Our twenty-first century world is constantly evolving and changing; innovators look to the future for ‘the next best thing’ and urbanization and industrialization have become the norm. Buildings are always in need of renovation, and new technology is released every year to make our lives easier and our work more effective. As a result, we are often removing ourselves more and more from our own past. There still are some places, however, where people see the value in looking back, rather than looking forward. They see the importance of preserving their heritage and their traditions, as they form an essential part of their identity. One such place is the country of Italy, where the amount of preservation that has taken place, both on national and regional levels, is quite remarkable.

Italy is broken up into twenty different regions, each one with its own unique identity, tradition, and culture. Lazio, in particular, is located in central Italy. It is home to the capital of Italy, Rome; although its modern role is certainly not what defines it. When referring to the preservation of history and heritage in Rome, most structures, artifacts, and symbols stem from two different eras of Roman history, generally, the Pagan and Christian eras.

The mythological foundation of Rome takes us back to roughly 745 BCE. According to legend, twin brothers Romulus and Remus, abandoned at birth, raised by a she-wolf, and destined to become the founders of a great city. Even today, the image of a wolf nursing twin boys is one of the most iconic images of the city, appearing on the badge for the local soccer team, AS Roma. The legitimacy of this legend is of course questionable, but it is a story that
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has stood the test of time for almost two and a half millennia and is as much a part of the city’s identity as any of the actual structures. Another more visible and tangible reminder of Rome’s beginnings is the Circus Maximus. In its heyday, this stadium hosted chariot races and would have been the main source of entertainment for the population of the Seven Hills. Today it is little more than a shallow valley, but the outline of the stadium and track are still clearly visible. In another city or another country, it is very likely that this now useless field would have been filled in and reused, as is sometimes the case for historical sites. Luckily this landmark is still preserved, giving visitors a small glimpse into Rome’s past.

Following a short reign of kings that began with Romulus, the city evolved into a Republic ruled by a Senate. Unbeknownst to many visitors, references to the Republic can be found everywhere in the city, from the public transportation, to the manhole covers, to just about any public work you can imagine. The letters SPQR are inscribed, painted, or written all over the city. These form an acronym for the Latin phrase Senātus Populusque Rōmānus, which means “The Senate and the People of Rome”. It was this era of pagan Rome that made the Forum so famous because it served as the location of the Senate. This was the center of life in Rome for centuries, and although it is now in ruins, it offers a unique view on life in ancient Rome and the origins of the city. Throughout much of the ancient Roman period, the Forum served as a place where people of all social classes could gather to discuss politics, catch up on news, or simply be social. In a similar way, the Forum is still providing that same atmosphere today. It may no longer be a site of politics and society, but it still attracts hundreds of visitors everyday who come to explore and learn more about life in ancient Rome. Rome’s architecture transports us back in time a feat few other cities are able to achieve.

Following the collapse of the Republic came the most famous period in Roman history: the Empire. After the assassination of Julius Caesar and the subsequent civil war, the first emperor, Augustus, took the throne. One of the major projects that he commissioned during his reign was the construction of the Pantheon. Today a Catholic church, it is one of the best-preserved structures of the ancient world. Only a few decades after the completion of the Pantheon, the Flavian dynasty of emperors began work on an enormous amphitheater that is today arguably Rome’s most iconic landmark: the Colosseum. Both of these locations are, given their intended purposes, ironically perfect places to experience the crossover between the Pagan and Christian eras. Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity throughout the Empire in the 4th century CE before splitting the territory into an eastern and a western half and ruling from the new eastern capital of Constantinople, effectively abandoning Rome and the western half of the empire. The Church, based in Vatican City, filled the gap left by the Roman state. Upon establishing themselves, Christians needed
places to worship and sought to remove pagan iconography from the city. They converted the Pantheon into a church and declared the Colosseum a holy site where many Christians were martyred.

Unfortunately, not all ancient sites were converted quite as cleanly as the Colosseum and the Pantheon. The Basilica di San Clemente, one of Rome’s nearly 1,000 churches, serves as a prime example of messier repurposing in Rome. At the entrance of the Basilica di San Clemente, the columns that line the room and support the building are noticeably mismatched, which suggests that they were likely all stolen from various pagan sites and reused. Beneath the church, visitors can view what was clearly another church that was partially destroyed in order to create a foundation for the Basilica di San Clemente. Furthermore, beneath even those partial ruins, there is evidence of what used to be a pagan temple for the secretive Cult of Mithras. The temple had been lost and forgotten for millennia, but is today open to the public for all to experience another side of the ancient world.

Another famous site that was built over ruins is Piazza Navona. With its Bernini fountains, open space, and traffic-free walkways, it is one of the most beautiful locations in the city where visitors can enjoy various street performances or watch artists at work. Due to this peaceful atmosphere, it may seem surprising that the reason this open space exists is because it used to be a racetrack, as evidenced by the oval shaped road surrounding the piazza. The Pompey Theatre is similarly buried and built over today. The road and buildings currently standing in its place are curved to match the semicircular outline of the theatre. Repurposing, for better or for worse, did preserve some of Pagan Rome, but the Christian era brought in a lot of its own designs, such as the construction of new churches and the establishment of Vatican City, that have come to be defining features of modern Rome.

The stunning and storied architecture is not Rome’s only claim to fame. Italy’s capital is also known for its rich cuisine. Rome has particularly excellent artichokes, known as Carciofi alla Romana, which hail from Rome’s Jewish Ghetto. Carciofi alla Romana are renowned throughout Italy as a local delicacy in which Rome’s Jewish population takes great pride.

Rome is by no means the only richly cultured place in Italy. The southernmost region of mainland Italy, Calabria, is home to many scenic mountains and coastlines, as well as museums and medieval castles. Riace, a small town in Calabria, hosts a multiday religious festival that highlights the region’s local culture. Local bands and musicians perform while people of all ages dance and enjoy the festivities. Whether young or old, the people of Riace all come together to celebrate their local heritage and traditions during this festival.

From Riace, it is a short trip over to
Sicily, whose culture and traditions are very unique, due in large part to its very particular history. In the early days of ancient Rome, Sicily was actually controlled by the Greeks. All of southern Italy, in fact, was part of a region called the Magna Graecia, or ‘Greater Greece’, and was dominated by Greek culture. Evidence of this time is still evident in the incredibly preserved Valley of the Temples, dedicated to Greek, not Roman, deities. Another reminder of the Greek heritage in Sicily is the ancient city of Siracusa, which was famously home to Archimedes and eventually ousted Athens as the most powerful city in the Greek world.

Sicily eventually came under Roman rule, but after the fall of the Empire, Sicily became its own independent kingdom. This contributed to the development of Sicilian culture and its divergence from the culture of the mainland. This is evidenced in the fact that Sicily has its own language, which, although similar to Italian, is too distinct to be just a regional dialect. Another major difference between Sicilian and mainland Italian culture is in their culinary customs. For instance, it is common practice for Italians today to shop at a supermarket to buy groceries, whereas in Sicily supermarkets are almost nonexistent and people shop regularly at daily, outdoor markets, as they would have in years past before the development of supermarkets. Catania’s fish market is arguably the most famous of these outdoor markets; its abundant stores of fresh seafood attract huge crowds everyday. As in most Mediterranean cultures, fish is a critical part of the Sicilian diet, and Sicily consequently has a thriving fishing industry. One particular town that boasts a booming fish industry is Modica, a small seaside town in southern Sicily where one can find the last master shipbuilder in the region. This shipmaster preserves the long-standing traditions of shipbuilding that he learned from a line of masters before him.

Apart from fish, Sicilian cuisine is home to several unique foods that are not found in other regions of Italy. For example, while fried food is not too common in the rest of Italy, it is a staple in Sicily. The most quintessential Sicilian food is called arancino. These fried riceballs are traditionally stuffed with cheese and a ragu sauce, though anything can go in them. They were originally developed in the 10th century for nobility to be able to carry a portable meal with them while they hunted. They subsequently became very popular among the general population and are still a local favorite to this day. Lemons feature prominently in Sicilian cuisine as well, due to the abundance of lemons grown locally in Sicily and southern Italy. Sicilians frequently consume a unique, icy lemon-based frozen dessert, called granita, and a lemon-based liquor, called limoncello. Limoncello is meant to be sipped after a meal to aide with digestion and can be found throughout all of Italy, although it is predominantly produced and consumed in the southern regions.

At the opposite corner of Italy from Sicily resides Venice, which is unlike any other city in Italy. Venice was founded when invasions forced residents of various cities to abandon their
homes and flee to outlying islands. Due to the city’s topography, being situated as it is on a few small islands, there are no cars. The only ways to get around are by foot or by boat, including Venice’s iconic gondolas. They are no longer the most practical mode of transportation, but the canals are still lined with them and steering gondolas is considered a very serious practice. It takes years of training to become a certified gondolier, and the entire trade is regulated by the city. The gondolas are an important part of Venetian tradition, and so the city mandates that certain dress and conduct requirements be met so that this tradition is not lost.

West of Venice, the rest of northern Italy is a very eclectic assortment of regions. It is often considered the most industrial area of Italy, in part because of the large fashion industry in Milan and the supercar industry in Modena. Northern Italy’s comparatively greater industrialization relative to the southern regions is due to its geographic location, as well as its mountainous terrain and harsh climate. Northern Italy’s proximity to the rest of Europe makes exporting goods cheaper than it would be from southern regions, and its topography renders it ill-suited for an agricultural way of life.

The north is not entirely industrial, however, as it is the unofficial home to the Slow Food movement, an international organization dedicated to providing access to food that is good, clean, and fair and celebrates local food traditions and producers. This offers stark contrast to the industrialization usually associated with northern Italy, but has earned Modena, in the Emilia-Romagna region, the nickname, “the land of fast cars and slow food.”

The most northwestern region in Italy is Valle d’Aosta. Since this region borders France and Switzerland, French is unsurprisingly an official language there. Additionally, over half of the population speaks a local language called Valdôtain, a derivative of Celtic. The region that is now Valle d’Aosta was originally inhabited by Celts and has been occupied by several cultures throughout the past few centuries due to its desirable location, and Valdôtain developed from Celtic into what it is today as a result of these many different occupations.

While northern Italy may be a very eclectic collection of regions, they are all united by a common denominator: their diet. Whereas most of Italy centers their dishes on pasta, northern Italians eat risotto, a type of creamy rice dish. Risotto is also served in a more traditional manner—one on a plate or in a bowl—than its Sicilian fried rice counterpart, arancino, which is often served on just a napkin.

The importance of these regional traditions and identities is not lost on the Italian population. They understand what a diverse culture they have and how critical it is to maintain it. For instance, the National Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions in Rome contains a gallery that showcases display cases for every region in Italy that aim to highlight the unique traditions and cultures of each region. Furthermore, to protect and preserve the small farms that are so vital to Italy’s heritage, a quality assurance label is applied to qualifying Italian food products. This label, called Denominazione di Origine Protetta (Protected Designation of Origin, or DOP), is given to products such as wine, cheese, and olive oil that meet certain standards of locally produced quality. This is in contrast to the majority of the developed world, in which consumers will often buy a more inexpensive product even if it means that the quality is poor. The DOP label ensures consumers that they are buying a high quality, healthily produced product, even if it is more expensive than mass-produced, cheap products. This gives the small scale, local producers a chance to compete
with larger, industrial producers, offering some protection to the small producers who are preserving Italian culture.

On Mt. Etna, very close to Catania, Sicily, there are dozens of small vineyards that cultivate unique grapes that will only grow in the rich volcanic soil at certain altitudes. This means that for these growers, even if they wanted to expand their business they cannot. Mt. Etna is emerging, and is already considered by some to be one of the elite wine producing regions in the world, despite the small quantity. Unfortunately, without outside help and protection, many of the unique wines would be lost to a cheaper industrial alternatives.

It is easy to perceive Italy as one cohesive nation with a uniform culture, but it is important to recognize how each region has its own distinct culture and history. With minimal investigation, it is quite apparent that Lazio is vastly different from Sicily, which in turn is vastly different from Valle d’Aosta, and so forth. Once exposed to the uniqueness of each region, it is difficult to view Italy as just one place. In traveling across Italy, it is guaranteed that each destination will be different than previous. The country of Italy is not so much one culture as it is a collection of twenty different cultures. From the local food, to the local traditions, to the local heritage, each region in Italy has its own unique flavor. There is, however, one very crucial factor that all Italian regions have in common: they preserve their heritage and traditions. Italy thus stands out as a nation that celebrates its past in a world of nations that continuously look to change and outdo one another. Italy’s regions are each heading in a slightly different direction, but they are all unified in that what they value is where they came from and not where they are going.

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