

June 2008

## Ancient Rome in Modern Italy: Mussolini's Manipulation of Roman History in the Mostra Augustea della Romanità

Annie Esmé Lewine  
*Macalester College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/classicsjournal>

---

### Recommended Citation

Lewine, Annie Esmé (2008) "Ancient Rome in Modern Italy: Mussolini's Manipulation of Roman History in the Mostra Augustea della Romanità," *Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity and Classics*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/classicsjournal/vol2/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Classics Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity and Classics by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).



Ancient Rome in Modern Italy:

Mussolini's Manipulation of Roman History in the Mostra Augustea della Romanità

*Annie Esmé Lewine*

## I. INTRODUCTION

History is a powerful tool of rhetoric and has been used often to legitimize power and justify policy. Benito Mussolini certainly made use of Roman history in order to popularize his campaigns and his regime, and his rhetorical invocation of history centered on ancient Rome and its mythical history and manifested itself in the promotion of romanità, or romanness. Romanità emphasizes the legacy of ancient Rome and brings into the light the glories of the Roman past. Romanità was a powerful source of nationalism which aided a broken down people in building national pride. The Mostra Augustea della Romanità (the Augustan Show of Romanness), an exhibit celebrating the 2,000<sup>th</sup> birthday of the emperor Augustus, linked the ancient Roman legacy with the Fascist past. Mussolini came to power after a tumultuous time in Italian history, making his leadership and emphasis on Roman pride easily received by the Italian public. Mussolini's use of romanità allowed Italians to see in Fascism the opportunity for a new golden age, and "Mussolini's dictatorship was considered to be as historically necessary as Caesar's and Augustus' personal leadership for...a unified Italy."<sup>1</sup> The emphasis on ancient Rome led people to think of Fascism as a natural descendent of the Roman Empire, and that Mussolini was the destined ruler of a new Roman Empire.

---

<sup>1</sup> Visser, Romke, "Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the Romanita," *Journal of Contemporary History* 27.1 (Jan., 1992), 15.

Romanitá was an effective tool of Fascist propaganda in part because of the pervasive presence of physical evidence of Rome's ancient glory. The ubiquitous presence of symbols, artifacts, buildings and ruins were instrumental in the success of romanitá and helped foster nationalism centered on Fascism. Italians would have had a sense of the "inheritance of history and romance" which couldn't possibly "fail to be ingrained in the nature and thinking of the Italian people."<sup>2</sup> Amidst the scenery of such a great history, Italians grew up with physical and symbolic reinforcements of their Roman heritage.

Not only were structures such as the Forum or Coliseum visible throughout daily life, but Mussolini and his supporters actively created physical connections between these symbols of former glory and the fascist regime. The Via dei Fori Imperiali, the Via dell'Impero under the Fascist rule, "connects Piazza Venezia, the core of Fascist Italy... [with] the throbbing heart of Ancient Rome."<sup>3</sup> Mussolini's supporters drew an even clearer connection between ancient Rome and modern Italy in the Mostra Augustea della Romanitá. The exhibition, which opened in 1938 and was seen by thousands of Italians and foreigners, was divided into three sections: the social, historical and political development of the empire; architectural and engineering achievements; and religious and social life. For this paper, I will focus on the portion of the exhibition dedicated to the social, historical and political development of the empire and the way in which it highlighted the themes of military expansion and the figure Augustus. While the show "represented only one phase in a continuous scheme for displaying by means of monuments the full extent of the Roman dominion,"<sup>4</sup> it was probably the most blatant and large scale demonstration of ancient Roman glory and its relevance to modern Italy.

---

<sup>2</sup> Wagener, A. Pelzer, "A Classical Background for Fascism," *The Classical Journal* 23.9 (June 1928), 670.

<sup>3</sup> Nelis, Jan, "Constructing Fascist Identity: Benito Mussolini and the Myth of Romanitá," *Classical World* 100.4 (2007), 408.

<sup>4</sup> Strong, E., "Romanitá throughout the Ages," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 29.2. (1939), 137.

The Mostra Augustea della Romanità celebrated the bimillennium of Augustus' birth with an exhibition displaying artifacts and history from throughout ancient Roman history. The exhibit began with rooms exploring early Roman history, including maps of Aeneas' travels – drawn according to Virgil's *Aeneid* – and a small plot of land with Romulus' mythical plow. Following the rooms on early Roman history were two rooms dealing with pre-Caesarian history, a room on the Punic Wars and the conquest of Italy and a room on expansion during the civil wars. After Caesar's room came five rooms dedicated to the accomplishments of Augustus, detailing the creation of the empire and the beginning of the *Pax Romana* and a new age of morality. Often in the exhibit Augustus' deeds were emphasized when other emperors' achievements were shadowed in order to ensure that Augustus was seen as the greatest ruler in the exhibit. The need to put forward Augustus as the most important Roman ruler was rooted in Mussolini's desire to emphasize a history of strong, centralized leadership.

The show was organized by a group of scholars associated with the Istituto Nazionale di Cultura Fascista (National Institute of Fascist Culture) and was not directly curated or designed by Mussolini himself. Despite the lack of direct involvement, Mussolini's influence on the show is clear: the major themes of the exhibition were expansion and the glory of the emperor Augustus, two themes playing directly into the way in which the Fascist regime used ancient history to propagate the Fascist agenda. The Mostra Augustea, as an exhibition of the glorious history of Rome, emphasized the role of expansive imperialism in creating the glorious past, as well as the role of the strong, centralized leadership of Augustus in creating the Roman Empire.

## II. EXPANSION IN THE MOSTRA AUGUSTEA DELLA ROMANITÁ

The Mostra Augustea della Romanitá provides a rich example of Mussolini's use of ancient Roman history in Fascist propaganda. In what it emphasized, the Mostra Augustea illustrates important elements of Fascist policy. The prominent role of militarism and expansion in the Mostra Augustea is directly linked to the importance of imperialism in Mussolini's regime. The themes of expansion and warfare were very prominent in the Mostra Augustea and were emphasized more than any other single topic in Roman history.

Two rooms were dedicated to pre-Caesarian Rome and focused on the Punic Wars and the conquest of Italy and expansion during the civil wars, with no discussion of the founding of the republic or the consuls. There wasn't much space for these rooms, and "this long historical stretch was amazingly compressed...Even so, the main episodes of the period received striking illustration."<sup>5</sup> The rooms included images of Romans and their allies fighting in their armor, maps of the conquests and illustrations of the sites where they fought.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis on military expansion reinforced the Fascist regime's idea of warfare as a Roman trait. As the Fascist regime "radicalized in the wake of the war in Ethiopia, romanitá...became more militant and exclusive. Fascist propaganda used ancient Rome's domination of the Mediterranean as the rationale and justification for the Fascist empire of Mussolini."<sup>7</sup> The campaigns in Africa became thought of as merely attempts to re-conquer ancient Roman land.

The emphasis on military expansion as an essential part of romanitá continued in the rooms dedicated to Caesar and Augustus. A long, dark hall chronicled the military achievements

---

<sup>5</sup> Strong, 141.

<sup>6</sup> It is also important to note that very little mention was made of Spartacus or the Servile Wars. In addition to the emphasis on expansion and warfare, Mussolini also emphasized a Rome with no civil unrest and focused on the leaders, not the people.

<sup>7</sup> Stone, Marla, "A Flexible Rome: Fascism and the Cult of Romanitá," in *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789-1945*, ed. Catherine Edwards (Cambridge University Press: 1999), 207.

of Caesar, in which the Gallic Wars and the civil wars were illustrated with maps of his battles and conquests; Caesar's legislative achievements were completely omitted. The next five rooms were dedicated to Augustus and his achievements, and also detailed the accomplishments of his family and close friends. Sixteen portraits of Augustus were located in the central room of Augustus alone, and the monuments of the Augustan age were separated into those in Rome and those elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> This separation of monuments emphasizes the importance of Rome as a capital of the empire and demonstrates the widespread nature of the empire. Following the rooms dedicated to Augustus was a grandiose Hall of Legions which included the Sacratio dell'Aquila (the sanctuary of the eagle). This hall was very large and contained records of all the glorious legions, reconstructions of forts and camps, including a reconstruction of Masada, the last stronghold of the Jews rebelling in the province of Judea.<sup>9</sup> The large scale of the room, as well as its proximity to the Augustan rooms, speaks to its importance in the exhibit.

Finding precedent for expansion was key for Mussolini's legitimization of his agenda because it was one of the most contentious elements of his regime and one of the most important. The Punic Wars were particularly important for Mussolini at this time because it offered him a way to justify his campaigns in Northern Africa, which were very unpopular both domestically and internationally.<sup>10</sup> "With the Fascist conquest of Ethiopia and the declaration of empire in 1935, romanità came to serve the ends of empire...militarism and xenophobia."<sup>11</sup> The prominence of the Punic Wars in the exhibit served to solidify the associations of the current campaigns in North Africa with the ancient Punic Wars, and supported the popular argument that

---

<sup>8</sup> Strong, 148.

<sup>9</sup> Strong, 151.

<sup>10</sup> The League of Nations put economic sanctions in place against Italy in 1936 for its invasion of Ethiopia. For more information on the League of Nations and Italy's invasion, see George W. Baer's "Sanctions and Security: The League of Nations and the Italian-Ethiopian War, 1935-1936," *International Organization* 27.2, (Spring, 1973), 165-179.

<sup>11</sup> Stone, 207.

“Fascist conquests in North Africa and the Aegean...were only moves to regain lands properly and historically belonging to Italy.”<sup>12</sup> The military and warfare were very important elements of the Fascist regime and agenda, and thus their corresponding importance in the Mostra Augustea demonstrates the strong connection between the show and Fascist policy.

### III. THE ROLE OF AUGUSTUS IN THE MOSTRA AUGUSTEA DELLA ROMANITÀ

The Mostra Augustea depicted themes closely related to the Fascist agenda, and the history of the Empire as shown in the exhibit reflected modern times. Mussolini was deeply invested in portraying himself as a destined ruler and a direct descendent and inheritor of Augustus’ legacy. By reinforcing parallels between Mussolini and Augustus, the glorification of Augustus in the Mostra Augustea served as praise for Mussolini as well.

Scholars at the time saw parallels between Mussolini’s rise to power and the reign of the emperor Augustus, and the Fascist regime’s publicizing of these parallels made allusions to the great Roman past all the more powerful. Both Augustus and Mussolini came to power following times of civil unrest and faltering national pride. Scholars under the Fascist regime portrayed Augustus as becoming the sole ruler of Rome at a time when people were eager for a peaceful, organized political system and were willing to accept an end to the republic in exchange. Mussolini found in this version of Augustus’ rise a parallel for his own time; both leaders came to rule in what contemporary scholars called “a land impoverished, demoralized, dissonant, and torn by factious strife, weak in government, in national spirit, in foreign prestige.”<sup>13</sup> Mussolini provided the public with a central, charismatic figure to rally around as well as the discourse of romanità, which reminded people, both Italians and foreigners, of Rome’s glory, past and

---

<sup>12</sup> Stone, 207.

<sup>13</sup> Wagener, 647.

present. In both cases, the rulers were depicted as having brought stability, order and glory to a shaky, unstable nation.

The Mostra Augustea della Romanità was nominally about Romanness, not strictly Augustus, but from the beginning he was the exhibit's clear focus. The show was an important way for Mussolini to find an example in Roman history of a powerful, glorious leader to connect himself with, and who better to ally oneself with than Augustus, who ushered in the great *Pax Romana*, created the Roman Empire and began a Golden Age for Rome. If, in Fascist propaganda, "all roads lead to Rome" it makes sense that "at the 'Mostra' all roads led to and from Augustus."<sup>14</sup> The importance of seeing Mussolini as the destined inheritor of the ancient Roman Empire added to the importance of romanità, and by centering the exhibition of Romanness on Augustus, the exhibit connected Mussolini with Augustus, who was seen as the greatest ruler of Rome.

Of all historical persons and events, Augustus was granted the most space for his achievements, and influenced the entire show. Starting with the entrance to the exhibit, which was modeled after the Temple of Rome and Augustus at Ancyra, on which the *Res Gestae* were inscribed, Augustus' role as the focal point was immediately clear. A large statue of Augustus raised on a red dais was also visible from the entrance, but one had to go through several rooms before actually entering its presence,<sup>15</sup> making him dominant over all periods of Roman history.

The emphasis on Aeneas and his mythical journey, as well as the other legendary histories presented in the early Roman history portion of the exhibit, also enhanced this theme both because of the connections seen between Augustus and Aeneas and because of the importance of this mythical history to Augustus. The very first room of the exhibit contained

---

<sup>14</sup> Strong, 137.

<sup>15</sup> Strong, 139-140.

maps of Aeneas' journey and memorials to '*Pater Aeneas*.' The large amount of space that "mere mythology" occupied" was partially due to the fact that "part of [Augustus'] political program [was] to create a mythical setting for his empire, letting it appear as divinely appointed."<sup>16</sup> This creation of mythical history was key not only to Augustus, but to Mussolini as well. The entire show was a creation of a legendary background for Fascism so that Mussolini, too, would appear as 'divinely appointed.'

Augustus' central role in the Mostra Augustea is evidenced not only in his presence throughout the exhibit but also in the omission of certain parts of history. Only military accomplishments were shown in the hall dedicated to Caesar, because "if Augustus was to be [the] focal point, it followed that Caesar must be kept somewhat in the shade."<sup>17</sup> In the rooms dedicated to Augustus' reign, Augustan Rome, Augustan art, or events that happened during his reign did not appear; only the figure Augustus himself and things in which he was directly involved were given space in the exhibit.

Another notable piece in the Augustan rooms was the glass pillar containing a cross inscribed with the Gospel of Luke. The cross, which was placed directly across from a large statue of Augustus, highlighted the fact that Jesus Christ was born under Augustus' reign. Many scholars in Fascist Italy and elsewhere at the time were very interested in the correspondence between the birth of Jesus Christ and the beginning of a new moral, glorious empire. One scholar at the time wrote that Augustus was "not only himself a prince of peace...under [his] reign was born the great, nay the greatest prince of peace."<sup>18</sup> The connection of this former great ruler to Jesus Christ was important in the reign of Mussolini because Rome was seen as the birthplace and home of Christianity, and the connection with the Pope and the Church was always a

---

<sup>16</sup> Strong, 140.

<sup>17</sup> Strong, 44.

<sup>18</sup> Wagenvoort, quoted in Strong, 148-149.

tenuous but important one in securing popular support.<sup>19</sup> Mussolini and the Fascist regime “portrayed Rome as the safe haven in which Christianity was harbored,”<sup>20</sup> and the connection of Augustus with Jesus Christ would be seen as an important emphasis of this idea of a safe haven. The cross was also essential in the portrayal of Augustus – and thus Mussolini – as being divinely appointed.

The role of Augustus and his achievements as depicted in the Mostra Augustea was an important demonstration of Mussolini’s campaign of romanità. The emphasis on Augustus and his glories translated to a promotion of Mussolini and highlighted the parallels between Mussolini and Augustus.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Romanità, or Romanness, was essential to Mussolini’s regime. Many scholars have alluded to the importance of the mythical history of Rome in building support for the Fascist regime. The Mostra Augustea is an example of the way in which the Fascist regime built up a national sense of romanità. The exhibit also tailored the meaning of romanità to include the most important elements of the Fascist agenda, emphasizing the role of military expansion and the strong centralized leadership of Augustus in building an empire. The prominent role given to this theme of expansion and especially the Punic Wars was an important example of the Fascist regime’s use of ancient history to justify Mussolini’s military agenda. The focus on Augustus as a great ruler and as a bringer of stability and peace was also an important part of the Mostra

---

<sup>19</sup> Mussolini understood that in order to win over the public he would have to work with the Pope and conservative Catholics because many of their interests were in sync, such as a return to a stable, imperialist and unified nation. The tension that existed between the two groups – Fascists and Roman Catholics – was often rooted in issues of education. Mussolini understood the importance of educating the young, and had to struggle with the Church to gain the control of youths’ education. Scott, 654-655.

<sup>20</sup> Nelis, 400.

Augustea because of the parallels it emphasized between Augustus and Mussolini. By promoting and praising Augustus, the exhibition also glorifies Mussolini.

#### Works Cited

- Nelis, Jan, "Constructing Fascist Identity: Benito Mussolini and the Myth of Romanitá." *Classical World* 100.4 (2007) 391-415.
- Stone, Marla, "A Flexible Rome: Fascism and the Cult of Romanitá." In *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789-1945*, ed. Catherine Edwards. Cambridge University Press: 1999, 205-220.
- Strong, E., "Romanitá throughout the Ages." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 29.2 (1939) 137-166.
- Visser, Romke, "Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the Romanita." *Journal of Contemporary History* 27.1 (Jan., 1992) 5-22.
- Wagener, A. Pelzer, "A Classical Background for Fascism." *The Classical Journal* 23.9 (June, 1928) 668-677