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Mussolini's Gladius: The Double-Edged Sword of Antiquity in Fascist Italy

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Mussolini's Gladius: The Double-Edged Sword of Antiquity in Fascist Italy

Abstract

Mussolini and the Fascist Party used a plethora of propaganda techniques in order to suggest the renewal of the old Roman Empire with the rise of the Italian Fascist Party. Through the use of ideology, race issues, religion, educational control, posters, theatre, architecture, and archeology, the Fascists used the Roman past to glorify modern Italy and the Fascist party. The Fascists' use of these Roman allusions made their own deficiencies more apparent and led to a general failure of their propaganda program in terms of creating a new Italian identity focused upon the Ancient Roman past.

Keywords

Italian Fascist Party, Fascism, Mussolini, Roman Empire

Disciplines

European History | History | Military History | Political History

Comments

History Senior Thesis

MUSSOLINI'S GLADIUS: THE DOUBLE EDGED SWORD OF ANTIQUITY IN FASCIST ITALY

Mussolini and the Fascist Party used a plethora of propaganda techniques in order to suggest the renewal of the old Roman Empire with the rise of the Italian Fascist Party. Through the use of ideology, race issues, religion, educational control, posters, theatre, architecture, and archeology, the Fascists used the Roman past to glorify modern Italy and the Fascist party. The Fascists' use of these Roman allusions made their own deficiencies more apparent and led to a general failure of their propaganda program in terms of creating a new Italian identity focused upon the Ancient Roman past.

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HISTORY 418: PROFESSOR BOWMAN 4/18/2016

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Timeline of Events

Political Events	Year	Cultural Events
Mussolini and the Fascists come to power after marching on Rome.	1922	<i>Novecento Celebration</i> Gentile Reform
Negotiations for the concordat to solve the “Roman Question” begin and are resolved, resulting in the <i>Lateran Accords</i> .	1927-1930	Mussolini’s Biography is written, the wall of the <i>Res Gestae</i> is erected.
Mussolini begins to restrict the functions of Catholic youth groups such as Catholic Action in order to encourage participated in Fascist youth groups.	1930-1932	Pope Pius issues his response in an article entitled <i>Non Abbiamo Bisogno</i> . <i>Testo Unico</i> brought into practice.
Mussolini’s expansionist aspirations begin to take hold in Italian foreign policy, leading to the conquest of Ethiopia and Libya.	1935-1938	Major archaeological dig sites are opened in Rome, including the Mausoleum of Augustus and the <i>Largo Argentina</i> . The <i>Manifesto on Race</i> is published.
Mussolini allies with Hitler and by 1940 is full committed to World War II on the side of Nazi Germany.	1939-1942	Fascist propaganda begins calling all non-Axis members barbarians, and urges Italians to defend their classical heritage.
The Fascist government runs out of monetary and social supports; the Allies invade Sicily, quickly moving up the Peninsula to liberate Rome; Mussolini is killed by Northern Italian Communists.	1942-1945	Fascist funding of archaeology in Rome ceases amidst financial troubles and public backlash.

I. Introduction

In 1940, an Italian worker saunters along the Tiber to his home after a long day of work. As he walks, he sees the grandeur of Rome: the great Vatican palace of Saint Peter's Basilica, the huge and ornate churches lining the streets, the massive neo-classical Vittorio Emmanuelle monument in the center of town. Eventually, he loses sight of these amazing monuments to Rome's medieval and modern history, and comes upon a new piazza. In the center of the piazza is a large circular structure, made almost entirely out of clay and brick, and it is labeled as the *Mausoleo di Augusto* (Mausoleum of Augustus). Though the building is in bad shape due to its long tenure underground, the worker gazes in wonder at the building brought straight out of the times before Christ. The propaganda of Italy's Imperial Roman roots reminds him, however, that this ancient monument has not simply been revealed for his own pleasure; no, as he looks about him he notices that the piazza is filled with grey concrete and massive offices and living spaces. The surrounding Fascist architecture destroys the harmony the worker had witnessed as he looked upon the ancient mausoleum, and, in disgust, he continues to head home, shaking his head at what Rome has become.

While perhaps an exaggeration, the above fictional Italian worker's response to the *Piazza Augusto Imperatore* (Square of the Emperor Augustus) was likely common amongst the Roman populace during the Fascist era. Mussolini and his Fascist party made frequent use of Ancient Roman motifs, symbols, terminology and architecture in order to further their own goals and create their own mythology of the state. This use of the Roman past, however, tended to not have the effect that Mussolini or the Fascists wanted. Mussolini's use of the Roman past undermined his position and authority through the comparisons made between his own policies and ideologies and those of the Ancient Romans.

Ia. Historical Background

Italy's history can be split into three primary periods: the Classical period, the Medieval period, and the Modern period. The Classical period, spanning from the supposed foundation of the Roman state in 753 B.C. to the fall of the Western Empire around 476 A.D., forms the basis for reference that the Fascists used in their own era. During most of this period, the Italian peninsula was unified under the authority of Republican and then Imperial Rome, and Italy, being represented by the Roman Empire, was the eminent power in the Mediterranean and European worlds. This was the period of grand monuments made of marble, the ideal of the state above all else, and of Italian military and cultural supremacy. By the late fifth century A.D., however, the Romans had lost control of much of their territory and had lost Italy to the invading Ostrogoths who were Germanic peoples hailing from the Danube River region (modern-day Romania).¹ This invasion heralded the coming of the Medieval period, which included a massive number of depopulating wars in Italy and isolation of the Italian cities. The Ostrogoths were soon nearly annihilated by the Byzantines as they attempted to reunify the Eastern and Western portions of the Roman Empire. The Byzantines were unable to hold onto the territory for long, however, as the Lombards from south-central Germany moved south into Italy and pushed out the Byzantine garrisons in Rome and southern Italy. The Byzantines did not hold Sicily, their last remaining holding in the west, for long after the wars of reconquest were over. The Lombards fell to the Franks under the rule of Charlemagne, at the behest of the Pope in Rome who had begun separating his Church from the one based in Constantinople. Charlemagne enforced Papal authority throughout the peninsula, and out of that conflict the Pope and the Catholic Church rose supreme as the most powerful forces in Italy.

¹ Ian Wood, "Adelchi and 'Atilla': The Barbarians and the Risorgimento," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 76, (2008): 234.

Medieval history after the coronation of Charlemagne in 800 A.D. revolved around the central Papal States and the many Italian city states that dotted the peninsula. The Catholic Church dominated religious affairs in central and western Europe for centuries, and had become an extremely wealthy institution by the time of the Renaissance. The many Italian city-states were powerful mercantile states that fostered regional animosity and prevented the unification of the peninsula by many hopefuls during the High Medieval and Renaissance periods. During the Renaissance and into the Modern period, starting around 1453, the Catholic Church and Italian culture became synonymous. The Popes were some of the largest patrons of the arts in all of Italy, and the grand churches, basilicas, cathedrals, and other Catholic monuments rose out and above their ancient Roman counterparts. This cultural hegemony was frequently cited during the wars for Italian unification in the nineteenth century.

By the time Mussolini and the Fascists came to power, the cultural identity of the Italian peninsula was still very much disputed. Two primary cultural groups existed: the Classicists, who favored reference to the Roman past, and the Romanticists, who favored the Catholic Church and the Medieval period. The Italian monarchy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tried to toe the line, but eventually sided with the Classicists while alienating the Catholic Church, which turned out to be unpopular. The resulting feud between the Italian monarchy and the Catholic Church would damage the legitimacy of the government and throw Italian cultural assumptions into complete disarray.² World War I would show the true weakness of the monarchy by proving the inadequacies of the Italian military and the limits of Italian diplomatic and international prestige, and so the Fascists were able to come to power in the early 1920s. The Fascists believed that in the Roman past lay the key to creating a more powerful

² Alessio Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man: Youth Training Regimes in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 41.

Italy, and so they sought to repair the cultural damage done in the intervening years since Italian unification.³

Ib. Historiography

The extent to which the Fascists believed and propagated an ideology inspired by their interpretation of the Roman past is not in contest here. Many scholars have focused on the effects of this propaganda on the Italians under Mussolini and those who followed shortly after. Modern scholarship tends to argue in various directions. John Pollard, author of *The Fascist Experience in Italy*, describes the Fascist party as failing on all ideological fronts as it had no unified position.⁴ Pollard's analysis focuses upon various Fascist documents and policies that seem to contradict each other, as well as a disillusionment with the world of politics from an Italian civilian perspective. Pollard also argues that the Fascists, while perhaps having little ideological and cultural cohesion and impact, did lead to changes in national identity in greater Italy. Their legacy destroyed the focus on Italian nationalism, as it became taboo to revere a regime based upon racism as Fascism was by the 1940s, and Italians thereafter described themselves as Europeans rather than Italians, more embracing their city cultures or the greater European culture than their Italian heritage.⁵

Scholars such as Emilio Gentile focus far more on Mussolini's use of the past and archeology and even go so far as to suggest that Fascist cultural efforts dominated their policies. Gentile argues that the Fascists orchestrated an "anthropological revolution" focused on

³ Benito Mussolini, *My Autobiography*, trans. Richard Washburn Child (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006), 131.

⁴ John Pollard, *The Fascist Experience in Italy* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 127.

⁵ Pollard, *The Fascist Experience*, 135.

renewing Italian culture and creating a new Italian identity.⁶ Gentile, as opposed to Pollard, believes that the Fascist archeological and cultural policies had a positive impact on Italian identity and cemented Roman fervor and the Italian connection to ancient Rome for subsequent generations.⁷ Gentile does, however, concede that Mussolini's concept of the Roman man was not successful as it was too varied in its description to become widely popular among city and provincial Italians.⁸

The other major argument inherent in any discussion of Fascist uses of Ancient Roman symbols, architecture, and culture is the reasoning for it. Scholars such as Paul Baxa argue that Mussolini was simply playing a large game of tug-of-war against the Catholic Church for the souls of the people of Rome; the Church sought to draw people to the Medieval/Renaissance monuments and churches, while the Fascists tried to encourage Romans to visit large Fascist forums and the ruins of the old Imperial Fora of Rome.⁹ Susan Brangers disagrees with Baxa's assessment, instead arguing that Fascist use of Roman archeology and culture was almost solely inspired by propaganda and economic purposes, as building/renovation projects created more jobs in Great Depression-era Italy.¹⁰

Borden Painter's arguments are in contention with the assertion that Mussolini's attempts to create a unified Italian culture behind ancient norms backfired. Painter argues that Mussolini successfully created his cultural concept of *romanita* during the propaganda and architectural golden age of the 1930s.¹¹ Painter's argument is that, at the time, the Italians viewed this new

⁶ Emilio Gentile, "The Fascist Anthropological Revolution," in *Culture, Censorship and the State in Twentieth-Century Italy*, edit. Robert Gordon and Guido Bonsaver (London: Legenda, 2005), 31.

⁷ Gentile, "The Fascist Anthropological Revolution," 31.

⁸ Gentile, "The Fascist Anthropological Revolution," 31.

⁹ Paul Baxa, "A Pagan Landscape: Pope Pius XI, Fascism, and the Struggle over the Roman Cityscape," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 17, no. 1 (2006): 109.

¹⁰ Susan L. Fugate Brangers, "Political Propaganda and Archeology: The Mausoleum of Augustus in the Fascist Era," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3, no. 16 (August 2013): 126.

¹¹ Borden W. Painter, *Mussolini's Rome: Rebuilding the Eternal City*, (New York: Palgrave

culture very positively, and that it was only with the defeat of the Fascists in 1944 that the country moved back into the safety of more recent Italian cultural institutions such as the Catholic Church.¹²

The arguments below assume that Mussolini and the Fascists had the goal of creating a new Italian identity, or *romanita*, based upon the ideals and ideology of the ancient Romans. Further, Mussolini's archeological efforts were focused upon achieving this concept of *romanita*, and not in direct contention with the Catholic Church, with which he would instead argue over religious concerns. Mussolini's primary domestic goal in Italy was to revive Italian nationalism based on classical tropes and ideals by promoting the classical period physically through archaeology and propaganda as well as through public speeches and literature. Mussolini and his party's efforts to create a new Rome based upon the archeology, ideology, and splendor of ancient Rome failed and caused Mussolini's legitimacy to be questioned in Rome and across the Italian peninsula.

II. Placing Mussolini as a Modern Caesar

Before any scholars were likening Mussolini to a Roman emperor, the man himself was. During his earliest initiatives to gain power in Italy, Mussolini was already calling for himself to be selected as the dictator for the Italian state.¹³ His allusions to ancient Roman political practices did not cease there either. In his autobiography, Mussolini calls his central cadre a "quadrumvirate," in clear reference to the triumvirates of the late Republican-era in Rome and

Macmillan, 2005), 27.

¹² Painter, *Mussolini's Rome*, 161-162.

¹³ Jules Archer, *Twentieth Century Caesar: Benito Mussolini*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), 65.

the tetrarchy of the late Empire.¹⁴ Mussolini's clearest example of mimicking the Roman emperors, however, was his political use of the *Res Gestae* and his own autobiography.

Much of Mussolini's archeological efforts in the middle of the 1930s revolved around the earlier mentioned *Piazza Augusto Imperatore*. One of his largest requirements for the surrounding piazza was the erection of a wall that would have inscribed upon it, in Latin, the *Res Gestae* of Augustus (See Appendix A, Figure 1). Augustus' *Res Gestae* was a list of accomplishments the emperor had done for the Roman people, written by Augustus himself. Mussolini saw many parallels between Augustus and himself, or at least he manufactured parallels, and so he erected the wall and wrote his own biography in order to be remembered as the new Augustus, who had "saved the state," with his own private army during his triumphal March on Rome.¹⁵

Mussolini's autobiography discusses his life from birth until the earliest days of the discussions for the Lateran Pact (around 1927). The biography begins with a more or less thorough discussion of his father and World War I and how they shaped his opinions and forced him to be tough on the people of Italy in order to save them.¹⁶ When he finally reaches the organization of the Fascist Party as such, the parallels between his biographical account and Augustus' list of achievements becomes clearer. Augustus describes his military actions after Julius Caesar's death as a public service to the Roman people and the Senate.¹⁷ He claimed that the men who killed his adoptive father and then ran to Greece "waged war on the state," so he "conquered them in two battles."¹⁸ Similarly, Mussolini describes Rome as needing to be saved from a "subversive" liberal agenda, and that his efforts focused upon cleansing the enemies of

¹⁴ Mussolini, *My Autobiography*, 129.

¹⁵ Augustus, "The Deeds of the Divine Augustus," translated by Thomas Bushnell, MIT Classics Department, 1.

¹⁶ Mussolini, *My Autobiography*, 11.

¹⁷ Augustus, "The Deeds," 1.

¹⁸ Augustus, "The Deeds," 2.

Italy out of power and bringing glory to the Nation of Italy that it had lost due to the actions of the liberal agents.¹⁹ Mussolini's March on Rome, which many have likened to Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon, is described by the man himself as a triumph, and that in Rome "an indescribable welcome awaited me."²⁰ This parallels closely to Augustus' own description of his return to Rome after reconquering the Italian peninsula; he claims that the people and senate showered him in gifts such as the consulship and additional powers of *imperium*.²¹ Both Augustus and Mussolini make extreme claims to have saved the people of Rome especially, with Augustus remarking that "I freed the entire people, at my own expense, from the fear and danger in which they were."²²

Augustus has often been remembered as an emperor who focused on bringing back old traditions. He commissioned such works as Livy's *Histories* and Vergil's *Aeneid* to explore the origins of Rome. Mussolini, too, suggested that he had come to Rome to bring back the pride that had been lost during the past few centuries in the "Eternal City."²³ In his biography, Mussolini repeatedly names himself as the leader of the "national legions." He claimed that he represented the power of the "entire people" of Rome.²⁴ His use of Roman literary tropes and nomenclature was likely derived from similar biographies written by Augustus, Eutropius and other Roman writers and historians. For example, Mussolini refers to events by who was in charge of certain offices in a given year, much like Roman historians used consulships to distinguish between years in their own histories.²⁵ In the same plaza where he ordered the erection of the wall with the *Res Gestae*, he ordered for multiple inscriptions to be placed upon the surrounding buildings

¹⁹ Mussolini, *My Autobiography*, 131.

²⁰ Mussolini, *My Autobiography*, 138.

²¹ Augustus, "The Deeds," 1.

²² Augustus, "The Deeds," 5.

²³ Mussolini, *My Autobiography*, 140.

²⁴ Mussolini, *My Autobiography*, 140.

²⁵ Mussolini, *My Autobiography*, 139.

to be written in Latin rather than Italian. The inscriptions were simply more Fascist propaganda, but Mussolini seems to have been extremely out of touch with his supporters in Rome, few of whom could actually read Latin.²⁶ Thus, despite these attempts to use Latin literature and allusions to Latin literature in order to build himself up as the new Caesar Augustus, the majority of the Roman populace likely looked at the Latin inscriptions with little more than confused interest, rather than understanding and pride in Mussolini and their supposed Ancient Roman past.

III. A Modern Pagan Cult

Mussolini and the Fascists envisioned an Italy completely controlled by the state. Whether they acquired this idea from the ancient Romans or not, they certainly drew many comparisons between the Roman ideology surrounding the importance of the state over the individual and their own ideology. The Fascists, much like their ancient Imperial cousins, sought to control the people of Rome and Italy by uniting religion, nationalism, and Fascist ideology into one state-centric religion. The emperors of Imperial Rome had used their own influence to become the heads of the Roman religion and push the idea of the divine ruler. Meanwhile, the Fascists sought to not unite the existing Catholic majority into their state religion, rather they wanted to create a new religion based upon Fascism and Mussolini.²⁷

In 1932, Mussolini penned *The Social and Political Doctrine of Fascism*, summarizing his previously stated Fascist ideological concepts. In this document, Mussolini describes Fascism as “a religious conception in which man is seen in his immanent relationship with a superior

²⁶ Paul Corner, *The Fascist Party & Popular Opinion in Mussolini's Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 181.

²⁷ Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man*, 41.

law.”²⁸ While never written down in such a way, Roman religion had a similar aspect to it during the era of the empire. Roman religion was a public religion with the emperor as its head priest (a tradition beginning with Julius Caesar). Religious rituals were tied closely with the social and political lives of many Romans. Mussolini’s idea of Fascism as a religious conception draws directly from this socio-religious tradition. Moreover, many Fascist events had religious and political aspects to them much like their Roman counterparts. The Fascists would often use the attendance of certain individuals at Fascist events such as rallies in order to determine their loyalty to the state.²⁹ The Romans, while not having records of such popular sovereignty, likely paid close attention to who attended what ceremonies as well, given that non-public religious activity was not only seen as heretical but treasonous.³⁰

Giovanni Gentile, a Fascist philosopher in charge of education reform, wrote extensively on the subject of religion and how it affected individual-state relations. From Gentile’s perspective, history itself was a form of religion, as he suggested in his reform: history, as a form of religion, is “an ever-changing ideal and body that has segments burned into permanency.”³¹ Gentile believed that the Fascists could use history to create a new religion around the state, to the point where he supported an idea of pseudo-ancestor worship.³² Gentile reorganized Fascist education to focus on the history of Italy as told by Fascist politicians in order to indoctrinate children into believing the concept of the state religion. To this end, Gentile created a curriculum that focused upon the Latin past as opposed to the Christian medieval era.³³ The Fascists believed that emphasis on the ancient Romans would not only bring pride back to the Italian

²⁸ Benito Mussolini, “The Doctrine of Fascism,” in *The Fascist Revolution in Italy: A Brief History with Documents*, edit. Marla Stone (New York: Bedford and St. Martin’s, 2013), 78.

²⁹ Corner, *The Fascist Party*, 179.

³⁰ Clifford Ando, *Roman Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 224.

³¹ Giovanni Gentile, *The Reform of Education*, trans. Dino Bigongiari (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), v.

³² Giovanni Gentile, *Theory of the Mind as a Pure Act* (New York: The Classics, 2013), 203.

³³ Gentile, *The Reform of Education*, v.

nation, but also encourage the messages they themselves had espoused at rallies and on propaganda posters. Unfortunately, many Italians lacked this educational background, and so more conservative parents, and the Catholic Church, stood against this new curriculum before it was even fully implemented.³⁴

Gentile, despite believing in history as a religion, had a very poor opinion of organized religion as a whole. In his primary philosophical work, *Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, Gentile argued that religion had existed during the medieval era as a vehicle for humanity's progress, despite his misgivings about the Catholic Church.³⁵ However, he also argued that humanity's next step would be to transcend the bonds of religion, specifically organized monotheistic religion represented by the Catholic Church, and focus upon humanity as a whole, or at least a wider conception of the state as above the individual.³⁶ Fascist attitudes on the Catholic Church tended to be similar to those of Gentile.³⁷

Mussolini, however much he wanted to create a new religion based upon the state and perhaps using himself as the cult figurehead, did not actively antagonize the Catholic Church as much as he could have. In fact, he solved a crisis that had been in place since the unification of Italy, the so-called 'Roman Question.' The Catholic Church's place in modern Italian politics was not decided by the Italian monarchy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but by Fascist Italy and Mussolini. Mussolini instigated and signed the *Lateran Accords*, allowing the lands held by the Catholic Church surrounding Saint Peter's Basilica to become an independent city-state known as Vatican City.³⁸ The official religion of Italy became

³⁴ Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man*, 40-41.

³⁵ Gentile, *Theory of the Mind*, 227.

³⁶ Gentile, *Theory of the Mind*, 228.

³⁷ Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man*, 40-41.

³⁸ Vatican Archive, "Treaty Between the Holy See and Italy, the Lateran Treaty," Vatican State Archives, <http://www.vaticanstate.va/content/dam/vaticanstate/documenti/leggi-e-decreti/Normative-Penali-e-Amministrative/LateranTreaty.pdf>, Article 11.

Catholicism, and all properties owned by the Catholic Church were to remain untouched by Fascist magistrates and other Fascist organizers and organizations.³⁹ The *Lateran Accords* officially solidified the Church's territory in Rome and religious authority in Italy, at least theoretically.

In reality, the alliance with the Catholic Church seemed to only be a Fascist method of defeating Socialist opposition forces in Rome rather than fully uniting the new government of Fascist Italy with the Catholic Church and the papacy.⁴⁰ The Fascists did not hold true to the *Accords* for long, and soon Pope Pius XI was on the defensive, trying to maintain his hold over the many ancient Roman ruins and monuments the Church had either indirect control over or had been incorporated into churches throughout the centuries.⁴¹ The Fascist argument for seizing these monuments and archaeological sites was that they belonged to the Italian people and the state, not the arbitrary authority of the Catholic Church.⁴² Matters deteriorated on the ideological state of things as well. Despite promising to work with the Catholic Church in matters of education and socio-religious doctrine, the Fascists redoubled their efforts to diminish the importance of the Catholic Church in Italian history and pushed ever harder for a cult of personality around Mussolini.

The Italian reaction to Fascist maneuvers in the field of religion was extremely negative. The majority of the Italian populace was Roman Catholic and, despite Fascist attempts to create a new religion focused on the state, Church membership and attendance remained strong.⁴³ The Pope felt that he had enough support that he even began to denounce Mussolini publicly and the Fascists just months after the Lateran Accords had been signed. Pius XI published a response to

³⁹ Vatican Archive, "Treaty Between the Holy See," Article 11.

⁴⁰ Baxa, "A Pagan Landscape," 112.

⁴¹ Baxa, "A Pagan Landscape," 112.

⁴² Baxa, "A Pagan Landscape," 112.

⁴³ Baxa, "A Pagan Landscape," 120.

Fascist violence and policy in 1931 entitled “Non Abbiamo Bisogno.” In this piece, Pius XI declared Mussolini and the Fascists to be pagan worshippers, and claimed that true Catholics would turn away from their teachings.⁴⁴ He further indicted Fascist violence and stated that their preoccupation with fighting in order to get what they wanted politically came from a more barbaric time, by which he meant ancient Rome.⁴⁵ While the Fascist authorities were trying to encourage a secularization of education and the introduction of a state-sponsored educational program, Pius XI labeled these moves as “pagan” and indoctrination into the state-fueled idolatry of Fascism.⁴⁶ This “Statolatry” that Pius attacked in this piece was precisely what the Fascists were interested in creating, so the comments from Pius, from the Fascist perspective, should have had little effect on their policies, popularity, and the progress of their doctrine in terms of the Italian populace.

The Pope’s words rung out among the citizens of Rome and Italy, however. Bishops, priests, and local Catholic Action⁴⁷ officials spread the word that what the Fascists were doing was creating a new pagan religion that would attempt to destroy the single most important Italian institution: the Catholic Church.⁴⁸ The Fascists during this time, roughly 1928-1933, vastly underestimated the faith many Italians in Rome and across the peninsula had. The scathing words used by Pius XI became common words of rebellion; the usage of the word pagan to describe Fascist failings and evil spread across Socialist and Catholic newspapers.⁴⁹ To attend Fascist events and support the Fascists openly was to risk being chastised by local clergy, a fate

⁴⁴ Pius XI, *Non Abbiamo Bisogno*, Papal Encyclicals, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius11/P11FAC.HTM>, 44.

⁴⁵ Pius XI, *Non Abbiamo Bisogno*, 11.

⁴⁶ Pius XI, *Non Abbiamo Bisogno*, 44.

⁴⁷ Catholic Action was a Catholic group focused on organizing Catholic youth and political minds in order to further the goals of the Church and educate the young.

⁴⁸ Christopher Duggan, *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini’s Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 182.

⁴⁹ Baxa, “A Pagan Landscape,” 109.

most provincial Italians especially feared.⁵⁰ In these ways, the Catholic Church managed to maintain its hold over the Italian religious sphere, and the Fascists were forced to tone down their state-focused faith rhetoric after 1933, though Fascist ideological control of the Italian youth remained absolute in the city of Rome as well as many other urban centers across the Italian peninsula.⁵¹ Conservative Italians of the previous generation, as well as many Catholic supports and clergy, continued to oppose this Fascist control over their youth and fought to subvert it.⁵²

IV. The “Roman” Man

There was one aspect of the Fascist program that the Catholic Church supported: the conquest of ‘heathens.’ In May of 1936, Mussolini announced the annexation of Ethiopia to cheering crowds of Italians in Rome.⁵³ This crowd included not only Fascist party members, but citizens of all stripes and clothes from around Rome, including members of the clergy.⁵⁴ The Catholic Church supported Fascist moves into Ethiopia, and later Libya, because it allowed the Church to regain footholds in previously Catholic regions.⁵⁵

The conquest of Ethiopia and Libya, as well as the growing closeness between Hitler and Mussolini in the latter 1930s, created a new allusion to Roman culture for Mussolini to exploit.

In July of 1938, Fascist scholars, scientists and party members published *The Manifesto on*

⁵⁰ Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, 182.

⁵¹ Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man*, 41.

⁵² Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man*, 40-41.

⁵³ Benito Mussolini, “The Discourse on Empire,” in *The Fascist Revolution in Italy: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Marla Stone (New York: Bedford and St. Martin’s, 2013), 142.

⁵⁴ Mussolini, “The Discourse on Empire,” 141-142.

⁵⁵ Aristotle Kallis, *Fascist Ideology: Territory and Expansionism in Italy and Germany, 1922-1945* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 128.

Race.⁵⁶ In this Manifesto, the Fascists claimed not only that there was a pure “Italian” race, but also that this Italian race was “Aryan” and descended from the Romans.⁵⁷ The Fascists stressed in their manifesto that being descended from the Romans was a privilege that “elevates the Italian to an ideal of superior consciousness of himself and of his greater responsibility.”⁵⁸ This “greater responsibility” that the writers of the document were referring to was the conquest of the Mediterranean and the reestablishment of a Roman Empire, which the Fascists believed was the duty of the racially superior Italians.⁵⁹

Interestingly, the question of from where the Italian race descended had been in contention in previous centuries. During the *Risorgimento*, or the Italian nationalist movement in the latter nineteenth century, the question of who the Italians were boiled down to what cultural path they should pursue. Romanticists believed in an Italian descended from the Goths and Lombards who invaded Italy in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, because that belief lent itself to focusing upon the Medieval Italian past rather than the Classical one.⁶⁰ The debate was never fully settled, but the Fascists planned to firmly cement Italian racial identity with that of the Romans by the late 1930s, when race finally entered in to the previously not racist Fascist party.⁶¹

Unsurprisingly, despite the Catholic Church’s willingness to exploit Italian conquests in Africa, the Church disliked the new “Manifesto on Race” due to its supposed focus on Roman ideology.⁶² The Romans were accepting of all races officially, though they did eventually see it

⁵⁶ Il Giornale d’Italia, “The Manifesto on Race / *Razzismo Italiano*,” in *The Fascist Revolution in Italy: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Marla Stone (New York: Bedford and St. Martin’s, 2013), 95.

⁵⁷ Il Giornale d’Italia, “The Manifesto on Race,” 96.

⁵⁸ Il Giornale d’Italia, “The Manifesto on Race,” 97.

⁵⁹ Il Giornale d’Italia, “The Manifesto on Race,” 97.

⁶⁰ Wood, “Adelchi and ‘Atilla’,” 234.

⁶¹ Il Giornale d’Italia, “The Manifesto on Race,” 95.

⁶² Sergio Pagano, “The Catholic Church and Racial Laws,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (January 2009): 10.

as their duty to rule over the Mediterranean as the Fascists did.⁶³ The Romans believed that Mars had simply made them stronger than their counterparts, and that Romanizing the Mediterranean would be the same as civilizing the other Mediterranean peoples, allowing everyone to be on the same footing technologically and economically.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, the Fascists preferred to present the Romans as strictly racist so as to better justify their own claims and actions.

This new focus on rewriting the classical past, rather than simply alluding to it, led to a new educational program in Fascist schools across the Italian peninsula, leading to even more closings of Catholic institutions. The focus of Fascist educational policy by the mid-1930s became one of indoctrination and militarization. The entirety of the students of Italy were required to use a book known as the *Testo Unico*.⁶⁵ In the *Testo Unico*, there existed numerous references to Roman racism and the idea of the “Roman Man,” which would pervade Fascist educational talks and discussions after the conquest of Ethiopia.⁶⁶

Fascist middle schools were instructed to teach the values of the “Roman Man” early on, to the point of encouraging children to rebel against their old-fashioned parents.⁶⁷ The curriculum included “The Duties of the Citizen,” which described every Italian as pawns under the Fascist state whose duty it was to die for the state if need be.⁶⁸ In the lesson plan, the Fascists suggest that the “entire world now looks to Rome” as it had been in the Classical era.⁶⁹ Mussolini and the Fascists used this educational program to create what they believed was the emblematic “Roman Man,” based upon the old Roman soldiers and legionnaire culture.

⁶³ Ando, *Roman Religion*, 223.

⁶⁴ Ando, *Roman Religion*, 223.

⁶⁵ Alessandro Pes, “Becoming Imperialist: Italian Colonies in Fascist Textbooks for Primary Schools,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 18, No. 5 (2013): 604.

⁶⁶ Pes, “Becoming Imperialist,” 604.

⁶⁷ Nino Sammartano, “Course on Fascist Culture for Use in Middle Schools,” in *The Fascist Revolution in Italy: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Marla Stone (New York: Bedford and St. Martin’s, 2013), 110.

⁶⁸ Sammartano, “Course on Fascist Culture,” 111.

⁶⁹ Sammartano, “Course on Fascist Culture,” 111.

Unfortunately, the allusion held little water; the Catholic Church continued to halt the Fascist advance in these matters by arguing that education in the 1930s was at an all-time high.⁷⁰ The Romans did not have such educational opportunities and Roman citizens were not bred into soldiers, as the Fascists would suggest they were. The Church continued to advertise itself as the humanistic alternative to the Fascist militaristic education, even as military efforts were beginning to ramp up in Italy and elsewhere in Europe.⁷¹

V. *Gloria Patria Romanorum*

The conquest of Ethiopia and the indoctrination of Fascist youth were only Mussolini's first steps in his plans to evolve Italy into a new Roman Empire and expand Italian dominion across the Mediterranean. Mussolini viewed his regime as one of constant revolution, and to continue the revolution he needed to acquire additional territory so that the Italian people were never anxious.⁷² His expansion scheme was highly influenced by the boundaries of the old Roman Empire: Mussolini sought to expand Italian influence from the western Iberian Peninsula all the way to Turkey and south into North Africa.⁷³

After Ethiopia, Mussolini's first opportunity to push this expansionist policy forward was during the Spanish Civil War. While not necessarily seeking to conquer the Iberian Peninsula by 1936, Mussolini believed that an expansion of Fascist influence into the region would not be far off from the dominion he craved.⁷⁴ Thus the Italian military was equipped for another round of action and sent to the Iberian peninsula, where once the Romans had fought for centuries to hold on to the small sections of land they had maintained in that region. The Italian army was not sent

⁷⁰ Pagano, "The Catholic Church and Racial Laws," 10.

⁷¹ Pius XI, *Non Abbiamo Bisogno*, 11.

⁷² Kallis, *Fascist Ideology*, 37.

⁷³ Kallis, *Fascist Ideology*, 129.

⁷⁴ Kallis, *Fascist Ideology*, 128.

merely with weapons, however. The Italian troops sent to Spain were given approved Fascist songs to sing in order to both boost the morale of the Spanish Fascists as well as spread around Mussolini's Roman military vocabulary.⁷⁵

One of the approved songs included several Roman allusions and the author of the song clearly sought to evoke a sense of Roman and Italian importance and power. The song calls the soldiers of Italy members of the "Black shirt legions," and prepares them to die by reminding the soldiers they will die as "Legionaries of Fascism."⁷⁶ Calling the soldiers legionaries of course has the Roman allusion imbedded into it, but there also exists an ideological component to the term as well. The Roman military was, for a significant portion of the Republic and into the early Empire, a citizen army that was expected to defend the state that protected it. This song was meant to remind the soldiers that they were fighting to protect the state that, in turn, protected them, encouraging further patriotism. The song then reminds the soldiers and their allies to never forget the "Eternal light of Rome," lest they die on the wrong side of "history."⁷⁷ Mussolini was convinced of his own invincibility, to the point that he continually referred to his own military actions as a continuation of Augustus' imperial ambitions.⁷⁸

In terms of conquest and military victories, Mussolini's comparisons to Augustus were laughed at by the non-Fascist Italian intellectual community.⁷⁹ Augustus conquered all of Egypt, large swathes of territory in North Africa, Germany, northern France and other minor territories in the Mediterranean. Italian military endeavors tended to be unsuccessful due to a myriad of circumstances.⁸⁰ While the Spanish Civil War ended in Fascist victory, Socialist and Catholic

⁷⁵ Unknown, "Song from the Spanish Civil War: 'Long Live Spain!'" in *The Fascist Revolution in Italy: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Marla Stone (New York: Bedford and St. Martin's, 2013), 147.

⁷⁶ Unknown, "Song from the Spanish Civil War," 147.

⁷⁷ Unknown, "Song from the Spanish Civil War," 148.

⁷⁸ Mussolini, "The Discourse on Empire," 142.

⁷⁹ Guido Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 131.

⁸⁰ Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature*, 131.

writers in Italy mockingly praised the Germans and their material aid to Spain, rather than the lackluster Italian efforts.⁸¹ Eventually, Mussolini's advisors convinced him that a non-military expansionist strategy needed to be adopted. This shift in policy occurred around 1937, when Mussolini planned to create a new Italian hegemony across the Mediterranean basin by abusing his relationship with the power alliance of Britain, France and Germany.⁸² This plan, of course, did not work as Italy's relationships with Britain and France became strained when Hitler incurred the Western Allies' wrath. Mussolini was then forced to choose sides, and thought that Hitler was going to win any coming war, and so the Rome-Berlin Axis was formed.⁸³

The last parts of the Spanish Civil War song became major rhetorical points for the Fascists to use after the alliances with Britain and France failed. The final verse of the song states: "We want a Fascist Europe" which is no longer "Tormented by the treacherous Reds."⁸⁴ Before 1939, the "Reds" would have been an allusion to the Socialists and Communists in Italy and abroad. After the formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis and the beginning of World War II, "Reds" began to mean non-Fascist barbarians rather than simply Communists or Socialists.⁸⁵ Mentioning the "Reds" or Communists in a negative light alienated many small northern towns that were proud of their recently created left-wing political history and culture.⁸⁶ This made Fascist control of these regions even harder than before, and many plebiscites had to be rigged in order to effectively run Fascist administration in these regions.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature*, 132-133.

⁸² Kallis, *Fascist Ideology*, 129.

⁸³ Kallis, *Fascist Ideology*, 129-130.

⁸⁴ Unknown, "Song from the Spanish Civil War," 148.

⁸⁵ Gino Bosccasile, "Anti-American Poster on Cultural Barbarism," in *Propaganda: The Art of Persuasion: World War II*, ed. Victor Margolin (Hong Kong: The Wellfleet Press, 1987), 96.

⁸⁶ Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature*, 133.

⁸⁷ Corner, *The Fascist Party*, 179.

VI. The Extravagance of Antiquity

Mussolini's wish to distance himself from the non-Fascist barbarians began much earlier than the dawn of World War II, however. Since the early 1920s, the Fascists had been advertising Fascism as a counter to the cultural barbarism of the Romantic Italian artists and the artistic modernism of other non-Fascist nations.⁸⁸ The first major artistic festival of the Fascist period was the *Novecento* celebration of 1922. In his speech that opened the festivities, Mussolini argued that Fascism would foster a more sophisticated art form than had the previous Italian government and other governments in central and western and Europe.⁸⁹ Mussolini specifically wished to see Italian artists bring back the classical model of sculptures using Fascist money to acquire marble for such endeavors.⁹⁰

Mussolini was so engrossed in this form of art that he commissioned a bronze recasting of a Roman marble statue of Augustus, which he placed on a road near the Forum of Augustus (See Appendix A, Figure 2). Other Fascist monuments were either based upon older, classical pieces of art, or were accented with Roman stylistic tropes, such as Latin inscriptions, symbols of the Roman gods, and others. Ardengo Soffici, an Italian painter, art critic, and Fascist, argued that Fascist art captured the present by perfecting the past.⁹¹ He furthered wrote that Fascist art represented the best "characteristics specific to Italianness, that remain from the epoch of Greco-Roman art to the nineteenth century."⁹²

The majority of the Italian population did not agree with Soffici's assertions. As was described in the introduction, one of Mussolini's grandest artistic and architectural projects was

⁸⁸ Ardengo Soffici, "Fascist Art," in *The Fascist Revolution in Italy: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Marla Stone (New York: Bedford and St. Martin's, 2013), 133.

⁸⁹ Benito Mussolini, "The Twentieth Century: Inauguration Speech Given at the Opening of the First Novecento Exhibition," in *The Fascist Revolution in Italy: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Marla Stone (New York: Bedford and St. Martin's, 2013), 128.

⁹⁰ Mussolini, "The Twentieth Century," 130.

⁹¹ Soffici, "Fascist Art," 134.

⁹² Soffici, "Fascist Art," 134.

both the exhumation of the Mausoleum of Augustus and creation of the Imperial *Piazza* around it.⁹³ The *piazza* was designed to enhance the beauty of the ancient ruins represented by the Mausoleum, as well as demonstrate the functional beauty of Fascist architecture and new Fascist sculpture work.⁹⁴ In all of these goals, the piazza failed. The concrete Fascist architecture was considered ugly when compared to the presence of the Mausoleum of Augustus as well as the few classical sculptures brought into the piazza.⁹⁵ The sculptures of the Fascist artists were ridiculed as well, many were defaced while the classical sculptures were spared.⁹⁶

With the failure of the Imperial *Piazza*, Mussolini sought to showcase the new Fascist artistic vision a different way. Mussolini located additional Roman ruins in the region of Rome known as the *Largo Argentina*, and quickly set to work excavating the area (See Appendix A, Figure 3). The site contained four previously unexcavated temples, and Mussolini hoped that this new archeological site would attract more visitors and result in increased praise for the Fascist mission.⁹⁷ Unfortunately, the *Largo Argentina* represented a heavily trafficked area, and Italians simply balked at the increase in difficulty when it came to their commute, and so Mussolini's efforts were left relatively unnoticed.⁹⁸ In addition, Mussolini was soon committed to entering World War II, and so funding for the dig dried up and has not been continued since then (though the Italian government has maintained it as a tourist site).⁹⁹

Fascist propaganda sought to inspire Italian populace by evoking historical images of Ancient Rome. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Fascist government needed Italians to invest in bonds in order to pay for the military campaigns abroad and domestically. The poster

⁹³ Brangers, "Political Propaganda and Archeology," 126.

⁹⁴ Brangers, "Political Propaganda and Archeology," 126.

⁹⁵ Brangers, "Political Propaganda and Archeology," 126-127.

⁹⁶ Brangers, "Political Propaganda and Archeology," 128.

⁹⁷ Brangers, "Political Propaganda and Archeology," 132.

⁹⁸ Brangers, "Political Propaganda and Archeology," 132.

⁹⁹ Brangers, "Political Propaganda and Archeology," 133.

“Buy Treasury Bonds from the Bank of Rome” included an image of Romulus and Remus breast feeding from the she-wolf as she stands over a shredded British flag.¹⁰⁰ Despite the nationalistic classical imagery, this poster seems to not have been extremely effective in bringing in investors. The Fascist government ran out of money fairly quickly and began borrowing from Axis allies early on during World War II.¹⁰¹

By 1943, the Americans had landed on the island of Sicily, threatening Italy directly. Mussolini quickly resorted to his old use of the term “barbarian” to describe the Western Allies and their Soviet Allies in a new anti-American poster.¹⁰² This new propaganda poster presented the American invaders as all African Americans, which was supposed to evoke hatred in the indoctrinated racist Italian populace. In addition, the poster suggested that these African American invaders planned to steal the beautiful classical Roman sculptures and simply sell them for a little bit of money. The sculpture in the picture is of a female as well, and so the African American soldier is of course groping the breast of the sculpture, further proving the point that these invaders are foreign barbarians.

Despite scathing propaganda posters such as these, Rome was liberated in January 1944 and the Americans were welcomed by the Roman populace and Catholic Clergy at the entrance of the Via Appia. Soon after, a new Italian government was founded in Rome and it aided the Allies in their march northward. Mussolini himself was killed by an Italian communist partisan group in Northern Italy in 1945 as the Fascist dictator sought to escape the country into Switzerland. Ironically, a similar fate befell many of the less-favored Roman emperors, such as Caligula and Elagabalus, who were assassinated by their own people.

¹⁰⁰ A. Capitani, “Buy Treasury Bonds from the Bank of Rome,” in *Propaganda: The Art of Persuasion: World War II*, ed. Victor Margolin (Hong Kong: The Wellfleet Press, 1987), 93.

¹⁰¹ Kallis, *Fascist Ideology*, 130.

¹⁰² Bosccasile, “Anti-American Poster on Cultural Barbarism,” 96.

VII. Conclusion

In 1940, an American writer named Roaldus Richmond was interviewing people for a Federal Writers' Project involving memory and immigration. One of the individuals interviewed by Richmond was a man who went by the title Mayor Duncan. "The Mayor," as Richmond's piece is called, discusses Duncan's immigration to America and his interpretation of the Italian response to Fascism. Duncan described Italians who were "anti-Fascist but pro-Italian," proud of their nation's accomplishments but at odds with the system that ruled over them.¹⁰³ The Italians of Duncan's tale were extremely patriotic, but did not buy into the idea of "il Duce," and certainly did not identify their nation with the ancient past. According to Duncan, the clergy in his area were all "fine" men who represented a bastion of anti-Fascism.¹⁰⁴ Duncan and his fellow Italians would go to their services and listen to the "true" cultural voice of Italy, the Catholic Church.¹⁰⁵ Duncan also spoke of complete disdain for Mussolini himself, who was seen as an opponent to the Catholic Church and to Italy's freedom of political, social, and artistic expression.¹⁰⁶

Mayor Duncan's testimony provides a window into the opinions of everyday Italians during the Fascist period in Italy. The information Richmond gleaned from Duncan points to an Italian populace that was proud of the nation, its accomplishments, and its major cultural, institution the Catholic Church, but not one that supported the Fascist cultural aims nor subscribed to the ancient ideals the Fascist Party tried so hard to instill in its people. This testimony argues for the failure of Fascism in the cultural sphere of Italian life. Nor were testimonies such as this one singular in nature, many Italians from Rome and other cities where

¹⁰³ Roaldus Richmond, "The Mayor," Folklore Project, Life Histories, 1936-1939, Library of Congress, 3.

¹⁰⁴ Richmond, "The Mayor," 3.

¹⁰⁵ Richmond, "The Mayor," 3.

¹⁰⁶ Richmond, "The Mayor," 3.

such measures were taken to increase classicism in everyday Italians' lives felt similarly based upon their own words and attendance of Fascist/Classical events.¹⁰⁷

After Mussolini's overthrow by 1944, the Catholic Church stepped back into Italian politics.¹⁰⁸ The Church had been fostering Catholic Action programs and educating its youth to become leaders in the eventual new Italy the Catholics believed would come soon with the downfall of Fascism.¹⁰⁹ The new political parties in the newly created Italian Republic would be dominated by Catholic influence for decades, suggesting that the Church did not lose much power nor influence during the Fascist rule in Italy. The Catholic Church urged a return to the Italian cultural roots located in the Renaissance period, which still fostered a relationship with the classics, while focusing on conceptions of religion and Italian impressionism and other forms of Renaissance art.

Despite many attempts to create a new Italian culture based upon ancient models, the Fascist cultural model was swept away with relative ease. The grand monuments and *piazzas* that the Fascists worked on and constructed lay unused and unvisited for many decades until renovation projects began in the 1960s to boost Italian tourism.¹¹⁰ The "Roman" man of Mussolini's Empire did not stand against the tide of the Catholic Church's influence, nor the degradation of the Ancient monuments in Rome, nor the histories written after the war damning both the Fascists and their Roman inspirations. The histories written right after the war praised the Catholic Church's actions during the entire period, heralding it as the hero of Italy. Similar to how the Italians reacted to many of the ancient references and policies during the Fascist era, the Italians looked upon the ancient ruins, Fascist imperial ambitions, and Fascist propaganda with

¹⁰⁷ Brangers, "Political Propaganda and Archeology," 126.

¹⁰⁸ Manlio Graziano, *The Failure of Italian Nationhood: The Geopolitics of a Troubled Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 160.

¹⁰⁹ Graziano, *The Failure of Italian Nationhood*, 160.

¹¹⁰ Painter, *Mussolini's Rome*, 1.

disdain after 1945.¹¹¹ The whole of Italy during the Cold War took part in a cultural romanticism for decades, focusing on the cultured Catholic Church and the era of the Italian city-states.¹¹²

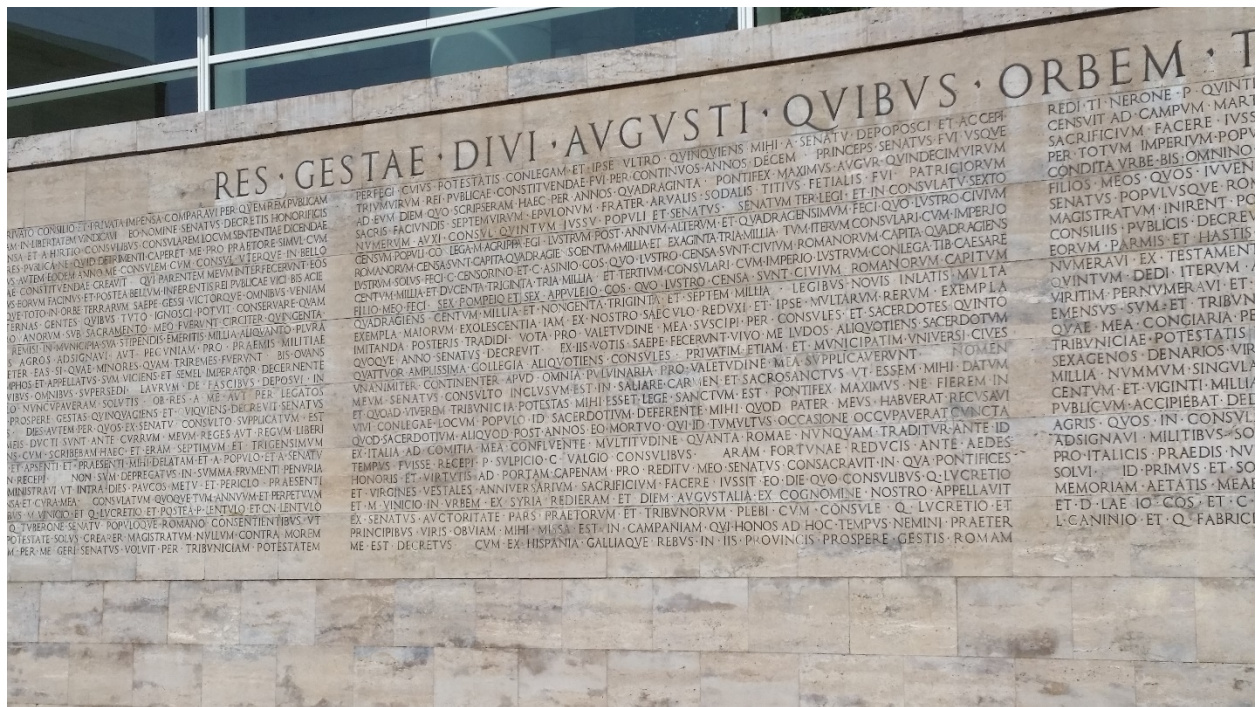
The Fascist experiment had failed in its attempts to change the underlying cultural assumptions of modern Italy, and by doing so it reinforced the position of romantic norms and the power, authority, and cultural preeminence of the Catholic Church in Italy in the post-1945 era.

¹¹¹ R. J. B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (New York: Arnold Publishing, 1998), 145.

¹¹² Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship*, 145-146.

Appendix A: Pictures

Figure 1



Res Gestae Wall. Rome, Italy. Photograph provided by Author.

Figure 2



Statue of Augustus. Re-casted in Bronze by Mussolini. Rome, Italy. Photograph provided by Author.

Figure 3



Largo Argentina. Site excavated by the Fascists. Photo provided by Author.

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