

Libya, Strada Litoranea, The Arch of the Philaeni [deleted] - 1937

AUTHOR

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Nello Quilici (1890–1940) composed the Italian text for the inscription of the Arco dei Fileni, which was translated into Latin by Giorgio Pasquali. Quilici was a journalist and editor of *Corriere Pa...*

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1 Top front inscription on the east side

Alme Sol, possis / nihil urbe Roma / visere maius.

Life-giving Sun, may you never admire anything greater than the city of Rome.

2 East side inscription, underneath inscription 1

*Ipsa media in via Syrtica / a mari de caelo / a litoribus Africae
nostrae / convenientibus, / hic arcus imperii maiestam testatur /
quam / Rege Victore Emanuele III / Benitus Mussolini / summus rei
publicae moderator idemque fascistarum dux / a septem collibus
huc attulit / ut novum cultum humanitatemque / toti terrarum orbi
demonstaret, / summum gentibus donum / Romae fortunae atque
gloriae redditis.*

In the very middle of the Via Syrtica, between the sea, the sky, and the harmonious shores of our Africa, this arch bears witness to the majesty of an Empire that, during the reign of King Victor Emmanuel III, Benito Mussolini, highest governor of the state and leader of the Fascists, brought here from the seven hills, to show the whole world the new culture and civilisation, the greatest gift for peoples who have been restored to the good fortune and glory of Rome.

*Italo Balbo Libyae proconsule / anno XV a fascibus restitutis, /
primo ab imperio condito, / MCMXXXVII.*

Under Italo Balbo's governorship of Libya in the 15th year since the restoration of the fasces, in the first year since the founding of empire, 1937.

3 West side inscription, place corresponding with inscription 2

*Ubi corpora non memoriam, / Philaeni fratres, vestram, / qui vosque
vitamque rei publicae condonastis, / harenae nudae gignentium /
obruerant, / Roma per fasces restituta / fata ulcisci / pristina doctior;
/ brachiis Syrticae regionis inter se iunctis, / quae vitae renatae
aestum exciperent / sua signa statuit.*

Where the sands, bare of life, buried your bodies, but not your memory, Philaeni brothers, you who sacrificed yourselves and gave your lives to the republic, Fascist Rome, more able than ancient Rome to vindicate fate, plants its standards which gather up the breath of a new life, between the joined limbs of the Syrtic region.¹

Original Footnotes

- ¹ Translation adapted from Agbamu 2019: 164-65.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Pasquali's Latin inscriptions appeared on both sides of a monumental arch designed by Florestano di Fausto (1890–1965) and inaugurated in 1937 at a ceremony attended by Benito Mussolini (Fig. 1 and 2). The monument, inspired by the story of the Philaeni brothers, best known from Sallust's *Bellum Iugurthinum* (79), was built at the halfway point of the *Strada Litoranea*, near the town of Ras Lanuf. This was a coastal road, constructed by the Italian colonial authorities and completed in the same year as the arch's inauguration, that ran from the Libyan border with Egypt to the border with Tunisia. At the top of the arch, on the eastern side of the arch and therefore facing the rising sun, was an inscription in large letters, a quotation taken from Horace's *Carmen Saeculare* (9–12): *Alme Sol, possis nihil urbe Roma visere maius*. This is an abridged adaptation from the third stanza of Horace's poem, which was composed to celebrate the *Ludi saeculares* instituted by Augustus in 17 BCE. 1937, the year of the arch's inauguration, also saw lavish celebrations of Augustus' bimillenary, during which links were made between the first Roman emperor and Mussolini. The lines of the *Carmen Saeculare* from which the inscription is adapted read:

Alme Sol, curru nitido diem qui
promis et celas aliusque et idem
nascaris, possis nihil urbe Roma

visere maius.

Horace, *Carm. Saec.* 9–12

Life-giving Sun, who with your bright chariot bring forth the day and conceal it, and who are born different and yet the same, may you never admire anything greater than the city of Rome! (trans. Antonino Nastasi)

Horace's *Carmen Saeculare* was widely appropriated during the Fascist period, especially in the period around the celebration of his bimillenary in 1935. The fact that this was also the year in which Italy launched its invasion of Abyssinia meant that the celebration of Horace and of empire neatly coincided. For more on these lines of Horace's *Carmen Saeculare* under Fascism, see Strobl 2015; Grilli 1999; Fedeli 2020: 71–75.

Underneath the Horace inscription were two colossal bronze sculptures of the eponymous Philaeni brothers, crafted by Ulderico Conti (1884–1966). On the inside walls of the arch were two bas-reliefs showing the construction of the Litoranea and the 'foundation of empire – an affirmation of the renovated pre-eminence of Rome in the civilised world' (De Agostini 1938: 25).

The placement of the arch in the middle of the *Via Syratica* running along the North African coast, conceptualised by Italian imperialists after Gabriele d'Annunzio as Italy's 'Fourth Shore' (*Quarta Sponda*), is emphasised in the east side inscription 2. Here, Pasquali's Latin text claims Italian ownership over the shores of Africa (*a litoribus Africae nostrae / convenientibus*) whereas Quilici's Italian more neutrally refers to *Africa mediterranea*. Pasquali renders Quilici's characterisation of Mussolini as *capo del governo* into the Latin *moderator*, a term by which Mussolini was referred to in other Fascist Latin inscriptions (for example in Rome's Mercati di Traiano). Mussolini had proclaimed the foundation of an Italian empire in 1936. Thus, the arch's eastern inscription claims that the new imperial culture of Fascist Italy had been brought from the seven hills of Rome to Italy's Libyan colonies (former provinces of the ancient Roman Empire). This new culture is embodied by the arch, which monumentalises the legendary Philaeni brothers, whose story is most fully narrated by the Roman historian Sallust.

In Sallust's account of the Jugurthine War (112–105 BCE), the historian digresses from his narrative to tell the story of the two Philaeni brothers. The digression occurs when the events of the war against Jugurtha arrive at the region associated with the Carthaginian pair. According to the story related by Sallust, during a war between Carthage and Cyrene, when both sides had been worn down by the conflict, a solution was proposed to end the fighting. Both Carthage and Cyrene would send out teams of runners towards each other, from their respective cities. Where the runners met, there the frontier between the two cities' territories would be established. The Philaeni brothers, the team from Carthage, set out at the appointed time but, because they ran further than the team from Cyrene, were accused of cheating. Therefore, Cyrene offered the brothers a choice: either they should agree to be buried alive on the spot that they claimed to reach and thus extend Carthaginian territory to that point, or the team from Cyrene could have the same option but take any point of their choosing. Out of a profound patriotism and selflessness, the Philaeni brothers agreed to these terms and were buried alive at the site Di Fausto's arch was supposed to mark. This story of territorial expansion and patriotic sacrifice was rich material for a Fascist imperial monument, even if the brothers were Carthaginian. Furthermore, this inscription faced Carthage (currently Tunisia), homeland of the brothers.

Although this story is only very briefly alluded to in the arch's inscription, there are clear convergences between both Pasquali's Latin, Quilici's Italian, and Sallust's original text. For example, Sallust's introduction to the area in which the *arae Philaenorum* were found emphasises the barrenness of the sandy landscape (*ager in medio harenosus, una specie; neque flumen neque mons erat, qui finis eorum discerneret* – in between [Carthage and Cyrene] was a sandy landscape of uniform appearance; there was no river or mountain by which to discern their border. Sall. *Iug.* 79). Similarly, both Pasquali (*harenae nudae gignentium*) and Quilici (*spiaggia deserta*), make explicit the desolation of the region. Likewise, Sallust (*seque vitamque suam rei publicae condonavere* – they sacrificed themselves gave their lives for the republic, Sall. *Iug.* 79) and Pasquali refer to the self-sacrifice of the Philaeni in similar terms (*qui vosque vitamque rei publicae condonastis* – you who sacrificed yourselves and gave your lives to the republic). Such a formulation is absent in Quilici's Italian, making it clear that Pasquali was deviating from his Italian source in order for his Latin to be closer to Sallust's text.

During the Second World War, the *Strada litoranea* was an important vector of transportation for both Allied and Axis forces in the North African theatre of war. Before the arch was destroyed under Gaddafi in the 1970s, Horace text was replaced by an Arabic text, and Kenrick (2009: 155) suggests that it was replaced with Quranic verses. The remains of the arch, including the bronze figures, but not, it seems, Pasquali's inscription, were removed to the outdoor space of a small museum in Ras Al-Aali. During the Libyan Civil War in 2011, the area of Ras Lanuf was the site of fierce fighting between regime and rebel forces. As of October 2017, according to a statement from the Director of the Sirte Antiquities Office, Abdul-Azim Hafez, the statues are acknowledged by UNESCO and the Libyan Antiquities Office to be safe.

Pasquali's Latin text of the arch, with an Italian translation, was published in *La strada litoranea della Libia* (1937) and has since appeared in Munzi (2001), Lamers and Reitz-Joosse (2016) with an English translation of the western side, Brillante (2019), and Agbamu (2019), also with an English translation.

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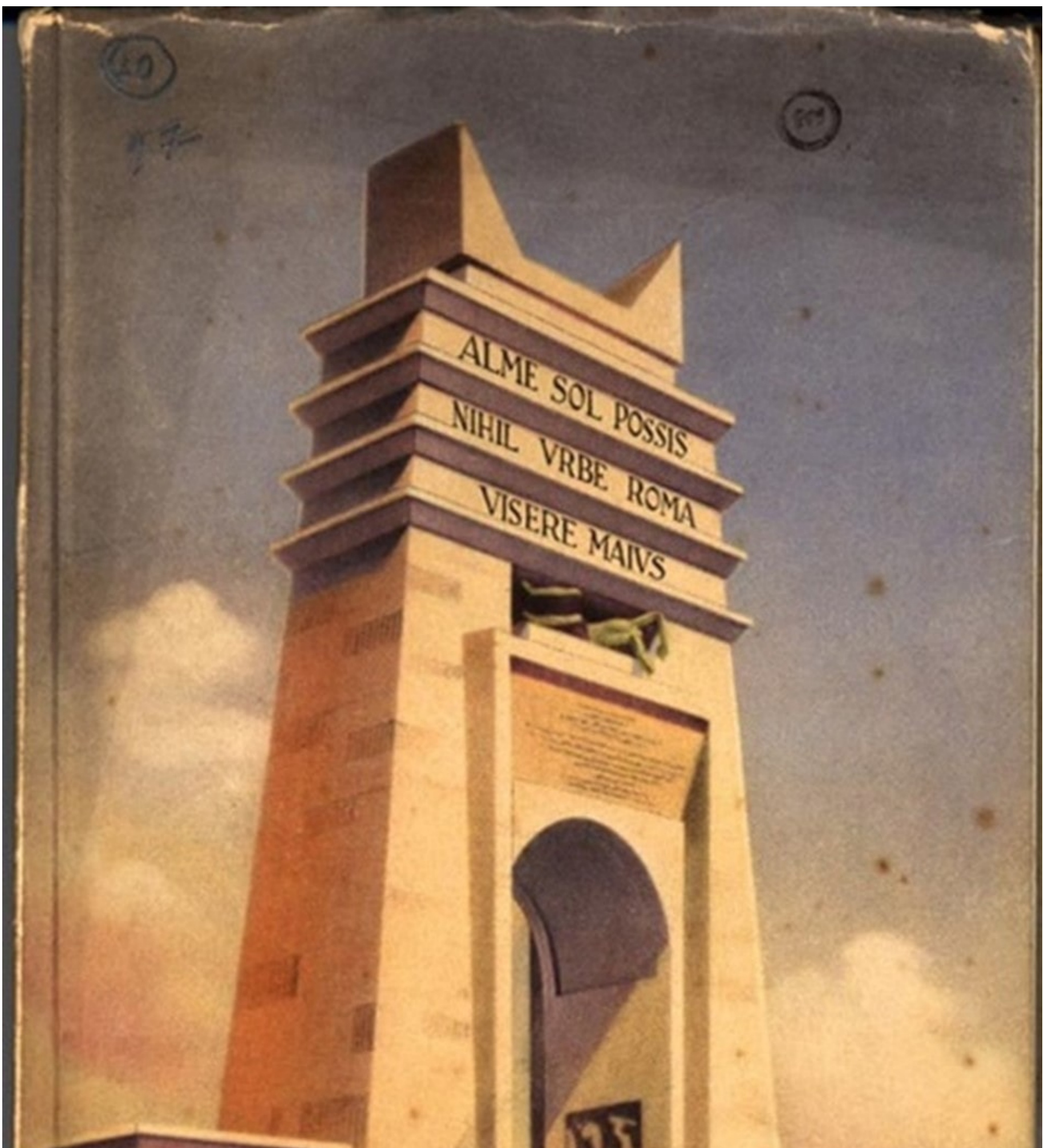




Figure 1: The Arco dei Fileni, shown on the cover of De Agostini (1938) "La Libia Turistica" (Milan: De Agostini).



Figure 2: The Arco dei Fileni in "Il Duce in Libia" (1937) (Milan: Mondadori).