Fascist Italy's Ossuaries of the First World War: Objects or Symbols?

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Italy's Fascist ossuaries of the First World War. It is intended to show how a methodology that uses images and texts can expose the political purposes that underpinned the creation of the ossuaries, to contribute to the literature on the commemoration of fallen soldiers, and to advance the study of war monuments as expressions of political forces. The paper also represents an attempt to bridge between different approaches to the study of war monuments that have emerged in history and in visual studies. It examines Italian ossuaries of the Great War as both objects and symbols, or as aesthetic configurations and carriers of political meanings. Physical characteristics, such as those associated with context, space and style, are shown to express elements of Fascist ideology relating, for instance, to hierarchy, victory and power.

Contents

Objectives

[1] Italy's Fascist leadership used war cemeteries to exploit the dead for political ends. Initially, Italian soldiers who died fighting in the First World War were buried in mass graves and makeshift cemeteries close to battlefields. During the 1920s and '30s, the Fascist authorities disinterred hundreds of thousands of the fallen whose remains were re-buried in large ossuaries, or bone-depositories.[1] The aim

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[1] The literature on Italy's Fascist ossuaries is varied and cross-disciplinary, but by no means comprehensive. It includes historical studies, such as: Claudio Canal, "La retorica della morte. I monumenti ai caduti della Grande Guerra," in: *Rivista di Storia Contemporanea* 4 (1982), 659-669; Renato Monteleone and Pino Sarasini, "I monumenti italiani ai caduti della grande guerra", in: *La Grande Guerra: Esperienza, Memoria, Immagini*, eds. Diego Leoni and Camillo Zadra, Bologna 1986, 631-662; Patrizia Dogliani, "Les monuments aux morts de la Grande guerre en Italie," in: *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains* XLII, 167 (1992), 87-96; Emilio Gentile, *Il Culto del Littorio: La Sacralizzazione della Politica nell'Italia fascista*, Rome 2009, 66-74; Bruno Tobia, "Dal

was to serve the ambitions of the regime by politicising the memory of the dead. Designed by architects sympathetic to the regime, the ossuaries were built along former front lines in north-eastern Italy, and under the patronage of a special commission of the Ministry of War (now the Ministry of Defence). Their construction was essential to a campaign that involved the demolition of existing military cemeteries and the repression of local initiatives to commemorate the fallen.[2] As products of Fascist propaganda, the ossuaries exemplify the role played by war cemeteries in influencing perceptions of history, society, war, nationhood and the state.

[2] This paper builds on Daniele Pisani's account of the genesis of the ossuaries.[3] However, it is intended to show why – rather than how – they were built, and to expose the political motives that underlay their construction. The ossuaries reflected efforts to manipulate the memory of the First World War, to shape Italian culture and identity, and to promote ideals of sacrifice, heroism and martyrdom. Their architecture was seen by contemporaries to express fundamental principles of Fascist ideology. Hence, the creation of the ossuaries can be examined in a way that contributes to an understanding of the wider political context, in which it illustrates the value of war cemeteries as sources of political history, and to recent cultural approaches to the memory of the First World War.

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milite ignoto al nazionalismo monumentale fascista (1921-1943)", in: *Storia d'Italia. Annali* 18, Turin 2002, 593-642, here 605-607; Marco Mondini, "Le sentinelle della memoria. I monumenti ai caduti e la costruzione della rimembranza nell'Italia nord orientale (1919-1939)", in: *Annali della Fondazione Luigi Einaudi* 40 (2006), 273-294; John Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, London 2010, 46-49. It also comprises works rooted in art history or architectural history, including: various authors, "Un tema del moderno: I sacrari della Grande Guerra", special issue of *Parametro* 213 (March-April 1996); Anna Maria Fiore, "La monumentalizzazione dei luoghi teatro della Grande Guerra: Il sacrario di Redipuglia di Giovanni Greppi e Giannino Castiglioni", in: *Annali di Architettura* 15 (2003), 233-248; and Anna Maria Fiore, "I sacrari italiani della Grande Guerra", in: *L'Architettura della Memoria in Italia: Cimiteri, Monumenti e Città, 1750-1939*, eds. Maria Giuffrè, Fabio Mangone, Sergio Pace and Ornella Selvafolta, Milan 2007, 357-364; Paolo Nicoloso, *Architetture per un'Identità Italiana: Progetti e Opere per fare gli Italiani Fascisti*, Udine 2012, 94-97; Daniele Pisani, "La massa come fondamento. I sacrari fascisti della Grande Guerra", in: *La Rivista di Engramma*, online publication 95 (December 2011), http://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=797 (accessed 3 May 2017); Daniele Pisani, "Lo spazio dei sacrari e i sacrari nello spazio", in: *Post* 3 (2012), 70-77; Daniele Pisani, "'Il primo e il più grande monumento della vittoria': Nota su di un caso di iconografia aniconica", in: *Engramma: La Tradizione Classica nella Memoria occidentale*, online publication 113 (February 2014), http://www.engramma.it/eOS2/index.php?id_articolo=1507 (accessed 3 May 2017).

[2] Lisa Bregantin, *Per non morire mai: La percezione della morte in guerra e il culto dei caduti nel primo conflitto mondiale*, Padua 2010, 193-272.

[3] Daniele Pisani, "From Italian Monuments to the Fallen of World War I to Fascist War Memorials", *RIHA Journal* 0165, 27 June 2017, URL: http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2017/0150-0176-special-issue-war-graves/0165-pisani.

Method

[3] In that this paper examines the architecture of the ossuaries with a view to uncovering the political forces behind their construction, it addresses the relationship between aesthetics and meaning, or how aesthetic characteristics, such as form, scale, proportion, texture and composition, were bound together to express meanings that were central to Fascist ideology. This ideology related to factors such as social hierarchy, political hegemony, the glorification of war, martyrdom and alliances with Catholicism. Evidence of the political intentions that shaped the ossuaries, and of the interpretation of those intentions, is provided in texts, drawings and photographs produced during their construction. Thus, this paper uses visual and textual sources in an effort to reveal how the ossuaries were perceived at the time of creation. It also draws on secondary literature in the fields of cultural and political history, and on a theoretical framework that is predominantly rooted in visual studies. In that respect, the paper embodies an attempt to unite approaches to the study of war monuments that have emerged within the different disciplines of history, art history and architecture.

[4] This contribution explores the ossuaries as objects and symbols in order to expose, for example, the part they played in struggles for power and in the propagation of ideas relating to war and nationhood. A similar approach has been taken by Samuel Hynes, George Mosse, Emilio Gentile, Reinhart Koselleck and other scholars who have explored war monuments as conduits of political ideologies.[4] However, there is a risk that this approach might reduce the role of war monuments to that of carriers of embodied political messages, despite the fact that it is difficult to disentangle political influences from cultural, socio-economic and other factors.[5] Another drawback of the "political approach" is that it can suggest a direct and simple form of correspondence between the intentions of a regime, the political meanings invested in a monument and the aesthetics of that monument. In reality, memorials are the product of negotiation and compromise between multiple agents with different agendas, including designers, builders, patrons, and national and local authorities. As such, they express a range of different, and sometimes contradictory, messages, which are subject to interpretation by individuals and social groups.

[5] Historians including Jay Winter, David Cannadine, Eric Leed, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker have attempted to correct the "political perspective" by shifting attention from the political to the personal and by arguing that, in addition to the marshalling of political power, the burial of the fallen can be understood in terms of bereavement and mourning. Hence, they

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[4] Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, London 1990, 269-282; George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, New York 1990, 32-50; Emilio Gentile, *Il Culto del Littorio*, 66-74; Reinhart Koselleck, "Einleitung", in: *Der politische Totenkult: Kriegerdenkmäler in der Moderne*, eds. Reinhart Koselleck and Michael Jeismann, Munich 1994, 9-20.

[5] Mondini, "Le sentinelle della memoria", 278-281.

adopted a cultural approach defined as the "grief school"[6]. Yet, the historians Alex King and Stefan Goebel have questioned the validity of dichotomous interpretations of monuments on the basis that remembrance can be both personal and political.[7] In effect, by privileging the role of either public politics or private emotions, the "political" and "grief" schools offer partial representations of the origins and functions of memorials and their meanings. Certainly, the study of war monuments benefits from a "layered" approach that addresses their significance on different levels, which may range from the meanings drawn by individuals and families, to those generated at local, national and international levels.

[6] A more pluralistic reading might be achieved by looking in detail at the production and reception of the ossuaries in order to reveal the multiple and dynamic relationships that exist between aesthetic configurations and their associated meanings. It is also the case that, while the acknowledgement of grief represents an important extension to the field, it might not add greatly to an examination of Italian ossuaries that had a markedly political character, and which were intended to repress unfavourable private feelings and to promote the interests of the Fascist dictatorship. Thus, this paper focuses on why the ossuaries were built, and its scope is limited to how specific elements of their architecture expressed particular motivations of Italy's Fascist authorities. Moreover, in drawing on both visual analysis and contemporary sources relating to their reception, it offers evidence in support of a political interpretation of physical or aesthetic characteristics, while avoiding a deterministic approach that might exclude other forms of interpretation.

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[6] For that side of the debate, see: Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, Cambridge 1979, 212; David Cannadine, "War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain", in: *Mirrors of Mortality*, ed. Joachim Whaley, London 1981, 187-242; Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory*, *Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, Cambridge 1995, 2-11; Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *La violenza, la crociata, il lutto. La Grande Guerra e la storia del Novecento*, Turin 2002. See also the essays by Winter, Hynes and Catherine Merridale in: Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, eds., *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 1999.

[7] In particular, King sought to overcome the fracture between the two approaches by shifting attention to the processes "whereby people came to see meaning" in monuments through rituals, ceremonies and other forms of participation (*Memorials of the Great War in Britain: The Symbolism and Politics of Remembrance*, Oxford 1998, 1-19); Similarly, Goebel proposed to reconcile the two schools through a comparative, transnational approach that favours common human experiences over the exploration of narratives associated with a particular nation (*The Great War and Medieval Memory*, 2-5). The work of the literary scholar Samuel Hynes might also be seen to straddle the divide between the political and grief schools (see his "Personal narratives and commemoration", in: *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, Cambridge 1999, 205-220).

Space

[7] The aesthetic characteristics of the ossuaries can be analysed under the three headings of space, context and style. As argued below, the spatial structures of the ossuaries can be seen as concrete manifestations of Fascist ideals of a society and its social hierarchy, and of symbolic meanings that stemmed from the conditions under which those spatial structures were created. During the First World War, over 600,000 Italian soldiers died in a relatively small geographical area that stretched across the regions of Trentino, Friuli and Veneto, and into what is now Slovenia. Originally, those who fell in battle were buried in makeshift graves, as burials took place amidst the chaos of war. Immediately after the war, those burial places were re-arranged into small cemeteries, which were scattered along the former front lines. Individually marked graves contained the bodies of those who could be identified and burial grounds were relatively small, modest and similar in form to minor civilian cemeteries.[8] In 1927, nearly a decade after the war, the Fascist authorities declared those piecemeal conditions to be unsatisfactory and launched a major campaign to award the war dead a "glorious burial". Thus, hundreds of thousands of bodies were moved to new and impressive ossuaries and the original humbler cemeteries were demolished.

[8] The Fascist campaign meant that remains of the dead were re-organised in line with the very different socio-spatial structures of the new ossuaries. Rather than individual graves, the fallen were packed into vast monuments, with little or no distinction between one set of remains and the next. At the ossuary of Redipuglia, which was created in 1935-1938, identified corpses were slotted into small niches marked by their names. The niches were arranged in a grid within a stepped structure, which ascends a slope that is delineated by cypress trees (Fig. 1).

1 Giovanni Greppi and Giannino Castiglioni, Ossuary, Redipuglia, 1935-1938 (photograph by the author)

[9] The unknown remains of over sixty thousand men were massed into a crypt at the top of the monument. The ossuary, which resulted from a collaboration

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[8] Lisa Bregantin, *Per non morire mai: La percezione della morte in guerra e il culto dei caduti nel primo conflitto mondiale*, Padua 2010, 193-197.

between the architect Giovanni Greppi and the sculptor Giannino Castiglioni, is the largest of its kind and accommodated the remains of approximately a hundred thousand soldiers. The compact and centralized format of Redipuglia follows from what was described in 1933 as a "strategy [...] of super-concentration"[9]. Individual memories and the capacity for private mourning were largely supressed in favour of meanings that suggested the unity of the state, its power over the individual and visions for a cohesive society. Archival documentation shows that particular attention was given to the ideal of uniformity in the construction of the monument.[10] As expressed in 1938, the aim was "to immortalize and exalt the memory of heroes", rather than to accommodate "individual affections, feelings or memories"[11].

[10] The collective order of the ossuary was evidently militaristic and it reflected a military hierarchy that lent distinction to a handful of top commanders, who are separated from the massed body of the commanded. Six tombs stand apart in front of those entombed in the main part of the monument. The largest of those tombs, which is separated from the others, is that of the commander, the Duke of Aosta Emanuele Filiberto di Savoia, a cousin of the King and a fervent fascist. Behind him are his five generals. Still further back the dead are arranged in serried ranks, as in a "zombie" army that is ready to march into battle under its commanders (who in real battles were seldom at, or even near, the front). As described in 1941, "Redipuglia is not a Cemetery, but a rally of devout sons and warriors [...] of the Fatherland"[12]. The social hierarchy is reflected in a hierarchy of form and space through the placement of the leaders at the front, and of the rank and file into a stepped and ordered background. Moreover, the soldiers' readiness to fight is suggested by the obsessive repetition of the word *PRESENTE* that runs along the face of the ascending steps (Fig. 2).

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[9] "*formula* [...] *del super-concentramento*", Archivio Commissariato delle Onoranze ai Caduti, Sezione Tecnica, Pian de Salisei, Letter from Gen. Giovanni Faracovi to Ministry of War, 29-11-1933. All translations are by the author.

[10] Archivio Commissariato delle Onoranze ai Caduti, Sezione Tecnica, Redipuglia, B14, Demanio 20-2-1940.

[11] "eternare la memora degli eroi e di esaltarla nel tempo", "più che ad affetti, sentimenti e ricordi individuali", anon., "I sacrari per le salme dei caduti nella Grande Guerra", in: *Rassegna di Architettura* 10 (Oct. 1938), 401.

[12] "Redipuglia non è, dunque, un Cimitero, ma una adunata di figli devoti, di guerrieri [...] della Patria", Attilo Fuiabo, *Credo nella Resurrezione degli Eroi*, Milan 1941, 227.

2 Giovanni Greppi and Giannino Castiglioni, Ossuary, Redipuglia, 1935-1938 (photograph by the author)

[11] That word refers to the Fascist ritual of the *appello* or roll call; that is, when an officer called out the name of the dead and his comrades answered *presente*, meaning that the dead are forever present in the memory of the living and are always ready to serve.[13] Thus, in 1938, the secretary of the Fascist Party, Achille Starace, described the ossuaries as the "battle cry" of Fascist Italy.[14] However, despite the reiteration of *presente*, individual histories and memories are notably absent at Redipuglia. The actual identities of the fallen are practically annihilated and the dead are not remembered as husbands, fathers and sons, but only as soldiers. The annulment of the identities of all but the very highest ranks was elitist, rather than egalitarian, as it underlined the separation of the celebrated, but largely incompetent, commanders from the mass.[15] Their elevation was in line with a Fascist attachment to the principle of hierarchy and to the cult of the leader. Moreover, the narrative that is expressed by Redipuglia obscures the fact that, unlike the hundred thousand soldiers that made up the mass, none of the commanders died in battle, but passed away peacefully in post-war Italy.

[12] Essentially, the ossuary of Redipuglia embodied meanings that reflected the nature of an ideal Fascist society. In 1925, Benito Mussolini proclaimed that the Fascist regime should be "totalitarian" or have total control over all aspects of

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[13] Roberta Suzzi Valli, "Il culto dei martiri fascisti", in: *La morte per la patria: La celebrazione dei caduti dal Risorgimento alla Repubblica*, eds. Oliver Janz and Lutz Klinkhammer, Rome 2008, 101-117, here 108; Gentile, *Il Culto del Littorio*, 48.

[14] Il Comune di Asiago per la inaugurazione del Monumento ai caduti: Altipiano dei Sette Comuni, Asiago 1938, 10.

[15] Dogliani, "Redipuglia", 383-384; Mark Thompson, *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front*, 1915-1919, London 2009, 52-64.

Italian life.[16] The aim was to unite the entire Italian population within an ideologically coherent and homogeneous society. The extent to which Mussolini succeeded in that aim remains an open question; nevertheless, the ossuary at Redipuglia can be seen as the symbolic representation of a totalitarian state, wherein the individual is subordinated to an all-embracing authority and subsumed within the mass. At Redipuglia, the dead are seen to be united by a common will that is expressed partly through the spatial order and the chorus of *presente*. In that sense, the ossuaries acted as ideological instruments that promoted social cohesion, consensus, and common values that were embedded in the monuments through the configuration of space and form.

[13] Redipuglia also shows how symbols with different origins might be embedded in a unifying architectural format. Its arrangement on a hillside is reminiscent of Calvary and of the sacrifice of Christ – symbolism that is reinforced by the placement of three crosses at the top of a steep climb (Fig. 2). The suggestion is that the dead have sacrificed their lives to redeem the nation. Visitors were meant to ascend the monument via two prescribed routes in the form of matching lateral staircases. The climb is long, steep and taxing, as befits an act of submission or aspiration, and an expression of gratitude for the sacrifices of the dead. As a pilgrim, the visitor is intended to express an indebtedness to the fallen and faith in that for which lives had been lost. At the same time, the steep slope, and the placement of the three crosses at the top of the monument, demonstrates how the iconography of Fascism borrowed from Catholicism and combined ideological mechanisms, which were political and religious.[17] Military and religious symbols were embedded within a common aesthetic configuration, as a Catholic rhetoric of sacrifice and martyrdom reinforced a narrative based on a political-militaristic "cult" of the fallen.

[14] Redipuglia and the other ossuaries were meant to unite Italians through a shared memory of the dead, to sanctify national causes, and to restore a sense of honour in a country, which had been greatly shaken by the events of the First World War. It is also important to note that the cult of the fallen contributed to preparing the nation for future military engagements. In that the living were led to believe that they owed the dead to continue fighting for Italy, the ossuaries supported the regime's militarist and imperialist ambitions; for example, those that came to the fore around the time of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. At the inauguration of the ossuary of Asiago in 1938, General Pietro Badoglio, who commanded Italy's army in Ethiopia and later in the Second World War, stated that to be "worthy" of the fallen all Italians "must be ready to follow their example".[18]

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[16] Philip Cannistraro, *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, London 1982, 539-542; R. J. B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism*, London 1998, 131-153; Luca Scuccimarra, "Stato totalitario", in: *Dizionario del Fascismo*, eds. Vittoria De Grazia and Sergio Luzzatto, vol. 2, Turin 2005, 692-696.

[17] Gentile, *Il Culto del Littorio*, 5-7.

[15] The ossuaries were also intended to act as secular sites of pilgrimage, to which Italians would flock in order to pay homage to the dead and to be educated according to Fascist propaganda. Those aims were facilitated by gathering a remarkable quantity of remains into few vast ossuaries. An allied campaign of propaganda, which was targeted especially at veterans and young people, publicized the ossuaries through guidebooks, films and the press.[19] New roads and railways were created to render the monuments more accessible. Moreover, the spatial organisation of the ossuaries allowed for large, choreographed, political functions and ceremonies. Some later ossuaries, which were designed by Giovanni Greppi and Giannino Castiglioni in 1932-1938, were primarily based around voids rather than solids – thereby creating a new balance between the symbols and values carried by architecture and those expressed by functions in space. In that respect, the spatial formats of the ossuaries might be compared to those of church architecture, in that they incorporated axes or routes that might have ceremonial roles. Indeed, the criss-crossing staircase on the exterior of Caporetto was meant to create "a mystical atmosphere" for the visitor.[20] Processional routes were not necessarily large, or intended for a mass audience, as evidenced by the narrow concentric corridors of the ossuary of Oslavia (Fig. 3).

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[18] "degni", "si sentano sempre pronti a seguirne il mirabile esempio", Pietro Badoglio, *Il Comune di Asiago*, 10.

[19] For example, see: Giannino Antona-Traversi-Grismondi, "Cimiteri di guerra," in: *Il Decennale, X anniversario della Vittoria*, Florence 1929, 465-477; Nino Gallimberti, "Ossari Di Guerra", in: *Rassegna di Architettura* 4 (1932), 463-465; *Il Comune di Asiago* 1938; anon. "I sacrari per le salme dei caduti nella Grande Guerra", in: *Rassegna di Architettura* 10 (1938), 401-410; Renato Michelesi, "Dove riposano gli eroi della Grande Guerra", in: *Le vie d'Italia: Rivista mensile della Consociazione turistica italiana* 45, 11 (Nov 1939), 1436-1443.

[20] "*atmosfera mistica*", Archivio Commissariato delle Onoranze ai Caduti, Sezione Tecnica, Caporetto, F2, Contract of Giannino Castiglioni, 25-5-1935.
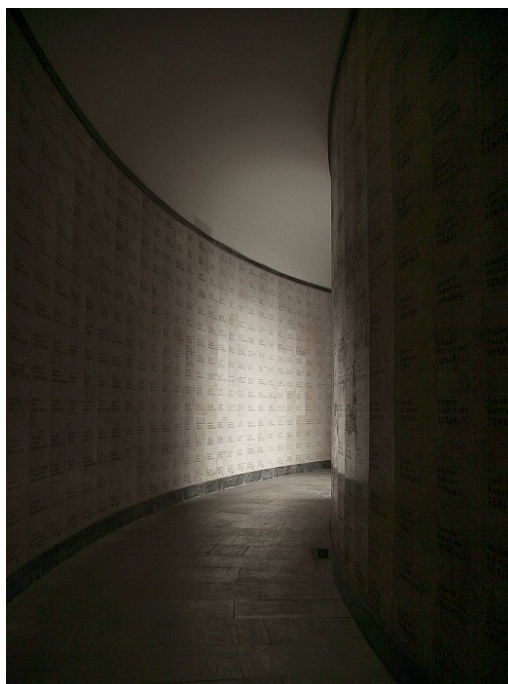
3 Ghino Venturi, Ossuary, Oslavia, 1938 (photograph by the author)

[16] As in ecclesiastical architecture, the spatial organisation of the ossuaries also allowed symbolic value to be wrung from various functions performed by the individual, although the ideal and iconic route was upward, tiring and evidently symbolic.

Context

[17] The location, or positioning, of the ossuaries in the landscape was also an important source of meaning. Many were located in areas that were previously under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and which were appropriated by Italy as a result of the First World War. Thus, they marked newly-won territories and acted as symbolic "sentinels" placed near Italy's new borders. They staked a claim on new lands and helped to justify the lives lost in the acquisition of that land. They were also part of efforts to "italianize", or assimilate, the local population, which involved the repression of Slavic languages and local cultures.[21] The fact that the ossuary of Redipuglia is in a newly annexed area, where most of the local men had fought on the Austrian side, makes it all the more remarkable that its form projects a myth of unity and cohesion. In addition, the ossuaries were strategically located close to major battlefields in accordance with Mussolini's plan "to deploy the glorious Fallen, where [...] soldiers were once deployed".[22] Thus, the monuments gave symbolic value to battlegrounds and, in turn, gained

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[21] Anna Vinci, *Sentinelle della patria: Il Fascismo al confine orientale: 1918-1941*, Rome 2011, 161-168.

[22] "*Là dove furono schierati i combattenti* [...], *saranno schierati i gloriosi Caduti*", Benito Mussolini, quoted in Gallimberti, "Ossari Di Guerra", 463. For concrete evidence, see: Archivio Commissariato delle Onoranze ai Caduti, Sezione Tecnica, Pian de Salisei, B2, F2, List of battles fought in the area surrounding the ossuary, 5-5-1940.

additional value from a close association with the places where soldiers had fought and died.[23]

[18] A number of the monuments are located on mountains that were of strategic importance during the war, and reflect how both sides fought to gain high ground. For example, the ossuary on the apex of Monte Grappa is at an altitude of roughly 2000 metres (Fig. 4).

4 Giovanni Greppi and Giannino Castiglioni, Ossuary, Monte Grappa, 1932-1935 (photograph by the author)

[19] It is a powerful symbol of a victory won by the Italians who fought uphill against the Austro-Hungarian army. The isolation and altitude also adds to its symbolic power by generating a strong sense of other-worldliness. Architecture was used to exploit the topography of the landscape and its evocative characteristics. The ossuary is reminiscent of a "tower of Babel", with concentric rings ascending to a peak, and a triumphal avenue which marks the crest of the mountain. This Heroic Route, or *Via Eroica*, is flanked by vertical slabs, each commemorating a battle that took place in the surrounding area. Originally, the beginning of the Heroic Route was marked by a large statue depicting Italy as a robust female figure in the company of a foot soldier. Over twelve metres tall, the statue has since disappeared under mysterious circumstances, but was illustrated in the contemporary press.[24] In effect, the overall layout represented Italy's "heroic route" to victory. It reflected efforts to re-configure the memory of the First World War as a glorious success, and to undo a rupture that divided the nation between those who remembered a triumphant victory and others for whom the war meant a pointless slaughter.[25] As the Fascist leadership sought to restore national unity and to impose imagery of a victorious war, the ossuaries

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[23] Michelesi, "Dove riposano gli eroi della Grande Guerra", 36.

[24] M. Pa. [Mario Paniconi], "Cimitero del Grappa", in: *Architettura* 14, 12 (Dec. 1935), 663-667: 666; anon., "Cimitero monumentale del Grappa", in: *L'Architettura Italiana*, 30, 11 (Nov. 1935), 376-381, here 380; "Il cimitero monumentale del Grappa", *Rassegna di Architettura* 14, 7 (Nov. 1935), 385-391: 391.

played a part in attempts to re-write the past and to silence discordant memories.

[20] The shape of the ossuary at Monte Grappa, and the fact that it is made of stone taken from the mountain, suggest that it exists as a natural extension of the landscape. It functions to convert the mountain into a national monument and a massive repository for national memories.[26] The equation between the nation and a mountain is reinforced by an inscription that borrows from a war-time song: "Monte Grappa, you are my fatherland" ("*Monte Grappa, tu sei la mia patria*"). Craters remain in the ground below, which contribute to a narrative that speaks of conflict and of the vastness of an isolated landscape. The conjunction of the monument with the landscape might also be seen to suggest a natural cycle of death and re-birth. In 1938, the head of the state commission responsible for the building of the ossuaries, General Ugo Cei, described the battlefields as "sacred land, sown with the dead, for the blossoming of Victory".[27] That comment reflected a key component of Fascist ideology, which is the idea of palingenesis or of national regeneration, which was seen to follow from war and death.[28] In that respect, it was also noted that hill-top locations and their views would convey a "sensation of continuous ascension" and elevate the mind "from the memory of the fallen" to "Italy's grandeur".[29]

Style

[21] Perhaps the most obvious way to examine how the architecture of the ossuaries was used to carry meaning is through the notion of style, or the configuration of space and form in accordance with specific, and appropriate, architectural languages. The architecture of the ossuaries drew on familiar and historical sources that derived from various styles and traditions. In particular, classicism and its stylistic conventions provided a dominant influence. The adoption of classical models, albeit in a simplified or stripped form, can be seen in the ossuaries of Fagarè and Asiago, which embody elements such as an arched portico and a triumphal arch. An official report of the 1930s describes the ossuary of Asiago as "inspired by Roman architecture".[30] Clearly, Roman classicism had specific meanings for Fascism, as the language of empire and Italian greatness,

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[25] Giovanni Sabbatucci, "La Grande Guerra come fattore di divisione", in: *Due nazioni: Legittimazione e delegittimazione nella storia dell'Italia contemporanea*, ed. Loreto di Nucci and Ernesto Galli della Loggia, Bologna 2003, 106-125.

[26] Marco Armiero, *A Rugged Nation: Mountains and the Making of Modern Italy*, Cambridge 2011, 87-108; Pisani, "Il primo e il più grande monumento della vittoria", 5.

[27] "santa terra seminata di morti per il germogliare fecondo della Vittoria", Ugo Cei, *Il Comune di Asiago*, 12.

[28] Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, London 1996, 32-36.

[29] Archivio Commissariato delle Onoranze ai Caduti, Sezione Tecnica, Asiago, F2, Report of Orfeo Rossato, 30-4-1929.

[30] "*inspirata alle opere dell'architettura romana*", Archivio Commissariato delle Onoranze ai Caduti, Sezione Tecnica, Asiago, F1, 30-11-1930.

and resonances that were particularly important in the context of the conquest of Ethiopia and the foundation of Italy's Fascist empire in 1936.[31] Imperial Rome was the model for efforts, dating from the late 1920s, to establish a Fascist style, or *stile Littorio*, throughout Italy. In that sense, the ossuaries might be seen to have exported Roman antiquity from the capital to Italy's new and remote territories.

[22] In addition, the architecture of the Middle Ages was another major source of inspiration, and a considerable number of the ossuaries are reminiscent of medieval castles or fortresses, as evidenced by the ossuary of Oslavia (Fig. 5).

5 Ghino Venturi, Ossuary, Oslavia, 1938 (photograph by the author)

The defensive nature of those references was appropriate to the martial character of the ossuaries and to their position as guardians of Italy's borders. The Middle Ages were also mined for positive associations with chivalry and the heroism of medieval military traditions, which may have mitigated the horrors of modern mass warfare.[32]

[23] It is also significant that traditions were never adopted unthinkingly, but were re-invented and converted into modern form through processes that were characteristic of Italian architecture in that period.[33] For instance, at the ossuary of Montello, which was designed by Felice Nori and completed in 1935, classical elements such as columns and a temple front were "updated", and exemplify a

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[31] Richard A. Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture, 1890-1940*, Cambridge, Mass. 1991, 391-438; Joshua Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity: The Roman Past in Fascist Italy*, Ithaca 2012.

[32] Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory*, 187-230.

[33] Fiore, "I sacrari italiani della Grande Guerra", 360-361.

modern tendency towards simplification, abstraction and plain geometrical forms (Fig. 6).

6 Felice Nori, Ossuary, Montello, 1935 (photograph by the author)

[24] In general, the ossuaries were shaped by an interplay of tradition and modernity that was typical for architecture created under Italian Fascism, and which reflected underlying tensions between reactionary and revolutionary elements in Fascist culture.[34] At first sight, the juxtaposition of traditional and modern forms might be seen to express contradictory messages. However, it stemmed from the heterogeneous nature of Italian Fascist ideology and from an urge to create architecture that was both national and modern, or in tune with both tradition and the spirit of the age.[35]

Conclusion

[25] In conclusion, it can be argued that Italy's ossuaries of the First World War were built to convey a range of political messages. Those messages can be exposed through an approach that examines the ossuaries as aesthetic objects that carry, or carried, networks of symbolic meanings. This implies an approach that may draw support from textual and visual sources, and which works across disciplinary boundaries to combine, for example, the fields of aesthetics and history. In essence, the question is how physical factors, such as space, form, context and style, came to reflect and reinforce meanings associated with fundamental principles of Fascist ideology. In that regard, it is important to accept that the relationships between aesthetics and meaning are pluralistic, and subject to individuation and to the exigencies of culture, time and place. Certainly, in the gap between intention, aesthetics and meaning, there is always some degree of flexibility and variation. Moreover, it is important that political influences cannot be isolated from those which are cultural, social or socio-economic. Thus, whereas it may be possible to draw connections between specific aesthetic characteristics and the political meanings that they were seen

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[34] Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945*, Berkeley 2001.

[35] Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture*, xi-xxiii.

to embody, all such analyses are inevitably reductive. Given that proviso, this study represents an effort to explore the aesthetics of Italian ossuaries in order to shed light on the politics of Fascist Italy. It suggests that specific elements of the architecture of the ossuaries were intended to express Fascist ideals related to society, religion, war and the interpretation of history.

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