

Essay

THE EUROPEAN AVANT-GARDES AND ITALIAN FASCISM. THE KANDINSKY-MARINETTI CORRESPONDENCE IN JULY 1932¹

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Nowadays, many scholars agree that there was a ‘fascist culture’ in Mussolini’s Italy and that cultural policy mattered to regime.² However, the reciprocal acceptance of futurism and fascism is often doubted. It is frequently argued that Italian futurism was a broadly-based aesthetic movement which often came into conflict with fascism during the 1920s and 1930s. Therefore, the latter isolated it.³ The numerous works arising from futurism’s centennial anniversary do not substantially diverge from this perspective. While art historians adhere to this idea,⁴ historians often argue that futurism was an essential element of the Italian pathway to totalitarianism.⁵ Some works point out that futurism found favor with fascism, although its relationship with the regime was opportunistic in nature.⁶

I argue that the link between fascism and art, by which I mean futurism and Novecento – a movement led by the art critic Margherita Grassini Sarfatti (1880–1961) – cannot simply be read as opportunistic.⁷ Furthermore, futurism’s straightforward fascist affiliation did not discredit it on an international level.⁸

The source presented here confirms not only the close relationship between the fascist regime and futurism, but also the existence of a uniquely fascist culture, its

¹ Essay relates to source: Letter from Vassily Kandinsky to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (July 23, 1932).

² See the debate on the existence and meaning of a “fascist culture” in: Tarquini, Alessandra, *Storia della cultura fascista*, Bologna 2011.

³ Crispolti, Enrico, *La politica culturale del fascismo, le avanguardie e il problema del futurismo*, in: De Felice, Renzo (ed.), *Futurismo, cultura e politica*, Turin 1988, pp. 247–283; Salaris, Claudia, *Artecrazia. L’avanguardia futurista negli anni del fascismo*, Florence 1992.

⁴ Among the most important exceptions is Benzi, Fabio, *Arte in Italia tra le due guerre*, Turin 2013.

⁵ See Gentile, Emilio, *The Struggle for Modernity. Nationalism, Futurism and Fascism*, Westport 2003; id., “La nostra sfida alle stelle”. *Futuristi in politica*, Rome 2009.

⁶ D’Orsi, Angelo, *Il Futurismo tra cultura e politica. Reazione o rivoluzione?*, Rome 2009.

⁷ Cioli, Monica, *Il fascismo e la ‘sua’ arte. Dottrina e istituzioni tra futurismo e Novecento*, Florence 2011; but also Benzi, *Arte in Italia tra le due guerre*.

⁸ Cioli, Monica, *L’arte italiana fra nazionalismo fascista e universalismo europeo (1918–1934)*, in: Mazzocca, Fernando (ed.), *Novecento. Arte e vita in Italia tra le due guerre*, Milan 2013, pp. 352–359. My argument is also based on a book I am writing with the support of a grant from the Gerda Henkel Foundation with the title “Futurism and avant-garde in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Italy, Germany, France”.

‘modernist’ ideology and its discrepancies with National Socialism.⁹ Finally, it highlights the entanglements between futurism and other European avant-garde movements. While this source has already been published, up until now it has been underestimated and dismissed as irrelevant to the history of art.¹⁰ I argue that it is, on the contrary, of great historical and political significance and should be widely discussed.

To understand the letter sent by Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944) in July 1932, we must first present the persons and institutions involved. The *Staatliches Bauhaus* was one of “the most important and momentous cultural manifestations of the twentieth century”.¹¹ It was a German art school founded by Walter Gropius (1883–1969) in Weimar in 1919 with the goal of reconciling the fine and the applied arts. Its approach to design is particularly famous. In 1919, the faculty of the school consisted of the German sculptor Gerhard Marcks (1889–1981), the Swiss painter Johannes Itten (1888–1967) and the German-American painter Lyonel Feininger (1871–1956), along with Gropius. By the following year, the school also included the Swiss painter Paul Klee (1879–1940) and the German painter, sculptor and designer Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943), who led the theatre workshop; they were joined in 1922 by the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky.

Because of changing political contexts, the school was forced to relocate three times: it was first situated in Weimar, which it had to leave in mid-1925 after a right-wing coalition ousted the Social Democrats from the Thuringian state parliament. The Bauhaus then moved to the industrial city of Dessau, where the school reached its apogee, its modernist approach to design symbolized by the famous building created by Gropius.¹² In October 1932, after the NSDAP had gained control of the Dessau city council, the Bauhaus moved to Berlin. The school was directed by three different architects: as already mentioned, the first was Gropius, who led it from 1919 to 1928; the second was Hannes Meyer (1889–1954), from 1928 to 1930, and, lastly, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969), from 1930

⁹ See Griffin, Roger, *Modernism and Fascism. The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, New York 2007.

¹⁰ Cit. in Derouet, Christian, *Kandinsky: diario italiano 1932–1940*, in: *Kandinsky a Parigi 1934–1944*, Milano 1985, pp. 72–74; Masoero, Ada, *Kandinsky: lettere con l’Italia*, in: Caramel, Luciano (ed.), *Kandinsky e l’astrattismo in Italia 1930–1950*, Milan 2007, pp. 43–67, p. 44 f.

¹¹ Siebenbrodt, Michael-Schöbe, Lutz, *Bauhaus 1919–1933. Weimar–Dessau–Berlin*, New York 2009, p. 7.

¹² Poling, Clark V., *Kandinsky: Russian and Bauhaus Years, 1915–1933*, in: *Kandinsky: Russian and Bauhaus Years, 1915–1933*, New York 1983, pp. 12–83, p. 56.

until 1933. Finally, the Bauhaus was closed under pressure from the Nazi government, which claimed that it was un-German and Bolshevik. After its closure, the staff dispersed, mostly emigrating to the USA and taking their Bauhaus ideals with them.

The Bauhaus was part of a range of initiatives and efforts called “modernism”¹³, which strove to re-establish unity between the areas of artistic and technical production, which had been separated by emerging industrial production. The resulting social separation of the artist, their isolation, and the fragmentation as well as segregation of different types of art, was to be reversed. This led to the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which strove to synthesize all the arts involved in construction and manual trades.

Regarding its formative period scholars often speak of an expressionist phase. In 1922 Gropius reorganized the Masters’ duties, in particular, Itten’s duties and power were reduced. The Bauhaus reorientation¹⁴ was substantially stimulated by the work of Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931) in Weimar. In 1917, Doesburg had founded the Dutch artists’ association and review *De Stijl* with Piet Mondrian (1872–1944). After having visited the Bauhaus, van Doesburg moved to Weimar in 1921. From March to July 1922 he held his legendary *De Stijl* class in Peter Röhl’s (1890–1975) studio in the city. Many Bauhaus students took part in his course. Nevertheless, he was never appointed by Gropius to a teaching position.

Since Theo van Doesburg acted as intermediary between Italian futurism and Walter Gropius, the allusion to him is important. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the 1920s, the Dutch artist introduced Enrico Prampolini (1894–1956), a key figure of the new futurist generation, to Gropius.¹⁵ The Italian avant-garde appeared, along with the Russian, in the prestigious *Künstlerische Graphik des Bauhauses*.¹⁶

¹³ Siebenbrodt- Schöbe, , Bauhaus 1919–1933, p. 8.

¹⁴ See Claussen, Horst, Walter Gropius. Grundzüge seines Denkens, Hildesheim 1986, in particular pp. 103–114; Pennewitz, Ulrike, Kunst und Handwerk oder Kunst und Industrie?: Zur Konzeption des Bauhauses, in: Klinger, Kerrin (ed.), Kunst und Handwerk in Weimar. Von der Fürstlichen Freyen Zeichenschule zum Bauhaus, Köln 2009, pp. 137–149; Siebenbrodt, Michael, Die Bauhaus-Werkstätten in Weimar – ein Streitfall. Vom Kunst-Handwerk zum Laboratorium für die Industrie, in: Ackermann, Ute (ed.), Streit ums Bauhaus, Erfurt 2009, pp. 158–163.

¹⁵ Orazi, Vittorio, Gropius e Prampolini al Bauhaus, in “Arte oggi” 1963 (Berlin, Bauhaus Archiv. Mappa Enrico Prampolini).

¹⁶ Mappenwerk. Bauhaus-Drucke. Europäische Graphik. Vierte Mappa. Italienische und Russische Künstler. 1921. Mappa mit 10 Lithografien und einer Radierung. Gedruckt und herausgegeben vom Staatlichen Bauhaus Weimar, 1923. On the relationship between van Doesburg and Italian Futurism see Fabre, Gladys, Towards a Spatio-Temporality in Painting, in: Fabre,

A further relevant person who we must present is Kandinsky, the author of the letter. A Russian painter, writer and art theorist, he was one of the principal founders of abstract art. In 1896, Kandinsky settled in Munich. Between then and his final departure from the Bavarian capital in 1914, “he precipitated a vast sea change in the vision and vocabulary of modern art“. His historic breakthrough to abstraction may in fact be seen as a “modern apotropaic act, a quintessentially twentieth-century exorcism aimed at healing a civilization paralyzed into complacency by the specters of unprecedented social, technological, political and cultural changes.“¹⁷ In 1912, he published the manifesto *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*: this was a public pronouncement of his move towards pure painting, of his leap to abstract art. In late 1914, Kandinsky returned to Russia due to the outbreak of the war. After the Russian Revolution, the artist’s social class, ideology and age set him apart from other members of the Russian avant-garde. In 1921, Kandinsky left Russia for Germany: the opportunity was provided by an invitation to the Bauhaus. In 1922, Gropius offered Kandinsky a teaching position at his school.

The final relevant person is Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, an Italian poet and editor, and the founder of the futurist movement. He published the first futurist manifesto in 1909 in the French daily *Le Figaro*. In early 1918, he founded the Futurist Political Party, which, a year later, was incorporated into Benito Mussolini’s (1883–1945) *Fasci Italiani di Combattimento*. Marinetti was one of the first affiliates of the Italian Fascist Party. Though he opposed fascism’s later exaltation of existing institutions and walked out of the 1920 fascist party congress, from 1924 onwards the destiny of futurism was closely linked to Italian fascism. Indeed, in his book *Futurism and Fascism*, published in 1924, Marinetti argued that fascism had expelled the revolutionary spirit of its early years from its program. Working in the political sphere, which “imposes” and “limits”, fascism had to face the needs of *Realpolitik*, while futurism – acting within “the infinite dominion of fantasy” – had to “dare, dare, dare”¹⁸.

As a matter of fact, though fascism collaborated with the old elites, i.e. the Catholic Church and the monarchy, it strove for a new society and a new state: the Italian regime possessed a revolutionary tension that it shared with futurism. Both

Gladys-Wintgens Hötte, Doris (eds.), *Van Doesburg & the International Avant-Garde*, London 2009, pp. 58–67.

¹⁷ Weiss, Peg, *Kandinsky in Munich: Encounters and Transformations*, in: *Kandinsky in Munich: 1896–1914*, New York 1982, pp. 28–83, p. 28.

¹⁸ Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso, 1924, *Futurismo e fascismo*, in: id., *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, ed. by De Maria, Luciano, Milan 2005, pp. 489–572, pp. 496–497.

aimed to create a new ruling class, an elite, based on ambitious and revolutionary concepts drawn from science and art. Fascism and futurism shared a revolutionary goal, expressed by the former through the doctrine of corporatism and the rational organization of the state, and by the latter through a spiritual and cosmic aesthetic termed *Aeropittura*, ‘Aeropainting’.¹⁹ In 1932, the official *Enciclopedia Italiana* published a famous essay on fascist doctrine, signed by Mussolini but written by Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944). It stressed that fascism’s concept of life, in contrast to the positivism and materialism of the 19th century, was spiritual and that culture in its different forms – art, religion, science – was the constitutive element of the individual.

Yet the Italian dictatorship also supported other artistic movements like *Novecento*, which was inspired by tradition. The *Novecentisti* were searching for a specific type of “modernity” that drew “on the present as well as on myth, on the interior as well as on current political debate.”²⁰ The futurists, conversely, favored a projection towards the future, revolution, “modernism”. Led by Margherita Sarfatti, a renowned art critic and writer who was also one of Mussolini’s erstwhile mistresses, *Novecento* proposed simple, balanced, comprehensible art through the choice of traditional themes, such as maternity and still life. The paintings of these artists were realistic, drawn from everyday life, but at the same time idealized and inspired by classical artistic models of the past, which gave them a timeless dimension. The rehabilitation of the Renaissance and its harmonious composition as well as Giotto were their points of reference: the result was an archaic or classical realism, with simple, static forms. However, the artists belonging to *Novecento* did not intend to imitate past art; rather, they tried to interpret the great teachings of classicism in the context of their contemporary culture.

Sharing different values of fascism, futurism and *Novecento* both expressed their support for the regime in works that were not merely propagandistic, but that inspired fascist political doctrine. The artistic initiatives organized by the dictatorship up until 1935 were numerous and of very high quality – from the reorganized Venice Biennale and the Milan Triennale to the Roman Quadrennial founded in 1931. These exhibitions were open to different artistic trends, such as futurism and *Novecento*. The fascist acceptance of these two different artistic movements, inspired by revolution and tradition respectively, should not be seen as an incoherent

¹⁹ See Cioli, *Il fascismo e la ‘sua’ arte*.

²⁰ See Benzi, *Arte in Italia tra le due guerre*, p. 86.

or purely tactical policy.²¹ I argue that the myth of the past and political innovation (or revolution) were both constitutive elements of fascist modernism.²²

The cultural policy of the Italian dictatorship was not restricted to the visual arts or to the movements of futurism and *Novecento*. It reached architecture as well, and other forms of art.²³ This is stated in Kandinsky's letter to Marinetti, which alludes to Mussolini's visit to the Second Exposition of Rational Architecture in Rome in March 1931, on the day before its inauguration.

In his letter, the Russian painter asks the leader of futurism to support the cause of the Bauhaus: the school risks closure because it is thought to be Marxist, Jewish and to pursue an "oriental style". Kandinsky repudiates these accusations: in his eyes, they refer to the former Bauhaus director, Hannes Meyer, who was dismissed for his Marxist leanings. The Russian artist worked to have him fired, as the memoirs of his wife Nina Kandinsky (1893–1980) confirm. Kandinsky was worried about Meyer's communist ideology and propaganda at the Bauhaus. As a consequence, he suggested that Dessau's mayor, Fritz Hesse (1881–1973), speak with the director personally. Hesse followed this advice, but failed to make Meyer renounce his ideas. Hesse then asked the director to resign, but he refused. Nevertheless, Hesse was eventually able to fire him because of his Swiss nationality.²⁴

After receiving Kandinsky's letter, which suggested sending a telegram to Kandinsky himself or to the director of the Bauhaus, Marinetti not only wrote to Mies van der Rohe, but also spoke to the Italian foreign minister. As a matter of fact, Kandinsky was instrumental in describing the Bauhaus in detail: the letter had to be immediately delivered to the Italian government, in the hope that this would intervene. This had no effect and the Bauhaus was closed in October 1932 by the Nazi-led government of Saxony-Anhalt.

²¹ Cannistraro, Philip V., *La fabbrica del consenso. Fascismo e mass media*, Rome-Bari 1975, pp. 38–42; Bordoni, Carlo, *Fascismo e politica culturale. Arte, letteratura e ideologia in "Critica fascista"*, Bologna 1981, p. 47; Brentzel, Marianne; Ruscher, Uta, "Ich habe mich geirrt. Was soll's". Margherita Sarfatti. Jüdin. Mäzenin. Faschistin, Zurich 2008, p. 215.

²² See also Esposito, Fernando; Reichardt, Sven, *Fascist Temporalities. Revolution and Eternity. Introductory Remarks on Fascist Temporalities*, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 13 (2015), pp. 24–43.

²³ Vittorio Fagone speaks of an active and coherent "cultura politica": see *Arte, politica e propaganda*, in: Barilli, Renato (ed.), *Anni Trenta. Arte e cultura in Italia*, Milan 1982, pp. 43–78; id., *L'arte all'ordine del giorno. Figure e idee in Italia da Carrà a Birolli*, Milan 2001, pp. 333–334.

²⁴ Kandinsky, Nina, *Kandinsky et moi*, Paris 1978, pp. 158, 161, 167. On Meyer see for example Kieren, Martin, *Das Bauhaus auf dem Weg zu einer Produktivgenossenschaft – der Direktor Hannes Meyer*, in: Fiedler, Jeannine; Feierabend, Peter (eds.), *Bauhaus*, Cologne 1999, pp. 204–215.

This source confirms the positive cultural image of fascism in Germany. Margherita Sarfatti stated in 1929 that Germany was the country that showed the greatest interest in Italy in the twenties: “Among the 5,000 publications on fascism nearly one third come from Germany and some of them are excellent. There is no newspaper or journal, which does not provide its readers continuously with accurate and often exhaustive information about Italy and fascism.”²⁵ The German economist Erwin von Beckerath (1889–1964) wrote in 1932 that German scholarship, in which the memory of the “strong state” of the pre-war period was still alive, attempted earlier and more successfully than its counterparts in other countries to evaluate, without prejudice, the fascist phenomenon.²⁶ Yet the letter shows that for some European intellectuals and avant-garde artists, fascism was not merely an institutional but also a cultural model, as clearly stated by Kandinsky. He also refers to the repressive cultural politics of Nazism, which later became infamous under the name ‘*Entartete Kunst*’. ‘Degenerate art’ was a term adopted by the Nazi regime to describe all modernist art, banned on the grounds that it was un-German, Jewish, or communist; those identified as degenerate artists were subject to sanctions. These included being forbidden to sell or to exhibit their art, being dismissed from teaching positions and in some cases being forbidden to produce art.

The situation in Italy was different, which explains the confidence with which Kandinsky wrote to Marinetti: a sign not only of the interconnection and mutual understanding that existed between artists and theorists of different avant-garde artistic movements in Europe, but also a clear indicator of the positive opinion an important figure like Kandinsky had of Italian fascism’s cultural policy. This is confirmed again by a further letter from the Russian artist, which also eliminates any doubt about the character of the letter here engaged with, which cannot be reduced to its instrumental purpose. The day before the Nazi police operation against the Bauhaus, Kandinsky wrote to Werner Drewes (1899–1985), one of his former students: “of course it is very embarrassing for us, ‘modern’ artists, that the new government misunderstands the new art. In Italy it looks very different! The new architecture and the new art (ital. futurists) have been recognized as fascist art. Futurists are now called ‘futur-fascisti’ (their new review was recently delivered to me

²⁵ Sarfatti, Margherita G., *Il fascismo visto dall'estero*, in: *Gerarchia* 9, 1929, pp. 436–443, p. 439.

²⁶ Beckerath, Erwin von: *Il fascismo e la Germania*, in: *Gerarchia* 12 (1932), pp. 872–877. See Petersen, Jens, *Der italienische Faschismus aus der Sicht der Weimarer Republik*, in: id., *Italienbilder-Deutschlandbilder. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Cologne 1999, pp. 212–248. See also Schieder, Wolfgang, *Faschistische Diktaturen. Studien zu Italien und Deutschland*, Göttingen 2008.

from Rome²⁷). Maybe the Nazis will realize that the Italians act correctly... Henceforth we will see how it goes on and what will become of our art! Anyhow artists should be apolitical, thinking of their work and devoting themselves to it with energy. Nevertheless art and science should be given complete freedom: what is wrong will die off by itself.”²⁸

In fact, in 1934, the futurist Ivo Pannaggi (1901–1981), who belonged to the so called *futurismo di sinistra*²⁹ (left futurism) at the beginning of the 1920s and attended the Bauhaus’ courses, could still guarantee Walter Gropius a talk as part of a conference on architecture: “concerning the actual situation, I guarantee that it doesn’t play any role.”³⁰ This refers to the fourth Volta Conference, on ‘dramatic theatre’, held in autumn 1934. Luigi Pirandello (1867–1963) was the president of the convention, and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti its secretary. Among the famous invitees, even though not everybody was able to take part, were Gropius³¹, the French dramatic adviser Denys Amiel (1884–1977), the English director, set designer and actor Sir Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966), the German dramatic adviser and novelist Gerhart Hauptman (1862–1946), the Italian painter Enrico Prampolini, the Dutch architect Hendricus Theodorus Wijdeveld (1885–1987), the Irish poet and dramatic adviser William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca (1898–1936), the cinematographic director Giovacchino Forzano (1884–1970), and the English writer William Somerset Maugham (1874–1965).³²

Nonetheless, during the thirties, the Italian dictatorship increasingly centralized the organization of the arts.³³ With the racial laws of 1938, right-wing fascists like Roberto Farinacci (1892–1945) tried to promote an Italian version of ‘Degenerate Art’. This should also be seen in the context of the exhibition of ‘*Entartete Kunst*’

²⁷ Kandinsky refers here to the magazine “Futurismo” published in Rome between May 1932 and November 1933. It was edited by Mino (Stanislao) Somenzi.

²⁸ Kandinsky, Vassily to Drewes, Werner, 10 April 1933, in: Hahn, Peter (ed.), Bauhaus Berlin. Auflösung Dessau 1932. Schließung Berlin 1933. Bauhäusler und Drittes Reich. Eine Dokumentation zusammengestellt vom Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin, Weingarten 1985, p. 126.

²⁹ See Lista, Giovanni, *Arte e politica. Il futurismo di sinistra in Italia*, Milan 1980; Berghaus, Günter, *Futurism and Politics. Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909–1944*, Providence et. al. 1996, pp. 197–239; Versari, Maria Elena, *Futurist Machine Art, Constructivism and the Modernity of Mechanization*, in: Berghaus, Günter (ed.), *Futurism and the Technological Imagination*, Amsterdam 2009, pp. 149–175.

³⁰ Letter from Ivo Pannaggi to Walter Gropius, Florence, 6. August 1934 (Berlin, Bauhaus-Archiv, Nachlaß Walter Gropius, Papers II, 617).

³¹ See also the documents in: Berlin Bauhaus Archiv, Papers II 141; Papers II, 651.

³² See Reale Accademia d’Italia Fondazione Alessandro Volta, *Atti dei convegni 4, Convegno di Lettere 8–14 Ottobre 1934 – XII, Tema: Il Teatro drammatico*, Rome 1935.

³³ Cioli, *Il fascismo e la ‘sua’ arte*, pp. 209 ff.

in Munich between 19 July and 30 November 1937, organized by the German painter and politician Adolf Ziegler (1892–1959) and the NSDAP. This exhibition of 650 works of art confiscated from German museums was staged as a contrast to the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung*.³⁴

Now, in Italy, it was possible to read articles such as “Un’autorevole testimonianza a carico dell’arte ‘moderna’. Straniera bolscevizzante e giudaica” (“An Authoritative Opinion of ‘Modern’ Art’. Foreign, Bolshevik and Jewish”), written by Telesio Interlandi (1894–1965).³⁵ The author sketched a picture of artistic deviance through paintings – by the metaphysicists Carlo Carrà (1881–1966) and Giorgio De Chirico (1888–1978), the expressionist Renato Birolli (1905–1959), and the abstractionists Lucio Fontana (1899–1968), Virginio Ghiringhelli (1898–1964), Mauro Reggiani (1897–1980) and Manlio Rho (1901–1957) – that were reproduced with the article, along with a piece from rationalist architects Pietro Lingeri (1894–1968) and Giuseppe Terragni (1904–1943). The latter even built a decidedly fascist masterpiece, the *Casa del Fascio* in Como, also called the *Palazzo Terragni*.³⁶ Yet the Italian fascist dictatorship did not embark on a policy against ‘degenerate art’.

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³⁴ Crispolti, Enrico, *Il mito della macchina e altri temi del futurismo*, Trapani 1969, pp. 695 ff.

³⁵ *Il Tevere*, 24–25 November, N. 23, 1938.

³⁶ Negri, Antonello (ed.), *Anni Trenta. Arti in Italia oltre il fascismo*, Florence 2012, p. 150.

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