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# The ancient world. Interpretations and public uses of antiquity in Fascist Italy

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This review of recent Italian publications on the public use of antiquity in post-unification Italy pays particular attention to the myths of *romanità* during the Fascist era. Significant changes in the historiographical debate in recent decades are highlighted, including the fact that the study of antiquity has become a privileged means of understanding broader political, cultural and social processes relating to the legitimisation of power, the role of images and exhibitions, urban space and the importance attributed to architecture, archaeology and art. The discussion on the public uses of antiquity and the myths of *romanità* reveals the many complexities of this issue, from the protagonists via the tools used to transmit history to the lines of continuity and rupture between liberal Italy, Fascist Italy and republican Italy.

**Key words:** Fascism, myths of Rome, public use of antiquity, historiography

## A new cycle of studies

In recent years, a growing number of scholars have become interested in the recurrence of antiquity in the history of post-unification Italy, particularly during the Fascist *ventennio*. The extensive dialogue between classical and contemporary scholars, which is enriched by the specific expertise of historians of architecture, art, archaeology and law, is reflected in the large number of publications on this subject.<sup>1</sup> The centenary of the March on Rome is likely to have prompted several research projects focusing on these issues, primarily

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<sup>1</sup> This article will focus on the following four publications: Elvira Migliario, Gianni Santucci (eds.), «*Noi figli di Roma*». *Fascismo e mito della romanità*, Florence, Le Monnier, 2022; Fabrizio Oppedisano, Paola S. Salvatori, Federico Santangelo (eds.), *Costruire la nuova Italia. Miti di Roma e fascismo*, Rome, Viella, 2023; Sergio Brillante, «*Anche là è Roma*». *Antico e antichisti nel colonialismo italiano*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2023; Andrea Avalli, *Il mito della prima Italia. L'uso politico degli Etruschi tra fascismo e dopoguerra*, Rome, Viella, 2024. Other recent books are cited throughout the article.

concerning the myth of Rome and *romanità* ('Romanness').<sup>2</sup> Although anniversaries can provide important opportunities for wide-ranging projects, the multidisciplinary approach mentioned above should not be reduced to a mere commemoration. This approach, which dates back at least to the 1970s, is the result of both the natural development of the disciplines involved and the demands of the rapidly changing field of historiography.

Initially focused on propaganda and the extent to which intellectuals and institutions adhered to nationalism, studies on the role of the ancient world in recent Italian history gained momentum at the beginning of the new century, 'emerging as a significant aspect for interpreting the relationship between culture, propaganda and politics in the Fascist era'.<sup>3</sup> They gradually intersected with research on Fascism as a political religion, which reconstructed the regime's ideological and cultural dimension, and the decisive role of art historians and archaeologists in mediating the Fascist concept of *romanità*.<sup>4</sup> More generally, and also with regard to the history of contemporary Italy, these issues are important because they demonstrate how Italianness was imposed and the methods used to nationalise the masses. The relationship with the past could not be ignored, as it was an integral part of the legitimisation of Risorgimento nationalism and, subsequently, of the different ways in which Italy was conceived after 1861.<sup>5</sup> The result is an invaluable observatory that can shed light not only on the evolution of historiography, but also on the troubled effort of patriotic pedagogy, which involved the ruling classes, political parties and intellectual protagonists in the various stages of unified Italy — albeit with varying methods and results.

The internal reasons for this renewed interest of scholars and the broadening of sources and research approaches confirm that the 'double journey' into the past has been an important achievement in the recent historiographical debate. The attention given to the public uses of history has provided long-term perspectives based on how historical moments, issues and figures around which

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the special issue edited by Brad Bouley and Richard Wittman *Italy and the Eternal City: Rome in History, Memory, and Imagination*, "California Italian Studies", 2024, 13, 1, permalink <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6wv730sn> (last accessed 15 March 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Paola S. Salvatori, *Fascismo e romanità*, "Studi Storici", 2014, n. 1, pp. 227–239, here p. 234, which offers a concise reconstruction of the Italian debate, starting with the well-known studies by Luciano Canfora and Mariella Cagnetta. See also Alessandra Tarquini, *Il mito di Roma nella cultura e nella politica del regime fascista: dalla diffusione del fascio littorio alla costruzione di una nuova città (1922-1943)*, "Cahiers de la Méditerranée", 2017, n. 95, pp. 139–150; Giovanni Belardelli, *Il mito fascista della romanità*, in Fernanda Roscetti (ed.), *Il classico nella Roma contemporanea. Mito, modelli, memoria*, Rome, Istituto nazionale di studi romani, 2002, pp. 327–358.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. P.S. Salvatori, *Fascismo e romanità*, cit., pp. 236 and ff.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Francesco Benigno and E. Igor Mineo (eds.), *L'Italia come storia. Primato, decadenza, eccezione*, Rome, Viella, 2020.

ambitious political operations have taken shape — each time linked to changes in the means of transmitting and circulating historical knowledge — have been projected into the present. The development of mass communication — which exploded after the First World War — gave a new, pervasive imprint to interactions between the past and the present, especially in the decades between the two world wars, and not only in Italy.<sup>6</sup> This has provided a rich opportunity for reflection, where the objective of historical research to dismantle falsifications does not contradict the equally powerful need to understand — following Bloch — the impact of myths, collective beliefs or even distorted uses of the past, in order to grasp the cultural universe of the societies in which they assert themselves. As Andrea Giardina suggested, we could even contend ‘that the strength and vitality of a political myth can sometimes be directly proportional to the degree of manipulation of the past: retrospective imagination is also part of political creativity’.<sup>7</sup>

The ancient world and, in particular, *romanità* continue to lie at the heart of these intertwining paths of history and memory, in all their various expressions. When questions are raised about representations and their public use, and their meaning is questioned, those paths become precious litmus tests for escaping the necessary but insufficient interpretation that highlights only their deviant and propagandistic nature.

Given the extent of the investment that the Fascist regime made in the past and its political, ideological and symbolic implications, it is not surprising that it continues to attract interest and attention.<sup>8</sup> When historians began to examine Fascism’s claim to ‘remake’ Italians, a systematic research effort was devoted to the collection of myths, rituals and symbols, taking the discussion beyond the boundaries of ‘classical’ interpretations. In 1985, in what was a relatively innovative book at the time, Pier Giorgio Zunino described the rich debate within Fascist culture as follows: given its various ‘souls’, the relationship with the past was a decisive card to legitimise itself and assert its idea of the present and future.<sup>9</sup> Discussing this view of history, Zunino believed that Fascism had shown a ‘need’ rather than a ‘desire’ for the past. He thus wanted to emphasise the ‘constructive’ tension projected towards the future and the privileged link with more recent periods of the national past, above all the Great War, which was considered the ‘steel pivot around which the entire process of remembrance revolved’.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Nicola Gallerano (ed.), *L'uso pubblico della storia*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Andrea Giardina, *Roma antica sui mari. Mussolini e la costruzione di un mito*, in E. Migliario, G. Santucci (eds.), «*Noi figli di Roma*», cit., p. 61. In general, see Id., *Ritorno al futuro: la romanità fascista*, in Andrea Giardina, André Vauchez, *Il mito di Roma da Carlo Magno a Mussolini*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2008, pp. 212–297.

<sup>8</sup> One of the most recent publications on the Fascist regime is Paola S. Salvatori (ed.), *Il fascismo e la storia*, Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Pier Giorgio Zunino, *L'ideologia del fascismo. Miti, credenze e valori nella stabilizzazione del regime*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1985.

<sup>10</sup> Ivi, p. 100.

In fact, the regime's relationship with modernity has been at the centre of a rich and controversial debate to which English-language studies have made a notable contribution. In turn, these studies have paid particular attention to representations of the past, political aesthetics and the symbolic dimension of politics.<sup>11</sup> In this regard, Zunino downplayed the significance of the myth of Rome, arguing that its excessive instrumental uses had ended up making it 'inanimate'.<sup>12</sup> Even Renzo De Felice's biography of Mussolini gave very little space to the subject, despite acknowledging that the image of Rome was a 'historical myth around which to try to bring together and unify the various national traditions and cultures, and which can be used to give the masses a national consciousness'.<sup>13</sup>

It is no coincidence that later research has consistently revised this interpretation. Without denying its propagandistic essence and rhetorical apparatus, which cannot be ignored if we want to understand the regime's cultural policy,<sup>14</sup> the myth of *romanità* is increasingly studied as a symbolic axis around which the Fascist imagination revolves, even in its relations with modernity. The latter was the result of 'a vast operation of decomposition and recomposition of the past', which gave rise to a 'fictitious but highly effective fusion due to the totalising form of the myth of Rome', and it looked to the Roman Republic for 'certain ethical models embodied by austere citizens deeply involved in the life of the state'. It also drew on the Principate — starting with the Augustan age — for 'the celebration of the chief architect of great legal structures', 'calm and satisfied' imperial power and the 'splendour of architecture and urbanism'.<sup>15</sup> The myth of *romanità* thus becomes an effective means of exploring the complexities of the Fascist concept of historical time, as well as measuring the aims and outcomes of a politics of memory and totalitarian pedagogy that pervaded many areas of public life. In doing so, it left a legacy that extends beyond the most immediately visible aspects of urban design.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Of the many existing publications, the following are worth mentioning: Marla S. Stone, *The Patron State: Culture & Politics in Fascist Italy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998; Claudio Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy*, Toronto-Buffalo-London, Toronto University Press, 2003; Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, London, Palgrave, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> P.G. Zunino, *L'ideologia del fascismo*, cit., p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce, II. Lo Stato totalitario 1936-1940*, Turin, Einaudi, 1981, p. 268.

<sup>14</sup> See the essays by Mario Isnenghi collected in *L'Italia del fascio*, Florence, Giunti, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> A. Giardina, *Roma antica sui mari*, cit., p. 61.

<sup>16</sup> Among Emilio Gentile's many works, it is worth mentioning *Il culto del littorio. La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1993; *Fascismo di pietra*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2008.

## Periodisation and directions of research

A detailed analysis of the individual essays included in the books under review is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, it will focus on a few key points and thematic connections. The books explore not only the activity of the scholars involved in the scientific debate, but also — and more importantly, in my view — cultural institutions and their initiatives, some major political and cultural events (e.g. the 1937 Augustan Exhibition), the architectural reorganisation of urban spaces and the importance attributed to art and archaeology. A first point worth mentioning is the decision of some authors to extend the chronological scope beyond the Fascist *ventennio*. In doing so, they adopt a broad periodisation that covers the situation at the turn of the century and extends the view beyond the Second World War, allowing us to identify breaks and continuities with representations of the ancient world.

This long time span is evident in Sergio Brillante's monograph. Split equally between the Liberal and Fascist periods, the book describes the role of the ancient world in colonial narratives, showing that *romanità* was central not only during the *ventennio*, but also between the end of the nineteenth century and the First World War. The defeat of the Italian soldiers at Dogali in 1887 and the military campaign to conquer Libya are the focal point of the analysis of the role of classical scholars, who tried to justify Italy's aspiration to overseas expansion by invoking the 'superior' civilisation inherited from Greek and Roman classicism.<sup>17</sup> Brillante describes the positions — which were far from unanimous — of some of the protagonists of the debate, beginning with Ruggero Bonghi, Giosuè Carducci and Arcangelo Ghisleri. The subsequent phase was that culminating in the 1911–12 biennium, dominated by Giovanni Pascoli (to whom the book's title refers), the nationalist Enrico Corradini and, above all, Gaetano Salvemini. The latter argued against nationalist interventionism and the 'fabrication of facts about Tripoli' in ancient texts, but Brillante dismisses this criticism as sterile because it was based on the flawed idea that the target was not so much 'the colonial enterprise itself, but the moral decline of public debate'. Among the 'professors', Achille Coen was one of the few to denounce both Italy's colonial policy and the 'tendentious interpretations of classical texts' used to justify it, although he remained isolated and was not very influential. Writing articles based on rigorous knowledge, Coen participated in the public debate, effectively assuming the role of a 'true intellectual'. The positions of opponents of the Libyan war, such as Felice Ramorino and Ettore Ciccotti, are also described as 'structurally ineffective'.

<sup>17</sup> In view of the extensive coverage given to the myth of Dogali, it would have been fitting to include a reference to Alfredo Oriani, whose *Fino a Dogali* (1889) became a key text in nationalist and subsequently Fascist circles: cfr. Vincenzo Pesante, *Il problema Oriani. Il pensiero storico-politico. Le interpretazioni storiografiche*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 1996.

During the Fascist era, Ciccotti was one of the very few who distanced himself from the celebratory tones of the Augustan myth — the only ‘shadow’ among ‘so much light of enthusiasm’, according to the young Etruscologist Massimo Pallottino (to whom I will return).<sup>18</sup>

Some useful chronological expansions can also be found in *Costruire la nuova Italia*, which aims to shed light on the relationship between politics and archaeology between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (including the Ostia excavations),<sup>19</sup> but also on legacies and influences in the post-war period. The examples are not limited to Italy or the Fascist era; there are chapters on Franco’s Spain,<sup>20</sup> the geopolitical implications in the debate of the 1950s,<sup>21</sup> and the persistence of images of Fascist *romanità* in certain contemporary contexts.<sup>22</sup> The book’s novelty lies in its focus on the ‘visual’ dimension of *romanità*, which is reconstructed through surveys of urban, iconographic and artistic aspects. Destined to materialise Fascism’s ability to ‘last’ and to project the ‘universal mission’ inherited from the past into the future, spaces and ‘places’ are at the centre of an original work in progress, which intersects research and public discourse, as demonstrated by recent controversies over the permanence of symbolic traces of the *ventennio* and their weight in present-day Italy.<sup>23</sup>

The regime’s monumental policy took the form of an urgent confrontation with *romanità*. In addition to the spectacular case of the Italian capital, the strategic importance of *romanità* in the urban fabric was also exploited in cities elevated to the status of ‘sentinels of the homeland’, such as Bolzano,<sup>24</sup> although the demolition in Trieste to recover Roman remains on the eastern border would have deserved a mention. *Romanità* represented a powerful symbolic resource, but it could also be perceived as limiting the full, autonomous expansion of contemporary trends. Whether it concerned the Case del Fascio, the headquarters of the Opera Nazionale Balilla (a Fascist youth organisation),<sup>25</sup> exhibitions or displays, modernist or vaguely ‘revolutionary’

<sup>18</sup> S. Brillante, “Anche là è Roma”, cit., pp. 70, 90, 79, 192.

<sup>19</sup> Grégoire Mainet, *La promozione degli scavi di Ostia Antica da parte del Comitato Nazionale Pro Roma Marittima (1904-1914)*, in F. Oppedisano, P.S. Salvatori, F. Santangelo (eds.), *Costruire la nuova Italia*, cit., pp. 47–70.

<sup>20</sup> Antonio Duplà-Ansuategui, *Fascism and Classical Architecture in Spain 1938-1956: Some Examples*, ivi, pp. 311–334.

<sup>21</sup> Giovanni Costenaro, *Un impero “Euro-Africano”? Geopolitica coloniale e mito di Roma dalla crisi del ’29 agli anni Cinquanta*, ivi, pp. 335–359.

<sup>22</sup> Joshua Arthurs, *How Often Do You Think of the Roman Empire? Lesson from the Study of Romanità*, ivi, pp. 361–372.

<sup>23</sup> See Giulia Albanese and Lucia Ceci (eds.), *I luoghi del fascismo. Memoria, politica, rimozione*, Rome, Viella, 2023. A key text in this area remains Vittorio Vidotto, *Roma contemporanea*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. Elvira Migliario, Hannes Obermair, *Roma sulle sponde del Talvera*, in E. Migliario, G. Santucci (eds.), «Noi figli di Roma», cit., pp. 135–159.

<sup>25</sup> Some examples can be found in Orietta Lanzarini, *Due allestimenti di Luigi Moretti. Il Padiglione dell’Opera Nazionale Balilla (1937) e la Rassegna dell’edilizia della Gioventù*  
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influences never disappeared.<sup>26</sup> However, following the conquest of Ethiopia, gigantism inspired by classical vestiges became prevalent as it was considered more suited to the political needs of militarising society and culture.<sup>27</sup>

A notable example is the never-completed project for the construction of the Palazzo del Littorio, which is analysed by Giorgio Lucaroni. The reference — in the competition brief — to the need for ‘continuity with the tradition of Rome’ revealed possible interpretations of the link between past and present, reflecting the tensions arising from ‘an artistic atmosphere marked by crisis and internal feuds, based not on conflict but on balance’. The shift in focus to the ‘values’ of that tradition, understood as constantly moving and renewing itself, made it possible to find a point of reconciliation between the different stylistic trends visible in the projects. According to Lucaroni, this explains the decisive — and political — significance assumed by a ‘discursive space’ centred on the categories of imperialism (later also translated into terms of race), Latin culture and Mediterraneanism. The competition brief thus invited architects to favour an approach to Fascist *romanità* that, on an architectural level (but monuments and street names could also be considered), was not limited to capturing the end result. Equally important were the ‘narratives, contexts, institutions and subjects’ that led one to treat ‘Italian architectural culture as a true “intellectual field” participating in the ideological evolution of the regime and, consequently, in its continuous reworking of the myth of *romanità*’.<sup>28</sup>

Lucaroni further explores this concept in his concise yet comprehensive monograph, which portrays the city as a setting for a patriotic pedagogy that also speaks through places and urban geometries. Through the analysis of ‘three different but complementary documentary sources: schools, intellectual circulation and competitive and exhibition production’, architectural culture is turned into the ideal terrain for exploring ‘the concepts and images that inform the “Fascist era”, the roots and horizons constructed by a regime of historicity that claims to bend not only art and culture but also historical discourse to the needs of politics’.<sup>29</sup>

*Italiana del Littorio* (1942), in F. Oppedisano, P.S. Salvatori, F. Santangelo (eds.), *Costruire la nuova Italia*, cit., pp. 115–140.

<sup>26</sup> On the ephemeral arches used by the regime, see Pier Luigi Tucci: “The Novelty of Eternity”. *The Legacy of the Roman Arch in Fascist Italy*, ivi, pp. 19–45.

<sup>27</sup> See, among others, Paolo Nicoloso, *Mussolini architetto. Propaganda e paesaggio urbano nell’Italia fascista*, Turin, Einaudi, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Giorgio Lucaroni, “*Navigare necesse*”. *Il concorso per il Palazzo Littorio e i tanti volti della romanità*, in F. Oppedisano, P.S. Salvatori, F. Santangelo (eds.), *Costruire la nuova Italia*, cit., pp. 99–114: here pp. 103, 114.

<sup>29</sup> Giorgio Lucaroni, *Architetture di storia. Fascismo, storicità, cultura architettonica italiana*, Rome, Viella, 2022, pp. 23, 20. See also Alessandro Sebastiani, *Roma antica e l’ideologia nazionale italiana. Trasformazioni di una città dal Risorgimento al fascismo*, Rome, Carocci, 2024.

Another area of considerable interest is archaeology. After all, as Cristiana Volpi observes with regard to Rome, both architecture and archaeology were part of a project that aimed to reshape the urban fabric in order to enhance its many resources, including its ‘spectacular’ ones.<sup>30</sup> Simona Troilo returns to the theme of her important monograph, *Pietre d’oltremare*, in two chapters on the use of Roman artefacts in Fascist Libya.<sup>31</sup> In that monograph, she showed how archaeological excavations had been a fundamental component of the Italian government’s strategies since the beginning of the century, as they had been for other European countries. These excavations were motivated by strictly scientific reasons, linked as they were to the political demands of a form of nationalism that seemed ever more distant from the nineteenth-century interpretations of the ancient world.<sup>32</sup> During the *ventennio*, the regime built a strategy with multiple implications around the ‘staging’ of sites in its colonial possessions, taking advantage of previous excavations. This strategy found a vast sounding board in Italy’s participation in various colonial exhibitions abroad.<sup>33</sup>

These aspects are also examined in the second part of Brillante’s book. Thanks to the joint efforts of politicians and scholars (including Giuseppe Volpi, Roberto Paribeni and Renato Bartoccini), conferences and archaeological excavations contributed to the promotion of tourism in the colonial territories, which had explicit political implications. The aim was to illustrate the now complete continuity between the civilising role of ancient Rome, which had gradually ousted other powers in the Mediterranean area (notably Carthage, a recurrent theme in historiography and public discourse), and Fascist Italy’s achievements in the present. Although the ‘Mediterraneanist’ interpretation centred on the ‘mare nostrum’ rhetoric emerged early on, it only fully established itself in the 1930s. Mussolini himself, whose political biography was far from consistent in its treatment of Rome and *romanità*, initially adopted a more cautious stance towards the Mediterranean,<sup>34</sup> before being celebrated as the heir to Caesar’s military genius and then to the Augustan policy of imperial pacification.

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. Cristiana Volpi, *Il fascismo e l’architettura. Il mito della romanità e il ritorno all’antico nella Roma di Mussolini*, in E. Migliario, G. Santucci (eds.), «Noi figli di Roma», cit., pp. 111–134.

<sup>31</sup> Simona Troilo, *Touring the Ruins. Roman Antiquity and Whiteness in Fascist Libya*, in F. Oppedisano, P.S. Salvatori, F. Santangelo (eds.), *Costruire la nuova Italia*, cit., pp. 165–188; Ead., *Roma in colonia. Resti e reperti della romanità nella Libia fascista*, in E. Migliario, G. Santucci (eds.), «Noi figli di Roma», cit., pp. 85–110.

<sup>32</sup> Simona Troilo, *Pietre d’oltremare. Scavare, conservare, immaginare l’Impero (1899-1940)*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> For an up-to-date bibliography, see Beatrice Falcucci, *L’impero nei musei. Storie di collezioni coloniali italiane*, Pisa, Pacini, 2025.

<sup>34</sup> Cfr. Paola S. Salvatori, *Mussolini e la storia. Dal socialismo al fascismo (1900-1922)*, Rome, Viella, 2016. On the contexts in which the terms *mare nostrum* and *nostrum mare* were used, mainly by the Romans, see A. Giardina, *Roma antica sui mari*, cit. pp. 64 and ff., which draws on previous work by Luciano Canfora.



Accompanied on visits to the excavations, foreign guests could see ‘the modern layout given to the Libyan territory’ and spread Italy’s positive image once they returned home.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, the visit to Cyrenaica by the renowned classical scholar Wilamowitz was widely exploited. However, Cyrenaica was a more complicated territory than Tripolitania, given the deep roots of the resistance movements and, in this specific case, an archaeological heritage linked mainly to the Greek tradition.<sup>36</sup>

In fact, the Greek legacy was another important issue in the Fascist regime’s relationship with the past, with controversial results. Rome’s emphasis on synthesis through the integration of the conquests of Greek civilisation was gradually replaced by an insistence on the superiority of the Roman model, into which the peninsula’s various cultures were eventually absorbed. In his work on Magna Graecia, Emanuele Ciaceri — a student of Ettore Pais — downplayed the importance of colonisation and emphasised the role of indigenous culture. The civilisation of Magna Graecia was thus recognised as having ‘developed independently of Greece thanks to its fusion with pre-existing Italic civilisations’. In 1933, Ciaceri put his knowledge at the service of a pronounced ‘nationalist vocation’ and made a comparison ‘between the opulent and decadent Greekness of the East and the innovative and creative Italian Greekness’, with the aim of ‘tracing the characteristics of a clearly recognisable Italianness, of which Rome [was] the moment of greatest splendour, while Mussolini’s Fascism [became] its confirmation and renewal’.<sup>37</sup> The introduction of racial laws and the aggression against Greece of October 1940 exacerbated the divide, while Giuseppe Sergi’s ‘Mediterraneanist’ theories — which had previously been well received — were put aside. The goal was now to cast the Greeks off as a people ‘tragically’ doomed to decline because of their inability to preserve the purity of their racial identity, making Rome the sole and authentic guardian of Western civilisation.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> S. Brillante, “*Anche là è Roma*”, cit., p. 103.

<sup>36</sup> Ivi, pp. 120–136. In reality, despite the formal tribute to the country that had hosted him, Wilamowitz also introduced various ‘distinctions’. However, these were too subtle to reduce the impact of his public comments, which — all things considered — corresponded to Italian intentions.

<sup>37</sup> Claudio Schiano, *Romanità e ideologia coloniale in Emanuele Ciaceri: una visione fascista dei rapporti fra culture?*, in F. Oppedisano, P.S. Salvatori, F. Santangelo (eds.), *Costruire la nuova Italia*, cit., pp. 245–263: here pp. 247, 256. See also Amedeo Visconti, *Lecture della grecità d’Occidente nella storiografia d’epoca fascista: Emanuele Ciaceri e la “Storia della Magna Grecia”*, in Marco Cuzzi, Laura Mecella e Paolo Zanini (eds.), *Lecture dell’antico, mito di Roma e retoriche antisemite in epoca fascista*, Milan, Milano University Press, 2024, pp. 167–192.

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. Paola S. Salvatori, *Aquile sul Partenone. Grecia e Roma nel razzismo fascista*, in E. Migliario, G. Santucci (eds.), «*Noi figli di Roma*», cit., pp. 307–326; Gustavo Corni, *Modelli dell’antichità classica. Volk e razzismo*, ivi, pp. 283–306; Alessandra Coppola, *La storia greca, antica e moderna, in età fascista*, in P.S. Salvatori (ed.), *Il fascismo e la storia*, cit., pp. 15–30.

The idea of civil and ‘spiritual’ supremacy rooted in the myth of Rome and Latin culture affected the relations with Nazi Germany, where references to ancient Greece were widely emphasised.<sup>39</sup> Tensions were most frequent in border areas, particularly when the political-military alliance undermined the idea that the territory had Roman origins and destabilised the more recent memory of irredentism.<sup>40</sup> Historians of Law made negative comments about Roman law, and hostility towards its ‘supposed individualistic character’ united the Germanist, socialist and anti-Jewish elements of Nazism.<sup>41</sup> Finally, recent studies have highlighted how the German Reich’s relationship with the past followed different lines from the ‘historicist’ canon that remained dominant in Italian Fascism (and Soviet communism). In Hitler’s Germany, events designed to ‘stage’ the past (e.g. museums, exhibitions) ended up subordinating history to the energy that emanated primarily from the ‘timeless’ memory of the nation.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Institute of Roman Studies and the Augustan bimillenary celebrations: *romanità* on display**

Founded in 1925 by Carlo Galassi Paluzzi, the Institute of Roman Studies established itself as a key contributor to Fascist policies aimed at promoting studies and activities that conveyed the narrative of ancient remains to the present in an ‘analogical’ key. This cultural institution effectively combined initiatives related to the strictly scientific side (i.e. conferences, publications, the *Roma* journal) with the commitment to popular dissemination. There are many essays about the Institute, whose history has already been explored,<sup>43</sup> including by some authors who have contributed to the books under review here.<sup>44</sup> Although these provide interesting insights into its activities, such as the

<sup>39</sup> Cfr. Johann Chapoutot, *Il nazismo e l’antichità*, Turin, Einaudi, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Cfr. E. Migliario, H. Obermair, *Roma sulle sponde del Talvera*, cit.

<sup>41</sup> Cfr. Gianni Santucci, *L’ostilità nazionalsocialista al diritto romano*, in E. Migliario, G. Santucci (eds.), «*Noi figli di Roma*», cit., pp. 263–282: 267.

<sup>42</sup> See, in particular, Christopher Clark, *I tempi del potere. Concezioni della storia dalla Guerra dei Trent’anni al Terzo Reich*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Cfr. Antonio La Penna, *Il culto della romanità nel periodo fascista. La rivista “Roma” e l’Istituto di Studi Romani*, “*Italia contemporanea*”, 1999, n. 217, pp. 605–630; Albertina Vittoria, *L’Istituto di Studi Romani e il suo fondatore Carlo Galassi Paluzzi. Dal 1925 al 1944*, in F. Roscetti (ed.), *Il classico nella Roma contemporanea*, cit., pp. 507–537.

<sup>44</sup> Jan Nelis has summarised his many works in two essays: “*Ianus redivivus*”: *l’Istituto di Studi Romani e il doppio volto del mito della romanità*, in E. Migliario, G. Santucci (eds.), «*Noi figli di Roma*», cit., pp. 161–180; and *Imperialismo romano e fascismo, tra aderenza ideologica e opposizione alla costruzione di un mito. L’Istituto di Studi Romani e la critica augustea*, in Massimiliano Ghilardi and Laura Mecella (eds.), *Augusto e il fascismo. Studi intorno al bimillenario del 1937-1938*, Città di Castello (Pg), LuoghInteriori / Istituto Nazionale di Studi Romani, 2023, pp. 391–404.

Augustan bimillenary celebrations,<sup>45</sup> the overall picture is inevitably shaped by overlapping themes and issues. Perhaps more than elsewhere, what is lacking is a specialist book that concisely reconstructs its history and function during the Fascist *ventennio*, the type of initiatives it undertook, the profound implications of its historiographical, political and cultural commitment, and its attempts to converge with the new context of republican Italy.

The Royal Institute for Ancient History, chaired by Pietro De Francisci, has received less scholarly attention. It resulted from the regime's extensive reorganisation of the entire historical sector between 1933 and 1935,<sup>46</sup> which involved the coordination of activities across the four major national institutes by the newly formed Central Council for Historical Studies, led by Cesare Maria De Vecchi. It is no coincidence that the Savoy-Fascist interpretation of the Risorgimento promoted by the *quadrumvir* (minister of national education in 1935–36) saw the state, authority and military discipline inherited from Rome as the basis of Piedmontese 'primacy', which was at the origins of the Risorgimento.<sup>47</sup> Other than emphasising the difference with the situation handed down by liberal Italy, the state's involvement in modernising research and its role of direction and control — in terms of historical schools, journals, book series, publications, conferences, international contacts and so on — defined some key features of Fascism's relationship with history.<sup>48</sup>

The Institute of Roman Studies also played a very active role in the celebrations marking the bimillenary anniversary of Augustus' birth. In the wake of the anniversaries of Virgil (1930) and Horace (1936), this was the 'acme of the first phase of the Institute's life'.<sup>49</sup> It was probably also the culmination — in terms of mobilisation and success — of the introduction of *romanità* into Fascist Italy and the exaltation of Mussolini as the modern incarnation of the imperial *auctoritas*.<sup>50</sup> To mark the occasion, the Institute launched *Storia*

<sup>45</sup> The Institute of Roman Studies is at the centre of the entire second section of the book edited by M. Ghilardi and L. Mecella (eds.), *Augusto e il fascismo*, cit.

<sup>46</sup> Cfr. Leandro Polverini, *La riorganizzazione fascista degli studi storici e l'Istituto italiano per la storia antica*, "Studi storici", 2016, n. 1, pp. 9–26.

<sup>47</sup> Cfr. Massimo Baioni, *Risorgimento in camicia nera. Studi, istituzioni, musei nell'Italia fascista*, Rome-Turin, Carocci - Comitato di Torino dell'Istituto per la storia del Risorgimento italiano, 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Cfr. Andrea Giardina and Maria Antonietta Visceglia (eds.), *L'organizzazione della ricerca storica in Italia*, Rome, Viella, 2018; Romano Ugolini, *L'organizzazione degli studi storici*, in Ester Capuzzo (ed.), *Cento anni di storiografia sul Risorgimento*, Roma, Istituto per la storia del Risorgimento italiano, 2002, pp. 83–176.

<sup>49</sup> Leandro Polverini, *L'Istituto di Studi Romani fra Mostra Augustea e Storia di Roma*, in M. Ghilardi and L. Mecella (eds.), *Augusto e il fascismo*, cit., pp. 201–214: here p. 213.

<sup>50</sup> For some reflections on the international uses and echoes of Roman culture, see Penelope J. Goodman, *Augustus and his Bimillennium in the Soft Power Strategy of the Fascist Regime*, in F. Oppedisano, P.S. Salvatori, F. Santangelo (eds.), *Costruire la nuova Italia*, cit., pp. 285–310; Christopher Smith, *The British Reaction to the Mostra of 1937*, in M. Ghilardi and L. Mecella (eds.), *Augusto e il fascismo*, cit., pp. 503–529.

*di Roma*, a monumental project comprising 30 volumes to be published by Cappelli, including a ‘Plan of the Work’ in 1938. Finally, it made an essential contribution to the organisation of the Fifth National Congress of Roman Studies and to a conference on Augustus held at the end of the celebrations, against the scenic backdrop of the reconstructed Ara Pacis.<sup>51</sup>

The Augustan exhibition, in particular, has been used frequently by historians as a case study.<sup>52</sup> Coordinated by archaeologist Giulio Quirino Giglioli and inaugurated on 23 September 1937, it reflected the euphoric atmosphere that followed the conquest of Ethiopia, which was enshrined in the national calendar with the introduction of 9 May as a public holiday celebrating the empire. On the same day, the second edition of the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution was inaugurated, following the successful 1932 edition.<sup>53</sup> This decision was steeped in meaning, reaffirming the link between the past and the present, the revival of the splendour of ancient Rome and its transition into the modernity embodied by Fascism. In fact, the two exhibitions are important observatories for understanding some of the specific features of a media device to which the regime entrusted an important task in representing and narrating itself. After a period of bold, modernist experimentation that reached its peak in the 1932 exhibition, and despite repeated invitations to take it as an example, subsequent exhibitions seemed to revert to a more traditionalist conception, visually restoring a model that combined strength, order and discipline.<sup>54</sup> On closer inspection, the Augustan exhibition was in dialogue with other contemporary projects based on the same exaltation of state power, such as the Redipuglia memorial (1938).<sup>55</sup>

This emphasis largely signalled the distance from previous events. The 1911 archaeological exhibition, organised to mark the 50th anniversary of unification, had acknowledged the role of the provinces in Rome’s development. Under the Fascist regime, the perspective was entirely centripetal, focusing on a postulated ‘historical, cultural and technical homogeneity’.<sup>56</sup> The ‘Italian

<sup>51</sup> Cfr. Andrea D’Agostino, *La “necessaria solitudine” di due monumenti. L’Ara Pacis e il Mausoleo di Augusto sotto il fascismo*, in Gian Piero Piretto (ed.), *Memorie di pietra. I monumenti delle dittature*, Milan, Raffaello Cortina, 2014, pp. 35–68.

<sup>52</sup> The bibliography is vast. See M. Ghilardi and L. Mecella (eds.), *Augusto e il fascismo*, cit., the third part of which focuses entirely on the exhibition.

<sup>53</sup> Among the many studies, it is worth citing Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Anno X. La Mostra della rivoluzione fascista del 1932*, Pisa-Rome, Istituti editoriali poligrafici internazionali, 2003, which contains a useful appendix.

<sup>54</sup> Cfr. Maddalena Carli, *Vedere il fascismo. Arte e politica nelle esposizioni del regime (1928-1942)*, Rome, Carocci, 2020.

<sup>55</sup> Cfr. Gaetano Dato, *Redipuglia: il Sacratio e la memoria della Grande guerra 1938-1993*, Trieste, Irsml, 2014.

<sup>56</sup> Alessandro Cavagna, *Il “benefico impulso” di Roma: la Mostra augustea della romanità e le province*, in P.S. Salvatori (ed.), *Il fascismo e la storia*, cit., pp. 51–72: here p. 63. See also Sergio Rinaldi Tufi, *Augusto e le province dell’impero nelle mostre del 1937-38 e del 2013-14*, in M. Ghilardi and L. Mecella (eds.), *Augusto e il fascismo*, cit., pp. 451–475.

civilisation exhibition’, which was designed for the 1942 Rome Universal Exposition but never built because of the war, would ultimately have been — in the organisers’ intentions — the most impressive ‘staging’ of the continuity and universality of Italian primacy.<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, during those years, the Fascists’ use of *romanità* evolved into the construction of a ‘Fascist *romanità*’, integrated into totalitarian Caesarism.<sup>58</sup> This resulted in content and message being disseminated more quickly. The syncretic revival of Roman and Catholic universalism, which was widespread among journalists, was far from obvious at a time when Fascism’s claim to sanctify itself could be perceived as a blow to religious authority. Even in the realm of *romanità*, an ‘ambiguous relationship’ developed,<sup>59</sup> characterised by periods of collaboration and encounter alternating with moments of fierce competition, depending on the regime’s choices and the vicissitudes of domestic and international politics.<sup>60</sup> The question remains as to how the conflict was perceived beyond intellectual circles and educated minorities; perhaps the influence of moderate clerical culture in facilitating integration between the ‘two religions’ should be reconsidered, also through targeted documentary research. The situation was undoubtedly worsened by the introduction of racist ideology, which the regime used to legitimise its imperial ambitions and civilising mission. As is well known, the racial laws affected every sector of Italian society, including universities; in the field of *romanità*, and classical studies more broadly, the turning point of 1938 contributed to the radicalisation of pre-existing nationalism, encouraging anti-Semitic rhetoric that was prevalent in journals and circulated in various ways.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Cfr. Igor Melani, *Rinascimento in mostra. La civiltà italiana tra storia e ideologia all’Esposizione Universale di Roma (E42)*, Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2019.

<sup>58</sup> Emilio Gentile, *Onde Cristo è fascista? La romanità del cesarismo totalitario*, in M. Ghilardi and L. Mecella (eds.), *Augusto e il fascismo*, cit., pp. 3–74.

<sup>59</sup> Cfr. Sergio Roda, *Il fascismo, i cattolici e la storia di Roma: un’ambigua relazione*, in F. Oppedisano, P.S. Salvatori, F. Santangelo (eds.), *Costruire la nuova Italia*, cit., pp. 223–243. See also Donatello Aramini, *Il mito di Augusto e l’Istituto di Studi Romani tra fascismo e cattolicesimo*, in M. Ghilardi and L. Mecella (eds.), *Augusto e il fascismo*, cit., pp. 137–183.

<sup>60</sup> Cfr. Paolo Zanini, *Rivendicazioni nazional-cattoliche sul Levante, mito di Roma e spunti antisionisti e antisemiti tra anni Venti e primi anni Trenta*, in M. Cuzzi, L. Mecella and P. Zanini (eds.), *Lecture dell’antico*, cit., pp. 33–46.

<sup>61</sup> The book cited in the previous footnote offers many examples. On the role of journals, in particular, see Marco Cuzzi, *Miti antichi, odi moderni. Il culto di Roma e l’antisemitismo nelle riviste dell’Universalismo fascista*, *ivi*, pp. 14–32; Emanuele Edallo, *Antisemitismo e mito di Roma nelle pagine di “Gerarchia”*, *ivi*, pp. 123–146; Pietro Pinna, *Il mito della Roma antica nel periodico “Il Legionario”. Tra propaganda e ideologia universalista*, in F. Oppedisano, P.S. Salvatori, F. Santangelo (eds.), *Costruire la nuova Italia*, cit., pp. 265–283.

## Before Rome. Public uses of the Etruscans

Adopting an entirely Roman-centric perspective, which exalted Fascism as the culmination of a thousand-year tradition of civilisation and racial superiority, came at the expense of other ancient peoples living on the peninsula. Recent studies on the role of Etruscan culture during Fascism have examined its presence in academia, historiography and — on a more general level — public discourse, intersecting it with the cultural policies developed above all by Fascism. In 2013, Antonino De Francesco highlighted the importance of the issue, placing the ‘myth of the origins of the Italian people’ in a long-term context. The debate on the origins (Eastern, Mediterranean, Nordic), language and art of the Etruscans was shaped by the pressures of a rapidly changing context, which led to Etruscan history being positioned alternately within the national ‘tradition’.<sup>62</sup> During the nineteenth century, the interpretation of the Etruscans as an emblematic case of Italianness *ante litteram* made it possible to combine the search for the nation’s physiognomic traits with the recognition of persistent local identities. During the *ventennio*, this interpretation was gradually sacrificed in the name of expelling everything that did not fit the ideal type of an Italian ‘family’ as defined by the Romanesque canon, which in the late 1930s took an openly racial tone.<sup>63</sup>

Andrea Avalli’s book is the result of extensive and well-documented research that ‘aims to demonstrate how the Etruscan imagination was mobilised at various levels under Fascism, with repercussions for the future, to theorise Italian cultural and racial continuity from antiquity to the twentieth century, with the political purpose of legitimising the social order maintained by the dictatorship’.<sup>64</sup> Building on pre-fascist elements, this approach pervaded the entire *ventennio* and was mediated by historiography, exhibitions and, later, cinema. It took on explicit anti-Semitic overtones and was eventually integrated into republican Italy without undergoing significant changes. By emphasising the ‘long duration of Italian scientific racism in the field of antiquity’, Avalli consciously exposes himself to the ‘interpretative risk’ of a teleological reading.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, different contexts must be considered in order to understand the discursive devices that seem to be marked by an identical ‘morphological’ structure. The specific context of the relationship between intellectuals and Fascism was extremely complex, as is now evident from a wealth of literature.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Antonino De Francesco, *L’antichità della nazione. Il mito delle origini del popolo italiano dal Risorgimento al fascismo*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2017 (1st ed. Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>63</sup> See also Marie-Laurence Haack, *Crani etruschi vs crani romani? Il fascismo e l’antropologia degli etruschi*, in P.S. Salvatori (ed.), *Il fascismo e la storia*, cit., pp. 31–50.

<sup>64</sup> A. Avalli, *Il mito della prima Italia*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>65</sup> Ivi, pp. 13–14.

<sup>66</sup> See, among others, Gabriele Turi, *Lo Stato educatore. Politica e intellettuali nell’Italia fascista*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2002.

Combining printed sources and private papers (letters and diaries), Avalli carefully reconstructs the debates of the time, the positions of individual exponents of Etruscology and art history, and the role of universities, cultural institutions, journals, conferences and the sectors of Fascism most sensitive to the issue (e.g. the Strapaese movement). He starts with Giulio Quirino Giglioli's discovery of the statues of Veio in 1916. In addition to Giglioli and many leading academics between the two world wars, including Antonio Minto, Pericle Ducati, Carlo Anti, Alessandro Della Seta and Aldo Neppi Modona (the latter two victims of racial persecution), Avalli gives ample space to Massimo Pallottino and Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli. Their figures and interventions define the two poles around which the story of Etruscology develops from Fascism to the transition to a democratic and republican context.

Bianchi Bandinelli initially supported some of the nationalist ideas of the 1930s but then changed his position. With some wavering, he eventually denounced the most radical, racist and anti-Semitic tendencies, leading him to openly criticise, in July 1942, 'those who seek in statues not works of art but the continuity of blood'.<sup>67</sup> In the post-war period, he joined the Italian Communist Party and revised his theories in line with the criteria of historical materialism and Gramsci's legacy, but he remained fairly isolated in his allergy to the revival of Etruscan art. He even dismissed it outright for its lack of originality and firmly opposed the modernist approach and avant-garde languages, as evidenced by the controversy surrounding the 1955 Exhibition of Etruscan Art and Civilisation held at Villa Giulia. Avalli notes that the scholar ended up sharing 'retrospectively' — albeit for opposite reasons — the interpretation of racism 'as a form of irrationalism foreign to Italian culture', which was widespread in the intellectual circles of those years.<sup>68</sup>

As for Pallottino, who had inherited the role of supreme guardian of Etruscology from Giglioli, he was free to repropose his own historiographical positions after a career shaped entirely by the regime's institutions (and values). Among other things, the young scholar had curated 14 rooms of the Augustan exhibition, in which the Etruscans appeared as 'fully integrated into *romanità*'.<sup>69</sup> Avalli emphasises Pallottino's ability to mediate and compromise in the aftermath of the events of 25 July and 8 September 1943, when he openly distanced himself from Fascism by founding the Association for the Risorgimento of Italy and publishing articles in the journal *L'Indice dei fatti e delle idee*, inspired by monarchist, nationalist and Catholic convictions.<sup>70</sup> With

<sup>67</sup> A. Avalli, *Il mito della prima Italia*, cit., p. 195.

<sup>68</sup> Ivi, p. 231.

<sup>69</sup> Ivi, p. 159.

<sup>70</sup> References to Pallottino's activities in these years can be found in Luca La Rovere, *L'eredità del fascismo. Gli intellettuali, i giovani e la transizione al postfascismo 1943-1948*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 2008, pp. 211–215.

the outbreak of the Cold War, he took advantage of the political and cultural climate of the time, which encouraged a rather indulgent attitude towards the recent past.<sup>71</sup> This allowed him to retain a key role in academic circles and public events. Thus, in the 1950s, his previous nationalist supremacist positions were relegitimised within the framework of a ‘Europeanist and Atlanticist representation of the Etruscans’,<sup>72</sup> whereas *romanità* could be remodelled in terms of Catholic universalism, proto-Europeanism and Western tradition.

The academic environment reflected the lack of transparency and unresolved contradictions concerning scholars’ positions during the Fascist era. This was confirmed by the substantial failure of the purge, given that almost all the scholars who had supported the regime — often even the most radical ones — were swiftly reinstated, as occurred at the Institute of Etruscan Studies.

### Concluding remarks: perceptions between myth and reality

This article has demonstrated the richness and vitality of the historiographical debate, which revolves around the many issues arising from the public and political use of antiquity. The recurrence of certain themes in edited books can be repetitive, and the variety of fields examined can occasionally fragment the analysis. Consequently, it is down to the reader to identify the connections between people, events, places and issues. However, these are acceptable risks, which do not undermine the important value of the books in question. It is clear that the Fascist regime’s use of antiquity cannot be investigated in isolation. The persuasive and seductive power of the ancient world — and especially of ‘blackshirt’ *romanità* — lay precisely in its circular structure, that is, the synchronous way in which it united all channels of transmission, especially the visual ones (including cinema),<sup>73</sup> amplifying its messages. What has been said about classical vestiges also applies here: a dense web composed ‘of continuous visual and rhetorical references, thanks to which images moved from one media outlet to another, expanding their meaning each time and allowing different audiences to engage with them’.<sup>74</sup>

In an attempt to take stock of the concept of *romanità*, Enzo Fimiani’s rich contribution seems to question most of the studies mentioned in this article. In his opinion, the ‘extraordinary pervasiveness of the political myth of ancient

<sup>71</sup> For a recent publication on this theme, Andrea Martini, *Fascismo immaginario. Riscrivere il passato a destra*, Bari, Laterza, 2024.

<sup>72</sup> A. Avalli, *Il mito della prima Italia*, cit., p. 247.

<sup>73</sup> Cfr. Giacomo Manzoli, “Roma Wasn’t Built in a Day”. *La rappresentazione della romanità nel cinema fascista*, in E. Migliario, G. Santucci (eds.), «Noi figli di Roma», cit., pp. 181–200. See also Gianmarco Mancosu, *Vedere l’impero. L’Istituto Luce e il colonialismo fascista*, Milan, Mimesis, 2022.

<sup>74</sup> S. Troilo, *Pietre d’oltremare*, cit., p. 236.



Rome' and the 'widespread diffusion of stylistic elements of Roman antiquity in Italian society' are not reflected in any 'concrete changes in the state structure'. In other words, the mythopoetic operation was not extended to the point of 'injecting a concrete dose of ancient Rome into the complex regulatory, legal and institutional system of Fascism'.<sup>75</sup> The gap between the 'totalitarian impulse' and its 'legislative precipitates', one of the most notable short circuits in the history of Fascism, would thus fall within the broader context of the regime's 'imperfect machine'.<sup>76</sup>

Fimiani's observations deserve credit for bringing the analysis back to reality. The internal contradictions between the emotional and theatrical mobilisation associated with political myth, on the one hand, and its practical impact, on the other, reveal that the Fascist regime was 'eternally oscillating between words and deeds, proclamations and concrete results, accomplished facts and norms':

However, something else seems to emerge from the depths of the Fascist myth of ancient Rome, like a kind of reverse history of Italian Fascism. Each time a fact, often achieved through brute force, precedes a formal or normative arrangement, the regime achieves its goal. Conversely, when it attempts to transform an ideal, a propaganda slogan or mythopoeia into concrete and consequential facts, it fails or risks failure — and *romanità* that does not become a state is a striking example of this.<sup>77</sup>

These are important considerations that can also serve as a warning against the persistence in public discourse of positions that trivialise or even condone the Fascist *ventennio* (the infamous 'good things' of Fascism). However, there may be confusion on a strictly historiographical level. The regime failed not so much — or at least not primarily — because of its inability to give concrete expression to its totalitarian vocation. Including *romanità* in this framework does not improve our understanding of the phenomenon and its implications. On the other hand, Fimiani himself acknowledges that 'concrete effectiveness' is not 'the best parameter' for measuring 'the historical weight of a myth and the mythopoetic operation that brings it to life, affirms it and promotes it'.<sup>78</sup> The myth of *romanità* served another purpose:

<sup>75</sup> Enzo Fimiani, "Lo Stato fascista fermo come su granito": cortocircuiti di regime tra mito di Roma antica e realtà statuale, in E. Migliario, G. Santucci (eds.), "Noi figli di Roma", cit., pp. 9–35: here pp. 25–26. See also the following chapters in the same volume, which are more relevant to the history of law: Cosimo Cascione, *Su alcuni fondamenti romani dell'ideologia fascista del Codice civile*, pp. 201–222. Mario Varvaro, *Salvatore Riccobono e l'esaltazione giusromanistica di Roma antica*, pp. 223–262. See also Simone Ciambelli, Thomas Morard, *Dalla corporazione fascista alla corporazione romana: teoria e propaganda*, in F. Oppedisano, P.S. Salvatori, F. Santangelo (eds.), *Costruire la nuova Italia*, cit., pp. 71–98.

<sup>76</sup> Cfr. Guido Melis, *La macchina imperfetta. Immagine e realtà dello Stato fascista*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2018.

<sup>77</sup> E. Fimiani, "Lo Stato fascista fermo come su granito", cit., p. 31.

<sup>78</sup> Ivi, p. 13.

that of defining an idealised representation and an ambition to return to imperial splendour, as well as the concept of Italianness as an aspiration to domination and power. In this guise, it presents itself as the litmus test of a project devoted to an anthropological transformation of society, which was pursued with a cultural policy careful to use the most diverse channels of transmission.

In light of this ambitious project, a more systematic exploration is needed to reconstruct the positions within the anti-fascist community. The latter was well aware that Italian history had to be freed from the monopoly of Fascist narrative, as demonstrated by the famous 1935 controversy on the Risorgimento within *Giustizia e Libertà*. In addition to the individual experiences of prominent scholars and intellectuals — such as Gaetano De Sanctis, Piero Treves and Arnaldo Momigliano<sup>79</sup> — and the circulation of Gramsci's theses,<sup>80</sup> it would be interesting to further explore the anti-fascist diaspora, particularly the communication strategies implemented to counter the regime's appropriation of the past and the extent to which the latter persisted among Italian communities abroad.

The invitation not to ignore the distance between aspirations and reality, between projects and results, can instead be seen as a valuable recommendation to shift the focus of research to how things were received. This is an important step towards establishing a more compelling link between the inexhaustible repertoire of images and representations of the ancient world and its assimilation into Italian society at the time, to the point of measuring how deeply it was rooted in public discourse well beyond the experience of the *ventennio*. In this sense, the school system — with its various levels and grades — is a relevant field of research whose potential does not seem to have been fully exploited, as far as school archives and 'children's writing' are concerned.<sup>81</sup> Interestingly, the school universe is absent from Avalli's book, even towards the end, where the author cites some interesting examples of the survival of a certain Etruscan imaginary in literature and cinema.

<sup>79</sup> Cfr. Massimiliano Ghilardi, *Arnaldo Momigliano, l'Istituto di Studi Romani e una mancata celebrazione Mussolini-Augusto*, in M. Ghilardi and L. Mecella (eds.), *Augusto e il fascismo*, cit., pp. 345–389; Luca Iori, *Classics against the Regime. Thucydides, Piero Gobetti, and Fascist Italy*, in Luca Iori and Ivan Matijašić (eds.), *Thucydides in the 'Age of Extremes' and Beyond. Academia and Politics*, "HCS - History of Classical Scholarship", 2022, supplementary vol. 5, pp. 143–182; Anna Magnetto (ed.), *Piero Treves. Tra storia ellenistica e storia della cultura*, Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Cfr. Emilio Zucchetti, Anna Maria Cimino (eds.), *Antonio Gramsci and the Ancient World*, London, Routledge, 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Cfr. Quinto Antonelli, Egle Becchi (eds.), *Scritture bambine. Testi infantili tra passato e presente*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1995; Mariella Colin, *I bambini di Mussolini. Letteratura, libri, letture per l'infanzia sotto il fascismo*, Brescia, La Scuola, 2012.

‘The ancient world at school,’ one might say.<sup>82</sup> After all, younger pupils were those who could more easily absorb the ‘continuist’ vision of a history that ‘flowed from the children of the she-wolf to the son of the blacksmith’, thanks to ‘the sense of mythical time proper to their age’.<sup>83</sup> As the school is the hub of all knowledge processing and transmission, and the place where our relationship with history is situated within a long chronological timeline, it also enables us to see how the ‘analogical’ use of the past manifests itself in different periods. In the classroom, a narrative based on the canon of the ‘fundamental unity’ of Italian history was circulated,<sup>84</sup> moving Fascism along the timeline and bending it to its contingent needs. This was to be expected and resulted in many contradictions, at a time when the confrontation with more recent eras revealed the equally strong need to build and promote a distinctive, original tradition.

*Translated by Andrea Hajek*

<sup>82</sup> Cfr. Andrea Fava, *La guerra a scuola: propaganda, memoria, rito (1915-1940)*, “Materiali di lavoro”, 1986, n. 3-4, pp. 53–126. On the teaching of Latin and Greek, see: Niccolò Bettegazzi, “Religione e patria” nei *Carmina Selecta di Nazareno Capo. Appunti sulla storia culturale del latino durante il ventennio fascista*, in F. Oppedisano, P.S. Salvatori, F. Santangelo (eds.), *Costruire la nuova Italia*, cit., pp. 207–221; Jacopo Bassi and Gianluca Cané (eds.), *Sulle spalle degli antichi. Eredità classica e costruzione delle identità nazionali nel Novecento*, Milan, Unicopli, 2014; Andrea Balbo, *Accogliere l’antico. Ricerche sulla ricezione della letteratura latina e sulla storia degli studi classici*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell’Orso, 2020.

<sup>83</sup> Gianpasquale Santomassimo, *Saggio introduttivo*, in Massimo Baioni, *Il fascismo e Alfredo Oriani. Il mito del precursore*, Ravenna, Longo, 1988, pp. 13–27: here 15.

<sup>84</sup> Cfr. Arrigo Solmi, *Discorsi sulla storia d’Italia*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1935.