Book Reviews

Han Lamers and Bettina Reitz-Joosse

The Codex Fori Mussolini: A Latin Text of Italian Fascism (London: Bloomsbury, 2016)

The shock and bewilderment felt by the group of graduate students that the two authors of the *Codex Fori Mussolini* took to the Foro Italico in the northern outskirts of Rome back in 2013 (the story is told on page 4) is familiar to everyone who has visited this bizarre heterotopic site. Here, against the dramatic backdrop of the surrounding mountains, on the bank of river Tiber, lies a new Fascist city for the youth, contrived and ordered like the simulacrum of the kind of future society envisioned by the Fascist regime. Generations of visitors have been bemused by the mere survival of this complex (in addition to the built architecture of the site, there are Fascist-era mosaics and a monumental promenade dotted with milestones of Fascism's own history), let alone its pristine condition or the contemporary (multiple) uses of its facilities. But, like in the case of the students that Han Lamers and Bettina Reitz-Joosse accompanied to the site, nothing prepares the visitor for the sight and troubling significance of the giant marble monolith dedicated to Mussolini that adorns the monumental entrance to the Foro Italico, still emblazoned with the words 'Mussolini' and 'Dux'. The monolith, erected on the site on the eve of the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome (the *Decennale* celebrated in style in 1932), was in itself a fascinating mediation between past and present, between the two core Fascist myths of Roman-ness (*romanità*) and universality (*universalità*): invoking ancient emperors and medieval popes while celebrating the present and future of the 'Fascist revolution'; reproducing the form of an Egyptian obelisk while also offering a thoroughly futural re-interpretation of its form. Yet few, very few visitors are aware of perhaps the most bizarre of its legends – a metal box, buried inside the monolith's base, containing a 'Latin text of Italian Fascism', as per the subtitle of this book, written on parchment by Latin scholar Giuseppe Amatucci.

Codex Fori Mussolini is the fascinating product of Lamers's and Reitz-Joosse's laudable efforts to shed much-needed light on the history of this parchment.

As they rightly point out (2–3), this is a story that is largely forgotten or ignored amidst an otherwise strong revival of historiographical interest in Fascist Rome, as built city and myth. I can accept my share of responsibility at this point: I was dimly aware of the existence of the *Codex* when I was conducting my research on Fascist Rome but I failed to delve deeper into the mystery of its existence or its content. In hindsight, this was an inexplicable error of judgement on my part, not least because the mere decision to bury a text in Latin about the short history of Fascism on the base of a modern-era obelisk at the entrance of the then called Foro Mussolini on the eve of the *Decennale* anniversary arguably constitutes the most evocative and symbolic early evidence of Fascism's unabashed pursuit of universality.

Like the *Codex* itself, the book is divided in three parts. The first largest section is dedicated to the historical and cultural context of the production of the text. Over more than eighty pages, the authors attempt to *situate* the *Codex*: as a celebratory text about Fascism and Mussolini deliberately compiled in Latin (16–27); as a deposit on the foundations of the flagship facilities of the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) in the outskirts of Rome (28–47); as a fascinating detail of the story of the monolith itself (48–62); as part of the celebrations for the *Decennale*; and as a symbolic marker of critical escalation of the cult of Mussolini in the 1930s.

The second section is the *raison d'être* of this publication: a bilingual (original Latin-English translation) edition of the 1220-word text itself. There is of course an exquisite paradox at the heart of this venture: the original *Codex*, supposed to be deep inside the base of the monolith, remains inaccessible and unverifiable. In the introduction, the authors have identified a number of possibilities and difficulties surrounding the retrieval of the text. The four official publications of the original *Codex*, between 1932 and 1937, contain minor authorial and editorial differences that feed the mystery surrounding the story of the parchment. For the historian, this kind of multiplicity of versions raises compelling, if somewhat difficult, methodological questions. For example, are the variations between the four editions more interesting and significant in a historical sense than the text published here? Or, given that the original is inaccessible, should the historian opt for the assumption that the text closer to the date of the original is also likely to be the most accurate reflection of the buried *Codex*?

The authors have chosen to publish the latest authorised version by Amatucci himself, even if it differs slightly from the 1932 edition that was closer to the date of the original parchment. Their choice is a perfectly defensible one and the reasons behind it are briefly explained in the Introduction (8–9). However, it is the third section of the book, the Commentary (99–122), that

provides, perhaps unexpectedly, the most valuable part of this publication. If the translated text provides the reader with a fascinating historical discovery, the Commentary contains the historical insights and tools to mine the translated text. The differences between the four editions are explained here in more detail, as are aspects of the historical, cultural, architectural, institutional, and political context of the *Codex* itself. In this understated section, Lamers and Reitz-Joose bring all their efforts and expertises together to transform a text into an intriguingly complex historical panorama of Italian Fascism as a whole.

It is by no means a criticism to confess that I took so much pleasure in re-reading the text with the help of the commentary that I ended up wishing for more. I wondered whether the authors could have re-imagined the text as the 'authorised' compendium to Fascism's self-presentation to a future audience. As a 'foundation deposit', the *Codex* could indeed be seen as condensing and transmitting 'the memory of the builder or the people who produced a structure into the future' (62). The wealth of information that accompanies the annotations is a real asset to the reader but remains – understandably – concise and elliptical. As the first decade of Fascist rule was coming to an end, the *Codex* appears as a bridge to the primary ambition that would dominate Fascism's second decade in power – namely the quest for a Fascist *universality* in both place and time. For a regime obsessed with self-celebratory fanfare, the striking absence of any ceremony marking the deposit in 1932 (64) is indeed bewildering, even if it adds to the mystery of the *Codex* itself. Maybe this understated approach to the deposit back in 1932 was more fitting to the intended function of the *Codex* as the official cipher transmitting Fascism's universal ambitions into posterity. In this sense, the *Codex* was as much looking towards the past – the myths of *romanità*, of medieval Christianity, of the Renaissance; the pantheon of Italian nationalism; the legends of the birth and 'victory' of Fascism itself – as towards the future.

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