Imperial Roman Art and Ideologies in Pre-Fascist Colonial Italy: (D)evolution of the Treatment of Afro-Italian Women

Ella Grenci
Bucknell University

***

When comparing two ages of expansion, the Roman Empire and pre-fascist colonial Italy, the latter demonstrates greater traditional tyrannical tendencies than the former regarding the treatment of Afro-Italian women. During pre-Constantinian times (r. 306-337), as the empire expanded and grew more diverse, the division between "Romans" and "non-Romans" became increasingly blurred. Although the empire's provinces mirrored the general outlooks, knowledge systems, and political realities of the empire itself, their local identities persisted. Therefore, the integration of provincial customs rendered neither the provinces nor their people subordinate, differing from Italy's pre-fascist colonial era. On the other hand, Italian colonists of the 19th and 20th centuries perceived Afro-Italian women differently. Deeming them as "temptresses and corrupters of the purity of the Italian race," the colonists imposed overt exoticism onto the group (Agbamu 196). The paradoxical maltreatment of attraction and repulsion is exposed in the limited artistic expression that remains from the period. Such artistic expression thus presents a distorted edition of imperialism that adversely surpasses the very imperial imagination that, from the outset, pre-fascist Italy sought to replicate.

To deconstruct the complexity of Roman imperial and Italian colonial imaginations, it is necessary to define two essential terms: imperialism and colonialism. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Palestinian-American philosopher Edward Said describes how

imperialism draws attention to the *way* that a nation exercises power over another, with colonialism being one of those control mechanisms.[1] Nevertheless, I examine how Italian colonialism exerts imperialist tendencies of force and coercion in a more profound way than Imperial Rome. It is necessary to explore the origins of Rome's imperial imagination towards North Africa to compare it to modern Italy. The imagination is based in antiquity and can be summarized as follows: the ideological victory and literal victories over North Africa act as the frame of ancient Roman glory, before the Roman Empire's genesis, which would further serve expansion and progression during the empire itself. The African continent was an integral part of the Roman collective identity and was perceived as "uncultured" territories destined to be conquered and absorbed. There are several important ancient figures who are emblematic of this attitude, including Dido, Sophonisba, Hannibal, and Cleopatra.[2] Dido, the founder and first queen of the Phoenician city-state Carthage, is often seen as the personification of North African antiquity. The queen, according to Virgil's *Aeneid*, stabs herself with her lover Aeneas's sword as a reaction to his abandonment. He later became the founder of Rome, according to myth, in 753 BCE. Sophonisba was a Carthaginian noblewoman who held great influence over the Numidian political landscape during the Second Punic War. In 203 BCE, she poisoned herself to avoid Roman triumphal humiliation. Similarly, there was Hannibal, who is considered one of the greatest military generals of Western antiquity and was a consistent threat to Rome. However, he was ultimately defeated at the end of the Second Punic War, and the fall of Carthage was a pivotal moment in Rome's expansion. Finally, there was Cleopatra, the last ruler of Ptolemaic Egypt, who Emperor Octavian defeated at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE. A year later, she ended her life to avoid being paraded as a prisoner by the future Emperor Augustus.

What do these four have in common? In the original imperial imagination, these African rulers and leaders are viewed as threats that jeopardize the integrity of a Roman national identity. This concept, coined as the "Hannibal-prototype," symbolizes the terror

that Hannibal and "the Others" bring to the Romans. This idea demonstrates how, before the official start of the Roman Empire in 27 BCE, Roman culture dismissed these people as unhistorical until Roman conquest. Yet, contradictorily, it also expresses how essential these ancient powers are to the empire's own existence. As aforementioned, the three women discussed all died to avoid the shame accompanied by Roman domination.[4] Although they maintained their agency in death, they failed to disrupt the imperial destiny of domination or the Roman *stirpe* (Agbamu 203).

Despite Roman fear of North African power, as the empire grew, the North African provinces became part of the Roman canon. This integration is supported by the combination of provincial and Roman characteristics in artistic expression. For instance, the Temple of Dendur, originally in Dendur, Nubia, bears architecture typical of New Kingdom Egypt (1550-1070 BCE) such as the pylon entrance. Additionally, all the temple's reliefs show Emperor Augustus in the traditional regalia of the pharaoh, in a low-relief style with an Egyptian deity sitting next to him (figures 5-6). Similarly, the now-destroyed Septizodium possessed a tall facade with seven niches representing the seven planets,[5] adorned by Numidian marble and Egyptian granite (figure 7). It was created as a monumental front to the imperial palace of Punic-Libyan emperor Septimius Severus, to meet the eyes of African travelers along the Via Appia (Grant 65). Both buildings combine Italian-Roman architecture with provincial materials in a seamless manner.

Concerning the representations of North African women, there are two predominant types. The first is the "provincia" type, which includes imagery of liberated and enslaved women who are practically and ideologically Roman and have a known *patria* that is not an enemy of Rome. This style is categorized by romanticized allegories and personifications that suggest a peaceful integration of these women. Although they are presented with more dignity than the second type, their individuality remains unexplored. The "capta" style, on the other hand, includes seized women of historic Roman enemies such as the Dacians of modern-day Romania and the Parthians of modern-day Iran. They are subjected to physical violence in artistic depictions to illustrate a generalized, shared experience under imperialism. Their very existence personifies militarism and portrays them as tangible rewards for Roman

soldiers—a theme that will manifest itself in madamism during Italy's colonial era. When visually comparing the two styles of representation, they are vastly different. The silver provincia denarius shows a reclining woman who occupies the entire surface of the coin (figure 8). Labelled as a personification of Africa, the woman wears a long headdress and holds a snake in her right hand and an abundant cornucopia in her left. All aspects of the coin are harmonious, and the figure herself is distinguishable with identifiable body characteristics, such as the shoulder, neck, and hands. Her discernibility and elongated posture exude a modest excellence that parallels the "peaceful" incorporation of provincial lands into the Roman canon. On the other hand, the capta denarius is not concentrated on the woman, but rather serves the towering presence of Julius Caesar (figure 9). Here, the captured figures are abstracted with their heads serving as their only identifiable body part. One of the figures, presumably the man, is bound, rendering the unrestrained woman as a readily accessible reward for the emperor and his army. Both the provincia and the capta type are triumphalist in nature, and neither explores the individuality of the North African woman apart from her contribution to Roman progress.

The provincia genre, unlike the capta, was not limited to numismatic illustrations and found itself within portraiture, more particularly funerary portraits, which fuse individuality and idealism. *Mummy Portrait of a Woman* (55-70 CE) from Hawara, Egypt, reveals an interesting comparison between life and death and how women were depicted (figure 10). Here, the vessel on which the work is superimposed preserves the physical body while the portrait immortalizes the woman's likeness. The encaustic painting on the wood panel maintains the physical attributes of its provincial region, such as skin color, hair color, hair density, dark eyes, and prominent cheekbones, and is consistent with the provincial lack of verism that is often seen in imperial familial portraiture. Despite this, the Hawara mummy portrait has characteristics typical of the *terraferma,* such as the depiction of her curls resembling those of Empress Agrippina the Younger (15-59 CE) of the Julio-Claudian dynasty (figure 11). In addition to this, images such as *Panel with Painted Image of Isis* show just one example of provincial deities and religious practices integrated into the perceived Roman culture (figure 12). The Cult of Isis, to name one example, became one of the most popular and

influential religions during Rome's apex alongside that of Dionysus, and was frequently depicted in sculptures, reliefs, and frescoes. In the aforementioned artwork, Isis is enriched with symbols such as a snake, horns, and olive leaves, displaying her power over the Earth, motherhood, and fertility. However, in this case, her lighter complexion is merely an artistic convention—one that opposes a darker male skin tone to differentiate sex (figure 13). *Panel with Painted Image of Isis* from Iside, Egypt, and *Mummy Portrait of a Woman* from Hawara depict the provincial woman, in this case, African women, in ways that posthumously honor them as members of Roman society.

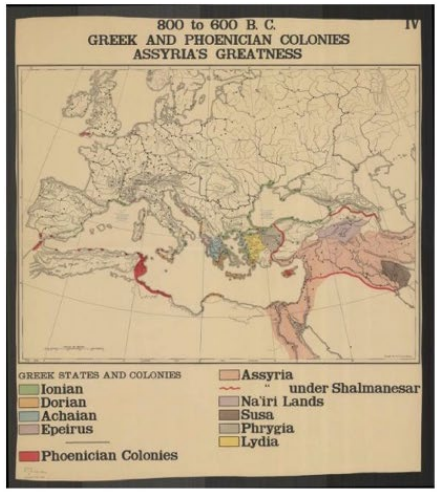
How do these representations of provincial African women compare to those during Italy's pre-fascist colonial period? Fundamentally, the regression in the treatment of African women is a distortion of the imperial imagination of provincial dominion that neglects the cultural integration imagination. The colonists aimed to reach a singular ideological collective that would bring the nation from the periphery to the center of European power in the 19th and 20th centuries. They did so by surveilling the conceptual borders between colonizers and colonized, resulting in the dehumanization of all those who were considered corrupters of the new collective imagination. Three essential phenomena solicited and revealed the imagination's distortion: aestheticization of the African woman, Unification of Italy, and the Scramble for Africa. The first consists of the aestheticization of the ancient antagonism between Italy and Northern Africa, which romantic philosophies brought by the Enlightenment promoted. It is directly linked to the rhetoric that Europe is "civilized and evolved" while Africa is a "site of buried origins" (Agbamu 28). Even thoughts of leftist thinkers, such as Arcangelo Ghisleri, were misconstrued to further amplify the imperialist Italian tendencies. For example, colonists appropriated his 1928 statement that reads, "[Libya] is not a history, since barbarian countries…have nothing but legends or myths…and history only starts with being civilized (Ghisleri).[6] This aestheticization can be viewed as an extension of the contradiction posed by the Hannibal-prototype of antiquity, of which the Romans feared. Secondly, the Scramble for Africa from 1875 to 1914 and the Unification of Italy in 1861 complement each other. The initial unification of the nation in 1861 and its subsequent additions of

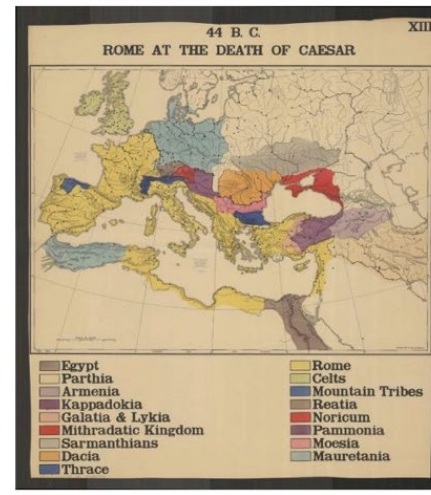
Venice in 1866 and Rome in 1870 bred modernization, which called for the rapid expansion into the African continent. The dismantling of the subcontinent, which was the goal of the Scramble for Africa, was recognized as a viable solution to the demographic problems, cultural fragmentation, overwhelming emigration, and socioeconomic difficulties that the new nation faced. Conquests such as the invasion of Libya in 1911 and 1912 were seen as a remedy to the grave defeats of Italy at Dogali (1887) and Adwa (1896) and served as the foundation of a collective *Italian* identity, mirroring the Roman Empire's initial imagination of domination.

All the previously discussed concepts could not persist without the creation of and dispersion of literature that defended the colonial social position. The notions of Giorgio Almirante and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti promote Africa's inferiority to Italy. Almirante (1914-1948) established Movimento Sociale Italiano, a neo-fascist group that defended colonial motivations for African domination that existed into the fascist era. In his writing for *La Difesa della Razza*, a fascist magazine that ran from 1938 to 1943, he fostered a climate that defined what an "inferior" human being looked like. "Inferiors," according to Almirante, jeopardized his conception of a pure Italian race from a racist and biological point of view. One of his articles cites the Edict of Caracalla (212 CE) of the Severan dynasty as historical evidence that the integration of non-white peoples was the sole reason for the Roman Empire's eventual fall. He used this proclamation specifically because the Severan era granted citizenship to the provinces, which led to sexual relations between "Romans" and "non-Romans," thus "destroying" the Italian race (Almirante 27-29).[7] Almirante's beliefs were similar to those of Filippo Tomasso Marinetti, an Italian poet and art theorist who founded Futurism, a 20th-century art movement. Marinetti thought that war, particularly against Italy's inferior counterparts, was beautiful and necessary for unification under a single collective imagination of dominion. Therefore, as supported by the two theorists' ideas, Italian colonists never intended to accurately replicate the Roman Empire but rather only used its logic of domination and ancient imperialist tendencies to increase their global status. Colonial Italy chose its subjects of conquest not because they were Roman provinces or captured territories, but because they were vulnerable, advantageous, and susceptible to domination. An

example of such is modern-day Ethiopia, which was never a part of the Roman Empire, yet was one of the main colonial objectives for Italy. As such, Italian colonists employed futurist rhetoric to reject the past's integrative imagination. Consequently, they deformed the logic of Roman imperialism and used Africa as a "blank space onto which fantasies of ancient Rome could be projected" (Mudimbe).

The distortion of imperial Rome at the expense of a collective identity created an innate hierarchy between colonial Italy and the African continent that they deemed primitive. This conglomerate, futuristic primitivism, is expressed most clearly in fetishization and exoticization in art and practice.[8] Fetishization renders the Afro-Italian woman as primitive and as objects of power and objects that give power to Italian colonists. They were seen as beings without a history, sexual and ethical temptations, and "exemplary cultural artifacts of the most unenlightened spirits and the least civilized societies" (Pietz 1). Sex and gender in the pre-fascist era were fundamental to how domination was exercised and pivotal in defining racial systems. Colonial Italy's regression from the Roman Empire is exposed in the limited photographs and advertisements that remain of sexually available "Veneri Neri," or Black Venuses. The greed that drove pre-fascist colonialism and the uncontrolled desire to dispose of the "Other" to support the self is evident in the appearance of the African woman in Figure 14. The dehumanizing nature of the image, when compared to the "activity" of the male photographer, emphasizes her sexual "availability," which is further exemplified by her quasi-open legs, nonchalant gaze, open torso, and the "exotic" jewelry. Whether exposed in the photograph of the Venere Nera, in the "portrait" on the cover of *La Difesa della Razza* (figure 15), or colonial stamps (figures 16-19), pre-fascist colonial Italy regresses. It regresses in the fact that its collective imagination reduces the African and Afro-Italian woman to a mere object of Western appetite and thus rejects the Roman Empire's integrative vision and adversely surpasses the original imagination of domination that they originally sought to restore.





Figures 1-4: *Historical Geography Charts of Europe: Ancient and Classical Period 2800 B.C. to 475 A.D,* Townsend MacCoun, 1894. https://collections.lib.uwm.edu.

Figure 5: Temple of Dendur, Egyptian, Roman era, completed by 10 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 6: Relief of Augustus burning incense in front of the defied figures Pedesi and Pihor on the Temple of Dendur, Egyptian, Roman era, completed by 10 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 7: 3D Model of Septizodium; originally on the Via Appia in Rome during the 3rd century CE; completely demolished by 1588. https://en.wikipedia.org.

Figure 8 (Left): Reverse of a Hadrianic gold aureus, 45-46 CE. American Numismatic Society. Figure 9 (Right): Reverse of a silver denarius of Julius Caesar, 45-46 CE. American Numismatic Society.

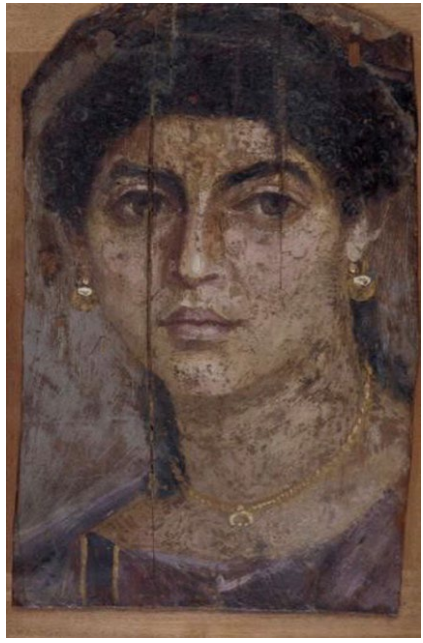


Figure 10: *Mummy Portrait of a Woman*, Hawara, Egypt; Roman era, 55-70 CE. Encaustic on wood panel. British Museum.

Figure 11: *Portrait of Empress Agrippina the Younger,* Roman era, 15-59 CE. White marble. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Figure 12 (Left): *Panel with Painted Image of Isis,* Egypt, Roman era, 100-200 CE. Tempera on wood. Getty Villa, Los Angeles, California; Figure 13 (Right): *Panel with Painted Image of Serapide,* Egypt, Roman era, 100-200 CE. Tempera on wood. Getty Villa, Los Angeles, California.

Figure 14: Luigi Naretti, *Araba d'Archio-Venere,* before 1891. "Fotografia di una colonia: L'Eritrea di Luigi naretti (1885-1900)" by Silvana Palma. *Quaderni Storici*, vol. 37, no. 109, 2002, pp. 83-147.

Figure 15: Historic stamp from Italian colonies & Italian Somaliland, Italian, c. 1820-1950. Possessed by Xavier University of Louisiana, https://www.jstor.org.

Figure 16: Stamp with statue of Caesar Augustus *"Imperium sine fine dedi" [I have entrusted them with an endless empire'],* Italian East Africa, 1938. Prieto-Andrés, Alfonso Corral García e Cayetano Fernández Romero, (2022). *La propaganda dell'imperialismo colonial italiano in Africa attraverso I francobolli* (1903-1941). *Nations and Nationalism*, 29(4), 1401-1421.

Figure 17: Stamp with statue of Victory, Italian East Africa, 1940. Prieto-Andrés, Alfonso Corral García e Cayetano Fernández Romero, (2022). *La propaganda dell'imperialismo colonial italiano in Africa attraverso I francobolli* (1903-1941). *Nations and Nationalism*, 29(4), 1401-1421.

Figure 18: Edouard Matania, The Italians in Tripoli-Italy draw the sword of Old Rome" from *The Sphere*. November 4, 1911. Mary Evans Picture Library.

Figure 19: Cover of *La Difesa della Razza* (In the Defense of Race), Volume 1, August 5, 1938. Private collection.

Notes

[1] Said defines imperialism as "The practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory" and colonialism as "the establishment of settlements in a distant territory; almost always being a consequence of imperialism" (Said 9).
[2] Refer to figures 1-4, respectively, on the page entitled "Images" to see the expansion of Rome in accordance with the eras of each historical figure.
[3] Hannibal forced Rome to fight for survival for over two decades. He was responsible for one of Rome's most devastating defeats, the Battle of Cannae, in 216 BCE, and is considered the bogeyman of Western imperialism.
[4] Rome destroyed Carthage, but enriched Alexandria; reduced Egypt to a Roman province and brought Africa into universal history (Agbamu 48).
[5] According to the Romans, the seven planets included the Moon, Mercury, the Sun, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Furthermore, in 1588, during the reign of Pope Sixtus V and under the direction of Domenico Fontana, the remaining parts of the Septizodium were destroyed.
[6] Although this quote originates from a book, it does not contain a page number. The original citations can be found under the heading "Al Cortese Lettore" at the beginning of Ghisleri's work.
[7] Caracalla, the emperor from whom the edict derived, was the son of Septimius Severus. As aforementioned, he was the first emperor of African origins.
[8] Futurism is defined as progression and expansion from the past because of the perceived threat that tradition poses against contemporary life. Primitivism is a controversial term and style that has attempted to present images from "primitive" cultures, which in turn, either amplify awareness around those cultures or relegate them to inferior social status. Primitivism is often measured against Western social standards and promotes European superiority.

Works Cited

Agbamu, Samuel. *Restorations of Empire in Africa: Ancient Rome and Modern Italy's African Colonies*. Oxford University Press, 2024.

Agnès de Marre, Martine Elizabeth. *The Role and Position of Women in Roman North African Society*. 2002. University of South Africa, PhD dissertation. *Unisa Institutional Repository*.

Almirante, G. "Roma Antica e i Giudei." *La Difesa della Razza*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 27-30.

Bell, Sinclair W. "Chapter 18: Images and Interpretation of Africans in Roman Art and Social Practice." *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Imagery and Iconography*, edited by Leah K. Cline and Nathan T. Elkins, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 425-464.

Fullerton, Mark. *Art and Archaeology of the Roman World*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2020.

Ghisleri, Arcangelo. *La Libia Nella Storia E Nei Viaggiatori Dai Tempi Omerici All'occupazioneItaliana*. Torino: G.B. Paravia & c., 1928.

Gjerden, Jorunn Svensen, et al., editors. *Exploring the Black Venus Figure in Aesthetic Practices*. Rodopi, 2019, https://search.ebscohost.com.

Grant, Michael. *The Severans: The Changed Roman Empire*. Routledge, 1996.

Maas, Michael, and Fay A. Yarbrough, editors. *Empires and Indigenous Peoples: Comparing Ancient Roman and North American Experiences*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2024, https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com.

MacCoun, Townsend. *MacCoun's Historical Geography Charts of Europe: Ancient and Classical Period 2800 B.C. to 475 A.D*. University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, https://collections.lib.uwm.edu.

Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso. *Fondazione e manifesto del futurismo*. Poligrafia Italiana, 1910.

Mudimbe, V. Y. *The Idea of Africa*. Indiana University Press; James Currey, 1994.

Palumbo, Patrizia. *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*. University of California Press, 2003, http://site.ebrary.com.

Pietz, W. "Fetish," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, edited by R. S. Nelson & R. Shiff. University of Chicago Press, 2003. https://search.credoreference.com.

Revell, Louise. *Ways of Being Roman: Discourses of Identity in the Roman West.* Oxbow Books, 2016. *JSTOR.*

Sabelli, Sonia. "L'eredita' del colonialismo nelle rappresentazione contemporanea del corpo femminile nero." *Breve gente, memoria e rappresentazioni del colonialism italiano,* edited by Elena Petricola and Andrea Tappi, Zapruder World, 2010, pp. 106-115.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. First edition, Knopf, 1993.

Trentin, Lisa. "Chapter 17: Images and Interpretation of "The Other" in Roman Social Practice." *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Imagery and Iconography,* edited by Leah K. Cline and Nathan T. Elkins, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 405-425.