

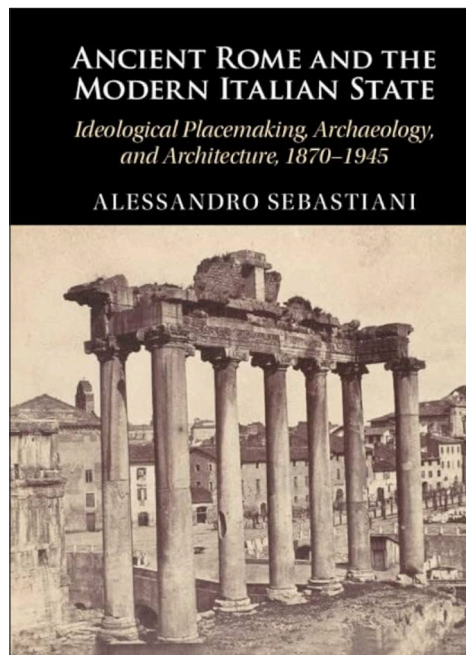
Book Review

Sebastiani, Alessandro. 2023. *Ancient Rome and the Modern Italian State. Ideological Placemaking, Archaeology, and Architecture, 1870–1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-0093-5410-3 hardback £85.

Alessandro Sebastiani's volume is an in-depth analysis of the interrelationships between ideological placemaking, archaeology and architecture, which takes the city of Rome, the capital of the modern Italian state, as its stage. The period of interest is the 75 years between 1870, when Rome became the capital of the Italian Kingdom, and 1945, the year that saw, with the end of World War II, the final collapse of the fascist regime. The volume is divided into six chapters. The first ('Placemaking. An Introduction', p. 1–14) is dedicated to the crucial concepts of ideological placemaking (the creation of collective places of identity) and authenticity ('reconstructing the most objective sequence of different identities that a place can bear' p. xxvii).

The second chapter ('Ideological Placemaking', p. 15–59) describes the network of ideological narratives of the post-unitarian period, centred on the theme of *Romanità/Romanitas* (Romanity), underlining the role of archaeologists and architects in building the post-unitarian capital, the Third Rome.

The third chapter ('Post-Unification Placemaking', p. 60–96) deals with the wide urban reshaping of 1870–1922. These are the decades of the first three General Master



Plans (1873, 1882 and 1909), which also saw the implementation of the first ideological placemaking. The author rightly recalls its anti-papal character, highlighted in particular by the monumental projects such as the Palace of Justice (by G. Calderini, inaugurated in 1911), the triumphal Ponte Vittorio Emanuele II and the Vittoriano with annexed demolitions. The same years saw the demolition of most of the villas and gardens of Papal Rome and the first *sventramenti* ('eviscerations'), i.e. cuts of the urban fabric, conceived with the aim and justification of widening, beautifying and restoring dignity to the city, such as those to open Via Cavour, Corso Vittorio Emanuele, Largo Argentina and to create the Tiber embankments.

With the fourth chapter ('Reclaiming historical identities of four classical monuments', p. 97–146), the author delves into the fascist *Ventennio* and the narratives of the multiple historical identities of four of the main classical monuments, reconsidered as central places of *Romanità*: the *Ara Pacis Augustae*, the Colosseum, the Imperial Forums and the Mausoleum of Augustus. After an overview of Augustan Rome, in which the author identifies the first building fever under the banner of political propaganda and Augustus as a model of ideological placemaker for Benito Mussolini, the author moves on to the diachronic historical description of the four monuments.

The following chapter ('The fascist placemaking of four classical monuments, 1922–1945', p. 147–194), dealing with the fascist *sventramenti*, focuses on the architectural projects which modified the identities of the four monuments mentioned above. In this attempt to emphasize a new ideological vision of Rome, the Duce, as the new Caesar and Augustus (he was celebrated in these terms in the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* – Augustan Exhibition of Romanity, 1937–1938) was the leading placemaker. At the same time, archaeologists and architects operated on the urban landscape, through a process of selection, subtraction and addition, functional to a distorted reinterpretation of the past but at the cost of a loss of authenticity. The failure of the operation is evident especially for Piazza Augusto Imperatore ('the greatest failure in building places of identity', p. 171), where a mature fascist identity takes shape to the detriment of the isolated, almost alien Mausoleum of Augustus.

The sixth chapter ('The fascist ideological placemaking: new architecture', p. 195–233) is dedicated to some of the most distinctive fascist places conceived in order to shape the new Italian identity. Some were actually realized, such as Via della Conciliazione, the Foro Mussolini, the Sapienza University Campus, EUR (Esposizione Universale di Roma, born as Esposizione Universale 1942). Others were planned but never built, such as the Palazzo del Littorio and the Danteum along the Via dell'Impero. A short 'Afterword' follows by way of conclusion (p. 234–237).

One cannot help but acquiesce with the main issue of the volume, that the birth of Italian ideological placemaking occurred during the decades following unification, fuelled by a distorted, rhetorical and falsifying vision of the Roman past aimed to create a new collective national identity. Crucial in this discourse was the myth of Rome: already claimed in the Risorgimento and post-unification period, employed by the historical Left in an anti-papal function, it took on further relevance in Enrico Corradini's nationalist and colonialist party and was taken to extremes during the fascist regime. Indeed, it fitted perfectly in the fascist ideological agenda, which aims to recreate the new *homo romanus*.

Ideological placemaking, the philosophical foundations of which the author traces in the neo-idealist and actualist thoughts of Giovanni Gentile, Benedetto Croce and Martin Heidegger (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927), manipulates and reinterprets the past through the selection and distortion of architectural, historical and archaeological heritage, at the cost of the loss of authenticity and context. In the author's words, Rome becomes the theatre 'of one of the largest ideological placemaking projects ever conceived in Europe' (p. 14), but it is also the theatre of a great failure: excisions prevented the osmosis between past and present, resulted in simple juxtaposition of ancient and modern, never (or rarely) harmonious. Monuments, when isolated, lose their soul.

Architects (e.g. Marcello Piacentini and Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo), archaeologists and art historians (e.g. Rodolfo Lanciani, Giacomo Boni, Corrado Ricci, Roberto Paribeni, Giulio Quirino Giglioli, Antonio Muñoz, Alfonso Bartoli) acted together with politicians as placemakers, cooperating in the mutilation of values, identities and authenticity of places and monuments. Although centred on the cult of ancient Rome, some post-antique figures were saved, such as Dante Alighieri, enhanced as the forerunner of unified Italy, and Saint Francis of Assisi, whose 700th death anniversary was celebrated in 1926. The resulting Rome of Mussolini was a patchwork of past and present.

It is easy to concur with the author's conclusions (p. 236–237), that 'today, these different architectural buildings are part of our cultural heritage, forms of artistic expressions of a political regime to be condemned but not cancelled' and that Rome as an urban place is still full of 'authentic narratives'. Moreover, one cannot but agree with what the author writes in the brief final consideration, regarding the valorization and contextualization of the architecture and spaces created by modern placemaking, as they have become part of Italian cultural heritage, without giving in to the fashionable current of cancel culture (see Ben-Ghiat 2017; Belmonte 2024).

On some specific passages, however, more precision would have been desirable. Regarding Paribeni, for example, it seems misleading to emphasise only that 'he is

linked to investigations in sites in Ethiopia, the cornerstone of Mussolini's reborn of Italian empire' (p. 56): his role was much broader and more crucial, engaged as he was in the field in Crete, Egypt, Eritrea, Asia Minor, Palestine, and then as a senior cultural manager with the role of Director of the Museo Nazionale Romano, Superintendent of excavations and museums in Rome and Director General of Antiquities and Fine Arts. With regard to the assertion that 'practically nothing survives excluding the foundation cut of the burial chamber created in the bedrock' of the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus (p. 117), it would have been appropriate to recall that part of the rich sculptural and architectural decoration is preserved in the British Museum, where it was transferred by the archaeologist Charles Thomas Newton (1816–1894), who discovered the material during excavations in 1856–1857. Certainly, it must be a misprint where, recalling the cinerary urns of Agrippina and her son Nero, the author adds that 'the latter was transported to the capitol and served as a unit of measure for wheat and lime' (p. 121). In reality, it was not Nero's urn (Nero Caesar, not the emperor) that has been transferred and transformed, but that of Agrippina (the so-called *Rugitella de grano*), which is not the Lesser, Nero's mother, but the Greater, Germanicus' wife and mother of Caligula.

It could be useful to recall also the following typos: the excavators of the Mausoleum of Augustus are called 'Giulio Quirino Giglioli and Antonio Maria', forgetting for the latter the surname Colini (Antonio Maria Colini, 1900–1989) (p. 123); the earthquake which destroyed the Temple of the Divine Trajan is dated to the 1800s, instead of the 800s (the disastrous earthquakes of 801 and 847) (p. 144). Furthermore, some definitions appear inappropriate: the Roman Republic as a 'democratic republic' (p. 137); Trajan's Markets as a commercial rather than administrative and bureaucratic complex (p. 141). Finally, it is not clear which commemorative coin issues, connected with the fascist regime, that the author is referring to (p. 183). Beyond a general classicism of the coinage production, loaded with imperial references from 1936 to 1943, no commemorative issue was launched relating to the Roman period. There were, however, stamps issued between 1930 and 1941, commemorating the 2000th anniversary of the births of Virgil, Horace, Augustus and Livy.

These comments, made with the duty of the reviewer in mind, do not detract from the soundness of Sebastiani's volume. Corroborated by an analytical bibliographic documentation (p. 239–268) and enriched by numerous sources in Italian followed by the English translation in order to provide the reader with the original references, the book stands out as a reference work in the studies of the Italian ideological placemaking.

To conclude, just a reflection on the period posterior to that covered by the volume. In a context in which nationalistic ideology has been replaced by the economic exploitation of natural and cultural assets (denounced by Antonio Cederna in 1956 and

1965, for example) and the Roman Campagna has given way to massive overbuilding of the suburbs — a marginal Rome masterfully told by Pier Paolo Pasolini in his poetics of the Borgate (Rhodes 2007) — was authenticity better guaranteed?

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