

BOOK REVIEW

The Fasces: A History of Ancient Rome's Most Dangerous Political Symbol. By BRENNAN, T. COREY. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. xii + 304. Hardback, \$34.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-764488-1.

We have in Professor Brennan's fine new study the first book length examination of the fasces, a symbol of *imperium* and "a common periphrasis for Roman high public office in general... across a period of almost 2,700 years" (1; 217). Described in 1984 by Canadian scholar Anthony J. Marshall (1937-2016) as a "portable kit for flogging and decapitation," the fasces seem to have originated in Etruria where an early example was discovered in 1897 in a grave from the late 7th century B.C. in Vetulonia. Carried on the shoulders of groups of lictors, "the ceremonial parade" made by these men and these bundles of axes and rods tightly wrapped with long straps injected "pure psychological terror into... the community" (12). The first datable literary reference to both nouns, lictor and fasces, comes from lines 27-28 of Plautus's *Epidicus* where the character Thesprio tells his fellow slave Epidicus that all he is lacking for his "praetorship" is *lictores duo, duo ulmei fasces virgarum* ("two lictors, two fasces of twigs of elm").

A lictor, a word which may have derived from the noun *licium* (belt) and/or the verb *ligare* (to bind), was an enforcer. He would tie the hands of wrongdoers together with the straps of the fasces before beating them with the rods or wielding the axe to decapitate the person. One of the most memorable and truly awful of these lictorial executions took place during the first year of the Republic in 509 B.C. when the consul Lucius Junius Brutus ordered the lictors to behead his sons, Titus Junius Brutus and Tiberius Junius Brutus. The treasonous pair had conspired to restore the Tarquin dynasty to the throne in Rome and their father stayed to see that their decapitations were carried out (15-16).

The impetus behind the book was the violent and shocking "Unite the Right Rally" held in Charlottesville, VA in August 2017, whose members displayed "a Roman-style fasces" among their emblems of hate. This gave the author pause and he flashed back to 1985-1986 when his doctoral advisor, Professor Ernst Badian (1925-2011) suggested that he consider a study of the staff of the praetors,

the “lesser colleague(s) of the consul” whose position was first created in 366 B.C. (vii; 52). And so almost 40 years later the author has turned his scholarly hand to writing “not so much a comprehensive treatment of the fasces” along with the lictors. . . “as an impressionistic sketch of what the symbol meant to the Romans and some of those who looked back at the history and insignia of their ancient society, sometimes thorough multiple interpretative layers” (7). There is in fact “no obvious endpoint for the study of the ancient fasces.” They and the lictors who carried them were “an attribute of office in the Byzantine period, and in an attenuated form, utilized by the emperor’s body-guard probably down to 1453” (3).

The book has been evenly organized in to 12 well-illustrated chapters which take the reader through antiquity up to the time when the fasces disappear from sight for a time. Then, during the 15th and 16th centuries, the fasces came back to life, reborn, invigorated and rehabilitated by a fable from Aesop, variably titled “Old Man and His Sons” or “A Bundle of Sticks,” in which a father demonstrated to his sons how a single stick was easily broken, but that bundle of such sticks was well-nigh unbreakable. Thus was fasces transformed into a symbol of strength thorough unity. All that changed in 1922. While people in Washington D.C. that year celebrated the opening of the Lincoln Memorial and were well-acquainted with the Aesopian interpretation, people in Italy witnessed Mussolini’s “March on Rome” and saw the symbol’s meaning reversed. Italian unity would be born thorough authoritarian strength.

After inventing the word fascism in 1919 Mussolini spent the next twenty years putting the fasces everywhere he could—on coins, buildings, perfume bottles, cigarette packages and postcards—all in an effort to convince Italians to make a mystical return to their Roman roots. The message of mottoes from the period *vis unita fortior* (“force united is stronger”) in Latin and “la legge o la scure” (“the law or the axe”) in Italian could not be clearer. Good Italians must obey or die (179; 250). This is a beautifully written book about a potent, malleable and sinister symbol. The volume concludes by saying: “We are now a full century past the point where one can argue that the primary associations of the fasces are benign” (217). Every one of us needs to know what happened, and the easiest way to do that is to read Professor Brennan’s brilliant book.

MICHELE VALERIE RONNICK

Wayne State University, aa3276@wayne.edu