

Fascist past, present and future? The multiple usages of the Roman Empire in Mussolini's Italy

Review of: Jan Nelis, *From ancient to modern: the myth of romanità during the ventennio fascista: The written imprint of Mussolini's cult of the 'Third Rome'*, Brussels/Rome, Belgisch Historisch Instituut te Rome/Institut Historique Belge de Rome, Brepols, 2011, 242 p., ISBN 9789074461740. € 35,00.

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From ancient to modern: the myth of romanità during the ventennio fascista. The written imprint of Mussolini's cult of the 'Third Rome' is Jan Nelis' contribution to a still quickly expanding body of literature engaging with the cultural aspects of fascist Italy. Jan Nelis, who undertook his doctoral research in the Department of Literary Studies at Ghent University, has published widely in both Italian and English on questions of identity, religion and the reception of antiquity. *From ancient to modern* engages with all these topics and offers a valuable contribution to the already extremely rich historiography on fascism.

Following the controversial but pioneering studies of Renzo De Felice, scholarship on fascism has in recent decades increasingly taken an 'internal' perspective, focusing less on its causes or effects and rather considering the intentions of fascist actors to be of prime importance. Of these intentions, the question of the creation of a fascist consensus in society has taken a pivotal position in the understanding of the nature of fascism and has consequently dominated the scholarly agenda. It was this striving for consensus, after all, which contributed to the fact that the fascist dictatorship was upheld by more than coercion alone, enjoying, at least temporarily, popular support.

From this perspective, innovative studies by Roger Griffin and De Felice's disciple Emilio Gentile have emphasized that fascism claimed to be a faith, attempting to allure the masses to its creed of national regeneration by cultural means. Fascism, in the words of Gentile, was to foster 'a visible community of belief and a force for renewal in the life of the nation'. It is well known that the 'invention of tradition' proved to be a powerful vehicle with which this reawakening of the nation could be achieved. In Italy especially, with its history of internal division and oppression by foreign powers, a political religion pointing to past unity proved to be appealing. Unsurprisingly, the glory of Imperial Rome in particular stood as a shrine on which both past achievements and hopes for the future could be projected.

One important result of this obsession with the past was the fascist identification with, and usage of, the Roman past to legitimise contemporary claims to power: *romanità*. Whereas previously scholarship has focused largely on monuments, new national holidays and cultural artefacts such as the 'Roman salute',

Nelis' study departs from established patterns in important aspects. *From ancient to modern* is simultaneously faithful to the established scholarly focus on *romanità* whilst expanding its scope significantly by making a fertile cross-over between the disciplines of history and literary studies. Its focus lies exclusively on written sources and by concentrating on these Nelis' study makes a convincing argument that important aspects of the Roman past have hitherto been overlooked in the study of fascism.

From ancient to modern is structured in three long chapters. The first of these provides a succinct overview of the current state of fascism studies, geared towards the 'internal' and 'cultural' approach that Nelis adopts in the rest of his study. Although the pitfalls of both methodological perspectives could arguably have been elaborated upon to a greater extent, the chapter rightly states that there is a 'growing awareness of the importance of myth to Italian fascism', clarifies why this awareness has been beneficial and fruitful and thus makes a convincing case for approaching *romanità* in this way.

The subsequent analysis of the myth of *romanità* is undertaken in two steps in the following chapters, although the dividing line between these is sometimes somewhat arbitrary. The first chapter is based on an impressive amount of primary sources of practically all types of published material that circulated in the twenties, thirties and early forties – with the notable exception of newspaper articles. In short and clear paragraphs, Nelis provides a comprehensive overview of the conceptualisation of *romanità* in various spheres of fascist society and ideology: in addition to specific references to Romans such as Virgil and Horace, foreign policy, religion, the 'civilising mission' and racism were all deeply affected by references to the Roman past. It proved to be an extremely heterogeneous phenomenon that was even able to ease tensions between Church and State in Italy by establishing 'a synthesis between *romanità* and traditional religion'.

The final chapter is an in-depth and diachronic analysis of four specific journals. Discussing journals from the entire range between popular and academic, Nelis posits that *romanità* left no sphere of society unaffected. This was even the case for the *Nuova Antologia*, whose founding preceded Mussolini's rise to power by some fifty years, but in which by the end of the 1920s 'references to fascism and to fascist *romanità* became the ruler rather than the exception'. This chapter also argues that academia, a sphere often considered to have been able to retain a certain autonomy during the *ventennio fascista*, was deeply coloured by fascist propaganda, also in reference to the Roman past.

This important correction of historiography in relation to university life under Mussolini does not stand alone. Nelis also illustrates, for instance, how Caesar, alongside the well-known example of Augustus, was used by Mussolini to legitimise his war rhetoric and how the Roman consul was recast 'totally in the service of fascism' on the eve of the Second World War. Unfortunately, due to the book's thematic rather than chronological structure, strong arguments like these are at times diffused in the extensive description of primary sources. The same is true, necessarily, of the chronological development of the notion of *romanità*. Nelis argues that this phenomenon's conception was fairly stable, but given his concurrent emphasis on the flexible adaptation of references to the Roman past to political events of the day, this is sometimes hard to assess. A clearer focus on grand political developments – the March on Rome, the *delitto* Matteotti, the Lateran Treaties, the War in Ethiopia and the Berlin-Rome Axis for instance – as an underlying structure could have remedied this. Nonetheless, *From ancient to modern* is an exceptionally rich and thought-provoking study of the previously overlooked written usage of the Roman Past in fascist Italy. The book analyses in an intelligent manner the way in

which the fascists shrewdly used this past to foster their community of believers in the present.

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