis should be placed on the extreme contrast between the two. Because, by 1936, Mussolini had finally created his own Roman Empire following the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, his conception of *romanità* took an imperialistic turn. The *Enciclopedia Virgiliana* illuminates the contrast between the two celebrations: "The bimillennial celebration of Augustus required a thirst for imperialism and reflected the aggressive side of Fascism. The bimillennial celebration of Virgil was still bound to the pacifistic and renovating side of the regime."<sup>24</sup> In 1930 the fascist regime and the Italian people, as the *Enciclopedia Virgiliana* describes, did not quite have their thirst for imperialism. Mussolini's decision to emphasize more pacifistic and pastoral themes reflected his acute understanding of the situation. The overwhelmingly opportunistic side of Mussolini prevailed.

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### Mussolini and Julius Caesar

In his interview with Emil Ludwig, Mussolini stated: "Julius Caesar . . . [is] the greatest man that ever lived."<sup>25</sup> Throughout his twenty years in power, *Il Duce* always found time to praise the Roman statesman who effectively ended the Roman Republic. Although Mussolini's overt admiration for a dictator who ushered in the era of the Roman Empire seems at odds with the non-imperialistic light in which he hoped to be portrayed before 1935, the watered down and docile language with which he spoke of Julius Caesar reflected his devotion to a subdued vision of *romanità*. Ignoring the brutal and tyrannical aspects of the Roman dictator, Mussolini once said: "I am convinced that this man was a man of singular goodness: perhaps he was the first

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<sup>24</sup> *Enciclopedia Virgiliana* 2. 470.

<sup>25</sup> Ludwig 210.

Roman who had a sense of the future.”<sup>26</sup> As Mussolini attempted to do in nearly every opportunity possible, *Il Duce* twisted his veneration of Julius Caesar in such a way as to support his agenda. The specific characteristics of Julius Caesar that Mussolini chose to highlight were always the ones which he wanted the Italian people to value.

The Italian dictator’s worship of Julius Caesar was, at times, ridiculous. When asked if there was ever a usurper in history who was loved, Mussolini responded: “Julius Caesar, perhaps. The assassination of Caesar was a misfortune for mankind . . . I love Caesar. He was unique in that he combined the will of a warrior with the genius of the sage. At bottom he was a philosopher who saw everything *sub specie aeternitatis*.<sup>27</sup> *Il Duce* evidently had a special spot in his heart for the Roman tyrant. The admirable characteristics he attributes to Caesar are those that he himself hopes to possess. Later in this same interview, he toned down the praise a little bit. When Ludwig asked him if he considered Caesar an exemplar, a restrained Mussolini replied, “. . . not altogether, but the virtues of classical Rome, the doings of the Romans of old, are always in my mind. They are a heritage which I try to turn to good account.”<sup>28</sup> As his speech suggested, it was not necessarily Caesar but Rome that Mussolini admired. The remarkable contrast between the exceptionally praising rhetoric in the first quote and the more subdued tone in the second suggests a paradoxical aspect of Mussolini and his relationship with Julius Caesar. Although at times the character and deeds of Julius Caesar aided Mussolini in justifying many of his own character traits and actions, the fascist dictator always had to be careful not to praise too much a man who so clearly embodied tyranny.

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<sup>26</sup> *Opera Omnia* 24. 45.

<sup>27</sup> Ludwig 65. *Sub specie aeternitatis* translates as “under the aspect of eternity.” Therefore, one who sees everything *sub specie aeternitatis*, such as Caesar, sees everything as it was true in eternity.

<sup>28</sup> Ludwig 193 – 194.

One of the more striking parallels between *Il Duce* and Julius Caesar that the fascist regime highlighted was between Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon and Mussolini's March on Rome. The fascist Ministry of Information, immediately following Mussolini's seizure of power, strove to emphasize this seemingly crucial correlation. It is no coincidence that when Mussolini addressed the people of Rimini on April 15, 1933, he referred to Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon as his own "March on Rome" (*La Marcia su Roma*), the exact wording used for Mussolini's own March on Rome.<sup>29</sup> When Caesar crossed the Rubicon, the world fundamentally changed; the fascist regime implied that because Mussolini had crossed his own Rubicon by marching on Rome, the result would be the same. The Rubicon River took on a mythical role for the fascist regime. However, there was a significant problem for this myth: the Rubicon was an utterly insignificant river, both in size and purpose, during the time of Fascism. In fact, even today it is almost impossible to spot when traveling through the Italian countryside. Because of this problem, in September of 1932, Mussolini decreed that the Fiumicino River, located in northern Italy next to his birthplace of Predappio, would thereafter be called the Rubicon. In justification of this decision, Mussolini declared, "Foreign visitors ask me where the Rubicon is, and we cannot show them. Let us find our river."<sup>30</sup> The historian George Seldes, writing a contemporary history of Mussolini in his 1935 book Sawdust Caesar: The Untold History of Mussolini and Fascism, cynically pointed to the absurdity of such a decision: "Thus it was shown to the world that a problem which harried historians and geographers had disputed violently from medieval times could be settled only through an act of dictatorship."<sup>31</sup> The complexities of

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<sup>29</sup> Opera Omnia 25. 287.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in George Seldes, Sawdust Caesar: the Untold History of Mussolini and Fascism (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1935) 371.

<sup>31</sup> Seldes 371.

history and geography mattered little to Mussolini. Enhancing his personal prestige and greatness were of far greater importance.

Mussolini also used Julius Caesar to rationalize and justify the political killings he had committed throughout his rise to political power (the most notable of which was the assassination of socialist deputy Giacomo Matteotti, murdered in 1924 after he accused the fascist party and Mussolini of election fraud). Throughout his own rise to the top of the Roman political hierarchy, Julius Caesar was no stranger to political assassination. The Roman dictator, after all, achieved complete control of the Roman Republic through victory in civil war against Pompey. Caesar, though known for his clemency (*clementia*) after achieving consensus in Rome, was known to be ruthless and unforgiving on the battlefield. After conquering all of Gaul, he brought back its king, Vercingetorix, to Rome and mercilessly ordered his death in front of the jubilant Roman crowds. Addressing the brutal side of the man he so admired, Mussolini declared, “Still, in like manner, one must not pass a harsh judgment upon Julius Caesar for having had Vercingetorix put to death. Of course his life-story would have been a finer one without that act of barbarism, but it is absurd to hold so titanic a figure to reproach because of one regrettable incident.”<sup>32</sup> The “in like manner” refers to the justification he had given to Ludwig just moments ago regarding the murder of Giacomo Matteotti. By making such a parallel, Mussolini suggested that he, just like Julius Caesar, should not be condemned for one blemish. Of course, in reality, the blemishes were numerous for both men.

Hidden deeper in his words is the implication that just as Julius Caesar was a “titanic figure”, so too will Mussolini. In a speech on July 6, 1933, titled “Caesar”, addressing the recent growing production of scholarly work on Julius Caesar, *Il Duce* provocatively posed a question

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<sup>32</sup> Ludwig 138.

to his audience: “Six volumes written on Caesar in three years. Is this not a sign of the times?”<sup>33</sup> Though the clever orator did not express it overtly, it is unmistakable that, through the use of this rhetorical question, Mussolini believed that comparisons between himself and Julius Caesar are not without merit. With statements such as this, however, Mussolini ran the considerable risk of likening himself to a tyrant. Many may have loved Caesar, but, in the end, many others wanted him dead. After all, he illegally usurped power and threatened the integrity of the Roman Republic. Mussolini, though one day he would face the same fate as Caesar, certainly wanted a more favorable end.

Accordingly, *Il Duce* always made sure to balance his comparisons to Caesar with statements distinguishing himself from the Roman dictator. During the same conversation in which Mussolini called Caesar “the greatest man that ever lived”, he watered down his comments considerably with an addendum: “Yes, I have tremendous admiration for Caesar. Still, I myself belong rather to the class of the Bismarcks.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, Mussolini considered himself more a statesman, like Bismarck, than a dictator, like Caesar. Later in the interview, Mussolini came about as close as he ever did to criticizing the man who ended the Roman Republic; he articulated: “For my part, at any rate, I have never had any inclination to fancy myself a god.”<sup>35</sup> Julius Caesar nearly deified himself yet Mussolini had no such intention. These two quotes epitomize Mussolini’s complex relationship with Julius Caesar. Although, as I have shown above, he often made subtle references to his remarkable similarities with the Roman dictator, given the opportunity to make a direct and overt connection, *Il Duce* always refused. Mussolini may have revered Caesar, but, as Mussolini publicly alleged, he was no Caesar himself.

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<sup>33</sup> Opera Omnia 26. 22.

<sup>34</sup> Ludwig 210.

<sup>35</sup> Ludwig 219.

Once again, we must return to the opportunistic nature of Benito Mussolini. In the previous discussion of Mussolini's emphasis on Virgil's pastoral, agrarian, and peaceful themes rather than on his imperialistic and militaristic ones, I argued that Mussolini was the master of using seemingly contradictory ideas to his advantage, depending on the circumstances. When the times called for agrarianism and pacifism, Mussolini emphasized the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*; when the times called for Empire and militarism, Mussolini emphasized the *Aeneid*. The same pattern, moreover, appears in Mussolini's treatment of Julius Caesar. Just as any skilled politician and orator, *Il Duce* shrewdly picked and chose certain aspects of Caesar that aided his cause and simultaneously ignored or criticized those qualities that could have been potentially harmful. In this way, Mussolini proved himself a master of manipulating and exploiting the myth of *romanità* for his political and personal gain.

Finally, just as the "Declaration of Empire" in 1936 changed Mussolini's conception of Virgil, it did the same for Mussolini's relationship with Julius Caesar. When one views the propaganda and speeches of Mussolini on the whole, one can see that the vast majority of references to Julius Caesar occurred before 1936. After Mussolini declared a Roman Empire on May 9, 1936, did he decide to stop drawing parallels between himself and Roman leaders? The answer, of course, is no. Following the creation of Empire, *Il Duce* deliberately shifted his attention from Julius Caesar, the man who destroyed the Roman Republic and paved the way for the Roman Empire, to Augustus Caesar, the man who created and consolidated the Roman Empire. After conquering Ethiopia, Mussolini was no longer paving the way for Empire but had assumed his role, like Augustus had done, as creator and consolidator of it. For a man who once described Julius Caesar as the greatest man who ever lived, Mussolini forgot him fairly quickly.

Given Mussolini's overwhelmingly opportunistic character and his fervent desire to bring the Italian nation to greatness, however, this transition is far from shocking.

## Chapter III: The Shift to Imperialism: The Second Italo-Ethiopian War 1935 – 1936

From his seizure of power in 1922 up until his preparations for the Ethiopian War in 1934, Mussolini aimed to give his observers across the world the impression that Italy desired a restrained and peaceful role within Europe. It is within this same light that one can best understand which aspects of *romanità* he chose to emphasize and which aspects of *romanità* he chose to ignore during this time. On October 3, 1935, at five in the morning, *Il Duce* ordered Italian troops, led by General Emilio De Bono, to advance into Ethiopian territory. Though during the course of the war Mussolini contended that Italy, far from the aggressor, still desired peace, the situation had unmistakably changed.

By ordering the invasion of Ethiopia, Mussolini had crossed over into the realm of imperialism and, as a result, needed to change his propaganda campaign of *romanità*. No longer could *Il Duce* emphasize the countryside and agriculture; instead, he turned to themes of empire and destiny. “In Mussolini, the myth of Rome,” according to the classical scholar Peter Bondanella, “became the basis for a foreign policy . . . and an imperialistic vision of the modern world.”<sup>1</sup> Mussolini and his fascist foreign policy had become undeniably imperialistic, and *romanità* came to the forefront of this new agenda.

A major problem that Mussolini faced in his preparations for war was convincing the Italian people that embarking on such a colonial invasion was worth the cost and effort. On the eve of the war, many Italians were against such an invasion. More important things, like

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<sup>1</sup> Bondanella 172 – 173.

creating jobs and expanding the food supply, needed to be addressed.<sup>2</sup> Although Mussolini successfully marketed *La Battaglia del Grano* and gave the impression that his agricultural campaign was tremendously successful, as I discussed in the previous section, economically speaking it was a failure. Furthermore, Italy, just like other countries throughout the world at this time, was suffering from the impact of the Great Depression. The way many saw the situation, according to Alberto Sbacchi, was that an overseas invasion would only diminish further their dwindling resources at home.<sup>3</sup>

Many other questions still remained: was Ethiopia worth taking? What could the forceful acquisition of a seemingly valueless African territory possibly achieve? Denis Mack Smith touches on these issues; he argues that the fascist regime was “without popular support, without the indispensable preliminary studies which were patently necessary, and without the trained colonial administrators and technicians necessary for success.”<sup>4</sup> Mussolini faced the daunting task of selling to his Italian subjects an invasion that, according to many, was doomed to failure from the beginning and, even if it were successful, would bring few benefits.

It was with these doubts in mind that Mussolini and his fascist government embarked upon a wide-scale propaganda campaign on the eve of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. The very fact that Mussolini chose to initiate this new program reiterates the general lack of support for the invasion. This new propaganda campaign fundamentally changed the fascist regime’s rhetorical relationship with the Roman Empire. As I will investigate through the remainder of the thesis, the Second Italo-Ethiopian War ushered Mussolini into a period of extreme militarism and imperialism, a dramatic shift in policy that he hoped to justify through the cult of *romanità*.

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<sup>2</sup> Alberto Sbacchi, Legacy of Bitterness: Ethiopia and Fascist Italy, 1935 – 1941 (Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1997) 36.

<sup>3</sup> Sbacchi 36.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Mussolini’s Roman Empire 43.

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## Reasons for War

Mussolini did not become imperialistic overnight. Rather, this new policy was a product of his opportunism. On the eve of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, Mussolini himself believed a colonial invasion was the best possible means to achieve his overall aim of making Italy great once again. Plan A, the domestic front, had failed; it was time for Plan B. Why exactly Mussolini considered an overseas invasion the best plan, however, is still up for discussion. Scholars have debated this very question for years and have been unable to reach any sort of consensus. In his article investigating the various potential reasons why *Il Duce* called for a colonial war, Renato Mori provides an excellent synthesis of the varying historical opinions. On one side, there are historians who argue that Mussolini did not actively want to invade the African nation but, rather, recognized the necessity of distracting his country from the serious economic crisis in which it found itself. Historians such as George W. Baer led this charge of attributing the war to primarily economic factors.<sup>5</sup> Because Italy was in such bad shape economically speaking, Mussolini needed some sort of spark to garner support for his regime. The invasion and acquisition of a colonial territory, he thought, would serve this purpose.

Another historical camp, with Lucio Villari as its most prominent advocate, contends that the Ethiopian War was an attempt not only to overcome Italy's economic difficulties but also, more importantly, to augment Mussolini's authority and prestige.<sup>6</sup> Denis Mack Smith reiterates this idea: "The economic motives for imperialism, though effective as propaganda, would not have borne close and serious investigation. More substantial was the matter of prestige, because

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<sup>5</sup> Renato Mori, "Delle Cause dell'Impresa Etiopica Mussoliniana," *Storia e Politica* 17 (1978): 666.

<sup>6</sup> Mori 666 – 667.

Mussolini urgently needed to reinforce in Italians the belief that Fascism stood for something big, important, and successful.”<sup>7</sup> In this context, the very character of *Il Duce* is paramount. As has been discussed earlier in this thesis, Mussolini was a man who wanted to elevate the Italian nation to greatness and be the man responsible for it. In light of Mussolini’s personal ambition, Villari’s historical camp offers a compelling argument. According to its rationale, the Ethiopian War was a means by which *Il Duce* could bring his people to a prestige unseen since the times of the Caesars.

The historians of this opinion tend to minimize the importance of economic factors. They argue that a war with Ethiopia would, in reality, be of little economic benefit but of significant cost, both in terms of materials and human life. As it ended up, the Ethiopian War was indeed a huge drain on Italy’s resources.<sup>8</sup> This argument, however, contains a hint of revisionist history. At the time of Mussolini’s order for the invasion of Ethiopia, it was difficult to predict with any certainty whether or not such a military campaign and subsequent colonial acquisition would bring economic prosperity to the Italian nation. Nonetheless, the argument that Mussolini invaded Ethiopia to enhance his authority and prestige is compelling. Above all, according to Mori, Mussolini needed to achieve a lasting consensus within the Italian people.<sup>9</sup> Mussolini was losing popularity because of the economic downturn. When he first marched on Rome in 1922, he promised economic prosperity. What had he done to accomplish this goal? Ethiopia, according to this historical camp, was Mussolini’s chance to prove his ability to succeed.

Another explanation for Mussolini’s decision to invade Ethiopia is something often referred to as the Adwa complex. In the late nineteenth century, the new Italian nation had

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<sup>7</sup> Smith Mussolini’s Roman Empire 65.

<sup>8</sup> Mori 667.

<sup>9</sup> Mori 667.

hoped to join its European counterparts in the scramble for colonial territories and, accordingly, sought the African kingdom of Ethiopia as its own. An Italian invasion force on March 1, 1896, entered Ethiopian soil and approached the town of Adwa. The battle that ensued, the Battle of Adwa, could not have gone worse for the Italian army as they were completely crushed by a much more poorly equipped Ethiopian defense force. Such a crushing defeat was a humiliation to the Italian army and the Italian nation as a whole. While other European powers had cruised to victories over helpless African forces, the Italians were utterly destroyed. Even on the eve of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War in 1935, the Italian people, according to the proponents of the Adwa theory, had not yet recovered psychologically from such an embarrassing defeat. Benito Mussolini, as David Clay Large argues, was not immune from this mindset. According to Large, *Il Duce*'s desire to exact revenge for Italy's crushing defeat in the Battle of Adwa was the primary motivation for his decision to invade Ethiopia.<sup>10</sup> Through the conquest of Ethiopia, Mussolini would be able to remove the stain of defeat from Italy's national honor.

Thus, three main arguments for the causes of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War have been established: the war as a way to divert attention away from Italy's economic problems, the war as a way to increase prestige (both Italy's and Mussolini's), and the war as a way to avenge the humiliation of Adwa. While holes exist in all three arguments, each offers an intriguing angle from which to view the war. All three hold validity for the purposes of this thesis. Throughout this work, I have argued that, above all, it was Mussolini's overwhelming desire to make Italy a great power again (with himself at the head of course) that guided nearly all of his actions throughout his twenty years in power. Regarding the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, *Il Duce* once

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<sup>10</sup> David Clay Large, "Mussolini's Civilizing War," MHQ: Quarterly Journal of Military History vol. 5, 2 (1993): 45.

declared: "My goal is simple. I want to make Italy great, respected, and feared."<sup>11</sup> With this proclamation by Mussolini in mind, all three explanations coincide. The economic problems plaguing Italy made such a goal nearly impossible; to be a great power, Italy would need economic prowess. Accordingly, Mussolini saw a colonial invasion as an avenue for achieving economic growth. Furthermore, success in war would certainly bring prestige to Mussolini and his country – as the second argument goes. Lastly, a feared and respected Italy could not be possible if the stain of Adwa remained branded in the Italian psyche. Over the past few years, the regime, lacking any tangible results, had lived on rhetoric. Suddenly an imperialist adventure seemed the solution to attain some sort of prosperity and national honor. Just as Mussolini's opportunistic and ambitious mindset guided his policy regarding *romanità*, so too did it guide his foreign policy regarding the Second Italo-Ethiopian War.

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## The Invasion<sup>12</sup>

The Second Italo-Ethiopian war began on October 3, 1935 as General De Bono led his Italian army into Ethiopian territory from Italian Eritrea.<sup>13</sup> Though the war lasted less than a year (it ended on May 7, 1935 with the Kingdom of Italy's annexation of the African state), it was a war with mostly negative consequences for *Il Duce* and his fascist government. The length of eight months that it took Italy, a supposed world power, to conquer the uncivilized Ethiopians demonstrated that Mussolini's Italy still lagged far behind other European countries in terms of military might. As the rest of the world watched the Italian invasion, the difficulty that the Italian army faced in its Ethiopian campaign was a source of embarrassment for the

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in: Large 45.

<sup>12</sup> This next section is based primarily on David Clay Large's article previously cited.

<sup>13</sup> Angelo Del Boca, The Ethiopian War, trans. P.D. Cummins (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965) 44.

fascist dictator. His invasion of Ethiopia, as discussed in the previous section, was supposed to be the catalyst for a rise to national and personal greatness. Instead, it brought only disappointment. During the first two months of the war, General De Bono, in charge of all Italian forces in Ethiopia, made several significant territorial gains, specifically taking the city of Mekele, the capital of the northern province of Tigre, on November 8. Nonetheless, *Il Duce* was not satisfied with the army's progress. According to Mussolini, De Bono had been unnecessarily cautious. When De Bono argued that his army needed more rest and better supplies, *Il Duce* rebuked him for delaying the invasion and demanded an immediate takeover of the entire Tigre region. Weeks after the conquest of Mekele, Mussolini called for the resignation of General De Bono and replaced him with his old rival, Marshal Pietro Badoglio. The appointment of Badoglio, notorious for his ruthlessness, fundamentally altered the theme of the war; no longer did the Italian army show any restraint or mercy towards its enemy. The Second Italo-Ethiopian became a war marked largely by brutality.

From this point onwards, the Italian army bombed hospitals and Red Cross buildings, systematically annihilated undefended villages, and even resorted to using mustard gas on enemy soldiers as well as civilians. According to the military historian David Clay Large, the barbarity by the Italian army paved the way for Japan's merciless invasion of China in 1937 and the violent Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939. In the bombing of one such defenseless village, a bottle dropped by an Italian pilot was found filled with a note that read: "Long live Italy, long live the Duce, long live the King. We bring, along with our tricolor, the *fasces*, and the civilization. Greetings to the Negus. Ask him if he has digested his biscuits [bombs]."<sup>14</sup> As this note suggests, the fascist ministry had convinced its soldiers that their fight was a noble one. During the war, Mussolini led a campaign all across Italy to convince his subjects of the

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<sup>14</sup> Large 50.

worthiness of their cause in Ethiopia. In December of 1935, he spoke: “The war that we began in the land of Africa is a war of civilization and liberation. It is the war of the poor. The Italian people feels [this war] as its own. It is the war of the poor, of the disinherited, of the proletariat.”<sup>15</sup> It was a war of liberation both for Ethiopia and Italy. Through such a war, Italy would return international prominence to its own people and civilizing power, the power of the Roman Empire reborn in modern Italy, to the Ethiopian people.

The Italian incursion into Ethiopia marked the end of Italy’s peaceful role within Europe and, as a result, the end of its inclusion in the League of Nations, from which it withdrew in 1937. Many other European powers, specifically Great Britain, were horrified by the brutal tactics used by the Italian army throughout the invasion. On several occasions, the British minister in Ethiopia sent word back to London that Italian pilots deliberately targeted hospitals and Red Cross buildings. Despite efforts by the League of Nations to convince Mussolini not to invade the neutral African kingdom of Ethiopia, *Il Duce* consistently refused. As a result, the League of Nations applied economic sanctions against Italy for invading Ethiopia, a fellow member of the League of Nations. Mussolini did not understand the British objections; he argued: “The Italians do not ask for British territories but instead only intend to act like the English have done for centuries. Italy too has a right to a place in the sun.”<sup>16</sup> Though Mussolini’s arguments may have had some merit, the League of Nations nonetheless disapproved, and, as a result, Mussolini moved much closer to Nazi Germany. Fascist Italy’s burgeoning relationship with Nazi Germany paved the way for World War II. The Second Italo-Ethiopian War, therefore, had considerable consequences in the realm of foreign policy.

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<sup>15</sup> Opera Omnia 27. 203.

<sup>16</sup> Opera Omnia 27. 231.

Most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, Mussolini's military campaign in Ethiopia had significant ramifications for the ways in which he addressed his ancestors, the Romans. It was impossible to effectively reconcile his earlier *romanità* propaganda campaign, the one that emphasized a rural, agricultural, and pacifistic Italy, with the imperialistic, aggressive, and militaristic Italy that the world saw in the Second Italo-Ethiopian. Even attempting to maintain this sort of image certainly would have been contradictory. Of course, this did not stop the Italian dictator. Even when his Italian forces were embarking upon a brutal military campaign in Africa, Mussolini maintained that Italy was a peaceful nation. In February of 1936, he declared: "Italy wants security in Africa, peace in Europe."<sup>17</sup> The hypocrisy of *Il Duce* is more than apparent. Conveniently for Benito Mussolini, however, the people he chose to mimic, the Romans, were full of contradictory personalities. At times they emphasized pacifism and agriculture, other times expansion and imperialism. In the Roman race, Mussolini found a model that he could opportunistically twist to any occasion. The conquest of Ethiopia in 1936 provided another such opportunity for *Il Duce* and his vision to make Italy great once again. A changed *romanità* had become the language of this new Italian greatness.

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<sup>17</sup> Opera Omnia 27. 224.

## Chapter IV: *Romanità* in Mussolini's New Roman Empire

On the evening of May 9, 1936, from the central balcony of Palazzo Venezia in Rome, Benito Mussolini proclaimed to a massive crowd of euphoric Italian citizens:

Italy finally has her own Empire. A fascist Empire because it carries the indestructible signs of will and the power of the fasces, because this is the goal towards which for fourteen years all energy was stressed and disciplined in the youth . . . Empire of peace, because Italy wants peace for herself and for everyone; Italy decides for war only when forced by urgent times . . . An Empire of civilization and humanity for all the people of Ethiopia. This is within the tradition of Rome, that, having won, it associated its people to its destiny . . . The Italian people have created an Empire with their own blood.<sup>1</sup>

This speech, immortalized by the fascist regime (as the wall paintings of figures H and I, both containing quotes from this speech, demonstrate), had immense repercussions for the fascist regime, the Italian people, and the country as a whole. Victor Emanuel III of Savoy became the Emperor of Ethiopia, and Pietro Badoglio, the victorious Italian general, was named viceroy.<sup>2</sup> Everyone watching *Il Duce*'s famous "Declaration of Empire" on this day, however, knew these were meaningless titles. There was a new Roman Empire, but Benito Mussolini, the fascist dictator, was its true Emperor. From this point onwards, the fascist regime underwent a radical change. *Il Duce*, the new Augustus Caesar, embarked upon a mission to make his own Italy into an Empire that could even rival his ancient predecessor, the Roman Empire.

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<sup>1</sup> Opera Omnia 27. 268 – 269.

<sup>2</sup> Letizia Argenteri, "'Faccetta Nera, Bell'Abissina!' The Power of Fascist Political Propaganda," American Italian Historical Association 30 (1999): 3.

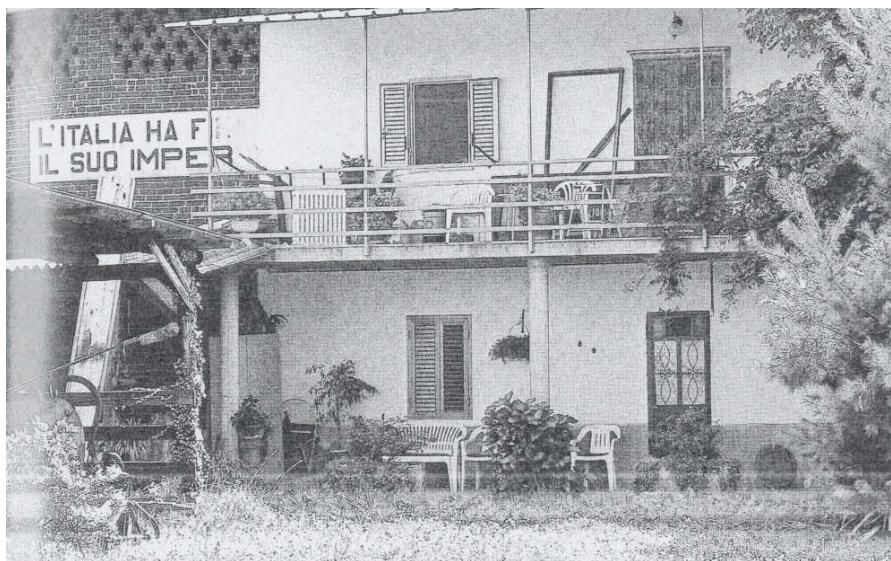


Figure H - “Italy finally has her own Empire.”<sup>3</sup>



Figure I - “The Italian people have created an Empire with their own blood”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ariberto Segàla, I Muri del Duce (Gardolo [Trento]: Arca, 2000) 155.

<sup>4</sup> Segàla 156.

## Maps of Empire – The Basilica of Maxentius

Even before the final conquest of Ethiopia in 1936, Mussolini had already begun to plan for Empire. As early as 1934, he had commissioned several officials within his regime to construct four large marble maps that would encapsulate the past conquests of the Roman Empire. Mussolini charged the Office of Fine Arts of the Governorship of Rome (*Ufficio di Belle Arti del Governatorato di Roma*) with the task, and, on April 21, 1934, the fascist regime unveiled their work. Figure J, listed below, shows all four maps in order from left to right. The choice of April 21 for the inauguration was quite deliberate; it marked two fascist holidays, Labor Day (*La Festa del Lavoro*) and the mythical anniversary of the foundation of the Rome.<sup>5</sup> Sharing the date with the foundation of Rome was particularly significant as *Il Duce* hoped to demonstrate to his Italian subjects that he and his fascist regime were on the verge of creating a New Roman Empire, a continuation of Roman tradition.



Figure J<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Heather Hyde Minor, “Mapping Mussolini: Ritual and Cartography in Public Art during the Second Roman Empire,” *Imago Mundi* 51 (1999): 149 – 150.

<sup>6</sup> Barron Private Collection, March 2008.

Mussolini chose the Basilica of Maxentius along the *Via dell'Impero* (the modern day *Via dei Fori Imperiali*) as the location for the maps. Figure K is a street plan north of the Forum, showing how the new *Via dell'Impero* connected the Victor Emmanuel Monument with the Colosseum. The maps, as the street plan shows, were situated on the Basilica of Maxentius, located on the outer wall of the Roman Forum. With such a location, Mussolini aspired to create an avenue connecting a testament to Italy's modern greatness, the Victor Emanuel Monument, with a testament to Italy's ancient greatness, the Roman Colosseum.<sup>7</sup> In the *Via dell'Impero*, past and present joined together to make one everlasting fame. As a result, the Basilica of Maxentius and the *Via dell'Impero* became a patent symbol of Mussolini's imperialistic vision that he slowly began to develop on the eve of the Ethiopian invasion.

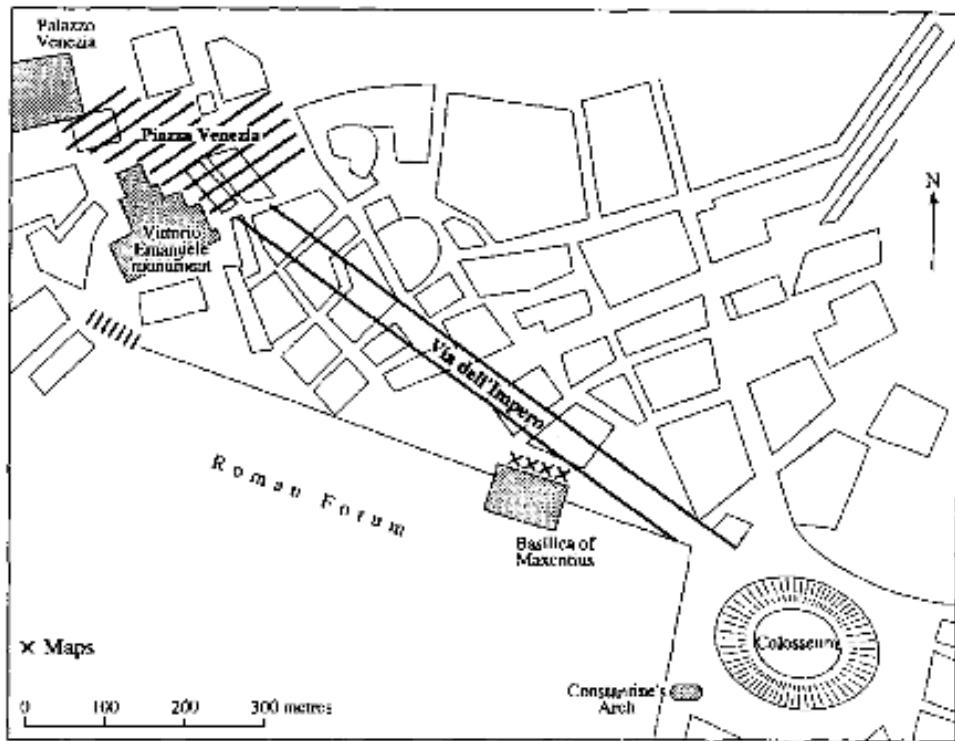


Figure K<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Minor 147; 151.

<sup>8</sup> Minor 152.

The intent of these maps was unmistakable: Mussolini hoped that his own Italy would one day reach the territorial and imperial greatness achieved by the Roman Empire. The message became even more apparent when in 1936, after the successful conquest of Ethiopia, *Il Duce* ordered the addition of a fifth map to the sequence, a map that displayed the territorial triumphs of his New Roman Empire. Denis Mack Smith, in a discussion of the maps on the Basilica of Maxentius, wrote: “As Germany was finding her national formula in racialism, Italians were finding theirs in Roman Imperialism . . . [the] large marble maps . . . marked successive stages in the conquests of the ancient Roman Empire, and Italians enjoyed the implications that history might repeat itself.”<sup>9</sup> These maps along the *Via dell’Impero* marked the beginning of the transition to an imperialistic and militaristic fascist regime.

Mussolini appointed Antonio Muñoz, the Inspector of Antiquities and Fine Arts for the fascist regime, as the man responsible for the production of the maps. In his contemporaneous work, written in 1935, about Mussolini’s renovation of the Eternal City, Muñoz wrote that the maps represented “in an obvious way to the eyes of the people, both learned and uncultivated, the development of the dominion of Rome . . . The Duce himself wanted these lapidary maps to be displayed in this location, teaching and providing a lesson for all; remember our pride, hope for our future.”<sup>10</sup> Mussolini imparted upon Muñoz his conception of what the maps should embody, and, consequently, the maps reflected his vision. The maps, as Muñoz wrote, connected remembrance of the past with hope for the future. This connection between the past and the future was the very essence of Mussolini’s *romanità*. With Mussolini’s orders and Muñoz’s production, the maps on the Basilica of Maxentius were a wonder at which all Italians could marvel for years to come.

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<sup>9</sup> Smith, Mussolini’s Roman Empire 84.

<sup>10</sup> Antonio Muñoz, Roma di Mussolini, (Rome: Fratelli Treves, 1935) 221 – 222.

A more detailed description of the five maps is in order. The first map displays the beginning of the Roman State, headed by Romulus, in the eighth century B.C.E., the second map the Roman Empire after the Punic Wars in 146 B.C.E., the third the Roman Empire at the death of Augustus in 14 C.E., the fourth the Roman Empire during the time of Trajan (the Roman Empire's territorial peak) from 98 to 117 C.E., and, lastly, the fifth map the New Roman Empire with Mussolini as its *imperator* (See Figures L, M, N, O, and P). The continual growth of the Roman territory from Map 1 to Map 4 demonstrated that the Roman Empire was one of progress and territorial expansion. The juxtaposition of these four maps with the fifth map of the New Roman Empire was a blatant attempt by the fascist regime to draw a direct correlation between the two empires. Just as the Roman Empire of the past increased in size from Map 1 through 4, the placement of Map 5 hinted that future maps would surely also increase in size. The choice of coloring, furthermore, was quite telling. The territories of the Roman Empire were marked by white, the light of civilization, while all the territories elsewhere were black, left in the dark without Roman civilization to guide them to the light. It was Mussolini's deluded hope to extend this light throughout all the world.

Though the Empire of Augustus and Trajan far exceeded that of Mussolini territorially, this did not stop Mussolini's apologists from suggesting that Mussolini's Empire was the greater one. In an entry in the fascist journal *L'Urbe* in 1936, Giuseppe Bottai published a review of Mussolini's recently constructed fifth map. He boasted that Mussolini's new Empire penetrated further into the African continent than Augustus' ever had. The fascist journalist declared with absolute certainty that Mussolini's Empire would "prosper through the Italian people's work and be . . . defended against all-comers by their arms."<sup>11</sup> According to fascist supporters, the New

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<sup>11</sup> Giuseppe Bottai, "La Carta Marmorea dell'Impero Fascista," *L'Urbe* 1 (1936): 3 – 4.



Figure L – Map 1<sup>12</sup>  
ROMA AI SUOI INIZI. SEC. VIII. AC.



Figure M – Map 2<sup>13</sup>  
DOMINIO DI ROMA DOPO LE GUERRE PUNICHE. A 146 A.C.

<sup>12</sup> Barron Private Collection, March 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Barron Private Collection, March 2008.



Figure N – Map 3<sup>14</sup>  
L'IMPERO ALLA MORTE D'AVGUSTO IMP. A. 14 D.C.



Figure O – Map 4<sup>15</sup>  
L'IMPERO AL TEMPO DI TRAIANO IMP. 98 – 117 D.C.

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<sup>14</sup> Barron Private Collection, March 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Barron Private Collection, March 2008.

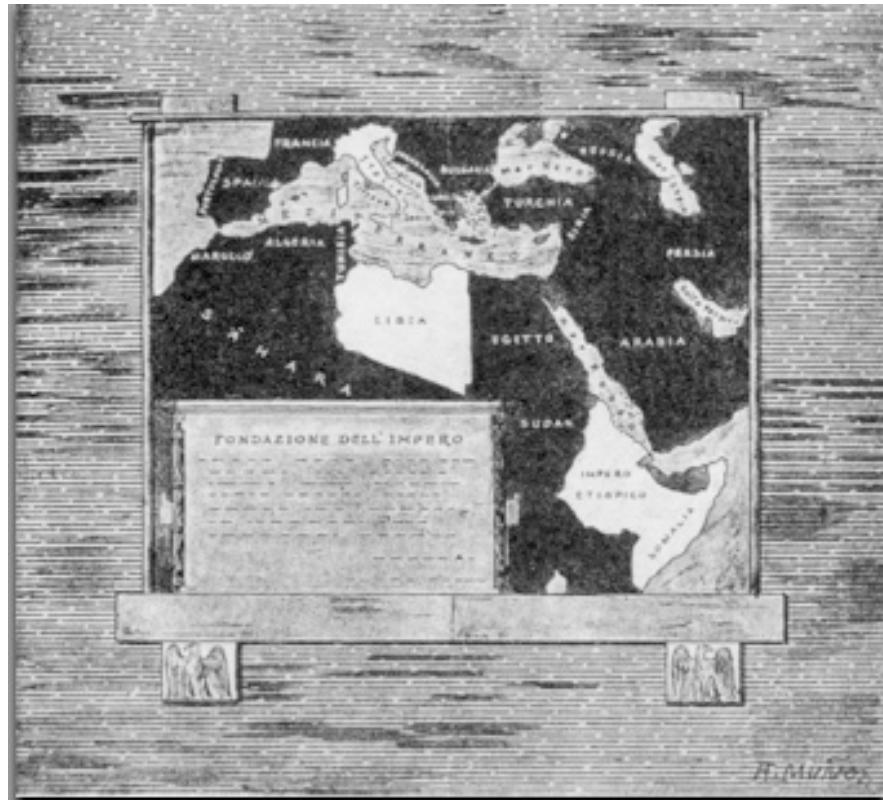


Figure P – Map 5<sup>16</sup>  
Sketch of New Roman Empire by Antonio Muñoz

Roman Empire, as a direct continuation from the First, would continue to prosper with Mussolini.

Though the first four maps remain in the same position today, after Mussolini's fall from power in July 1943, the fifth map, considered a relic of an embarrassing fascist past, was covered with red paint by anti-fascist crowds. After the Allied forces liberated Rome in November of 1944, the Commission of History and Art demanded the fifth map's removal from the wall. It was not until a year later, however, that the new Italian government officially ordered the removal. As much as the fifth map was an object of anti-fascist sentiment during the years after

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<sup>16</sup> Minor 155.

the death of Mussolini, it was equally an object of fascist and imperialistic sentiment during Mussolini's time in power.

The maps on the Basilica of Maxentius along the *Via dell'Impero* were but one example of the use of Roman themes in an overtly imperialistic manner. As has been discussed previously, the fascist victory in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War and the subsequent "Declaration of Empire" were paramount in this change in fascist sentiment and policy. The years after the creation of these maps saw countless other efforts on the part of Mussolini and his fascist government to emphasize the more militaristic aspects of Roman culture. As the next part of this thesis will contend, distinct contrast developed between the *romanità* before 1935 and the *romanità* afterwards. Keeping in mind the opportunistic and ambitious character that defined Benito Mussolini, however, this drastic change is far from surprising.

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### **A New and Improved *Romanità***

After the successful conquest of Ethiopia in 1936, the most apparent change in *romanità* propaganda was that now, instead of skirting around the idea of Empire, Mussolini and his fascist propaganda openly reveled in it. While earlier in his regime Mussolini wanted the Italian people to look up to the Romans as a model civilization, the "Declaration of Empire" by Mussolini indicated that they now equaled, if not bettered, their ancestors in prestige. In turn, this instilled in the Italian populace a strong sense of superiority. While they were the new and improved Roman race, their European counterparts, though perhaps more technologically and industrially advanced than the Italians, were considered lesser. Fascist propaganda now referred

to the Gauls and Britons as barbarians, just as they were in the times of the Romans.<sup>17</sup> The Italians were once again the leading light in a world of darkness.

*Romanità* became the basis of Mussolini's newly conceived imperialistic vision. Just as Hitler justified Nazi imperialism in Eastern Europe, Mussolini constantly pointed to the imperialistic vision of the original Roman Empire as a precedent for his aggressive endeavors in the Mediterranean and Africa.<sup>18</sup> Subsequently, Mussolini's language during this period took on a much more radical and imperialistic tone. No longer did he keep a pacifistic face for the other world powers to see. He believed that Italy had finally achieved its place in the sun and never shied away from showing it. Fascist foreign policy and internal propaganda became based on this Roman imperialistic vision. In the words of Emilio Gentile: ". . . the myth of Humanity had entered into Fascist culture, mainly to legitimize its totalitarian aspirations and create a new religion of the state."<sup>19</sup> A policy and ideology revolution had occurred within the fascist regime, and *romanità* was at its forefront.

The fascist school system exhibited these changes in the post-Ethiopian War period. In 1937, Mussolini established a youth body named the Italian Youth of the Lictor. While previously there had been several youth organizations, the fascist regime decided to merge them all into this one organization. The name of this new organization, the Italian Youth of the Lictor, is particularly intriguing because of its reference to Roman culture. Throughout the Roman Republic and Empire, the lictors were those who, bearing the Roman *fasces*, defended the consuls. By giving the new youth organization such a name, Mussolini demonstrated his hope that the fascist youth would be the lictors of the New Roman Empire, those who would bear the

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<sup>17</sup> Melograni 230.

<sup>18</sup> Bondanella 183 – 184.

<sup>19</sup> Emilio Gentile, The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy, trans. Keith Botsford (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) 75.

*fasces* in defense of *Il Duce*. In this new system, the emphasis was placed on military training for fascist youth. With Mussolini as the guiding force, the fascist regime began to exert even more influence upon the Italian education system. During this period, it was not uncommon for fascist party leaders to speak several times a day to the Italian youth. Even jurisdiction over rural schools, historically controlled at the local level, was transferred to the control of the Ministry of Education.<sup>20</sup>

Fascist schoolbooks circulating in the years after the Italian conquest of Ethiopia exemplify the new emphasis on imperialism and the Roman Empire. One history textbook, offering a simplified and brief history of Italy since its unification in 1870, considered the March on Rome and the triumphant conquest of Ethiopia as the watershed moments in Italian history.<sup>21</sup> Other textbooks stressed the same aspects of Italian history. In one particular textbook intended for fascist youth, the Ethiopian War, referred to as the greatest colonial war in history, played the most significant role in the modern history of Italy. Furthermore, as this one book suggested, the entire history of modern Italy culminated in Mussolini's "Declaration of Empire" on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1936, the mythical day in which the Caesars' Rome and Mussolini's Rome were joined together in a sacred bond.<sup>22</sup> Just as the Ethiopian War was the turning point for Mussolini's regime, as fascist textbooks during this period argued, it equally was the turning point for the Italian people.

Nowhere else was Mussolini's turn towards a militaristic *romanità* more evident than in the fiery speeches he gave during this period. In the years after the Second Italo-Abyssinian War, Mussolini's speeches were often held in tandem with public spectacles and ceremonies highlighting the grandeur of Rome, both past and present. Militarism overwhelmingly marked

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<sup>20</sup> Clive Foss, "Teaching Fascism: Schoolbooks of Mussolini's Italy," Harvard University Library vol. 8, 1 (1991) 10.

<sup>21</sup> Clive Foss, "Teaching Fascism," 16.

<sup>22</sup> Clive Foss, "Teaching Fascism," 17.

their tone. Perhaps the greatest example of Mussolini's increasingly aggressive tone after his victories in Ethiopia is his famous speech to the Sicilian town of Syracuse on August 28, 1937, in which he exclaimed: "I am certain that Italy, the Empire, and Fascism can count on you, on your strong hand, on your dire tenacity, on your intrepid heart. And remember that Rome subdues."<sup>23</sup> This famous speech, titled "*Roma Doma*" ("Rome Subdues"), made it clear to the Italian people that he intended an aggressive future for their nation. The world was theirs for the taking.

Similarly, on May 25, 1936, in a speech titled "Imperial May", Mussolini reminded the Italian youth of their duty to the Empire: "We prepare to defend the Empire; the youth, armed for tomorrow, will be invincible, because they are enlivened with the fascist spirit."<sup>24</sup> Any reference to Empire, as is true in this particular speech, was a deliberate attempt by *Il Duce* to draw the connections between Rome of old and the Rome of new. Accordingly, in any discussion of Empire, militarism and aggressiveness must also be present. Just months after the end of the war, Mussolini spoke of the odds that his Italian countrymen had overcome in their quest for greatness: "The Empire was not born out of compromises on the tables . . . of diplomacy. It was born out of five glorious and victorious battles."<sup>25</sup> The basis of Empire, according to Mussolini, is conquest in battle. Simple as it may sound, Empire implies imperialism, aggression, and militarism. Therefore, on its most elementary level, it is incompatible with the pacifistic persona that Mussolini had put on throughout his first ten years in power. Mussolini the pacifist was no more. Militarism was the only option.

In Mussolini's eyes, Italy had entered into a new era in the history of Fascism. In October of 1936, he pronounced to a crowd that "Years twelve, thirteen, and fourteen [1934,

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<sup>23</sup> Opera Omnia 28. 243.

<sup>24</sup> Opera Omnia 28. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Opera Omnia 28. 33.

1935, and 1936] of the fascist era: the period of Empire. A people without space cannot live; a people bearing an ancient and magnificent culture, like the Italian people, has certain rights on the face of the earth.”<sup>26</sup> Mussolini’s words in this particular speech yield interesting insights into how he viewed the connections between his own Italy and its Roman ancestors. Implied in his speech is the idea that because Mussolini’s Italy was ancestrally connected with the Rome of the Caesars, it is therefore entitled to a special place in the world. In other words, because of his ancestors’ achievements, Mussolini considered himself entirely justified in his quest for Empire.

At the center of this Empire, of course, was Benito Mussolini himself. As Peter Bondanella argues, his passionate speeches about *romanità*-based imperialism “depended as much upon the Duce’s physical presence and the magic of his oratory as they did upon mythic content.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, Mussolini and *romanità* propaganda remained inextricably linked. On October 24, 1936, *Il Duce* spoke to the 10<sup>th</sup> legion of the Italian army, the legion that Julius Caesar led during his early army years; Mussolini declared: “I find here, in this square, the same ardent faith, the same quavering enthusiasm, the same spirit of the ‘Tenth Legion’, the legion preferred by Julius Caesar, the founder of the First Empire of Rome.”<sup>28</sup> Through rhetorical mastery, Mussolini aimed to instill this Roman passion, the passion so prevalent in Caesar’s ancient 10<sup>th</sup> legion, in his own Italian army.

Regarding *romanità*, a few aspects of this speech to the 10<sup>th</sup> legion stand out above the rest. Firstly, by calling Julius Caesar’s Empire the *First* of Rome, Mussolini made it clear that he truly believed to have founded a Second Roman Empire. Secondly, to give Julius Caesar the title

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<sup>26</sup> *Opera Omnia* 28. 33. Though Mussolini did not declare Empire until May of 1936, he still refers to years 1934 and 1935 as the years of Empire. Given the subdued and pacifistic tone that Mussolini practiced for the most part during these years, it is rather peculiar that he chose to refer to them as years of Empire. Perhaps, then, Mussolini is already engaging in a re-writing of his own history.

<sup>27</sup> Bondanella 181.

<sup>28</sup> *Opera Omnia* 28. 57.

of “founder of the First Empire of Rome” seems particularly striking when one considers the previous ways in which Mussolini dealt with the Roman leader. As discussed previously in this thesis, Mussolini quite cleverly dealt with all the various and hypocritical Roman characteristics that Julius Caesar embodied. In his conversations with Ludwig, Mussolini rarely referenced Caesar’s destruction of the Roman Republic and subsequent foundation of Empire. The tone and themes of this speech, given a few months after his own “Declaration of Empire”, demonstrated that the situation had changed. Now, Mussolini hoped that his audience would draw a direct connection between Julius Caesar, the founder of the First Roman Empire, and himself, the founder of the New Roman Empire. The imperialistic side of Julius Caesar, the one that Mussolini covered up less than five years ago, was now the one he wanted all onlookers to envision.

Although Julius Caesar remained an important figure in Mussolini’s rhetoric, at this point in his regime, Mussolini astutely recognized that there was a more ideal Roman leader for him to emulate: Augustus Caesar. Julius Caesar, the man who paved the way for Empire, was the perfect model for Mussolini when he was doing the same before 1935. However, in the years after the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, Mussolini believed to have entered his phase of consolidation. Thus, Augustus Caesar, the man who solidified the first Roman Empire, offered Mussolini the perfect exemplar. Figure Q, a postcard of Augustus and Mussolini from 1937, exemplifies the attempts on the part of the fascist regime to draw parallels between the two leaders. Augustus Caesar and Benito Mussolini, both listed as the Founders of Empire (*Fondatori d’Imperi*), stand side by side. The *fasces* hang over the two Roman leaders as symbols of their unparalleled power and prestige. While a garland wreath, a Roman symbol of



Figure Q<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Sturani 290.

victory, divinity, and power, covers the brow of a triumphant Augustus Caesar, a fascist military helmet covers the head of an ambitious and warlike Mussolini. As this post card and his speeches exhibit, Mussolini unmistakably wanted his Italian subjects and the rest of the world to recognize him as the Founder of the Second Roman Empire.

Another piece of propaganda (Figure R – see next page) that was circulated during this period touches on many of the same themes – Empire, militarism, the founder-role of *Il Duce*, and Italy's leading role in the world – already discussed in this section. This postcard differentiates itself from the others cited in this thesis, as this particular one, produced in 1935 when Italy was embarking on its military campaign in Ethiopia, was distributed directly by the Ministry of Popular Culture (*Ministero della Cultura Popolare*). As I discussed earlier in this thesis, typically the fascist regime only indirectly influenced the production of Italian postcards. However, when the need for strong propaganda became absolutely pivotal (as was true during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War), the fascist regime was not afraid to step in directly. As one can easily see, the postcard is full of fascist and Roman images. Beginning with the top of the postcard, one sees the S.P.Q.R. symbol with two children suckling on a wolf, an image synonymous with the Eternal City. The abbreviation S.P.Q.R. stands for the Latin phrase *Senatus Populusque Romanus* (The Senate and the Roman People), which refers to the government of the Roman State and was often used as the official signature of the government. Furthermore, the two young children stand for Romulus and Remus, the mythical founders of the Roman race, suckling on the she-wolf that nourished them. During his fascist regime, Mussolini placed this dual symbol, S.P.Q.R. and the she-wolf with Romulus and Remus, throughout his nation's capital in an effort to remind his subjects of their prominent ancient history. In fact, even to this day, the letters S.P.Q.R. remain the motto of the municipal government in Rome.



Figure R<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Sturani 244.

In the top right of the image, one sees a picture of *Il Duce* surrounded by the words “remember the founder of the Empire!” (“*MEMORE AL FONDATORE DELL’IMPERO*”). Mussolini’s pose here almost identically mirrors that of figure Q, the last postcard analyzed. Just as before, *Il Duce* is pictured in his fascist army helmet with the *fasces*, as a reminder of his power, in the background. Once again, *Il Duce* is bestowed the title *fondatore* of Empire. Just below the image of Mussolini is an image of the Roman eagle, another symbol of Roman military prowess during the times of Republic and Empire. Roman armies often bore this symbol into battle as their battle standards. The figure in the middle of the postcard is a symbol for Italy. Standing on the globe, Italy has assumed its vital and dominating place in the world once again.

The bottom of the postcard is similarly full of powerful images. Factories, wheat, and *fasces* surround the globe. The presence of these images suggests that Italy, as a new leader in the world, is supported by its industrial might (the factories), its agricultural prosperity (wheat), and the strength of its ancestors (the *fasces*). The fascist regime loaded this propaganda piece with images of imperialism and *romanità* in an effort to commemorate the new Italy, a great Italy where success was due, as the postcard suggests, not only to its Roman ancestors but also, more importantly, to its beloved new Caesar, *Il Duce*.

Even though Mussolini’s conception of *romanità* changed drastically after the “Declaration of Empire”, the fascist dictator continued to emphasize the agricultural aspects of Roman culture that he had so often stressed in the early years of his regime, specifically during *La Battaglia del Grano*. In December of 1936, in an article titled “*Italia Rurale*” (“Rural Italy”), Mussolini recognized that the land was still fundamentally important for his nation’s growth:

Through three civilizations, Italy was essentially rural. From the ground, the race attained in millennia the energy of life and the resources of autonomy. Since Rome, consular and imperial, founded the colonies of the legionnaires, the prosperity of the nation always coincided with agricultural growth. Similarly,

political decline was always accompanied, or preceded, by the decline of agriculture.<sup>31</sup>

For once, we see a Mussolini speech lacking, for the most part, any over the top rhetoric. *Il Duce* spoke the truth in this particular instance. All the efforts Mussolini made to modernize and industrialize his country failed for the most part, and Italy still remained a predominantly rural country. Therefore, he deemed it necessary to underscore the importance of agriculture to his nation, no matter the year.

Though Mussolini continued to demonstrate an appreciation for a rural Italy even in the years after the conquest of Ethiopia, his tone in doing so took a militaristic shift. As he often contended, militarism and agriculture went hand in hand. In fact, as the history of the Roman Republic and Empire suggest, they were inseparable. The model Roman citizen was the farmer-soldier. A major problem throughout the history of Rome was land. After soldiers fought for their fatherland, they needed land on which they could settle for the remainder of their lives. Thus, the military and the land were intrinsically linked and eventually became nearly synonymous. The Italian army, like the Roman army, must still depend on agriculture. However, that which gave *Il Duce* hope that his own army could surpass the Roman army was Italy's apparent industrial and technological might. Though the Italian army may need to rely on its Roman ancestors for mental and spiritual strength, through *Il Duce*, it would be able to lead its nation to a prominence even greater than that of ancient Rome.

In this new era of prominence, Augustus Caesar played a significant role in the *romanità* propaganda that Mussolini developed. To the people of Syracuse, in August of 1937, Mussolini passionately uttered: “One needs to return to the times of the First Empire of Rome, and precisely to the age of Augustus, to find a spectacle such as that which Italy offers in this age, so

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<sup>31</sup> Opera Omnia 28. 87.

ardent with passion, so rich with undertakings . . . “<sup>32</sup> The only thing that could rival the Age of Augustus, according to Mussolini, was the Age of Mussolini. In the next few years, Mussolini aimed to praise the first Roman *princeps* and, consequently, highlight the connections between Augustus’ achievements and his own.

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### **Augustus’ Bimillennial Birthday – *La Mostra Augustea della Romanità***

On September 23, 1937, the inauguration of the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* in celebration of the bimillennial birthday of Augustus Caesar, Professor Giulio Quirino Giglioli, the creator and organizer of the exhibition, turned to Mussolini, the patron, and said: “Your work as *civis romanus* is present and life-giving – not merely in what you say, but in the spontaneous connection between so many of your deeds to those of the greatest Romans of two thousand and more years ago.”<sup>33</sup> Whom Giglioli meant by “the greatest Romans” was clear: Julius and, more importantly, Augustus Caesar. From the day of its opening, the *Mostra Augustea* served both as a commemoration of Augustus Caesar and as a celebration of Benito Mussolini. No onlooker could miss the message the fascist regime intended with such a spectacle: Mussolini was the modern Augustus.

The *Mostra Augustea*, erected in the *Palazzo delle Esposizioni* in Rome, became a spectacle for all Italians and the entire world to see. Open for a little more than a year, the exhibition sold 714,628 tickets.<sup>34</sup> During this time, all official visitors to Rome and all official delegations (such as those from Germany and Japan) visited the exhibition in an attempt on

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<sup>32</sup> *Opera Omnia* 28. 232.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in: Gentile 76.

<sup>34</sup> Friedemann Scriba, “The Sacralization of the Roman Past in Mussolini’s Italy. Erudition, Aesthetics, and Religion in the Exhibition of Augustus’ Bimillenary in 1937 – 1938,” *Storia della Storiografia* 30 (1996): 21.

Mussolini's part to impress his allies and demonstrate the greatness of which his new Empire, just like his ancestral one, was capable. Nothing delighted *Il Duce* more than when in May of 1938, Adolf Hitler, dictator of Nazi Germany, on his official visit to Italy, visited the museum on two separate occasions.<sup>35</sup> The *Mostra Augstea* was yet another means for Mussolini to convince all those watching him that his Empire was one of the greatest the world had ever seen.

However, as Friedemann Scriba argues in his analysis of the exhibition, Mussolini was only superficially interested in the Augustan movement. While other Italian scholars during this period had devoted their entire lives to accomplishing a feat such as the *Mostra Augstea*, Mussolini merely viewed the exhibition as a means to consolidate his power and prestige. Mussolini made it clear to the organizers of the exhibition that he wanted the project to coincide with his overall image of *romanità*. Other than this broad instruction, the organizers, specifically Giglioli, were given free rein in the details of the project.<sup>36</sup> What did the details matter to Mussolini? He viewed the project simply as another opportunity to draw more parallels between Augustus and himself.

Augustus was the perfect exemplar for Mussolini and his regime. Throughout his reign, the first Roman *princeps* stressed agricultural growth and recognized the importance of the Roman family. In Augustan Rome, special privileges were bestowed upon individuals who married and had children. There was the so-called *ius trium liberorum*, which gave preference and advancement in government service for those men who fathered children. Bachelors, on the other hand, were subject to harsh taxation. As seen in Mussolini's *Battaglia del Grano* and his various attempts to instill marriage legislation, Mussolini too shared these goals. On May 26, 1927, in a speech before his fascist supports, he advocated, in addition to a bachelor's tax, the

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<sup>35</sup> Scriba 27.

<sup>36</sup> Scriba 26.

implementation of a tax on childless marriages. Later in this speech, he also emphasized the need to reruralize Italy.<sup>37</sup> Above all, Augustus and Mussolini were concerned with restoring Rome to its traditional values. Augustus hoped to return Rome to sanctity after years of civil war. Likewise, Mussolini viewed the period before Fascism as a period of decadence; thus, he made moral and social reform a top priority throughout the *Ventennio*.

Right around the time the fascist regime created the *Mostra Augstea*, fascist scholars began to write about the similarities between Mussolini and Augustus. According to many of these scholars (Italian as well as many English and American), Augustus, just like Mussolini, came to power because the people wanted a leader who would bring peace and order to their nation.<sup>38</sup> While Mussolini may have originally promised peace and kept Italy peaceful in the first ten years of his regime, his brutal campaign in Ethiopia in 1935 would suggest that *Il Duce* was far from the bearer of peace that these scholars made him out to be. Yet fascist scholars, often sponsored by *Il Duce* himself, overtly attempted to parallel Augustus with Mussolini. Many scholars pointed to their similar political actions and their analogous reactions in the face of the political and social problems that plagued their respective peoples. Many Christian scholars also contended that just as Augustus permitted the rapid diffusion of the Christian message (the validity of this statement certainly could be called into question), Mussolini did the same thing with the Lateran Pacts of 1929, allying the kingdom of Italy with the Vatican.<sup>39</sup>

Before an investigation into the specific works of art present in the *Mostra Augstea*, we must review a few details about the exhibition itself. The entire museum consisted of more than 3,000 casts of ancient statues, portraits, reliefs, and inscriptions. The exhibition was teeming with models of the city of ancient Rome, the most astonishing of which was the model of

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<sup>37</sup> Scott 649.

<sup>38</sup> Mariella Cagnetta, “Il Mito di Augusto e la ‘Rivoluzione’ Fascista,” *Quaderni di storia* 3 (1976): 140 – 141.

<sup>39</sup> Cagnetta 141.

Constantine's Rome, built on a scale of 1:250.<sup>40</sup> Figure S, listed below, offers part of this particular model, specifically detailing the Circus Maximus and the Aventine Hill.

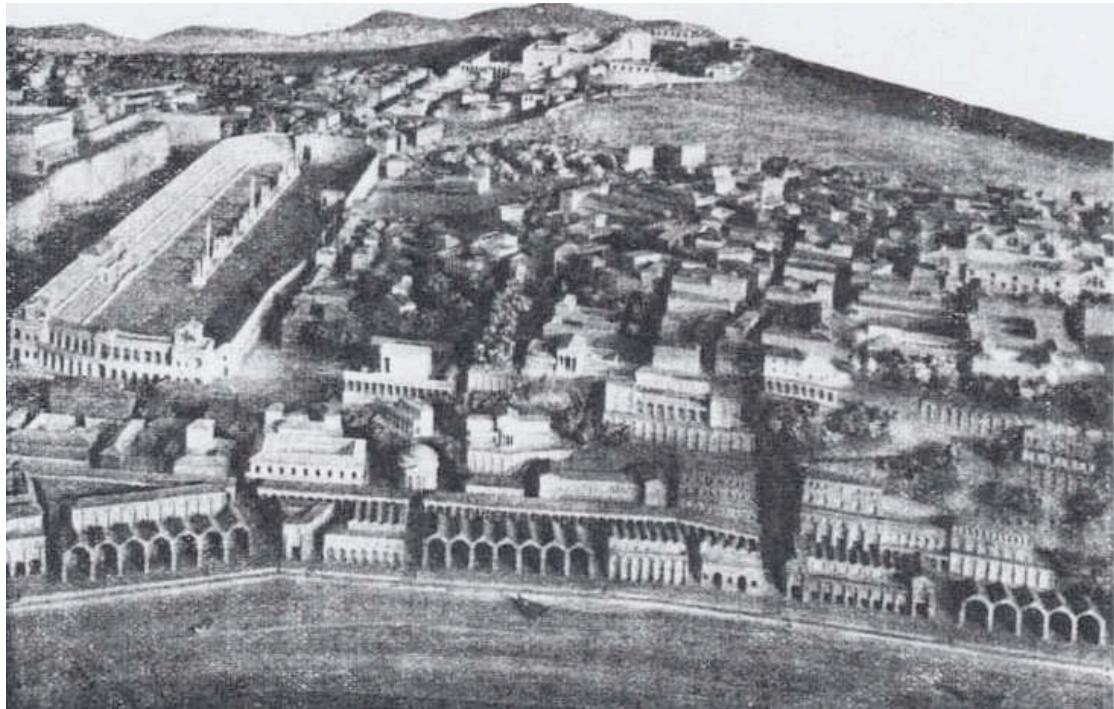


Figure S<sup>41</sup>

The front of the building (Figure T), designed by the Italian architect Alfredo Scalpelli, was impressive in itself. On the left and right of the front of the building were quotes from the famous Italian and Roman authors such as Livy, Cicero, Pliny, Tertullian, and St. Augustine. The Cicero quote chosen for the building, taken from *De Officiis* I.17.57, read:

There is no social relation closer, none closer, none dearer than that which links each one of us with our country. Parents are dear; dear are children, relatives, friends; one native land embraces all our loves; and who that is true would hesitate to give his life for her, if by his death he could render her a service?<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Scriba 21.

<sup>41</sup> Catalogo: Mostra Augustea della Romanità (Roma: C. Colombo, 1938) 596.

<sup>42</sup> Catalogo: Mostra Augustea della Romanità: 3.

Using Cicero as an ancient and respected authority, the fascist regime hoped to evoke the same sense of duty that had inspired Roman citizens for centuries in the hearts and minds of their Italian subjects.

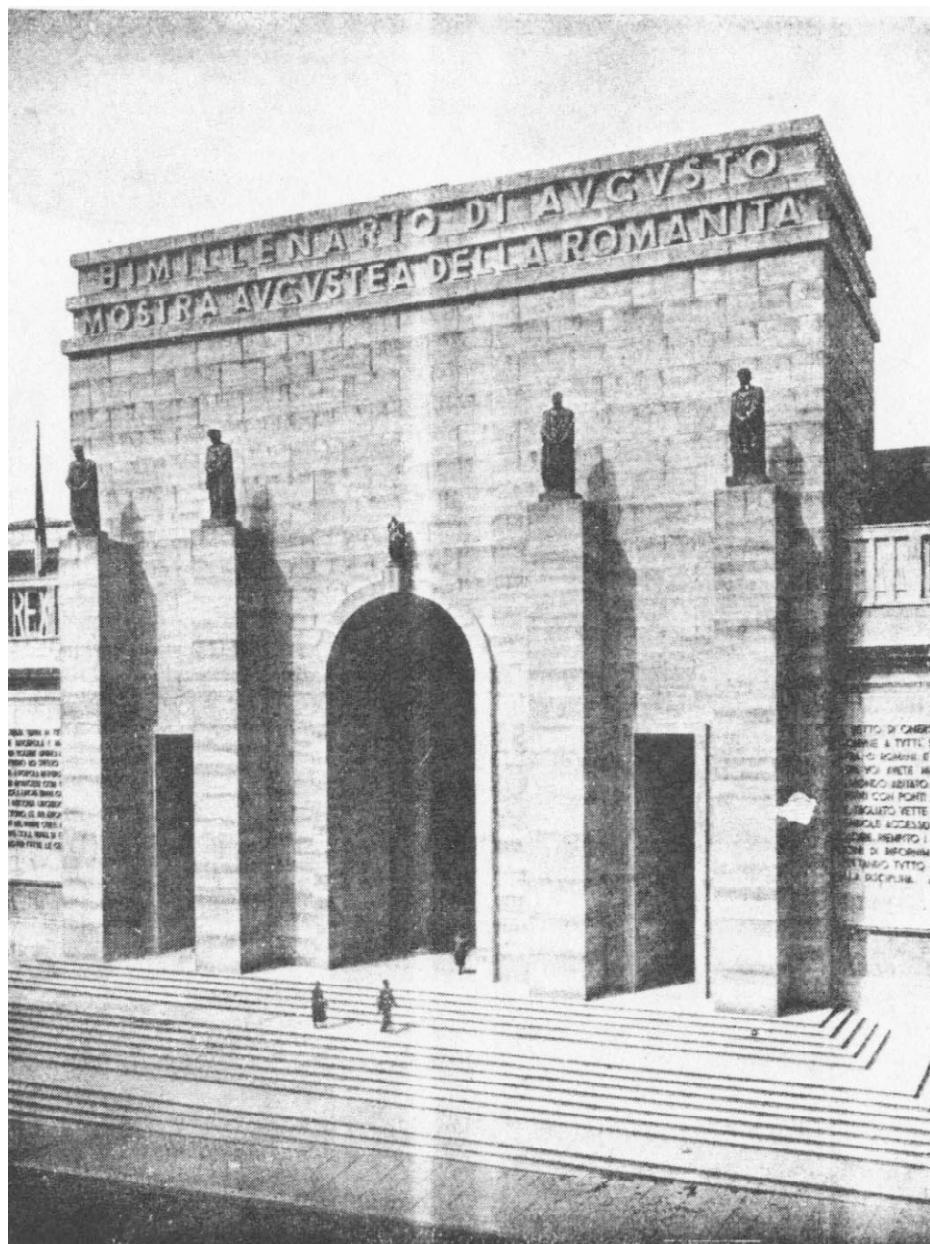


Figure T<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Catalogo: Mostra Augstea della Romanità 3.

Within the exhibition itself, the first twenty-six rooms on the main floor were organized chronologically, beginning with Romulus' furrow and continuing with rooms dedicated to the early expansion of Rome. Further into this sequence were rooms detailing the Roman civil wars of Caesar and Pompey and Marc Antony and Octavian (Augustus Caesar). One of the last rooms of the Roman Empire celebrated the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman world. Each room was devoted to a particular aspect of Roman culture that attempted to strengthen the myth of *romanità* ever-present in fascist culture. The bottom floor of the museum glorified Roman streets, urbanism, architecture and engineering, while the upper floor was devoted to various professions, religion, and everyday life throughout the history of the Roman people.<sup>44</sup> Though the bottom and upper floors also intended to inform the modern Italians about their great ancestors, it was clear to everyone that the main floor, the one which highlighted the glory and conquest of the Empire, was the main event.

Room X on the main floor, titled “Augustus”, was perhaps the highlight of the entire exhibition. According to the official catalogue of the *Mostra Augustea*, it was “truly the center of the exhibition.”<sup>45</sup> After all, the *Mostra Augustea* was a celebration dedicated to the Roman leader. This particular room was full of various statues, maps, inscriptions, and coins that commemorated the years of Augustus’ reign. One particular statue (see Figure U on the next page), the famous *Augusto di Prima Porta*, emphasized the more militaristic side of Augustus Caesar. In it, Augustus is covered from head to toe in traditional Roman military attire. With his left hand, he carries the Roman javelin (*telum*). A Roman crest covers his chest, covered with various Roman symbols, including allusions to Roman deities such as Mars (the god of War).

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<sup>44</sup> Scriba 21.

<sup>45</sup> Catalogo: Mostra Augustea della Romanità 106.



Figure U<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Catalogo: Mostra Augustea Della Romanità 106.

His armor also contains images that related to his conquered territories. The placement of Mercury, the son of Venus, at his left foot is an effort to highlight Augustus' apparent divine ancestry. Throughout his reign, Augustus claimed that his family line, the Caesars, descended directly from Aeneas, the son of Venus and the mythical founder of Rome.

The choice of a militaristic statue is particularly interesting. Unlike his great-uncle Julius Caesar, Augustus was not known for his military prowess. Rather, he consolidated his power and extended the Roman Empire through a keen sense of political relations within Rome and diplomatic tact outside it. The highlight of his regime, after all, was not a victorious battle but the Augustan Peace. Because no Roman leader could appear as anything other than a soldier, Augustus' regime, with Maecenas at the helm, embarked upon a propaganda campaign to make him seem a successful general. The Battle of Actium, Augustus' supposed triumphant victory over Marc Antony, was a mere skirmish. However, as a result of effective propaganda, the Roman world considered it an epic battle victory for Augustus. Similarly, Mussolini was no stranger to exaggeration in the form of propaganda. While Augustus' Battle of Actium supposedly solidified the First Roman Empire, Mussolini's victory in Ethiopia supposedly established the Second Roman Empire. Augustus and Mussolini were equally crafty masters of the art of propaganda.

The largest room by far in the exhibition honored the glory of the Roman Legions. Room XVII, named "*Esercito*" ("Army"), contained countless replicas of Roman military equipment as well as statues commemorating the feats of the Roman army. By displaying such military prowess, the fascist regime hoped that one day its own army of Blackshirts could achieve such prominence. Reconstructions of Roman standards, like the example on the next page (Figure V), filled the room. In this particular example, one sees three different standards that Roman

soldiers carried into battle. To the Roman army, the standards were sacred and could never be surrendered to the enemy. When Gaius Crassus, a famous Roman general and a member of the First Roman Triumvirate (along with Julius Caesar and Pompey), was crushed by the Parthian Army in the Battle of Cumae (53 B.C.E.), his army's standards were lost to the Parthian enemy. The loss of such standards was a huge embarrassment to Rome, and when Augustus came to power, he made their recovery one of his main priorities. The inclusion of standards in the *Mostra Augustea* demonstrated Italian pride for their Roman ancestors' military feats.

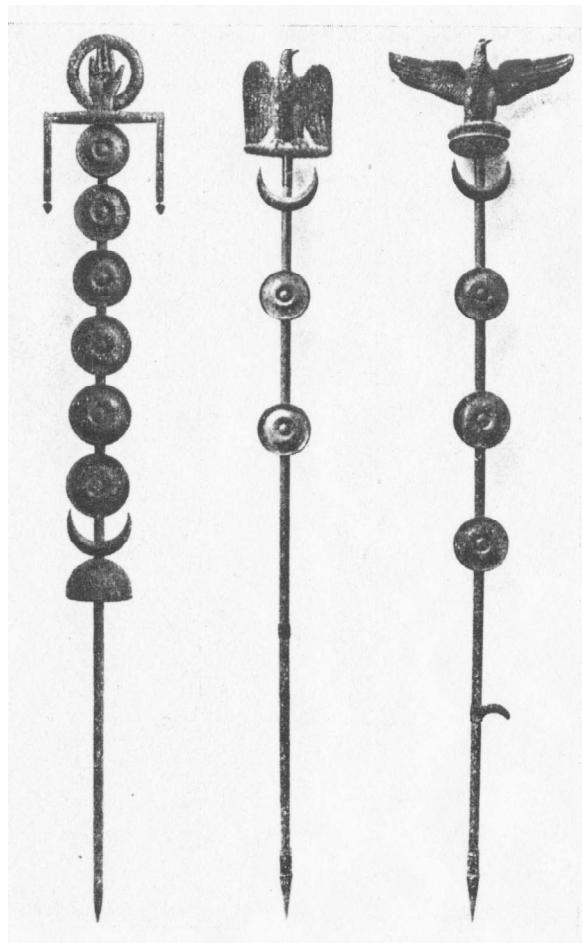


Figure V<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Catalogo: Mostra Augustea della Romanità 48.

The last room of the chronological sequence on the main floor, room XXVI, was labeled “The Immortality of the Idea of Rome: The Rebirth of Empire in Fascist Italy.” Ending the main floor with such a room implied that a fascist Italy, led by Benito Mussolini, was the natural progression of the Roman Empire. The sequence had begun with Romulus, continued with Augustus, and now had culminated with Mussolini. The Roman race, continued by the Italian race, had found a *telos*, an end, in the New Roman Empire. One quote on the wall of the room reiterated this notion: “The idea of an Imperial Rome did not become extinct with the fall of the Western Empire.”<sup>48</sup> It did not become extinct because, according to Mussolini, modern Italy had taken its place. The quote continued: “With Fascism, through the will of *Il Duce*, every Roman idea, every Roman institution, every Roman work returned to shine upon a new Italy, and after the epic feat of the soldiers on African soil, on the ruins of a barbaric empire, the Empire of Rome was resurrected.”<sup>49</sup> The rest of the room contained a variety of art work (statues, maps, inscriptions among them) that highlighted the apparently obvious connections between ancient Rome and modern Italy. Figure W on the next page provides a view of the room as a whole. The entire room was dedicated to Mussolini and his fascist party that had returned Rome once again to its rightful place in the world.

The *Mostra Augustea* stood as a glorification of the Roman past but also a harbinger of what Mussolini wanted to happen in the future. The *romanità* and Fascism room prominently displayed a quote of Benito Mussolini that read: “We who have the privilege to live in this divine peninsula, from where the Romans spread throughout the entire world, need to live not as parasites of their greatness and of their glory, and not be orientated towards the past but be

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<sup>48</sup> Catalogo: *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* 362.

<sup>49</sup> Catalogo: *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* 362.

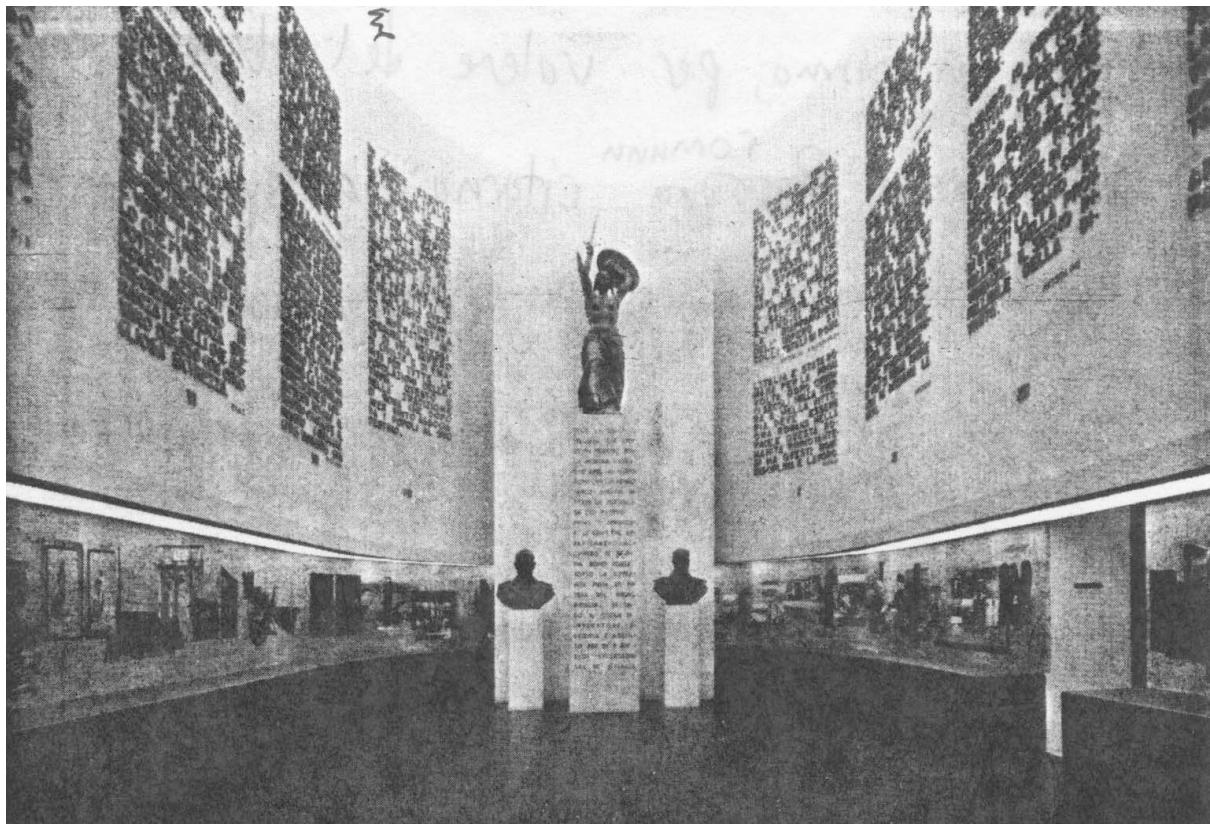


Figure W<sup>50</sup>

orientated with a strength towards the future.”<sup>51</sup> Though Mussolini certainly viewed his Roman ancestors with a proud eye, he declared here his desire to exceed them in greatness and glory. When one considers the ways in which *Il Duce* had presented the Romans only five years earlier, a dramatic transformation becomes plainly obvious. No longer was Mussolini content with viewing the Romans as a sacred role model. While initially ancient Rome was the teacher and Mussolini was the pupil, after the conquest of Ethiopia and the “Declaration of Empire”, Mussolini had become the master. Unfortunately for *Il Duce* and his dazzled Italian countrymen, modern Italy was nowhere near capable of accomplishing feats similar to those of ancient Rome. From the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* onwards, *Il Duce*, backed by his imperialistic and

<sup>50</sup> Catalogo: *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* 371.

<sup>51</sup> Catalogo: *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* 371.

militaristic vision of *romanità*, embarked upon a deluded mission for grandeur that was doomed to failure from the beginning.

## Conclusion

On June 6, 1940, Mussolini issued a final call to arms to his beloved army: “Soldiers of the land, of the sea, and of the air! Blackshirts of the revolution and of the legions! Men and women of Italy, of the Empire, and of the Kingdom of Albania! Listen! . . . Run to arms, and show your tenacity, your courage, your valor!”<sup>1</sup> Four days later, Italy declared war on Great Britain and France and officially entered World War II. Five years later, on April 29, 1945, when Axis forces had finally surrendered to the Allies in Italy, Benito Mussolini met his demise. *Il Duce* was hung upside down from the roof of a gas station in Milan’s Piazza Loreto.<sup>2</sup> When one contrasts the enthusiasm of the Italian nation for his speech in 1940 with its role in his gruesome death in 1945, it becomes evident that things had drastically changed in five years. During that time, according to Denis Mack Smith, “. . . Mussolini deliberately and even carefully steered his fascist movement into imperialism and into a succession of wars which eventually left Italy prostrate.”<sup>3</sup>

After the inauguration of the *Mostra Augustea* in 1937, Mussolini made it clear to everyone that he had found a great vision for Italy, a vision that Italy would one day exceed the fame of its Roman ancestors. After the successful military campaign in Ethiopia in 1936, Mussolini alienated himself from the rest of the members of the League of Nations, as they had disapproved of the invasion. As a result, Mussolini moved closer to an alliance with Nazi Germany, the other aggressive power on the European continent. In 1937, Italy formally withdrew from the League of Nations and entered into the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany

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<sup>1</sup> Opera Omnia 28. 403 – 406.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Mussolini’s Roman Empire 252.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Mussolini’s Roman Empire v.

and Japan. With such powerful allies, Mussolini grew more and more imperialistic and militaristic. He continually demanded that his generals begin preparations for an invasion into East and North Africa, though the generals always responded they were not quite yet ready. In April of 1939, *Il Duce* finally sent Italian troops into Albania. Not yet satisfied, Mussolini pressed for the invasion of Yugoslavia. However, Hitler said no. According to historian Edwin P. Hoyt, the Nazi dictator still sugarcoated the situation for *Il Duce*, “giving [him] the satisfaction of feeling needed, even when the need had passed. Now all had changed, and Italy was relegated to a supporting role. It was the beginning of the end of Mussolini’s dream of Empire.”<sup>4</sup> The subsequent Italian invasion of Greece, without Nazi endorsement, turned into an everlasting failure. From then on, everything Mussolini had hoped for came crashing down; Mussolini faced not only his own country’s defeat but also his own death.

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From the moment that Benito Mussolini marched on Rome on October 27, 1922 to become leader of a new fascist Italy, he understood the power of words. His appreciation for the impact of propaganda allowed him to convince his Italian subjects (and even himself) that modern Italy was destined for greatness. A fundamental aspect of this vision was the myth of *romanità* that remained present in fascist propaganda throughout the entire regime. However, the specific characteristics and facets of Roman culture and history that *Il Duce* chose to highlight changed drastically according to the times. While *romanità* was always important, opportunism always took precedence. Mussolini, above all else, wanted to return the Italian

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<sup>4</sup> Edwin P. Hoyt, Mussolini’s Empire: The Rise and Fall of the Fascist Vision. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1944) 184.

nation to pre-eminence and, of course, be the person responsible for this return. Thus, *romanità* always yielded to Mussolini's opportunistic plan and was molded around it.

In the years before the invasion of Ethiopia, Mussolini hoped to strengthen the Italian nation with an emphasis on peace, agriculture, and the countryside. He viewed these themes as necessary to succeed on the domestic front. Considering the years before fascist Italy a period of social and moral decay, *Il Duce* made it his goal to make Italy a model nation once more. Using the pastoral aspects of Roman culture as a model as seen in the celebration of Virgil's Bimillennial Birthday in 1930, Mussolini sought this goal. During this time, *Il Duce* emphasized many different aspects of Roman culture. Ancient Rome, in Mussolini's eyes, was a model civilization to which he hoped his Italian nation would aspire. He glorified Roman leaders for their achievements but loyally stayed away from any notion of Empire and War. Italy, according to Mussolini, was a peaceful country. Though Roman culture was inherently violent, the fascist dictator carefully skirted around these issues and only focused on the sides of Roman culture that were most useful for him.

This restrained vision of *romanità* continued until 1935 when the situation changed considerably. Mussolini called for the invasion of Ethiopia, and although during the war itself he attempted to maintain the image of Italy as a non-aggressive nation, *Il Duce* had unmistakably changed Italy's course. The creation of an Empire, a new yet still Roman one, on May 9, 1936 ushered in a new era of fascist rule and a new conception of *romanità*. From thence forwards, the fascist-promoted *romanità* took a militaristic and imperialistic turn. Instead of emphasizing pastoral and peaceful aspects of Roman culture embodied in Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, Mussolini highlighted the militaristic might and territorial expansion of his forefathers. He turned outwards, to colonial expansion, to achieve success. Fascist propaganda, the fascist

education system, Mussolini's speeches, and the production of the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* all show the effects of this shift in Mussolini's policies. As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, Mussolini no longer saw the First Roman Empire as a symbol of unattainable greatness. In fact, *Il Duce* convinced his countrymen that their new Roman Empire was capable of even more.

Mussolini's twenty years as head of fascist Italy were full of contradictions. First, he portrayed himself as peace-minded. Ten years later, he was an unabashed imperialist. *Il Duce* said that, for Italy to return to greatness, it must become industrialized and urban. Yet, he also emphasized that Italy had always been rural and must remain so to achieve this greatness. Originally, Mussolini spoke of the Caesars in reserved terms by recognizing both their achievements but also their ruthless sides. After the invasion of Ethiopia, Mussolini considered himself the new Caesar. Countless other examples of Mussolini's hypocrisy and shifting positions can be found throughout his time as head of Italy. *Il Duce* viewed every event he faced as Italian dictator through his own lens of opportunism and adjusted his policies accordingly. With the power of propaganda, what did hypocrisy matter? This mindset, ever present throughout the *Ventennio*, explains why it is impossible to pin down with any certainty who exactly Mussolini was and what exactly Fascism was.

At the end of this study, can one more definitively arrive at a definition of *romanità*? In fact, it still remains a nebulous concept – but this is exactly the point. Who were the Romans? What was Roman culture? These questions are equally difficult to answer. The Romans embodied such a wide variety of qualities that it is impossible to reduce them to any one easy propaganda image. Although far from the classical scholar he hoped to be viewed as, Mussolini recognized the contradictions inherent in Roman culture and exploited them for his personal

gain. The Romans constantly changed what it meant to be Roman; so did Mussolini. Perhaps in this sense Mussolini, a man of contradictions, was more Roman than he could have ever imagined. His conception of *romanità* wavered according to the times, and, thus, what it meant to be Roman during the era of Fascism was always evolving. Nonetheless, throughout all these changes, according to Mussolini, Italy always remained Roman.

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