What role did architecture play in identity formation and ideological representation in Italian-occupied Ethiopia?
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Introduction

The theme of this research paper is the ideological significance of architecture in Gondar, Ethiopia, during the Italian colonial period (1935-1941). Rooted in the ambition to recapture and dominate territories, which were once part of the Roman Empire, the invasion of Ethiopia played a major role in the construction of the Fascist identity and authority. Italy's involvement in East Africa consists of a complex history of events, politicians, ambitions and discourses. It began long before the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, before the fascist regime even came to power, with the purchase of Assab by the Italians in 1869.

At the end of the 19th century, Italy was a recently unified nation (1861) seeking to build up its national identity and political power both in Europe and internationally. Italian nationalists spoke of reclaiming the importance of the Roman Empire through colonisation, with ambitions focused particularly on the African continent, which became the fighting ground of other European nations (Britain and France). This competition known as the “Scramble for Africa” was won by far better-equipped colonial powers, leaving Italy with a sense of deep frustration and humiliation, which lingered as Benito Mussolini rose to power, some forty years later.

As a latecomer to both industrialisation and colonisation, Francesco Crispi's government had to make a secret agreement with Britain, which already had a hold of African territory, to secure the Port of Massawa in Eritrea in 1886. This was the first major step in Italy's ambition to controlling the Horn of Africa and with it access to the Red Sea. It was shortly followed by the occupation of parts of
Somaliland under several agreements made with the Somali Sultans.

Italy’s interest in East Africa quickly turned to the Abyssinian Empire, ruled by Menelik II. In 1896, the Treaty of Wuchale was signed between the two nations; for Italy, Ethiopia became a protectorate, a subordinate country depending on a superior power’s protection and partial control. For the Ethiopians, the relation was primarily diplomatic, to facilitate foreign affairs between Menelik II and other European powers. These two very different interpretations led to the first Italo-Ethiopian conflict, where Italy attempted to force Ethiopia to accept the Treaty through military action. Vastly outnumbered and under-equipped, Italian forces led by General Oreste Baratieri were heavily defeated at the battle of Adwa (March 1896). This defeat triggered riots in Italy, and the collapse of Crispi’s government. Italy was forced to recognize Ethiopia’s independence, a severe blow to the national identity, which Mussolini will later seek to avenge.¹

On the Ethiopian side, the 1880s and 1890s were marked by Menelik’s campaigns to incorporate new territories into the Ethiopian Empire, resulting in a sovereign nation. However, as Benito Mussolini seized power in 1925, Ethiopia’s independence was once again threatened. Though not subject to a formal declaration, Italy began the second Italo-Ethiopian War in 1935, claiming to respond to an Ethiopian border attack. Emperor Haile Selassie attempted to plead the country's cause to the League of Nations, but was unsuccessful as the most powerful countries were all engaged in colonialism. In 1936, Italy succeeded in its

long-awaited conquest of Ethiopia, through a strategically planned attack and the use of modern weapons and techniques.²

As former capital of the Abyssinian Empire, Gondar was appointed one of Italian East Africa’s main administrative centres. Thousands of Italians settled in Ethiopia to farm the land, expecting to profit from cheap labour and live as a privileged class on a “civilising mission” in a land of poverty. In the first part we will explore how Italian architects and city planners organized the city into different zones according to fascist ideas of social class and racial separation.

Administrative buildings and other seats of power, located in strategic locations such as important crossroads, were meant to convey an image of Italian superiority and authority. Several major buildings will be analysed in the second part, based on historian David Rifkind’s interpretation of their location, along with physical and symbolic aspects, in the Fascist representation and colonial discourse.

Finally, we will focus on a recurring practice: the appropriation of existing buildings of national importance for use by the Fascist regime, such as the Ras Biet Palace, which also had a large public space in front, which was used for Adunate (mass rallies). Thus evoking historic links to the Roman Empire as a legitimisation of power, and appropriating symbolically the ancient Abyssinian imperial city through ritual practice. This raises the question of the role of architecture as a material, historical backdrop for ephemeral events.

Ethiopia is unique among other African nations as it was the first to be recognized as an independent state, enter the League of Nations, and experience a relatively short period of European rule. This essay will be based on historical research, in the aim of understanding and analysing the complex situation of the Italo-Ethiopian conflict through its repercussions on architecture, while attempting to question the idea of “humane colonialism.”
I. City planning to instil a Fascist Identity

A civilising mission
European colonialism in Africa was developed by major powers such as Britain, Spain, Portugal, France, Germany and Italy. Similarly to the other powers, the Fascist state established a colonial structure, which enabled them to control their colonies and benefit from their land, natural resources and labour.3

The impact of colonisation on all subordinate countries is political, economic, environmental, psychological, and the repercussions are present to this day. However, Ruchi Shree argues that “how and to what extent any country was affected was dependent upon numerous factors.”4 One of the distinctions she mentions is between ‘settler colonialism’ and ‘exploitation colonialism.’ Italy’s approach in East Africa can be described as ‘settler colonialism,’ as it was a large-scale immigration motivated by economic and political expansion. ‘Exploitation colonialism’ is similar, but mainly focused on the access of the colony’s raw materials to export to the homeland, as was the case for the British Empire in India, Egypt and South Africa.

European Empires often justified colonisation (particularly on the African continent) by putting forward the various improvements they made in infrastructure, health services and education. The native population was represented as uncivilised prior to the arrival of white, racially superior colonists. The Italian Colonial Empire was no different in this respect, however it did “have many peculiarities that set it apart from other African colonies, starting with the

particular way in which it was created and populated, not to mention its dependence on the totalitarian nature of the Fascist regime,” as Giulia Barrera states.5

It is therefore important to note that Italy made an insistent point of presenting the colonisation of Ethiopia to the public in a very dramatic way, hoping to shape settlers and natives into fascist identities. In the book Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy, Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi analyses the construction process of Mussolini’s discourse as Italy’s claims on East Africa broadened in the early 20th century. The author speaks of a strong parallel between agricultural and military operations: the army of farmers engaged in a Battle of Wheat (1925) in Italy’s countryside “created the premises for the “legitimate” heroic role Italy played in the theatre of world politics.”6 Italy’s colonial enterprise was portrayed as a “civilising mission” carried out by unemployed urban Italians7 who were relocated as farmers in East Africa. Architecture was used to draw them into the government’s demographic colonisation policy; in Gondar they were promised housing and work, but also a range of amenities which were familiar to them (cafes, shops, cinemas, etc.).8 The settlers served both their own nation, which needed more 'living space', and the colonised countries, which they developed through agriculture. This interpretation of reality “found its apotheosis in the rhetorical construction of the Ethiopian war.”9

Benedetta Zocchi analyses the drastic turn in the collective perception of Italian colonialism in East Africa from liberal

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8 Ibid. p.497
colonialism into a “purely imperialist mission”. The early phase relied on caricaturing descriptions of African natives and their way of life to make a parallel between race and levels of morality. Zocchi points out three ideas conveyed by Italian explorers in their writings; the various ethnic groups of Ethiopia were described as an “indigenous people” which only cared about the immediate present, quick profit, and had no “moral features”. The “African Other” was to be pitied by European colonists. Mussolini condemned the previous governments’ policy, which he judged to be too “unfocused” and insisted on building a unique Fascist way of colonisation. Zocchi analyses General Graziani’s discourse, as he announced that the only viable solution in Africa was “transplanting there a superior race,” which would dominate the Ethiopians and carefully avoid mixing races. The resulting society was built upon a clear differentiation between colonists and colonised that was formalised as a series of race laws, which in turn shaped the layout of cities.

**Race laws and zoning**

North of Menelik’s capital Addis Ababa, the city of Gondar was once Abyssinia’s imperial capital. Gondar greatly expanded around 1635; Susenio, the son of the city founder, employed Indian craftsmen to build his palace. The craftsmen worked under Portuguese command, a fact that the Fascist regime insisted upon during the colonisation of modern Ethiopia. In the discourse of Italy’s

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11 Zocchi, op. cit.
12 Ibid., p. 10.
14 Ibid. p. 15.
16 Ethiopia is also known by the exonym Abyssinia. Gondar was founded as the capital of Ethiopia in the 1630s by Emperor Fasiledes, and Addis Ababa was founded in 1886 by Menelik II.
17 Rifkind, op. cit., p. 494.
“civilising mission” in Ethiopia, the existence of refined architecture such as the Gondarine castle complexes was explained by this European supervision of the building process. At the end of the 18th century, the city had begun to fall into ruin. During the Italian occupation, it recovered some of its former prestige as Italian authorities shaped the city to be a model for its East African colonies (Somalia, Eritrea, and Libya).

Italian settlers arrived in Gondar in 1936, and by 1938 more than 2000 settlers lived north of the Fasil Ghebbi (the main palace complex), while the 14 000 Ethiopian inhabitants mostly occupied the south. The castle complex was used as a barrier by Gondar’s chief designer, Gherardo Bosio, to separate the neighbourhoods. The northern part of the city consisted of two adjacent zones, separated due to a difference in elevation; the lower district was commercial while the raised area was used to implant governmental buildings, thus marking the Italian seat of power.

Italians were already used to a hierarchy of residential areas in the homeland according to social class, and “insisted that urban design give concrete expression” to these differences. Similarly, Italian city planners used both everyday and ceremonial functions to separate colonists and the colonised according to a precise zoning system, and the regime sought to regulate interactions by implementing race laws. As Zocchi points out, there were major differences in education (colonised populations were allowed three years of elementary school) as well as working life, as African labour was paid around three times less than Italian labour. Anchored in

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18 Ibid., p. 494
19 Ibid., p. 495.
20 Ibid., p. 496.
21 Zocchi, op. cit., p. 19.
so-called biological and anthropological arguments, race was used as a criterion to determine the population’s learning and working abilities, as well as the areas in which they lived.

Urbanism was also used as a means to instil identity formation of separate African and Italian communities following fascist ambitions and ideology. According to historian David Rifkind, Gondar’s urban development was mainly dictated by Bosio’s initial master plan (fig.1), prepared and implemented in 1938. However, various other plans were commissioned by the successive Italian authorities, which indicate their changing priorities over the relatively short period of occupation. Initially, the architect sought to impose “order and hierarchy” through a grid of streets regardless of the changing topography, with the most important governmental buildings gathered between the Fasil Ghebbi and the Ras Biet (another palace complex). Around the city centre, residential areas would house Italian settlers, while Ethiopian inhabitants would be relocated to the south (villaggio indigeno).

Within the Ethiopian quarters, the colonial authorities maintained the segregation between Christian, Muslim and Jewish neighbourhoods that had already been part of the city plan since the 17th century, which helped them justify their race-based zoning system. In order to present the Italian rule as “benevolent,” they added amenities to the Muslim and Jewish districts, built mosques, and restored the main Orthodox churches of Gondar. It is interesting to note that architecture played a major role in this

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22 Ibid., p. 19. These arguments were based on behaviour and physical appearance, as well as a people’s inherent ability to develop and become civilized.
24 Ibid., p. 506.
25 Ibid.
“policy of courting” the different religious groups to win their favour towards the colonial rule.\textsuperscript{26}

\textbf{Figure 1.} Gherardo Bosio, first master plan for Gondar, 1936 (ACS-MAI, Cartella 1) in Rifkind, David, “Gondar. Architecture and Urbanism for Italy’s Fascist Empire,” Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians v.70, n.4 (December 2011), p. 504.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
In Bosio's second master plan, all of Gondar's administrative functions were “abruptly relocated” in Azozo, twelve kilometres away, for reasons that “remain obscure.”

It is interesting to note that Gondar's second master plan was designed according to the Athens Charter (CIAM), which treated the site as a “tabula rasa, unencumbered by historical context,” in which modernist avant-gardes could carry out their architectural experimentations unrestrained. In the case of Gondar and other Ethiopian cities, it seems that Italian city planners viewed the existing city as an empty canvas. While the city's former status as Abyssinia's imperial capital was granted symbolic importance, the local architecture and urban organization were mostly disregarded. This new Gondar was seen as a model for future cities in the Italian Empire; Bosio described them to be “concentric cities with urban zoning plans centred around a knoll or spur, where, as though it were an acropolis, the buildings of government, the element of conquest and domination, will constitute the urban hierarchy of the city which should formally make evident the predominance of white over black, and visually admonish that every piazza seek our supremacy over the infantile, primitive indigenous population.” Once again, the Roman Empire was evoked to legitimise fascist colonial policy.

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27 Ibid., p. 503.
28 Ibid., p. 494.
29 Ibid., p. 505.
Bosio’s final master plan is marked according to Rifkind with a “high level of racial anxiety;” preventing “interracial fraternisation” was made a priority by Mussolini, who felt directly concerned by the Italians’ “bad behaviour” in Italian East Africa. The importance of the “purity” of Italian blood was to be restored. In response to these concerns, Bosio planned to separate major roads for Africans and Europeans. The segregation policy dictated the lives of religious communities, whose traditional separation was maintained and reinforced, and which privileged Italians in their separate enclave. Gondar showcases the fascist regime’s strong influence over the organisation of its subjects, and the ideology of racial superiority and Fascist identity it tried to materialise through city planning.

\[^{30}\text{Ibid., p. 506.}\]
Figure 4. Post and telegraph office, Gondar, 1936–37 (photo by David Rifkind)
II. Fascist architecture of Gondar: translating political order into built form

The Post Office at the crossroads
Architects and city planners in Italian East Africa sought to express the fascist political order in the buildings of developing Colonies, marking these cityscapes with a new identity. In the commercial district of Gondar, the post office building stands on a platform, marking the connection between two major roads: one that connects the city to the rest of the province (Amhara), and the other which heads south to the Fasil Ghebbi. In the Roman Empire, as in the Fascist Italian Empire, road infrastructure was a means of controlling and dominating a country by connecting strategic cities and enabling commercial activities for the profit of the imperial power. According to this ideological approach to planning, Rifkind explains how the architecture of Gondar’s post office is an exemplary case of this practise. The monumentality and the straight lines of the post office building and platform give geometric regularity to a sloping, uneven space and convey an idea of importance and organisation.

The post office represented the administration and widespread authority of the fascist colonial empire across East Africa. Looking at the history of the Patriot’s resistance movement shows that Ethiopia was never a stable colony. Italian authorities had to manage constant Ethiopian guerrilla attacks such as cutting communication lines, especially in rural areas. Nonetheless, Italian

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31 Rifkind, op. cit., p. 498.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
buildings aimed to represent the ideal of a properly functioning, Italian-dominated Ethiopia. Colonial cities had to meet architecturally at least- Mussolini’s ambition of showing his European rivals Italy’s capability as an imperial power. According to Marco Santoro, most Italian planners agreed that monumentality needed to be a characteristic of Italian colonial architecture, which connected it to classical architecture. In this case the raised platform and stairs leading to the central vertical element, as well as the columns, which all referenced Roman temples, participate in creating a dramatic entryway. Gondar’s post office makes a symbolic and ideological statement at this important crossroads.

The Comando Truppe and Circolo Militare e Coloniale
Erected in the administrative district for the military authorities, the Comando Truppe and Circolo Militare e Coloniale (a social organisation for Italian settlers), are immediately recognizable in Gondar’s cityscape by their tall towers. This fortress-like architectural form was a symbol of power in Fascist Italy. Bosio referred to their implantation as “the representative area” of the Fascist state. The two buildings frame the road from the Fasil Ghebbi towards the unbuilt cathedral to the north, a major axis which was named the “Street of the Emperor King” (Viale Re Imperatore), a reference to the Via dell’Impero in Rome, which was inaugurated in 1932 by Mussolini himself. In contrast to the post office, the two buildings appropriated specific Ethiopian architectural forms. The stepped profile of the ancient palace complex, the Fasil Ghebbi, was interpreted in a rationalist style, and

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36 Rifkind, op. cit., p. 498.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
symbolises the Fascist ‘incorporation’ of the Abyssinian empire.\textsuperscript{39} This subjugation of an empire by another was not only represented in architecture, but it was celebrated collectively through ephemeral events.

\begin{figure}[h!]
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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Figure5.png}
\caption{Comando Truppe}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h!]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Figure6.png}
\caption{Circolo Militare e Coloniale, Gondar, 1936–37 (photo by David Rifkind)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{39} Rifkind, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 498.
III. Adunate: mass rallies as a historic connection to the Roman Empire and legitimization of power

The romanità narrative
As mentioned earlier, Italy’s conquest of Ethiopia and other colonies is strongly rooted in an imperial ideology. Ruchi Shree mentions British post-colonial theorist Robert J.C. Young, who argues that imperialism should not be used interchangeably with colonialism, which is “nothing more than development for settlement or commercial intentions.” Imperialism, on the other hand, operates from the centre (Rome in this case) as a state policy, with ideological implications. This is quite visible in Gherardo Bosio’s master plans for Gondar, which evolved according to the government’s different demands and priorities.

Most importantly, the Fascist regime incorporated and justified its colonial policy in Ethiopia in and through romanità, which “could be assessed as the idea of ‘Romanness’; a resurgence of old Roman (cultural) values, which were, in Fascist times, appropriated for constructing a modern fascist narrative.” The annexation of the Horn of Africa was described as a way to ‘regain lands properly and historically belonging to Italy.’ This statement refers to the conquest of Egypt under Octavian in 30 BC, which became a primary source of food for the Roman Empire, along with Sicily. While Mussolini hoped that Ethiopia would become the Italian Empire’s ‘breadbasket’, the reality of settler farming was far from the case.\textsuperscript{40} This disillusioned vision will not be explored in this essay, which focuses on the Adunate.

\textsuperscript{40} Far from becoming Italy’s breadbasket, Italian East Africa required heavy investments to exploit the natural resources, which further weakened the homeland’s economy. (Tarish, p. 15-16)
With the invasion of Gondar, Adunate (mass rallies) became part of the annual calendar of the Italian settlers; the city’s occupation (1 April), the Declaration of Empire (9 May), but also the March on Rome when Mussolini seized power (28 October), were often marked with these gatherings. According to Rifkind, the Adunate and parades were organised in such a way as to re-enact symbolically important events simply through their collective march, without costumes or mimicry. The most important site was the Piazza del Littorio, a large square north of the Fasil Ghebbi (Abyssinian Palace Complex), which was transformed to accommodate Adunate, at the border between the Italian colonial city and the ancient Ethiopian castles.

On the Piazza del Littorio, “as the masses rallied before the ramparts erected by the Solomonic dynasty, they symbolically re-enacted the Italian seizure of Ethiopia,” not only by modern Italian colonists but also referring to the occupation of North Africa by Roman Emperor Augustus centuries before. As for the parades, they were carefully adapted to Gondar’s architecture. One parade in February 1940 (fig. 8) began at the foot of the Ras Biet Palace, proceeded along the Viale Re Imperatore, a prominent axis in the administrative centre, and continued to the Circolo Militare e Coloniale (left) and Comando Truppe (right). Rifkind explains that through these reenactments, the “fascist citizenry collectively and ritually celebrated the state’s secular mythology.”

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42 Ibid.
Figure 7. Piazza del Littorio, Gondar, 1936. (Gli annali dell’Africa Italiana 2, no. 4 [1939])

Figure 8. Parade on the Viale Re Imperatore, 3 February 1940 (Gli annali dell’africa italiana 3,n. 3 [1940])
Conclusion

The Italian colonial enterprise in Ethiopia involves a complex set of actions, ambitions, and strategies among which the romanità narrative played a major role. As the perceived descendants of the Roman Empire, Italians were embarked in a dramatized pursuit of this lost ‘golden age’. Mussolini sought to prove Fascist Italy’s superiority to the Ethiopian people, which he considered uncivilised, and its rightful place among European powers as they colonised the African continent. Following a series of political maneuverings from the end of the 19th century, Italy achieved the conquest of the ancient Abyssinian nation in 1936, and quickly proceeded to implement and secure its authority. Thus the city’s planning and architecture were important tools in the development and representation of fascist colonial rule in Ethiopia, as well as strong forces of identity formation among the Italian settlers and the indigenous population. The city of Gondar, in the province of Asmara, showcases the race laws and zoning system, which resulted from the Italian imperialist ideology. The mass rallies which regularly appropriated Gondar’s main avenues were used to historically connect the Italian colonial empire of the late 1930s to its Roman predecessors, and thus legitimise its power and rule.
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https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2098&v=h2ergh02CRk&feature=emb_logo


