

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &  
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

# thersites

10/2019

Filippo Carlà-Uhink & Maja Gori (Eds.)

## Modern Identities and Classical Antiquity



[www.thersites-journal.de](http://www.thersites-journal.de)

## **Imprint**

### **Universität Potsdam 2020**

Historisches Institut, Professur Geschichte des Altertums  
Am Neuen Palais 10, 14469 Potsdam (Germany)  
<https://www.thersites-journal.de/>

### **Editors**

PD Dr. Annemarie Ambühl (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)  
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink (Universität Potsdam)  
Dr. Christian Rollinger (Universität Trier)  
Prof. Dr. Christine Walde (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)

**ISSN 2364-7612**

### **Contact**

#### **Principal Contact**

Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink  
Email: [thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de)

#### **Support Contact**

Dr. phil. Christian Rollinger  
Email: [thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de)

### **Layout and Typesetting**

text plus form, Dresden

### **Cover pictures:**

1 – The Archaeological Museum of the Republic of North Macedonia in Skopje at the time of its construction. Photo by Maja Gori, 2008.  
2 – Roman gladiator. Part of a statuary group in Rruga Taulantia, Durrës, Albania. Photo by Filippo Carlà-Uhink, September 2019.

### **Published online at:**

<https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol10>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License:  
Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).  
This does not apply to quoted content from other authors.  
To view a copy of this license visit  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

SAMUEL AGBAMU

(King's College, London)

## Review of Han Lamers and Bettina Reitz-Joosse: *The Codex Fori Mussolini*

Bloomsbury (London 2016) = Bloomsbury Studies in  
Classical Reception, x + 139 p., with 24 b/w illustrations.  
ISBN: 9781350054868, \$ 38.60 (pb)/\$ 103.50 (hb)

In the last decade and a half, Fascist *romanità*—the evocation of ancient Rome in Fascist political and cultural discourse—has benefitted from a wide-ranging, incisive body of scholarship across disciplines. The significance of ancient Rome to Italian Fascist self-presentation has been drawn out especially in scholarship which argues that *romanità* went beyond rhetoric but was instead an important ideological element of Fascism's self-representation as a 'backwards-looking' modernity.<sup>1</sup> In

this respect, Han Lamers's and Bettina Reitz-Joosse's volume emerges from a well-developed scholarly field, at the same time as advancing it in important ways, by turning to a 'foundational' (in more ways than one) document of Fascist Italian *romanità*. The significance of Lamers's and Reitz-Joosse's study is clear: this is the first time that the *Codex Fori Mussolini* has been translated out of Latin in its entirety, and the first detailed commentary and discussion dedicated to it. The volume itself falls

---

<sup>1</sup> See, especially, Griffin (2007) on Fascism's 'backwards-looking' modernity. See also,

---

Arthurs (2012) on *romanità* as a means to 'excavate modernity'.

into three main parts: establishing the background to the *Codex Fori Mussolini*; the Latin text of the *Codex* itself with an English translation; and a richly detailed commentary.

While scholarly approaches to Fascist *romanità* have encompassed fields of study as diverse as architecture, urban planning, film, spectacle, and scholarly publications under the regime, Lamers and Reitz-Joosse have pioneered the investigation of Fascist Italy's project of reviving Latin.<sup>2</sup> The study, *The Codex Fori Mussolini: A Latin Text of Italian Fascism*, stands out as an excellent introduction, not only to Fascist neo-Latin, but to Fascist *romanità* more generally. The volume incorporates themes drawn out in previous publications by Lamers and Reitz-Joosse, as well as addressing aspects of Fascist *romanità* investigated by other scholars. For example, it looks at the use of film produced by *Istituto LUCE* to immortalize and promote Fascist building projects, as discussed especially by Federico Caprotti; or Fascism's 'ruinous imaginary' in imagining its own monumental, physical ruins in the distant future, as explored more recently

by Julia Hell.<sup>3</sup> Despite the breadth of themes discussed, the focus of the study is razor-sharp and stays tightly structured around the *Codex* and the obelisk of the Foro Mussolini.

In the first part, Lamers and Reitz-Joosse set the *Codex Fori Mussolini* into context. The *Codex*, a record of Fascism's first decade in power, was written in Latin by the classicist Aurelio Giuseppe Amatucci (1867–1960). It was buried as a foundation deposit under a monumental monolith of Carrara marble in the newly built sports complex, north of the historic centre of Rome, the Foro Mussolini, now the Foro Italico. Lamers and Reitz-Joosse offer a fascinating and rich discussion of the background to the *Codex*'s composition, outlining the structure and context of the *Codex*, before briefly discussing the various editions in which the content of the *Codex* was published, detailing some of the textual variations between editions. It is in such attention to textual detail that the classical training of the authors shines through most obviously, echoed further in the commentary to the text, which I turn to below.

After introducing us to the career of Amatucci, Lamers and Reitz-Joosse turn to discuss the configuration of Latin as a language of Fascism. Much of the discussion will be familiar to readers of the authors' previous research (see footnote

---

2 Lamers and Reitz-Joosse (2016); Lamers, Reitz-Joosse and Sacré (2014); Lamers (2017); Bettegazzi, Lamers, and Reitz-Joosse (2019). On architecture, see especially Kallis (2014); on urban planning, Baxa (2010); Caprotti (2007); on Fascist *romanità*'s 'written imprint' see Nelis (2011).

---

3 Hell (2019).

n. 2), but its inclusion here is important to this volume's purpose and is useful in setting further discussion into context. Latin's ideological pull for Fascism, as a language both national and international, is highlighted by the authors. A key tension between the universality of Latin, and its promotion under Fascism as a national language of Italy is not drawn out here. Although it may not contribute to the discussion of the *Codex* itself, it is an interesting area of further discussion, especially in how Latin might underpin the contradictions between Fascist universalism, and the ideology's ultra-nationalism.

The authors then turn to explore how Fascism shaped itself into the language of Roman antiquity, by examining how the *Codex* "incorporates and activates ancient sources" (p. 23). Entire phrases are lifted directly from classical texts, sometimes haphazardly, other times more deliberately, but in both cases, securely anchoring the *Codex* in ancient precedents. As Lamers and Reitz-Joosse suggest, the style of the *Codex*'s Latin is closest to Cicero's while also resonating strongly with Livy.

Although the significance of the parallel between the opening of the *Codex* and that of book 21 of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* is clearly drawn out in the commentary, the centrality of the myth constructed around Carthage and the Punic Wars in the Roman historical imaginary sheds a different light on the *Codex*'s aping of Livy. As scholars

have pointed out, Carthage and its destruction are deeply ambivalent presences/absences in the Roman imagination.<sup>4</sup> For Fascist Italy to re-invoke Carthage in its revival of Rome absorbs these ambivalences which expose and exacerbate Roman anxieties over empire.<sup>5</sup> More significantly, perhaps, the architecture of the Foro Mussolini, and the location of the *Codex* underneath the monolith, looked to a future in which visitors to Rome would gaze on the monumental ruins of Fascist Rome. In other words, Fascist Rome was built to last a long time, but not forever, mirroring the philosophy of German National Socialist architect Albert Speer (pp. 46–47). As Julia Hell recently argued, the ruin-gazing scenarios of empires finds its ur-scene with Scipio Aemilianus' tears over the ruins of Carthage in 146 BCE, since the Roman conqueror saw in the destruction of Rome's Punic nemesis a reflection of the Eternal City's own future, knowledge implicitly acknowledged in Fascist neo-Roman architectural philosophies.<sup>6</sup> So, if the ruinous imaginary of Roman imperialism saw its fall foreshadowed in the destruction of Carthage, what does

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Giusti (2018); O'Gorman (2004).

<sup>5</sup> See Agbamu (2019) on how this plays out in a monument of Fascist imperial *romanità*.

<sup>6</sup> Hell (2019).

Carthage mean for the architects of the Foro Italico, a complex built to one day be majestic ruins?

In the next section, Lamers and Reitz-Joosse set out the context for the location of the *Codex* within the Foro Mussolini, inaugurated in 1932—the tenth anniversary of Fascism’s march on Rome. This was a sports complex built under the auspices of the Opera Nazionale Balilla, the Fascist youth organization, and remains largely unchanged to this day, aside from a rather superficial name-change. The maps and images to illustrate the location of the complex are helpful, but some require clearer labeling (particularly figures 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4). The project of land reclamation for the construction of the Foro strikingly parallels that of the Pontine Marshes, especially in the context of what Federico Caprotti refers to as ‘internal colonization’,<sup>7</sup> but this is not highlighted by the authors, although it is mentioned in the commentary to the *Codex* (p. 110 – xlvi/57).

The penultimate section of the contextual part of the study turns to the obelisk, or monolith, under which the *Codex* was buried. In situating the monolith within the obelisk tradition, which stretches back into distant antiquity, the authors briefly point out that the appropriation of obelisks has ancient Roman precedents (p. 48). The

appropriation of Roman appropriative culture is something of which the Fascists were very much aware. Lamers and Reitz-Joosse do not mention the fact that at the 1937–1938 Mostra Augustea della Romanità, a spectacular exhibition staged to celebrate the bimillenary of the first Roman emperor, links between the Roman past and Fascist present were made through obelisks. In a room of the exhibition dedicated to the eternity of Rome, representations of the Circus Maximus obelisks, brought to Rome by Augustus, were juxtaposed with that of the Lateran obelisk, restored by Sixtus V, and that of the Axum Stele, stolen from Ethiopia following Italy’s invasion, 1935–1936, and erected in Rome. The continuity between Rome’s obelisk-stealing tradition, and Fascism’s emulation of the practice, was further emphasized in Publio Morbiducci’s giant bas-relief sculpture ‘La Storia di Roma attraverso le Opere Edilizie’ in Rome’s EUR district. Here, the Roman erection of Egyptian obelisks is directly juxtaposed with Mussolini’s theft of the Axum Stele. Obelisks had been used to monumentalise Italy’s defeat at Dogali 1887, and Italy’s subsequent defeat and vengeance over Ethiopia later, in 1936. Thus, while Lamers and Reitz-Joosse do make clear the significance of the form of the obelisk for such a context as the Foro Mussolini, the most radical implications for how the modernizing form of the Mussolini obelisk underpins the Fascist historical

---

7 Caprotti (2007).

imaginary's self-positioning in relation to past, present, and future, remains to be drawn out.

In the final section on the *Codex* in context, the authors consider the document as a foundation deposit. Again, they place such artefacts in their historical context, comparing the *Codex* to deposits from Mesopotamia at the beginning of the second millennium BCE and the practice of placing a *lapis primarius* in new buildings today (p. 62). The placing of such 'messages to the future' are also underpinned by a ruinous imaginary, and a 'self-archaeologising' transformation into an object to be excavated in the distant future. The *Codex* was buried with a series of gold medals, minted especially for the occasion. It is fascinating that, given the fact that both the *Codex* and the medals remain buried, we do not know what the medals depicted, with the possible exception of one which shows Mussolini in profile wearing a lionskin, tying the Fascist dictator with the strongman of classical mythology, Hercules. After considering the parchment of the *Codex* itself, Lamers and Reitz-Joosse move on to its Latin text and translation.

The translation is elegant and highly readable. Where the Latin has long sentences with multiple relative clauses, Lamers and Reitz-Joosse break it down into several sentences. On occasion, translations for individual words could have been conveyed the ideological weight of the Latin further. For example,

in line 2, *exarsit* is translated as 'raged', although to have hit upon the fiery connotations of *exardo* would have been true to Fascism's obsession with fires and conflagrations, no doubt an heir to Futurism in this respect. Linked to this, the translation navigates Amatucci's use of Latin to describe modern innovations excellently, for example Amatucci's reference to *aeria classis* which Lamers and Reitz-Joosse keep as an 'air fleet'. To translate it as 'air force' would have lost the archaizing vocabulary of Amatucci's Latin, and so the translators remain sensitive to the tensions in describing the new in the language of the old.

The commentary shows an astounding level of erudition, ranging from close readings of the *Codex* compared with Livy, Cicero, Vitruvius, and others, to in-depth contextualization within Fascist cultural politics. The deep significance of the *Codex* is masterfully drawn out by the authors whose expertise situates them uniquely for this project.

At a crucial juncture in Italian politics, when far-right politics underpinned by xenophobic populism gains in confidence, returning to the texts of Italian Fascism is an urgent as ever. When Fascism speaks in the language of ancient Rome, classicists have an obligation to confront such inheritances. Lamers and Reitz-Joosse more than succeed in this task, setting an example for such scholarship in the future.

## Bibliography

- Agbamu (2019) – Samuel Agbamu, ‘The Arco dei Fileni: A Fascist Reading of Sallust’s *Bellum Iugurthinum*’, *Classical Receptions Journal* 11.2 (2019) 157–177.
- Arthurs (2012) – Joshua Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity: The Roman Past in Fascist Italy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 2012).
- Baxa (2010) – Paul Baxa, *Roads and Ruins: The Symbolic Landscape of Fascist Rome* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2010).
- Bettegazzi, Lamers and Reitz-Joosse (2019) – Nicolò Bettegazzi, Han Lamers & Bettina Reitz-Joosse, ‘Viewing Rome in the Latin Literature of the Ventennio Fascista: Francesco Giammaria’s *Capitolium Novum*’, *Fascism* 8.2 (2019) 153–178.
- Caprotti (2007) – Frederico Caprotti, *Mussolini’s Cities: Internal Colonialism in Italy 1930–1939* (Youngstown: Cambria Press 2007).
- Giusti (2018) – Elena Giusti, *Carthage in Virgil’s Aeneid: Staging the Enemy under Augustus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018).
- Griffin (2007) – Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2007).
- Hell (2019) – Julia Hell, *The Conquest of Ruins: The Third Reich and the Fall of Rome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2019).
- Kallis (2014) – Aristotle Kallis, *The Third Rome, 1922–1943: The Making of a Fascist Capital* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2014).
- Lamers (2017) – Han Lamers, ‘Latinizing Mussolini’s Message: Nicola Festa’s Latin Translation of the “Proclamation of Empire” (1936/7)’, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 24.2 (2017) 198–218.
- Lamers and Reitz-Joosse (2016) – Han Lamers & Bettina Reitz-Joosse, ‘Lingua Lictoria: the Latin Literature of Italian Fascism’, *Classical Receptions Journal* 8.2 (2016) 216–252.
- Lamers, Reitz-Joosse and Sacré (2014) – Han Lamers, Bettina Reitz-Joosse & Dirk Sacré, ‘Neo-Latin Literature—Italy: Fascism (1922–1943)’, in Philip Ford, Jan Bloemendal & Charles Fantazzi (eds.), *Brill’s Encyclopaedia of the Neo-Latin World: Micropaedia* (Leiden: Brill 2014) 1091–1096.
- Nelis (2011) – 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: Belgisch Historisch Instituut te Rome 2011).
- O’Gorman (2004) – Ellen O’Gorman, ‘Cato the Elder and the Destruction of Carthage’, *Helios* 31.1/2 (2004) 99–125.

---

Samuel Agbamu  
King's College, London  
Email: samuel.agbamu@gmail.com

**Suggested citation:**

Samuel Agbamu: Review of Han Lamers and  
Bettina Reitz-Joosse: The Codex Fori Mussolini.  
In: *thersites* 10 (2019): Modern Identities and  
Classical Antiquity, pp. 227–233.  
<https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol10.140>