

# The Relicts<sup>of the</sup> Fascist Regime on Italian Buildings

Or Who Is Afraid<sup>of the</sup> Fascio Littorio?

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During its twenty-one years of reign (1922-1943) the Italian Fascist regime erected numerous buildings in Italy to underline its right to reign and to manifest itself in history. The architectural heritage of this period is huge: it starts with single monuments and the restoration of antique constructions, runs through uncounted party headquarters up to heavy urban restructuring, construction of new boroughs and ends with the creation of entire new communities. Using the regime's symbol – the *fascio littorio* – nearly all constructions were clearly characterised as works of Fascism.

This article takes a closer look at the remains of these special building decorations. The approach towards this theme will be done by drawing up classifications for the different types of usage of the symbols in the Fascist architecture as well as for the different levels of their conservation. The article focuses on the problems of dealing with this specific aspect of the cultural heritage: conservation, restoration or even reconstruction.

These questions will be discussed by means of examples, which are taken from the so-called *Agro Pontino*, a – regarding the Fascist architecture – very special area south of Rome.



Fig. 1: The Agro Pontino. Reclamation and resettlement scheme 1931.

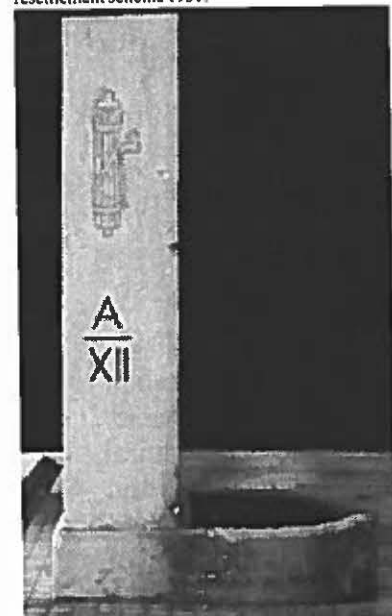


Fig. 2: Sabaudia. Fascio Littorio on a water well (1934).

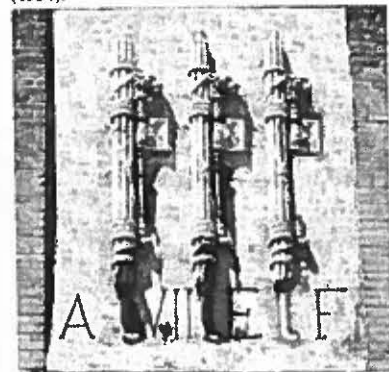


Fig. 3: Rome, side wall of the Marcellus Theatre. Travertine relief with Fasci Littori "all'antica" (1929).

## THE "AGRO-PONTINO-PROJECT"

The Agro Pontino is a huge and plain area eighty kilometres south of Rome, which has always been marshlands, uncultivated and contaminated by malaria. At the end of the 1920s it became part of the reclamation and resettlement scheme of the Fascist Regime. It was promoted by state propaganda as one of the fundamental steps in the establishment of a new, revolutionary social order. Not only in Italy but also abroad, the scheme was highly acclaimed as an outstanding success for the new regime. The "integral reclamation" project went beyond the drainage of highly infested marshlands and the conversion into arable land. Between 1927 and 1939 nearly 3,000 farmsteads, eighteen little villages and five entire new towns, the so-called *città nuove*, were built on the Agro Pontino. The *città nuove* were Littoria (1931-32, now Latina), Sabaudia (1933-34), Pontinia (1934-35), Aprilia (1935-36) and Pomezia (1938-39) (fig. 1).

Although the goal of project was to create modern but strictly simple and rural Italian architecture, the buildings erected in the *città nuove* were an important part of the Fascist state architecture and so they were also decorated with the Regime's symbol, the *fascio littorio*.

## THE FASCIO LITTORIO

The *fascio littorio*, the symbol of the Italian Fascist Party (fig. 2), is – compared with the swastika of the German Nazis – rather unknown. The origin of the symbol lies in ancient Rome, where it was the power-insignia of higher officials. The so-called "fasces" were composed of a bundle of rods tied up with an axe, which was the sign of the Roman official authority. The fasces were carried by servants of the officials, the "lictors". The word "littorio" derived from this name.

The reason for taking an originally ancient object as a symbol of the new Fascist Party is based on the *antique cult*, which Mussolini integrated in his ideology to get a further legitimisation of his right to reign. However the reason for choosing exactly this symbol is probably the nominal relation with the word *Fascismo*, which was created from the word *fascio*. It could be translated as bundle, alliance or compound. In 1919 when Mussolini started gathering his first followers, he organized them in certain groups and called them *Fasci di Combattimento*, or combat units.

With regard to architectural decoration the *fascio littorio* was used either singularly or combined as a group of three. There were no exact prescriptions for the design of the lictor-bundles. According to the building type or the architect's style they were made either in a naturalistic way (fig. 3) or they appeared very stylised (fig. 4). Likewise there were no rules for the position of the axe's blade, which is to be found in nearly every position: on the right or on the left side, on top, in the middle or at the bottom, upright or upside down.

## THE FASCIST YEAR-DATE

Very often letters and roman numbers appear underneath or beside the *fascio littorio* (fig. 2, 3, 10). These cryptic codes refer to special dates. When Mussolini took over governmental power after his "march to Rome" on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 1922, he already knew that he would be the founder of a new epoch. Confidently he proclaimed it as the "Fascist era". As expected from 1922 onwards a new chronology was initiated as well as the common Gregorian calendarium. The new year-dates were written in roman ciphers preceded by the letter A, which stood for the word *anno*, year. Behind the date the letters E. F., an abbreviation for *Era Fascista*, are often found. With regard to the architectural ornament, the Fascist date was more an addition to the *fascio littorio* than a solitary element which primarily served to determine the building more precisely as a work of the Regime.

## THE DIFFERENT USAGES OF THE FASCIO LITTORIO

There are different ways in which the *fascio littorio* can be mounted on a building:

**Application:** The symbol is merely applied to the already erected building. It assigns the edifice as a work of the Regime, but is however not a part of the design (fig. 5).

**Integration in decorative elements:** The *fascio littorio* is not a direct part of the architecture, but included in decorative elements such as mural paintings, mosaics or reliefs (fig. 6).

**Integration in the façade's architecture:** The symbol is not only part of the

design but also fitted in its form with the style of the building (fig. 7).

**Artistic utilization:** Beyond its use as an ornamental application, the stylised symbol has become an important design-element of the architecture. It determines in an effective way the look and impression of the façade, but remains a reversible component not affecting the construction (fig. 8).

**Transformation into a building element:** The symbol is a whole building element with static functions; respectively certain building elements are intentionally designed in the form of fasces (fig. 9).

It has to be pointed out that there is no chronological development regarding the different ways of incorporating the symbol. It was always the decision of the architect (or the owner) in which way it should appear on the construction.

## THE DIFFERENT STATES OF CONSERVATION

Trying to figure out what happened to the architectural inheritance of Fascism in general until today, it is unavoidable to focus on the Regime symbols which were mounted on the architecture. The questions which have to be asked are: how many of the symbols have been preserved, how could they survive and in what condition are they today?

Searching for the symbols in the *città nuove*, one comes across quite a lot of the remains of Mussolini's Regime, which sometimes are even in a very good condition. For example in Pomezia two enormous lictor-bundles still flank the entrance of the ex-party headquarters, although municipal institutions are today accommodated inside (fig. 10).

But not every symbol is maintained. Comparing the architectural inventory with its original drawings, blueprints and photos, many more Fascist symbols will appear. But these have been removed so completely and carefully that they left no marks on the building itself, except the ones which were an important element of the design; in this case the removal of the decoration left a certain void, which gives us an indication of their former existence (fig. 11).

Yet not only the extreme cases of "totally removed" or "totally preserved" exist: the *città nuove* show a lot of different interim solutions concerning the state of conservation. For example, one will find Regime symbols, which in fact have been removed, but in such a way that the virtual form remains clear (fig. 12, 13).

Then we have *fasci littori* from which only the axe's blades have been cut off. At the end just "neutral" vertical stripes remain. This partial removal was done sometimes in quite a rough and quick way (fig. 14), in other cases the apparent intention was to reach an aesthetic solution for the façade by eliminating the marks of the removal as well (fig. 15). In both cases a well-informed beholder still understands the real meaning of the neutralised stripes.

The question now is how these different states of conservation can be explained.

## THE SPECIAL ROLE OF THE "CITTÀ NUOVE"

The *città nuove* played a special role, not only regarding the society in Fascist Italy but also the post-war times. The new towns were supposed to be the architectural manifestation of the Fascist state in stylistic questions as well as regarding the image of society, which they were to represent, for they were a prestige object of national and international importance. Accordingly the inhabitants of the towns were chosen very carefully. It is true that the settlement of the reclaimed territory, which was named "inner colonisation", followed certain demographic aspects: the future inhabitants came from provinces with dense populations and high rates of unemployment.<sup>4</sup> Still, each family had to apply at the Department of Internal Migration, so it is obvious that the applying families were supporting the Regime by putting their hope for a better life in its hands. Also the Department surely preferred not to choose people with a contrary position to the Regime.

Another historical particularity: by order of the Italian King Mussolini was arrested on the 25<sup>th</sup> July 1943 and taken to Gran Sasso, where he was rescued by the Nazis two months later. On arriving in Salò in South Tyrol Mussolini proclaimed a new Fascist government, the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana*. The republic only existed in German-occupied Italy including the province of Littoria containing the *città nuove*.

Whereas the rest of Italy could liberate itself from the Regime's insignia as soon as the middle of 1943 – and sometimes it went on very violently – on the Agro Pontino actions of iconoclasm were rather rare. There was neither

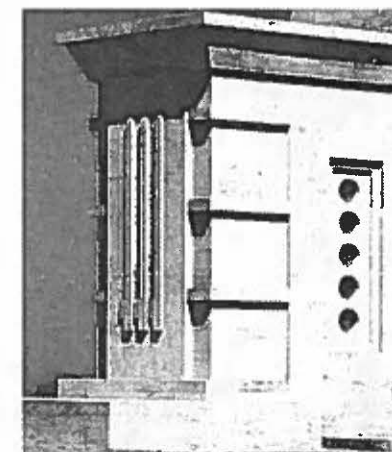


Fig. 4: Lybia. Arco dei fileni. Stylized Fascio Littorio (1937).

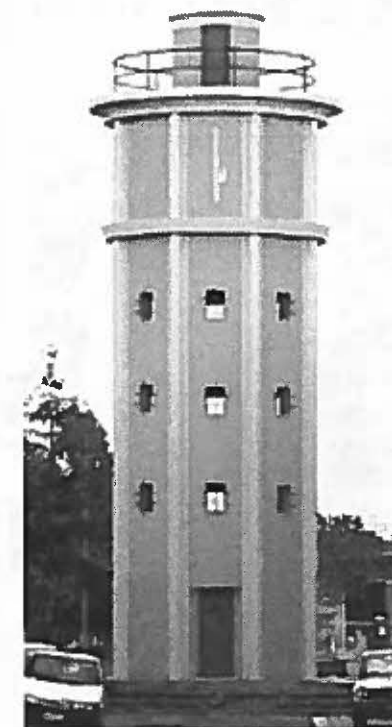


Fig. 5: Borgo Vodice. Water reservoir with Fascio Littorio (1935).



Fig. 6: Sabaudia, Town Hall. Travertine relief "Victory on the march" (1933-34).



Fig. 7: Sabaudia, Town Hall Tower. On this example the position of the balcony-door is not in the middle for it "has regard" for the Fasci Littori (1933-34).



Fig. 8: Littoria (now Latina), Post Office (1932-33).



Fig. 9: Bolzano, Triumphal arch (1928). The load-bearing parts of this antique-looking arch, a monument for the fallen of World War I, have the form of enormous lictor-bundles. With this composition the architect Marcello Piacentini brought the victories of World War I into a symbolic relation with the not yet succeeded victory of Fascism. At the same time he maintained reference to Ancient Rome as required by Mussolini's ideology.

time nor will for a complete removal of the symbols. Even the official order to change the Fascist names of streets and squares was not pursued.<sup>5</sup>

After the definitive liberation from Fascism respectively from the Germans by the allied forces, the required defascisation finally reached the province of Littoria too. But here the "purgation" of the Fascist remnants proceeded in a slow, almost hesitant way, in personnel as well as in an architectural sense.<sup>6</sup> Disbelief and astonishment were so strong that the abused symbols survived some time longer. The population of the Agro Pontino was paralysed. For example, the provincial government of the province of Littoria had to charge bricklayers for "cleaning" the buildings by removing Fascist symbols and inscriptions. At first, however, the provincial administration, which was responsible for the defascisation of the Palazzo Littorio, refused to pay the bricklayers.

Exempted from the ordered "purgation" were "works of art", i.e. all works done by painters or plastic artists such as mosaics, mural paintings and reliefs.

Due to this historical background the different states of conservation now appear in a clearer light. It seems conceivable that the large amount of symbols remaining in the "città nuove" leads to the conclusion that the people in Mussolini's "towns of heart" had not much will to free themselves from Fascism. The many lictor bundles, which by the removal of the axes' blades had been rendered unrecognisable, were probably carried out by the bricklayers, who were told to minimise the damage on the only recently erected façades. As acts of private iconoclasm can be read only the few totally removed symbols, which were easy to reach and remove.

### PRESERVATION RESTORATION RECONSTRUCTION

Once they had survived the "purgations", the Regime's relicts normally were allowed to remain on the façades,<sup>7</sup> even if the usage of the *fascio littorio* was forbidden by the Italian constitution. One reason for allowing the remaining Regime's signs to stay on the buildings surely lies in Italy's more positive and unencumbered relation to its Fascist past. In Italy the period between 1922 and 1944 is seen like any other historical period.

Similarly, the curators of monuments since the mid 1980's, when most of the public buildings of the 1930's were placed under a preservation order by the Italian legislation, have followed the directives to preserve and also to restore the maintained symbols as parts of the buildings' history.<sup>8</sup>

Together with the progressive "Berlusconisation" of Italy, the Fascist past is more and more seen in a transfigured way. So in the recent past one could find certain attempts in the *città nuove* that reach far beyond the conservation directions of the official departments.

For example in December 2002 the mayor of Sabaudia, a member of the right-wing party *Alleanza Nazionale*, decided together with the municipal committee to initiate a public collection for the restoration of the victory-relief on the town-hall-façade (fig. 16). The purpose of the restoration was the reconstruction of the removed *fascio littorio* in the arm of the victory-goddess and the also removed Fascist Party emblem above her. The protests of the local opposition against the reconstruction were defended by the mayor's declaration that the venture stood in the context of the preservation of Sabaudia's original architecture and that it would be the conservation department that had to decide about the technical questions of the restoration. After a common visit of the locations, the responsible official in charge of the conservation department gave his agreement for the reconstruction, for in his opinion the relief was "only a work of art and nothing more", which missed an important element.

With this argument he refers to the already described classification of the decoration. The symbol or emblem stands in the special context of a "work of art" and therefore it is worth preserving, even though it is gone. The reconstruction is only seen as an aesthetic upgrade of the relief, the political aspect has no interest. Nevertheless, by the initiatives of the local opposition, the matter in dispute assumed bigger dimensions and in April 2003 two members of the left-wing opposition applied in the Italian parliament for a general debate on this theme; for now as before it is unconstitutional to use or re-establish the Fascist symbols. Since then the decision has been delayed.

Something similar happened in one of the other new towns, Pontinia, but without any consciousness of the public. A historical source which deals with the foundation and history of Pontinia tells us that on the day of Mussolini's arrest the fasces on the town hall façade were destroyed in a violent act by some



Fig. 10: Pomezia, Headquarters of the Fascist Party, main entrance (1938-39).

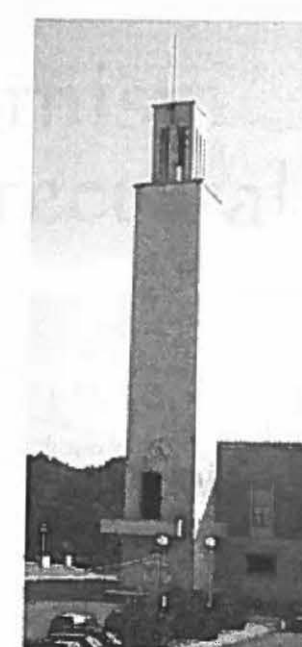


Fig. 11: Sabaudia, Town Hall Tower (1933-34) without the fasces (compare with fig. 7).



Fig. 12: Latina, Town Hall (1932-33), main entrance. The Fascio Littorio has been cut off without polishing the surface afterwards, so that it survived in its negative form.



Fig. 13: Latina, Ex Tax Office (1935-36), side entrance. The Fascio Littorio has been distempred, but still shines through.



Fig. 14: Sabaudia, Ex Commander's house of the M.V.S.N.-Barracks (1933-34), side entrance. Fasci Limon without the axe's blades.

regime opponents. Characteristically the author declares the removed lictor-bundles as the first "victims" of that day. Seeing the façade today, one will not find any marks of former damages. Therefore the present *fasci littori* is a complete reconstruction made in post-war times.

Searching for an explanation for the will to restore the architecture within the fascist decoration in the *città nuove*, it might again be helpful to look at the special role which the *Agro Pontino* played in the Fascist past. Today's people belong to the post-colonist generation, mostly born and grown up already there and accustomed to the symbols surrounding it. The *città nuove* are their home towns. So it is obvious that they developed the same pride in their native places which everyone else in the whole world does, even though the places are connected with Fascism. Or it could be just because of it, for their parents were the first colonists, who had to handle all the difficulties of building up a totally new existence without any experiences. Step by step the past narrated by the parents was transfigured and reduced to only personal life. The unbalanced view of the Fascist past has to be seen as a kind of nostalgia.

Another factor is that the historiography about the *Agro Pontino*-Project as far as possible left the difficult Fascist side out of consideration. The historians and inhabitants do not deny it but a real and extensive discussion of the Fascist past is still missing.

### REFERENCES

1. A general view on the subject of the *città nuove* can be found in Dennis Doordan, *Building Modern Italy*, Princeton 1988; Annibale Folchi, *Littoria. Storia di una provincia*, Rome 1992; Diane Ghirardo, *Building New Communities*, Princeton 1976; Riccardo Mariani, *Fascismo e città nuove*, Mailand 1976; Alessandra Muntoni, *Sabaudia. Atlante storico delle città italiane N. 3*, Rome 1988; Alessandra Muntoni, *Latina. Atlante storico delle città italiane N. 5*, Rome 1990.
2. The announcement of the contest for Sabaudia says for example that the future new town must be "eminente rurale". *Casabella*, N. 70 (1933), pp. 30-35.
3. In contrast to Ancient Rome, where the axe was always put on upright, fasces with an upside-down fixed axe were carried only in official funeral processions.
4. Above all they came from Venetia and Emilia Romagna.
5. The individual "defascisation" of the personnel started at the end of 1943. The first ones, who had to give evidence about the "offences" of the past twenty years, had been persons working in official functions for the Regime. The following year the "Upper commissioner's department for the purge" ("l'Alto Commissariato per l'Epurazione") was founded, sanctions against Fascism were introduced and norms installed for the confiscation of the Regime's revenue.
6. Annibale Folchi, *La fine di Littoria 1943-45*, Rome 1994 and *Littoria. Storia di una provincia*, Rome 1992, pp. 351-387.
7. There are only a few exceptions such as one case from the 1980's, when in the reception hall of Latina's Palazzo Governo the lictor-bundles in Dulio Cambellotti's fresco were distempred. The reason for the distemper was the visit of the state president Pertini, who during the Fascist Regime was arrested because of his activities in the Italian Resistenza.
8. In Italy the law for protection of historical monuments provides that every public building after fifty years - if the architect is dead - is automatically under an "indirect" protection of the State. That means that the owner of such a building has to ask permission for any architectural change. The appropriate authority for the architectural heritage in the Agro Pontino is the "Soprintendenza per i Beni Architettonici e per il Paesaggio del Lazio", which belongs to the Ministry of Education and the Arts (Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali).



Fig. 15: Latina, Residential building "INCIS" (1935-36). "Neutralized" fascies on the side façade.



Fig. 16: Sabaudia, Town Hall. Travertine relief „Victory on the march“ (1933-34) after the defascisation.



Fig. 17: Pontinia, Town Hall (1934-35).

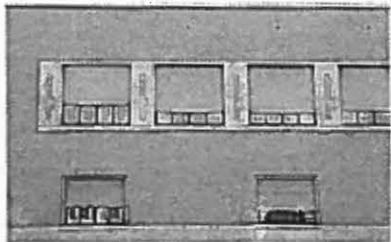


Fig. 18: Pontinia, Town Hall (1934-35). Detail of the façade's windows with the restored fascies.