

05. Frescoes Revisited

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Sacrarium of Casa del Mutilato in Palermo with the frescoes. Source: Elisabetta Ciarmatori, Beatrice Lorenzi, Guglielmo Maria Zaffini, La Casa del Mutilato di Palermo, Progetto di restauro di un monumento dei Ventennio, 2016.

1. Frescoes in the Sacrarium of Casa del Mutilato in light of the Italian colonial ambition in the Middle East.

The front wall of the Sacrarium at Casa del Mutilato in Palermo is structured as an altar with a cross in the centre and two frescoes on the sides. The recently restored frescoes were painted in 1940, roughly one year after the completion of the building, by Italian painter and sculptor Antonio Giuseppe Santagata (1888 – 1985). The frescoes bear the titles *Waiting for the Battle* and *The Battle* and depict soldiers in a war-torn and desert-like landscape. On the pillars of the Sacrarium dividing the crucifix and the frescoes, we can read locations of some of the battles in which Italian soldiers died and were wounded and mutilated. Does the scene in the frescoes depict any particular of these battles, or is it an allegory of the battle in general? My suggestion is to read the frescoes, based on the iconography of their visual clues as well as the particular historical moment in which the frescoes were painted, as a depiction of the anticipated battle in which the Italian soldiers were to occupy the so called Holy Land.

On the right-hand side fresco, *The Battle*, we see the soldiers launching an offensive. On the right side on the horizon we see a hill with three crosses, a traditional depiction of Calvary or Golgotha, where Christ was crucified together with two thieves. The aura marks the holiness of the site, originally outside of Jerusalem, and today housed under the Chapel of the Calvary which contains the apex of the Rock of Calvary. The Chapel of the Calvary is adjacent to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which contains the empty tomb where Jesus Christ was buried and later resurrected. The iconic cupola above the Aedicule, which contains the Holy Sepulchre itself, can be seen on the left-hand side fresco, *Waiting for the Battle*, in form of a mystical bell jar over the hill on the horizon. The rotunda of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is then also inscribed in the circular opening in the ceiling of the atrium of Casa del Mutilato, itself titled 'Tempio Munito Fortezza Mistica', similarly to circular Templar churches modelled on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, such as the Temple in London or the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, known as the Round Church, in Cambridge, UK. The reason why the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is only invoked in the frescoes rather than clearly depicted, is at least threefold. First, it allows the viewers to transport themselves to the historical moment of the crucifixion and entombment of Christ, that is times when Jerusalem and Palestine were under the rule of the Roman Empire; second, it allows us to better contemplate the holy sites rather than the church housing them; and third, in 1940 there was an ambition of the Italian clergy to raze down the existing Church of the Holy Sepulchre and to build a new basilica in its place.

Understanding the landscape as Jerusalem and the Roman province of Judea helps us also to interpret the ruin of a white structure behind the soldiers on the left-hand side fresco. This can be identified as the second Solomon Temple in Jerusalem destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70 in retaliation for an ongoing Jewish revolt. The site, the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem, is the site of today's Dome of the Rock. This element of the fresco again reminds us of the Roman domination of the region, as well as the Roman, Fascist and not least the Catholic antisemitism. At the same time, the ruined white structure also refers to the modernist architecture of Tel Aviv bombed by Italians in 1940, killing 137 civilians. In 1940 also other parts of Palestine were bombed by the Italians, in particular the harbour and the oil refinery in Haifa.

The monumental timelessness of the frescoes serves the purpose of forging an unbroken continuity of Italian and Catholic presence in the Holy Land, first during the Roman Empire, then during the Crusades, and lastly in the Fascist colonial ambition during the 20th century. The frescoes simultaneously represent all the three eras, legitimising the Italian claim on rule

over the territory. The Crusades, military campaigns in the Eastern Mediterranean aimed at recovering the Holy Land from Muslim rule, are of a particular interest here. Initiated in 1095, the First Crusade culminated with the Crusaders defeating the Fatimid Caliphate and conquering Jerusalem in 1099 and hence founding the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. Interestingly in relation to Palermo, these events were more or less parallel with the Norman conquest of Sicily (1061–1091). In the wake of the Crusades, various religious military orders were established to protect the holy sites as well as the pilgrims on their way from Europe. Among these the most well known were the Knights Templar (The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon), the Knights Hospitaller (the modern Sovereign Military Order of Malta) and the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre.

While the Templars remain a subject of many myths and conspiracy theories due to their rise to power and wealth and abrupt dissolution and persecution by the French king Philip IV in 1307, in the shadow of the Templar fantasies the two other orders have remained active until today and the Order of the Holy Sepulchre plays an important role in this story.¹ As early as 1927, a Fascist Party official wrote to the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre, observing “how greatly H. E. Mussolini has at heart the prestige of Catholicism and Italy in Palestine; and how it is always the wish of the Duce to acquire greater influence through our joint institutions which have such historical and political influence.” In 1929, Mussolini was decorated with the insignia of a knight first class, and by accepting the decoration, he symbolically associated himself with the protection of the Church of Resurrection, i.e. the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. As a pontifical order, title of Grand Master of the Order belonged to the Pope, however in 1928 Pope Pius XI named as rector and permanent administrator of the Order the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, at that time Archbishop Luigi Barlassina. In 1940, Pope Pius XII named a cardinal as Protector of the Order and centralised the organisation in Rome, as part of the Grand Magisterium, transferring the title of Grand Master to Cardinal Nicola Canali. The fact that both Barlassina and Canali had Fascist sympathies was an important factor for the collaborative efforts of the Fascist government and the Catholic Church in the Holy Land.

Particularly in Palestine, at that time under the British rule, Italian consuls had for many years worked with Catholic institutions, often dominated by Italian clergy and functioning in Italian, with the aim of spreading Italian culture and influence, and providing protection to local

¹ The Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre was founded in early 12th century but did not survive the fall of Jerusalem in 1291. In 1847 it was re-founded by the Pope Pius IX as a knightly institution of the Roman Catholic Church based on the history and traditions of the medieval brotherhood. The principal mission of the Order is to assist the Church in the Holy Land so that it can sustain the liturgical life and charitable and social work it performs, to eagerly participate in the mission of supporting and promoting the presence of Christian faith in the Middle East, and to work for fundamental human rights, such as all dignity and freedom of religion. The Order supports initiatives that help protect and ensure the continued presence of the Christian minority that has been in the region from the Church’s first time. The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, is said to annually receive some 10 million dollars by the donations of the members of the order.

In Sicily there are a few documents on the presence of the Order throughout centuries. In 1932, there were only a few knights, yet the Lieutenant, nominated by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, started the work of reorganisation, thus bringing about the rebirth of the order on the island. During the years of reconstruction the use of prestigious churches in Palermo was assigned to the order: the Church Capitulate of San Cataldo in 1937 and the Oratory of San Caterina of Alexandria in 1946.

Catholics. At its seizure of power in 1922, the Fascist regime sought to foster the historical association between the monarchy and the holy places, and Fascist consuls assiduously cultivated Italian prestige in the Holy City, while the Italian king Vittorio Emanuele III (reigned 1900-1946) had inherited the traditional title of 'king of Jerusalem' claimed by the Royal House of Savoy. Hence, On 19 June 1940, a few days after Italy entered the WWII, two Italian archbishops and forty-seven bishops petitioned Mussolini to take the Holy Sepulchre out of Britain's hands and to entrust it to the Italian Royal House of Savoy. Already since the 1920s the two most common justifications for an extension of Italy's influence in the Middle East were the country's rights as a Catholic power and the heritage of the Roman Empire. Since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the WWI, Palestine was however under British control and the whole of the Middle East was divided between the British and French spheres of influence. It was first and foremost this imperial *status quo* dictated by the Allies that Mussolini aimed to challenge when entering the WWII in 1940. While most research on Italian colonialism focuses on the conquest of Libya, Ethiopia and Eritrea before the WWII, paying less attention to the Italian expansionism in Dalmatia and the annexation of Albania, the scope of the Italian colonial ambition was much greater and involved domination over the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean and the countries bordering it in the Middle East.

The year 1940, when the frescoes were executed, was decisive in this regard with the Italian bombing of Mandatory Palestine, primarily centred on Tel Aviv and Haifa but affecting also coastal towns such as Acre and Jaffa, starting in July 1940, and the Italian invasion of Egypt in September 1940 as the beginning of a larger operation aimed at gaining control over the Middle East which took shape of the Western Desert Campaign (1940-1943) and which Italy ultimately lost. In July 1940—at the same time as Italy launched the bombing of Mandatory Palestine—Germany recognised the Italian sphere of influence over the Mediterranean and the lands bordering it, including Egypt, Palestine and Syria. It is in this context that the frescoes in the Sacramentum of Casa del Mutilato were executed, depicting the anticipated successful campaign of the Fascist Italy progressing from Egypt and recapturing Jerusalem in the manner of Roman punitive expedition and a Crusade at the same time. The bishop of Terracina for example expressed to his flock that “only when the Flag of Fascist and Catholic Italy is unfurled over Christ's Sepulchre will the Holy Land have received the veneration it deserves.”

Parallel to the painting of the frescoes, two Italian architects, Antonio Barluzzi (1884 – 1960) and Luigi Marangoni (1872–1950), started working on an ideal model of a new basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, over the two holiest sites depicted in the frescoes. While Barluzzi, known as 'Architect of the Holy Land', was based in Palestine, Marangoni joined him from Venice in January 1940 upon the invitation of Archbishop Gustavo Testa (1886 – 1969), the driving force behind new basilica of the Holy Sepulchre which was to replace the current structure. In case of Italian victory, the new basilica, radically changing the urban fabric of Jerusalem and thus only made possible under conditions of a totalitarian state and expropriation of the Muslim property, would become a monument to the new Italian rule over the Holy Land and the Middle East.

Images



Italian bombing of Tel Aviv on 9 September 1940.
Source: Tel Aviv Municipality via The Jerusalem Post



Luigi Marangoni and Antonio Barluzzi, Project for the reconstruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Source: L.H. Vincent, D. Baldi, L. Marangoni and A. Barluzzi, *Il Santo Sepolcro Di Gerusalemme*, Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, Bergamo 1949.

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