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Epilogue

Constructing romanità: 
The Obelisk at the Foro Mussolini

Roman representations of construction and destruction have undergone 2000 years of reception and have in their turn become available to be manipulated and strategically employed by others. This afterword offers some reflections on one particular moment in the history of this reception and appropriation and aims at opening up avenues for future exploration. We remain in the city of Rome, but travel forward in time to the 20th century and the fascist regime under Benito Mussolini.

The entrance to the Foro Italico, a complex of mostly sports-related buildings in the north of Rome constructed in the 1920s and 1930s, is dominated by a huge monolithic marble obelisk, which to this day bears the inscription MUSSOLINI DUX (fig. 20).1 The obelisk was placed there in 1932, and the story of its creation, transportation and erection was told and retold by the Italian fascist regime. No other type of monument depends for its impact so much upon the viewer’s ‘memory’ of its creation as does an obelisk.2 In chapter 1, I discussed how in antiquity inscriptions, visual representations, and literary texts were employed to activate and manipulate a viewer-reader’s awareness of the effort, difficulty and spectacle of the transportation and erection of an obelisk. The fascist propaganda surrounding the obelisk of Mussolini, even though conveyed via a different set of media, displays a range of comparable strategies.

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2 For my use of the term ‘memory’ see p. 7 above.
Furthermore, the incessant fascist staging and representation of processes of construction and engineering, like the erection of the obelisk, relied on a selective and manipulative appropriation of actual Roman constructions and their representations. Romanness (*romanità*) in fascist Italy was a central, but extremely
flexible concept: the Roman (especially Roman imperial) past could be activated through carefully selected references and general gestures towards Roman aesthetics, *mores*, or history. Fascism’s flexible use of *romanità* is well exemplified in the Foro Italico itself, initially known as the Foro Mussolini. The name given to the complex evokes a parallel with the newly excavated Imperial Fora in the city centre, most of them named after their imperial builders. The label ‘Foro Mussolini’ underscores the imperialistic ambition that Mussolini nurtured for Italy, as well as his own position within the fascist regime. However, similarities between the imperial fora and the foro Mussolini remained largely confined to the name: in terms of use, layout, and aesthetics, the sports complex had almost nothing in common with the commercial and legal centres of imperial Rome.

Construction at the site began with the Academy for Physical Education in 1927, and in the following years, a large sports complex evolved, including two stadia, an indoor swimming pool, a tennis stadium and training area, and a fencing academy. The monumental entrance to the site opens just past the obelisk into what was known as the Piazzale dell’Impero, a broad avenue leading up to a large marble fountain, and an open-air display of fascist propaganda in the form of inscriptions and mosaics.

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3 On fascism and the concept of romanità, see especially Stone (1999), Visser (1992), Nelis (2007a) and for further bibliography the survey article of Nelis (2007b).

4 On the fascist exploration of the imperial fora and the construction of the new Via dell’Impero across them, see Schieder (2006), 717-20, Painter (2005), 22-5, the contemporary presentation of the achievement by Calza (1934) (which I have not yet been able to consult in the original), and a selection of the photographic documentation by the Istituto Luce in Insolera (2001), 132-59.

5 On the appropriation of Roman architectural forms in the architecture of the fascist period in general, see Welge (2005). Schieder (2006) offers a good first overview of the programme of ‘liberating’ ancient monuments in Rome and integrating them into the urban fabric.

The idea of dedicating an obelisk to the Duce and placing it at the entrance of the complex was conceived by Renato Ricci, the prefect of the Opera Nazionale Balilla. The obelisk was intended to emulate the scores of those already erected in Rome by emperors, popes and princes. It would (of course) be the largest of them all, made entirely of white Carrara marble, its tip to be covered in gold.

In 1928 the search for a suitably large block of marble, free of imperfections and cracks, began in the quarries of Carrara. The block that was discovered was then extracted, cut, and covered with a protective encasing of wood and iron. Thus prepared for transport, the monolith, weighing almost 300 tons (excluding its heavy cover), began its journey from the quarry to the marina of Forte dei Marmi. Floating between two pontoons, it was then conveyed to Rome by sea and the river Tiber, and finally arrived there in June 1929. Three years later, it was

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8 On the obelisks of Rome and their histories, see Iversen (1968) and D’Onofrio (1992).
transported from Farnesina to the site of the Foro, erected, and inaugurated on 4th November 1932 as part of the decennial celebrations of the march on Rome.9

Every step of the obelisk’s journey and erection was meticulously documented and reported in the national press, in newspapers, weeklies and specialised journals. These publications were often lavishly illustrated with photographic documentation, often provided by the Istituto Luce (see figs. 21 and 22, photographs showing the obelisk in the quarries of Carrara and passing under de Ponte Fabricio). Luce also filmed the proceedings, using the material for documentaries and newsreels.10 In the last category a striking 25 items on the obelisk alone were produced and presented to the Italian public.11 Via all these different channels, the long duration, the cost, the technical hazards and the superhuman achievement of the project were documented and extolled. Although the scope of this coverage is far wider than that of its Roman counterpart considered in chapter 1 above, individual strategies are remarkably comparable.

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9 For details of this process, see D’Amelio (2009), 41-83.
10 On the Luce coverage of the obelisk transportation, see Tiberi (2009).
11 D’Amelio (2009), 10. The DVD appended to D’Amelio (2009) gives a good impression of the material used for the newsreels and documentaries.
For example, an article which appeared in 1933 in the architectural design magazine Casabella on the subject of the obelisk begins:  

Quando si sta ad ammirare col nasi in aria quel candido blocco di marmo di Carrara che ricorderà nei secoli il nome di Mussolini, e se ne valutano ad occhio le misure e i pesi, non si può evitare una domanda molto semplice e legittima: come fu trasportato fin lassù e innalzato sulla sua base questo ciclopico monolito?

When one is admiring, nose in the air, this white block of Carrara marble, which will recall for centuries the name of Mussolini, and if one roughly estimates the dimensions and weights, one cannot avoid one very simple and legitimate question: how was this Cyclopian monolith brought here and raised on its base?

Even more explicitly than in the ancient sources studied in chapter 1, the question ‘how did this get here?’ is suggested to the viewer-reader. At the same time, calling the obelisk a ciclopico monolito, with its suggestions of colossality and mythical proportions, already suggests that the reader can expect the answer to be spectacular and impressive. In what follows, categories of praise familiar from the ancient material are activated. Pagano stresses the speed at which the work was executed (una velocità veramente esemplare), and devotes much attention to the immense difficulty of the work, describing in detail the design of the lifting mechanism, the dangers and crises of the actual lifting process and the ways in which they were solved. Ricci, who commissioned the project, is praised for his exceptional daring in attempting the raising (reminiscent of the inscription praising Constantius II in Rome):  

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12 The article, written by the editor, Giuseppe Pagano-Pogatschnig, appeared in the first installment of January 1933 (22-3), and is here quoted from its reproduction in Insolera/Sette (2003), 30-1.

13 See above, p. 25-7.
Per un anno e mezzo è rimasto [l'obelisco] coricato in attesa di chi osasse innalzarlo. Per decisione di S. E. Renato Ricci, animatore di sempre nuovi ardimenti, l’onore di questa arditissima impresa è spettata all’architetto Costantino Costantini …

Figure 23. Demolition of the concrete structure used for the erection of the marble obelisk.
For one and a half years, the obelisk remained lying there (i.e. on the shore), waiting for the one who would dare to raise it. Through the decision of His Excellency Renato Ricci, the leading force of ever new daring undertakings, the honour of this most difficult undertaking became the responsibility of the architect Costantino Costantini …

This presentation of events actually uses the three-year delay to advantage, and at the same time smoothly elides the fact that Ricci, as the one who had commissioned the obelisk, could hardly escape the responsibility of raising it, and that it required no special daring on his part to organise it. Finally, the article directly addresses the theme of memory and future recollections of the raising. Of the moment when the concrete construction used for the raising is spectacularly shattered and the obelisk freed from the concrete scaffolding (figs. 23 and 24), Pagano writes:

Il crollo finale dell’ultima stilata non sarà mai cancellato dalla memoria di chi ebbe l’avventura di assistervi.

The final collapse of the last pier will never be deleted from the memory of those who experienced the good fortune of being present.

Those who attended this spectacular moment would never forget it – but how about those who did not? The dramatic blow-by-blow account in the article, supported by illustrations showing the different steps of the process, attempts to recreate the dramatic moments for the readers’ imagination, as in the description of a near-disaster during the demolition:

la trave … si inclina, sta per ribaltarsi, si inclina; ma quando si attende già lo scroscio della caduta, il motore ‘rata’ e la stilata oscilla paurosamente verso il monolito: le funi, per tre volte, resistono.

The pier leaned, was on the point of tipping over, leaned; but when one was already expecting the thunder of collapse, the engine made a strange noise, and the support swayed worryingly towards the monolith: the ropes held three times.

The question suggested in the first sentence of the article, and the dramatic representation of its answer, are made part of the reader’s appreciation of the obelisk. Although the possibilities of modern media render the communicative situation very different from antiquity, the same basic strategy of creating or manipulating a ‘memory’ of construction is clearly recognisable.
I now turn to the ways in which these ‘memories’ were deliberately ‘romanised’. The erection of an obelisk is in itself a reference to antiquity, and in imperial Rome these monuments were a conspicuous display of the emperor’s power. But a whole range of features surrounded the Mussolini obelisk with a further aura of romanità, though none of them, strictly speaking, had an ancient Roman precedent: the placing of the obelisk in the context of a (neo-)imperial forum, the Latin inscription on the obelisk itself, and the material of the obelisk. In being made of Carrara marble, and not, like its ancient forebears, of Egyptian granite, it was innovative, but the quarries at Carrara had been opened by Augustus and exploited by the Romans for centuries. Carrara marble was an ‘Italian’ choice, and conveyed a general sense of romanità.

On the connection of Mussolini’s obelisks (including the Foro Mussolini obelisk and the Axum stele) with Roman, especially Augustan, displays of power, see Wilkins (2005), 61-2.

The imperialist claim communicated by the import of foreign, especially north-African, obelisks was of course also not lost on Mussolini, who had the so-called stele of Axum transported to Rome in 1937 and erected in front of the Ministry of the Colonies in the Piazza
The connections between the ancient obelisks and their modern counterpart were pointed out at every opportunity (incessant media coverage ensured that there were many of these) and cleverly utilised for propaganda purposes. The connection most emphatically stressed was that between Roman and Fascist mastery of the technical challenges and the enormous effort of raising an obelisk. For example, in the publication accompanying the official opening of the Foro Mussolini in 1937, Ricci himself wrote that the Carrarians had in the Fascist era renewed a typically Roman enterprise.\(^\text{16}\) The fact that Egyptians had already erected obelisks successfully long before the Romans, and that the Roman obelisks had been variously transported and reerected between Roman imperial times and the 1930s, were conveniently left unmentioned. Instead, tangible connections between the ancient and the fascist effort were inventively ‘discovered’: in a Luce newsreel of May 1929, a large square marble block, destined for the podium of the obelisk, was shown from two sides, one of them cut smoothly with modern methods of marble working, one allegedly still showing the incisions of the chisels of ancient Roman workmen.\(^\text{17}\) The obelisk was presented to the public as an achievement not only directly linked to, but also surpassing the incredible engineering achievements of the ancient Romans.

One document underlines more than any other how closely the regime attempted to tie the obelisk of Mussolini to ancient models. Before the erection of the obelisk in 1932, three gold coins and a piece of parchment, protected by an appropriate container, were immured in the marble base of the obelisk, following and adapting the model of the reerection of the obelisk in St Peter’s square.\(^\text{18}\) The parchment bore a Latin text, composed by Aurelio Giuseppe Amatucci (1867-1960), a Latinist with a special interest in late antiquity.\(^\text{19}\) This text was not published in print until five years later, when it appeared, untranslated, in an appendix to a book published by the Opera Nazionale Balilla on the occasion of the official opening of the Foro di Porta Capena. The stolen monument was only returned to Ethiopia in 2008. See Curran/Grafton/Long/Weiss (2009), 291-3.

\(^\text{16}\) Ricci’s essay is quoted in D’Amelio (2009), 51: ‘l’esperienza fu inventata, l’ingegno e la tenacia ebbero ragione di tutti: i carrareesi rinnovarono in tempo fascista l’impresa tipicamente romana’.
\(^\text{17}\) D’Amelio (2009), 10 with n. 15. Istituto Luce, Roma, Archivio Storico, Giornale Luce, A0346.
\(^\text{18}\) Beneath that obelisk, reerected under Pope Sixtus V by the architect and engineer Domenico Fontana, a number of bronze medallions were immured, as described by Fontana himself in his account of the raising: Fontana (1590), 5v-6. However, a text is not mentioned among the objects placed under the obelisk. On Renaissance foundation deposits (usually consisting of medals and coins) see further Schraven (2009) and Schraven (2012), 142-6.
\(^\text{19}\) On Amatucci see Alfonsi (1944) and Pizzolato (2007).
Mussolini. The text has never been republished or translated from the Latin, and has (to my knowledge) received only one very brief discussion in an article by Peter Aicher.

The text of ca. 1400 words is written in a classical, sometimes Ciceroonian, highly emphatic style, and comprises three sections. The first and longest of these (lines 1-62) deals with the political career of Benito Mussolini. The situation in Italy before the rise of fascism is sketched, followed by the appearance of Mussolini as a saviour of messianic proportions and a list of his magnificent achievements. The second section treats the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) and its prefect Renato Ricci (63-94), while the final section (95-134) is devoted to the construction of the Foro Mussolini, and especially to the cutting, transportation and erection of the obelisk.

The text is entombed in the podium of the obelisk, inaccessible to anyone as long as the obelisk stands. For what readership was the text intended? A preliminary hypothesis, to be tested by further investigations, is that the text was written not for a contemporary audience, but for posterity. It may be intended to provide an authorised version of history for a future (re-)discovery of the Forum complex, the fascist empire and its ‘emperor’ Mussolini. Perhaps recent archaeological discoveries relating to the Roman emperors (especially Augustus) and their building projects inspired the fascist leaders to think about their own future rediscovery. Through Amatucci’s text, the fascist regime was attempting to mould its own future reception – an assumption also supported by the location of

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20 Opera Nazionale Balilla (1937), 103-4.
21 Aicher (2000), 130-2 and 134. Without this article, I would never have learnt of the existence of the text, which has been almost entirely forgotten. D’Amelio (2009), a recent and thorough monograph on the obelisk, accords just half a footnote to this remarkable document (82, n. 2). A complete edition (with translation and commentary) of the text is currently being prepared by Han Lamers (Leiden) and myself.
22 Line numbers refer to the edition of the text in Opera Nazionale Balilla (1937).
23 This investigation will be undertaken by Lamers and myself: see n. 21.
24 Nelis (2007a), 405-7 stresses that before the bimillennial of Augustus, Caesar played an equally if not more important role in Mussolini’s attempts at linking himself to founding figures of the Roman empire, only to be superseded by Augustus in the second half of the 1930s.
the text, under a monument that serves as a concentrated statement of fascism’s power and dominance, as well as that of its leader.25

The raising of the obelisk under which the text lies forms the climax and conclusion of the entire text. It tells the story of the obelisk chronologically (Amatucci 107-30):

Quo vero studio, quibus adsiduis conatibus, qua anxia cura Carariae montes longe lateque temptati atque pervestigati sint ut marmor reperiretur ex quo obeliscus monolithus DUCI dicaretur haud facile enarrari potest. Denique candida moles, quae in altitudinem LX, in latitudinem X fere pedes egrederetur, reperta est solisque lumine refulsit. Sed huius inventionis gaudio nova cura successit, cum moles illa ex monte in aequum, Cararia Romam transvehenda esset. Quod quidem nulla antea gens nisi Romani perfecerant, neque qua ratione Romani perfecerint satis constat. Vicit tamen architectorum nostrorum acre ingenium fabrorum singularis peritia, omnium patriae DUCISQUE ingens amor. Quo factum est ut illa moles ferro, ligneo mira arte contexto inclusa fabris molientibus viam primum ex monte in urbem atque ex urbe ad mare inter civium, qui floribus ornaverant, gratulationes precesque vehetur, deinde duobus iunctis novo artificio ratibus, quae inter se onus illud \( \overline{\Xi} \) fere pondo acciperent atque transveherent, quam difficillimo cursu mari Tirrheno et per flumen Tiberim Romam ad Divi Pauli portum perveniret.


25 Another point in support of this hypothesis is the fact that the text supplies information that a contemporary reader would not have required, such as the date of the First World War (line 2).

26 This appears to be a mistake in the (transcription of) the Latin text published in Opera Nazionale Balilla (1937), which shows only one horizontal line above the number (\( \overline{\Xi} \)), indicating a multiplication factor of one thousand. However, the weight of the obelisk could not have been 12,000 Roman pounds (about 4 tons); it must rather have approached 1,200,000 pounds (400 tons). I assume that two vertical lines on either side of the cipher have been omitted in the transcription, which would indicate a factor of 100,000 and provide the correct amount.

27 This precise date has probably been transcribed incorrectly. Depending on whether we should substitute \( \text{Kal.}, \text{Non. or Id. after V.} \), the date could be either the 26th of September, the 3rd of October or the 11th of October. In any case, the inauguration of the obelisk took place on the 4th of November 1932.
quadratae impositus, altitudine pedum fere CXXX, cuspidé aurea, marmoris candore ceteros omnes vincit.

It is not an easy task to describe the genuine dedication, the unremitting attempts, the solicitous attention with which the mountains of Carrara were tested and searched far and wide, to find marble from which a monolithic obelisk might be dedicated to the DUCE. Finally a shining mass was found, which exceeded in height sixty feet, in width almost ten feet, and glittered in the sunlight. But upon the joy of discovery followed a new task, because this mass had to be transported from the mountains to the plain and from Carrara to Rome. This indeed no people except the Romans had earlier managed, and how they managed it is not sufficiently clear. But nevertheless the strong talent of our architects, the singular skill of our craftsmen, and the huge love of all for the fatherland and for the DUCE prevailed. Thus it was achieved that that mass, encased in iron and wood woven together by miraculous skill, as a result of craftsmen toiling at the road, travelled first from the mountain into the city and from the city to the sea amid the rejoicing and good wishes of the citizens, who had decorated it with flowers, and then, by means of two pontoons that had been connected to each other by a new system and which between them supported and conveyed that load of almost 400 tons by the most difficult route possible, over the Tyrrhenian sea and via the river Tiber, arrived in Rome at the harbour of San Paolo.

In the harbour of San Paolo, the ship, which was called ‘Apuano’, stood for almost five months, until the river swelled. Finally on the 22nd November 1930 (VIII), they carried it to Farnesina, and, when the right moment had come, they exposed the obelisk. This obelisk, in the tenth year from the restoration of the Fasces, after being placed on the square basis by means of suitable machines and instruments, with its height of almost 130 feet, with its gold tip, and with the shine of its marble, surpasses all others.

In relation to the text as a whole, the amount of space and detail lavished on the obelisk is striking. It receives a stunning 23 lines, compared to, for example, two lines (46-7) spent on the entire building activity of Mussolini, and a further two (48-9) on his excavation of ancient monuments. Furthermore, the story of the obelisk is treated last. A potential reader is invited to see the obelisk as the pinnacle and culmination of all achievements of fascism, the Italian people and its leader.

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28 The decennial celebrations for the march on Rome.
Most of the individual achievements praised are already familiar from the news coverage of the time. Amatucci, too, stresses the skill of the architects, the love for the Duce which apparently inspired all those involved to superhuman efforts, and the almost unsurmountable *difficultas* of the task. Although the Roman precedents for the obelisk are explicitly referred to, the text itself does not seem obviously to emulate specific Roman literary models. Although some of the themes prominent in the accounts of Pliny the Elder and Ammianus Marcellinus (such as the size and novelty of the ships used for transportation) also occur in Amatucci’s text, clear intertextual links with ancient descriptions of obelisk raising are absent, as are links with other prominent descriptions of Roman engineering (except perhaps for the relatively generic topos of the impossibility of description). The general impression of *romanità* created by the language and classical style is sufficient, and is combined with rhetoric and themes more inspired by contemporary newspaper articles than ancient models.

The relation between this text and its memorial function is rather complicated. On the one hand, the text elides its own memorial function. It is the obelisk itself, and not the text, which is to serve as a lasting memory of the greatness of fascism, as the conclusion of the text makes clear:

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Stat in ipso aditu FORI MUSSOLINI et patriae fata per DUCEM renovata, DUCIS in patriam excelsum invictumque animum, civium erga DUCEM immotam fidem, res per Fasces praecclare gestas in perpetuum consecrabit.
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It stands in the very entrance to the FORO MUSSOLINI and it will immortalise for eternity the fortunes of the fatherland, restored by the DUCE, the excellent and unconquered spirit of the DUCE regarding the fatherland, the immovable loyalty of the citizens to the DUCE, the outstanding achievements of Fascism.

There is no direct reference to the competition between architectural and textual monumentalisation and memorialisation, a theme which has been prominent throughout this investigation. This text has no need of asserting its own memorial powers, since the very fact of its ever being read (in its original version on the

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29 On impossibility of description, see p. 80. Meaningful intertextual links are by no means absent from Amatucci’s text entirely. For example, the opening sentence (*Bellum maxime omnium memorabile quae unquam gesta sint …*) clearly recalls Livy 21.1, the beginning of the Second Punic War in his *Ab Urbe Condita.*
buried parchment, that is) requires the obelisk’s removal, relocation or collapse. At the moment of reading, the text’s claims about the eternity of the obelisk will already have been proven false, but they will have been superseded by the eternity of the text itself.