

*The Antiquity of the Italian Nation: The Cultural Origins of a
Political Myth in Modern Italy, 1796-1943*

By Antonino De Francesco

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Antonino De Francesco's *The Antiquity of the Italian Nation* opposes a growing trend among historians to see the rise of Fascism as a direct and inevitable consequence of the Risorgimento, Italy's nineteenth-century political movement for unification. According to the author, such a view creates a false sense of continuity, as Italian nationalism did not develop in a linear way but was informed by multiple intersecting models that successively appropriated and reconfigured ideas whose origins lay elsewhere. To illustrate this complexity, De Francesco focusses on a single theme – the myth of an autochthonous pre-Roman civilisation – and explores how its discursive function changed over time. The starting point of his chronological survey is Vincenzo Cuoco, whose 1806 novel *Platone in Italia* suggested the primordial existence of an indigenous Etruscan population from which all inhabitants of the peninsula descended. Cuoco not only found a way to assert the ethnic unity of a young nation composed of traditionally diverse states, but he was also able to claim Italy's cultural primacy by crediting the Etruscans as the original civilisers of Europe. De Francesco highlights the importance of this fantastical thesis within the contemporary political context and points out that it was a direct challenge to the dominant status of Napoleonic France.

The author of *The Antiquity of the Italian Nation* then compares Cuoco's position with the work of Gisuseppe Micali. While the latter insisted on the antiquity of the Italic peoples and emphasised their high civilizational achievements prior to the military triumph of Rome, he carefully avoided any mention of their uniform nature. Micali's celebration of ancient regional diversity implied an Italian identity based on cultural rather than ethnical factors. In his opinion, historic invasions by the Gauls and the Greeks had substantially changed the country's anthropological profile. Surprisingly, however, De Francesco's thorough territorial analysis reveals that Micali was also warmly received in those areas that he regarded as influenced

by foreign elements. Because Micali's writings were fully compatible with the various local traditions of the peninsula, they enjoyed great popularity during the national revolution of 1848, when some patriots regarded a federative system as preferable to a single republic. His ideas remained topical even after the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, appealing to those who protested against the centralisation imposed by the House of Savoy.

De Francesco pays special attention to the southern regions, where this opposition took the form of 'Brigandage' – armed rebel forces that endangered the stabilisation of the unified state. Due to the Mezzogiorno's socio-economic backwardness, the task of integrating the different parts of the country into a harmonious whole proved difficult to accomplish. Thus, De Francesco observes how the Micalian emphasis on heterogeneity gave way to a novel appreciation of Rome and its successful fusion of peoples. Nevertheless, the idea of an Italy made up of small territories persisted throughout the nineteenth century. De Francesco uses the example of Giacomo Racioppi, who, as late as 1889, acknowledged the specific heritage of the Two Sicilies and simultaneously insisted on its valorisation from a pan-Italian perspective. Seeking a precedent in antiquity, Racioppi's concept of nationalism comprised the peculiarities of individual areas so as to present the Italian south in a more positive light.

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the study of ancient history had also branched out into other disciplines such as palaeoethnology, archaeology, and anthropology. As De Francesco goes on to show, the findings produced in these fields only seemed to confirm the impression of national dividedness. With regard to the origins of the Italic peoples, Giuseppe Sergi distinguished an Aryan race in the north of the peninsula and a Mediterranean stock in the south, the latter of which had produced the Roman Empire and thus attained a position of dominance. Drawing on Sergi's theory but turning it upside down, Alfredo Niceforo saw a connection with atavism and argued that the southerners' racial specificity was the actual reason for their conservative behaviour. Contrary to what the current research on Italian racism might suggest, De Francesco convincingly argues that this interpretation did not anticipate the policies of the Fascist regime but in fact became an instrument of left-wing criticism directed at the liberal state and its inability to make progress.

On the other hand, De Francesco discusses the prominent academic Ettore Pais, who responded to the political crisis with a reading of the past that extolled Rome's unifying function as an example to be emulated by modern Italy. Under the influence of German scholarship, Pais profoundly renewed the study of Roman history and distanced himself from both the antiquarian tradition and the socio-anthropological disciplines, whose interest in territorial realities, he thought, had led to a particularism that entrenched the country's internal contra-

dictions and thus obstructed the creation of a national identity. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Pais's concern about the crumbling of civil order found expression in his support of colonialism, Italy's intervention in World War I, and after 1922 in Fascism. Yet despite the prevalent cult of Romanism, De Francesco provides evidence that the theme of the peninsula's antiquity was still very much alive in this era. For one thing, references to an ancient plurality of lineages implicitly paid tribute to the synthesising and civilising power of Rome. Moreover, the work of Giuseppe Sergi was appropriated to buttress the Fascist racial doctrine and to justify the Italian Empire's expansion in Africa. Finally, the colonial project produced new reflections on the formative processes of civilisation, and this context enabled Massimo Pallottino to affirm that the Etruscans were indeed autochthonous.

The Antiquity of the Italian Nation provides a valuable insight into the genesis of a political myth and the manifold uses to which it was put over the course of the century and a half that preceded the birth of republican Italy. The series of interpretative models that were applied to the peninsula's pre-Roman past suggest a nation trying to define itself by constantly moving back and forth between the dialectical poles of unity and diversity, between a singular and a plural mode of existence. Antonio De Francesco does an excellent job disentangling the various ideological strands that fed into this development. Time and again, he manages to uncover hidden nuances and divergences beneath superficial similarities. The short summary given here can hardly do justice to the depth of his argument, which impresses especially through its handling of a large number of intellectuals and through its detailed illumination of their respective career paths. However, one should add that De Francesco writes for an esoteric audience with specific knowledge of the Risorgimento period and thus often fails to explain the wider historical background of his subject. Furthermore, the clarity of the discussion suffers under a dense and wordy style, probably because text was originally written in Italian and then translated by Stuart Wilson, 'a Scottish *fine letterato* [...] without any particular experience in history' (p. vii). Nevertheless, this book is a highly recommendable contribution to the study of classical reception and modern Italian history.