'Garibaldi was here?!': Commemorative monuments and the emergence of a national memory culture in nineteenth-century Italy – a network approach

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Introduction

Commemorative monuments have often been considered key tools in the project of nation-building. From the second half of the nineteenth century, the cities of Europe were increasingly adorned with all kinds of statues, plaques, and memorials commemorating historical events and celebrating the heroes of the nation. These monuments and the activities centred around them (unveiling ceremonies, commemorative gatherings, wreath layings, etc.) relayed the nationalist cause from the consciousness-raising of the intellectuals into the wider public sphere, and often became focal points of (contested) historical narratives and collective identities.[1] Placed in the urban environment, these landmarks had a double-edged function, not only historical (as reminders of a glorious past and being part of the grand narrative of the nation), but also territorial (reminding that the locality is part of the national territory).[2] Therefore, studying the distribution of national monuments, poised as they are between the general cultural evocation of a nationwide past and the specificity of their locatedness, can offer valuable insight into the process and degree of integration of a territory's disparate regions into a nation state. With the help of a database of historical-national monuments, we will look at their mediating function

between the commemorated personalities and the locations of their commemorative presence. An analysis of this dataset offers a new way of studying the relationship between national and regional layers of collective memory.

Italy offers an excellent test case to explore the possibilities of this data-driven methodology. The unification of a nationally Italian collective memory corresponds directly with the unification of the Italian state out of the pre-existing, old historical regions with their own, well-established historical consciousness. While a national memory culture becomes apparent in the late nineteenth century, public monuments remain predominantly local/regional in orientation, with only a few memory figures (especially Garibaldi) commemorated on a truly national scale.

The dataset

This approach requires a comprehensive dataset in which to trace these processes with any claim, if not to completeness, then at least to representativity. Over the last decade, the Amsterdam-based *Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms* (SPIN), led by Joep Leerssen, has created an enormous relational database of historical source material and metadata aimed to study the origins and spread of romantic nationalism across virtually all of Europe's cultural communities and across the entire spectrum of cultural production.[3] During my time as a researcher at SPIN, I have spent considerable effort to streamline and enlarge the collection of historical monuments (mostly statues), which, at the moment of writing, captures metadata on ca. 8500 monuments from all over Europe. The most important criteria for inclusion in the database are that the monuments are (1) secular not religious, excluding

Figure 1: The distribution of monuments across the Italian lands in 1918, mapped according to coordinates (fetched from geonames.org) of towns in which the monuments are located.

the enormous amount of church-related statues that have no particular connection to nationalism, and (2) that they are located in the public sphere, accessible to the general public, excluding statues in private collections and museums.

As always with cultural data, it is hard to estimate the level of representativity of the dataset, especially on a European scale, as information on public monuments is not equally available online. This is an added reason to focus on the Italian case, a country that is relatively well documented. To systematize the method of data collection, I have worked along the two main axes of this database: *places* and *persons*. First of all, I inventoried monuments from the 25 most populated Italian cities and the 9 remaining regional capitals.[4] From this, I assembled a checklist of all persons commemorated in these cities and used that checklist to look for monuments dedicated to these persons in other places as well. This yielded a dataset of 732 monuments placed on Italian territory up to 1918, distributed over 206 towns, and dedicated to 312 memory figures. Almost 50 percent of these were created during the last three decades of the nineteenth century, with monument production reaching its absolute peak in the 1880s.[5] The number of monuments was increased tenfold between 1850 and 1918. The geographical centre of activity lies in the north-western and central regions (Fig. 1). Rome was by far the most productive (counting 144 monuments by 1918), followed by Milan (57) and Florence (54). By far the most popular dedicatee was Giuseppe Garibaldi (131), followed by King Victor Emmanuel II (43), and Giuseppe Mazzini (23).

A network of places and persons

The database is designed to capture, most importantly, (1) when the monument was erected, (2) where the monument is located, and (3) to

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whom the monument is dedicated. In this sense, each monument forms a datable connection between a person and a place. This enables us to visualize the relational patterns between places and persons as a network that develops over time (as tracked by the dates of monument placements). In the network visualizations presented below, the places are grouped together in twenty regions.[6] The regions are represented by the black nodes, the persons by the red nodes, and the monuments by the green nodes. The size of the red nodes (i.e. the persons) is determined, not by the number of connections, but by their betweenness centrality in the presented network. In order to study its development,
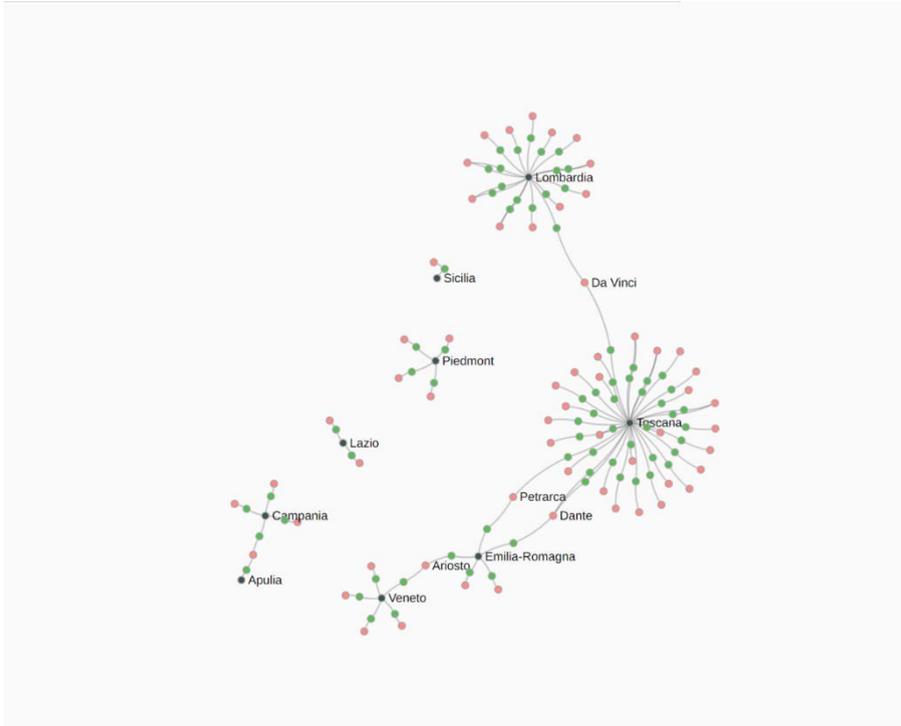

Figure 2: A network graph showing the relationships between Italian memory figures (red) and regions (black) as connected through the presence of commemorative statuary (green) at the start of 1850. It counts 72 monuments and 59 dedicatees.

we will examine the network at three points in time: in 1850 (Fig. 2), in 1870 (Fig. 3), and in 1918 (Fig. 4).[7]
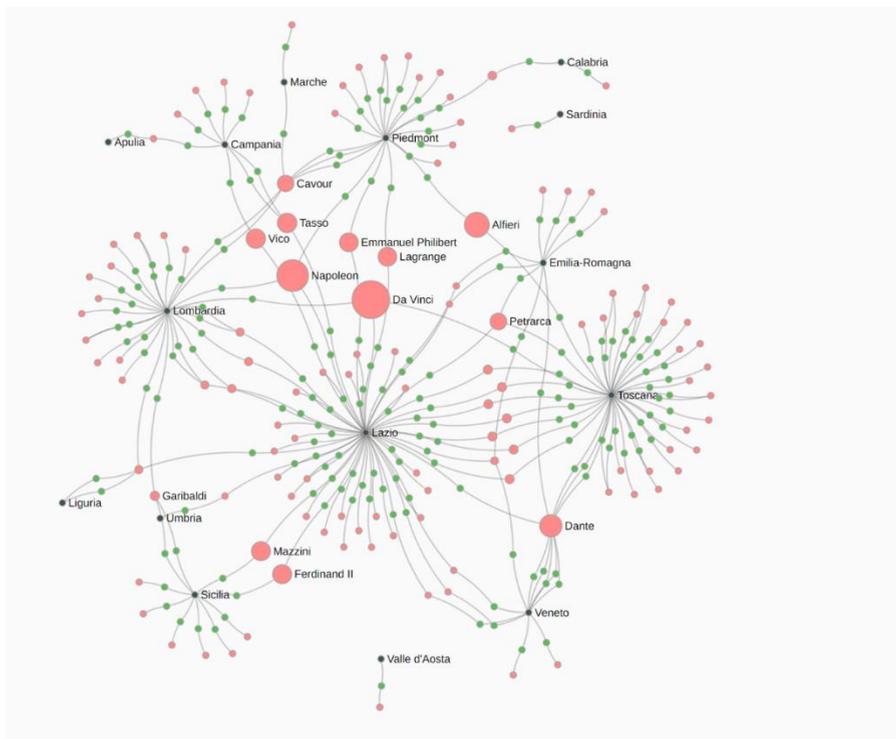

Figure 3: A network graph showing the relationships between Italian memory figures (red) and regions (black) as connected through the presence of commemorative statuary (green) at the start of 1870. It counts 176 monuments and 120 dedicatees.

In 1850 (Fig. 2), the development of Italian memory culture was still clearly in its pre-national phase. Some regions, especially Tuscany and Lombardy, already show signs of historical consciousness through public statuary. But there is almost no overlap, no shared points of reference; each of the regions cultivates its own memory figures.

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By 1870 (Fig. 3) the connections between the regions had already multiplied, with especially late medieval and Renaissance figures transcending regional borders. Dante Alighieri emerged as a national hero during the centenary celebrations of his birth in 1865, when at least six monuments were dedicated to him, especially in the regions of Veneto and Tuscany; in that year, his native Florence became the capital of the new Italian state.[8] Meanwhile, Leonardo da Vinci and the eighteenth-century poet Vittorio Alfieri act as the only connectors between, respectively, Tuscany and Lombardy, and Tuscany and Piedmont, resulting in a high centrality score. The region of Lazio, i.e. the Papal States, is positioned at the centre of the network, indicating that Rome, even before it was annexed by the Italian state in 1871, emerged as its mnemo-cultural capital. This is partly the result of the conscious effort to centralize Italian memory. At the Pincio Gardens, for instance, a national pantheon was created on the initiative of Mazzini (who himself would become a major memory figure later in the nineteenth century). The busts placed in these gardens, added in several series across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were not only selected to represent various historical periods, or walks of life, but perhaps especially the various regions of the Italian peninsula.[9] The impact of such a centralization of memory outside the city of Rome was, of course, relatively limited; it points merely to the intention of creating a national memory by collecting and acknowledging local and regional memory figures, rather than to the reality of a shared memoryscape. Connections between the other regions are still relatively few, and many of them (e.g. Sardinia, Apulia, Abruzzo) are not, or barely, integrated into the network. Consequently, at this stage, Italian memory culture cannot be convincedly called 'national' in scope.

Figure 4: A network graph showing the relationships between Italian memory figures (red) and regions (black) as connected through the presence of commemorative statuary (green) at the start of 1918. It counts 732 monuments and 312 dedicatees.

The situation had changed significantly by 1918 (Fig. 4). The regions (including Lazio) and their specific memory figures are now located more at the periphery of the network, which is now centred around a field of shared memory figures. This indicates that the centralization of memory has made way for a unification of memory, following the unification of the Italian state. The emerged national memoryscape is also dominated by nineteenth-century figures who explicitly spurred national unification, either in the cultural sphere, such as the composer

Giuseppe Verdi or the poet Giosuè Carducci, or in the political sphere, such as Camillo Benso di Cavour, Mazzini, and, especially, 'father of the nation' Garibaldi, whose 132 monuments are scattered across seventeen out of the twenty regions.[10] In terms of centrality, Garibaldi is only surpassed by King Victor Emmanuel II, due to him having a monument in Valle d'Aosta, so forming a rare connection to the otherwise isolated region.

Together, this handful of national heroes are good for 246 of the 720 monuments in the database. However, this also indicates that public statuary still predominantly resolved around local and regional memory figures. Most of the dedicatees (210 out of 318) are unique to one region, and only 24 of them are represented in more than two. To be sure, this regional orientation does not necessarily imply a regionalist (anti-national) tendency, as cities and regions tend to boost their prestige by celebrating *local* writers, scholars, patriots and politicians who are claimed to be of *national* importance, exemplifying the localities' participation in national culture and history.

Conversely, monuments dedicated to the transregional, national heroes, like Garibaldi, are usually also inspired by events that happened at that specific location; they are not distributed randomly across the land. When we plot Garibaldi's statues alongside his life itinerary (see Fig. 5) we can easily see that their distribution is predominantly confined to his theatre of operations (mostly in the North and in Sicily).[11] This indicates that the monuments do not commemorate Garibaldi per se, but his involvement in events that happened in and around a specific place. One could even argue that the potential of Garibaldi as a nation-wide memory figure is partly determined by the wide range of his travels during his life. It should also be noted, however, that some of Garibaldi's monuments are located in places that were apparently never visited by Garibaldi, indicating an attempt to homogenize the mnemonic landscape.
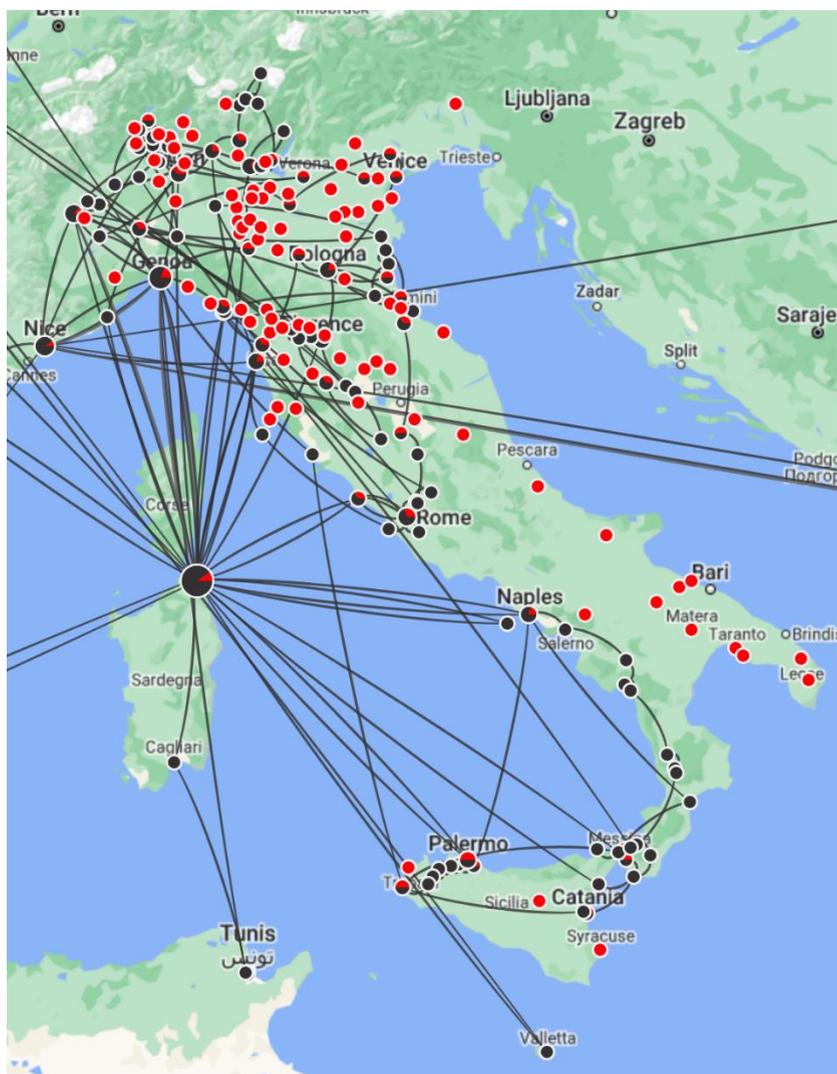
Figure 5: A visualization showing the places visited by Garibaldi (black), with lines approximating his movement between them, alongside places where monuments eventually were dedicated to his memory (red). The scenario is accessible online at: https://ernie.uva.nl/viewer.p/21/73/scenario/175/geo/

In this sense, Garibaldi truly transcends the status of a historical memory figure, confined in time and place, and becomes a symbol of nationhood.[12]

Concluding remarks

First and foremost, this paper was aimed to showcase a data-driven, digital method for studying commemorative monuments as virtual connections between the historical personalities to which they are dedicated, and the places where they are located. Of course, this method necessarily involved a certain reduction of complexity. For example, we have pretended as if all monuments have equal status and significance, while we all know that an equestrian statue on a central town square expresses a higher level of valuation than a bust in the Pincio gardens. What we have demonstrated here, however, is that the (quantitative) intensification of monument production in late-nineteenth-century, post-unification Italy, was accompanied by an increasing (qualitative) integration of the Italian memoryscape. In the second half of the nineteenth century, and especially after 1870, the regions were increasingly linked into a complex system of shared memories; herein we can recognize the emergence of a national memory culture. Nevertheless, a large portion of the monuments were still dedicated to memory figures specific to the region, with only a handful of characters commemorated on a truly national scale, signifying a complex interrelationship between regional and national identities in collective memory.

Endnotes

¹ E.g. T. Nipperdey, ‚Nationalidee und Nationaldenkmal in Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert', in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 206/3 (1968), 529-585; G. Mosse, *Nationalization of the Masses: Political symbolism and mass movements in Germany, from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York, 1975); A. Ben-Amos, 'Monuments and memory in French nationalism', in: *History and Memory* 5/2 (1993), 50-81; L. Berggren & L. Sjöstedt, *L'ombra dei grandi: Monumenti e politca monumentale a Roma, 1870-1895* (Rome, 1996); C. Reyero, *La escultura conmemorativa en España: La edad de oro del monumento público, 1820-1914* (Madrid, 1999); J. Leerssen & A. Rigney (eds.), *Commemorating writers in nineteenth-century Europe: Nation-building and centenary fever* (London, 2014); J. Leerssen, 'The nation and the city: Urban festivals and cultural mobilization', in: *Nations and nationalism* 21/1 (2015), 2-20; B. Varga, *The monumental nation: Magyar nationalism and symbolic politics in fin-de-siècle Hungary* (New York 2016). The extent to which this nationalist message was understood by ordinary people has recently been problematized; see A. Petterson, 'The monumental landscape from below: Public statues, popular interaction and nationalism in late nineteenth-century Amsterdam', in: *Urban History* 46/4 (2019), 722-746. On the recent conflicts surrounding public statuary, see A. Rigney 'Toxic Monuments and mnemonic regime change', in: *Studies on National Movements* 9 (2022), 7-41.

² Cf. N. Johnson, 'Cast in stone: Monuments, geography, and nationalism', in: *Society and Space* 13 (1995), 51-65; H. Walser Smith, 'Monuments, kitsch, and the sense of nation in Imperial Germany', in: *Central European History* 49/3;4 (2016), 322-340.

³ This database is available online at ernie.uva.nl and at ernie.nise.eu

⁴ I.e. Rome, Milan, Naples, Turin, Palermo, Genoa, Bologna, Florence, Bari, Catania, Verona, Venice, Messina, Padua, Trieste, Brescia, Parma, Taranto, Prato, Modena, Reggio Calabria, Reggio Emilia, Perugia, Ravenna, Livorno, Cagliari, Catanzaro, Ancona, L'Aquila, Trento, Potenza, Campobasso, and Aosta.

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5 In this, Italy follows a well-established European pattern; cf. E. Hobsbawm, 'Mass-producing traditions: Europe, 1870-1914', in: E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), 263-307.

6 I.e. Lombardy, Lazio, Campania, Veneto, Sicily, Emilia-Romagna, Piedmont, Apulia, Tuscany, Calabria, Sardinia, Liguria, Marche, Abruzzo, Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, South Tyrol, Umbria, Basilicata, Molise, and Valle d'Aosta.

7 All visualizations presented here were created with *Nodegoat*, the digital research environment, with built-in visualization tools, developed by Lab1100. For more information see: nodegoat.net

8 See also M. Yousefzadeh, *City and nation in the Italian Unification: The national festivals of Dante Alighieri* (New York, 2011).

9 The Pincio Garden is part of Europe-wide trend of public pantheons; see generally E. Brouwers, *Public pantheons in revolutionary Europe: Comparing cultures of remembrance, c.1790-1840* (Basingstoke, 2011).

10 Garibaldi's status as a 'father of the nation' in Italy is comparable to that of Bismarck in Germany; cf. R. Gerwarth and L. Riall, '"Fathers of the Nation?" Bismarck, Garibaldi and the Cult of Memory in Germany and Italy', in: *European History Quarterly* 39/3 (2009), 388-413.

11 With thanks to SPIN-assistants Mercy Arendt and Maja Wilkowski for collecting data on the travels of Garibaldi (and other important figures in the history of nineteenth-century nationalism).

12 A similar thing happened with the memory of the 1798 insurrection in Ireland; see: J. Leerssen, 'Convulsion recalled: Aftermath and cultural memory (post 1798 Ireland)', in: M. Tamm (ed.), *Afterlife of Events: Perspectives on mnemohistory* (New York, 2015), 134-153.