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# The Past Is How We Present It: Nationalism and Archaeology in Italy from Unification to WWII

Andrew P. McFeaters

*Abstract: Between the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, Italian archaeology was greatly influenced by nationalism. The political use of archaeology by the Italian government can be seen in the years following unification and even more so when Benito Mussolini came to power, determined to make a new Italy modeled after the Roman Empire. He planned to do this by enforcing the adoption of ancient Roman culture, but also by resurrecting the Roman past through various archaeological projects to remind the Italians of their heritage. This goal guaranteed a nationalistic approach to the archaeological record, the effects of which are still visible today, especially in Rome. Despite the fact that large sums of money were poured into the archaeological work of this period, the methods and objectives ensured that only a past that could be sold to the masses was a past worth presenting.*

## *Introduction*

Anyone who has the chance to walk the streets of Rome can understand why it is known as the Eternal City. Evidence of the city's continuous habitation for over two thousand years is clearly visible. As the Holy See of the Catholic Church and the heart of the once great Roman Empire, Rome has been a significant city for much of its existence. The city's most recent rise in prominence began during the period of Italian unification and continued into the interwar years when Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime was set on making Rome, and Italy, great once again. Between unification and World War II, archaeology on the Italian peninsula was developing and changing along with the new state itself. Nationalism, the idea that a state is defined by the people who live within its borders and identify themselves as a single nation, was an important factor in Italy's unification and contributed to the transformations which took place in the other countries of Western Europe during the nineteenth century. Nationalistic ideas were not only affecting contemporary times but also the past by impacting

archaeological objectives during this time. Italian archaeology was influenced by nationalism immediately after the modern state was created, and saw nationalism reach its most influential period during the interwar years when the Fascist regime sought to resurrect classical Rome. Today much of the archaeological work carried out during this period is still visible, although the focus of the remains has shifted from nationalistic propaganda to tourist attractions. As a case study, early Italian archaeology presents an interesting example of the effects a nationalistic approach can have on archaeology and why such an approach can produce ambiguous results.

### *Nationalism and Archaeology*

The past has been used to support political agendas since the Renaissance, if not earlier, by nobles and clerics who felt they needed to justify their position in life by owning ancient objects and works of art (Diaz-Andreu & Champion 1996). When the French Revolution took place, the idea of the nation-state emerged and the political manipulation of the past continued on a much larger scale than before. As a result, the European nations looked to the buried past for evidence to inspire the writing of their own histories. This desire for self-promotion affected contemporary archaeology by institutionalizing it through the creation of museums and its inclusion in universities (Diaz-Andreu & Champion 1996). By the early 1870s, the unifications of Italy and Germany intensified this search for national roots through ethnic and linguistic evidence (Diaz-Andreu & Champion 1996).

Nationalism's relationship with archaeology can be argued as inherent or perhaps even unavoidable, but this does not mean that the results are always negative (Kohl & Fawcett 1995). Nationalism has had a very big impact on archaeology, stimulating it to become a science, developing its infrastructure, and establishing the way in which archaeological knowledge was organized (Diaz-Andreu & Champion 1996). Nationalism encouraged archaeologists to look more closely at spatial variations in the archaeological record than before in order to determine cultural similarities between sites (Trigger 1995). Perhaps if nationalism had not existed, archaeology, or the study of the past in general, would still be a hobby for a few individuals instead of the discipline it has become (Diaz-Andreu & Champion 1996).

The relationship between nationalism and archaeology can be dissected into three aspects (Diaz-Andreu & Champion 1996, citing Sørensen). First, archaeology must be politically useful if it is to become institutionalized. Second, after becoming institutionalized, it enters the public sphere. Third, archaeology is given importance

related to certain political decisions. Finally, propagandistic messages are added to popularize it (Diaz-Andreu & Champion 1996).

### *Italian History*

To better understand how Italian archaeology was affected by unification, Italy's history leading up to that point is briefly summarized here. Between the decline of the Roman Empire and Italian unification, the Italian peninsula was divided up into several small city-states (Guidi 1996). This began to change in 1860 with the initial stages of Italian unification. Unification took place from 1860 to 1870 and was initiated by the northern region of Italy, of which Piedmont and the Island of Sardinia, which made up the Kingdom of Sardinia at the time, played the largest role (Albrecht-Carrié 1962). The underlying motivation for unifying Italy was the northern bourgeoisie's perception that the other two regions were promising markets (Guidi 1996). By 1866, all but the region surrounding Rome had been ceded to the new Italian Kingdom (Albrecht-Carrié 1962). The region around Rome was still controlled by the Papacy with Rome itself being protected by the French. However, in 1870 France was at war with Prussia and had to relocate those troops guarding the Papal State. Italian troops took this opportunity to enter Rome, completing Italy's unification on September 20, 1870 (Albrecht-Carrié 1962).

Once Italy was unified, a centralized government was formed. This new government developed a single agency to deal with the conservation of Italy's cultural heritage (Guidi 1996). The agency, known as the General Direction of Fine Arts and Antiquities, was headed by prehistorian Luigi Pigorini, an unusual choice given Italy's wealth in classical material remains (Guidi 1996). This was not the first centralized agency in the Italian peninsula, however, as the foreign *Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica* had been established in Rome in 1828 by German scholars. This agency, however, was only concerned with classical antiquities and later became the *Istituto Archeologico Germanico* (Guidi 1996:109). The influence of foreign scholars on Italian archaeology is an interesting side note as Rome University's first chair in classical archaeology was given to Emanuel Loewy, an Austrian scholar, at the start of the twentieth century.

### *Italian Archaeology*

The Italian archaeologist Alessandro Guidi (1996) believes that the history of Italian archaeology is similar to that found elsewhere, as archaeology reflects economic, social, and cultural

developments of the ruling elites. His claim is verified by nationalism's impact on Italian archaeology shortly after unification. Prehistory as a study developed in mid-nineteenth century Europe around the time of Italian unification and quickly became a political tool in Italy. Economic expansion in the form of railways, roads, and factories resulted in a large increase in the discovery of archaeological sites on the peninsula (Guidi 1996:110). Those who pioneered Italian prehistoric archaeology were not of the aristocracy, as was traditionally the case in classical studies, but professional men such as engineers, geologists, and naturalists. It is interesting to note that these people belonged to the social class, which was behind the unification, arguably an annexation, of the northern, central, and southern regions of Italy (Guidi 1996).

Interpretations of prehistoric Italy's development were affected by unification since there was a perceived need to justify the way in which the new state had formed. It was widely known that the Roman Empire branched out from Rome, but Italian prehistory offered the ruling elites an older connection to the past, which justified the manner in which the Italian state developed. The prehistorians from the northern region explained prehistoric Italy's development as a series of migrations by northern populations south into the peninsula during the Bronze Age (Guidi 1996). These northern immigrants replaced the Neolithic natives and created new types of settlements, such as *terremare*, or "black earth" settlement mounds, and lake dwellings (Guidi 1996). Their descendants supposedly crossed the Apennines at the close of the Bronze Age to create the Latin and Villanovan civilizations, which sparked a unifying cultural characteristic throughout the peninsula. The hypothesis that civilization came from the north reinforced the contemporary actions of the northern bourgeoisie, which is probably why the hypothesis stood for some time despite significant weaknesses (Guidi 1996). This hypothesis was eventually disproved, however, by archaeological findings. Political use of archaeology in Italy decreased thereafter, but continued to an extent. Archaeology in Italy would not serve a larger political role until after the First World War.

### *Italian Nationalism and Archaeology Between World Wars*

During the interwar years, Italian archaeology was again used as a political tool, however, nationalism's role in Italian archaeology was much greater in this period. After the First World War, Europe was readjusting to life without war. European governments had become so involved in people's lives through social, economic, and

familial aspects because of the war that people were more receptive to state intervention, including ideas that state planning and science would bring national greatness back to their countries (Passmore 2002). On October 28, 1922, the founder and leader of the Fascists, Benito Mussolini, was given the opportunity to lead Italy back to greatness along such lines (Painter Jr. 2005). The Italy that had existed from 1870 to 1922 was regarded as a failure by the Fascists. The hopes and dreams of Italians were not fulfilled by the politicians and political parties during this time, and Mussolini sought change this through a dictatorship which was established by 1926 (Painter Jr. 2005). He believed that Italy's future lay in its past, specifically the Roman Empire. Yet, Mussolini was not the first well known Italian to call for such a course of action. The nationalist and poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, seen as the first Italian propagandist of modern times, called for the revival of the Roman Empire as early as 1912 in his play *La Nave* (Rhodes 1976). Mussolini shared D'Annunzio's disgust with the late nineteenth and early twentieth century liberal Italy (Rhodes 1976). D'Annunzio paved the way for Mussolini by playing upon public sentiment and creating a sense of longing for the glorious past of the Roman Empire.

To increase nationalism and gain support for the Fascist party, Mussolini felt resurrecting ancient Rome would be an excellent means of achieving power, offering a way to preserve Italy amid the changing technological world at the same time (Rhodes 1976). Mussolini intended to resurrect ancient Rome in more ways than one. The word *Fascist*, selected as the name for his party, was derived from the word *fasces*, bundles of birch or elm rods with an axe projecting from one end. *Fasces* symbolized the power the magistrate had in ancient Rome to decapitate and scourge, while also serving as the symbol of official authority. Attendants of the magistrate in ancient Rome, known as *lictors*, carried the *fasces* around for the magistrate as a visual reminder of his power. When Mussolini first began to use the word in 1919 he had incorporated it into the group name *fasci di combattimento*, meaning "bundles for combat" (Rhodes 1976). The *fasci di combattimento* became the *squadristi*, also known as the Blackshirts, who had the job of cutting down opponents like the communists (Rhodes 1976).

Mussolini's approval of the classical *fasces* symbol ensured the symbol became representative of the Fascist party. In fact, the *fasces* symbol had changed over time, so a decision had to be made concerning which version of the symbol should be employed to represent the Fascist regime (Falasca-Zamponi 1997). Mussolini charged an archaeologist with the task of researching the historical

transformations and original details of the symbol. When confronted with the results, he decided upon the design most common in Roman times, which differed from the design the party had been using. The design the Fascist party was currently using placed the axe in the middle of the rod bundle with the axe head protruding from the top, while the particular Roman design that was adopted placed the axe outside the bundle (Falasca-Zamponi 1997). This change in symbol design, albeit a small action, provides an example of just how important archaeology was at the time as a source for investigating the past. It was important to Mussolini that the symbol, which would represent him, his party, and his work, be the same symbol that once represented the political elites of ancient Roman society.

Mussolini attempted to identify his party with ancient Rome in other ways as well. The year 1922 marked the beginning of the *Era Fascista*, or E.F., which Mussolini used in place of A.D. (Rhodes 1976). Roman numerals were used to count the years of the *Era Fascista*, so, for example, 1932 A.D. became X E.F. The bourgeois handshake was replaced by the Roman salute and the Youth Movement ranks were given unit titles from the classical Roman army. Also, the various Fascist organizations' standards were modeled on the Roman standards, known as the *labarum*, which had an imperial eagle mounted on top (Rhodes 1976). These attempts to breathe new life into the ancient Roman culture were popular among the Italians for the emotions of unity and nationalism they evoked.

Personally, Mussolini tried to equate himself with some of Rome's best known historical and mythical figures such as Augustus, Romulus, and Aeneas. In doing this, Mussolini's goal was to prove the fascist theory that a new Renaissance would begin and that he would represent the pinnacle of Rome's founders and renewers in an age of heroes (Gilkes 2003). In his autobiography Mussolini states, "my objective is simple: I want to make Italy great, respected, and feared; I want to render my nation worthy of her noble and ancient traditions" (1928:308-9). Part of his plan included making *romanità* a key component of the fascist state and ideology (Painter Jr. 2005). *Romanità*, or Romanness, was not a new ideology, but had existed before the fascist revolution and was employed to justify Italian colonialism in Africa before World War I (Visser 1992). The cult of *romanità* is important because it provided Mussolini with a way to gain public support. The excavations of Rome were one program undertaken to remind the Italian people of their country's legacy. *Romanità* to Mussolini was an incorporation of fascism's emphasis on modernity, youth, revolution, and establishing a new Italy with ancient Rome's glories and achievements (Painter Jr. 2005). Although the

ideology had typically been within the realm of educated elites, it also appealed to the common Italian people (Visser 1992).

As Mussolini employed tactics, which recalled the imagery of ancient Rome and conveyed a sense of tradition, archaeology played a substantial role in providing the raw material the Fascists used for inspiration (Gilkes 2003). This is why archaeology's most prominent days of constructing nationalism took place during the interwar years, especially in Italy and Germany, where it was used to justify racial extermination and the territorial expansion of the two countries (Diaz-Andreu & Champion 1996). In Italy, it was classical archaeology which was influenced the greatest by politics, although prehistoric archaeology was also affected. Much like the Nazis who claimed the existence of a supreme Aryan race, Italian prehistorians began to speculate the existence of a Mediterranean race, claiming a Neanderthal skull found in Guattari cave in 1939 represented the first Italian (Guidi 1996). Classical archaeology received the most political attention, however. Mussolini had big plans for the city of Rome and the remains of the Roman Empire buried beneath it.

In 1924, on April 21<sup>st</sup>, the day attributed as Rome's birthday, Mussolini described his plans for a new Rome in a speech made to its citizens (Packer 1989). He planned to modernize the city, but also to expose its antiquities. This included the following: opening space around the Theater of Marcellus, the Capitoline Hill, and the Mausoleum of Augustus; reorganizing the *Forum Boarium*, *Forum Holitorium*, and the *Velabrum*; excavating the temples in *Largo Argentina*; and accommodating for the Traiano Park (located on the Oppian Hill), the Circus Maximus, the Via dei Trionfi, and the Imperial and Roman Forums (Packer 1989). Figure 1 shows the locations of some of these projects. Mussolini claimed, "by isolating the monuments of ancient Rome, the relation between the ancient Romans and the Italians is made more beautiful and suggestive" (1928:295). The Fascist leader was a showman when it came to promoting the work of his regime and often participated in the inauguration of work programs, including archaeological excavations, by striking the first blow of the pickaxe (Guidi 1996). Fascist nationalism had found its oldest and best source of propaganda: the past.

Of all the archaeological work done in Rome during this period, the most well known was a long-term program to excavate at the Colosseum and Roman Forum (Guidi 1996). The person who oversaw much of the excavation and restoration in this area was the archaeologist Corrado Ricci (MacKendrick 1983). The project ran from 1928 to 1939 and plenty of government funding was devoted to the archaeological work in the forum area (Guidi 1996). During the



project, major sections of the imperial forums were exposed including: the east section of the Forum of Augustus, the west half of the Forum of Caesar, the east and center section of the *Forum Transitorium*, sections of the Markets and Forum of Trajan, and some miscellaneous sections of the Forum of Peace (Packer 1997). The work on Caesar's Forum began in 1930 and was completed after three years (MacKendrick 1983).



Figure 1. (1) Piazza Venetia, (2) Capitoline Hill, (3) Via dell-Impero, (4) Imperial Forums, (5) Roman Forum, (6) Velia Hill, (7) Colosseum, (8) Traiano Park, (9) Via dei Trionfi, (10) Circus Maximus.

A new street, known at the time as the *Via dell-Impero*, was constructed to join the Fascist center in the *Piazza Venezia* to the Colosseum and Forums for the purpose of providing a visual link between two great periods in the country's history (Packer 1989). The new street separated the Roman Forum from the Imperial Forums,

however (Guidi 1996). This division of the forums was intended in order to surround the individual on the street with Rome's past and was a political, not an archaeological, decision. Also, one third of the Forum of Caesar, which is one of the forums that makes up the Imperial Forum, remains buried under this street today (MacKendrick 1983). In Caesar's Forum, Ricci was able to reconstruct three of the temple's columns, along with their cornice, frieze, and architrave (MacKendrick 1983). The excavations came with a price, however, including the destruction of lesser monuments, houses, and quarters, which had originated in ancient or medieval times, as well as the removal of one of the named hills of ancient Rome, the Velia, which was once part of the core of the ancient city (Guidi 1996). The people living in the buildings torn down in these areas were provided with less crowded living conditions outside the city center in newly constructed buildings. This was considered a step up from their previous housing, which had been deemed unsanitary slums by the Regime (Painter Jr. 2005).

Excavations carried out by the fascists have been criticized greatly in present times for several reasons. One of the most obvious criticisms is political agenda, which directed the work and influenced how that work was to be carried out, what was considered valuable, and how those remains would be presented. The artifacts and structural remains were not the subjects of the excavations, but rather the ideas of empire and national greatness they represented. Since it was only the tangible form of these ideas that the Fascists sought, it is not surprising that the excavators were less than gentle with the remains they were pulling out of the ground (Packer 1997). In the removal of the medieval Pantani quarter, five neighborhood churches were quickly dismantled; the furnishings either disappeared or found their way to other sanctuaries. Any salvageable building materials from the churches or houses were sold or taken away; the more aesthetically pleasing features were incorporated into the substructures that buttress the northwest side of the Aventine Hill and the *Via Alessandrina* and can still be seen today (Packer 1989). This destruction was acceptable to Mussolini if it allowed for the promotion of the ideologically approved past, even if it meant clearing whole quarters of medieval Rome (Dyson 1998).

The excavators have also been criticized for their lack of notes, records, and attention to details concerning the architecture and sculpture fragments they encountered during the excavations. Many fragments were only provisionally catalogued, with their proveniences and stratigraphic relationships recorded inadequately; if something was not of particular interest, it was thrown away (Packer 1997). The

records that were taken, however, vanished among the disorder of World War II or were never properly published (Packer 1997; Dyson 1998). The workers involved in the archaeological work were not professionals, but hired labor offsetting the high unemployment rate of the time. The laborers were more concerned with doing their job and staying employed than learning the details of Rome's past. Perhaps the most disheartening aspect of the work done in the center of Rome is the lack of any kind of research questions. Mussolini was not interested in how Rome functioned economically or what archaeology could tell him about the people who designed and built the temples and buildings of ancient Rome, as he was merely exposing them. The ruins of ancient Rome were no more than a billboard with which to promote his desires of expansion and bolstered pride in a feeling of descent from a great civilization. Exposing the ruins had the unfortunate effect of exposing them to three decades of air pollution by the 1970s. The air pollution was the result of a population that tripled in size and owned 30 times as many registered vehicles as compared to pre-World War II, speeding the deterioration of the ruins. In the 1970s, the air pollution's effects on the ruins were realized; more attention was paid to the antiquities and a campaign was started to save them from the pollution (Packer 1989).

Although nationalism can easily manipulate archaeology for negative purposes, sometimes it can make positive contributions. It can be argued that some of the archaeology done during the Fascist period as a means of propaganda can be considered in a positive light. The Roman and Imperial Forums exist today for the most part as they did at the completion of the project in 1939. The Forums are extremely popular draws for tourists and provide Rome with the benefits associated with tourist attractions. If the program had not been carried out, the remains of the forums may still lie buried under occupied buildings and the tourist draw might be less. Those ruins that were given priority were also preserved from destruction or falling into complete disarray as well.

Another benefit was that the Italian classical archaeology program flourished during the interwar years as a result of the goals Mussolini set out to reach in resurrecting ancient Rome. The Institute for Roman Studies was established in 1926 by Mussolini for the purposes of studying Rome. This institute produced a journal three times a year, which published articles concerning Rome's past (Painter Jr. 2005). During the interwar period, Italy's academic output in the classics was considered satisfactory by scholars who also applauded the Fascists for their interest in the subject area. The author and classicist Marbury B. Ogle (1937) commends the Italian scholars for the massive

amount of work they are turning out at this time and briefly highlights some of the publications in an article for the journal *Italica*. Another author and classicist, A. Pelzer Wagener (1928), offers a comparison of contemporary Rome to ancient Rome in an article from *The Classical Journal*, in which similarities between Mussolini's Rome and ancient Rome are pointed out. Wagener (1928) even contemplates the possibility that Rome might seek to have an empire once again. Although he makes clear his disapproval of fascism, he seems to approve of Mussolini's goal of unearthing ancient Rome (Wagener 1928). This sentiment was shared with the American cultural elite, including classicists (Dyson 1998).

Italian archaeology was highly publicized during the interwar years as part of the Fascist regime's propaganda program. Archaeology was presented to the public through the monthly magazine, *Capitolium*, which chronicled Rome's transformation over the years, focusing on the archaeological digs and the restoration and construction programs (Painter Jr. 2005). Mass media was, for the first time, being used to promote archaeology (Guidi 1996). Another contribution made by the Fascists was the creation of a large exhibition dedicated to ancient Rome (Guidi 1996). At the time of its creation, the exhibition was called the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* and contained replicas of artifacts, photographs, casts of inscriptions, and models concerning Roman engineering and architecture (MacKendrick 1983). Later the exhibition was turned into the Museum of Roman Civilization and survives today (Guidi 1996).

Outside of Rome there were many archaeological undertakings funded by the Fascist regime, both in Italy and abroad; however for the purposes of this paper only one example will be discussed. The Fascist undertaking to recover two Roman ships from the bottom of Lake Nemi, 30 kilometers south of Rome, was one of these projects (Guidi 1996). Previous attempts to raise the ships had been made as early as 1827, which caused damage to some of the remains. The recovery attempt by the Fascists began in earnest on October 20, 1928, when Mussolini ordered the Italian civil and naval engineers to drain the lake (MacKendrick 1983). The process took four years of work in order to lower the lake's level seventy-two feet. By November 1932, both ships were exposed and one was relocated to a hangar (MacKendrick 1983). Recovering these large ships was no small feat, as the hulls had to be reinforced with iron and shored up, covered with wet canvas so their condition did not worsen, and raised and transported to a museum on the lake shore that had been constructed specifically to house them. Wooden tools were used to excavate the ships because iron tools would have damaged the ships'

timbers (MacKendrick 1983). Unfortunately, the ships did not survive the war and were burned by retreating German soldiers in 1944. The artifacts associated with the boats were located elsewhere at the time, and survived to be put on display in the museum where they can be seen today (MacKendrick 1983).

### *Conclusion*

One might contemplate whether the impact of nationalism on Italian archaeology can be determined as wholly positive or negative. Although a lot of archaeological work was completed through ample government funding, there were certain expectations of this work. The archaeologists and excavation teams were given orders to expose the layers which exemplified classical Rome's glory, and, in the process, forever obliterated many remains that told Rome's story from the height of the Roman Empire to the early twentieth century. If the urban renovations had not taken place, however, one could speculate that much of the exposed ruins would still be under occupied buildings and inaccessible to scholars and the general public. The remains of the Roman and Imperial Forums would not have suffered from air pollution, but at the same time, the revenue they generate as tourist attractions would not exist. The ships from Lake Nemi might still be under more than 70 feet of water which would have saved them from destruction by the Germans, but today's scuba technology could allow pillaging of the underwater wrecks by treasure hunters before the artifacts currently on display in the museum could be properly recorded and recovered. Good or bad, nationalism has real impacts on both the past and the present and ultimately it will be up to us to decide how the past is presented.

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