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The Barren Mediterranean: Rural Imaginary in Italian Colonial Libya

Michele Monserrati

“The Mediterranean is inseparable from its discourse.”
-Predrag Matvejević¹

Introduction. “Mare Nostrum” or “mirabili frutta africane”?

Famously, the rhetorical language of Italian colonialism showed a significant penchant for the maritime legacy of the Romans to spearhead its “civilizing mission” in Africa. By alluding to the Roman dominion over the Mediterranean, the myth of *Mare Nostrum* persisted even despite the diminished role that post-*Risorgimento* Italy played in the Mediterranean Sea, compared to the more hegemonic English and French navies. Such a rhetorical trope proved to be widely popular during the campaign to invade Libya (1911-12), even when the obvious rationale for this annexation was to shore up the emigrations of Southern Italian peasants abroad by involving them in a farm settlement scheme. This maritime trope was promoted by prime imperialist voices such as Corradini and D’Annunzio and has received much scholarly attention.² However, it was neither the only one nor, possibly, the dominant one. Side by side with *Mare Nostrum*, an image of “Africa Felix” rooted in its potentially fertile land and Mediterranean agrarian landscape became a prominent motive of the campaign to invade Libya.

To take but one example, Gualtiero Castellini’s book *Tunisi e Tripoli* mentioned the Punic Wars to make a case in favor of occupying Libya. Rather than referencing the victory of Rome over Carthage to foreshadow the possible establishment of Italy as trade power in the Mediterranean, Castellini instead recalled a well-known episode of the Punic Wars, between third and first century BC, to underscore the fertility of the North African land. The author manipulated Livy’s anecdote about the statesman Cato producing a basket full of figs in front of the Roman Senate that—he claimed—had arrived from Carthage the day before. In Castellini’s recounting of this episode, the dry fruit is replaced by “mirabili frutta africane” (“wondrous African fruits”), while the message is subverted: for Cato, the presence of ripe fruit in the enemy’s territory should persuade the Roman Senators to destroy Carthage.³ For Castellini, instead, the fresh African fruits are a sign of the fertile agricultural land of Libya, which is referenced as the “nuova Sicilia Africana” (“new African Sicily”).⁴ While the Punic Wars historically ushered Rome into a period of seafaring dominion, the adaptation of this anecdote to the Libya campaign underlined the agrarian character of Italy’s colonizing enterprise.

¹ Predrag Matvejević, *Mediterranean. A Cultural Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 12.

² For an in-depth exploration of the Mare Nostrum trope in the discourse of Italian colonialism see Olga Tamburini, “La via romana sepolta nel mare: mito del *mare nostrum* e ricerca di un’identità nazionale,” in *Mare nostrum. Percezione ottomana e mito mediterraneo in Italia all’alba del ‘900*, ed. Stefano Trinchese (Milan: Guerini Studio, 2005), 41-95.

³ Gualtiero Castellini, *Tunisi e Tripoli* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1911), 155.

⁴ Gualtiero Castellini, *Tunisi e Tripoli*, 162. See also Sandro Gentili and Isabella Nardi, *La grande illusione: opinione pubblica e mass media al tempo della Guerra di Libia* (Perugia: Morlacchi, 2009), 88-89.

The article's main argument is that in the first two decades after unification (1860-1880), Italian nationalism constructed a mainly sea-based representation of the "Mediterranean," centered around Italy's expectation of inheriting the dominant Roman position in sea trade that is at the origin of the *Mare Nostrum* expression. Between the 1880s (after the 1878 Berlin congress and the 1881 French occupation of Tunisia) and the Libyan occupation (1911-1912), such propaganda developed instead a land-based, agrarian representation of the "Mediterranean" in Italian political discourse, aimed at linking the Italian nationalistic campaign to occupy Libya with the Roman past. This article contends that this shift in representation can be ascribed to Italy's positioning within the Mediterranean balance of powers, which conceded to France and England the role of arbiters of the Mediterranean Sea and accepted Libya as its designated area for colonial expansion, in lieu of the much more coveted Tunisian territory.

Having set aside the dreams of expanding in the Southern Mediterranean to revive the Roman thalassic legacy,⁵ Italian nationalists saw in the new African colony a possible solution to the so-called "Southern Question," by offering arable land to a class of Southern Italian peasants that increasingly emigrated abroad in search of new opportunities.⁶ In this respect, this article shows how a rich travel literature, as well as reports from scientific expeditions, in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, aimed to revive the Roman agrarian legacy of the region, with the effect of presenting the Libyan rural landscape as akin to the Italian countryside. A land-based Roman/Mediterranean myth thus came into existence alongside the enduring maritime myth. Such a thesis complicates the perspective on Italian colonialism in North Africa that Daniel J. Grange introduced in his monumental work *L'Italie et la Méditerranée (1896-1911)*. In his title, the French historian connected the Italian defeat at Adwa (1896) with the Libyan invasion (1911). Grange provided a detailed account to explain how Italian public opinion evolved from mostly opposing the Italian colonial mission after the Adwa debacle, to largely endorsing the Libya occupation. Within this time frame, the rhetorical myth of the *Mare Nostrum* received a significant boost through the foundation of the Italian *Lega Navale* (1897) and a substantial government strategy of investment in the navy. As a result, Italy sought to play a more crucial role in the Mediterranean Sea at the dawn of the Italo-Turkish war:

L'expédition de Tripoli arriva à point pour donner consistance à ces attentes encore vagues. [...] L'escadre qui part pour Tripoli en septembre 1911 est le symbole très fort de ce retour de la Péninsule réunifiée aux chemins de la mer et de la puissance. Les nationalistes ne se trompent pas sur la force de ces mythes sur l'âme italienne, qui voient, à partir de 1910, dans la *Lega navale*, un excellent vecteur pour propager leurs idées.⁷

(The Tripoli expedition came at the right time to give substance to these still vague expectations. [...] The squadron which left for Tripoli in September 1911 is a very strong symbol of this Peninsula's reunified return to the paths of sea

⁵ In the words of Saskia Van Genugten "As with the Roman Empire, nationalists viewed expansion into the southern Mediterranean as a natural development following the unification of Italy." (Saskia Van Genugten, *Libya in Western Foreign Policies, 1911–2011* [London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016], 10-11).

⁶ On the debate about internal and external colonization, as a solution for the Southern poverty see Aliza S. Wong, *Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy, 1861–1911: Meridionalism, Empire, and Diaspora* (New York, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 144-47.

⁷ Daniel J Grange, *L'Italie et la Méditerranée (1896-1911): les fondements d'une politique étrangère*, vol. 1 (Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 1994), 348-49.

and power. The nationalists are not mistaken about the strength of these myths about the Italian soul, which saw in the *Lega navale*, from 1910 on, an excellent vehicle for propagating their ideas.)⁸

While this maritime version of the Italian Mediterranean imaginary echoed especially in the rhetoric supporting the Italian expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean,⁹ I argue that the Libya campaign generated a complementary land-based Mediterranean imaginary, in line with the plan of relocating Italian peasants to the Ottoman region. Despite the military rhetoric that renamed the Libyan shore as the Italian “quarta sponda” (“fourth shore”), this mediterraneist discourse placed scant emphasis on the significant part that Tripolitanian ports played in the Mediterranean sea-trade economy during the Roman times, or the emergence of Tripoli as a major city-port during the Medieval and early modern period.¹⁰ The Libya campaign left little room for imagining Italy as reviving the Roman seafaring legacy,¹¹ because it concentrated on the agrarian heritage of the Latin empire.

With Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze’s *régime de signes* in mind, that is a positing of Libya’s representations as hierarchical organizations of signifying signs referring to a transcendental signifier, this article points to the ways such literary production coded the Libyan landscape into a dualistic territory. On the one hand, signs of the Roman presence were olives trees, vines, aqueducts, an assemblage that suggested a fertile and familiar Mediterranean land. On the other hand, the territory of the locals was characterized by signs indicating aridity, unproductivity and alienation.

When referring to the Italian visual aesthetic of the *Mare Nostrum*, and the construction of Italy’s Mediterranean empire, scholars have highlighted the importance of built environments in conveying representations both of *Mediterraneità* and of Oriental others.¹² Specifically, research

⁸ Author’s translation.

⁹ The conquest of Libya offered Italy a new strategic location to launch new attacks against the Ottoman territories in the Eastern Mediterranean. See, for instance Carlo Picasso, “La quarta sponda,” *Lega Navale. Organo dell’Associazione “Lega Navale Italiana”* VIII, no. 2 (January 1912): 19-20, “Il Mediterraneo centrale, questo almeno, finalmente, è già quasi divenuto un lago italiano; chi [sic.], se la soglia occidentale di esso è ancora, purtroppo signoreggiata da Biserta e da Malta, quella orientale è in nostra mano. Il respiro dell’Italia si fa ampio ormai sull’antico *mare nostrum*, e nuove speranze fioriscono...” (“At least the central Mediterranean, finally, has almost become an Italian lake; if the western threshold is still, unfortunately, ruled by Bizerte and Malta, the eastern threshold is in our hands. The breadth of Italy is by now widening on the ancient *mare nostrum*, and new hopes are blooming...” [translation by copyeditor]).

¹⁰ See David J. Mattingly, *Tripolitania* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

¹¹ Even in the journal of the Italian *Lega Navale*, the conquest of Libya did not stir up dreams of an Italian hegemony on the Mediterranean, but it was more realistically seen as a strategic move to grant Italy freedom of movement, in a space dominated by the French and English navy. See, for instance, Ettore Bravetta, “La potenza navale necessaria,” *Lega Navale. Organo dell’Associazione “Lega Navale Italiana”* VIII, no. 17 (September 1912): 248, “Noi italiani dunque, anche lasciando da parte, se si vuole, l’egemonia nostra sul Mediterraneo, considerandola un’utopia, dobbiamo, per semplice necessità di equilibrio, avere una marina forte e tanto più forte quanto più aumenterà la forza delle altre marine mediterranee” (“Even leaving aside, if you wish, our hegemony over the Mediterranean, considering it a utopia, we Italians must therefore, for the simple need of equilibrium, have a strong navy, and one much stronger than other Mediterranean navies, stronger than their power may ever be” [translation by copyeditor]).

¹² See Brian L. McLaren, *Architecture and Tourism in Italian Colonial Libya: An Ambivalent Modernism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Sean Anderson, *Modern Architecture and Its Representation in Colonial Eritrea: An In-Visible Colony, 1890-1941* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015).

on Italian colonial architecture and urbanism has detailed the effort of urban planners to give material form to the government's propaganda. Here, I propose to expand analysis of the Italian aesthetic of "Mediterraneism" to representations of the natural environment. Crucially, with the unfolding of the Libyan campaign Italians nationalists considered the idea of a uniform Mediterranean landscape as a *natural historical landmark* to testify to the historical presence of the ancient Romans in North Africa and to legitimize the link between the Italian colonies and their supposedly glorious ancestors.

Ultimately, I suggest that hegemonic notions of identity and space converged in Italian colonialist discourse to create the "Mediterranean" as a place suited to the Italian peasant migrants at the expense of the non-Italian other. If "Place is how we make the world meaningful and the way we experience the world,"¹³ then this new definition of the Mediterranean space fostered a sense of national belonging, while constructing the non-Italian presence in the region as ravaging and out-of-place. By insisting on the botanical similarities between Italy and the North African shore, the Libyan territory came to be represented as a landscape of the "self," while manifesting the presence of the Muslim "other" in the form of its most arid regions. Whereas Said's *Orientalism* builds on a structuralist representation of the East as a non-West, the Italian representation of Libya projected onto the territory the opposing categories of Self and Other, or familiar and exotic, as both visually present in the landscape.

The Mediterranean Queen

During the *Risorgimento* years both liberal and democratic intellectuals maintained, overall, an anti-imperialistic stance in the name of the principle of self-determination of the nations. The liberal and Catholic intellectual Cesare Balbo (1789-1853), repeatedly referred to the Mediterranean as an "Italian lake" in his book *Della storia d'Italia dalle origini fino ai nostri tempi, Sommario* (On the History of Italy from its Origins to Our Times, 1846); however, he was only subsuming the Roman seafaring expansion, and the Venetian and Genovese territorial conquests, under the label of "Italian."¹⁴ A different perspective emerged in the aftermath of Italian unification (1861), when political thinkers nurtured the dream of making Italy the new Queen of the Mediterranean, restoring the dominion long-established by the Romans. Even a democratic thinker like Giuseppe Mazzini, who advocated for the self-determination and freedom of all oppressed peoples in Europe, at the end of his life appealed to the rhetoric of the *Mare Nostrum* to support Italian colonialism in Africa:

Already in the past, the flag of Rome was unfurled on top of the Atlas Mountains, after Carthage had been vanquished, and the Mediterranean became known as Mare Nostrum. We were the masters of that entire region until the fifth century. Today the French covet it and they will soon have it if we don't get there first.¹⁵

¹³ Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 17.

¹⁴ Cesare Balbo, *Della storia d'Italia dalle origini fino ai nostri tempi: sommario* (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1856), 39, 193, 434.

¹⁵ Giuseppe Mazzini, "Principles of International Politics," in *A Cosmopolitanism of Nations: Giuseppe Mazzini's Writings on Democracy, Nation Building, and International Relations*, eds. Stefano Recchia and Nadia Urbinati (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 239.

Clearly, for Mazzini, Italy's intervention in North Africa would have the effect of reviving Italian control of the sea trade, rather than restoring the agrarian production of the region. A year later, Luigi Fregoso in his book *Del primato italiano sul Mediterraneo* (On the Italian Supremacy over the Mediterranean) laid out the idea of bestowing the maritime legacy of the Romans to the Italian kingdom:

Gittiamoci a questo mare che abbiamo da alcuni secoli e così ingiustamente abbandonato, che è lì pronto, desioso di riceverci, che da tanto tempo ci invita a lui, che abbraccia, che stringe, che bacia sì affettuosamente le nostre terre.¹⁶

(Let us throw ourselves on this sea that we have wrongly left abandoned for several centuries, and which lies there, ready, longing to receive us, and which for some time has been inviting us, which embraces, which clasps, which kisses so affectionately our lands.)

Given the political unrest and proliferation of warfare around the Mediterranean basin, Fregoso called for the development of a robust Italian military navy to challenge the maritime hegemony of England and France.

The sea-based Italian imaginary of the *Mare Nostrum* presented a unique aspect in the juxtaposition of the Roman thalassic legacy with the medieval eastward expansion of the maritime republics, particularly Venice and Genoa. Italian nationalists found far-fetched elements of continuity between the Roman civilization and the Maritime Republics, thus weaving together these two remote historical times to spearhead the seafaring ambitions of the new Italy. Fregoso was quick in turning this nationalistic map of Italian history into a call for action: “Qual è l’Italiano,” he wrote, “che conscio di una così magnifica eredità di memorie, davanti ad un così splendido avvenire non si senta commuovere, agitare da un desiderio febbrile di attività?”¹⁷ (“What Italian, knowing of this magnificent heritage of memories and facing such a proud future, does not feel himself moved and agitated by a feverish desire for activity?”). Leone Carpi, who authored one of the earliest studies on Italian migration and colonies (1874), was equally adamant in predicting Italy's future dominion over the sea: “Né si dica che noi come nazione siamo risorti troppo tardi per prendere anche sui mari il posto che ci compete e che si esige assolutamente dalla peculiare nostra condizione,” (“Nor should it be said that we as a nation have risen too late to also take the place on the seas which belongs to us and which is absolutely required by our peculiar condition”).¹⁸ Yet, for the recently born Italian state, the seafaring empire's rhetoric would soon need to reckon with the geopolitical realities of the Mediterranean.

The “nomos” of the Mediterranean

Politically, the establishment of the colonial project in Africa invigorated the competition between this multi-historical version of the Italian *Mare Nostrum* with the French project of

¹⁶ Luigi Campo Fregoso, *Del primato italiano sul Mediterraneo* (Rome: E. Loescher, 1872), 177.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸ Leone Carpi, *Delle colonie e dell'emigrazione degli italiani all'estero* (Milan: Tip. Lombarda già Salvi, 1874), 114.

Latin Africa.¹⁹ Especially after France took control of Tunisia in 1881, including the symbolic reconquest of Carthage, Italy responded by entering the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria a year later. From the Parliament in Rome, the deputy—and future Foreign Minister—Antonino di San Giuliano welcomed the new alliance as a move to surpass French hegemony in the Mediterranean, which he defined as the sea “che fu già detto *mare nostrum*, che vogliamo *mare liberum* e che non possiamo a nessun patto consentire diventi *mare alienum*” (“that was once called *mare Nostrum* which we wish [to be] *mare liberum* and which we cannot at any cost allow to become *mare alienum*”).²⁰

The Congress of Berlin (1878), however, had already challenged Italian ambitions of becoming a dominating force in the Mediterranean. As a result of this Congress, England took over Cyprus, while France was able to expand in North Africa. Austria controlled the Adriatic coast through Bosnia-Herzegovina, and even the recently born Kingdom of Greece (1830) was conceded acquisition of Thessaly. Following its dashed dreams of restoring the Roman *Mare Nostrum*, Italy could only find solace by shifting its interest toward the Red Sea, where Foreign Minister Pasquale Stanislao Mancini ordered the occupation of the port city of Assab in December 1881.²¹ More importantly, Italy came to accept the spatial order of the Mediterranean by recognizing its lesser influential role and the authority of England and France in all decisions regarding future areas of expansion. Indeed, Italy began to consider colonization of Libya only when England and France presented it as an opportunity, in an attempt to appease Italian malcontents for having lost Tunisia to France. After having accepted the established Eurocentric spatial order in the Mediterranean, Italy began to rethink its own spatial view of the Mediterranean, moving away from its sea-based representation.

Since the early modern period, England had successfully replaced Venice as the commercial agent handling trade between Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean.²² After the collapse of the Napoleonic empire and the Treaty of Paris (1814), England extended its possessions to include the former Venetian islands of Zante, Cephalonia, and Corfu, along with other islands in the Ionian Sea. The subaltern role of Italy in the Mediterranean was one of the main reasons why the *Mare Nostrum* trope did not alter the historical distance and unfamiliarity that Italians perceived towards their surrounding sea. For most Italians, from the *Risorgimento* until the advent of Fascism, the Mediterranean remained an estranged or fearsome place to keep at bay. In spite of the many port cities, only a minority of Italians lived by or near the sea and the Italian coastlines bore the memories of plunders by both pirates and the corsairs. To make the memory of the sea even more traumatic, in 1866, the Austrian navy crushed the maritime dreams of the new Italy by

¹⁹ 1869 was the year the Italian state gained a foothold in Africa with the acquisition of the Assab Bay in Eritrea.

²⁰ Atti Parlamentari, Camera dei deputati, xv, viii, 4 April 1884, p. 7105 (quoted in Richard J. B. Bosworth, *Italy. The Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy before the First World War* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979], 80).

²¹ See Mark I. Choate, “Tunisia, Contested: Italian Nationalism, French Imperial Rule, and Migration in the Mediterranean Basin,” *California Italian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 5. In 1869, the Italian shipping company “Rubattino” had already purchased the rights to Assab. See Giacomo Gorrini, “I primi tentativi e le prime ricerche di una Colonia in Italia (1861-1882),” in *Biblioteca di scienze politiche e amministrative*, ed. Attilio Brunialti, vol. 9 (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice, 1897); Giorgio Doria, *Debiti e navi. La compagnia di Rubattino, 1839-1881* (Genoa: Marietti, 1990).

²² See Maria Fusaro, *Political Economies of Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean: The Decline of Venice and the Rise of England, 1450-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

obtaining a striking victory at Lissa.²³ Therefore, during the years leading up to the 1911-1912 Italo-Turkish war, the sea-based interpretation of the Mediterranean identity progressively lost touch with the developing Italian foreign politics.²⁴ The editorial of the January 1907 issue of *Lega Navale* explains the decision to drop “Mare Nostrum” from the journal title, as motivated by the lack of reference to a concrete reality for the Italian navy:

“Mare nostrum” è simbolo e sintesi d’un passato glorioso che non s’invoca per vano sfogo retorico o per istolida spavalderia: è soltanto una memoria, ma sacra, come tutto ciò che costituisce il patrimonio intellettuale e morale dei popoli che ebbero un passato di gloria e di potenza. E poiché nulla più giova ad elevare l’animo, tra le angustie della vita reale, che il ricordo del passato, se da esso emana un nostalgico richiamo di tempi migliori, noi restiamo fedeli al motto “Mare nostrum” come sprone e come monito a tutti gli Italiani. Parli forte nel cuore di tutti noi la voce solenne che da “Mare nostrum” prorompe; e, rievocando quel che gli Italiani un tempo furono sul mare, ci dia la chiara visione dei tempi mutati, e la giusta misura di quel che dovremo e potremo essere sul mare.²⁵

(“Mare nostrum” is the symbol and synthesis of a glorious past that is not invoked out of vain rhetorical outburst or foolish bravado: it is only a memory, but sacred, like everything that constitutes the intellectual and moral heritage of the peoples who had a past of glory and power. And since nothing helps to elevate the soul, amidst the anguish of real life, more than the memory of the past, if a nostalgic reminder of better times emanates from it, we remain faithful to the motto “Mare nostrum” as a spur and as a warning to all Italians. Speak loudly in the hearts of all of us the solemn voice that bursts out of “Mare nostrum”; and, recalling what the Italians once were on the sea, give us a clear vision of the changed times, and the right measure of what we must and can be on the sea.)

In an astute rhetorical move, the editorial page acknowledged the untimely effect of the expression “Mare nostrum” as referring to the subordinate Italian role in the Mediterranean, while, by the same token, it evoked that historical legacy to insist on the crucial role of the Italian

²³ See Claudio Fogu, “We Have Made the Mediterranean; Now We Have to Make Mediterraneans!,” in *Critically Mediterranean*, eds. Yasser Elhariry and Edwige Tamalet Talbayev (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 187-88. See also, Paolo Frascani, *Il mare* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008).

²⁴ Claudio Fogu offered a compelling explanation for the erasure of the Mediterranean Sea from the Southern Italians’ identity after unification. In his view, the “Southern Question” is mainly an attempt to integrate Southern Italians into the Italian nation building project, by turning them into Northern Italians. A main component of this project of nationalizing the South (in which participated Northern Italian elites and a selection of Southern Italian intellectuals, the so-called *Meridionalisti*) consisted in removing the links between the South of Italy and the larger Mediterranean region. In Fogu’s words, “the former ‘Kingdom of the Two Sicilies’ was literally territorialized, that is, it was *made South* by virtue of suppressing its long-standing biogeographical centrality *in* and *to* the Mediterranean,” (187). In this sense, the territorialization of Libya as a rural region instead of as a sea-trade power, and the invention of the Roman rural myth, is a consequence of this territorialization of the South of Italy as an agrarian land. This interpretation is not in opposition to my view of considering the progressive reduction of the *Mare Nostrum* rhetoric, as a result of Italy’s vanishing dream of becoming a Mediterranean trade power, especially after the French conquered Tunisia. Since rural exploitation was one of the more realistic benefits of conquering Libya, Southern Italians were framed as the ideal people for this task.

²⁵ Francesco Pometti, “Lega navale,” *Lega Navale. Organo dell’Associazione “Lega Navale Italiana”* III, no. 1 (January 1907): 1.

navy. On the other hand, the prospect of conquering Libya favored the emergence of a land-based, agrarian perception of the Mediterranean that was coherent with the expected results of Libya's colonization. By acknowledging the secondary role of the Italian navy—and the fact that many Italians simply ignored the sea—the nationalists who launched the Libyan campaign promoted a new Mediterranean identity that was instrumental to the project of relocating Southern Italian peasants in the new colony. While the word “Mediterranean” itself literally means “that which is between the surrounding lands,”²⁶ the colonialist campaign in North Africa shifted attention to the lands that surround the sea. As a consequence, the rhetoric of the *Mare Nostrum* moved away from the impossible dreams of a maritime hegemony to concentrate on the fertility of the Mediterranean lands under Roman rule. Carl Schmitt, in his essay *Land und Meer* (*Land and Sea*, 1942) noticed the contradictory ways in which references to the Roman Empire were attributed to modern nations, such as England.²⁷ Rome's historical expansion was insular at the beginning, as it was rooted in the Italian peninsula; only after the Punic Wars did Rome become a maritime or thalassic power. Compared to the British, Italians took their time but finally aligned their mythic representations to historical reality: while in the first two decades after Italian unification a thalassic interpretation of the Roman myth prevailed, the gradual building up of the colonialist rhetoric in favor of the Libyan conquest emphasized the “prodigious” agrarian skills of the Roman ancestors.

“The fundamentalism of the land”

Of course, the idea that Italy should become a naval power was not entirely abandoned by poets and writers, who continued to revive the memories of historical sea battles as inspiring examples for the young Italian navy. In 1882 Giosuè Carducci (1835-1907), the official national poet of Italy, celebrated Giuseppe Garibaldi's naval expedition to liberate the Italian South as a sign that the Mediterranean was on the verge of becoming, once again, Italian property: “E l'aquila romana tornò a distendere la larghezza delle ali tra il mare e il monte, e mise rauchi gridi di gioia innanzi alle navi che veleggiavano franche il Mediterraneo per la terza volta italiano”²⁸ (“And the Roman eagle returned to spread its wings between sea and mountain, and released raucous cries of joy at the sight of ships that freely sailed the Mediterranean, for the third time property of Italy”). Alfredo Oriani's *Fino a Dogali* (*All the Way to Dogali*, 1889) is another example of early support for Italian colonialism that associated the image of the Italian warships directed at East Africa with other sea battles, including the Punic Wars, the expansion of Genoa and Venice in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Battle of Lepanto (1571) between the Holy League and the Ottoman Empire.²⁹

The most notable example of seafaring rhetoric is from Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938), Carducci's aspiring successor, because it is situated during the years leading up to the Libya campaign. D'Annunzio, the foremost poet of Italian nationalism, was an early supporter of Italy's effort at building war ships. In 1888, he published a series of articles under the collective

²⁶ David Abulafia, “Mediterraneans,” in *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, ed. William V. Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 64.

²⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea. A World-Historical Meditation*, eds. Russell A. Berman and Samuel Garrett Zeitlin, trans. Samuel Garrett Zeitlin (Candor, NY: Telos Press Publishing, 2015), 17.

²⁸ Giosuè Carducci, “Per la morte di Giuseppe Garibaldi,” in *Prose*, ed. Mario Saccenti (Bologna: UTET, 2013), 558, ebook.

²⁹ Alfredo Oriani, *Fino a Dogali*, 1st ed. (Bologna: Augusto Gherardi, 1889), 311.

title of *L'Armata italiana* (The Italian Armada), calling for the development of a naval army.³⁰ The outrageous Italian navy defeat at the hands of the Austrian fleet in Lissa (1866), on the Adriatic Sea, became D'Annunzio's battle cry for the construction of an Italian navy that would vindicate this humiliation and live up to the legacy of the Venetian Republic. For instance, in the *Odi navali* (Naval Odes, 1892-93), D'Annunzio conjures up the shadow of Captain Emilio Faà di Bruno, one of the casualties at Lissa, to demand vindication of the human loss in the battle, and to confidently foreshadow a glorious future for the Italian navy ("Il fato / è certo; e a quel Giorno s'accendono i fochi su l'are"³¹ ("Fate / is certain; and on that day the fires are lit up in the air"). A few years later, in the hymn "Canto augurale per la nazione eletta" ("Augural Canto for the Chosen Nation," 1899) D'Annunzio foreshadowed the day in which Italy would cover the Mediterranean Sea in blood with its war ships: "Italia! Italia! Così veda tu un giorno il mare latino coprirsi di strage alla tua Guerra" ("Italy! Italy! / May you see one day the Latin sea covered with /slaughter in your war").³² D'Annunzio further revisited the Venetian past of Mediterranean hegemony to stir Italy into action on the Adriatic Sea, in the prose of *Il Fuoco* (*The Flame*, 1900) and the epic tragedy of *La Nave* (*The Ship*, 1908).³³ The latter narrates the traditional story of Venice's sixth-century foundation by a group of Romans, finding in the Lagoon a protective refuge against the Hun and Germanic invasions. By narrating the rise of Venice as a military power in the Adriatic Sea, as a result of the will of its people, the play intentionally stages the *Mare Nostrum* myth, as becomes evident in the opening hymn:

[...] O Iddio che vagli e rinnovelli
 nel Mar le stirpi, o Iddio che le cancelli,
 i viventi i viventi saran quelli
 che sopra il Mare
 ti magnificheranno, sopra il Mare
 ti glorificheranno, sopra il Mare
 t'offriran mirra e sangue dall'altare
 che porta rostro.
 Fa di tutti gli Océani il Mare Nostro!
 Amen.³⁴

(. . . O God who weighs and replenishes
 tribes in the Sea, o God who erases them,
 the living the living will be those
 who upon the Sea

³⁰ See Lucy Hughes-Hallett, *Gabriele D'Annunzio: Poet, Seducer and Preacher of War* (New York: Anchor Books, 2014), 676, eBook.

³¹ Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Poema paradisiaco: Odi navali (1891-1893)* (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1899), 187.

³² This hymn was first published in the periodical *Nuova Antologia* on November 16, 1899. It then became the conclusion to *Elettra* (1904) in the second volume of *Laudi del cielo, del mare, della terra e degli eroi*. Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Elettra. Alcione. Laudi del cielo, del mare, della terra e degli eroi*, Vol. 2, Libro 2-3 (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1904), 181. For an interpretation of the famous final verse of the hymn, "with the plough and prow" ("con l'aratro e prora"), see Rhiannon Noel Welch, *Vital Subjects: Race and Biopolitics in Italy, 1860-1920* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 174-75.

³³ In *Il fuoco*, the protagonist Stelio Èffrena is a poet who aims at revivify the subdued people of Venice by reawakening their past glory in history and art. By reevoking Venice's Eastern Mediterranean possessions, D'Annunzio hints at Italy's need to regain access to the Adriatic.

³⁴ Gabriele D'Annunzio, *La nave* (Milan: Mondadori, 1955), 9.

will magnify you, upon the Sea
will glorify you, upon the Sea
will offer you myrrh and blood from the altar
that bears the rostrum.
Make of every Ocean Our Sea!
Amen.)³⁵

The people of Venice in *La nave* must face a conflict that is not only a struggle for survival. There are cultural, religious, and civilizational choices at stake in D'Annunzio's highly dichotomic plot. On the one hand, the political leader Marco Gràtico, a virile Venetian *superuomo* of Roman origins, leads Venice toward a maritime expansion under the guidance of a Catholic God. On the other, a feminized and telluric Orient, represented by the mythical whore Basiliola Faledra, subjugates Marco Gràtico and prompts him to kill his brother. Thus, the political use of the *Mare Nostrum* myth is adapted to the context of Adriatic nationalism with its allusions to the necessity of a sea conflict against Eastern, non-Latin and non-Catholic enemies.³⁶

With the Italo-Turkish War of 1911-12, D'Annunzio's rhetoric of war found even more definite expression in the fierce poetry of the *Canzoni della gesta d'oltremare* (Poems on Naval Deeds, 1911-1912). In this work, both interpretations of the Roman myth—as symbol of maritime and agrarian might—are deployed in order to cast Italy as a nation that is returning to the land of its fathers and restoring a lost civilization. The motive of maritime glory, however, is understated, and treated as secondary to other more significant themes. While D'Annunzio compared the Italian war navies fighting along the Libyan coast to the maritime republics of Genoa (in the second book *La canzone del sangue* [The Song of Blood]) and of Pisa (in the fourth book *Canzone del Sacramento* [Song of Sacrament]), the rationale for this comparison was not to predict a dominion over the Mediterranean Sea. Instead, D'Annunzio evoked medieval and early modern sea battles to primarily portray the Italo-Turkish war as a religious conflict. The Italian republics are considered “Christians,” while the Oriental others are indistinctly paired under the banner of “Muslim.” As Lucia Re explains, “D'Annunzio's operation is [...] twofold. Not only does he [...] ‘sacralize’ the war, turning it into a religion, but he also ethicizes religion. D'Annunzio unites Arabs and Turks under the same category as ‘infidels’ and ‘Muslims’ and effectively conflates them as a single ‘ethnic other.’ In this process, religion becomes part of ethnicity on both sides: Italians are Christians, the enemies are Muslim.”³⁷

While downplaying the *Mare Nostrum* myth, D'Annunzio characterized Libya's colonization as an extension of the fatherland. As Roberta Pergher puts it, “he saw the Libyan shore as complementing the three shores of the Italian peninsula, where the sea did not divide but

³⁵ Translation quoted from Jennifer Scappettone, *Killing the Moonlight: Modernism in Venice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 153-54.

³⁶ It is not by chance that this play will be adapted as a silent film during the Italo-Turkish war (1912) and as an opera in 1918, directed by Italo Montemezzi. See David Laven and Elsa Damien, “Empire, City, Nation: Venice's Imperial Past and the ‘Making of Italians’ from Unification to Fascism,” in *Nationalizing Empires*, eds. Stefan Berger and Alexei Miller (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014), 511-51. See also, Jennifer Scappettone, *Killing the Moonlight*, 152-55.

³⁷ Lucia Re, “Italians and the Invention of Race: The Poetics and Politics of Difference in the Struggle over Libya, 1890-1913,” *California Italian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 28.

rather connected shores on different continents, tying them to the same fatherland.”³⁸ By focusing more on land expropriation and cultivation, and less on the Libyan shore as springboard for Italian hegemony in the Mediterranean, D’Annunzio aligned his poetry with the economic interests of the government’s elites.³⁹ In turning attention to totalitarian forms of identity (through an emphasis on ethnic, religious, linguistic and place-based differences between Italians and locals), D’Annunzio reconnected his poetry to a mode of colonization that Franco Cassano (who borrowed the concept from Carl Schmitt) described as the “fundamentalism of the land.” In stark opposition to the “fundamentalism” of the “sea,” that is based on the exaltation of “individual freedom,” the “fundamentalism” of the “land” is an expression of fixed identities, “the closure of cultural frontiers” and “the grotesque demonizing of the Other.”⁴⁰

This fundamentalism was predicated on fear of the “other” and fear of mobility, which resulted in practices of exclusion and discrimination. A new understanding of Mediterranean identity, focused on its botanical flora, sought to introduce this distinction between a space that was Mediterranean, and therefore Western, and a space that was arid, and therefore inhabited by locals.⁴¹ The distorted historical notion of Libya as the “granary of Rome” provided the ground for an aggressive expansionist campaign.

Reclaiming the “granary of Rome”

Even more than D’Annunzio, Giovanni Pascoli’s celebratory speech *La grande proletaria si è mossa* (*The Great Proletarian, She Has Risen!*, 1911), couched the argument of the annexation of Libya in terms of offering land to Italian peasants. Libya was represented not as a colonial outpost, but as “an extension of their [Italians’] native lands,” a place familiar to those who were accustomed to Roman monuments and a Mediterranean agrarian landscape. This land-based Mediterranean identity was deployed to differentiate Italians as good *coloni*, that is, peasant/migrants, from the occupying Turk population.⁴² Indeed, the double identity of Pascoli’s

³⁸ Roberta Pergher. *Mussolini’s Nation-Empire: Sovereignty and Settlement in Italy’s Borderlands, 1922-1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 38.

³⁹ In this regard see Mario Isnenghi, “D’Annunzio e l’ideologia della venezianità,” *Rivista di storia contemporanea* 19 (1990): 419.

⁴⁰ Franco Cassano, *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*, eds. and trans. Valerio Ferme and Norma Bouchard (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 58.

⁴¹ This exclusionary interpretation of the Mediterranean identity that I consider in the representation of Libya’s natural environment has also been applied in relation to the built environment and the concept of race. As Stephanie Malia Hom points out, “Throughout the Italian occupation of Libya, colonial officials engaged the discursively fluid idea of *mediterraneità* (Mediterraneanness) to justify not only their territorial invasion but also the expansion of Italy’s colonial state apparatus. For example, *mediterraneità* provided the rationale that guided urban planning and residential architecture. *Mediterraneità* also became a key pillar of Italian criminal anthropology and racial theories in which the Mediterranean figured as the *Ursprung* of all European races” (Stephanie Malia Hom, *Empire’s Mobius Strip: Historical Echoes in Italy’s Crisis of Migration and Detention* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019], 14).

⁴² Adriana M. Baranello, “Giovanni Pascoli’s ‘La grande proletaria si è mossa’: A Translation and Critical Introduction,” *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011). Gabriele Montalbano has recently highlighted the racial discourse that came along with this spatial association of the desert with Arabs and fertile land with Romans. In fact, he demonstrated how Giuseppe Sergi’s theory of Southern Italians as belonging to a “Mediterranean race,” which was once responsible for the rising of the Roman empire, provided a theoretical background to characterize the Sicilian migrants in Tunisia as the return of Roman settlers in the former Roman territory. Theories that framed Southerners as racially inferior compared to the Aryan Northern Italians were absorbed within a new framing of Sicilians as “Italian” settlers reviving the Roman civilizing mission. See Gabriele Montalbano, “The Making of Italians in Tunisia: A Biopolitical Colonial Project (1881-1911),” *California Italian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2019): 1-21. In

Italian colonizers derives from the dual meaning that the root of the Italian word *colonia* (colony), had in ancient Rome. The Latin meaning of *colonia* indicated both a migrant group resettling in a new territory (also called *colonia*) and the land attached to a farm (from the Lat. *cōlere*, meaning both to inhabit a place and to cultivate land). Pascoli, therefore, downplayed the violence of Italian colonialism by defining the military operation as a process of mass resettlement and land cultivation. More importantly, by constructing the Italian migrants' identity as peasants and farmers, Pascoli left no room for reviving the Roman use of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania for shipping trade.

On the contrary, as Lucia Re noted, the image of Italian conquerors as deeply rooted in the (home)land was posed in contrast to the sea-based identity of the Turks and Arabs, who were described as “industriosi razziatori di negri e mercanti di schiavi”⁴³ (“industrious plunderers of Negroes and slave merchants.”) In this scheme, Italian peasant/migrants represented what Pascoli considered “civilization,” in contrast to the alleged “barbarity” of the locals.⁴⁴ To make the distinction even sharper, Pascoli resorted to an anecdotal interpretation of Libyan environmental history, which considered the Roman period as the most fertile time, while blaming the subsequent Arab invasion (“the nomadic and indolent populations”) for the progressive aridity of the land:

una vasta regione [Libia] che già per opera dei nostri progenitori fu abbondevole d'acque e di messi, e verdeggiante d'alberi e giardini; e ora, da un pezzo, per l'inerzia di popolazioni nomadi e neghittose, è per gran parte un deserto.⁴⁵

(this vast region [Libya], where once, by the work of our forefathers, water was abundant as were the crops. It was covered with trees and gardens, but now due to the inertia of the nomadic and indolent populations, it has long since become mostly desert.)⁴⁶

Pascoli was rehearsing a popular Orientalist trope of the period that was used in response to those who questioned the opportunity to conquer Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. On the one hand, opponents of Italian colonization objected that the physical environment, with its vast empty lands, was unfit for agricultural expansion. Notably, the socialist journalist and intellectual Gaetano Salvemini defined Libya as a “gigantic and useless sandbox”⁴⁷ to scorn the idea that it could ever become a productive asset for farming. On the other, the nationalist group in favor of invasion attributed the land's aridity to the historical Arab occupation and, more recently, the poor administration of the territory by the Turkish government. The socialist Pascoli drew this tale of environmental decline from the nationalist Enrico Corradini who argued that Africa's Islamization was the main factor that led to the soil poverty.⁴⁸ Corradini pointed to the remains

this sense, as Italian colonialism in Libya promised to restore Roman Mediterranean fertility, so the transformation of Southern peasants into settlers carried the promise of restoring the Roman soul in the “uneducated” and “instinctual” Southern character.

⁴³ Giovanni Pascoli, *La grande Proletaria si è mossa: Discorso* (Bologna: Nicola Zanichelli, 1911), 19.

⁴⁴ Re, “Italians and the Invention of Race,” 43.

⁴⁵ Giovanni Pascoli, *La grande Proletaria si è mossa*, 9.

⁴⁶ Baranello, “Giovanni Pascoli's ‘La grande proletaria si è mossa,’” 9.

⁴⁷ Gaetano Salvemini, “Perché non si deve andare a Tripoli,” *La Voce*, Anno III, no. 33 (17 agosto 1911): 631-32.

⁴⁸ In *L'ora di Tripoli* (Tripoli's Moment), Corradini wrote, “L'islamismo che prima dominò con gli arabi e poi coi turchi rovinò l'opera iniziata in Affrica dai due maggiori popoli dell'antichità, i greci e i nostri padri romani” (The Islam that first dominated the Arabs and then later the Turks ruined the work of the two greatest peoples of

of Roman aqueducts in the Tripoli area as evidence of the abundant waters that existed during antiquity. On the other hand, he considered land aridity as a result of a careless practice of deforestation by the natives.⁴⁹ In his 1913 travel book about Libya, Paolo Vinassa de Regny, professor of geology at the University of Verona, used his authority to blame the Arabs and the Turks for the deforestation and subsequent poor soil fertility in Cyrenaica. For Vinassa de Regny, aridity of the land was not a climatic characteristic of the region. In fact, he argued, it was the progressive destruction of the woodland area by locals that had caused a decline in local humidity and rainfall levels.⁵⁰ In his view, Italians should prioritize reforestation of the area, as a condition for Libya to again become the breadbasket of Italy, as it was during the Roman period.

The narrative of North African environmental degradation became a recurrent theme of colonialist propaganda to suggest a possible “renaissance” of the Libyan soil. However, the argument was anything but new, since it already existed in other contexts: this assumption about “native profligacy” was widely circulated in colonial forestry discourse from India and South Africa under British rule, to the French colonies north of the Sahara.⁵¹ Since the middle of the 19th century French officials had begun to introduce negative views of transhumant and nomadic pastoralists, who were blamed for promoting the deforestation of North Africa and, therefore, were deemed responsible for the scant rainfall in the region.⁵²

In the Italian context, the indigenous populations of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica had been considered responsible for the environmental degradation of the land long before the beginning of the Libya campaign. An early travelogue by the medical doctor Paolo Della Cella, *Viaggio da Tripoli di Barberia alle frontiere occidentali dell’Egitto* (Travel from Tripoli in Barbary to the Western borders of Egypt, 1819), already suggested that this territory offered great opportunities for agrarian development. A necessary condition was to provide the territory with modern agrarian production systems that replaced the locals’ “primitive” techniques.⁵³ Nevertheless, it was only with the launch of the state-sponsored scientific explorations of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania that began the systematic blaming of the locals for the unfavorable climate conditions and the subsequent elaboration of the land-based Roman/Mediterranean myth. The newly created Società d’Esplorazione Commerciale (Commercial Exploration Company,

antiquity, the Greeks and our Roman fathers” [translation by copyeditor]. Enrico Corradini, *L’ora di Tripoli* (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1911), 100-01.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 111-12.

⁵⁰ Paolo Eugenio Vinassa de Regny, *Libya italica* (Milan: U. Hoepli, 1913), 89-90.

⁵¹ Corey Ross, *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire: Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 298.

⁵² See Diana K. Davis, *Resurrecting the Granary of Rome: Environmental History and French Colonial Expansion in North Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

⁵³ “Più volte colpito dalla feracità di queste terre, dall’aria pura e temperata che vi si respira, circondato da tanti monumenti dello stato di prosperità degli antichi abitanti della Cirenaica, io non sapevo comprendere come, ne’ tempi principalmente che le armate europee, spinte dallo zelo di religiose conquiste, avevano preso la volta di queste contrade, nessuna potenza abbia pensato di trasmettere qui una colonia, onde sostenersi a pie fermo nel fertilissimo suolo della Cirenaica” (“Time and again I was struck by the fertility of these lands, by the pure and temperate air that one breathes there; surrounded by many monuments of the prosperity of the ancient inhabitants of Cyrenaica, I was unable to understand why, in times when European armies were principally driven by the zeal of religious conquests, and were passing through these areas, no power thought to establish colonies from which to soundly sustain themselves in the very fertile soil of Cyrenaica” [translation by copyeditor]). See Paolo Della Cella, and Domenico Viviani, *Viaggio da Tripoli di Barberia alle frontiere occidentali dell’Egitto fatto nel 1817* (Milan: dalla Tipografia dei fratelli Sonzogno, 1826), 79.

1879)—a Milan-based private society funded by the financial and industrial elite⁵⁴—established a trading post at Benghazi in 1880 to assess the potential economic advantages that colonization of the territory would offer. In one of the reports from the scientific expeditions, the founder of the *Società*, Manfredo Camperio (1826-1899) wrote that in Cyrenaica, “Quando le piogge fanno difetto vi si muore letteralmente di fame. Ora vi sono gli arabi che hanno fatto ogni possibile per rendere quella regione un vero deserto, e il loro fanatismo sarà una seria difficoltà per i nostri delegati” (“When the rains fail to come, you literally starve to death. Now there are Arabs who have done everything possible to make that region a real desert, and their fanaticism will be a serious difficulty for our delegates”).⁵⁵ This anti-Arab narrative, which developed in Italy from the 1880s on, became a commonplace during the Libya campaign and eventually found its way through to the political rhetoric of Fascist colonialism.⁵⁶ This imaginary environmental history benefited from non-scientific sources that underpinned its assumptions, especially the Classical texts of Greek and Latin literature.⁵⁷ Corradini found in the fourth book of Herodotus’s *Historiae*

⁵⁴ See Anna Milanini Kemény, *La Società d’esplorazione commerciale in Africa e la politica coloniale: (1879-1914)* (Milan: La nuova Italia, 1973).

⁵⁵ “Pindaro cantò delle frutta deliziose della Cirenaica che chiamò il giardino di Giove e di Venere. Diodoro asserì esser questo il paese più ricco del mondo. Ariano sostenne che la sua abbondante vegetazione la si deve alla ricchezza d’acqua, e Scilax ci dà una descrizione particolareggiata dei suoi prodotti. Ma non vorrei che queste lodi fatte alla Cirenaica dagli antichi vi inducessero in errore, sullo stato presente del paese che andremo ad esplorare. Quando le piogge fanno difetto vi si muore letteralmente di fame. Ora Vi sono gli arabi che hanno fatto ogni possibile per rendere quella regione un vero deserto, e il loro fanatismo sarà una seria difficoltà per i nostri delegati” (“Pindar sang of the delicious fruits of Cyrenaica, which he called the garden of Jupiter and Venus. Diodorus declared it to be the richest country in the world. Arianus believed that its abundant vegetation was due to the richness of the water, and Scilax gives us a detailed description of its products. But I would not want these praises of the ancients for Cyrenaica to lead us into error about the present state of the country that we will go to explore. When the rains fail to come, you literally starve to death. Now there are Arabs who have done everything possible to make that region a real desert, and their fanaticism will be a serious difficulty for our delegates” [translation by copyeditor]). See Manfredo Camperio, “Spedizione in Cirenaica. Lettura tenuta dal Capitano Camperio alla Società d’Esplorazione Commerciale in Africa,” *L’Esploratore. Giornale di viaggi e geografia commerciale*, anno V (1881): 13. See also Federico Cresti, “Colonizzare la Cirenaica: nascita di un’idea,” in *Non desiderare la terra d’altri. La colonizzazione italiana in Libia* (Rome: Carocci, 2011), 39–58; David Atkinson, “Constructing Italian Africa: Geography and Geopolitics,” in *Italian Colonialism*, eds. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, and Mia Fuller (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 16-19.

⁵⁶ As Federico Cresti writes, “erano queste le premesse che portarono più tardi, in epoca fascista, a considerare che dopo la fine del dominio romano il territorio era stato occupato dai barbari che ne avevano stravolto la civiltà e dilapidato rapacemente le risorse, incapaci di progresso e retriivi nei confronti di ogni forma di modernità, unicamente domabili con la spada e con le ferree leggi del rinascente impero” (Cresti, “Colonizzare la Cirenaica: nascita di un’idea,” 58; “these were the premises that later, in the fascist era, led to the belief that after the end of Roman dominion, the territory was occupied by barbarians who overturned its civilization and greedily squandered its resources; [it was believed that] they were incapable of progress, backwards in the face of every form of modernity and only tamable with the sword and the ironclad laws of the renascent empire” [translation by copyeditor]).

⁵⁷ Today, the scientific community has reshaped this narrative, although the possibility of Eurocentric biases always looms large. Post-World War II research has amply demonstrated the fallacies of such arguments, both at the historical and ecological levels. Nomads, for instance, did not necessarily develop a pastoralist economy; “in order to gain ‘protection money’ they might enhance the prospects for agriculture in a particular area, nor destroy it” (Peregrine Horden, Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* [Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2000], 74). The problem, as Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell argue, is to project a unitarian environmental view to an entire region, failing in this way to take into account the “distinctive” micro-regional fragmentations that altogether make up the Mediterranean world.

evidence of soil fecundity in ancient Cyrenaica.⁵⁸ Other authors, such as Vinassa de Regny or Luigi Manzi, drew from Pliny's *Natural History* information about Tripolitania's fertility.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the ruins of Leptis Magna (Labdah) and Sabratha (Sabrātah) in Tripolitania and the Pentapolis of Cyrenaica served to corroborate the literary evidence in asserting the existence of prospering agricultural sites in these two regions during the ancient period.⁶⁰ Yet, with its contrasting relations between Roman fertility and Arabic aridity, the declensionist narrative managed to also move away from a Mediterranean imaginary, made of seaports and ships, to one of olive trees and vines.

Natural historical landmarks of the Latin Mediterranean

Beginning in the first half of the 19th century, as part of the project of recovering "Latin Africa," French colonialists heavily invested in archeological sites—especially in Algeria—with the mission of transporting Roman ruins back to France. "Roman archaeological sites, such as Tipasa," Patricia Lorcin writes, "were perceived as sites of 'ancestral memory' that linked Algeria to the Western tradition and reinforced its French regionality."⁶¹ By contrast, the Italian government, during the years leading up to the Italo-Turkish war, did not subscribe to a similar nationalistic use of archeology in Libya.⁶² The use of archaeology as a visual expression of *Romanità* in Libya began only *after* the military invasion and gained importance in the later fascist period. In Stefan Altekamp's words,

it was already discernible from 1912 onwards that a tendency was developing for the desire to visualize ideological expression, using town planning and heritage management. The fairly well preserved victory arch for Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus in Tripolis played no part in the considerations of Federico Halbherr and his circle [in the 1910 Italian expedition]. However, during the frenzy of intervention induced by the Italian-Libyan war, the arch came to be redefined as a symbol of both an old and a new 'Roman' presence in Libya. Rather than from scholarly curiosity, it was the desire for a political symbol that brought the visible remains of Roman Tripolis into the spotlight as an archaeological monument.⁶³

Italian explorers in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, prior to 1912, could therefore only anchor the *Mare Nostrum* myth by means of sporadic Greek and Roman ruins located in Sabratha, Leptis Magna, Cyrene and Apollonia. Moreover, authors of travel books through Libya emphasized the

⁵⁸ Enrico Corradini, "Proletariato, emigrazione, Tripoli," in *Discorsi politici (1922-1923)* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1923), 121-22 (quoted in Claudio Segrè, *Fourth Shore* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1974], 39).

⁵⁹ Vinassa de Regny, *Libya italica*, 12; Luigi Manzi, *Tripolitania o Napolitania antica* (Naples: Società africana d'Italia, 1912), 17.

⁶⁰ Claudio Segrè, *Fourth Shore*, 39.

⁶¹ Patricia M. E. Lorcin, "Rome and France in Africa: Recovering Colonial Algeria's Latin Past," *French Historical Studies* 25, no. 2 (2002): 328.

⁶² See Marta Petricoli, *Archeologia e mare nostrum: le missioni archeologiche nella politica mediterranea dell'Italia 1898/1943* (Rome: Valerio Levi, 1990). On the search for Mediterranean roots in Crete see Angelo Mosso, *Le origini della civiltà Mediterranea* (Milan: Treves, 1910). The first (modest) Italian archeological mission in Libya, led by Federico Halbherr, was launched in 1910. A second expedition in 1911, led by Salvatore Aurigemma and Francisco Beguinot, discovered a 5th century Christian cemetery at Ain Zara.

⁶³ Stefan Altekamp, "Italian Colonial Archaeology in Libya 1912-1942," in *Archaeology Under Dictatorship*, eds. Michael L Galaty, and Charles Watkinson (Boston, MA: Springer US, 2004), 59-60.

scant remains of Roman aqueducts and dams, or went on excursions to French archeological sites in Tunisia.

The natural environment, therefore, offered a critical solution to scarce archeological activity on the ground. The vast presence of olive trees was considered as a natural-historical landmark of Roman influence in the region and an element of continuity with Italian flora. The relevance of olive oil and wine as literary tropes in the Greco-Roman and biblical traditions played a central role in the making of this landscape as Roman/Mediterranean and Italian.⁶⁴ In his 1908 travel book *Cirene e Cartagine* (Cyrene and Carthage), the Italian Senator, and future governor of Cyrenaica, Giacomo De Martino, described the scattered presence of fields of barley, wheat, as well as uncultivated olive orchards, as remains of “rooted” Greek and Roman civilization, in stark contrast with the uprooted mobility of the Bedouins and the desertic land:

E, come ai tempi fortunati di quei greci, la terra feracissima, dal colore intenso dei rossi mattoni, ogni cultura accoglie e il seme restituisce in rigogliose piante: altissime messi, olivi, carrubbe, coprono il piano e i monti. Ma dove i greci ebbero città fiorenti, circondate da campi di biade biondegianti all’infinito o da vaste foreste di cupi olivi; dove essi raccoglievano grano e olio dalla lussureggiante natura; oggi, i campi di orzo e di grano sono sparsi tra lande aride e deserte; e gli olivi sono incolti e selvatici; non città, ma rovine di quelle antichissime; non contadini dietro all’aratro solcante profondamente il suolo, ma pochi beduini che vanno senza posa di terra in terra; e questa appena mossa, abbandonano per ritornare poi, Dio sa quando, a falciare: agricoltori nomadi della terra, così come nomadi seguono i numerosi armenti. Il paese è deserto, o tale apparisce, poichè quelli non sono più abitatori del suolo, ma eterni viandanti; il presente non vive negli uomini e nelle cose; vive la memoria custodita dal silenzio della natura, muta evocatrice del passato.⁶⁵

(And, as in the fortunate times of those Greeks, the fertile earth, with the intense color of the red bricks, welcomes every culture and returns the seed in luxuriant plants: very high crops, olive trees, carob trees, cover the plain and the mountains. But where the Greeks had flourishing cities, surrounded by fields of endlessly yellowing fodder or by vast forests of gloomy olive trees; where they gathered wheat and oil from the luxuriant nature; today, the fields of barley and wheat are scattered among arid and deserted lands; and the olive trees are uncultivated and wild; there are no cities, but ruins of the very ancient ones; no peasants behind the plow that deeply furrows the soil, but a few Bedouins who go endlessly from land to land; and this as soon as they move, they abandon to return then, God knows when, to mowing: nomadic farmers of the earth, as well as nomads follow the numerous herds. The country is deserted, or so it appears, since they are no longer inhabitants of the soil, but eternal travelers; the present does not live in men and things; he lives the memory guarded by the silence of nature, silent evocative of the past.)⁶⁶

⁶⁴ On the other hand, the symbolic relevance of olive plants in the Talmud and in the Qur’an was not mentioned.

⁶⁵ Giacomo De Martino, *Cirene e Cartagine. Note e impressioni della carovana De Martino-Baldari, giugno-luglio, 1907* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1908), 20-21.

⁶⁶ Author’s translation.

The olive trees are considered “archeological” remains of the Roman and Greek presence in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, a testimony of its past fertility that Italy has the opportunity to restore. Nature itself becomes a site of “memory,” and the gap between the fertile past and the arid present is measured by the “silence” of the place. Giacomo de Martino considered the “soil fertility” in the Cyrenaican plateau as a “nature’s hymn to Ceres,” the goddess of agriculture. Instead, for the journalist Gualtiero Castellini, the sight of the same Cyrenaican plateau inspired comparisons to the mythical Garden of the Hesperides which, according to Greek legend, had existed in this region. (“L’altipiano della Cirenaica, l’antico orto delle Esperidi, è un solo frutteto” [“The Cyrenaica plateau, the ancient garden of the Hesperides, is a single orchard”]).⁶⁷

In addition to descriptions of agrarian sites, photographic sections were typically included in travel books across Libya to give the reader a visual experience of this new Mediterranean territory before or after Italy’s invasion (see Figures 1 and 2). Giacomo de Martino published images of olive tree orchards while lamenting their current state of desolation. Their presence was treated just like archeological remains of ancient Greek and Roman civilizations endangered by the land mismanagement of the locals. Working for the periodical *L’Illustrazione italiana*, the photographer Luca Comerio provided a snapshot of the ideal location that Tripolitania represented for an Italian peasant by showing a scene of goats grazing in a field of olive trees.



Figure 1. Olive’s trees in Sceksaidi. (De Martino, *Cirene e Cartagine*).

⁶⁷ Gualtiero Castellini, *Tunisi e Tripoli*, 171.

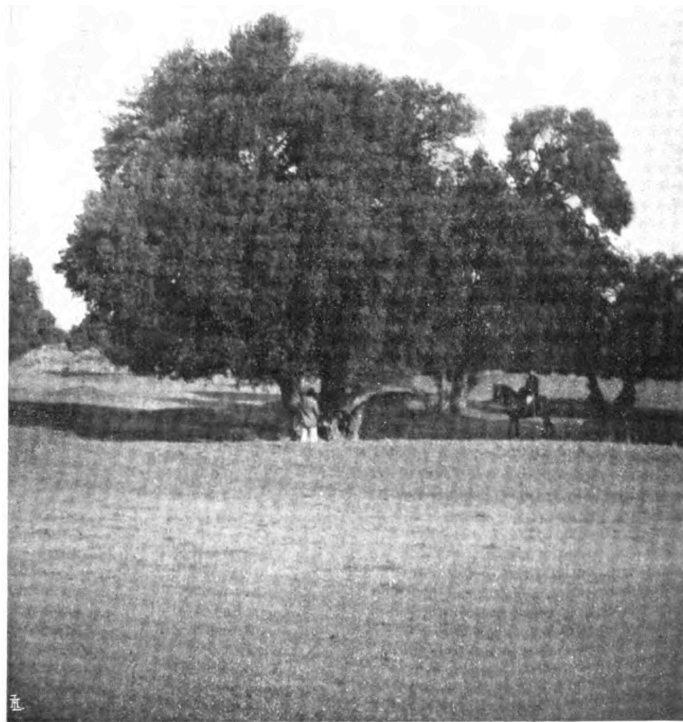


Figure 2. *Cyrene e Merg.* (De Martino, *Cirene e Cartagine*, 57).



Figure 3. Stock Photo - Goats grazing and olive trees, between Garian and Jefren, Libya, photograph by Luca Comerio, from *L'illustrazione Italiana*, Year XL, No 16, April 20, 1913.



UN SCEICCO A CAVALLO.

Figure 4. “A sheikh on horseback” (Paolo Eugenio Vinassa de Regny, *Libya italica*, Milan, U. Hoepli, 1913, 180)

Not coincidentally, these images of olive orchards are almost entirely deprived of the presence of locals. Just like with the photos of Roman ruins, non-Western signifiers were minimized in order to maximize the familiarity of Italian viewers with the image. The only local figure in Comerio’s photo is a shepherd grazing his flock in an olive orchard. His presence is thus a reminder of the harmful effects of the local habit of grazing land that was better suited to agrarian production. On the contrary, locals are abundant in exotic scenes with palm trees and Mosques (see Figure 4). In this case, “the element of exotic Africanness adds a new and spectacular element to the photographs, enhancing the mass appeal of the images.”⁶⁸

The use of agrarian references therefore underpins the construction of a Western/Roman Mediterranean transplanted in an Oriental and African (arid) soil. The use of “Mediterranean” as a landscape trope in Italian travelogues to Libya refers to an agri-landscape much more than a putative allusion of Italy’s maritime dominion in the *Mare Nostrum*, as result of controlling Libya’s coast.

Conclusion. The Barren Mediterranean

As observed earlier, the construction of a land-based Italian Mediterranean identity gained currency during the scientific exploration of Libya in the 1880s. An entire body of both scientific reports and travel books corroborated the idea that a Roman legacy in the Mediterranean was to be found in the natural environment, which offered surprising similarities with the Italian rural landscape. However, while this process of reterritorializing Libya as Mediterranean was taking

⁶⁸ Roberta Valtorta, Sarah Patricia Hill, and Giuliana Minghelli, “Photography and the Construction of Italian National Identity,” in *Stillness in Motion: Italy, Photography, and the Meanings of Modernity*, eds. Sarah Patricia Hill, and Giuliana Minghelli (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 58.

place—and eventually becoming part of the colonialist campaign—the alternative sea-based Mediterranean identity continued to be part of Italian nationalistic discourse. Such a lack of a uniform and a coherent message is undoubtedly indicative of the dysfunctional mechanism that is a trademark of the Italian colonial mission. After all, as Cassano reminded us, “Italians are parvenus in an improvised enterprise that uses splinters from the past to project the strength and the future it cannot achieve.”⁶⁹ In particular, the coexistence of these two alternative imaginaries underlines a certain disconnection between intellectual establishment and government agenda. “Italian national sentiment,” noticed Federico Chabod, “had been the creation of thinkers and writers and for a long time had lacked the support of a concrete political reality, as opposed to the case in France and England.”⁷⁰ The post-*Risorgimento* myth portraying Italy as the new power in the Mediterranean Sea continued to echo in the voice of Italian writers (from Carducci, to Oriani and D’Annunzio), even though Italian geopolitical interests were all but aligned with this vision.

This is not to say that such a narrative became a pure literary trope, without any repercussion for the context of Italian empire building. The *Mare Nostrum* motive emerged as a viable narrative in a more spatially limited and circumscribed form, when Italian navies occupied Rhodes and other Dodecanese Islands in 1912, or during the invasion of central and southern Albania in 1917.⁷¹ However, even when limiting the range of action to the Eastern Mediterranean, Italians were still required to comply with the *nomos* of the Mediterranean, that is to the will of the Concert of European Powers. In the name of this diplomatic context, for instance, the Italian government had to acquiesce to the independence of Crete in 1897, and restrain its expansionistic ambitions in the Adriatic Sea, due to England’s influence in granting the so called *équilibre adriatique*.⁷²

The land-based Roman/Mediterranean identity became instrumental in connecting the colonization of Libya with the Southern Question (that is, to providing a solution for the underdeveloped Southern Italian economy that caused massive labor migration abroad). At the economic level, it showed the potential that colonization of this territory could represent for private investors and Southern peasants alike, who could profit from relocating to such fertile land. On a political level, it helped promote the idea of Libya as a landscape already familiar to Italians, thus making the conquest appear as a restoration of a decaying Roman environmental legacy. By framing the aridity of the region within the context of the Arab and Turk occupations, while associating the forests, plants and olive trees with the history of the Roman presence, Italians considered Libya a landscape of the “self,” a mirror image, or an ideal extension, of its Mediterranean flora. By the same token, Libya continued to be a landscape of the “other,” with the Orientalist features that European powers attributed to their colonized territories. Italian

⁶⁹ Franco Cassano, “Against All Fundamentalisms: The New Mediterranean,” in *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*, 128.

⁷⁰ Federico Chabod, *Italian Foreign Policy. The Statecraft of the Founders, 1870-1896*, trans. William McCuaig (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 247.

⁷¹ On this subject specifically see Valerie McGuire, “Bringing the Empire Home: Italian Fascism’s Mediterranean Tour of Rhodes,” *California Italian Studies* 8, no. 2 (2018): 1-27; Valerie McGuire, “An Imperial Education for Times of Transition: Conquest, Occupation, and Civil Administration of the Southeast Aegean,” in *Italy in the Era of the Great War*, ed. Vanda Wilcox (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 145-63. At the time of writing this article, McGuire’s book on the subject, *Italy’s Sea: Nostalgia, Nationalism and Empire in the Mediterranean, 1895-1954*, is forthcoming from Liverpool University Press.

⁷² See Procopis Papastratis, “Megali idea and Mare Nostrum. Aspects of Greek and Italian Nationalism,” in *L’Europe Méditerranéenne: Mediterranean Europe. L’Europe Et Les Europes*, ed. Marta Petricioli (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2008), 81-85.

literary and visual sources *created* this dualist landscape both to make Italians want to live there and to draw the boundaries between insiders and outsiders. By using such a “regime of signs”⁷³ (such as deserts vs. forests, aridity vs. water, or grazing vs. agriculture), Italian colonialists coded the Libyan space into hierarchical landscapes, separated by semiotic borders and fixed into a static disposition that favored cultural conflict. The construction of Libya as a “barren Mediterranean” territory was the oxymoron that set the stage for colonial annexation and enable the use of violence.

⁷³ Félix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze. *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 123.