Back to the Future

Italian Fascist Representations of the Roman Past

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Abstract

Among the many ‘founding myths’ of Italian Fascism such as those regarding its relationship to the First World War, one element stood out as key to both its quest for absolute dominion over the Italian peninsula and its historically based self-concept and representation: the idea of present-day Italy as incarnating the spirit and virtuousness of Roman (late Republican and early Imperial) antiquity, creating the image of a Terza Roma, of a ‘third’, Fascist Rome. This concept was omnipresent throughout the entire period within which Mussolini dominated Italian politics. This very specific use of the historical past is discussed in this article, tracing its presence in various parts of the cultural and intellectual field, identifying the manifold ways in which history can meet contemporary, and ‘futural’, prerequisites. In so doing, it is inspired by recent scholarship underlining the futural, temporal thrust of Fascism and romanità, rather than its traditionally reactionary, backward-looking dynamic. As seems, at least to a certain extent, to have been the case in Nazi Germany, for the Fascists, antiquity indeed was no faraway, dusty past, but a lively source of inspiration and energy revealing the regime’s modernist, revolutionary ambition to build a ‘Third Rome’ which, literally and figuratively, made visible the earlier layers of Roman heritage.

Keywords


* This paper is dedicated to the memory of Jane Dunnett (1960–2013). The author would like to express his gratitude to Roger Griffin for his inspiring comments on the present paper.
Since the 1970s, scholarship on Italian Fascism has witnessed a growing interest in the role played by culture under Mussolini’s regime. Simultaneously, following the groundbreaking, and stimulating work of Renzo De Felice, a certain degree of grassroots-level consensus has been increasingly identified as crucial to Fascism’s intensifying grip on Italian society over the two decades often referred to as the ventennio fascista (1922–1943). This relative ‘success’ of Fascism appears to have come about via large-scale coercion, especially in the earlier years, but also through the use of what could be termed as ‘soft power’, i.e. of a process of ‘manufacturing consent’ through mainly cultural means.

This sustained focus on culture, now seen as vital to Fascism’s inner functioning as an ideology, has identified it as a force aimed at ‘revitalising’ the nation, this especially in light of the chaotic and traumatising experience of the First World War. One of the more interesting consequences of such recent ‘culturalist’ approaches is the concept of Fascism as a ‘political religion’ sacralising private and public life through both discursive (‘mythical’) and aesthetic (‘cultic’) means. Thus it has been identified as a culto del lictor, referring to one of the most striking symbols synonymous with Fascism, the Roman lictor.

3 In this sense, a most interesting study is Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See also Emilio Gentile, Il mito dello stato nuovo dall’antigiolittismo al fascismo (Roma, Bari: Laterza, 1982), and, for another recent treatment of these and similar theses, Roger Griffin, Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
Along with its aesthetic constituents (mass gatherings, the visual arts, architecture, cinema etc.), a specific discourse gradually penetrated the most diverse segments of cultural and societal life, conveying the image of a new, Fascist Self, of a renewed sense of national pride and identity. This process of ‘fascistisation’ was a direct consequence of the regime’s ‘totalitarian’ nature, of its attempts to occupy and dominate every aspect of Italian life, particularly through its most pervasive social mechanism, the Partito Nazionale Fascista [PNF; National Fascist Party].

Through the development of a vast network of leisure and youth organisations, and while also directing and supervising cultural life and the media, Fascism maintained a strong grip on society through to the end of the 1930s, when the introduction of racist laws sparked a certain degree of popular dissent. This dual process of suppressing the most basic civic liberties, supported by a ‘softer’ yet insidious approach to the exercise of power, enabled Mussolini to sway large parts of the population towards his cause, especially the youth, luring them with the promise of national rebirth or palingenesis, of renewed greatness in the future. Within this process ‘history’, mediated as a specific and detailed image of the Italian past, played a major part.

Among the many ‘founding myths’ of Fascism such as those regarding its relationship to the First World War, one element stood out as key to both its quest for absolute dominion over the Italian peninsula and its historically based self-concept and representation: the idea of present-day Italy as incarnating the spirit and virtuousness of Roman (late Republican and early Imperial) antiquity, creating the image of a Terza Roma, of a ‘third’, Fascist Rome. This concept was omnipresent throughout the entire period within which Mussolini dominated Italian politics. This very specific use of the historical past is discussed within the following pages, tracing its presence in various parts of the cultural and intellectual field, identifying the manifold ways in which history can meet contemporary, and ‘futural’, prerequisites.
La Terza Roma: Fascist images of the ‘re-writing’ of history

From the very outset of his quest for domination, and more particularly after the October 28, 1922 ‘March on Rome’, where thousands of Fascist squadristi marched on the capital mounting a successful push to overthrow the government, Mussolini aspired to create the image of Italy as a nation inspired and impelled by ancient Roman examples. Following the example of Julius Caesar crossing the river Rubicon in 49 BC, Mussolini portrayed the Marcia su Roma as having been his very own crossing of the Rubicon (although making the Milan-Rome trip by train).

This snapshot of the charismatic duce as a revolutionary ‘Caesarian’ condottiero and, some years later, as a modern-day dictator still in Caesar’s image, became a primary theme of Fascist propaganda. This predominant image influenced and shaped the weaving of a widespread and precise discursive web, with constant reference to a purported, idealised ‘Roman’ spirit guiding the nation. This led directly to the development of a highly ‘ideologised’ discourse on Roman antiquity.

Apart from the publicitary and academic means underpinning the propaganda surrounding antiquity (cf. infra), history, both ancient and contemporary, was also ‘written’ and mediated by various non-verbal means. These latter mechanisms contributed significantly to the success of the myth or cult of what came to be known as romanità.6 One of the most basic manifestations of this gradual process of ‘Romanisation’ may seem at first glance to be rather insignificant, but from a propagandistic point of view it was arguably one of the most effective: the introduction of everyday ‘Roman’ habits such as, primarily, the Fascist ‘Roman salute’. Such tendencies were notably intensified during the 1930s, when Achille Starace, segretario of the National Fascist Party between 1931 and 1939, was responsible for an increasing stress on the cultic, aesthetic means by which Fascism would be promoted and consolidated.7

Whereas the passo romano or ‘Roman step’, adopted by the army in the 1930s, met with a great deal of scorn, this Roman salute, portrayed as a direct reference to Roman antiquity, as well as being more hygienic than the

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7 On Starace, see, among others, Roberto Festerazzi, Starace: Il mastino della rivoluzione fascista (Milano: Mursia, 2002).
Figure 1  Detail of a building at Piazza Augusto Imperatore, Rome.
Inscription on a building at Piazza Augusto Imperatore, Rome.
handshake, gradually substituted traditional social behaviour in this very specific domain. The salute was swiftly and successfully adopted by many. This substitution of one of the most basic and everyday gestures was a constant, simultaneously implicit and explicit, reminder of the new Fascist reality.

This totalitarian determination to intervene in and structure everyday life went further, redefining the notion of time itself, including various attempts to fascistise the calendar in a 'Roman' sense. Thus the 'Caesarian' March on Rome became marked on the new calendar as the first day of the first year of the 'Fascist era' or *era fascista* (*E.F.*), an indication which was to be added to the traditional Gregorian calendar year. In addition, a score of official festivities were introduced or revived, including April 21st, the *Natale di Roma*, the mythical founding date of the city of Rome: a fitting 'Roman' and Fascist substitute for the ideologically incompatible May 1st celebration. Furthermore, the anniversary of the March on Rome became one of the major Italian holidays for some twenty years.

An additional way in which the dual historical narrative Fascism-*romanità* was translated in a somewhat less abstract manner than already mentioned measures was the utilisation of the physical remnants of antiquity, which were presented in expositions (see below), and which were also very tangibly present in various cities, first and foremost in the city of Rome itself. The archaeologists’ activities in the Italian capital proved remarkably useful in creating

![Figure 3](image-url)
the illusion of an ideologically specific revived ‘greatness’ so longed for by the regime, particularly through the excavation of some of the most evocative ancient monuments.

Apart from various sites and monuments such as the Mausoleum of Augustus or Augusteo, the Ara Pacis Augustae, the Theatre of Marcellus and the Area Sacra Argentina, there is the most scenographic site which the Fascist interest in ancient Rome produced: the zone divided by a large avenue stretching from what became the nerve centre of Fascist Italy, Palazzo Venezia with its iconic ‘Mussolinian’ balcony, running alongside various imperial forums, towards the quintessential symbol of ancient Rome, the Colosseum. The creation of the avenue, the Via dell’Impero – today known as the Via dei Fori Imperiali –, exemplifies the selective manner in which the Fascists utilised Roman antiquity: the excavations were undertaken in a hasty unscientific manner, with the focus clearly on the site’s potential as a magnificent parade ground, rather than its immeasurable historical value.9

**Figure 4** Palazzo della Civiltà del Lavoro, Rome.

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9 For archaeology under Fascism, see Antonio Cederna, *Mussolini urbanista: Lo sventramento di Roma negli anni del consenso* (Roma, Bari: Laterza, 1979); Daniele Manacorda and Renato
Among the more traditional and somewhat less obviously manipulative ways in which the tangible remnants of ancient Rome were utilised were a number of antiquarian expositions. One such event stands out as by far the most notable: the bimillenary birthday exposition organised in honour of Roman emperor Augustus in 1937–1938. On display were artefacts and casts of ancient statues, along with other more modern didactic means such as elaborate scale models of some of Rome’s more impressive engineering achievements – including the bridge crossing the Rhine. The *Mostra Augustea della Romanità*, a relatively ‘modern’ exposition, grew to become one of the most visited of its kind.

The *Mostra* is, arguably, the quintessential example of the highly efficient means by which Mussolini’s regime conveyed the idea of an ancient Roman revival to all strata of society. Most significantly, it contained a final room in which Fascism’s newly acquired imperial statute was evoked. Added to this, the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, an exposition celebrating ten years of Fascist power first organised in 1932, was re-opened; combined with considerably reduced transport fares, this made the trip to Rome even more accessible to the wider public.

As illustrated, Fascism’s intent was that antiquity and modernity be perceived, if not as one organic whole, then at least as distinctly interconnected. Before showcasing some of the more formally discursive means by which this nexus was reinforced, it is essential here to comment briefly on the importance of romanità to Fascist architecture. Indeed, this discipline and practice was highly responsive to the regime’s romance with antiquity, a sensitivity that translated itself into the conception of a specific style of architectural classicism, generally referred to as *stile littorio*. This ‘stripped’ (neo-)classicism,

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presenting a particular, highly recognizable blend of art deco, modern, functionalist and ancient Roman influences, could be observed in a host of (mostly representative) buildings, first and foremost in the nation's capital. 

Apart from the Città Universitaria, the iconic campus of Rome's Sapienza University situated in the city centre, and the Stadio dei Marmi on the Foro Italico to the north of the capital, the most renowned and, arguably, workable product of Fascist architecture and town planning is the well preserved EUR (Esposizione Universale di Roma) quarter, situated to the south. Originally conceived as the site of the universal exposition proposed to be staged in 1942, this project was completed after the demise of Fascism. However, part of its buildings date back to the 1930s. Among the parts of the complex constructed under Fascism, dating back to the 1930s, is the iconic Palazzo della Civiltà del Lavoro. This particular structure, popularly referred to as the Colosseo quadrato [square Colosseum], incarnates the most vibrant architectural translation of Fascism's two decade long quest to represent and insert antiquity into its own, ultimately disastrous, pursuit of renewed imperial splendour.

Examples such as the EUR serve to illustrate the importance of romanità to those initiatives endorsed by those holding political power. However, the myth of Rome was also cultivated, and disseminated, so to speak, from the bottom upwards, especially when it came to its more academic or purely discursive treatment.

The legacy of Rome and Fascist cultural organisations: the example of the Istituto di Studi Romani

As has been illustrated, the topos of the Fascist Third Rome became manifest in various ways, penetrating much of the cultural spectrum, inculcating a new Italian identity and self-consciousness by constant reference to an idealised image of the Roman past. Apart from these aesthetic manifestations, the major academic disciplines that dealt with the matter of antichistica – classicists, archaeologists, historians – often supported the top down ideological message, providing research based evidence presented in a number of scientific publications, along with the organisation of expositions, and participating in public-oriented initiatives such as those organised by the highly prolific Istituto di Studi Romani.

The express intent of this institution was the development and diffusion of knowledge about Rome. One of the first issues of Roma, the official journal, contained a handwritten note from Mussolini which evoked the Natale di
clearly setting out the interpretive lines from the very beginning: the total alignment of the Roman past with present ideological prerogatives. As Carlo Galassi Paluzzi, founder and main catalyst of the *Istituto*’s activities, observed, those working for the *Istituto* were to be conceived as an ‘army on the march,’ obeying to the orders of the duce and the king, and heading towards the common goal: the ‘victorious rebirth of the idea of Rome.’

Such a discourse fitted in neatly with the regime’s activist outlook and, as becomes clear from a reading of many of the documents preserved in Rome’s Central State Archive, as well as in the *Istituto*’s *archivio storico*, it greatly influenced the means the government then put at its disposal. In addition, Galassi Paluzzi’s speech mentioned above also contains another central idea that was evoked regularly throughout the *Istituto*’s existence, the concept of a close interrelatedness between the ‘three Romes’: ancient, Christian, and Fascist.

The institution’s discourse, as well as conceptualising its own activities as somewhat ‘messianic’, also orbited around this variant of the century old concept of pagan antiquity as the predecessor, as a form of *praeparatio*, of Christianity. In this context, its network extended to not only academics and politicians, but also to various members of the clergy, this to a point in which at times, mainly due to Galassi Paluzzi’s fervent religiosity, the *Istituto*’s catholic orientation and its inclination towards Fascism seem to have been almost equally influential on its activities.

Concerning the specific (and, statistically, largely predominant) input of academics however, the Fascist viewpoint remained the essential focus; the work of diverse authors such as Pietro De Francisci (see below), Giuseppe

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14 Galassi Paluzzi in 1941, speech conserved in the *archivio storico* of the *Istituto di Studi Romani*, *Affari generali* section, map 11, subplot 25.

15 In this context, see for example Albertina Vittoria, ‘L’*Istituto di Studi Romani* e il suo fondatore Carlo Galassi Paluzzi dal 1925 al 1944,’ in *Atti del Convegno “Il classico nella Roma contemporanea: Mito, modelli, memoria”* (Roma, 18–20 ottobre 2000), ed. Fernanda Roscetti (Roma: Istituto Nazionale di Studi Romani, 2002), 507–537.

16 The most important of these seems to have been Giuseppe Bottai. Jan Nelis, ‘La “fede di Roma” nella modernità totalitaria fascista: Il mito della romanità e l’*Istituto di Studi Romani* tra Carlo Galassi Paluzzi e Giuseppe Bottai,’ *Studi Romani* 58, no. 1–4 (2010): 359–381.

Ceccarelli, Roberto Paribeni, Carlo Cecchelli, Massimo Pallottino and Giuseppe Lugli – to name but a few –, shared one common element: whether by referencing the regime, selecting specific subject matter about which to write, or expressing a positive appreciation of the Roman past, they contributed, directly or indirectly, to the Fascist appropriation of history that was romanità.

This modus operandi can be precisely identified by a reading of the Istituto’s vast list of published titles, and particularly within the pages of Roma, but also in various scientific and popularising book projects. In addition, a manifold series of activities were organised during the institute’s time, such as conferences, visits to archaeological sites, public courses and radio broadcasts, all conceived around some variant of the pivotal concept of Fascism: the ‘Romanness’ of contemporary, and ideally also future, Italy.

The input of antichisti under Fascism: Pietro De Francisci vs. Ettore Ciccotti

Finally, we will illustrate the way in which the more strictly academic discourse on Roman antiquity translated the regime’s heightened interest in, and appreciation of, this period. As numerous book length studies would be needed to cover the entire category of scholarly writings that contributed to the ‘fascistisation’ of Roman antiquity, we will focus this part of our study on the work of Pietro De Francisci, considered as one of the most eminent Fascist antichisti. We will finish by taking into account one of the rare and, in the context of the contemporary relevance of ancient history most noteworthy and evocative, episodes of opposition against the then prevailing ideological climate.

At various moments rector magnificus of Rome’s Sapienza University (1930–1932 and 1935–1943), and a specialist of the Roman judiciary and state system, De Francisci’s scholarly output covered the broad area of the culture

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and history of ancient Rome, duly illustrating the degree of ideologisation to which history could be exposed under Fascism. In contrast to some of his contemporaries such as Ettore Pais, the depth of De Francisci’s contribution to the development of the myth of Rome remains to be fully documented. However, a provisional look at a number of his publications provides valuable hints as to the extent and development of his discourse on romanità.

Generally, De Francisci presented an idealised Rome, the prototype of a near perfect state system that, by means of its legal system, united ancient Romans with contemporary Italians. This was most notably the case in Per una storia italiana dell’impero romano, in which he hinted at the true nature of romanità, which he saw as inspired by a superior, and Roman, spirito, whose essence led to the refinement of his concept of the state. This idea is predominant throughout much of De Francisci’s work. Although essentially not markedly different from that of many of his contemporaries, his scholarship was carried out according to the highest of scientific standards, of a quality that allowed him both to conceal, where necessary, the highly politicised nature of his thought, and to thoroughly underpin those political statements which he openly acknowledged.

Inspired by his interpretation of the principles of Roman law, the Roman State and notions of Roman ‘discipline’, De Francisci’s concept of romanità aligned perfectly with the image of the strong, totalitarian, disciplined state promoted by Fascism. Whereas generally, such a message was embedded in an otherwise neutral academic discourse, De Francisci occasionally lapsed into somewhat stereotypical lip service to the regime’s mounting interest in Roman antiquity, as evidenced in the foreword to his Sotto il segno di Clio, which states that

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21 The only attempt to do so can be found in Romke Visser, ‘Pietro De Francisci’s idee van de romanità als cryptofascistische filosofie van de geschiedenis,’ Theoretische Geschiedenis 22, no. 4 (1995): 472–497.


23 See for example Pietro De Francisci, ‘Le basi giuridiche del principato,’ in Augusto, Roberto Paribeni et al. (Padova: CEDAM, 1939), 21–37.
today, as never before, we have seen in front of the mussolinian creation, square, solid, powerful in its structures and clear, balanced, luminous in its ideal contents, the rejuvenation of the intimate consciousness of the timeless virtue of many deeply rooted spiritual values which the Leader, victorious creator, has transformed into revolutionary actions, into a new harmony, a new political construction, affecting every aspect of national life.24

Another instance in which he further perpetrates the fascistisation of antiquity is in his treatment of a theme with which, due to his interest in the Roman state system, he was rather familiar, i.e. that of empire. As evidenced elsewhere, no transparent definition of this concept was ever formulated under Italian Fascism.25 Even De Francisci, who, in Civiltà Romana, spoke of imperium, which he saw as essential not only to antiquity but also to the present, never settled upon a clear definition. Indeed, after emphasising the crucial importance of empire to ancient Rome, he somewhat disappointingly, and without adding further substance to his line of thought, had to admit that it is a ‘problem difficult to resolve’.26

As noted, De Francisci’s work dealt with a variety of topics relevant to the idea of romanità. This included Julius Caesar, that most iconic historical example, and one whose continued presence played constantly on Mussolini’s mind.27 The subject of scholarly erudition, and protagonist both on the theatrical stage28 and in popularising writings, the figure of Julius Caesar was perfect subject matter for developing a hybrid discourse that combined a traditional historical approach with an at times almost cinematic, or in any case highly evocative, writing style. Thus in De Francisci’s Cesare we encounter, in an evocation of Caesar’s March on Rome, a clear amalgamation between past and present undertakings: ‘From that moment begins the new era: the war is no longer a conflict between two competitors or a conservative Senate and a

general with the ambition to rule, but a fight in which the earth participates, a fire burning on every bank of the Mediterranean’.29

A few years later, he repeated this rhetorical exercise. Because Fascist Italy had conquered its very own ‘empire’ by means of colonial conquest, Caesar’s adoptive son, who, as noted above, was lavishly celebrated in 1937–1938, was now seen to have been

resurrected in all his glory. And in this return, while the chant of the poet of empire resounds even more loudly, that chant which at the very offset of the rebirth showed Italians the sacred destiny of immortal Rome, the simple legend seems to us to also announce a necessary event; because, to conclude by citing Dante, the Titan was born so as to confuse those who love injustice, to bring peace and renewed justice: and we ask only to work with Him, under his command, in pure faith and constant obedience.30

The (Augustan) past had by now become the main source of inspiration for the present, a part of Italian inner self or identity, or, as De Francisci stated, Rome ‘in its essence could be reduced to a most intimate realisation of our existence, to an understanding which comes from inside.’31 For De Francisci, Rome was an ethical, political ideal at the service of present day action and ideology, an exemplum for the present. As noted, it was a powerful tool to use when justifying and adding cachet to such notions as imperialism, and state power.

In addition, it could be applied directly to some of the more sensitive issues that persisted during Fascism’s drive towards total power, such as its dependency on repression and violence. Here De Francisci again drew a distinct parallel with Augustus, notorious for the use of bloodshed and the curbing of personal freedom as a means of gaining power. In La costituzione Augustea,32 De Francisci paralleled Augustan Rome with the Fascist present:

And for that matter regarding this theme there has been too much debate concerning legality and constitutionalism, whereby the conditions of

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30 Pietro De Francisci, Celebrazione del bimillenario di Augusto (Milano: Bestetti, 1938), 30.
31 Ibid., 9.
the Roman State have been forgotten, as well as the fact that judicial formulae are subordinate to a principle of immanent justice, i.e. the necessity of safeguarding that same State in which the judicial formulae find their origin.33

Finally, he attended to another issue crucial to Fascism’s reliance on Roman antiquity, i.e. the somewhat paradoxical tension between Romanità’s forward looking, ‘futural’ thrust and the identification with a nostalgic longing for a faraway past.34 Here he attempted to redefine the concept of revolution, which he viewed as a constructive superamento of the past, of which only the essence was retained. Construction, not destruction, was required; a process that leaves room for past, present and future. No other contemporary author implicitly offered such a lucid characterisation of the value of Romanità to Fascism as the following, while also alluding to its ‘modernistic’ side: ‘Rome has never known a revolution which necessitated the violent destruction of the entire past in the name of abstract ideologies or purely intellectualistic visions. The sense of State, of sovereignty, of discipline are deeply rooted in the Roman conscience . . . transformations always finish in a surpassing, never in an annihilation, of the past.’35

De Francisci’s case can count as exemplary of, if not all antichisti, at least a large number of those academics studying Roman antiquity under Fascism. Be that as it may, a small section of the academic world remained immune to Fascism. Their modus operandi: covering ‘harmless’ subject matter, i.e. themes less susceptible to being linked with the propaganda surrounding the myth of Rome. To some extent, and with varying degrees of success, this allowed them to carry on performing essential scientific research throughout all of the ventennio, even if their thematic choice often meant that funding was more limited than to those investigating more ideologically appealing topics.

For most, any ‘non-conformism’ came to a halt at this point. However, there were some rare exceptions. The most well-known of these is Gaetano De Sanctis, one of a very small number who refused to pledge the obligatory oath

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33 De Francisci, ‘La costituzione Augustea,’ 100. One year later, the author would express a similar idea, this time in the context of the mentioned publication on the ‘juridical foundations of the principate’: De Francisci, ‘Le basi giuridiche del principato,’ 37.


35 Ibid., 218.
of allegiance to the regime which became law in 1931.\textsuperscript{36} An example more significant in the specific context of the theme of romanità is Ettore Ciccotti, an esteemed academic and a senator, who at first, like De Sanctis, refused to pledge the oath, although finally giving in to pressure and signing, mainly, it seems, so as to retain his academic position.

Apart from that initial refusal, the peculiarity of Ciccotti’s academic opposition to Fascism lies in the fact that he used precisely the same tools to criticise the regime as those the regime itself used to boost its own image: Roman history, and more particularly, the figure of Augustus. Thus in his \textit{Profilo di Augusto},\textsuperscript{37} published at a time in which propaganda involving the great, peaceful and virtuous Augustus was virtually omnipresent, Ciccotti painted a picture of Augustan Rome which was critical of the things that Italians had witnessed since the arrival of Fascism on the political scene: the increasing ‘sterilisation’ of political institutions, primarily the Senate, accompanied by the development of a dictatorial and repressive regime.

Just as had Julius Caesar, his adoptive father and an historical agent who under Fascism came to incarnate the prototype of the forceful leader, to Ciccotti, Augustus was an opportunist, someone who used the masses for mere personal benefit. As a demagogue and a traitor to his allies, in Ciccotti’s perception, Augustus served as a complete counter-example, whose story was bound to end in catastrophe. Indeed, adding an observation that clearly took aim at Mussolini’s by then effectively imperialist politics, Ciccotti stated that it was a near fact that ‘the [Roman] Empire contained the germs of its own dissolution.’\textsuperscript{38}

Hardly representative of scholarship on ancient Rome produced under Italian Fascism, this rare manifestation of opposition against the Fascist instrumentalisation of academia – which we have treated more extensively elsewhere\textsuperscript{39} – stands out as a rare and highly specific instance in which the myth of romanità was openly questioned and criticised. Ciccotti passed away one year after the \textit{Profilo} had been published, and thus, unlike many of his Fascist contemporaries, never witnessed the realisation of the cause on which he concentrated his scholarly activities.

\textsuperscript{36} On the oath, see Helmut Goetz, \textit{Der freie Geist und seine Widersacher} (Frankfurt am Main: Haag + Herchen, 1993), and Giorgio Boatti, \textit{Preferirei di no: Le storie dei dodici professori che si oppossero a Mussolini} (Torino: Einaudi, 2001).

\textsuperscript{37} Ettore Ciccotti, \textit{Profilo di Augusto} (con un appendice sulle leggi matrimoniali di Augusto) (Torino: Einaudi, 1938).

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 132.

Conclusion

As Roger Griffin most convincingly indicated in his 2007 opus *Modernism and Fascism*, Italian Fascism radically headed towards the future. At first sight, an essentially antiquarian topic such as *romanità* might seem less compatible with this thesis. However, both in its aesthetic and its scholarly manifestations, *romanità*, a historically rooted but at the same time contemporary myth intended at underpinning present-day ideological imperatives, was nothing less than an integral part of Fascism’s ‘futural’ thrust, of its intended project of the creation of a new Italy, of new Italians, surrounded and inspired by the remainders of antiquity, and their contemporary emulations.

Apart from academic discourse, architecture and archaeology played a central role here, as a de- and consequently re-constructed narrative on present, and future Italy. Recent scholarship such as Griffin's has indeed underlined the futural, temporal thrust of Fascism and *romanità*, rather than its traditionally reactionary, backward-looking dynamic. As seems, at least to a certain extent, to have been the case in Nazi Germany, for the Fascists, antiquity indeed was no faraway, dusty past, but a lively source of inspiration and energy revealing the regime's modernist, revolutionary ambition to build a ‘Third Rome’ which, literally and figuratively, made visible the earlier layers of Roman heritage.

It is to be hoped that such consciousness, present in the work of scholars such as Gentile and Kallis, will further solidify the so-called ‘new consensus’ in fascist studies, and help to further open up a field of research which has still to be fully explored and understood. The present article hopes to be read as an incentive towards such an initiative.