

eScholarship

California Italian Studies

Title

Italy and the Eternal City: Rome in History, Memory, and Imagination

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6wv730sn>

Journal

California Italian Studies, 13(1)

Authors

Bouley, Brad

Wittman, Richard

Publication Date

2024

DOI

10.5070/C313164303

Copyright Information

Copyright 2024 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Introduction

Italy and the Eternal City: Rome in History, Memory, and Imagination

Brad Bouley and Richard Wittman

Caput Mundi, Città Eterna, Theatrum Mundi: Rome as the Head of the World, the Eternal City, the stage upon which the world's drama was set. These aphorisms speak not only to the centrality of Rome across European and even world history, but to the perennial pretention of the Eternal City to signify far more than its mere self: to be a holy city, a world-historical city, the fountainhead of Western or at least of Italic culture. This latest thematic issue of *California Italian Studies*, entitled "Italy and the Eternal City: Rome in History, Memory, and Imagination," explores how the city and its representations have been continually shaped and reshaped over the centuries by a conviction that the indispensable significance of Rome extends beyond its local time and space, as well as by the time-honored habit of perceiving the city as a layered palimpsest of past Romes, all somehow vital and available in the present. As might be expected in a collection of essays on a topic so essentially linked to the city's historical identity, the eleven articles and one "Note from the Field" contained herein range across an immense spectrum of subjects, from Renaissance poetry to Risorgimento propaganda to early modern cartography to Fascist urbanism. Six of these contributions derive from the 2022 Society for Italian Historical Studies Conference, "Marching on Rome: Contesting the Eternal City Through the Centuries," which, on the hundredth anniversary of Mussolini's famous March on Rome, explored the longer history of advances, assaults, and attacks on the city, whether real or symbolic, across the ages.

The sense of Rome as the uniquely significant city, exceptional by nature, formed a component of its urban identity even from its earliest history. The city's foundation myths tied the city back to Aeneas and the destruction of Troy via a line of fictitious kings that culminated in Romulus and Remus. By the time of the Empire, Rome was already a world unto itself: the art historical chapters of Pliny's *Natural History* could establish an antithesis between the *mirabilia in terris* (Wonders of the World) and the much superior *Romae miracula* (wonders of Rome).¹ An acute consciousness of Rome's layered heroic histories likewise also extends back to antiquity. Roman Emperors were expected to exert great care in preserving and renewing historic buildings, even if this only exceptionally entailed preservation of the original forms and materials; witness Hadrian's self-effacing, historically scrupulous inscription across the pediment of his reconstruction of Agrippa's Pantheon.² This sense of living amid and atop the deposits of an exceptional history manifested itself in ever-mutating ways with each successive age. Paleo-Christian writers reframed these tropes in Christian terms, seeing proof of Rome's sacred status in all manner of local historical events. When the Roman Imperial capital was transferred to Constantinople, Roman clergy, jealous to preserve their city's standing in the Church, concocted a new doctrine of Roman primacy that pointed to the martyrdoms and burials of Paul and Peter there

¹ See: Jacob Isager, *Pliny on Art and Society: The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art*, trans. Henrik Rosenmeier (London: Routledge, 1991) 189–202.

² On this theme, see: Christopher Siwicki, *Architectural Restoration and Heritage in Imperial Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 44 and *passim*.

as proof of God's intention that Rome should ever remain the capital of Christianity.³ Subsequently the medieval city drew dignity and a sense of conviction from its shelter in the shadow of the ruined city, whose scale, antiquity, and technical quality surpassed rational explanation.⁴ From there the examples only multiply, from the epochal revival of the artistic and cultural forms of Roman antiquity during the Renaissance, to the ever-more complicated conjugations of the Christian and Imperial pasts that self-consciously sustained the status of Rome during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. More recently, whether via the anxious and little-understood historicism of the nineteenth-century popes or in Mussolini's obsession with *romanità*, Rome's unique distinction has often been signaled by juxtaposing restored, carefully staged historical elements and new modern infrastructures.⁵ Through all these permutations, the Janus-like orientation of the city, adducing past histories as proof of an enduring preeminence, has remained an essential feature of Roman culture.

The tendency to mythologize local Roman events in cosmic or world-historical terms is taken up by the essays here from a variety of angles. Jessica Goethals's "Apocalypse at the Gate" centers on the 1527 Sack of Rome by the troops of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, and specifically the subsequent literary reimagining of its violence. She shows how writers compared the sack to biblical and epic accounts of ruined cities, and drew similar conclusions about the significance and prophetic nature of the event. Even though it could have been foreseen by contemporaries, Goethals shows that the sacking of the Eternal City was an event pregnant with a variety of meanings, the specific content of which depended on the various writers doing the exegesis. Considering a much later attack on Rome, Piero Garofolo's "XX September 1870: Rome's Capture as a Contested Public Memory," examines the capture of the city as part of Italian unification both at the time of the event and then in memory and public memorial thereafter. Initially portrayed as the preordained culmination of the Risorgimento, the luster of the capture was tarnished under the Fascists, who sought to use the idea of capturing Rome for their own purposes. The memories of September 20 even became comical in the years after World War II, until reclaimed as a providential event in the early twenty-first century. Garofolo makes this argument through analysis of a variety of media products—he examines paintings, photographs, film, and literary works—and ultimately claims that portrayals of September 20 are part of a larger and ongoing argument about what it means to be Italian and part of an Italian state. The idea of Rome's transcendent significance is also at the heart of Kate Driscoll's "Renewal and *accoglienza* in Tasso's Rome," which studies the late Roman years of Torquato Tasso, a poet whose peripatetic life famously led him to consider himself "perennially out of place." Questioning a historiographical consensus that reduces Tasso's Roman period to a time of "abbuiamento" (darkening), Driscoll instead stresses Tasso's productive fascination with the idea of Rome as the reinstatement of the Holy Land of

³ J. M. Huskinson, *Concordia Apostolorum: Christian Propaganda at Rome in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries: A Study in Early Christian Iconography and Iconology* (Oxford: B.A.R., 1982), 1; Charles Pietri, "Concordia apostolorum et renovatio urbis (Culte des martyrs et propagande pontificale)," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome* (1961): 296–301. Of course, the matter of whether Peter ever even set foot in Rome was long controversial in certain quarters.

⁴ Amid a large literature, see: Dale Kinney, "Spoliation in Medieval Rome," in *Perspektiven der Spolienforschung, 1: Spolierung und Transposition*, ed. Stefan Altekamp, Carmen Marcks-Jacobs and Peter Seiler (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 58–82.

⁵ On the nineteenth century: Richard Wittman, "A Partly Vacated Historicism: Artifacts, Architecture, and Time in Nineteenth-Century Papal Rome," *Grey Room* 84, no. 3 (Summer 2021): 6–37. On Fascism and *romanità*: Romke Visser, "Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the Romanità," *Journal of Contemporary History* 27, no. 1 (January 1992): 5–22; and now the essays in: Elvira Migliario and Gianni Santucci, eds., *"Noi figli di Roma": fascismo e mito della romanità* (Milan: Le Monnier), 2022.

Jerusalem. In Rome, we learn, Tasso finally found the hospitable home he had long sought: a successor Jerusalem to the one he had already spent half his life writing about.

Two of the essays in this collection consider a failure of Rome's mythical power to work its magic on real events. In her contribution to our "Notes from the Field" rubric, Elizabeth Leake's "Marches on Rome" considers a series of cinematic and literary reflections on how the 1922 March on Rome sought to exploit the image of the Eternal City as a potent public setting for the manifestation of Fascist rhetoric. Underscoring the utility of affect as an analytical instrument for understanding what the march could come subsequently to mean in different contexts, Leake investigates how the disappointment frequently associated with the march by participants and observers functioned within the dynamic economy of passions so central to Fascist identity construction. Historian Kara A. Peruccio's essay, "Just as Capable," probes the limits of Rome's magic from a very different perspective, examining the cultural, political, and racial dynamics that characterized the International Woman Suffrage Alliance Congress held in Rome in 1923. Despite the Congress's attentiveness to Rome's historic association with noble ideals of Western civilization, Peruccio shows that Orientalist prejudices and stereotypes nonetheless characterized the attitudes of the Congress's majority Protestant North Atlantic leadership in their dealings with the Italian and Egyptian delegations. Underscoring the fact that such anti-Catholic or anti-Islamic prejudices ran counter to the Alliance's stated ideals of universal female suffrage, Peruccio examines how Italian and Egyptian delegates to the Congress pushed back against these prejudices—and reveals just how little effect they had in doing so.

The reflexive sense of Rome as a city impossible to apprehend distinct from its thick crust of mythical and historical pasts is another theme explored in these pages. Loren Eadie's "Marvelous Rome" analyzes the depiction of the city in Paolo Sorrentino's 2013 film *La grande bellezza*, a film built, in Eadie's words, around "concepts of looking, beauty, marvels, spectacle, and transformation." Her analysis traces the film's reaffirmation of Rome's perennial layering and re-layering of contemporary reality over historic memory and ancient myth. Putting the film into dialogue with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Vasari's *Vite*, Eadie focuses in particular on Sorrentino's dynamic engagement with the longstanding Roman literary trope of a *grande bellezza*, that is, a miraculous but also unexpected beauty or artistic creation that seems somehow beyond the power of humans to create. Rome's histories prove determinant in other ways in art historian Yvonne Elet's essay, "Marching into Rome," which explores Mussolini's attempt during the interwar period to re-make the northern entry to the city of Rome. This effort, Elet shows, was essentially informed by consciousness of the meanings associated in antiquity and the modern period with approaching Rome through the via Flaminia and the via Cassia, which meet at the Milvian Bridge. Asking why it seemed necessary to remake this area in order to place the Fascist imprint on the city, Elet argues that this expansive project aimed to manipulate and mythologize Rome's Renaissance and ancient pasts. "Tempesta's Rome Recut" by Jessica Maier, also an art historian, approaches related issues of Rome's layered history through an examination of the recutting and reprinting of Antonio Tempesta's 1593 map of Rome over the course of about a century. Maier investigates how the image of Rome, its portrayal in mapmaking, as well as Tempesta's intellectual property all went through a synchronous evolution during this period. In making this argument, she also explains the technical details of how prints were made and altered, discusses Tempesta's own goals, and reveals how the De Rossi family used Tempesta's plates to their own economic and social advantage during the reign of Pope Alexander VII (1655–67).

The remaining three essays in the collection are linked together by their different approaches to the idea of Rome as the setting for events that, as if by virtue of their Roman setting alone,

resonated far beyond their immediate moment or beyond the Eternal City itself. John Hunt's "Spaniards and Sbirri" starts in the heat of the summer in 1627 when tensions between the Spanish troops in Rome and the papal police overflowed into a series of clashes. Hunt uses these conflicts to argue that controlling urban space in Rome at this date was not simply about real estate, but rather became symbolic of wider struggles that were then underway beyond the Alps. The streets of Rome in this context served as a local stage on which a much wider European geopolitics came to be acted out and fought over. The focus in historian Rhiannon Evangelista's "The Racism of Romanità" is instead on Rome's status in thinking about Italic identities during the Fascist period. Her essay considers a theory of the Italian race articulated by Giuseppe Bottai, mayor of Rome from 1935 to 1936, and specifically Bottai's claim that Italian identity was rooted in a set of spiritual and civic values that had been passed down from ancient Rome to the modern world. Bottai's theory stood in contrast with the Fascist biological view of race, and though it was ultimately unsuccessful in recasting the race question, it underlines the importance historic Rome could have for imagining modern Italian racial identities. Representations of the Trasteverina Risorgimento activist and martyr Giuditta Tavani Arquati (1810–67), finally, form the topic of historian Diana Moore's essay in this collection, "Giuditta Tavani Arquati and Anti-Catholic Motherhood in the Fight for Rome." Moore's investigation reveals that already in the first decades after Tavani Arquati's death at the hands of papal *zuavi*, her emblematic story was recognized and exploited by Risorgimento propagandists as a counterexample to the pervasive generalization (still relatively common in Risorgimento historiography) that women tended to support the Church, while it was chiefly men who combated it in hopes of building a secular public sphere. Moore shows us that Tavani Arquati emerged from her Roman martyrdom not merely as a victim, but also as a fascinating early exemplar of anti-Catholic motherhood, patriotism, and courage.

Before concluding this introduction, we would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to all who contributed to the production of this issue of *California Italian Studies*. We would first of all like to thank our anonymous peer reviewers (you know who you are!): this special issue of *CIS* would have been simply impossible without the careful intellectual work you each contributed. We are also most grateful to the journal's outgoing editor-in-chief, Claudio Fogu, who agreed to the idea of this special issue and helped us get it up and running, and to the new editor-in-chief who patiently steered us through it, the inestimable Jon R. Snyder. We also extend warmest thanks to the journal's new managing editor (and still copyeditor), the tireless Joseph Tumolo. Grazie a tutti!