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# SPANISH MODERNITY AND ROMAN ANTIQUITY: BETWEEN THEATRICAL REVIVAL AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION (1920-1944)

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**ABSTRACT** The classical tradition was gradually introduced to the Spanish public as a way to reach European modernity since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. By popularizing Roman texts and monuments, Spanish intellectuals and national institutions established a national archive of heritage that could serve socio-cultural demands. At the same time, state intervention in the revival of classical drama shaped the reception of antiquity and conditioned its socio-political scope. In this article, I analyze how Spanish institutions and political representatives exploited classical heritage and produced the first ancient drama productions at Roman venues in the 1930s as socio-political statements. By engaging with archival material and historical sources, I explore the different reuses of these monuments and the afterlife of productions organized there. Finally, during Franco's regime and the rise of the Falange until the mid-1940s, their appropriation to display power consolidated its significance as an ideological and political apparatus of the Spanish state.

## INTRODUCTION

In the early 20th century, intellectuals, writers, and artists in Spain began to systematically engage with Graeco-Roman antiquity and produced an artistic corpus that permeated the Spanish socio-cultural expression<sup>1</sup>. This cultural elite assumed the role of the caretaker of the 'ruins' of classical antiquity and claimed the need to bring them back to life, as we read in the Spanish illustrated magazine *Por Esos Mundos* in its June 1916 edition:

Oh, old mutilated and vanished cities, eternal values of times and cultures, pages of stone on which the wise man leaning over them deciphers, like a modern geomancer, the millenarian hieroglyph of his civilization.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Morenilla Talens 2006: 437–45; Balaskas 2020.

<sup>2</sup> 'Oh, viejas ciudades mutiladas y desaparecidas, eternos valores de los tiempos y de las culturas, páginas de piedra en las que el sabio, sobre ellas inclinado, descifra como un moderno geomante el geroglífico milenarío de su civilización' (Morenas de Tejada 1916: 632).

Many of these intellectuals viewed the early decades of the 20th century as an opportunity to align themselves with international tendencies that would include Spain into the European modernity and would lead to tourist development. Similarly, after losing the last colonies of its old Empire in 1898<sup>3</sup>, Spain needed to consolidate a unified national identity within the new boundaries. Under these circumstances, Spain could renovate its traditional social structures and could embrace modern movements that alluded to a globalized world, urbanization, and collective perception of social life through the use of modern advancements and technologies. Cultural homogenization could also alleviate peripheral proto-nationalisms, which sought their ideological space by implementing alternative collective narratives in the peninsula<sup>4</sup>. As a result, classical antiquity managed to reach the Spanish audiences through literature and theatre by being identified with new trends of European modernity<sup>5</sup>. This opened up an opportunity to renovate the Spanish theatre through the prestige and 'glorious character' of Greco-Roman culture<sup>6</sup>.

National institutions that had emerged in the previous decades methodically sought during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to document, study, consolidate, and disseminate their cultural heritage as national capital<sup>7</sup>. These systematic efforts aimed to entangle the national populace with national heritage and the territorial space in which it was located, performing a nostalgic reconfiguration of national past.

The experience of the First War World converted these activities into questions of national significance in the self-determination and standardization of the nations. Such a dynamic procedure can be comprehended as the constitution of a national archive that offered the opportunity to both convert these monuments to lieux de memoire and appropriate them as vehicles for the nations' sociocultural modernization<sup>8</sup>.

In addition, what characterizes the socio-cultural perspective of the European inter-war period is that public reception of these monuments was a quest that such activities had to substantially consider and experiment with, as these developments addressed the notion of a unified populace and corresponded to the pursuit of national reach and state sponsored initiative. Thus, a popular – rather than elite – engagement with national heritage would be crucial for the successful implementation of the geographical self-determination of the nation states.

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<sup>3</sup> Díaz-Andreu 2003: 35.

<sup>4</sup> Hobsbawm 2012: 106–7, 119–20.

<sup>5</sup> García Jurado 1997; González-Vázquez 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Morenilla Talens 2006: 437–9.

<sup>7</sup> Plantzos 2014: ch. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Nora 1989; Plantzos 2014: 255–65.

However, since Spanish populace did not perceive classical antiquity as national heritage, the ideological engagement with classical culture was weak<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, the revival of Roman drama developed slower and systematic theatrical productions were still scarce in the late 19th century. For instance, performances produced by the Catalan playwright Adrià Gual, especially in Barcelona, and student productions comprised the majority of the theatrical initiatives of the period, but they did not produce a powerful collective impact<sup>10</sup>.

By aligning themselves with this socio-political orientation, Spanish intellectual elites gradually sought to form a Spanish archive of national heritage<sup>11</sup>. Following the extensive archaeological intervention in Roman antiquities that ensued the Spanish legislation in 1911<sup>12</sup>, a series of attempts were made to introduce classical heritage to the Spanish society. As Merida's popularity acquired a national dimension<sup>13</sup> during the 1920s, a theatrical revival at the Roman theatre was a natural development and followed the emergent excursionist trends.

In the meantime, the first calls for the systematic reuse of Roman theatres came from intellectuals with an international background who aimed to align Spanish cultural tradition with the European modernist reception of classical antiquities<sup>14</sup>. To heal the feeling of nostalgia towards the classical past, archaeologists and classicists committed themselves to reconstruct the monuments' symbolic integrity and reuse them as modern venues. One such example is Enrique Salanava's nostalgic reflection on converting the Roman theatre of Merida into a site of modern productions in the model of the Roman theatre of Orange<sup>15</sup>. However, despite the prevalence of Roman heritage in Spain, the identification with the classics often entailed a fusion of Greco-Roman elements that were not always clearly distinct.

Roman monuments would come to represent an abstract vision of prosperity, regional prestige, and tourist expansion. The national press began to dedicate illustrated features to the legendary Roman monuments that attested to the Roman presence and the classical tradition in the peninsula, but it did not become part of the collective narratives of the Spanish nationalism in the period. Roman theatres and amphitheatres received particular media attention as they often conserved their overwhelming and monumental material aspect in the natural landscape<sup>16</sup>. The theatres of Acinipo (Ronda), Clunia (Peñalba

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<sup>9</sup> Balaskas 2020.

<sup>10</sup> González-Vázquez 2019; Balaskas 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Cean-Bermúdez 1932; Díaz-Andreu 1995; Ríos Reviejo 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Junta Superior de Excavaciones y Antigüedades 1922; Díaz-Andreu 2003: 39.

<sup>13</sup> Monleón 2004: 61–75.

<sup>14</sup> Taberné 1926: 5; Díaz-Andreu 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Balaskas 2020: 473.

<sup>16</sup> Ruiz y Pablo 1925: 5; Díaz de Escovar 1930: 28; Díaz-Andreu 2016.

de Castro), Bilbilis (Calatayud), Emerita Augusta (Mérida), Italica (Sevilla) found their way to the public as Roman monuments of excursionist interest and adventurous or exotic outlook, along with their European counterparts<sup>17</sup>. This culminated in the establishment of the Second Spanish Republic in 1931 and its attempt to introduce social and cultural reform. In total, a series of political instabilities provided the frame for cultural renovation and national reconfiguration during the short-lived republican regime. Following the Spanish Civil War and the establishment of Franco's dictatorship some years later, a fascist identification with Roman antiquity dominated the cultural revivals of ancient theatres in Spain.

To explore these political transformations in the reception of Roman antiquity in Spain, I begin by addressing the use of classical culture by the Republican regime in the early 1930s. Next, I continue with an analysis of its theatrical productions at the Roman theatre of Merida and an interpretation of its socio-cultural impact. I finish by examining the appropriation of the Roman tradition by the fascist component of Franco's dictatorship, the Falange. Its perception and popularization of the idea of *romanità* epitomized the fascist appropriation of classical culture in Spain until the early 1940s.

### 1. THE REPUBLICAN REVIVAL OF ROMAN THEATRE AND THE FIRST STATE-SPONSORED PRODUCTIONS

The paramount need for the newly established regimes of the 1930s to legitimize their power and address the national populace via sociocultural institutions highly influenced the inter-war perception of theatre as national heritage. As a result, regular theatrical spectacles at classical venues emerged and attempted to forge an ideological identification with collective memory. However, the fact that ancient venues were often located far from the urban centres directed such ideological interests towards the local population that lived nearby and preserved a distinct, experiential perception of these monuments.

At the same time, an avant-garde perception of theatre emerged to reform the aesthetic tradition as well as to popularize and politicize art. Nationalization of the theatrical stage was one of the main quests in the theatrical production in Europe<sup>18</sup>. A series of theatrical questions that marked the development of the artistic activity (such as the role of director and the emergence of national theatres) were interpreted as part of this tradition and greatly influenced the theatrical production.

Despite the attempt of cultural homogenization and pedagogic tutelage in the 1920s, the lack of ideological engagement of the Spanish populace with clas-

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<sup>17</sup> Anonymous 1928: 21–28; E. R. V. 1936: 8.

<sup>18</sup> McConachie 2008; Fischer-Lichte 2017: esp. ch. 4.

sical culture as national heritage became apparent. The public that ideologically engaged with the symbolic materiality of classical antiquity was limited, while the social and political turmoil of the 1930s fundamentally shaped the course of perception of Roman heritage and, for the first time, state sponsored events were produced as national landmarks.

In particular, after the loss of political and institutional support, Spanish dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera was forced to resign in March 1930. The honour and prestige of king Alfonso XIII, who had initially permitted the establishment of the seven-year dictatorship in 1923, was also heavily damaged. Despite his desperate attempts to reverse the political course, he was forced to abdicate in April 1931 by the outcome of the municipal elections and the revolutionary committee that a little later proclaimed the republican regime. It was under these circumstances that the new regime introduced a new sociocultural reform, which intended to overcome elitism, popularize artistic expression, and legitimize its modernizing status.

At the same time, following the socio-cultural prestige that Merida had acquired during the previous years, and the numerous cultural revivals that had taken place at the Roman theatre, its use as ideological vehicle for the new regime was expected. Although Roman tradition did not become a *de facto* cultural expression of the Republic, antiquity often inspired the new regime to readily express its socio-political orientation<sup>19</sup>.

It was the Minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, Fernando de los Ríos, who undertook the first official initiative for the systematic use of Roman theatres in Spain in 1932<sup>20</sup>. His collaboration with the Mayor of Merida and the company Xirgu-Borràs, which performed at that period in the Teatro Español in Madrid, resulted in the production of Seneca's *Medea* at the Roman Theatre. The play was translated into Spanish by Miguel de Unamuno and was directed by the playwright and director Cipriano de Rivas Cherif. Margarita Xirgu and Enrique Borràs starred in the celebrated performance on 18 June 1933, which marked the republican socio-cultural perception of the classical tradition.

This event corresponded to the energetic intellectual ambition and the republican ideals that emerged with the Generation of '27 and popularized artistic expression<sup>21</sup>. During this endeavour, Seneca's role as a national author found its place in the cultural manifestation of the Republic. In such terms, the Republic and the Generation of '27 had appropriated *senequism* as a representation of the spirit of the Spanish nation during a time when the intellectual bourgeoisie sought to determine its spiritual values<sup>22</sup>. In Seneca's version of

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<sup>19</sup> Company i Mateo 2017: 260–83; Balaskas 2020.

<sup>20</sup> González-Vázquez 2015: 497; 2016: 109–10.

<sup>21</sup> Monleón 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Baldwin 2020.

*Medea* laid an opportunity of expressing an ideological identification with the Spanish national past and an allusion to collective memory<sup>23</sup>. Seneca's birth in the Spanish city of Cordoba provided a platform for a collective identification of the play with the Spanish national heritage, as this version provided the justification to label the festival as a Spanish national and political landmark<sup>24</sup>.

The engagement of the festival of Merida with national values contributed to the creation of a state tradition of classical drama in Spain, in the model of other Graeco-Roman theatres in Europe. The national exclusivity that the Republican initiative sought to ascribe to the production focused on Seneca's engagement with national memory and its ideological connection with the Spanish public.

Maintenance works took place before the spectacle to prepare the Roman theatre for the reception of the public. These included carpentry works, maintenance of the road that leads to the theatre, and works on the monument's stage.<sup>25</sup> Jose Ramon Mérida's – the official excavator of the archaeological site of Merida – strict policy on the revival of the theatre had obliged Rivas-Cherif to pledge that no architectural elements would be added to the stage<sup>26</sup>. In addition, aspirations for annual theatre festivals in Merida and Sagunto were revealed by the organizers, who suggested the large-scale, systematic reuse of classical venues around the country:

Merida and Sagunto could be the two centres of these cycles, and both cities would eventually represent in Spain and the world what Verona and Syracuse in Italy and Bayreuth in Germany mean [...] France in its midday Roman theaters, Greece in Delphi, Italy, as we have already said, in Syracuse and Verona, have popularized the performances of classical theater.<sup>27</sup>

After Merida's performance, Rivas Cherif had an ambitious plan. He visited the Roman theatre of Sagunto to inspect the site and organize the logistics for the performance<sup>28</sup>. *Medea* was programmed to be staged at the Roman theatre

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<sup>23</sup> González-Vázquez 2015: 494–5.

<sup>24</sup> Balaskas 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Municipal Historical Archive of Merida, Local Government of Merida, Book of Acts, Plenary (MHAM/LGM/BA/P), Session 3 July 1933: 74.

<sup>26</sup> De Rivas Cherif 1991: 110, 263–9.

<sup>27</sup> 'Mérida y Sagunto podrían ser los dos centros de esos ciclos, y ambas ciudades acabarían por representar en España y en el mundo lo que significan Verona y Siracusa en Italia y Bayreuth en Alemania [...] Francia en sus teatros romanos del Mediodía, Grecia en Delfos, Italia, como ya hemos dicho, en Siracusa y Verona, han hecho famosas las interpretaciones del teatro clásico' (Chabás 1933b: 12). The term *cycle* (Spanish *ciclo*, Italian *ciclo*) is used here to signify annual festival, as in the Festival of Syracuse.

<sup>28</sup> Anonymous 1933a: 12.

of the town during the annual local festivities<sup>29</sup>, while some restoration works were issued earlier that year<sup>30</sup>. However, due to the monument's instability, the performance was finally suspended<sup>31</sup>. Roman monuments in Tarragona and Italica were also proposed to be part of the festivals<sup>32</sup>. Rivas Cherif's intention was to perform *Spartacus* and other spectacles that would correspond to the authentic revival of open-air theatre<sup>33</sup>; this is why he contemplated performing an "oriental" play, possibly Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*, at the Arab palace of Alhambra, gladiators' contests at the Roman amphitheatre of Merida, and horse races at its Circus. "That would be like bringing Spain back to life"<sup>34</sup> he commented.

In artistic terms, the theatrical revival of Merida was also projected as an international expression that especially connected to France and Italy. Merida's aspirations to follow European theatrical trends can be seen in its identification as the Spanish Rome in every opportunity. Beyond the invitation of the ambassador of Italy Raffaele Guariglia<sup>35</sup> and his propagandistic gesture that promoted the Italian fascist ideals<sup>36</sup>, the ministry of Fine-Arts of Rome later invited the company to perform *Medea*, together with other plays at the Roman forum and other venues in Italy<sup>37</sup>. In addition, an unsuccessful collaboration with the Sorbonne University in France for the production of Seneca's *Medea* in Paris at the same period showcased the international reach of this early Spanish initiative for a professional theatrical tradition. To some extent, the French and Italian implication, with parallel cultural events, reflected the countries' interest in the Spanish case and the sociopolitical character of this cultural production.

The following year, the Festival of Merida was named *Semana Romana* (Roman Week) and followed a programme similar to other European festivals offering a variety of productions that included Seneca's *Medea*, Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*,<sup>38</sup> and classical dances. Its more thorough production and tourist-ori-

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<sup>29</sup> Anonymous 1933b: 10.

<sup>30</sup> Additionally, a year earlier, a subvention of 1.800 pesetas was agreed by the Ministry of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, due to the dilapidated condition of the theatre, in the form of rescue intervention (*Official State Gazette* 210, 28 July 1932: 735–6).

<sup>31</sup> Anonymous 1933c: 3.

<sup>32</sup> Chabás 1933a: 6.

<sup>33</sup> Anonymous 1933d: 6.

<sup>34</sup> 'Eso sería como ir resucitando a España' (Muñoz 1933: 20).

<sup>35</sup> Domínguez Méndez 2013. *Official State Gazette* 208, 27 July 1933: 607. Despite Guariglia's diplomatic presence and ceremonious gesture, the Journal *Dioniso* only referred to Merida's performances in the following summer season, by dedicating a brief feature (Arias 1935/1936: 51).

<sup>36</sup> Plantzos and Balaskas (forthcoming).

<sup>37</sup> However, the italo-abisinian war suspended the project (Rivas Cherif 1991).

<sup>38</sup> One of the *Elektra* performances had to be cancelled due to delay of the sets in their transportation to Merida. The improvised solution was to perform Francisco Alonso's play *Las Leandras* instead (Anonymous 1934: 6).

ented organization during the annual local festivities popularized the Festival despite the emergence of political controversies<sup>39</sup>.

However, despite the local and national attempt to create a Festival that would engage the Spanish populace with a republican approach to Roman tradition, productions in Merida did not create an ideological space that would convert the Roman site into a *lieu de mémoire*. Despite the lack of collective identification with the classical culture in Spain, bourgeois intellectuals, writers, and artists who identified themselves with the new republican experience, actively engaged with the Graeco-Roman tradition to express the socio-political developments that took place in the country. This ideological concern can be seen in intellectuals such as the poet Luis Cernuda who argued: “I can only deplore that Greece will never touch the Spanish heart or mind, the most remote and ignorant, in Europe, of the ‘the glory that Greece once was’”<sup>40</sup>.

## 2. FALANGE AND FASCIST ROMANITÀ UNDER FRANCO’S REGIME

The fascistization of the Spanish political scene had already begun in the 1920s, following Mussolini’s rise to power in Italy and active attempts by Italian fascism to expand its sphere of influence and intervene in Spanish society during the Spanish Republic<sup>41</sup>. Diplomatic relations between Spain and fascist Italy were initiated during Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship, but a geopolitical dispute over territories in North Africa had distanced the two regimes<sup>42</sup>. In contrast, the main fascist party in Spain, the Falange<sup>43</sup>, had established systematic relations with the Italian regime since its foundation in 1933. At the same time, Republican socio-political reform radicalized the Falange, although the latter did not produce its propaganda material and performances until after the Spanish Civil War.

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<sup>39</sup> Monleón 2004: 76–82; Balaskas 2020.

<sup>40</sup> “No puedo menos que deplorar que Grecia nunca tocara al corazón ni a la mente española, los más remotos e ignorantes, en Europa, de “la gloria que fue Grecia”” (Cernuda 1993: 657).

<sup>41</sup> Plantzos and Balaskas (forthcoming). It was also part of fascism’s desire to expand Italian influence abroad through interventions in cultural policy and propaganda (Ben-Ghiat 2001; Domínguez Méndez 2013).

<sup>42</sup> Tusell Gómez and Saz Campos 1982; Díaz-Andreu 2016.

<sup>43</sup> It was founded in October 1933 with the name *Falange Española*. Due to poor election results in 1934, the party merged with the nationalist and fascist movement *Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional-Sindicalista* and was renamed *Falange Española de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista (FE de las JONS)*. When, after the Civil War, Francisco Franco dictated a fusion of the party with the carlist movement *Comunión Tradicionalista*, it adopted its definitive name *Falange Española Tradicionalista de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista (FET de las JONS)*.

However, it was mainly during and immediately after the Spanish Civil War that cultural production came to reflect these sociopolitical contacts. During the Second World War (1939–1945), fascism also employed this aestheticized approach to politics in the Axis territories. Although Spain did not actively participate in the war, the Falange continued to interchange socio-cultural ideas and practices with Mussolini's regime. Classical productions in Spain served to reinforce power and authority, representing fascism's ability to control cultural production and public space<sup>44</sup>. Roman culture became a powerful apparatus to express a Mediterranean *mare nostrum* that hosted the Spanish and Roman Empire as a parallel power that radiated imperial and nationalist force.

According to Falasca-Zamponi, fascism beguiled the masses by anaesthetizing their senses and offering a cultic experience<sup>45</sup>. It emphasized a deified perception of politics combined with sensory alienation. Drawing on Benjamin's accounts of the aestheticization of politics under fascism, Falasca-Zamponi contends that this paradoxical combination led to the negation of human nature and a distortion of reality beyond social and aesthetic limits<sup>46</sup>. The introduction of aesthetics into politics not only perpetuated early 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist nationalism but also transformed sociopolitical reality into a community building project<sup>47</sup>. Esposito also draws on Benjamin's accounts and attests that:

It seems reasonable not only to view fascism as a political religion, and therefore a result of the sacralization of politics, but also to keep in mind the aestheticization of politics that finds expression in it [...] Through its objectification in public buildings, rituals, ceremonies and mass culture (e.g., the *Esposizione dell'aeronautica italiana*, or popular war books), it became the central element in the aesthetic-cultural generation of community. In fascism the values, norms and heroes of community were aesthetically staged and experienced as integral parts of a cult practice.<sup>48</sup>

Although Franco's military dictatorship was ideologically closer to Metaxas' Greece and Salazar's Portugal<sup>49</sup>, the political platform that contributed to the Republican defeat in the Spanish Civil War initially adopted a fascistized form of government<sup>50</sup>. The Falange systematically disseminated fascist discourse and assimilated Mussolini's cultural aesthetics in an attempt to reach moder-

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<sup>44</sup> Falasca-Zamponi 1997: 1–8; Griffin 2007: 70–4.

<sup>45</sup> Falasca-Zamponi 1997: 9–14.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Koepnick 1996.

<sup>48</sup> Esposito 2015: 353.

<sup>49</sup> Kallis 2003; Katsoudas 2004; Kallis 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Paxton 2013; Rodríguez Barreira 2014.

nity. Consequently, public events<sup>51</sup> and artistic performances in ancient venues alluded to Roman imperial ideals.

Thus, ancient spaces were transformed into sites for spectacular politics<sup>52</sup>. The use of classical theatres in Spain reflected feelings of nostalgia for eternal renown and the paligenetic myth that fascism safeguarded<sup>53</sup>. In this context, performances at Roman venues in Spain often fused the fascist imagination of Roman culture and the Spanish Golden Age tradition, in a way that they represented an authentic cultural identity. Public events and theatre, thus, became the ideal channels for shaping reality, rewriting history, and disseminating a metaphysical version of past and future through the use of new technology<sup>54</sup>. For instance, the Italian LUCE Institute and the Spanish NO-DO<sup>55</sup> served as audiovisual apparatuses that systematically disseminated the regimes' powerful propaganda. During that period, the Falange presented Spain as a fascist nation whose imperial status was based on a uniform, patriotic identity<sup>56</sup>.

The adoption of a new calendar in emulation of fascist Italy also evidenced this fascist orientation<sup>57</sup>. The alternative calendar was used mainly for bureaucratic, official, or media documents and propaganda after the coup of 1936. In particular, the war years 1936, 1937, 1938, and 1939 were named the I, II, III, and IV *Año Triunfal* (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> Triumphal Year), respectively. Following the final victory against the legitimate Republican regime, the year 1939 was renamed the *Año de la Victoria* (Year of Victory).

Journals such as *Jerarquía*<sup>58</sup> and *Vértice* introduced an ultra-nationalist narrative that appropriated imperial *romanità* as a national issue, although they did not manage to disseminate fascist discourse as effectively as their Italian counterparts. Meanwhile, Spanish archaeologists and classicists who supported the Falange, such as Martín Almagro Basch and Eugenio d'Ors, contributed to the appropriation of the political aspect of Roman antiquities in Spain and their perception as imperial assets<sup>59</sup>. For instance, Almagro Basch's systematic excavation of Empúries in Catalonia showcased the Spanish version of fascistized heritage. Imperial objectives and a fascistized Mediterranean identity were apparent in the presentation of his journal *Ampurias*:

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<sup>51</sup> Vázquez Astorga 2004; Duplá Ansuátegui 2017; Plantzos and Balaskas (forthcoming).

<sup>52</sup> Falasca-Zamponi 1997: ch. 1; Griffin 2007: ch. 8.

<sup>53</sup> Griffin 2007: 224–7.

<sup>54</sup> Griffin 1991: 29–30; Ben-Ghiat 2001: 174–80.

<sup>55</sup> The series of cinema newsreels NO-DO (Noticuario y Documentales) significantly contributed to the state propaganda by projecting audiovisual reports to the Spanish citizens from 1943.

<sup>56</sup> Duplá Ansuátegui 2003: 75; Saz Campos 2004; Gallego Margaleff 2005.

<sup>57</sup> De Francisco Olmos 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Duplá Ansuátegui 2012.

<sup>59</sup> López Izquierdo 1942; Gracia Alonso 2009: ch. 7.

Its name comes from the Greco-Roman city from which the Greeks brought a touch of Mediterranean civilization to the Peninsula. Empúries is the westernmost Greek city. The Romans disembarked there for the first time to fight Carthage. Cato the Elder built the first civilized settlement there. Following the Roman conquest, Spain ceased to be a land of tribes and became an imperial land.<sup>60</sup>

As Wulff Alonso<sup>61</sup> suggests, this case illustrates how archaeologists and classicists consolidated Spanish identification with the Roman past. Monumental archaeology gradually replaced liberal ideals<sup>62</sup> and public celebrations were regularly adorned with temporary architectural decoration that symbolically evoked the imperial aesthetics of the Roman empire<sup>63</sup>. The celebration of the bimillenary of the Roman Emperor Augustus in cities such as Zaragoza and Tarragona (1938–1940) embodied the regime's ideological identification with Italian fascism<sup>64</sup>. Similarly, in a spectacular public ceremony during a visit of the Italian Conde Galeazzo Ciano<sup>65</sup> to Spain in July 1939, even Franco momentarily adopted a fascist profile:

The feelings of friendship between our two countries are born out of a common history, in which at times it was the turn of the Roman legions to fertilize our land with their blood, and at other times it fell to the Spanish to leave their ashes in the sister lands of Italy.<sup>66</sup>

Under these circumstances, the theatre of Merida became an ideal space to celebrate a Spanish *romanità*, an identity that the Falange imposed in its attempt to emulate Italian fascism, evidencing an ideological use of the theatre

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<sup>60</sup> 'Su nombre es el de la ciudad greco-romana por donde los griegos trajeron a la Península el soplo de la civilización mediterránea. Ampurias es la última ciudad griega de occidente. En ella los romanos desembarcan por primera vez para combatir a Cartago. Y en ella asienta Catón el Grande el primer gran campamento civilizador. Tras la conquista romana España dejó de ser tierra de tribus y pasó a ser tierra imperial' (Almagro Basch 1939: 3).

<sup>61</sup> 2003: 231–4.

<sup>62</sup> Gracia Alonso 2012.

<sup>63</sup> For the works and importance of the Department of Plastics of the National Service of Press and Propaganda, the responsible for decorating those events, see Vázquez Astorga 2004.

<sup>64</sup> Duplá Ansuátegui 2017; Plantzos and Balaskas (forthcoming).

<sup>65</sup> Minister of Foreign Affairs and Secretary of Press and Propaganda in Mussolini's government.

<sup>66</sup> "Los sentimientos de amistad entre nuestros dos países han nacido de una historia en común, en la que unas veces tocó a las legiones romanas fecundar con su sangre nuestras tierras, y otras cupo a los españoles el honor de dejar sus cenizas en las tierras hermanas de Italia" (Anonymous 1939a: 3).

that reflected the political values that classical heritage had acquired. The glorification of Mérida by the falangist archaeologist Julio Martínez Santa-Olalla, who presented the city as one of the most splendid creations of the Roman world in Spain<sup>67</sup>, attested to this new identity. During the Spanish Civil War, the theatre was used to stage a monumental performance that commemorated the assistance of Italian legionaries from the *Corpo Truppe Volontarie*, who had fought alongside Franco's troops<sup>68</sup>. The Italian soldiers were headed to the port of Cadiz on their way back to their homeland, and Mérida offered an ideal Roman backdrop:

The streets of Mérida were adorned with flags and at various points were placed posters with quotes from the Generalissimo and General Astray that exalted Italy and the legionaries, as well as photographs of the Caudillo and Mussolini. In the Roman Theatre, medals were presented by Spanish women who offered them as mementoes.<sup>69</sup>

Considering that the theatre was used by local civilians as a refuge during bombardment of the city in the Civil War, the ceremony cynically demonstrated the militaristic fervour of fascist imperialism<sup>70</sup>. The legionaries also received a warm welcome in Seville and Cadiz, where fascist celebrations exalted the imperial *romanità*<sup>71</sup>.

In the following years, few productions were staged in the Roman theatre, merely a handful of plays and some military celebrations commemorating meaningful events. According to Paxton (2013), the creation and social impact of new institutions in early Francoist Spain reflected the fascistization of the regime, as evidenced, for example, by the *Sección Femenina*, the women's branch of the Falange<sup>72</sup>. Thus, the regime's first classical drama production, Plautus' *Aulularia*, was organized by the Carro de la Farándula, a theatre company operating within the *Sección Femenina* and financed by the Mérida city council<sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> Martínez Santa-Olalla 1941: 32.

<sup>68</sup> Rodrigo 2016: ch. 2.

<sup>69</sup> 'Las calles de Mérida estaban engalanadas con banderas y en diversos puntos se colocaron carteles con frases del Generalísimo y del General Millán Astray de exaltación a Italia y a los legionarios, así como fotografías del Caudillo y de Mussolini. En el Teatro Romano tuvo lugar la entrega de unas medallas que las mujeres españolas les impusieron como recuerdo' (Anonymous 1938: 4).

<sup>70</sup> López Díaz 2011: 420. Mérida was a strategic location that connected the northern and southern zones of the rebel army, which captured and secured control of the city in August 1936.

<sup>71</sup> Vázquez Astorga 2004.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> MHAM/LGM/BA/P, Session 3 October 1939, 11v. See also González-Vázquez 2015.

The press reiterated the imperial objectives of the performance, which were to “associate the city’s name with its magnificent imperial Roman monuments and [...] to use these ruins to disseminate classical culture and art”<sup>74</sup>. In addition, allusions to Catholic dogma inaugurated a national tradition that was systematically reproduced at the Roman theatre over the following decades<sup>75</sup>. Therefore, the initiative of the Carro de la Farándula to perform classical drama at the theatre, in keeping with the spirit of similar productions in Italy, can be considered part of the fascistization of Spain.

The choice of play was a question of theatrical tradition<sup>76</sup>. From the late 19th century until the 1930s, *Aulularia* was translated several times into Spanish, sometimes directly from the Latin and others from French editions<sup>77</sup>. Besides being an undemanding play for public consumption, *Aulularia* followed a philological tradition that had facilitated earlier staging at interior venues. The performance did not attract a wide audience, but its repetition in Madrid three months later was met with great success. Press critics praised the performance and repeatedly referred to the fresh, diachronic quality of Plautus’ comedies<sup>78</sup>.

The performance was staged on 1 October to commemorate Franco’s ascension to power<sup>79</sup>. At the same time, the provincial delegate of the theatre voiced the play’s objectives when he claimed that classical drama symbolically connected Spanish literature with national monuments<sup>80</sup>. Hence, the Falange presented itself as the caretaker of Roman civilization in the Spanish periphery.

The *Sección Femenina* returned to the Roman theatre for a solemn event in 1944. The site offered the ideal symbolism for the institution’s 8<sup>th</sup> National Council (*Consejo Nacional*). The youth organization of the Falange, the National Delegation of the Youth Front (*Delegación Nacional del Frente de Juventudes*), also helped to organize the event. Flags, falangist insignias, a small-scale parade, and a secular ceremony followed a Catholic mass at the church of Saint Eulalia. The local authorities offered a warm welcome to the military personnel, politicians, and spectators in attendance. The political event included official speeches, such one given by the general vice-secretary of the Falange, Manuel

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<sup>74</sup> ‘asociar el nombre de la ciudad a sus magníficos monumentos de la Roma Imperial y [...] utilizar las ruinas de estos para difundir la cultura y el arte clásico’ (Anonymous 1939b: 4). This notion of Hispanidad that the fascist component of the regime attempted so desperately to implement during the first years also found its way through literature. See, for instance, Giménez Caballero 1939.

<sup>75</sup> Araujo-Costa 1940: 11.

<sup>76</sup> MHAM/LGM/BA/P, Session, 18 September 1939: 5v–6.

<sup>77</sup> Blanco López 2010: 208–9.

<sup>78</sup> I. S. 1939: 3; De la Cueva 1939: 5.

<sup>79</sup> González-Vázquez 2015; 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Onetro Villacañas 1939; Monleón 2004: 85.

de Mora-Figueroa,<sup>81</sup> in which he repeatedly alluded to his vision of a Spanish empire and a National syndicalist political system. The Youth Front band later sang the Falange anthem, 'Cara al Sol', and guests were presented with special medals. Folkloric dance exhibitions by the *Sección Femenina* completed the event<sup>82</sup>.

Overall, it was an act of reaffirmation of Falangist commitment to the imperial fascist vision, a time when the process of desfascistization of the regime had already begun<sup>83</sup> and most of the Falangists who actively supported the alliance with the Axis powers had lost power. During this process, a triumphal resuscitation of the Roman past portrayed the theatre of Merida as proof of national unity<sup>84</sup>.

### CONCLUSIONS

Despite Spain's belated commitment to the classical ideal, intellectuals, artists, and classicists began to actively engage with classical drama in an attempt to reach modernity. Following European models of interpretation and theatrical performance, they hesitantly began staging classical drama in an academic context.

This cultural development turned public attention to ancient theatres, many of which were situated in peripheral locations. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the engagement of bourgeois intellectuals with the classical tradition engendered a distinctive use of Roman theatres, where performances of ancient drama eventually shaped the perception of antiquity as national heritage. However, the public success and republican advocacy of festivals of classical drama were not enough to convert them into national landmarks that re-established the lost roots with Roman antiquity.

The republican revival of 1933 and 1934 in Merida clearly alluded to an ancient intellectual past, and the theatre's long history of redeployment had already established it as a venue for national cultural expression. And even though public response and collective identification did not always synchronize with national expectations, the theatre's connection with European modernity was acclaimed by the liberal bourgeoisie, whose identification with classical antiquities was based on Romantic nostalgia.

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<sup>81</sup> Mora-Figueroa was an ancient member of the Falange and supporter of the alliance with the Axis forces. He had also served in the Blue Division, a unit of Spanish volunteers who fought within the Wehrmacht on the Soviet Front during the Second World War.

<sup>82</sup> For audiovisual documentation, see the RTVE, <http://www.rtve.es/filmoteca/no-do/not-58/1468395/>.

<sup>83</sup> Gallego Margaleff 2013.

<sup>84</sup> De la Barrera 2006: 121–6; Ortueta 2010.

After the Spanish Civil War and during the first years of the Second World War, theatrical production under Franco's dictatorship and Falange's influence in Spain implied not only an artistic statement but also a political demonstration of the interconnection between power and aesthetics. The cultural activities of the Falange emulated Mussolini's authoritarian perception of the classical past and appropriated the idea of a powerful empire. Although theatrical activity of the period was scarce in Spain, Roman antiquity played a central role in the Falange's cultural politics until 1942 and became a source of militaristic authority. In particular, classical monuments – especially the theatre of Merida – acquired a powerful symbolic nature in productions organized by fascist institutions. Classical theatre and public events that took place there in the early years of the regime were transformed into socio-cultural manifestations of the dogmatic authority of the Falange and the fascist perception of *romanità*.

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