

Jonathan S. PERRY

Roman Associations on Display:

Collegia in the Mostra Augustea della Romanit, 1937/8

One of the ideological underpinnings of Italian Fascism was the concept of 'corporativism', which, in Mussolini's pronouncements, called for the subordination of individual, selfish interests to those of the state as a whole, with all labor and economic production directed toward the betterment of the entire nation. Of course, this model, for all its theoretical and philosophical development, was a practical failure, as the government merely co-opted the units of production and suppressed collective action by industrial workers.

Nevertheless, corporativism is of interest to the classicist for at least two reasons. First, it was a fundamental component of Fascist education, especially in law schools throughout the country, and this educational reform led to renewed attention to various forms of 'collective' action, in historical as well as in contemporary terms. However, a more troubling dimension of corporative thought was its supposed evolution from Roman institutions, especially from the '*collegia*' that flourished in the western provinces of the Empire in the first three centuries CE. The 1930s witnessed a renaissance of scholarship among a number of (often quite young) professors who were clearly determined to connect present-day corporativism with the Roman past. Three representative studies of this sort are Alfredo Pino-Branca's *La funzione sociale delle corporazioni nella storia* (Padova 1930), Vincenzo Bandini's *Appunti sulle corporazioni romane* (Milano 1937), and Alberto Paolo Torri's *Le corporazioni romane* (Roma 1941), each of which lauds the present regime as the apogee of an important historical movement.

This paper will provide a brief summary and analysis of, principally, two studies by Francesco G. Lo Bianco. The first was a scholarly analysis of the Roman *collegia* entitled *Storia dei collegi artigiani dell'impero*, published at Bologna in 1934. The other was a popularization of his views on the subject, which was included in a series entitled 'Mostra della Romanit' and published in 1939. This study, called *Civiltà Romana: L'organizzazione dei lavoratori*, was designed to complement the famous 'Mostra Augustea della Romanit,' which was opened to the public throughout 1937/8, and many of whose materials would eventually find their way to the 'Museo della Civiltà Romana'. The *collegia* were featured in at least two of the original exhibit's salles, and explicit connection was made there between the ancient and the modern corporative institutions. Drawing on descriptions of the Mostra, I shall demonstrate that the Roman *collegia* were vital to the development of the Fascist ethos of work, and that their actual functions and meanings in Roman society were twisted to conform to Fascist concepts. This will provide a case in point of the consequences of the Fascist obsession with '*romanit*', and, perhaps, reveal some of the dangers, for both the past and the present, of seeing Rome through contemporary eyes.