Urban Rhetoric and Embodied Identities: City, Nation, and Empire at the Vittorio Emanuele II Monument in Rome, 1870–1945

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This essay examines the monument constructed by the Italian state in the center of Rome to commemorate Vittorio-Emanuele II, first king of united Italy. Opened in 1911 and constructed in the Beaux-Arts architectural style popular at that time as appropriately “imperial” for urban monuments throughout the West, the Vittoriano’s symbolism and iconography produce a “memory theater” through which the official rhetoric of a united and imperial Italy was intended to be conveyed to the nation. Yet despite attempts by succeeding governments to promote it as a dignified and sacred center of the city, the nation, and the short-lived Italian empire, the monument has been derided throughout its history. Concentrating on “official culture,” we analyze the form and iconography of the monument, trace the various planning interventions made by both Liberal and Fascist governments between the wars that emphasized the Vittoriano’s centrality within urban space and Italian territory, and comment on its use by the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, to promote an imperial spatiality through his performative rhetoric, which often unfolded while facing the monument in the Piazza Venetia. While urbanistic and territorial interventions emphasized horizontal axialities, burial and construction of a crypt for Italy’s Unknown Soldier at the monument produced a vertical axis that linked military sacrifice and past heroism to aerial flight and future victory within the Fascist cult of male youth. Key Words: Italy, Fascism, imperialism, monument, Rome.

We will never know what the monument will be when it is finished, and for those of our descendants in a remote future who will see the finished work, time will have wrought its own labours, which make every ruin appear venerable and beautiful (L’Illustrazione Italiana, November 6, 1921, cited in Gentile 1996, 12).

Seldom has the national monument of a leading Western European nation endured the casual and almost universal vilification of Rome’s monument to Vittorio Emanuele II (Figure 1). The sentiments expressed in L’Illustrazione Italiana, only ten years after its 1911 inauguration, already carry the air of a somewhat forlorn hope that time’s patina might give “The Altar of the Nation” a greater dignity. These hopes have not been realized. On the slopes of Rome’s Capitoline Hill, the massive confection of brilliant white columns, cornices, and heavy statuary, topped by cast-iron Victory chariots, commemorates the founding monarch of united Italy. In addition, its sober, symbolic functions include celebrating the unification of the state, honoring Italian military forces, housing the remains of the Italian Unknown Soldier, and accommodating the eternal flame in remembrance of all the nation’s war dead. The monument punctuates a key point in urban space, situated at the junction between the archaeological zone of the Classical Foro Romano—the medieval and baroque city of the Popes—and the nineteenth-century urbanization of the post-Risorgimento Liberal capital. Yet to most Italians, the Vittorio Emanuele II monument is more colloquially known as Il Vittoriano, and to the Romans who pass by every day, as “The Wedding Cake” or “The False Teeth.” Liberating Rome in 1944, American troops labeled it “The Typewriter,” a sobriquet thereafter adopted by Romans. The Vittoriano even comes under attack from the genre of serious guidebooks that usually retail uncritically the official meanings ascribed to such
monuments and symbols of national government (Barthes 1986; Duncan and Duncan 1992). In 1903, Augustus Hare’s venerable guidebook *Walks in Rome* dismissed the not-yet-completed monument as “pretentious” (Hare 1903). The current English-language *Blue Guide* labels it “an unforgivable intrusion into the centre of the city [that] can only be described as a colossal monstrosity” (Macadam 1994: 56, 72). Less reverent still is *The Rough Guide to Italy*, the self-styled “back-packer’s bible,” which reviles the “hideous white marble typewriter” as “without question . . . a pompous, overweening structure, too big, too white . . . and altogether too boastful” (Belford et al. 1990: 586). Its student clientele is advised to visit nearby Medieval and Renaissance churches instead—in *The Rough Guide*’s opinion, far more worthy of their interest than the Vittoriano. A grandiose statement of official culture has seemingly fallen victim less to contestation than to public contempt.

Our aim in this paper is to examine the various attempts made by the Italian State to define national identity and purpose through the monument’s design, its location in urban space, and the performance of state rituals within and around it. We place specific emphasis on the unique circumstances of Rome as a historic city and Italy as a territorial and geopolitical entity to explore the rhetoric of monumental space.

**Memorialization and the Study of Monuments**

Since David Harvey (1979) analyzed the ideological contests that surrounded the building of the Sacré Cœur Basilica at Montmartre in Paris, the geographical discussion of memory and landscape has developed significantly. Harvey was concerned to read Sacré Cœur in terms of the late-nineteenth-century struggle between capital and labor in the guise of the bourgeois Catholic and proletarian Socialist cultures that had so starkly riven the French capital during the days of the Commune. More than a decade of subsequent study has produced a well-established cultural critique of memorial landscapes, along with a sensitivity to the polyvocality of official and popular memorialization (Duncan 1992; Forster 1982; Johnson 1994; Strohmayer 1996; Withers
and elusive idea of Italianità [Italianness], was conceived, designed, built, decorated, and inserted into the rich and complicated contexts of twentieth-century Rome.

The exploration of official narratives of the Vittoriano may contribute towards the geographical discussion of memorial landscapes in four main ways. First, in its many historical incarnations, Rome more than any other single city has provided models and templates—architecturally, urbanistically, ideologically, and narratively—for the design and form of capital cities in the West (Onians 1988; Schama 1995; Agnew 1995). As imperial cosmopolis of Antiquity, as Renaissance and Baroque spiritual capital of Christendom, and as monumental ruin in the Piranesian Enlightenment imagination, Rome is a profoundly complex and deeply layered historical-symbolic landscape (Bondanella 1987; Liversidge and Edwards 1995). Any major intervention in its urban spaces and appearance must negotiate these historical complexities, layers, and associations. A national monument constructed in Rome, more perhaps than a similar intervention in Paris, Washington, or London, offers opportunities to explore the rhetorical expression in urban space of such political-geographical themes as national identity, territory, and empire. Second, the recurrent discourse of the Vittoriano’s iconography is embodiment. From its initial conception as an altar, a place of sacrifice and transcendence honoring the dead king, to the burial of the body of an unidentified soldier in its vaults, the Vittoriano has referred, more than to any abstract symbolism, to the human body as its central representational motif and as a focus for its performative role within the city. Examining the monument offers opportunities to incorporate the significance of physical, bodily spatialities into the interpretation of urban meanings and monumental landscapes (Domosh 1996; Sennett 1994).

Third, we believe that the contested identities of memorial landscapes are not solely political in any narrow sense. Andrew Charlesworth’s (1994) study of Auschwitz, for example, incorporates the politics of sacred memory within highly emotive and contentious debates surrounding the memorial landscapes of the Holocaust (see also Young 1993). Public monuments, especially those intended to encapsulate an imagined national spirit or identity, seek to materialize ideas of the sacred, the mystical, and the transcendental. In the case of the Vittoriano, transhistorical notions of empire and nation are among these ideas, for it is clear that the monument is intended to invoke memories of past Romes. This leads to our fourth concern, to demonstrate the structuring role of
rhetoric in monumental landscapes. In Italy as elsewhere in the parts of Europe most strongly influenced by the urban culture of Classical Antiquity, conscious attention to rhetoric, spectacle, and display has never ceased to shape landscape design and use in cities (Benevolo 1994). Rhetoric originated as a technique of convincing and persuasive argumentation in urban public spaces, and it was closely allied to the arts of memory. In this sense, the Vittoriano might be regarded as a memory theater, a rhetorical device for manipulating public memory (Yates 1966; Neve and Santoro 1989).

We open with a brief discussion of the city of Rome in 1870, the moment of the city's incorporation into the Italian state. We then outline state efforts to mobilize Rome's landscape and to use a particular monumental, neoclassical form of architecture to define an imperial Italian identity in the cultural context of late nineteenth-century European nationalism. We then turn to the Vittoriano itself, examining its spatialities at three scales. Locally, in terms of Rome's urban plan and morphology, the form and position of the Vittoriano reordered the internal spaces of Rome and immediately rendered the monument a crucial actor in the multilayered histories and identities of the Eternal City. Geographically, the location of the Vittoriano was deliberately manipulated as the symbolic heart of the Italian peninsula and the ceremonial center of the new Fascist empire. Finally, we examine the rhetorical construction of a vertical axis of meaning at the Vittoriano, reaching from earth to sky through the body of an anonymous soldier, entombed within the Vittoriano to represent all Italy's war dead. In closing, we return to the consistent failure of Italian governments' attempts to fix the fluid meanings of empire, nation, and identity in the spaces of the Vittoriano.

Historical Geographies of Modern Rome and the Making of a Capital

During the nineteenth century, while many other European cities rapidly industrialized and expanded in both population and area, and while European colonial empires were extended globally, Rome, erstwhile center of the greatest Classical empire, remained a small, antiquated city, controlled by the Pope and a small number of traditional aristocratic families. Rome was largely bypassed by industry, commerce, and the impress of nineteenth-century modernity, so much so that even in 1870, it was not unusual to see shepherds watering their flocks in the city's piazzas. The population of some 212,000 (Agnew 1995), was composed primarily of clerics, other holy orders, a rentier aristocracy, and a population of shopkeepers, hawkers, and beggars who revolved around the pilgrims and cultural tourists visiting the Eternal City.

Despite all of this, the city of Rome remained the ultimate prize of Italy's Risorgimento: the process by which, between 1859 and 1870, the various principalities, kingdoms, and occupied territories of the Italian peninsula were gradually incorporated by the north-Italian kingdom of Piedmont into the new nation-state of Italy. In 1861, the last part of Italy to remain outside the newly proclaimed state was the Papal Territories, bisecting the peninsula from the Adriatic to the Tyrrhenian, their center being the holy city of Rome. The infant Italian kingdom finally occupied the city in 1870 only when the French troops who had guaranteed the Papacy's secular power left Rome to defend France against Prussia. To Italian nationalists everywhere, the incorporation of Rome into Italia meant that the nation had finally achieved territorial unity for the first time since Antiquity. The priority was now to render Papal Rome a fitting and appropriate capital for the new Italy.

Immediately plans were laid to transfer the business of governance from Florence to Rome. Inspired by the desire to make Rome a modern European capital able to stand comparison with Paris or London, a commission was established to transform the former papal capital into a proud material expression of the new nation's modernity (Kostof 1973). This project, entitled Roma Capitale, prompted a series of debates about the best way to direct and order the growth of the city (Borsi 1963, 1980). At the same time, thousands of bureaucrats, civil servants, parliamentarians, soldiers and diplomats, and the associated paraphernalia of government all descended upon the city. Rome experienced a massive increase in population and a concomitant explosion of speculative development. Lack of cooperation between national and city government, an absence of appropriate civic finances, inadequate building regulations, and the failure to enforce any master-plan meant that the development was largely unregulated, foreclosing any attempts to plan the capital at the broader, city-wide scale (Agnew 1995; Kostof 1973). Rome's growth was
thus piecemeal; the city government was frequently obliged to follow, rather than lead, the developers.

Failing to realize its grandiose planning schemes, the new government nevertheless succeeded in marking its arrival through individual projects at key points in the city. The rhetorical significance of Rome’s existing statutory and public monuments could not be ignored, and the profoundly anticlerical nature of the Liberal state, which had already appropriated many religious buildings for government purposes, ensured that a huge equestrian statue of Garibaldi was erected on the Gianiculum Hill, directly overlooking the Vatican. Meanwhile, in 1889, when private finance, supported by the city government, erected a statue of Giordano Bruno, the sixteenth-century thinker and “heretic” on the site where he was burnt to death by the Inquisition, a propapal mob battled in the Piazza dei Fiori with supporters of the secular state. Elsewhere, as Gentile (1996) notes, attempts to celebrate secular anniversaries and heroes also prompted demonstrations and clashes. In response to the opposition of the Church (which constantly threatened excommunication for any Catholic participating in the democratic processes of the new state), the government constructed a number of high-profile public buildings alongside wide and straight new streets. The huge Ministry of Justice building was erected just beyond the Vatican walls. Like other new public buildings such as the Bank of Italy, the National Exhibition Hall, and the Ministry of Finance, it was designed in a neoclassical, Beaux-Arts style: intended to express the new international standing of the Italian state (Boco et al. 1995; Insolera 1980; Schroeter 1978; Tobia 1991, 1996; Williams 1992). This same architectural genre, inspired by late-nineteenth-century nationalism and the imperial pretensions of the European powers, was chosen for the most dramatic of all these projects: the monument to Vittorio Emanuele II.

As Johnson (1994) points out, the intense nationalism of the later years of the nineteenth century gave rise to widespread and sustained attempts across Europe and North America to commemorate national histories through monuments. Moreover, the late nineteenth century also witnessed the vigorous expansion of Euro-American global imperialism. And as John Mackenzie (1986) and Edward Said (1993) have argued, imperialism had as significant a cultural impact in the territory of the colonizers as upon the lands that were colonized. Felix Driver and David Gilbert (1996) have outlined some of the ways in which the cultures of imperialism had impact upon the metropolitan landscapes of the imperial capitals. The heady combination of national pride and imperial confidence that infused political and civic discourses in the closing decades of the nineteenth century ensured that, in many cases, the capital cities of European nations and empires were replanned and reconstructed to express a newly conceived national-imperial identity. The most prestigious and self-conscious elements of these recast cityscapes were large public monuments that sought to locate and embody national and imperial identities and meanings in key metropolitan locations.

The architectural and decorative style of Rome’s national monument places it within a loose category of what have come to be seen as bombastic, overblown expressions of bourgeois high culture through which the classically educated elite of the late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European powers emblazoned their capital cities and announced their nations’ pride and status. From Garnier’s Opera House of 1875 in Paris, to Admiralty Arch, the Victoria Memorial of 1911 and Buckingham Palace’s facade of 1913 in London, to monumental districts such as the Place Royale in Brussels and Union Station in Washington, common Beaux-Arts motifs and an overbearing scale characterized these fin-de-siècle monuments in both Europe and the New World. Their ornate, neoclassical design language was championed and celebrated above all in a series of “world” fairs and “universal” exhibitions. The style’s dominance at the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition, coinciding with the height of Euro-American global imperium, signified a modified but still clearly recognizable manipulation of the architectural and urbanistic motifs of imperial Rome in order to relate the modern national metropolis to a continuous heritage of European cultural supremacy (Gilbert 1991). Marble and white limestone were the favored building materials, Corinthian and Composite orders defined the decorative style of grand arches, pediments, and columns, while monumental statuary and the recurrent personification of “Victory” in bronze or marble recalled the iconography of Classical Roman cities. For both the established global empires of Britain and France, and for the more embryonic colonial ambitions of Belgium, Germany, or the infant Italian state, similar architectural themes and urban de-
sign, harking back to the decoration and iconography of the classical empires, declared an “Age of Empire” and inscribed their sentiments into the Western capital city. These sentiments clearly characterize Rome’s monument to Vittorio Emanuele II.

Geographies of the Monument:
Embodying Italy

Vittorio Emanuele II died in January, 1878. Within four months, a commission had been established by the infant state to raise a monument in his memory. An international competition was won in late 1881 by the French architect Paul-Henry Nénot, although the controversy attending his victory ensured that his scheme would never be realized (Dickie 1994). Amid accusations of plagiarism and political interference, the competition was reopened with a new range of criteria in late 1882. The monument was to be sited in Piazza Venezia on the northern slope of the Capitoline Hill—at the symbolic heart of Rome, adjacent to both the Foro Romano and the Campidoglio (Figure 2). The rules prescribed that it should constitute “an equestrian statue with architectural backdrop and suitable stairs” (Kos- tof 1973: 57). From its inception, therefore, the monument was intended as a highly rhetorical piece of urban scenography.

The parameters of the second competition thus set, the eventual victor was the Italian architect Giuseppe Sacconi, who oversaw the first stages of construction beginning in spring 1885. Sacconi designed his entry in the international fashion of the day and employed the Beaux-Arts architectural style that had so dramatically transformed Paris under the Second Empire. The realized monument would take the form of a three-level acropolis formed out of white Bre- scian marble. The lowest, base level, set atop an ascent of stairs, would be an altar to Dea Roma—the mythical goddess of Rome and secular spirit of the Eternal City. The second level would be devoted to the commemoration of the late king whose equestrian statue surmounted Dea Roma. The great stylobate of the third level would support a portico of sixteen composite columns to rise high above the Roman skyline, providing spectacular backdrop to the monument and its statuary, and to any public speaker making an address from the lower levels. Gold lettering on the portico of either wing proclaimed the twin secular deities of Civium Libertas (of the citizens) and Patriae Unitas (of the nation), in overt defiance of the Catholic domes and towers of Rome (Porzio 1986).

Everywhere on the monument, the sculptural decoration was explicitly symbolic and almost entirely figural. The whole construction was centered upon the classical figures of Dea Roma and the equestrian statue of Vittorio Emanuele II, mythic and historical individuals, respectively, who represented the ancient unity of Italy and the reborn nation-state. Elsewhere around the monument, statues and mosaics dominated the decoration and iconography of the structure, playing the role of figures in a memory theater that prompts a mythopoetic narrative of Italian unity linked to the geographical spaces of the peninsula. On the topmost frieze, atop the columns of the portico, the sixteen regions of Italy are represented by a parade of classical figures in Roman togas. Below them, surrounding the plinth upon which Vittorio Emanuele’s statue stands, the cities of Italy are also portrayed by iconic figures, garbed in the medieval costume appropriate to their city’s period of political florescence. Dea Roma in Classical dress stands separate and upright at the center of the nation’s altar (Figure 3). Around her, allegorical figures develop the monument’s rhetorical construction of a virtuous Italian history: Justice, Philosophy, and War. Above the whole edifice, the outcome of the story is embodied in Victory and apotheo- sized in the two laurel-wielding charioteers who, since the late 1920s, have surmounted the pavilion wings of the monument. At its base, flanking the central stairway, two fountains represent the Adriatic and the Tyrrhenian seas, to the east and west respectively of the Italian peninsula.

The monument develops a heroic narrative of Italian history, figuring historical references to empire in the recurrent motif of the human body. The Dea Roma and the equestrian statue of the king gesture directly to Michelangelo Buonarotti’s design for the adjacent Capitoline square, with its original classical personification of the goddess Rome and its antique equestrian statue of the emperor Marcus Aurelius. These blatant visual analogies lay explicit claim to the memory of Classical Rome and to a reunited Italy through allusion to the Capitoline—at once the capital of a united people and the hill into which the monument was built. The inscribed invocations to Cives (citizens) and Patria (nation) declare the secular, national goals of Liberal Italy, while the...
Statues personifying the cities and regions of Italy combine to record the Risorgimento project of unifying traditionally independent and disparate polities into a single nation. The ensemble punctuates the Roman horizon, in brilliant white marble and in the contemporary international style, thereby declaring the presence and intentions of the Italian state and contesting the skyline with the dome of St. Peter’s Basilica across the Tiber.

**The Urban Spatialities of the Vittoriano**

In addition to the iconography of the monument, the efforts to render the Vittoriano the repository of a nascent Italian national identity had impact directly upon the spaces surrounding the monument. From the scale of the local district, through the wider scales of city, nation, and empire, the Vittoriano was the focus of various urban interventions that sought to centralize it within the Italian capital and, in turn, within the Italian state and empire. In terms of the material built environment in which it stood, as well as of its intrinsic design, conscious efforts were made to negotiate the Vittoriano as the symbolic heart of the nation at the hub of Italian territory (Figure 4).

One of the key stipulations of the second competition to design the monument was that the site had to be the north-facing slope of the Capitoline Hill. The symbolic significance of this location—against the mythical acropolis upon which Rome was founded—was by no means accidental (Dickie 1994). The Capitoline Hill had been the site of the short-lived Roman Republic that, in the mid-fourteenth century, had resisted the rule of the Papacy (Hibbert 1985). Yet more signifi-
cantly, the Capitoline was widely regarded as a “sacred site” by adherents to the cult of romanità, the celebration of classical Rome, later to be actively promoted under Fascism (Visser 1992). It is increasingly recognized that notions of recapitulating a classical romanità already played a part in the nation-making project of Liberal Italy. During the 1911 World’s Fair that celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Italian state, and during which the Vittoriano was officially inaugurated, the ancient Baths of Diocletian had been transformed into a large-scale “Exhibition of the Provinces of the Roman Empire” that emphasized the “Roman” inheritance of the modern Italian state (Strong 1911; Piantoni 1980). Likewise, the leading archaeologist of the day, Rodolfo Lanciani, had been commissioned to map and reconstruct a historical geography of Classical Rome for public display, while the rhetoric of leading Liberal politicians confirmed that their secular state was only too eager to associate itself with the Classical Roman empire—suggesting that Italy was finally united by the rule of Rome for the first time in a millennium and a half (Bosworth 1975). The siting of the Vittoriano against the Capitoline and adjacent to the Imperial and Roman Fora (which the Liberal state had been gradually excavating since 1898) was a deliberate attempt to associate the new state with ancient Rome and to make an immediate trans-historical and spatial connection between the national monument of modern Italy and the Classical empire that had once sprung from the same hill.

Thus the monument had a symbolic location within the city itself, one that was made still more significant by a series of urban alterations taking place during the decades of its construction. The Vittoriano was meant to consecrate the nation-making of Liberal Italy (Gentile 1993), and even at the most basic level of its site within Rome, the monument asserted a centrality to the city. Its location on the Capitoline terminated the axis of the Via del Corso leading north to the Piazza del Popolo, the traditional gateway from the city to the north of Italy. By siting the Vittoriano at this southern terminus of Papal Rome’s central axis, the architectural competition established the Vittoriano at the core of Rome, its mass, style, and height further centering the city (see Figure 4).

Further, as the construction of the Vittoriano slowly proceeded between 1885 and 1911, the district immediately adjacent to the growing pile was redesigned to accommodate the edifice and to lend it a more imposing and grandiose setting at the heart of Rome (Racheli 1980). In 1882, Piazza Venezia had been little more than a narrow opening in front of the Austrian embassy at Palazzo Venezia. To the south (in front of the Capitoline and on the site of the Vittoriano) was the Palazzetto Venezia, a wing of the fifteenth-century Palazzo Venezia. To the east was the Palazzo Torlonia. The Via del Corso entered the square obliquely, in its northeastern corner. The second Rome plan of 1883 proposed that the Palazzo Torlonia be demolished to allow Piazza Venezia to be reconstructed as a grander and more spacious square (Kostof 1973). Already a more suitable and sizeable public forecourt to the monument was being envisaged. These sentiments found material effect with the subsequent demolition of Palazzo Torlonia and parts of the immediate district, including the medieval tower of Pope Paul III. To further accommodate the expanded Piazza Venezia and to open up still more public space before the Vittoriano, a new Palazzo Torlonia was built on the eastern side of the Piazza in 1908. It mirrored the Palazzo Venezia exactly and created the broad expanse of the present Piazza Venezia at the southern end of the Via del Corso (Racheli 1980).

The Vittoriano, however, was still obscured by the Palazzetto Venezia. As a consequence, the
1909 city plan decreed that this structure be demolished brick by brick and rebuilt one hundred yards to the west—thereby clearing the space before the Vittoriano (Kostof 1973). Indeed, the only structures that survived the clearance of the adjacent areas were the remnants of two Classical Roman buildings. The first was a fragment of an ancient tomb; it was left standing at the northeastern corner of the monument as an isolated gesture framed by the vast bulk of the Vittoriano, whose scale suggests both modern Italy’s resurrection of classical glory and the capacity of the modern state to supersede Antiquity. The second surviving structure, flush against the west flank of the monument, was known as the House of Giulio Romano. Allegedly a typically “humble” Roman patrician building, it owed its preservation solely to its antiquity and its “Roman” provenance, rather than any recognized historical or architectural virtue (Kostof 1973). Thus, through selective piecemeal adaptations, the square before the monument was gradually transformed into one of the largest and most imposing open spaces in Rome. And presiding over this space was the ever-growing bulk of the Vittorio Emanuele II monument.

As we have indicated, Piazza Venezia was the terminus of the papal city’s most important north-south route. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, the Piazza also became the focus of much of the growing city’s east-west traffic, emphasizing still further the centrality of Piazza Venezia—and the Vittoriano—as the emerging center of Rome. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, the Via Nazionale, a broad, prestigious avenue that was a showpiece of the new urbanism of the Roma Capitale program and which hosted banks, shops, and the National Exhibition Hall, advanced from

Figure 4. The Piazza Venezia and its immediate environs in central Rome. The bolder lines indicate the changes in urban morphology undertaken by Liberal and Fascist governments to centralize the monument and create a large space for public assembly before it. Source: J. Jayco.
Rome’s new Termini Station and the Baths of Diocletian on the eastern hills of the city to connect with Piazza Venezia (Kostof 1973). By the turn of the 1880s, this busy route from the station to the heart of the old city was linked to the new Corso Vittorio Emanuele, carved through the medieval city to the Tiber and the Vatican beyond (Fried 1973). Thus the main north-south and east-west routes of the expanding metropolis intersected precisely in Piazza Venezia. And it was perhaps no accident that the pilgrims and tourists arriving in Rome by train to see the Pope and the Vatican were now obliged first to negotiate the commercial center of the Italian Kingdom and a monument designed to exhibit the grandeur appropriate to a modern European capital city (see Figure 4).

In 1929 the Piazza Venezia was finally transformed into the indisputable political center of the city and nation when Mussolini moved his office to Palazzo Venezia from Palazzo Chigi, farther up the Via del Corso. From early 1925, Mussolini had been steadily accumulating political power and developing what we can identify in hindsight as the prototypical, modern twentieth-century totalitarian regime (Lyttleton 1973). Commentators are increasingly acknowledging the significance of architecture, urban planning, and public spaces to Italian Fascism (Arkinson in press; Fuller 1992, 1996; Ghirardo 1990, 1996; von Henneberg 1996; Isnenghi 1994). Making Rome a true capital city was a key element of Fascism’s nationalist strategy. The city’s population increased to more than a million by the mid-1930s as the suburbs expanded. In the historic center, Mussolini’s emphasis upon romanità and the memory and heritage of ancient Rome demanded that ancient remains be excavated to form the spectacular backdrop to the new monumental avenues constructed to stage the rituals and performances of Fascism (Gentile 1993). At the heart of the city, Piazza Venezia became the key national space for celebrating and performing the national ceremonies of the “political religion” that was Italian Fascism (Gentile 1993). From the balcony of the palace, across the piazza from the Vittoriano, Mussolini made his most famous public speeches, proclaiming the various military, social, and environmental “victories” won by Italy and Fascism, and urging the faith and obedience of the Italian people. The crowds gathered in Piazza Venezia beneath his balcony were characterized at the time as “oceanic assemblies”—a floodlit sea of faces responding to Mussolini’s demagogic presence, a presence amplified by the loudspeakers that surrounded the Piazza (Isnenghi 1994; Schnapp 1996). Doug Thompson (1991) has argued that the Fascist adoption of these modern technologies of amplification and flood-lighting paved the way for later totalitarian regimes. But our point here is that these rhetorical processes were quite literally grounded in Piazza Venezia—a site carved out of the urban fabric and rebuilt as the symbolic and political core of Rome. The towering stage-set that gave these rhetorical exercises the dimensions and architectural language of epic theatre was the Vittoriano—the most self-consciously spectacular symbol of Italian national identity.

**National and Imperial Spatialities: The Geopolitics of the City**

While the Altar of the Nation clearly played a central role within the spatialities of the city of Rome, the scale of its impacts may be further widened. Geroid O’Tuathail (1994) notes that architecture and memorials, particularly in capital cities, often materialize a state’s geopolitical agendas. In this section, we discuss the ways in which the Vittoriano and its immediate spaces were made central to a wider stage, figuring a refounded Italian imperial territoriality. The “geopolitical” agenda of Fascism was carved into the landscape of Rome and centered upon the Vittoriano and Piazza Venezia.

On May 9, 1936, Mussolini proclaimed the foundation of the new Italian empire with the fall of Adis Abeba and Italian victory in the Ethiopian campaign. This was the acknowledged high point of the dictator’s domestic popularity, and the “Founder of the Empire” was acclaimed by his subjects in another “oceanic assembly” in Piazza Venezia. The crowds assembled before the Vittoriano were not, however, the only ones to hear Il Duce’s rhetoric. The regime had also adopted radio as an element of its totalitarianism, to ensure that Mussolini’s voice was broadcast throughout the entire nation (Monteleone 1976). In the north and center of the country, leisure-time organizations designed to foster social and political control, such as the Dopolavoro, made the radio broadcasts a focus of their activities (DeGrazia 1981). In poorer regions in the South, as the novelist Carlo Levi recorded, the regime ensured that every single settlement possessed at least one radio that might be positioned...
in the central square so that Mussolini's rhetoric could be heard in all corners of Italy, echoing through innumerable smaller piazzas, simultaneously reviving the ancient tradition of direct political speech in the public forum and challenging the traditional localism of the church camparane (Levi 1947). As Mario Isnenghi writes of such occasions: "when people of Italy were gathered in the piazzas, Piazza Venezia was the centre of a macrosystem of spaces that were completely linked to one another imaginatively" (Isnenghi 1994: 326). Through such technologies, Mussolini’s presence was amplified from the confines of Piazza Venezia to incorporate the entire nation, while, conversely, Italians’ attention was centered upon Piazza Venezia—the central site of Fascism’s political religion presided over by the Altar of the Nation.

In addition to using popular media such as radio and film, the regime encouraged projects that promoted Piazza Venezia and the Vittoriano as the spatial heart of the Italian nation. From the 1920s, the Piazza became the focus of a remarkable program of archaeological excavation, slum clearance, landscaping and presentation of ancient ruins, planning, and monumental road construction. These were intended to make the zone surrounding the Vittoriano the hub not only of the Italian peninsula but also of Italian imperial space. The first of these wider Fascist attempts to cement Rome—and, more specifically, the triply symbolic site of the Piazza Venezia, the Vittoriano and the Roman Forum—as the heart of the nation, was begun in 1926 (Figures 2, 4). The Via del Mare (Road to the Sea) fulfilled a long-recognized requirement for a route that would connect Piazza Venezia with the south of the city (Kostof 1973). Under Fascism, the road also acquired a series of ideological imperatives that are significant for our theme. The broad, modern Via del Mare began at the base of the Vittoriano and swung around its western flank, passing the ramp to the Campidoglio, before connecting the monument to the restored, cleared, and landscaped Teatro di Marcello, a first-century Roman theatre. From here, it turned southwards, past excavated Roman monuments and temples that had been isolated and exhibited in pristine landscaped parklands, before heading out of the city towards the Tyrrhenian Sea. Outside the city, this route became the first autostrada, terminating at Ostia, the ancient port of Rome, then being developed as the seaplane terminus for the state’s nascent airline network. A number of themes are articulated in this scheme. Quite obviously, the valorization of ancient Rome—the cult of romanità—is a significant element. The seventeenth-century quarters surrounding the monuments were dismissed as so much “picturesque filth” by Mussolini, and his planners ensured that the long-established community around Foro Olitorio was evicted and the urban fabric cleared so that Classical Rome might be revealed and presented in all its glory (Atkinson in press; Kostof 1973). Thus a direct line of communication connected the Vittoriano and the Teatro di Marcello, suggesting an uninterrupted trans-historical connection between Modern Italy and the Classical Roman Empire.

At the wider scale, however, the direct link between Rome and the sea had more complex ideological resonances. In the short term, the regime wished to encourage Romans to spend their leisure time outside the city, enjoying the “healthier” airs of the coast. To this end, a railway had been built from the Ostiense district of Rome to the sea as early as 1924. The Via del Mare, however, was a far more emphatic statement of Rome’s imperial return to the Tyrrhenian shore. Reclaiming the Mediterranean as Rome’s Mare Nostrum was a central, if not the central, element of Mussolini’s imperial ambitions (Atkinson 1996). By making a direct connection between the sea and Piazza Venezia in the heart of Rome, Mussolini intended to emblemize a reunited Italy’s capacity to match, in the form of modern motor roads and seaplane routes, the ancient imperial highways that radiated from the city, and thus to signify Italy’s revived authority within the Mediterranean world. It is significant that the first major urban project of the Fascist regime was directed quite explicitly towards reconnecting Rome to the sea—and more precisely, connecting the heart of Rome at the Vittoriano and the Piazza Venezia to its imperial destiny in the Mediterranean.

A second, parallel scheme to tie modern Rome directly to its imperial heritage also sought to render the monumental space of Piazza Venezia as the axial point of a reborn Italian empire. The wide monumental avenue now known as the Via dei Fori Imperiali was first proposed in 1931 as the Via dei Colli or Via dei Monti—the road to the hills (Marchetti Longhi 1934). Shortly before it was opened in October 1932 as part of the celebration of Fascism’s tenth anniversary (Cederna 1981), the name of the route was changed to the Via dell’Impero (Avenue of the Empire). Bisect-
ing the spectacular excavated ruins of the imperial fora to either side, this road, as the site of highly choreographed parades, came, more than any other location, to express the connections between Classical and Fascist empires. When initially conceived, however, the road was intended primarily to represent an axis leading away from Piazza Venezia—the center of Fascist authority and national pride—towards the Alban hills and the southern peninsula. In combination with the Via del Mare’s projection towards the sea and the Via del Corso leading to the north of Italy, the Via dei Colli would make Piazza Venezia the focal point of three major axes that together encompassed the entire territory of the nation. Alfredo Ambrosi’s 1930 aeropainting (Figure 5) dramatically represented the imaginative spatialities of the Vittoriano and Piazza Venezia within the Italian peninsula by superimposing these monumental avenues onto the head of Mussolini so that the corporeal presence of Il Duce comes to embody the spirit of imperialism, reborn in Fascism and centered in Piazza Venezia.8

Of course, the creation of these monumental avenues was not driven solely by idealized spatialities of Italian city, state, and empire, nor was it uncontested. In justifying the schemes, the practical requirements of roads for a modern metropolis, particularly easing traffic circulation in the growing capital, were augmented by modernist belief in the virtues of bringing light and air to the cramped, noisome spaces of the metropolis (Agnew 1995; Fried 1973; Kostof 1973). Nor should we underestimate Fascism’s thirst for dramatic public stages upon which it could perform its romanità, and its imperial dreams (Gentile 1993). The drastic social and archaeological impacts of the projects did not go unremarked or unchallenged even at the time, although the opportunities for protest were severely limited: 5,500 homes were bulldozed in just eleven months to make way for the Via dell’Impero (Kostof 1973). Our aim in this section, however, has been to emphasize the extent to which Liberal and Fascist projects for the Vittoriano and Piazza Venezia reworked the spatialities of modern Rome, and how they extended these spatialities to render the monumental complex central to the wider national realm, and to the geopolitical project of constructing an Italian empire. The spatial politics of the monument were thus a crucial element of the state’s geopolitical and imperial rhetoric. In the final section, we turn from horizontal to vertical axes, examining the physical embodiment of gendered meanings within the spaces of the Vittoriano.

Body, Monument, and Vertical Axiality

In 1921 the Roman association of Garibaldian veterans, the Società Mutuo Soccorso Giuseppe Garibaldi, organized “the most successful national ritual ever performed in the pre-fascist era” (Fogu 1996: 328). At the suggestion of Giulio Douhet, one of the first theorists of aerial warfare, the body chosen to become Italy’s Unknown Soldier was removed from its grave in Aquileia, near Venice, for reburial in Rome at the Altare della Patria, that part of the Vittoriano upon which the equestrian statue of Vittorio Emanuele II surmounts the sculpted figures of Italian cities, and at the center of which Dea Roma surveys the open spaces of the Piazza Venezia (Isnenghi 1994; Fogu 1996). A discreet wreath cast in black iron with the words milite ignoto is the only external indication of this corporeal presence.

For the Vittoriano’s symbolic significance, however, and for its place in the landscapes of Rome and Italy, the presence of the Unknown Soldier is as vital as Sacconi’s original iconographic program for the monument and the Fascist reworking of its site. Not only does the
presence of a youthful male body, “sacrificed” on Italy’s farthest terrestrial borders, represent a “real presence” within the capital of Italian national territoriality—this is true of all such cadavers through which mass sacrifice was officially memorialized by the European states after the Great War (Heffernan 1994; Winter 1995)—but the manner of its interment at the nation’s symbolic center, the design and decoration of the internal mausoleum spaces within the Vittoriano, and the politico-religious resonances of a sanctified body placed in the city’s catacombs, extend and reinforce the imperial symbolism of the Vittoriano within Roman and Italian space. History, memory, empire, and the body coincide as the design and iconography of the tomb make spatial connections between past military sacrifice and the cult of youth and future glory promoted by Fascism.9

Arguably, Italy’s engagement in the European War, beginning May 24, 1915, was the single most unifying moment for the Italian nation since the incorporation of Rome as its capital in 1870. In the rhetoric of the time, youthful male blood spilled into the land symbolically inseminated the farthest frontiers of the national territory (Anderson 1991); it was commemorated in scores of remembrance parks in every province of Italy with trees planted in the name of each fallen soldier—symbols of resurrection (Canal 1982; Mosse 1990: 89). The long sanguinary stalemate in the Dolomite mountain borders with Austria, particularly in the killing fields of Monte Grappa from where the Piave River flowed red with blood, produced only a “mutilated peace,” whereby Italians believed themselves cheated of their rightful territorial gains, earned by Italian sacrifice but stolen by Anglo-French diplomatic maneuvering at the postwar peace conferences. This sense of betrayal and dissatisfaction played a significant part in the demise of the Liberal regime and the rise of Fascism. Indeed, in October 1922, when Mussolini’s blackshirt columns, in a rhetorical show of strength, marched on Rome to seize the state for Fascism and, as they claimed, restore Italian pride in the name of Italy’s war dead, they assembled in Piazza Venezia. And, when Mussolini arrived in the capital two days later, in spats and tails, to accept the premiership, he knelt before the tomb of the Unknown Soldier for a full minute before addressing his followers from the steps of the Vittoriano (Munro 1933). In his first public act as premier, the future dictator associated his Fascist movement with the sacrificial body in the Vittoriano. A decade later, celebrating the anniversary of the “Fascist Revolution,” Mussolini once again spoke to the masses in Piazza Venezia, in sight of the Altar of the Nation and the Unknown Soldier (Isnenghi 1994).

It was Italy’s last Liberal government that initially transferred the soldier’s body for burial in the national altar in Rome. The individual was selected by a bereaved, sorrowing mother from among six unidentified corpses brought to Aquileia from the battlefields of Monte Grappa, in a ritual similar to that undertaken elsewhere in Europe. Its translation in 1921 to the nation’s capital was, however, very much an Italian and Roman affair. The sanctification of urban space through the ceremonial reinterment of the physical body of a founding hero, at the site where the city’s nomen, or spirit, was believed to reside, called upon a long precedent in Classical and Christian culture. The Venetian Republic, for example, had celebrated the translatio of the evangelist Mark’s uncorrupted remains from Alexandria to the lagoon city as the founding moment of its Republic, the transfer itself accompanied by signs and wonders (Daniels and Cosgrove 1993). And in Rome, the obelisk raised by Pope Sixtus V in St. Peter’s Square in 1586 was said to be the same monument that had witnessed the martyrdom of St. Peter centuries earlier (Hibbert 1985). Thus, the rail journey transferring the chosen body from Italy’s mountain borderlands to the heart of the nation’s capital was a highly choreographed affair. The train with its burden halted at every station along its route so that the people of the cities could unite in homage to the nation’s sacrificed warrior (Fogu 1996). In Rome, a precisely planned parade and somber ceremony attended the interment of the body in the catacombs below the Vittoriano (Fogu 1996).

Interring the body in Rome was not an uncomplicated affair. There were powerful precedent and plentiful historical associations in a city that had been the seat of Roman emperors and Catholic popes. In Antiquity, Augustus had introduced a theocratic dimension to Roman imperium not only through verbal rhetoric, but also through a material program for the architectural fabric of Rome (Pagden 1995). He secured the city’s claim to universal empire by the physical presence of his own imperial ashes in death. The monumental complex he caused to be constructed on the left bank of the Tiber was itself an attempt to center global space on Rome. The supposed divinity of
the Emperor was celebrated at the Ara Pacis, signaling the peace Augustus had brought to the Mediterranean world under his dominion. The core of the complex was the Mausoleo di Augusto, where the god-emperor’s remains were interred. Mussolini—who planned to be buried alongside Augustus—would complete his own reconstruction of this pagan complex in 1938 as part of the celebrations of the Bimillenario (the 2000th anniversary of Augustus’s birth) (Kostof 1980). This year-long cultural celebration, designed to celebrate the trans-historical similarities between the idealism of Augustus and that of Fascism, was part of the cult of renewed empire and romanità (Visser 1992).

An alternative embodiment of imperial Roman universality had been constructed under the Emperor Hadrian in his rebuilding of the Pantheon—a temple initially built under Augustus in honor of the gods whose mutual harmony sponsored Rome’s quest for world domination. Hadrian’s temple, the one imperial structure from Classical Rome to survive virtually intact into the modern age, was designed according to strict Vitruvian principles, whereby the bilateral symmetries of the human body are fixed in the geometries of monumental stone. The building’s vertical spatiality emphasizes an axis extending from the shaft of light that pours through the opening at the top of its dome to strike the circular floor of the building. In the words of one commentator, the Pantheon celebrated “the imperial idea and all the gods of the empire who stood for it,” dei imperii rather than Dea Roma (F. Brown, quoted in Sennett 1994: 88). Rededicated by the popes as a Christian basilica, the Pantheon eventually became the resting place for the body of Vittorio Emanuele II, as the Liberal regime eventually resolved the long-standing conflict of Papa and State, and the Fascist cult of the male body and death combined, at the twentieth anniversary of Italy’s entry into the World War, to promote construction of a powerful sacred space in the very heart of a monument constructed in large measure to supersede the claims of the Church over Roman and Italian space. The secular altar of the goddess Rome could thus become compromised by conflating the body of the nation’s warrior with that of Christ, and thus, possibly, of his Vicar on earth. Until 1935, those who opposed Acciarese’s scheme won the day, and the body of the Unknown Soldier remained in a minor, unmarked space within the monument. But the Lateran Accords of 1929, which temporarily resolved the long-standing conflict of Papacy and State, and the Fascist cult of the male body and death combined, at the twentieth anniversary of Italy’s entry into the War, to promote construction of a powerful sacred space in the very heart of the Vittoriano. Here physical embodiment is the key rhetoric, further reinforcing its other concretized meanings.

To contextualize the significance of the body in Fascism, consider the 1928 *Enciclopedia Italiana*, which, under its entry for Fascism, had declared:

Fascist man is an individual who is both nation and fatherland, a moral law who ties individuals and generations into one tradition and one mission, who overcomes the instincts of a life closed within a small circle of pleasure in order to embrace the demands of a superior life in which the individual, through self-abnegation, the sacrifice of selfish interest, and even death, realizes that entirely spiritual experience in which his value as a man lies.12

In the years immediately preceding Fascist rule, the Modernist cult of the male body had already been given dramatic artistic expression at the Vittoriano in A. Rizzi’s powerful homoerotic mosaics of Apollo and Mars that decorated the pa-
vilion vault (Figure 6). The cult of manliness, adopted by Italian Fascism from prewar Futurism, emphasized that “the very concept of 'energy come alive' was applicable only to youth” (Mosse 1990:63). Clearly, the Unknown Soldier, an anonymous sacrificial body, offered enormous scope for reworking Futurist images of the youthful male into a representation of the ideals of Fascist man. In a ceremony choreographed by the State, the dead warrior’s body was reinterred once again on May 24, 1935, directly below the Altar of the Nation, at the deepest point of the crypt, its real presence marked by a stone altar carved from Monte Grappa limestone.

The approach to the tomb descends steeply through a series of sepulchral passages and vaulted spaces (Figure 7). In plan form, these construct a Greek cross, with the upper walls in marble and the lower in brick, a conscious adoption of the Classical style of late imperial fortification and military construction. The descent begins from hallways designed to commemorate Italy’s armed forces, displaying flags of all the army’s regiments and the inscribed records of decorated and dead soldiers transferred to the Vittoriano from the Castel Sant’Angelo. The work of the architect Armando Brasini, the design was part of the Fascist regime’s elaboration of the Vittoriano’s original symbolic references away from a narrow historical celebration of Italian Unification (memorialized in the Museo del Risorgimento and its archive, transferred there in 1930–1933) to a more contemporary and militant celebration of Italian nationalism and militarism. The precipitous descent leads to an ambulatory where the sarcophagus of the Unknown Soldier can be viewed directly, deeply entombed within the monument, in semidarkness, beneath a mosaic of the Crucifixion. It lies under a vaulted arch, simply inscribed with the words Sacello Milite Ignoto and guarded by two winged Victories, modern reworkings of the forms found upon Roman ceremonial arches, but here holding fasces, their arms raised in a Roman salute. In effect, we peer down into a mundus, similar to that of the Pantheon. And again, as at the Pantheon, an axis strikes vertically from these depths to the eternal flame burning, on the steps of the Vittoriano an echo of the Vestal flame of Classical times, which was kept alive in a temple on the Palatine Hill to propitiate the deities of death and to ensure the continued life of Rome.

The theme of youthful bodily sacrifice is reinforced by the iconography of the circular chapel next to the tomb and ambulatory. Its simple altar is also made of Monte Grappa marble, so that the sacrifice of the Mass takes place on the same stone as that of the nation’s fallen youth. Its domed

Figure 6. Antonio Rizzi, “L’Unione,” 1918 (mosaic showing the meeting of Mars (war) and Apollo (peace), in the lunette of the left pavilion vault of the monument to Vittorio Emanuele II).
vault is decorated by Giulio Bargellini’s mosaic figures of four early Christian martyrs, three of them canonized Roman soldiers—Martin, Sebastian, and George—the fourth the militant St. Barbara. The sacrificial connection among the Unknown Soldier, the Roman legionary, and the Christian martyr is direct: early Christian martyrs too were remembered as those “whose names are known to God alone.” In the words of L’Illustrazione Italiana, recording the opening of the crypt: “By the will of the regime, the altar of God now comes to be raised in the Vittoriano, so that all should understand that Roman valor and Christian faith are indissolubly conjoined in a renewed Italy” (quoted in Leone 1986: 51–52).

The cult of the dead within Italian and other states’ Fascism has often been remarked upon (Mosse 1990). In annual commemoration parades, surviving comrades from the War paid their respects at the Vittoriano, as at cenotaphs and military monuments everywhere in Europe, but the Mutilati (literally, the mutilated veterans) also proudly displayed their broken bodies as physical witness to Italian heroism in marches down the Via dell’Impero leading from the Vittoriano to the Colosseum, Classical Rome’s primary site of pub-
licit body culture and military masculinism. Exposed to public gaze more here than in any other European capital, the corporeal presence of the Unknown Soldier within the nation’s most self-conscious monumental space is linked physically to the geographical location of the battlefield where he died, through the journey from his first burial site at Aquileia and the use of Monte Grappa stone. In this way, the Italian state reinforced both a military culture and the Vittoriano’s (and Rome’s) claims to symbolic centrality within the national territory; an architectural and urban counterpoint to the Alpine environment of monti, boschi e torrenti in which the soldier had died, and which was then being promoted as the frontier testing ground for Italy’s youthful bodies in the years between the wars (Vallerani and Soriani 1995). The urban spatialities of the Vittoriano were also further transformed by the presence of the Unknown Soldier’s body. The wreath and inscription at the feet of Dea Roma suggest that the Soldier as fallen hero belongs to the city as well as to the nation. The symbolic pietà of female goddess and fallen son adopts a more militant iconography for public display than the intimate spaces within the monument where the body is a “real presence.”

Bargellini’s iconography for the crypt, chapel, and chamber does not refer only to past sacrifice. It makes a subtle but significant reference to the most dramatically modern incarnation of the Fascist male hero. The four martyrs of his mosaic stand guard around the domed cupola of the chapel in whose center is depicted Our Lady of Loreto, the focus of Italy’s most important medieval Madonna cult. The Virgin’s house had supposedly been transported through the air by angels from Bethlehem, across the Mediterranean Sea to Italy’s Adriatic shore. Iconographically, the Madonna represents not merely the suffering mother, but the idea of flight and the conquest of the air. In 1935 the Madonna of Loreto was officially declared the patron of aviators, those heroes of the Fascist regime who were extending Italy’s imperial reach under the leadership of the dashing young air ace, Italo Balbo, who believed that through aviation, Italy had recaptured the principles of ancient knighthood (Morse 1990:117; Segrè 1987).

The new spatial experiences of powered flight were exploited artistically in Italy more effectively than in any other European culture. Ambrosini’s image of Mussolini’s head with Rome’s new roads radiating out from the Piazza Venezia (Figure 5) is but one of a large collection of aeropitture (aeropaintings) produced in Italy between 1918 and 1945. The genre was initiated by Gerrardo Dottori in a 1918 image, “Wings over the Trenches,” that celebrates the freedom of the pilot, high over the Alps where his earthbound comrades are mired in grave-like trenches (Mantura et al. 1990). The principles of aeropainting were outlined in futurist F. T. Marinetti’s 1929 Manifesto, and the style was adopted in the decoration of the new air terminal at Ostia. The style was given official recognition at an Exhibition of Aeropainting held in 1931 to celebrate Balbo’s successful flight to Rio de Janeiro and back, after which the airmen marched in triumph from Ostia to the heart of Rome.

Aeropainting not only sought to capture the speed and energy of powered flight, but the new geometries and perspectives it offered over terrestrial space. Synoptic views of the city and its monumental spaces articulated Marinetti’s promotion of aeropainting as the official art of Fascism: from Ambrosini’s “Flight over Vienna” that celebrated Gabriele d’Annunzio’s wartime gesture of dropping leaflets over the Austrian capital, to Baldessari’s “Tricolor Spiral over Rome” (Figure 8), where the flight path of a looping plane is described as the national flag spiraling over the Vittoriano. By the mid-1930s, when Bargellini’s more conservative mosaic of Our Lady of Loreto was produced, aeropainting had turned unequivocally to revel in the spatialities of aerial

Figure 8. Roberto Marcello Baldessari, “Tricolor Spiral over Rome,” 1923 (oil on canvas).
warfare. Such works not only celebrated the machine and its motion, but significantly, the body of the young fighter pilot himself, especially when escaping from a failed aircraft. The bodily sensations of free fall and parachuting, and the vision of earth turning below, became a favorite subject of sculptures and paintings, such as Sante Monachese’s “Like a Dead Leaf over Rome” (1940). Consciences connections were established in Italian art and culture between the sacrifice and burial of the fallen soldiers of the Great War and their resurrection as youthful knights of the air, transcending the boundaries of space and time (Mosse 1990: 119–21, 184–85). In this context, it is not too fanciful to recognize in the image of Our Lady of Loreto, within the dome above the Unknown Soldier’s altar (traditionally, the architectural space symbolizing the sky), an invitation to future heroes to yield their own youth to the heavens as the Unknown Soldier had sacrificed his to the earth. The vertical axis within the Vittoriano thus extends from the depths of the tomb to the heights of atmosphere, from death to life and from past to future.

Conclusion

From the perspective of the late twentieth century, the Vittorio Emanuele II monument in Rome may seem initially to offer little more by way of urban aura and meaning than a rather embarrassing reminder of late-nineteenth-century bourgeois bombast. By over-elaborating its iconographic and symbolic content, those who commissioned and designed this memorial to the founding monarch of modern Italy succeeded in producing the very opposite to their rhetorical intention. Rather than challenging the dome of St. Peter’s on the urban skyline as a lasting and dignified expression of Italy’s cultural and political revival, of the nation’s claim to a worthy place among the European powers, and of Rome’s claim to recognition as a modern European metropolis, in the postwar era, the Vittorio Emanuele II monument retained a measure of ambiguity: only the decisive intervention of Mussolini himself thwarted a plan to paint it yellow so that the stark white Brescian marble of its construction, so dazzling in the summer sun, might appear less obtrusive against the ochre tones of the Roman cityscape. In the red crayon with which he dispatched his paperwork, Il Duce scrawled Niente.

In his classic text The Italians, Luigi Barzini addressed the Vittoriano’s ambiguities more thoughtfully than most writers. He concluded that this contrived bombast and overbearing bulk reflected wider anxieties and ambivalences within the new Italian state (Barzini 1964). These anxieties were intense during its late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attempts to construct an Italian nation-state in the face of apathy from most “Italians” and active hostility from the Papacy in Rome (Jemolo 1960). The ambivalence is present today in a country where the cement between nation, state, and territoriality remains weak. In this paper, we have sought to excavate the “official” rhetoric that was intentionally inscribed onto the monument by the governments of Liberal and Fascist Italy. Other meanings undoubtedly swirl around the site. Unquestionably, it held and may still hold intensely personal memories for the families of dead soldiers. Even at the apogee of Italian Fascism, when the cult of the nation and its supposed imperial destiny were at their height, the Vittorio Emanuele II monument retained a measure of ambiguity: only the decisive intervention of Mussolini himself thwarted a plan to paint it yellow so that the stark white Brescian marble of its construction, so dazzling in the summer sun, might appear less obtrusive against the ochre tones of the Roman cityscape. In the red crayon with which he dispatched his paperwork, Il Duce scrawled Niente.

Figure 9. “Why we’re going to the inauguration.” The satirical cartoon asks why various Romans are attending the inauguration of the Vittoriano. Typical answers include: “because it’s a day off school,” “to show off a new dress,” “to get a nomination to the Senate.” Source: Il Bastone (1911).
(No such thing!) over the proposal (Cederna 1979).

Yet despite the controversies and ambiguities that attended the initial architectural competitions, at the Vittoriano’s opening in 1911, at least in the report of the cultural commentator Ugo Ojetti, the Vittoriano did seem to embody *italianità*:

> Whoever has seen and experienced those moments, when art became one with history and beauty was fused with strength, will never forget them as long as they live: with a sigh or a shout, everyone present felt their soul propelled by emotion into the soul of the living nation, present, tangible, wonderful (Dickie 1994: 2).15

Likewise, the *London Times* commented that “in spite of triviality and vulgarity of detail [the monument] does express the spirit and pride of modern Rome” (Bosworth 1975: 86). These commentaries sought to underpin the attempt to render the monument as the embodiment of Italianness. Their own rhetoric, however, seems to acknowledge another, more consistent tone of public indifference and contempt, captured in the cartoon figures attending its inauguration (Figure 9). Our close examination of the Vittoriano’s evolution, and specifically a willingness to “read” it within a geographical context of imperial, national, urban, and corporeal rhetoric, yield a complex example of how official rhetoric is concretized and performed in urban space. Much of the significance of the Vittoriano derives quite specifically from that of Rome itself as a deeply layered artifact within Italian and European culture. But embodiment is also a powerfully recurring theme. The allegorical female bodies of the Italian provinces, the Dea Roma, the Virgin of Loreto, and St. Barbara alternate with the sacrificial military masculinism of the Unknown Soldier, Vittorio Emanuele II, and even Christ. As a memorial landscape, the monument sheds light on the complex interweaving of empire, memory, modernity, geopolitics, and the gendered bodily presences shaping spatialities within the contemporary city. At a time when the sites and significances of the body are being increasingly recognized within geographical writing (Nash 1996), and amid the recent revival of interest in the geographies of monuments and iconographic landscapes, the Vittoriano brings these together in a single memory theater. Equally, in a period in which the urban-imperial cultures of late modern European states and the cultures of Fascism are being reassessed (Driver and Gilbert 1996; Adamson 1995; Gentile 1993; Galbo 1995), the case of the Vittoriano in Rome casts light upon the continuing renegotiation of meanings and identities, of histories and memories, that marked the evolution of the modern European capital.

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**Notes**

1. The complexity of symbolism in Rome’s urban landscape is brilliantly demonstrated and mobilized by the English film director Peter Greenaway in his 1987 movie, “The Belly of an Architect,” in which, significantly, the Vittoriano is the main architectural character, and the decaying and pregnant bodies respectively of the American architect and his wife dominate the human narrative.

2. Such was the pace and range of imperial expansionism in the latter half of the nineteenth century that by the time of the Chicago World’s Fair, global space was increasingly recognized as being a finite resource, and theorists such as Frederick Jackson Turner, who spoke at Chicago, increasingly conceptualized a “closed-space” world order (Kearns 1983).

3. The political interference was alleged to result from Prime Minister Depretis’s insistence that the commission be awarded to the Frenchman to appease Paris over the recent anti-French rioting in Italy that followed French occupation of Tunis—a city with a sizeable Italian population and one which Italian nationalists coveted as a gateway to an envisaged Italian empire in Africa (Bessis 1980).

4. It is claimed that Depretis, a Brescian deputy, had a hand in the decision to build the monument with Brescian marble, which never fades or discolors, rather than with traditional Roman travertine marble.
5. The Liberal state erected a statue to the memory of the Republic’s leader, Cola di Rienzo, in 1887, upon the Northern slope of the Capitoline, adjacent to the site of the Vittoriano.

6. Although various Popes and later the Napoleonic administration of Rome (1798–1814) had made several attempts to excavate the ancient Foro Romano and the surrounding Imperial Fora, the program of the Liberal State was the most ambitious attempt to uncover the landscapes of antiquity. They planned a huge Passeggiata Archeologica (archaeological park), which would stretch from the Capitoline, through the Fora, to the Baths of Caracalla. Ironically, it was the Fascist successors of the Liberals who did most to realize these plans with their landscapes, interventions, and road building in this quarter of the city in the interwar years.

7. For the Italian state, any links to the classical past, however tenuous, were always welcome, but for buildings that could not offer any useful connections to ancient Rome (such as the Medieval cloisters of the church of Ara Coeli, the tower of Paul III, and other Renaissance structures of the vicinity), the fate was demolition.

8. In the detail of this painting, it is clear that Piazza Venezia is full of people—an “oceanic assembly” waving Italian flags and glorying in the imperial vision and prowess of Il Duce. Significantly, when the Italian Colonial Institute (a colonial lobby that campaigned for Italian expansionism in Africa) was formed in 1906, the Liberal government granted the well-connected organization its first premises inside the Vittoriano (Bosworth 1975).


10. The rejuvenating cycle of burial and resurrection—specifically linking the male body and the natural world—is of course a fundamental trope in European Christian art and cultures, in the links to natural religion, as James Fraser’s The Golden Bough demonstrated so fully and influentially in the years under discussion.

11. Terza Roma (Third Rome) refers to the revival of the city’s greatness in the Modern era, rivaling Classical and Renaissance works.

12. The Enciclopedia Italiana was one of the most significant cultural productions of the regime and was intended to constitute an Italian account of human knowledge and learning that emphasized Italian contributions to civilization and evidenced Fascism’s cultural credentials (Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana 1992).

13. Literally “Mountains, woods and torrents,” the alpine landscape which, in the Fascist era, came to replace the traditional bel paesaggio of cultivated hillsides as the iconic landscape of the nation, a region both of frontier wilderness and of physical endurance appropriate for cultivating the Fascist body.

14. Despite Marinetti’s hyperbolic promotion of Futurism as the regime’s official art, public commissions for the most part favored a much more conservative style. This was especially true for such a solemn project as the Unknown Soldier within the Vittoriano (see Patrizia Rosazza-Ferraris, “The Aeropainters and the State: Commissions and Acquisitions,” in Mantura et al. 1990: 33–36).

15. In Italian: Chi ha veduto ed ha visuito questi momenti, in cui l’arte e la storia, la bellezza e la forza sono state una cosa sola, in cui l’emozione ha lanciato con un sospiro o con un grido l’anima di ciascuno nell’anima della patria, viva, presente, tangibile e meravigliosa, non se ne dimenticherà finché vive. Our thanks to John Dickie for his advice on this translation.

References


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