Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 88(1), 1998, pp. 28–49

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

David Atkinson* and Denis Cosgrove**

*Department of Geography, University of Wales, Lampeter

**Department of Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London

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 Venezia. 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.*

(...)

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 statuary 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 pretentions 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, neosclassical 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).[2] 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.[3] 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" (Kostof 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 Brescian 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 apotheosized 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 Michaelangelo 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[4] 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.

(...)