

UC Berkeley

California Italian Studies

Title

Bringing the Empire Home: Italian Fascism's Mediterranean Tour of Rhodes

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9kd9m5tk>

Journal

California Italian Studies, 8(2)

Author

McGuire, Valerie

Publication Date

2018

License

[CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Peer reviewed

Bringing the Empire Home: Italian Fascism's Mediterranean Tour of Rhodes

Valerie McGuire

In 1926, the acting administrative governor of the Italian Aegean islands crossed the threshold of a newly restored castle of Rhodes. A photograph of Mario Lago dressed in the garb of a medieval knight appeared on the cover of the March issue of the popular culture magazine *L'illustrazione italiana*.¹ A local reporter for the Italian administration described the event as a “superb re-evocation of other times.”² However, the governor's masquerade as a Christian knight was clearly not meant to invoke the island's past so much as its future, as a celebrated destination within the Italian overseas empire. Since the Italian capture of Rhodes during the 1911–12 war for Libya, the local administration had invested heavily into restoration projects on the island. Rhodes was not only a famous location from antiquity but was also a storied location of the medieval Mediterranean, when the Knights of St. John had occupied the island for two hundred years while attempting to re-conquer Jerusalem during the fourth crusade. The Italian state's goals were twofold. On the one hand, it maintained that establishing a popular destination for resort tourism and well-to-do Italian and European travelers could help to offset the financial costs of the colonial project to “regenerate” the entire Aegean archipelago.³ On the other hand—and more importantly—by reconstructing and celebrating the island's distant Mediterranean past, the Italian state imagined that its own history of diaspora, exploration, and maritime expansion in the Mediterranean could become the premise for a new empire in the East. Restoring the cultural history of Rhodes was, paradoxically, to catapult Italy forward; by curating the past, the Fascist state could expect a greater return on its investment into the modernity it was spreading within its colonial territories.

An English division of the Knights of St. John reportedly left the ceremony admiring “the order, cleanliness and general courtesy of the city and its inhabitants.”⁴ These latter-day Christian knights were the first in what was to become a long list of distinguished visitors that eventually included foreign royalty and diplomats. In ways that closely mirrored the Fascist regime's program to modernize cities, institutions, and Italians on the peninsula, the Italian government committed to creating infrastructure and modernizing Rhodes in such a way that it would become a respected and even venerated locale of the Mediterranean. The goal was to make Rhodes into a “world capital” and to trade up the island's reputation as a run-down “borgo levantino” of the Aegean for one as a meeting place for elegant and cosmopolitan leisure travelers.⁵ The local administration, under the direction of Mario Lago (governor of the islands

¹ “Una caratteristica cerimonia a Rodi,” *L'illustrazione italiana*, no. 15, April 11, 1926. *L'illustrazione italiana* had represented and supported the Italian colonial project for several decades. See John Dickie, *Darkest Italy: The Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860–1900* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

² “Una caratteristica cerimonia,” 379. English renditions throughout this essay are my own unless otherwise indicated.

³ As Nicola Labanca has explained, the Italian overseas spaces never succeeded in generating more income than the state's investment into them (*Oltremare: storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana* [Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002]).

⁴ “I cavalieri gerosolimitani d'Inghilterra investono S.E. il Governatore delle insegne dell'Ordine,” *Messaggero di Rodi*, March 24 (1926).

⁵ Enrico Corradini, leader of the Italian Nationalist Association and one of the primary proponents of the invasion of North Africa, visited Rhodes in 1912, just after the Italian conquest. He described finding “an unexpected marvel of

from 1923–36), planned an ambitious program to reinvent Rhodes through state-of-the-art amenities as well as restoration of the island's historical monuments, which included architecture and artwork from the Hellenistic, Roman, Christian Crusader, and Ottoman periods.

Yet, as this essay will show, although the renovation project for a touristic Rhodes was billed as a scheme to “modernize” the island and to bring it rapidly into the present, much of the urban redesign centered on enhancing the “Eastern” or “Oriental” character of the island. Although the regime claimed its mission was to rescue the islands from the dilapidation that had accrued over five centuries of Ottoman rule, the local administration committed to restoring the Ottoman monuments and highlighting the Ottoman past in new construction and architecture. By grafting the Ottoman past onto the urban redesign, new architecture pointed to the Venetian merchant empire and distanced Greek national claims on the islands. Last but not least, restoring the Ottoman atmosphere maintained a lively sense of the exotic, which could appeal to travelers and reinforce the broader image of the Italians as modernizers.

Not far from the medieval palace of the Knights of St. John where Lago had inaugurated the master plan to renovate Rhodes was the so-called Turkish Quarter, where the island's minority Turkish and Jewish communities resided. Against the backdrop of a program to rapidly “Italianize” the island and make Rhodes into a reflection of the modernity of the Fascist metropole, the Levantine past was re-constituted through the island's minority communities and located in the Turkish quarter as a symbol of the island's decisive difference. The local administration undertook to restore over thirty Turkish mosques on the islands. Alongside these restorations were further efforts to reify Orientalist fantasies and revitalize the old Ottoman world. In one corner of the medieval city, Lago's administration converted a mosque into a *hammam*, or bathhouse, intending for it to service and promote culture of the local Turkish community. The administration ordered specially adapted “carpets” and attire from Turkey to enable the “preservation of Oriental costume for persons employed at the Bath.”⁶ However, the Bath of Soliman also became an essential reference point for visitors—one that confirmed Italian cultural and ethnic differences (and implicit superiority) with respect to the local population. As one traveler observed, the architecture of the Bath of Soliman was highly intriguing, but she herself would never deign to make use of it: “Those human bodies smeared with sweat seem like people about to suffer a Dantean punishment.”⁷

As the local government transformed Rhodes into an idealized touristic setting, hoping to offer the best of both “Western” and “Eastern” worlds, the Italian state propagated for mass consumption—both nationally in Italy and regionally to other European communities in the eastern Mediterranean—the colonial fantasies that underpinned the project. Thousands of Italian tourists eventually visited the island of Rhodes in the 1920s and 1930s. Many of them reached the island under the aegis of cruises organized by the Fascist trade union or the *Organizzazione*

the Mediterranean”] but also emphasized that Turkish rule in the island had devastated and obscured much of the island's rich local culture and economic potential (Enrico Corradini, *Sopra le vie del nuovo impero* [Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1912], 106).

⁶ Lago also asked that at least “due bagni-masseur di età superiore ai venti e inferiore ai 50 anni, moralmente e fisicamente sani e provetti nella tecnica del bagno turco” always be on hand (General State Archives of the Prefecture of the Dodecanese [henceforth, GAK DOD], Envelope 121[4]/1928).

⁷ “Ma nell'interno, quei corpi umani colanti sudore sembrano di gente che stia per subire una pena dantesca. L'altissima temperatura, che non comporta vesti vi farà subito fuggire a cercare l'ombra vicina della piccola moschea di Tacchiogi (la moschea del fabbricante di berretti)” (Maria Benzoni, *Oriente mediterraneo: memorie di una crociera* [Milan: La Prora, 1935], 138).

Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND).⁸ As Jonathan Culler has wryly observed in his analysis of tourism, “The tourist is interested in everything as a sign of itself, an instance of a typical cultural practice: a Frenchman is an example of a Frenchman, a restaurant in the Quartier Latin is an example of a Latin Quarter restaurant, signifying ‘Latin Quartier Restaurantness’.”⁹ In the inter-war period, it was not so much the island of Rhodes that was to be the destination as the carefully planned and designed fantasy of the island as a synecdoche for Italian empire in the Mediterranean.

Following Culler, this essay describes how the various tourism sites that Italy created during its occupation of the island sought to accentuate the island’s “Levantine-ness” and to make the island into a celebrated emblem of Italian expansion and experiences in the “Near East” or “familiar Orient.”¹⁰ In what follows, I examine how architecture, urban planning, and restoration pivoted on creating a symbolic encounter between the Christian crusader and Ottoman histories of the island. My study reconnects how architecture and urban planning aimed to create a very specific encounter with the local environment for travelers to Rhodes, one that celebrated Italy as having a uniquely long and rich history of travel and experiences within the eastern Mediterranean. I further retrace how this encounter was not just available to Italians who made the physical journey to the island but also to the “armchair travelers” who stayed at home and witnessed Rhodes from afar by consuming material culture linked to the production of tourism.¹¹ Guidebooks, photography, and documentary film as well as travel literature by both minor and major writers permeated everyday Italian life and captured the imagination and fantasy of consumers at home. As postcolonial studies have frequently emphasized, colonial histories are often contained in wide variety of locations and materials; the colonial past reveals itself as a complex and tangled enterprise of institutions and identities and extends well beyond administrative archives—colonial fantasies exist in photography, literature, and film.¹² Finally, I suggest that Rhodes helps to better illuminate the complex ways in which Italian colonization constituted itself not just through a hegemonic discourse but through interactions in local environments whose legacies have continued to influence and define Italian national identity into

⁸ As Victoria De Grazia has shown, the OND was an essential institution through which Italian Fascism entered into Italian civil society (*The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981]). Stephanie Malia Hom has further demonstrated how tourism was an important part of Fascist organization of leisure time (*The Beautiful Country: Tourism and the Impossible State of Destination Italy* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015]).

⁹ Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 155.

¹⁰ The tension between the “familiar” and the “Other” has always characterized Orientalist representations of the Levant. “The Orient was therefore subdivided into realms previously known, visited, conquered, by Herodotus and Alexander as well as their epigones, and those realms not previously known, visited, conquered. Christianity completed the setting up of main intra-Oriental spheres: there was a Near Orient and a Far Orient, a familiar Orient, which René Grousset calls ‘*l’empire du Levant*,’ and a novel Orient” (Edward Said, *Orientalism* [New York: Vintage Books, 1978], 57).

¹¹ In using the term “armchair travelers,” I follow the lead of Ali Bedhad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994). On the new literature of travel that was generated throughout the Fascist years in parallel with Italian colonial expansion, see Charles Burdett, *Journeys through Fascism: Italian Travel Writing Between the Wars* (New York: Berghahn, 2007).

¹² Ania Loomba points out that the virtually limitless terrain of colonial postcolonial studies calls for precisely that recognition of multiple levels of culture and institutions implicated by its ideologies: “The point is not that we need to know the entire historical and geographic diversity of colonialism in order to theorise, but rather, that we must build our theories with an awareness that such diversity exists.” Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism: The New Critical Idiom*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 3.

the present.¹³ This paper suggests how travelers and organized tourism also constituted a form of “settlement,” one which was being undertaken by middle- and upper-class Italians. The essay reveals that colonial economies were put to work to remake not just overseas spaces in Italian Africa but national identities “at home.”

The tourist resort in Rhodes was to be a “home away from home,” a place where Italians rehearsed metropolitan identities as well as a larger story about Italy as a nation of explorers and pioneers in the Mediterranean. The coupling of the exotic with the familiar happened with exceptional reliability throughout the island’s various urban and tourist frames, symbolizing Italy’s own diasporic experiences as well as the claim to reunite the history of Italian exploration with the present-day enterprise of colonial empire. Although Italians had frequently emigrated abroad, their government had also sought to ensure that they did so without disavowing the culture, language, and identity of the homeland, or *patria*.¹⁴ In many ways, the project for a touristic Rhodes carried these policies forward. Within the idealized setting of Rhodes, the story of Italian emigration could be told differently. Memories of migration, poverty, and crime (“o migranti o briganti”) could be substituted with narratives of exploration, merchant expansion and cultural imperialism in the Mediterranean.¹⁵

The inevitable ambivalences of imaginaries of the island as simultaneously Western and Eastern, however, was eventually to haunt and undermine Italian efforts to cast Rhodes as a symbol of Italy’s national regeneration. While the tension between “Eastern” and “Western” identities was at the core of the project between 1926 and 1936, the appeal of Rhodes’ dual status became unsustainable after the invasion of Ethiopia. In the context of urgent demands for hierarchies of race and difference, the Levantine which had been so carefully imagined and framed during the ambitious renovation program became the target for Fascist programs of hygiene and “purification” in the late 1930s. Nevertheless, the symbolic economies of Mediterranean-ness that I describe in this essay demonstrate that not only did Italian colonialism traffic in binaries of racial difference, but also that ambivalences of identity and race could be productive for consolidating new territorial conquests.¹⁶ Unlike the colonies in North and East Africa, where the focus of colonial programs was on Italian resettlement, the Aegean occupation promised to bring to the Italian empire a “sphere of influence” in the eastern Mediterranean, and to weaken the dominance of the French and British empires in the Mediterranean more broadly.¹⁷ And while tourism was also a project in other Italian colonies such as Libya, these tourist

¹³ Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan, *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010). As Andall and Duncan rightly describe, postcolonial interpretive frameworks that account for encounters between settlers and locals provide better tools for thinking about legacies and influences of the colonial period.

¹⁴ Mark Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ On the relationship between nation building, nationalism and Italian migration, see Donna Gabaccia, *Italy’s Many Diasporas* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁶ My analysis here engages with David Forgacs’ recent discussion of Italian racial identities across Italy’s history. As Forgacs brilliantly articulates, Italian culture negotiated its national identity alongside the formation of ideas of race that accrued during colonial experiences. David Forgacs, *Italy’s Margins: Social Exclusion and Nation Formation since 1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁷ On how Italy’s control of the Aegean helped prevent international intervention and defense of Ethiopia in 1935, see Bruce Strang, *Collision of Empires: Italy’s Invasion of Ethiopia and Its International Impact* (New York: Routledge, 2017). My own recent essay on Italy and the Aegean during the First World War similarly emphasizes how control in the Aegean continued to strengthen Italy’s position in world diplomacy: “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.

projects did not occasion resort towns such as the one in Rhodes, nor did these projects seek to inscribe a double identity of the colony as both Italian and foreign. As such, Rhodes as well as the other Aegean islands reflects an important, if neglected, case study of the Italian empire.

Framing the Sign: Witnessing the (Post-)Colonial

In calling attention to the “Levantine” backdrop of the island during the urban transformation of Rhodes, designers and planners built upon the island’s existing cultural capital as a destination for European travelers and as a productive site for Orientalist discourses.¹⁸ By the mid-nineteenth century, Rhodes already enjoyed a reputation as a pleasurable detour for adventurous Grand Tour travelers on their way to Constantinople. Some of the island’s more noteworthy visitors were, in effect, nineteenth-century Orientalists. Gustave Flaubert visited Rhodes in 1850 and described the island as a picturesque outpost where old and new worlds overlapped in a patchwork of epochs: “Les bazaars sont clairs et n’ont plus le caractère oriental—ça sent l’épicier grec.”¹⁹ Italian writing echoed Flaubert’s impression of Rhodes as a crossroads of West and East during their twentieth-century tours of the island. When Carlo Emilio Gadda wrote about his visit in the early 1930s, he similarly described an idyllic experience of the Orient thanks to the high standards of cleanliness found on the island. But rather than attribute this to the presence of Greek culture, Gadda sang the praises of the Italian occupying forces in the island: “Opera di mano italiana le strade, larghe e buone, che per tutta l’isola fanno la gioia dell’auto e che potremmo, due dì dopo, paragonare con le sconquassa-budelle di Corfù. Opera italiana gli edifici delle scuole, degli alberghi, dello stadio, dalla bellissima Chiesa, delle caserme, della Residenza: e amoroso lavoro d’Italia la ripulitura e il riordino degli edifici cavallereschi.”²⁰

Unlike French and British culture, for whom the colonial project had produced numerous noted novelists and authors in the nineteenth century—from Gérard de Nerval to T.S. Eliot—major Italian authors had not yet participated in a central way in the Orientalist project.²¹ New opportunities to witness and describe the experience of travel in the Orient—and to be published on the topic—were thus entangled with the Fascist revolution. For Gadda, there was a clear difference between even Corfu and Rhodes: while Corfu had traces of Italian-ness and Venetian cities, it was Rhodes, under Italian occupation, where the true vitality of the Italian empire could be witnessed.

In his celebration of the new city of Rhodes, Gadda focused on the public works that had taken place with speed between 1926 and 1930, when a master plan commissioned by Lago and designed by Florestano Di Fausto had dramatically altered the port of Rhodes. The urban renovation centered around shaping the city into both a capital and a resort, providing Italy with an administrative center for its rule over the Aegean and a setting for the launch of tourism. City planning decisions sought to transform the capital of Rhodes into a “garden city,” an English idea in vogue at the time, and hence to showcase colonial programs of hygiene, renewal, and

¹⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 16–17.

¹⁹ Gustave Flaubert, “Rhodes” (1850), in *Voyage en Orient* (Saint-Amand: Gallimard, 2006), 320–336, 322.

²⁰ Carlo Emilio Gadda, “Approdo alle zattere,” in *Il Castello di Udine* (Firenze: Edizione Solaria, 1931), 144. The second half of this collection of Gadda’s essays that appeared in various Italian newspapers throughout the 1920s, “La crociera mediterranea,” details his travel experiences in Southern Italy (emphasizing maritime spaces in particular) and then through the Aegean. Gadda followed a typical cruise itinerary for Italian travelers of the Mediterranean.

²¹ On Orientalism in Italian culture, see Barbara Spackman, *Accidental Orientalists: Modern Italian Travelers in Ottoman Lands* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

urban development. The master plan was allegedly to perform a *risanamento*, an urban renewal that would clear out Ottoman additions to the medieval city of Rhodes, which were perceived as decrepit architectural pollution to the crusader masonry.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, during the Christian Crusades to recapture the Holy Land, the Knights of St. John had held the island and erected a large fortified city with a moat to protect themselves against Ottoman invasion.²² Later, during their rule of the island, Turkish rulers made significant alterations to the fortified city. The Italian master plan aimed to reverse these, in part by realigning the streets of the old city in an alleged return to the ancient plan of the city as drafted by Hippodamus of Miletus.²³ Finally, the master plan included new zoning laws that demarcated a colonial city distinct from areas where locals lived. The plan called not only for the restoration of the medieval city but also for the creation of an elite neighborhood for the colonial administration and their families—in the Greek-inhabited area, known as the Neochori, or New Village—and of a tourist zone and a colonial administration center called the Foro Italico. The master plan ensured that, upon disembarking on Rhodes, the typical traveler would behold two cities, one colonial-modern and one medieval and Levantine.²⁴

The renovations to the medieval city focused on only one portion of the fortified area, however, and left Ottoman architecture intact elsewhere, reinforcing the island's reputation as a place of religious cohabitation and elevating claims about the tourist resort's ability to foster cultural contact between East and West. Many of the Ottoman additions and decorations that were stripped from the medieval city were later grafted onto the new colonial city that was erected adjacent to it. As architects made bold claims about "harmonizing" East and West and appropriating "native" architectural practices, they placed decorative motifs that originated with Ottoman or other "exotic" architectures in deliberate juxtaposition with the art-deco and rationalist structures that formally dominated new, colonial buildings. The architectural redesign of Rhodes brought a diverse range of architectural motifs to bear on the cultural landscape.

As in its colonial occupation of Libya, the Italian administration legitimized its occupation in the Aegean on the basis of "historical" precedent.²⁵ But in the case of Rhodes, traces of Italian history were in evidence in remnants from not only the classical periods of Hellenistic and Roman antiquity but also the periods of the Knights of St. John and of the Venetian and Genoese maritime expansions in the Mediterranean. To be sure, Rhodes was not the only island in the Aegean that boasted remnants of Venetian rule, and islands such as Corfu and Crete were also well-known repositories of Italian maritime history. However, Rhodes was the only Aegean

²² The Christian Knights-St. John eventually succumbed to the Turks in 1522, a watershed event for Ottoman dominance in the Mediterranean. See Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Sian Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 669.

²³ Simona Martinoli and Eliana Perotti, *Architettura coloniale italiana nel Dodecaneso, 1912–1943* (Turin: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1999).

²⁴ As a traveler described in 1933, there were indeed two cities to behold upon disembarking on the island: "There is a long beach with two ports, defended by an enormous tower. Behind the first is an even bigger one, severe in its presence, and from which emerges imposing fortifications, white minarets, palm leaves, and windmills: it's *old Rhodes*, home of the Knights-Crusaders. Along the second port, on the other hand, is a long stretch of superb modern buildings surrounded by elegant villas and flowering gardens. This is *new Rhodes*, Italian Rhodes." As this traveler observes, the new city was clearly an emblem of Italy, a sure sign of the regime's modernity, innovation, and elegance and in contrast with the old medieval town, another "dead city" of the Orient. Camillo Sarti, *Un viaggio in Oriente* (Varese: Nuova Italia, 1936).

²⁵ The Italian administration also invoked Roman precedent in North Africa in its rule of Libya. See Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 39–62, as well as Brian McLaren, *Architecture and Tourism in Italian Colonial Libya: An Ambivalent Modernism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003).

island of the same level of notoriety that was currently occupied by the Italian state. As the renovation project attempted to graft Italy's medieval and Renaissance past onto the urban fabric of the island, constructing edifices and using building materials based on models from the peninsula, it succeeded instead in collapsing Mediterranean history and drawing equivalencies between the Crusader and Venetian past and contemporary expansion in the Mediterranean and Africa.

These two tropes—Western modernity and Eastern exoticism—placed in close juxtaposition with one another gave Rhodes a particular “Mediterranean” style that the administration claimed would make the island desirable to travelers. Advertising, touring books, and brochures frequently emphasized the lush landscape, the Muslim monuments, and the “picturesque” sedimentation of so many historical periods. On the one hand, the new cultural landscape of Rhodes was to be familiar to the visitor—and parts of the medieval, walled city of Rhodes eventually closely replicated the historical center of an Italian city on the peninsula. But an encounter with the Levantine backdrop was equally central to a tourist's discovery of the island. A carefully calibrated architectural hybridity produced slippage, a productive ambivalence about whether the island of Rhodes was “Western” or “Eastern.” The juxtaposition of Christian medieval, Venetian, and Ottoman-Levantine elements formed the basis of a local architectural vernacular called *mediterraneità* or Mediterranean-ness. Mediterranean-ness ostensibly celebrated the checkered past and ethnic diversity of the islands—and visitors did not fail to take note of the multiple races and religious groups that inhabited the island—, but it also ensured that travelers engaged with the ideology of imperial conquest and resettlement that undergirded Fascist expansion projects in Africa and the Balkans. The thousands of Italian travelers who visited Rhodes in the 1920s and 1930s witnessed its “Mediterranean” atmosphere and experienced it as the perfect fusion of an elegant and upscale Italian style with the excitement and thrill of the colonial.²⁶

The Mediterranean became a sea that connected Italians to the otherwise distant and foreign reality of the colonial setting. More importantly, the Mediterranean as it was articulated in the built environment of Rhodes, renegotiated Italian history, reconnecting Italians to a storied but forgotten history of expansion and cultural imperialism in the East. In these new narratives of Eastern expansion under the Fascist regime, Italy's Southern-ness could become an asset for crafting greater cultural control and connection with the local as it was encountered by visitors and settlers in the Mediterranean.²⁷

Mediterranean-ness

As the principal architect of the Aegean from 1926 to 1928, Florestano Di Fausto theorized a vision of the Mediterranean that not only defined new constructions on the islands of Rhodes, Kos, and Leros, but also shaped a growing discussion about new constructions in all Italian

²⁶ “Rhodes a Changed Island,” *Egyptian Gazette*, June 8 (1935). This article was written at the direction of the Italian administration and included statistics collected by the local administration, including the figure that “last year more than 50,000 tourists visited the island.” GAK DOD, Envelope 1486(2)/1935.

²⁷ In contrast with previous studies that have emphasized how the Southern Question increasingly cast a negative light on Italy, such as Nelson Moe's study of Southern-ness as a kind of internal Orientalism, my analysis understands Southern-ness as potentially productive for imagining Italian empire and imagining Italy as a “benevolent colonizer,” thus setting the stage for later narratives of Italians as “good people,” or *Italiani brava gente*. Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

colonies. Di Fausto's work was instrumental to mapping the "twinned courses of Italian colonialism and *mediterraneità*," as Sean Anderson has described.²⁸ Di Fausto maintained that new constructions in the Dodecanese Islands and Libya should have stylistic continuity with existing structures and even derive inspiration from local building practices. Choices as to when and how to appropriate "native" architecture reveal, however, a definite program of staging colonial power. The "Mediterranean" vernacular, *mediterraneità*, resolved a dilemma between the apparently antithetical categories of modern and traditional that permeated debates about new constructions during the years of Fascist rule.²⁹ This vernacular provided a way to appropriate a large body of architectural styles and themes and absorb an emergent flow of exotic signifiers from the colonial space. As Anderson explains, "the Mediterranean is [...] a filter through which architects like Di Fausto and others generated a new Italian architecture in the colonies," and through which they could appropriate motifs and styles from a whole range of exotic cultural landscapes, from North African to Slavic architecture.³⁰

The appropriation of extant motifs and styles became a key strategy of the urban redesign in part because it allowed Italy to reproduce a well-known European encounter in the Ottoman Orient. But new architecture also strived to tell the story of Europeans in the Orient in a specifically Italian way. Fusing diverse epochs and the "antithetical" styles of the West and the Levant, the Mediterranean vernacular operated as a chronotope that discreetly signified Italy's "return" to imperial dominance in the Orient while bracketing previous "Italian" journeys to the Ottoman Empire.³¹ Importantly, the medieval architecture of the Knights of St. John was one of the first signifiers of the Christian past of the island that Italian architects were eager to reappropriate. Buildings in the Foro Italico made use of a red-orange porous stone called *finta pietra* (fake stone) to replicate the masonry of the Knights.³²

Also in the Foro, Di Fausto created a large esplanade adapted to mass political gatherings, which were as much a part of the cultural life of Rhodes under Fascist rule as they were in mainland Italy. Along the shoreline, he planned for an imposing edifice of brick that would command the attention of travelers arriving in the harbor. The shoreline promenade was designed to closely resemble the one in Libya and to create a set of mimetic correspondences between the two "facing" shores of Italy's colonial Mediterranean. The new shoreline, which contained the major Italian public buildings including the post office, the Bank of Italy, the Catholic Cathedral of St. John, and the Italian Club, embodied the latest in Italian architectural fashion, including the trends of rationalism and *Novecento*. These *finta pietra* buildings were an important way in which the new architecture cultivated a sense of pleasant "familiarity" for travelers and linked the island more closely to metropolitan Italy.

These buildings also contained embellishments and eclectic decorations that celebrated Rhodes' Eastern identity and underscored Italy's history of maritime expansion in the Mediterranean. The centerpiece of the Italian shoreline—and the example *par excellence* of his

²⁸ Sean Anderson, "The Light and the Line: Florestano di Fausto and the Politics of *Mediterraneità*," *California Italian Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2010): 1–13, 3 (accessed Nov. 2, 2018, www.escholarship.org/uc/item/9hmlp6m5).

²⁹ See Mia Fuller, "Building Power: Italy's Colonial Architecture and Urbanism," *Cultural Anthropology* 3/4 (1998): 455–87.

³⁰ Anderson, "The Light and the Line," 2–3.

³¹ As Fuller has shown of Italian colonial architecture in Libya, architects there justified the appropriation of local forms on the basis that these forms were in essence Roman: "Here the 'real' basis for using Libyan building as a model was that the latter was actually Roman" (Fuller, "Building Power," 472).

³² Anthony Antoniadis, "Italian Architecture in the Dodecanese: A Preliminary Assessment," *Journal of Architectural Education* 38/ 1 (1984): 18–25.

hybrid Mediterranean vernacular—was Di Fausto’s ingenious Palazzo del Governo.³³ This highly unusual building recalibrates a variety of stylistic influences, including Renaissance, baroque, and neo-Gothic. The bottom colonnade is in a neo-Gothic style and recalls the medieval architecture of the Knights of St. John. The top is rationalist, with smooth, light-colored, geometric surfaces. Decorative elements appropriate motifs from Arabic architecture, including latticed balconies and Moorish window treatments. The very shape and positioning of the building intimates the return of the “thalassocracy,” or maritime empire, in the Mediterranean. As one architectural historian has aptly described it, the enlarged portico that wraps around the base of the building gives the impression that the Palazzo del Governo is “emerging from the sea”³⁴ (fig. 1). Finally, the clear visual and architectural allusion to the Palazzo Ducale in Venice (fig. 2) announces that Italian rule in Rhodes builds upon the Venetian tradition of economic and military expansion in the Islamic world.



Fig. 1. Palazzo del Governo circa 1928 © Archive Touring Club Italiano.

³³ See Medina Lasansky’s discussion of the Palazzo del Governo in *The Renaissance Perfected* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 196–97, as well as Fuller’s analysis of Mediterranean-ness in *Moderns Abroad*, 39–62.

³⁴ Vasilis Kolonas, *Italian Architecture of the Dodecanese Islands* (Athens: Olkos, 2002), 46.



Fig. 2. Palazzo Ducale, Venice, Italy. Photo: Valerie McGuire.

On the other side of the Palazzo del Governo, walking distance from the administrative center, Di Fausto designed and erected the main buildings of a tourist zone that brought together decorative motifs of the Orient with forms from rationalist architecture. The Navy Club, the La Ronda Sea Baths, the Hotel of the Roses, and, at the northernmost tip of the island, the aquarium were constructed in soft pastel yellows and beiges, a palette that designers claimed was suited to the Mediterranean. These buildings were essentially rationalist and inspired by Le Corbusier, except that they had unusual, iconoclastic decorative elements.³⁵ Their embellishments borrowed “arabesques,” or elements of Islamic architecture, and included curving rooftop parapets that suggest undulating waves, Moorish window treatments, and, in some instances, minarets and large domes. The architecture on Rhodes followed the same route as that of other colonial powers in reappropriating earlier manifestations of Orientalism in Western architecture.³⁶ While Di Fausto freely borrowed from a variety of architectural traditions, he was clearly committed to replicating familiar Italian architectural themes that would, by contrast, heighten the exoticism of

³⁵ The rationalist school of architecture disavowed decoration; see Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (London: Architectural Press, 1946). It is further interesting to note that the Italian city constructed on the island of Leros was much closer to realizing Le Corbusier’s vision of the model future city than was Rhodes. The resort on Rhodes was instead designed to mimic the relations of dominance between Occident and Orient and thus required the inflection of Islamic motifs onto the rationalist building scheme.

³⁶ “For the Italians did not essentially incorporate elements from local tradition but drew inspiration exclusively from their own heritage. In fact, however, architects did not need to study the local architectural tradition of neighboring countries for elements of ‘Islamic’ architecture, since cultural exchange between the East and the West in Italian art dates back to the Renaissance” (Kolonas, *Italian Architecture of the Dodecanese*, 51).

the new built environment.

Di Fausto's designs also imported distinctive themes of Islamic architecture from other colonial settings. At the other end of the shoreline, adjacent to the entrance of the medieval city, was his New Market (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Sketch for the New Market © Archive Touring Club Italiano.

He fashioned this grand hexagonal building after the Great Mosque in Kairouan, Tunisia. The New Market became a model for later constructions in Asmara (Eritrea) and Barce (Libya) and is perhaps the clearest reference to Italy's other colonial projects in North and East Africa. On an upper level, facing the shoreline, were apartment homes for Italian families. The center of the courtyard interior was appointed with a large gazebo with a copper dome, where local farmers and fishmongers could gather to trade in produce and foodstuffs. When the New Market opened in 1926, the Italian administration heralded it as a watershed event signaling the modernization of the whole Aegean archipelago. It called further for the immediate evacuation of all merchants still selling food or other goods in the medieval city.³⁷ Where the old market had stood in the

³⁷ “Disseminato nella città murata, senza la possibilità di un accurato controllo, quasi dovunque privo di acqua abbondante, in locali non suscetibili di miglioramenti e di adattamenti, non rispondeva più alle specifiche condizioni

walled city, the local administration had other plans: it promised to establish “one of those characteristic oriental bazaars” for the resale of local artisanal products to tourists.³⁸ Thus, the authentically local practice of a farmer’s market was jettisoned for a “bazaar” that would more boldly suggest the Eastern character of the local inhabitants. The “Levantine” bazaar mirrored the open-air market sanctioned by the Italian state and, as its reverse image, reinforced the latter’s links with colonial modernization programs.

The New Market was furthermore in a strategic position—not only along the shoreline of the port where visitors first landed but directly underneath the imposing Palace of the Knights of St. John. Its position contributed to the carefully crafted Mediterranean-ness called for by Di Fausto in his 1926 master plan. The view from the harbor and shoreline placed the New Market and Palace in direct vertical communication with one another (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. New Market and the Palace of the Knights of St. John in vertical communication and juxtaposition
© Archive Touring Club Italiano.

This relationship created a sharp, visually exciting contrast and suggested the renewal of the two main symbols of the Italian intervention: Christian medieval and colonial-modern, or Mediterranean. The effect was much the same as in French Algeria where “the Casbah was locked behind the solid row of French structures [...] engrav[ing] the power relations of the colonial order onto the urban image.”³⁹ And yet, what distinguished the Italian case in Rhodes from the French one in Algeria is that, though the design clearly strived to accentuate hierarchies and economies of difference between the local and the colonial, the Italian state also laid claim to the local as symbols of its own past.

della Rodi moderna, incamminata ormai sicuramente e fermamente sulla via di un meraviglioso e promettente sviluppo” (*Messaggero di Rodi*, August 10, 1926).

³⁸ “Dopo l’apertura del Nuovo Mercato: Tentativo frustrato e illusioni cadute—Erbivendoli di occasione. Una opportuna ordinanza—contro gli abusi” (*Messaggero di Rodi*, August 18, 1926).

³⁹ Zeynep Celik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers under French Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 35.

Created in 1928 outside Rhodes, the Kalithea Baths are yet another tourist site that insisted on Italian familiarity with the island through the paradox of celebrating the exoticism and strangeness of the local.⁴⁰ The baths brought together diverse stylistic influences: “elements of classical composition, Arabesque detailing, and International Style disposition.”⁴¹ Constructed upon the site of the Italian landing in Rhodes in 1912, the baths operated as a symbolic landmark of the transformation of Rhodes from an Ottoman backwater into a new outpost of colonial Italy in the eastern Mediterranean. Their overall design reflected the seasonal nature of tourism and the regime’s objective to make the island into a summer destination. Each of the components of the buildings, including the double-chambered bathing pool, adjacent semi-circular building, and gazebo-entrance, allowed for natural ventilation that would be pleasant during the summer months. The main building of the site was a large, concrete cupola with a small bathing pool that acted as a visual epicenter for the baths’ function as mineral therapy for tourists (although in reality, mineral water was bottled nearby and cures were ingested by visitors).

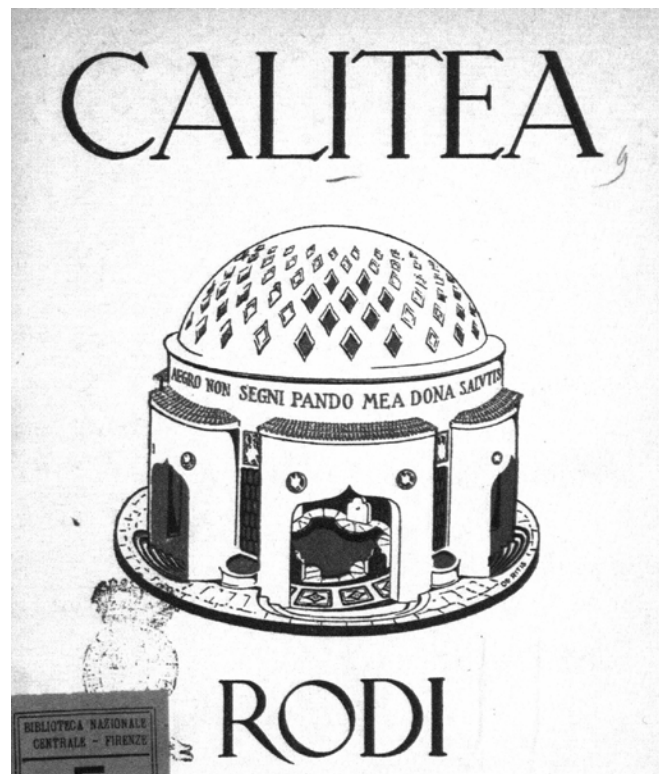


Fig. 5. Drawing of Kalithea Baths for French edition of the ENIT Brochure © Archive Touring Club Italiano.

More importantly, the Kalithea Baths stood as the visual fulfillment of Italian fantasies of a return to their fabled dominance in the East. Although the large cupola evoked a Greek Orthodox Church, all potential for an allusion to Byzantine architecture was denuded by the cupola’s isolation from adjoining structures. The building is in keeping with Italian architects’ general

⁴⁰ The baths are the most fully articulated of the eclectic projects of Pietro Lombardi, who replaced Di Fausto as the Dodecanese resident architect in 1928.

⁴¹ Antoniadis, “Italian Architecture in the Dodecanese,” 19.

claim that the Byzantine monuments of Rhodes were of little significance architecturally⁴²—a position surely meant to help deflect Greek national claims on the islands—and that they should therefore be dressed in “Muslim attire.”⁴³ Architect Pietro Lombardi placed additional Arabic decorative elements at the base of the cupola to enhance the overall allusions to Turkish religious architecture (fig. 5). But the building itself declared the Fascist promise to rejuvenate the nation. Half of a Latin hexameter verse on the imposing cupola proclaimed a Fascist moralism about health being the result of hard work: “For the ailing [person] not for the lazy [one] I open my gifts of [good] health.” Finally, the diamond-shaped openings that allowed sunlight and air into the cupola doubtlessly link the building to the Pantheon and ancient Rome.

The success of the Kalithea Baths as a “paradise-like landscape” and a place where the “architecture is completely in harmony with the vagueness of the place” also depended on the presence of “authentic” and “real” *hammams* that were in use back in the Turkish quarter of the island.⁴⁴ To visit the Kalithea Baths was to enjoy the Orient from the safety of Italian programs of hygiene, modernization, and urban renovation. The deliberately exotic setting of the Bath of Soliman, on the other hand, provided tourists with an additional spectacle and an “authentic” experience of the Orient after they had visited the major tourist sites of the new Italian constructions (fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Interior of the Bath of Soliman, ca., 1928, Rhodes, Greece.
Photo: General State Archives of the Prefecture of the Dodecanese.

These Turkish baths were a point of scholarly fascination among colonial architects studying autochthonous constructions on Rhodes. Hermes Balducci dedicated an entire chapter to the design, decoration, and function of baths in his monograph *Turkish Architecture on Rhodes*,

⁴² “Il periodo bizantino ha scarsa importanza per Rodi per quanto duri otto secoli. È un periodo oscuro. [...] Solamente qualche chiesetta dalla caratteristica cupola a tamburo, qualche mosaico e qualche cadente muro di torri costiere attestano la lunga dominazione di Bisanzio” (*Rodi: Guida del turista* [Milan: Bestetti and Tominelli, 1928], 12).

⁴³ Kolonas, *Italian Architecture of the Dodecanese*, 41–42.

⁴⁴ Benzoni, *Oriente Mediterraneo*, 144.

calling them “particularly characteristic” of the Ottoman period because the Turks had been unable to adapt existing buildings from the period of the Knights of St. John and had hence needed to construct original models.⁴⁵ Yet Balducci’s description of the use of a *hammam* reveals a mixture of familiarity and fascination with the strange. As he dwells on the differences between Turkish bathing practices and the original Roman ones (from which they may have originated, at least in part), he emphasizes the Turkish “reluctance” to use a bathtub or swimming pool.⁴⁶ New public works such as the Kalithea Baths were successful precisely because they shaped a touristic experience around the an idea of Rhodes as at once an emblem of historic Roman expansion into the eastern Mediterranean and a more recent Ottomanization. The Baths of Kalithea were proof that while an Italian might indulge in the intoxicating sights and smells of the East, no tourist would ever be lost, and indeed, Italian identity was to be regained as each tourist returned safely back into the Italian part of Rhodes and then home to the peninsula.

Touring the Local

The urban renovation of Rhodes would not have been complete without the cottage industry of guidebooks that produced and reinvented the local by pitting it against Italian modernization. The cover of one of the first guidebooks to Rhodes to appear from the Touring Club Italiano featured Ottoman monuments and palm trees (which are nonnative to the islands and were planted by the Italians) with the words, “world capital of the Aegean” running as a celebratory banner (fig. 7). The project of valorizing the island for cultural tourism pivoted on the twofold presence of luxury infrastructure within a lush and exotic setting. “Nothing to meet the needs of tourists is lacking,” announced the first edition of the Touring Club Italiano’s *Guida D’Italia: Possedimenti e Colonie*, which appeared in the signature red canvas format.⁴⁷

However, these world-class amenities were clearly meant to frame a touristic encounter with the local community of Rhodes and accentuate Italian modernization. In an early story for a magazine of the *Touring Cub Italiano*, one travel journalist enthusiastically described his visits to the local coffee house “Almost every evening I went to one of these coffee shops to observe all the different characters—Turks, Jews, Greeks, Levantines, Europeans sometimes joined by a

⁴⁵ Hermes Balducci, *Architettura turca in Rodi* (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1932), 37.

⁴⁶ Balducci writes at length about the *hammam*, noting that “the prescriptions of the Quran in fact admit the bath as aspersion [sprinkling] and not immersion, and the Turk conceives of the operation of the bath as not only an act of cleaning but also a method of pastime. If then according to this concept it approximates in a certain sense the Roman bath [...] the modalities of the Turkish bath present themselves as wholly original in our view because of their strong reluctance regarding the use of the swimming pool or the common bathtub” (37–38).

⁴⁷ “Nulla le manca per soddisfare le esigenze dei turisti: facilità da sbarco e brevità delle operazioni doganali e sanitarie che vengono eseguite con speciale cortesia; alberghi di lusso e di primo ordine sul mare e in montagna; musei e biblioteche; estrema pulizia della città e facilità di poterla visitare in ogni dove; numerosi pubblici Giardini in cui le rose fioriscono,” ecc . L.V. Bertelli, ed., *Guida delle Colonie e Possedimenti* [Milan: Touring Club Italiano, 1929], 75. The role of the Touring Club Italiano in creating momentum for tourism to Rhodes should not be underestimated. See Simona Martinoli and Eliana Perotti (Turin: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1999), 43–57. A 1926 obituary of Luigi Vittorio Betarelli, the founder of the Touring Club Italiano, aptly describes how Betarelli elevated tourism to a religion of the nation: “Luigi Vittorio Betarelli seppe elevare il turismo a religione di Patria; seppe, attraverso la descrizione e la valorizzazione delle bellezze naturali ed artistiche del nostro paese, insegnare agli italiani ad amare l’Italia e seppe dimostrare agli stranieri che l’Italia non solo è il più bello paese che occupa uno dei primi posti nella scala della civiltà e del progresso” (*Messaggero di Rodi*, January 22, 1926).

uniformed marine or one of our soldiers—and I listened to this sort of tower of babble of the many languages spoken in this tiny sliver of Mediterranean land.”⁴⁸ While guidebooks offered precautionary suggestions about special dress for inland excursions and warned that Italians “even of the most modest means” would not feel comfortable in the local accommodations used by the Greek community, they continually pointed to the colorful variety of ethnicities and languages that a visitor would encounter while touring Rhodes.⁴⁹ Guidebooks urged travelers to and use “imperial eyes” to take in the island’s multicultural history while observing local customs and habits.⁵⁰

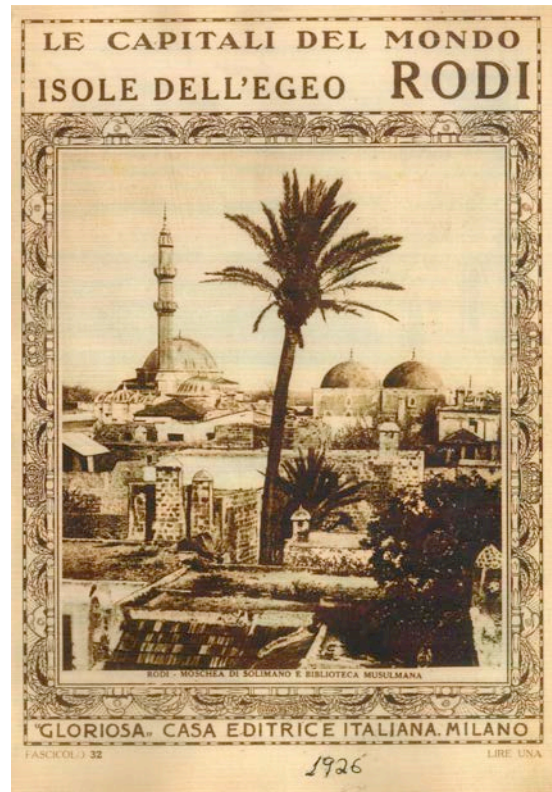


Fig. 7. “Le capitali del mondo: Isole dell’eggeo RODI.”
Cover of a 1926 guidebook featuring Turkish monuments in the background.
© Archive Touring Club Italiano.

⁴⁸ Giotto Dainelli, “Rodi dei cavalieri” in *Le vie d’Italia: rivista mensile del Touring Club Italiano* (1922: 3), 234–40, 236.

⁴⁹ “In the internal part of Rhodes (with the exception of Trianda and Sàlaco) and Kos and the other islands, there are only hotels and restaurants managed by Orthodox, visited by the local clientele, and it will be difficult for the Italian tourist, even of the most modest means, to find himself at ease here” (L.V. Bertelli, ed., *Guida delle Colonie e Possedimenti* [Milan: Touring Club Italiano, 1929], 2–25, 18).

⁵⁰ Mary Louise Pratt’s widely cited “imperial eyes” concept is certainly appropriate when speaking of Italian travelers that innocently sought delight while taking in local color, e.g. “the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony” (*Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* [New York: Routledge, 2008], 7).

Mirroring the ideological underpinnings of the architectural and urban hybridity described previously, Italian guidebooks conveyed ideas about ethnicity and race by signaling both familiarity and difference. The large-format guidebook *Le colonie, Rodi, e le isole italiane dell'Egeo*, coauthored by the legendary mountain climber, explorer, and cartographer Ardito Desio, contained vivid photographs of the local communities of the Aegean islands and emphasized the colorful “Levantine” diversity of the landscape.⁵¹ Yet rather than speak of the cultural and linguistic differences that separated Italians from the local population, the guidebook insisted on cultural stereotypes about Southernness while claiming that local Greeks revealed through their dialect the profundity of previous Venetian rule in the archipelago: “The sea-faring people even retain the Venetian sing-song in their manner of speech, and almost all of the marine terms are Venetian or Genoese” (393–94). Adding that local Greeks had quickly apprehended the language of their rulers (“many by now speak Italian”), the guidebook depicted local Greek culture as uncannily similar to the “Mediterranean” character of Italians: “[The Greek] loves conversation and passes long hours at the café, playing cards, and above all, chatting about politics” (393–94). This picturesque scene might easily have described a typical Italian *paese* of the same era, suggestive as it is of Italian stereotypes of the culture of the *mezzogiorno*.

These descriptions of Greeks, who took after their Italian rulers in both speech (*la cantilena veneziana*) and attitude,⁵² contrasted with guidebook descriptions of the utter and complete moral decay of the Turk. The typical Turk “is different, perhaps not so much physically—though he has almond-shaped eyes, full lips, and a drooping moustache that allows him to be easily recognized—as morally different” (393–94). The Turk’s grotesque physiognomy, in other words, was indicative of his weak psychology, which linked him to an Oriental and bygone way of life. Desio’s *Le colonie, Rodi* describes the Turk as generally immobile and sedate except when privy to irrational fits of emotion: “The Turk has nearly always a calm attitude, of a great philosopher, as he is for the most part. He doesn’t say much; he’s tranquil, but should he get irritated, he becomes violent” (394). Furthermore, the guidebook adds, the Turk is addicted to tobacco and passes time in a hypnotized state: “He likes to sit and smoke the *narghilè*, in mute contemplation” (394).

Observing Turkish inhabitants—as well as Jewish ones—was an essential part of the tour of Rhodes. Guidebooks complemented the master plan’s new routes through the city of Rhodes by encouraging travelers to wander through the old and new cities and experience their delightful contrasts. *Rodi: Guida del turista* (1928) suggested that travelers visit the new city first, take in its modernizing constructions, and then wander through the medieval city where they might discover the unexpected: “the desire for and the pleasure of discovering some small corner that makes your own personal sensibility vibrate” (52). The guidebook explained how such ambulation would make tourists into the heirs of a long tradition of poets who had visited Rhodes in the centuries after the island fell to the Turks and became a “sleepy” outpost of the Levant (54). The lingering residue of the Ottoman past might generate for travelers a productive encounter with their own fantasies. The Italian traveler could welcome the ghost of a knight clanking in armor, but he would instead cross paths with an infirm or veiled Turk: “In certain

⁵¹ Ardito Desio and Giuseppe Stefanini, *Le colonie, Rodi, e le isole italiane dell'Egeo* (Torino: Unione Tipografico Editrice, 1928).

⁵² The administration insisted with astonishing consistency on the affinity the local population had with their “Latin” rulers. “It is believed that out of 100,000 inhabitants, there are 83,459 Orthodox Greeks, 11,382 Muslims, 3,319 Jews originally from Spain, and 1,635 Europeans who are for the most part Catholic and even 50 Armenians! Within this microcosm of races and civilizations, the Latin imprint is felt with prudence but with constancy” (“Rodi: perla del Mediterraneo,” *Messaggero di Rodi*, March 19 [1926]).

alleys completely of stone and louvers, while you would expect to meet a knight clanking in iron, here comes silently an ass that carries a man hunched over by his fluttering turban, or here disappears into the distance the dark phantasms of veiled women. There is a lot of silence in this Daedalus of ancient alleyways. The Turkish population is restrained of voice and gestures” (55).

If wandering through the medieval town enabled visitors to more readily imagine the early modern Christian encounter in the Ottoman Empire, this feat had been in part accomplished through renovations, including repairs to the hospital, palace, fortification walls, and several of the main gates into the city. A major renovation was also undertaken for the Avenue of the Tongues or Avenue of the Inns, where, during the Crusader period, each of the different “nations” of the Crusader knights had established its own inn in what was a potent symbol of European unity in the face of the Muslim “infidel” during the Crusader period. As they had in restoring the Palace and building a governor’s residence contiguous with the Palace, restorers in the old city used a colored cement that resembled medieval masonry in Italian cities and that created correspondences with constructions in the new city.⁵³ When information about the original construction of buildings in the medieval city was missing, architects turned to Italian buildings of a similar era for models. In some instances, new constructions obviously evoked settings that would be recognizable to Italian visitors.⁵⁴ Yet Ottoman-era additions, such as common fenestration with an extended balcony, were left intact in other areas of the medieval city, including the Turkish and Jewish quarters (fig. 8). Though the Turkish and Jewish quarters did not experience any renovation, they were nevertheless designated as inside the monumental zone, or green belt, of the city that was particularly important to tourism. The Turkish and Jewish quarters—and more importantly, their inhabitants—thus came to constitute an essential part of the imperial tour of Rhodes.⁵⁵



Fig. 8. The Jewish Quarter with Ottoman additions intact after renovation © Archive of the Touring Club Italiano.

⁵³ Restoration plans called for the use of “intonaco cementizio impermeabile con terre colorate, per il muro dal parte del Museo, dosato con kg. 400 di cemento per mc. di sabbia, compreso lo scrostamento del vecchio intonaco e le impalcature necessarie” (GAK DOD, Envelope 144.2/1928).

⁵⁴ The Bank of Italy at the foot of the Avenue of the Inns, for example, closely resembled construction in Viterbo, the seat of the papacy in the tenth and eleventh centuries. See Kolonas, *Italian Architecture of the Dodecanese*, 33–34.

⁵⁵ Moreover, expropriations occurred to confiscate the property of Turks and Jews for the purposes of historical preservation, enclosing these communities in one corner of the medieval city.

Ambivalences in Film and on the Colonial Screen

But how successful were these top-down representations of the local in Rhodes in their bid to convince Italians at home that the Mediterranean was at one and the same time a familiar adventure and an exotic, avant-garde frontier worthy of Italy's military commitment? In collaboration with the Touring Club Italiano in 1926, the local administration established a photographic archive to promote further international publicity of the island.⁵⁶ Many of these photographs were destined for the pages of the guidebooks that tourists carried with them to Rhodes. Photographs appeared not only in pocket Baedekers but also in coffee-table books and were clearly meant for consumption by "armchair travelers" who were unlikely ever to make the journey.⁵⁷ Most photographs aimed to highlight the contrast between the "modernity" of the Italian colonizers and the "Levantine-ness" of the local community. Images of members of the local Turkish, Jewish, and Greek communities invariably showed them in traditional dress; they were often juxtaposed with photographs of new Italian architecture. Photography frequently captured pastoral rituals (e.g., annual harvests), religious festivals, and traditional celebrations, supporting the local administration's efforts to publicize religious holidays to visitors passing through the island.⁵⁸ But photography also had the potential to convey slippage and practices of ethnic objectification. An unusual photograph captures an encounter between a young Greek local and an Italian visitor. It foregrounds both cultural contact and cultural intimacy (fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Greek Woman Meets Italian Traveler, ca. 1927 © Archive of the Touring Club Italiano.

⁵⁶ As the *Messaggero di Rodi* described, "[il Gabinetto fotografico] provvede a raccogliere e diffondere le fotografie di monumenti, di paesaggi di avvenimenti, di costumi, che, in forma squisitamente artistica, costituiscono il nucleo di una serie di pubblicazioni che illustrano Rodi e le Isole Egee sottoposte al nostro dominio nei loro aspetti più caratteristici" (*Messaggero di Rodi*, March 25, 1926). I owe many thanks to Luciana Senna at the Archive of the Touring Club Italiano in Milan for making me aware of their photographic archive.

⁵⁷ Desio and Stefanini, *Le colonie, Rodi* is a good example of a large-format book meant for consumption by stationary audiences.

⁵⁸ The office of propaganda and tourism on Rhodes published an annual list of festivals and events that were to take place throughout the year. These included sporting events such as regattas and horse races, as well as religious festivals such as Greek Orthodox celebrations of the Dormition on August 15, the annual benediction of the waters on January 6, and the festivals of St. John (patron saint of the island) and St. Silvano (patron saint of the forest). For the Muslim community, the local administration advertised the festivals of Ramadan and Bairam.

The visual suggests parallels between the Italian woman dressed in the height of 1920s fashion and the Greek peasant woman in traditional dress, made all the more striking by the careful alignment of contrasting details: the Greek woman holds the reins of her donkey at the same level as the Italian her cigarette. The photograph suggests these two women are both an inverse and a double of one another.

When the photograph was published, however, the editors had eliminated the Italian tourist (fig. 10). While the unedited photograph certainly documented the grand-scale tourism project that the local administration was so eager to promote, it also suggested a social proximity between Greeks and Italians that could not be publicized.



Fig. 10. Greek Peasant Woman. Photo: Ardito Desio and Giuseppe Stefanini, *Le colonie, Rodi, e le isole italiane dell'Egeo* (Turin: Unione Tipografico Editrice, 1928), 405.

The suggestion of real proximity between Italians and the local community was also carefully managed in film. In 1928, when a documentary filmmaker arrived from the LUCE Institute in Rome to film the island, his mission was to create cinematic footage that would complement the other promotional materials of Rhodes. An abbreviated version of the images he shot in 1928 appeared as a three-minute newsreel representing the diverse communities of Rhodes—Greek, Jewish, Turkish, and Italian—through a series of processions, trafficking in stereotypical tourist clichés.⁵⁹ As local Greek peasants parade through the cobbled streets of the old town of Rhodes, cosmopolitan Italian tourists wander through the new Italian constructions—the Hotel of the Roses and the Kalithea Baths—intimating the usual cliché that the archipelago sat at a temporal crossroads. A longer version of the film, however, includes scenes that reveal greater intimacy, such as one in which an Italian colonist (identifiable by his cork helmet) takes part in a Greek festival, likely a “bride bazaar,” in the village of Embona, joining the locals during a ritual circle dance. The scene intimates the commonplace event of marriage between Italian officials and local Greek women, and, like the unedited photographs, reveals taboo themes of intimacy and identification.⁶⁰

Capturing an Orientalist gaze on film also meant celebrating the Turkish community in ways that suggested Italy’s desire to become familiar and intimate with the Orient precisely because the “Orient” was disappearing in the region under the rise of the nation-state. In a chapter of the film entitled “Il quartiere turco,” long pans show Turks in traditional Ottoman dress, including the fez, smoking lethargically, traversing the medieval city slowly on donkeys, and taking part in apparently rambling philosophic conversations (fig. 11). The Turk reappears in the film “like a great philosopher, which for the most part he is,” and steals the viewer’s gaze with his Oriental costume, decadent tranquility, and habitual smoking.⁶¹



⁵⁹ “Rodi Splendori di civiltà italiana nell’Isola dei cavalieri. Le terme di Calitea e l’albergo delle rose,” *Giornale LUCE* B0329 (1933), Istituto LUCE.

⁶⁰ In fact, the differences between the documentary and the newsreel suggest larger ambivalences of colonial policies about mixed marriage in the Dodecanese, where subjects were neither black nor white but still “other.” On Italian attitudes toward mixed marriage in Rhodes and other Southeast Aegean islands, see Alexis Rappas, “Greeks under European Colonial Rule: National Allegiance and Imperial Loyalty,” in *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 34/2 (2010), 201–18).

⁶¹ Desio and Stefanini, *Le colonie, Rodi*, 393–94.



Fig. 11. Stills from “Il quartiere turco,” *Rhodes*, 1928, produced by LUCE, director unknown.
Photos at 00:19:46, 00:20:05, 00:20:52.

In these scenes, the Turkish Quarter becomes the site for the Italian encounter with an Ottoman world that no longer existed in the same way that it had for European travelers in the nineteenth century. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War, much of the eastern Mediterranean was now a region of increasing nationalism and nation-states, and the rise of Kemalist Turkey meant that just a few miles away from Rhodes, a different regime of modernization and modernity was underway. The local administration in Rhodes generally prevented the local Turkish community from instituting reforms that emanated from Turkey, however.⁶² In one clip from the feature-length LUCE documentary, the viewer witnesses a Turkish woman respond to the filmmaker who, from off screen, asks her to replace her veil, which she does willingly, even flashing briefly a conspiratorial smile (fig. 12). As Ruth Ben-Ghiat has recently described, “empire films also evoke other histories, fraught and forbidden, unrealized or unrepresentable, addressing the spectator through allusions and references flashed onscreen.”⁶³

⁶² Lago’s administration insisted that the old Ottoman institutions and order be maintained. This extended from preserving the Ottoman millet system (organization according to religious cult) to preventing the Turkish community of Rhodes from instituting reforms that would align their community with the new order in Turkey.

⁶³ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism’s Empire Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), xxii.



Fig. 12. A Turkish woman replaces her veil at the request of the filmmaker, *Rhodes*, 1928, produced by LUCE, director unknown. Photo: at 00:20:11–00:20:19

As this film fulfills the viewer’s fantasy about an essentialized Orient on Rhodes, the viewer is brought into the narrow space of contact and intimacy with the colonial subject in ways that closely replicate the architectural project to bring the traveler safely into an encounter with the Ottoman. It is worth noting, moreover, that this action constitutes a reversal of the European colonial gesture as traditionally understood by scholars such as Franz Fanon, who argues that the West’s mandate to bring progress to the Orient was most fully articulated in its insistence upon the unveiling of the Muslim woman.⁶⁴ Here we find the opposite, that is, an interest in keeping the Orient hidden behind the veil, in what seems the ultimate visual manifestation of Italy’s desire to consume the Orient, albeit belatedly. This gesture enables Italy to elaborate how its “Mediterranean” colonial modernity was to be different from that of other European empires, a kind of alternative modernity that reinforced fantasies of the Levantine. The experience of gazing on the veiled woman, like that of bathing at the *hammam*, continually undermines the boundaries and ideas of difference that both new architecture and tourism propaganda aimed to reinforce.

At times, the administration’s commitment to retaining the religious customs of the local Turkish community and Ottoman practices was even carried to extremes. Lago insisted in 1935, about one year before his abrupt departure from the island, that the large nineteenth-century Ottoman clock tower in the center of the city retain the “ancient” hour and accord with the time in Mecca. The clock itself was part of the property of a prominent Turkish family’s *waqf*, or trust; in 1935, a family member had visited the island and re-set the clock to the meridian hour, to make it agree with the modernizations that had taken place in Turkey after nationalization. But the administration intervened to change the clock back to signaling the hour of prayer. In a discussion of the issue, the general secretary added, “the Muslim contingent, *with the exception of the fanatical modernizers*, remained very satisfied with the provision taken by the Government, and the old clock, placed within the tower of Piazza Solimano, went back to signaling the traditional hour yesterday at five o’clock.”⁶⁵ Not only was the Italian government opposed to Kemalist nationalism, but its sense of colonial modernity pivoted on notions of “returning” to an old way of life.

⁶⁴ Frantz Fanon, “Algeria Unveiled,” in *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*, ed. Prasenjit Duara (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 55.

⁶⁵ “l’elemento mussulmano locale, *ad eccezione naturalmente dei fanatici modernizzanti* è rimasto molto sodisfatto del provvedimento preso dal R.Governo perchè l’orologio vecchio, collocato nella torre di Piazza Solimano, riprendesse a segnalare l’ora all’antica, cosa che è avvenuta ieri alle 17” (italics mine; GAK Envelope 746 [1]: 1936).

Conclusion: Beyond Mediterranean-ness

In the final phase of its urban renovations, Italy abandoned the hybridity that had defined the original master plan to transform Rhodes. After 1937, in the aftermath of the Italian conquest of Ethiopia and under the influence of heightened anxieties about race, the local government overhauled the built environment of Rhodes yet again, this time effacing and abolishing the Levantine. Cesare De Vecchi, who presided in Rhodes as governor from late 1936 to 1940, initiated a major intervention to “cleanse” the architecture constructed in the 1920s of its Islamic-style decorations, calling for an aesthetic regime of *Romanità*. This was to be characterized by pure rationalist forms within Italian constructions and by the domination of themes from the architecture of the Knights of St. John.⁶⁶ Even architects and planners who had originally embraced the “Levantine” elements of local architecture renounced their earlier commitment to the preservation of Ottoman-era monuments: “We should accept that domes and minarets convey an image that is anything but characteristic of the city. We believe that one of the primary duties of architecture in an occupied territory is to express the personality of the conqueror tangibly over a long term. The art of modern construction in Rhodes systematically must be purely Italian inspiration and sentiment; it must promote the stamp of *Romanità*.”⁶⁷

A turn toward a more rationalist aesthetic for new constructions aimed to make the Knights of St. John into the unifying referent for all Italian architecture. New land expropriations were made in order to expand the city of Rhodes, yet another restoration of the walled city of the Knights-Hospitaller was undertaken, and new buildings were commissioned in a monumental, neo-medieval style. De Vecchi further called for “purification” of many of the Islamic decorations that had defined the aesthetics of *mediterraneità* through their hybrid forms and numerous references to “exotic” architectural traditions. One of the most dramatic interventions was the stripping of the chamfered arches of the Hotel of the Roses, and their replacement with Roman-style arches similar to those of the Palazzo delle Civiltà, the so-called Square Coliseum in Rome’s EUR district, built in 1940 to commemorate the enactment of Italian empire. Yet the chamfered arches had made the hotel recall other Mediterranean resorts, including the Excelsior Hotel at the Lido in Venice. After their removal, the Hotel of the Roses was further replastered with *finta pietra* so as to give the hotel the same neo-medieval style that characterized the other new building projects. Similarly, an Islamic-style tower with crenellated windows was removed from the Italian Club (today, the Café Akteion) and replaced with a more monumental tower typical of Italian colonial architecture in Africa (figs. 13 and 14).

The “purification,” with its interventions upon the walled city to strip its Ottoman monuments and restore its medieval, Crusader aesthetic, expanded the emphasis on the Crusader period already present in the original 1926 master plan. It also included a second major renovation of the Palace of the Knights of St. John, now the seat of the governor, to reinforce the martial and imperial character of the most important landmark of the island. Renovators used Hellenistic-era mosaics and Roman-era statuary, taken from the nearby island of Kos, to decorate the palace, underscoring the classical heritage of the islands. Interestingly, this “purification” of

⁶⁶ The bombastic Cesare De Vecchi was a member of the original quadrumvirate that marched on Rome with Mussolini. He had ferociously ruled over Italian Somalia in the late 1920s, and then been minister of education in Italy. Legend has it that Mussolini sent De Vecchi to Rhodes to be rid of him, but there is no historical foundation to this rumor.

⁶⁷ These are the words of Hermes Balducci, who had earlier written a monograph appraising the Turkish monuments to encourage their conservation, as cited in Kolonas, *Italian Architecture of the Dodecanese*, 56.

the built environment made the island look less like a picturesque version of Italy and more like its counterparts in colonial Africa.⁶⁸ As Mia Fuller has argued, the later emphasis on the “historic” character of Rhodes, together with the increasing mania for preservation, led to the transformation of the island into a museum piece that could conceal the colonial program while uniting the island to Italy’s campaigns in Africa.⁶⁹

As Derrida has noted in his well-known lectures on hospitality, in ancient Greek the word for “guest” is the same as the word for “foreigner,” *xenos*, and hence *xenophilia* (hospitality) and *xenophobia* share the same root.⁷⁰ Fantasies about friendship and making the strange familiar are forever bound to anxieties about the foreigner. In constructing a tourism economy for Rhodes, the Italian regime claimed to be reviving the ancient Mediterranean traditions of hospitality and “modernizing” and “domesticating” the Orient when, in fact, tourism also sought to keep alive the foreign and potentially dangerous stranger by reproducing the Levant in new architecture and by incorporating the spectacle of the Muslim Turk, the Orthodox Greek, and the Sephardic Jew into the tour of the island. Yet the tension between self and other and the oscillation between the familiar and the strange also allowed the possibility of ambivalence and encouraged the loss of difference. In the final phase of their rule, the Italians no longer imagined Rhodes as a “home away from home,” but as a facsimile of a forgotten Crusader era. The focus on archaeological projects in Rhodes and Kos in the late 1930s also helped to bring the wider rhetoric of a new Roman empire in Africa and the Mediterranean into the urban fabric and cultural landscape of Italy’s possessions in the Aegean.⁷¹

After 1937, the sense of the Aegean islands’ importance for the Italian empire still resided in the ways in which the islands’ reunited Italy to its history of expansion in the eastern Mediterranean. The difference was that the urban environment now emphasized the Crusader, the Roman, and to a lesser extent, the Hellenistic past as part of Italian culture and history.⁷² Such emphasis embodied the hardline regime of assimilation that characterized the Italian occupation between 1937 and 1940 when, under the rule of De Vecchi, all religious private schools and native languages were banned, Italian being the only language permitted for instruction. During this time, De Vecchi also attempted to expel a quarter of the island’s Jewish population by deploying the Anti-Semitic Racial Laws, or laws for the defense of the race (*La*

⁶⁸ See Mia Fuller, “Preservation and Self-Absorption: Italian Colonization and the Walled City of Tripoli, Libya,” in *Italian Colonialism*, ed. Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (New York: Palgrave and MacMillan, 2005), 131–142, 138.

⁶⁹ “Indeed, Italians seem to have regarded the entire city as primarily an archaeological and touristic site (a fact that is confirmed by archival sources), rather than one where they had to accommodate citizens’ Otherness. In other words, Italians’ view of Rhodes as ‘historic’—a view that in Tripoli or Benghazi was counter-balanced by Italian perceptions of local ethnicities and religions—outweighed its other characteristics, leading to Italian activities that left the city resembling an open-air museum by the end of Italian rule” (Fuller, *Moderns Abroad*, 79).

⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Rowby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁷¹ Simona Troilo, “‘A Gust of Cleansing Wind’: Italian Archaeology on Rhodes and in Libya in the Early Years of Occupation (1911–14),” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17/1 (2012): 45–69, and ead., “Pratiche coloniali: La tutela tra musealizzazione e monumentalizzazione nella Rodi ‘italiana’ (1912–1926),” *Passato e Presente* 87 (2012): 80–104.

⁷² Today, the restorations undertaken by De Vecchi remain intact and are an integral part of Rhodes’ status as a UNESCO world heritage site. And although the restorations have sometimes been criticized for pushing false historicism to new heights, the local community under Greek rule has consistently maintained the Italian designs, and today advertises itself to tourists as “the largest medieval city in all of Europe.” Indeed, after the destruction that resulted from the bombing of the medieval city in the Second World War, as one of the first projects of postwar reconstruction in the islands, the local municipality reconstructed the medieval city according to the Italian colonial plans.

difesa della razza), against non-native Jews of the islands.⁷³ Later, after the departure of De Vecchi, some of these anti-Jewish measures were relaxed, and during the war itself, Rhodes collected many Jewish refugees from Central Europe who had been shipwrecked or were unable to reach Palestine. By the same token, many local schools later re-opened, and under Nazi occupation, Greek children again attended school in their native language.⁷⁴

The De Vecchi period has often been labeled as an aberration, an excessively Fascist period that should be bracketed within the larger story of Italian modernization in the Southeast Aegean. Local memories have tended to underline that Italy presided over two decades of relative prosperity and cross-communal harmony; this idea has similarly shaped the Italian memory of its rule in the Aegean.⁷⁵ In reckoning with these positive memories, scholars have noted the similarities between them and wider European stereotypes about Italians as “good people,” the legend that, in comparison with their Nazi counterparts, the Italian Fascists were much softer in their approach to occupation and empire. But scholars also now recognize how narratives about Italians emerged in the post-war period as part of a larger European reconciliation, and that Italian Fascism lacked a Nuremberg moment when the full scope of projects for an empire in Europe and the Mediterranean were publicly litigated and discussed. This article has suggested that many of the seemingly positive memories and attitudes may have their roots in the ambivalent encounters and interactions of the late 1920s and 1930s. The massive project to transform the island of Rhodes into a model tourist destination and the celebration of the multireligious history of the island was a strong offense against national claims by the Greek ethnic majority in the islands. Whether one viewed Rhodes from the vantage point of the harbor, through the pages of one of the numerous guidebooks produced by the *Touring Club Italiano*, or from the inside of a local Turkish Bath, the island continually disrupted provincial and national identities and replaced them with metropolitan and cosmopolitan ones—all the while narrowing the gap between “self” and “other.” Rather than many of the more brutal consequences of

⁷³ Marco Clementi and Ireni Toliou, *Gli ultimi ebrei di Rodi: Leggi razziali e deportazioni nel Dodecaneso italiano, 1938–1948* (Rome: DerriveApprodi, 2015); See also, Renee Hirschon, “The Jews of Rhodes: The Decline and Extinction of an Ancient Community,” in *The Last Ottoman Century and Beyond: The Jews in Turkey and the Balkans, 1808–1945 (II)*, ed. Minna Rozen (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2002), 291–307.

⁷⁴ On Italian policies in the Aegean during the Second World War, see Davide Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 63–83. Rodogno aligns Italian expansion policies in the Mediterranean with Hitler’s expansion in Europe. For Rodogno, the population in the Aegean was allowed more freedoms (specifically, the freedom to marry) than the African populations under Italian rule. However, the anti-Jewish laws also were interpreted by the local administration as a call to regulate and open a bureaucratic procedure for cross-confessional and cross-national marriages in the Aegean. The marriages were numerous, and it was arduous for the administration to police all of its subjects to this degree. What is remembered, therefore, is that Italy continued to allow these mixed marriages to continue with little practical interference. A similar type of remembering has occurred in Africa, where anti-miscegenation laws were put into place, but what people remember is that the Italian authorities eventually ignored and loosened these policies in practice. See Giuliana Barrera, “Mussolini’s Colonial Race Laws and State-Settler Relations in Africa Orientale Italiana, 1935–41,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8, no. 3 (2003): 425–43.

⁷⁵ On the local memory of the Italian occupation, see Nicholas Doumanis, *Myth and Memory in the Mediterranean: Remembering Fascist Empire* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997); Clarissa Clò, “Mediterraneo Interrupted: Perils and Potentials of Representing Italy’s Occupations in Greece and Libya Through Film,” *Italian Culture* 27, no. 2 (2009): 99–115; and Ettore Vittorini, *Isole dimenticate: Il Dodecaneso da Giolitti al massacro del 1943* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2002).

occupation and colonization, it has ironically been the imaginative possibilities of a Mediterranean-ness that have been recorded and retained.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ As Marco Clementi and Ireni Toliou have recently demonstrated, there are strong claims to be made about the question of how the period of Italian colonization provided juridical anomie around the Jewish communities in the islands, making it possible for the German deportation of all remaining Jews in the Aegean in 1944. Clementi and Toliou's research also reflect the discovery and cataloguing of additional surveillance documents that were unavailable to researchers for the five decades after the war (Clementi and Toliou, *Gli ultimi ebrei di Rodi*).