

The Paradoxes of Antiquity in Modern Italy

Review of: Philippe Foro (ed.), *L'Italie et l'Antiquité du Siècle des lumières à la chute du fascisme*, Toulouse, Presses universitaires du Midi, 2017, 303 p., ISBN: 9782810705030, € 23,00.

Helen Roche & Kyriakos N. Demetriou (eds.), *Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2018, 471 p., ISBN: 9789004299061, € 165,00.

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The burgeoning scholarship of recent years on Fascist Italy has shown the extraordinary importance that classical antiquity (in particular, of course, Ancient Rome) held under Mussolini's regime. Thanks to the work of, among others, Jan Nelis on the cult of *romanità*, that of Joshua Arthurs on fascist classical archaeology, as well as the groundbreaking edition of the *Codex Fori Mussolini* published by Han Lamers and Bettina Reitz-Joose, it has become manifest to what extent Fascist Italy was obsessed with and entrenched in a particular understanding of the classics and the classical past. Mussolini's dictatorship was arguably the most self-consciously (neo)classical regime in modern Europe, with totalitarian aspirations that left deep marks in the development of scholarship, art, architecture and literature throughout the twenties and thirties. In many of its public manifestations, from the cult of Mussolini as a second Augustus to the classicizing ornamental schemes of new buildings all over the Italian peninsula, the Fascist regime presented itself as the natural progeny of antiquity, in a way, as the climax of the classics.

Recent scholarship has done much to reveal the far-reaching expressions as well as intrinsic ambiguities of this classical fixation of Fascist Italy, but it may be argued that (at least) two questions still remain largely unanswered. The first question is to what extent the Fascist focus on antiquity differed or followed from long-term 'classical' tendencies in Italian society since the Risorgimento. Did Mussolini's dictatorship involve a clear rupture with or rather a continuation of earlier assessments of antiquity in the development of the Italian nation state? The second question relates to the continuously hotly discussed meaning of 'fascism', in particular as regards the relationship between Fascist Italy and its totalitarian partner, Nazi Germany. Did Mussolini's obsession with antiquity find a counterpart in Hitler's regime – and if so (or if not), what does this mean for our understanding of Italian Fascism, and of fascism in general, as a totalitarian system and ideology? In sum, two aspects of the role of classical antiquity in Fascist Italy are still to be scrutinized in detail: its historical roots and its historiographical consequences.

The two edited volumes under review are both ideally situated to answer precisely these two questions. Bringing together a range of scholars from different disciplines, they have much potential in giving an overview of the scholarship up to

date as well as exploring new terrain. The first volume, edited by Philippe Foro from the University of Toulouse, expressly takes a long-term perspective, discussing the importance of antiquity in Fascist Italy within a larger timeframe from the eighteenth century onwards. The second, published in the well-established series of Brill Companions to the Classics, explicitly sets as its aim to compare the use of the 'classics' in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Yet despite the high potential both volumes have to offer, the overall impression they leave behind is one of missed opportunities.

The volume edited by Foro is partly based on a conference that dates back to 2011. Unfortunately, some of the recent literature published during this extended process of publication is not referred to in the various contributions, which make the volume as such a bit dated. More importantly, the volume lacks a clear line of reasoning that weaves together the various parts into a structured narrative. While many of the single contributions offer elaborated analyses of interesting material (such as Mariella Colin's study of *romanità* in Fascist children books), the overall result is that of a rich but disjointed tapestry. One reason for this lack of direction is the absence of a critical discussion of which kind of antiquity is at stake. Roman antiquity, of course, is central to the Italian experience, but it is by no means the only ancient heritage discussed in the volume, which takes a broader perspective that includes Greek antiquity (e.g. in Nathalie de Haan's fine chapter on classical archaeology in *Magna Grecia*), Etruscan antiquity (e.g. in Marie-Laurence Haack's analysis of the writings of Julius Evola) and Biblical antiquity (e.g. in Verdi's *Nabucco*, discussed by Michel Lehmann). Arguably, it is precisely the diversity of this multifarious ancient heritage that defines the paradoxes intrinsic to modern Italy's relationship with its ancient past. These paradoxes are frequently alluded to in the volume (e.g. the striking disinterest of Mazzini for antiquity, despite his being the intellectual torchbearer of the Risorgimento; the equally striking disinterest for Roman Pompeii in Risorgimento circles; or D'Annunzio's preference for Greek antiquity, despite his ultra-nationalism), but the volume at large lacks a wider attempt to explain how these paradoxes came into being and developed. As a result, the volume does not succeed in offering a new comprehensive interpretation of the long-term impact of antiquity on modern Italian history since the Enlightenment.

The Brill volume, edited by Helen Roche and Kyriakos N. Demetriou, suffers from an analogous shortcoming, although it contains a very good opening chapter by Roche that convincingly sets out an agenda for comparing the ways in which Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany appropriated the classics. In this context, however, it seems to be taken for granted that Italian antiquity should be identified with Roman antiquity – no mention is made of *Magna Grecia*, or for example Fascist archaeology in Albania, which could offer some remarkable comparisons with German 'colonialist' archaeology in Greece. Moreover, most of the chapters take a narrow focus on one of the two countries only, which makes the professed comparative aim of the volume rather difficult to achieve. The two exceptions (a chapter by Arthur J. Pomeroy on cinema and one by James J. Fortuna on architecture) could very well have been extended further (in this context, the comparative chapter in the Foro volume by Sarah Rey, on the classicists Gaetano de Sanctis and Kurt von Fritz, might have served as a model). Each of the specific chapters focusing on Italy (by Dino Piovan on ancient historians, Jan Nelis on the political religion of *romanità*, Joshua Arthurs on the 1937 *Mostra Augustea* and Flavia Marcello on architecture and urban planning) offer clear overviews of the topics discussed. As is entirely justified in a *Companion*, they do not contain new research but rather summarize the existing scholarship for a wider audience of non-specialists. The important questions on the role of classical antiquity in Fascist Italy remain however unanswered.

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