

Christian Giudice. *Occult Imperium: Arturo Reghini, Roman Traditionalism, and the Anti-Modern Reaction in Fascist Italy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. xii + 328 pp. ISBN: 978-0197610244. €76.32.

This book is a study of the life and work of Arturo Reghini (1878–1946). Reghini was an occultist, notable for his influential defence of an explicitly Italic form of Traditionalism, a twentieth-century intellectual movement that postulated the existence of an increasingly forgotten primordial Tradition. He was also a multifaceted individual: a prominent freemason who founded secret societies, wrote about Pythagorean metaphysics, and had a significant influence on the Italian far-right. *Occult Imperium* is the first academic book-length study of Reghini to appear in English. This work grew out of a doctoral dissertation that the author, Christian Giudice, completed at the University of Gothenburg. It is Giudice's first monograph, after having written numerous articles on esotericism in the modern world.

The first chapter introduces the subject of the book, the complex relationship between occultism and modernity, explored through an analysis of the life and writings of Reghini. Important elements of earlier research were the theories of intellectuals like Theodor Adorno, who described occultism as an inherently “irrational yearning” which emerged as a response to the advent of modernity (6). This thesis was later challenged by contemporary scholars, such as Marco Pasi and Alex Owen, who emphasized occultism's scientific and progressive aspects.¹ Giudice engages with this earlier research in the development of his own approach. According to him, the anti-modern is but “the flip side of the modern” (20). Consequently, he aims to find a middle ground which can appreciate both sides of occultism, the reactionary and the modern, without resolving the tension in either (8).

1. Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004); Marco Pasi, “The Modernity of Occultism: Reflections on Some Crucial Aspects,” in *Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years' Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*, eds. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Joyce Pijnenburg (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 59–74.

Chapter two introduces the reader to the historical context from which Roman Traditionalism emerged, giving an overview of the nineteenth-century occult and literary milieus that preceded it (27). The Spiritualist movement, emerging in the United States before spreading to Europe, was highly influential in this regard. Spiritualism invigorated nineteenth-century Italy with a fascination for the supernatural. Giudice emphasizes that Spiritualism found its most important followers among the intellectual elite (40). The chapter culminates in an overview of the “Neapolitan Masonic tradition,” an influential movement within esoteric Freemasonry. This school connected contemporary Italy to Ancient Hermetic wisdom, which formed the backbone for the later emergence of Roman Traditionalism.

Following his overview of the historical background of Roman Traditionalism, Giudice returns in chapter three to the principal figure of the book, Reghini. In particular, he examines his early life, which was characterized by a strong engagement with both idealist philosophy and the syncretism of the Theosophical Society. Previous research, such as that of Roberto Sestito and Natale Mario di Luca, considered Reghini’s Theosophical episode to have been something trivial and inconsequential.² Giudice challenges this understanding, instead asserting that it was “a brief, but necessary, period,” which formed an important step towards his later esotericism (61).

Chapter four attempts to situate Reghini within the history of Italian Freemasonry. While mainstream Italian Freemasonry emphasized fraternity, tolerance and material progress, Reghini found more appeal in irregular fringe orders (71). It was in this capacity that he first encountered Amedeo Armentano (1886–1966), who would go on to become his spiritual teacher and friend. Armentano initiated Reghini into what he understood to be a pristine Pythagorean tradition. Reghini’s initiation into this form of neo-Pythagoreanism appears to have been a significant event in his life, as it

2. Roberto Sestito, *Il Figlio del Sole: Vita e Opere di Arturo Reghini Filosofo e Matematico* (Ancona: Associazione Culturale Ignis, 2006), 24; Natale Mario di Luca, *Arturo Reghini: Un Intellettuale Neo-Pitagorico tra Massoneria e Fascismo* (Rome: Atanor, 2003), 24.

represented “a culmination of his search for an autochthone form of wisdom” (84). Although what actually took place during the initiation ritual remains obscure, what is clear is that it signifies a decisive moment in his pursuit of spirituality, which profoundly shaped his outlook thereafter.

In chapter five, Giudice examines Reghini’s most well-known political text, *Pagan Imperialism* (1914). This manifesto was influential in creating a juxtaposition between the original greatness of the Roman Empire and the “disease” of Christianity, which Reghini believed was the cause of its downfall (103). The central focus of this chapter is an in-depth analysis of the manifesto, which is the first of its kind (109). Giudice has also included an English translation of *Pagan Imperialism* in the appendices of the book, offering the reader both an academic translation and a scholarly commentary on this important historical text.

Chapter six contextualizes the life and writings of Reghini by detailing his interactions with Italian Fascism and Guénonian Traditionalism. Giudice notes that although Fascism and Traditionalism were similar in various ways, for example in their anti-modern outlook and exaltation of a mythologized past, it is futile to speak of the existence of a “Fascist esotericism” (123). The chapter continues by exploring the hitherto unpublished correspondence between Reghini and the founder of Traditionalism, René Guénon (1886–1951). Reghini’s biographer Sestito had occluded the influence of Reghini on the more renowned Guénon. Giudice draws a different conclusion, instead asserting that while Reghini and Guénon were clearly influenced by each other, the influence of the Roman Traditionalists on Guénon was more significant (133).

In chapter seven, Giudice discusses the five years in which Reghini edited three journals dealing with Pythagoreanism, imperialism, Paganism and occultism. In his first journal, *Atanòr* (1924), he developed his own political outlook while engaging in polemics with Fascism and Catholicism (152). In 1925, he founded *Ignis*, a journal concerned with “initiatic studies.” Pressured by a new law against Masonic institutions, and fearing the increasing violence of the Fascist police,

Reghini decided to discontinue its publication (157–58). Together with esotericist Giulio Parise (1902–1969) and Fascist intellectual Julius Evola (1898–1974), he created a new journal called *Ur* (1927–1928). This journal explored the so-called “Science of the I” and was concerned with methods of self-deification (159). After a period of fruitful collaboration, Evola and Reghini got into a dispute over plagiarism and consequently the journal was disbanded.

The final chapter covers the last sixteen years of Reghini’s life. During this period Reghini taught mathematics in a local secondary school and seems to have largely cut his ties with his Masonic past. Despite being a life-long critic of the perceived Catholic bent of Fascism, Reghini also believed in the possibility of a Traditionalist alliance with the regime, and became a card-carrying member of the Italian Fascist party in 1933 (165). Although secret societies were legally prohibited under Fascism, Giudice proposes that Reghini may have continued to have a group around him with whom he covertly practiced esoteric rituals. Towards the end of his life, Reghini completed his magnum opus *On Pythagorean Numbers* (1936–1944), which Giudice extensively analyses. Reghini died on July 1, 1946. Throughout his life, he remained faithful to the tradition into which he had been initiated as a young man by his mentor Armentano.

Giudice states that the “dark side of occultism,” which he claims has been overlooked in the work of earlier scholars such as Pasi and Owen, pressingly requires redressing in current scholarship (190). In his conclusion, Giudice reflects on the work of these researchers, whom he asserts have defended a progressive interpretation of occultism by highlighting contexts which confirm this particular thesis. Giudice challenges this by proposing that Roman Traditionalism is an expression of “anti-modern occultism” (190). He suggests that this perspective deviates significantly from what the majority of scholarship has previously imagined twentieth-century occultism to have been.

The book struggles in parts to find an appropriate balance in presenting its research in a way that fully engrosses the reader. The structure of the book consists of short sections, which sometimes read like a lacklustre summation

of historical fact, rather than an engaging and flowing narrative. But despite its sometimes arid tone, the excellent quality of Giudice's research is shown in his careful and meticulous outline of the history of Roman Traditionalism.

The more ambitious goal of the author is to explore the relationship between occultism and modernity. His treatment of this relationship, which forms the theoretical core of the book, is somewhat underwhelming. Giudice's main thesis is that Roman Traditionalism is a form of anti-modern occultism (189). He goes to great lengths to prove this; however, it could be argued that this analysis is somewhat redundant, as the anti-modern character of Traditionalism appears to be self-evident. Because so much of the book is dedicated to Giudice's elucidation of this argument, an opportunity to further explore the fascinating relationship between occultism and modernity may have been missed.

Regardless, this study, the first of its kind, is a valuable resource for researchers of twentieth-century occultism. The narrative threads that Giudice weaves together between the historical forces that shaped Reghini's thought, and the broader context of his life, undoubtedly shed new light on the history of Roman Traditionalism.

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