

Assessing the ‘Fascist Filter’ and its Legacy*

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The extensive physical alterations to the city of Rome in the Fascist period have arguably created what I refer to as a ‘Fascist filter’, which will be tentatively discussed here. This paper investigates perceptions of what I refer to as “low status ruins” from antiquity in the modern city of Rome, focusing on the Servian wall in the context of the Termini train station in Rome. What are the possible functions, meanings, and practical implications of ruins in a modern cityscape? How are they ‘remembered’ or envisaged as (classical) heritage? I will in the following tentatively discuss the possible *contextual value* of Ancient ruins in Rome, focusing on the legacy of the ‘Fascist filter’.

* This paper is based on an oral presentation, hence the absence of references.

Introduction

The normative ‘master narrative’ of Ancient Greece and Rome as the foundation on which Western civilisation rests, incarnated in the classical tradition, still implies that we ‘understand’ antiquity, that there are ‘direct channels’ (tradition) through which ‘we’ (as Europeans) are in direct contact with ‘our’ past. The complexity of classical tradition and what I have chosen to call the ‘Fascist filter’ arguably rule out the possibility of such comprehension. Hence I argue that understanding the role of antiquity as cultural heritage requires recontextualisation, a higher degree of interdisciplinary perspectives, as well as deep cultural self-reflection on the foundations and applied uses of the notion of national and European ‘identity’.

I

The following investigates the delicate balance between the destruction and the preservation of the *Servian wall* (the Republican city wall also commonly referred to as the ‘agger’, constructed approximately 378 BC), in the urban context of the *Termini* station in Rome. The longest surviving stretch of the wall – named after Servius Tullius, the sixth of the seven legendary kings of pre-Republican Rome – is located in a fenced-in small green area beside the main entrance to the station.

Despite its sheer size, it is remarkably inconspicuous and anonymous in the context of the station and the adjacent piazza. Reconstructed, or re-erected, fragments of the retaining wall of the *Agger Servianus* can be found in the *McDonald’s* restaurant in the shopping gallery on the ground floor of the main station building. The agger itself consisted of a great amount of earth and stones piled along the inner side of the wall, with a moat on the outer side of the wall as further protection. Hence the side of the remaining tufa blocks that make up the Servian wall, facing the Piazza dei Cinquecento in front of the station, was not actually visible in antiquity (at least not while it remained in defensive use).

Material remains, or the ruins that have been consciously preserved or passed through historical selection processes, are discussed as a stratigraphic palimpsest. They are thus related to debates, opinions and prejudice or preconceptions regarding the role of classical heritage in urban planning. My ongoing research thus deals with issues of consensus and conflict regarding evaluation and perception of classical heritage in the dichotomy between preservation and destruction. Questions of ideological continuity from the Fascist period and implications of decisions on cultural heritage and urban planning will also be included here.

Key clusters of concepts or themes pertinent to this study are:

- Archaeology, heritage, identity, and nation-building
- Perception of classical heritage through the ‘Fascist filter’
- ‘Low status ruins’, and evaluation of Ancient remains

The present investigation covers two periods of particular interest, which I refer to as ‘Termini I’ (1867–1874), ‘Termini II’ (1938–1942 & 1947–1950). I also take the intermediary periods into account, but I choose to focus on the periods of obvious physical change (destruction and construction). The study is thus not intended as an exhaustive study of the Termini station per se, the Servian wall and the station are used as examples of a more wide-ranging discussion concerning cultural heritage and urban planning.

Cultural heritage arguably needs to be constantly legitimised and infused with meaning in order to avoid moving exclusively towards preservation and musealisation. The explosion in human growth and increasing urbanisation is in deep conflict with this notion. Material cultural heritage is in this way in ongoing ‘competition’ with political and economic interests,

as well as with the logistical pressure of urban development. Furthermore, the notion of classical heritage is intertwined with a certain amount of exclusivity based on specialised knowledge and a certain ‘elitism’, which further complicates the issue.

Analysis of the rhetoric surrounding the Servian wall can offer examples of how cultural heritage can be manipulated in political decision-making – in the balance between the pressure for change and urban development on the one hand and cultural heritage preservation on the other. If ruins or relics are perceived as ‘reminders of the past’, preservation produces a selection of what is to be reminded and reflected upon, with a clear connection between political decisions and perceptions of the past. If ‘the past’ is viewed as a monolith, it is easily transformed into a political identity-affirming tool.

The Termini station provides a striking paradox in the combination of a truly modern station (this applies to both Termini I and II), with its role as a ‘gateway’ to the arguably most outspokenly historically self-conscious city in the Western world. The Termini area can thus be characterised as an ‘urban node’, as a meeting place, and as a vibrant, living part of the city. At the same time it constitutes a kind of internal suburbia or periphery within the city centre itself. Termini is thus from this perspective the ‘ultimate’ postmodern site in terms of a confrontation of the distant past with the present.

From a cultural heritage and cultural identity perspective, the station can be seen as a potential arena for marketing cultural heritage and for ‘city-branding’. The station as such is also highly involved in urban logistics, most importantly the new Metro lines. Can economic incentives ‘afford’ (not) taking cultural heritage integration into account? I am thus investigating changes in evaluation of recontextualised archaeological remains with an outlook to possible present and future suggestions for the contextualisation of urban cultural heritage.

The conspicuous ruins of the Servian wall outside Stazione Termini remain to this day, but only narrowly escaped destruction on a number of occasions since the preparations for the construction of the central railway station in Rome. The inclination towards preservation (‘la volontà di tutela’) essentially prevailed over time. My research on this topic aims at clarifying why and how this happened, and how it might be interpreted in a wider context.

II

We might arguably choose to focus on the ‘edges’, borders, or thresholds between archaeological sites and their surroundings in creating an ‘active level’ associated with the present. We may therefore legitimately think of archaeological sites in terms of scenography, and integrated versus separated space. It is important to discuss the contextual value of archaeological sites based on their ‘connectability’, their contested interpretations and meanings, as well as their maintenance.

The notion of ‘low status ruins’ mentioned earlier, suggests an off-the-record internal hierarchy of importance regarding Ancient remains in Rome. Ruins that are simply *there*, or decontextualised, such as the Servian wall, are reduced to a historical ‘backdrop’, of marginal specific importance, with a highly uncertain symbolic significance as a result.

This amounts to a question of didactics, which might be expressed in terms of physical presence vs. visual perception, visibility vs. invisibility, and transparency vs. intransparency. I am aware of the crudeness of the categorisation of ‘low status ruins’, and indeed of the concept itself. At first sight the Servian wall cannot really be classified as a ‘low status ruin’, as it has in fact been preserved. The examination of the reasons for its preservation (generally speaking its physical size in combination with vague associations of an abstract ‘historical importance’ to Roman and Italian identity), might however influence a more nuanced classification of its ‘status’ in terms of contextual value and cultural heritage preservation.

I identify three different perspectives on heritage evaluation particularly relevant to this study:

- Document value (contextualised historical characteristics)
- Experience value (architectural, aesthetical, and environmental value)
- Contextual value (summarised contexts – surroundings, landscape, and topography).

The division between ‘document value’ and ‘experience value’ is inspired by similar authorised procedures of the Swedish National Heritage Board. My notion of ‘contextual value’ is dependent on the two former categories, as it in effect summarises and assesses them from a more comprehensive perspective.

One of the most important questions for the future development of a city such as Rome is how to add function and contextual value to the experience of various parts of the city. As stressed earlier, this is in direct conflict with ‘logistical pressure’, technological development, and financial demands. My research thus aims at infusing meaning, not primarily extracting it. The process is tentatively regarded as one of extracting past meaning(s) in order to infuse them in the present, and to constructively discuss present and future cultural heritage preservation.

Protection of heritage and patrimony has long enjoyed a rich tradition in Italy. Partly due to a lack of outspoken national sentiment prior to 1860, Italian cultural heritage was seldom associated with ‘Italianness’, but rather based on territorial claims. The classical tradition, with the city of Rome as one of its main foundations – reinforced by the educational rite of passage of the Grand Tour from the mid 17th century until the early 19th century – enabled claims to Roman history and material remains of European dimensions. This dynamic between the ‘general’ European level of heritage, and the nation-building project amplified by Fascism in Italy regarding antiquity, has hitherto not been satisfactorily resolved. I would argue that attempting to trace changing nuances of heritage evaluation might facilitate the present and future of such undertakings.

Ruins in a sense constitute the ‘skeleton’ of urban environments. Breathing new life into remains of the Ancient past entails dissecting the foundations of the classical tradition, as well as placing these remains in dynamic contexts, avoiding solidified narratives and interpretations. We are faced with, and have to deal with, a double palimpsest in Rome: we have no option but to view antiquity, or at least ancient material remains, through what I refer to as the ‘Fascist filter’, mainly due to the extensive physical alterations to the city in the Fascist period, as well as the in my view incomplete and fragmented aspect of the monumentality of Fascist architecture. The weight attributed here to the Fascist filter is justified by the pivotal importance of focusing on antiquity on an identity discourse level during, as well as after, the Fascist period (1922–1943).

III

At the time of the first Fascist urban interventions (in the 1920s and 1930s), the city of Rome was ‘saturated’ typographically and symbolically. If we accept the distinction of the ‘three Romes’ (based on Mussolini’s conceptualisation of the ‘third Rome’), then the ‘first Rome’ was that of Ancient Rome, the ‘second Rome’ was symbolised by Papal authority and the Catholic Church. The ‘third Rome’ was similarly conceived of as synonymous with the new Fascist layer.

Such topographical urban layers can arguably be ‘read’ or interpreted as a stratigraphy. Mediaeval ‘Ancient architecture recycling’ is for example embedded in the second Rome. For the sake of legitimacy, Fascism thus had to create its own layer in Rome. The strategy later employed by the Fascist regime can be summed up as an appropriation of old layers in the

centre and the creation of new layers in the periphery of the city. This layer in turn joins forces with its predecessors in a complex and specifically Roman urban palimpsest.

What I refer to as the ‘Fascist filter’ is therefore to be understood as an acknowledgement of the effects of the major alterations of the cityscape (both horizontally and vertically) carried out during the Fascist period, as well as the subsequent appropriation of these alterations (the completion of the Termini station in 1947–50 provides an excellent case in point). There is no doubt that this ‘filter’ thus incorporated previous filters, primarily those of the ‘first’ and ‘second’ Rome.

The Termini station was completed after the war, and was far from the only architectural project to be finished (not destroyed or rebuilt) after the fall of the Fascist regime. Other examples are for example the planned 1942 Esposizione Universale di Roma (EUR) area; as well as Via della Conciliazione leading up to the Basilica of St. Peter, and the Vatican on the other side of the Tiber.

The cluttered Borgo by the Vatican emphasised the ‘wow’ factor in suddenly reaching Piazza San Pietro through Bernini’s colonnade. The Fascist approach, based on monuments and buildings in ‘grand isolation’, focused on the ‘liberation’ of ancient monuments – indeed of antiquity itself – which radically decontextualised the Roman cityscape and urban texture. This general aspect of completion and appropriation is hence substantially influential to my conceptualisation of the ‘Fascist filter’.

It is plausible to speak of a gradual shift after the excavation and development of the Termini station, from an almost purely *financial value* of the Ancient ruins in the area during the expropriation phase before Termini I in the 1860s, to a primarily *topographical value* in the 1930s (certainly by 1936, see below). The gradual development of a ‘cultural heritage policy’ can thus be discerned, very likely synchronised with the quite sudden modernisation process in Italy from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, arguably until the fall of the Fascism during the Second World War.

In 1936 the Fascist regime decided to demolish the old Termini station, as a realisation of the new systematisation of the railway amenities of the capital included in the 1931 Piano Regolatore; and to start constructing the side structures for a grandiose new station, designed by the architect Angiolo Mazzoni, suitable for the coming Esposizione Universale di Roma of 1942. The new station complex should be understood in the light of rapid modernisation, of logistical preparations for the Esposizione Universale; as well as in the context of ‘lo sventramento’ – in short, the complete destruction of less favourable architecture and whole areas of the city. The main building of the present station was completed in 1950 and features large stone slabs with a huge undulating roof (commonly referred to as the ‘dinosaur’). The new station was opened for the ‘jubilee year’ of 1950.

The identity crisis in Italy after the fall of Fascism might well have influenced the decision to change course regarding the completion of the station. The original design was however not entirely abandoned, as the main building was literally built on the foundations of Mazzoni’s unfinished project; which again highlights the ‘utilitarian’, or practical, approach to Fascist architecture and urban planning, also characteristic of the Italian post-war era.

The Servian wall has gradually become part of a museal context, which includes Palazzo Massimo and the Diocletian baths. After celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the present building, and the preparations leading up to the expected ‘invasion’ of pilgrims for the Millennium celebrations in 2000, the station was renamed *Roma Termini – Stazione Termini Giovanni Paolo II* in 2006. The Servian wall has gradually been decontextualised and marginalised within the station complex itself, the original idea of incorporating it into the building no longer being advocated, as recent expansion of the commercial area has obstructed the original view of the wall from within the station building.

In conclusion, the Servian wall seems to have been kept primarily as a 'reminder', or as an open-air museum piece, rather than as an important structure per se. The symbolic importance of the wall, as testimony par excellence to the early defence of the city, appears to have been instrumental in its survival during construction of the Termini station and the Piazza dei Cinquecento in Rome in Rome.