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The Fascist Temptation: British and Italian Imperial Entanglements in the Eastern Mediterranean

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This article reveals how, in the interwar period, British colonial authorities in Cyprus borrowed from the combination of political authoritarianism and economic development characterising Italian rule in the neighbouring Dodecanese, as both a solution to Greek irredentism and an administration suitable to ‘Mediterranean populations’. British authorities shunned, nonetheless, the chronopolitics and biopolitics buttressing fascist governance, which aimed at the political and cultural assimilation of Dodecanesians into the Italian national community. In conversation with the literature on imperial formations, the article therefore highlights the forms and limitations of the circulation of administrative practices and ideas across European colonial boundaries.

Introduction: Looking for Creative Colonial Governance

In 1936, Luigi Federzoni, president of the Italian Senate, published an essay for *Foreign Affairs* under the title ‘Hegemony in the Mediterranean’. In it, he dispassionately assessed the manner in which Italy’s imperial claims conflicted with those of France and of the United Kingdom.¹ Official circles in these three countries would easily endorse, at the time, Federzoni’s main point, that the future of the relations between the three Western European powers would be played out in the Middle Sea, as the point of physical contact between their colonial empires.²

After the settlement of the First World War, the three former allies consolidated their position in the Mediterranean and shared the last spoils of the Ottoman Empire. France, already in control of Algeria (1830–48), Tunisia (1881) and Morocco (1912), acquired a mandate over Syria and Lebanon from the newly created League of Nations. The United Kingdom received a similar mandate on Palestine, adding to the string of territories it already governed in the Middle Sea (Gibraltar, Malta, Egypt, Cyprus). Italy solely obtained, with the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, the international validation of its, by then, eleven-year occupation of the archipelago of the Dodecanese. It was a comparatively meagre addition to its dependencies in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, where, moreover, ‘pacification’ was never fully achieved before 1931. This discrepancy would fuel the resentment of Italian nationalist circles protesting against a mutilated victory (*vittoria mutilata*) and inspire the revisionist agenda of the fascists, especially in the 1930s, once Mussolini felt he had built his ‘consensus’ for fascism in Italy itself.³ Despite several appeasing attempts on the part of France and the United Kingdom, Italy pursued an active campaign of destabilisation in the Mediterranean following its conquest of

¹ Luigi Federzoni, ‘Hegemony in the Mediterranean’, *Foreign Affairs*, 4, 3 (1936), 387–97.

² Pierre Guillen, ‘Franco-Italian Relations in Flux, 1918–1940’, in Robert Boyce, ed., *French Foreign and Defence Policy, 1918–1940. The Decline and Fall of a Great Power* (London: Routledge, 1998), 150.

³ Reynolds Salerno, *Vital Crossroads: Mediterranean Origins of the Second World War, 1935–1940* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 9. Victoria De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Ethiopia and the proclamation of the Italian Empire (*Impero italiano*) in 1936.⁴ This mainly consisted in poking the fire of anti-colonial resistance, which engulfed every single one of the above-mentioned colonial settings in the 1920s and 1930s.

A rich historiography has documented these geopolitical tensions.⁵ What has not been systematically considered, however, is that dangerously unstable as it was, the Mediterranean in the interwar period was also a space of mutual observation, experimentation and occasional emulation between the rival imperial projects carried out by the three main European colonial powers. Such a 'transnational construction of a science of colonialization' took place in specific political and economic circumstances.⁶ The creation of the League of Nations in the wake of the First World War impelled European powers to rebrand their imperial rule as trusteeship, a tutelage exercised over subject communities 'until such time as they are able to stand alone' and achieve independent statehood.⁷ In addition, European powers faced social and labour unrest across their empires, which suggested the need to be economically more interventionist. Nonetheless, although intensely debated, *mise en valeur*, the economic development of colonised societies, seemed, for most imperial powers, elusive in the aftermath of the 1929 crisis. By contrast, in the 1930s, Italian authorities claimed to have obtained tangible results in this regard, ones that allegedly earned them the loyalty of their colonial subjects and certainly the interest of their rivals, specifically the United Kingdom.

This article will focus on British and Italian Mediterranean entanglements in a context of intense imperial rivalry around the cases of Cyprus and the Dodecanese. As two Eastern Mediterranean, post-Ottoman, multicultural provinces where Greek-Orthodox Christians, Muslims and, in the case of the Dodecanese, Jews lived together, these island settings were comparable and the challenges their administration presented seemingly similar. Yet it appeared to British authorities that their Italian rivals in the Dodecanese had been far more successful in obtaining the acquiescence, if not the consent, of their subjects, particularly of the Greek-Orthodox majority whose leaders, just like in Cyprus, had been strong advocates of *enosis*, or the political union with mainland Greece. This accomplishment they attributed to a governance that combined political authoritarianism with economic development, a method they sought to emulate in Cyprus. What they failed to see, or chose to ignore, was that fascist authorities used the Dodecanese as a testing ground for a far more ambitious vision of imperial rule. This vision drew on a specific chronopolitics, namely a complex of policy and discourse premised on the invocation of the Mediterranean's perceived Roman and Italianate legacy, essential to the legitimation of Italian rule and the ideal of modernisation, central in fascist ideology.⁸ This in turn inspired a biopolitics, the representation of Mediterranean subject populations as embodying that past and as such worthy, for the greater part, of political and biological assimilation with the Italian metropole. In other words, the Italians used the Dodecanese to strategically blur the difference between rulers and ruled, to efface, to some extent, what Partha Chatterjee once called the 'rule of colonial difference', something their British counterparts never attempted in Cyprus.⁹

This article draws primarily on the Italian archives of the ministry of foreign affairs but refers also to British official records as well as to the Cypriot and Dodecanesian press and, occasionally, to French and Greek official correspondence. Its broader aim is to engage a dialogue with the growing literature

⁴ Salerno, *Crossroads*, 13.

⁵ Ibid.; Nir Arieli, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East, 1933–40* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 24; Enzo Collotti, *Fascismo e politica di potenza. Politica estera, 1922–1939* (Milan: La Nuova Italia, 2000), 53–60; Paola Brundu Olla, *L'equilibrio difficile. Gran Bretagna, Italia e Francia nel Mediterraneo (1930–1937)* (Milano: Giuffrè Editore, 1980).

⁶ I am borrowing the expression from Pierre Singaravélou, 'Les stratégies d'internationalisation de la question coloniale et la construction transnationale d'une science de la colonisation à la fin du XIX^e siècle', *Monde(s), Espaces, Relations*, 1 (2012), 135–57.

⁷ Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, *The American Journal of International Law*, 15, 1 (1921), 11. See also Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians. The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 10.

⁸ Fernando Esposito and Sven Reichardt, 'Revolution and Eternity. Introductory Remarks on Fascist Temporalities', *Journal of Modern European History*, 13, 1 (2015), 24–43.

⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 16–8.

on imperial formations, which, in the wake of the work of scholars such as Ann Laura Stoler, Frederick Cooper or Martin Thomas, enjoin us to nuance the divisions between metropole and colony, nation and empire, or between supposedly distinct national styles of imperial policy-making.¹⁰ Indeed this article proposes to explore interwar European colonial policy-making in the Middle Sea through a trans-imperial lens. It will thus highlight the role of consulates, intelligence agencies as well as direct contacts between British and Italian officials in the exchange of administrative practices and ideas across imperial boundaries and the formulation of an imperial rule deemed suitable to Mediterranean societies. It will also, however, remain attentive to the substantive differences between the settings under scrutiny. The first two sections of the article will bear on the changing geopolitical importance of Cyprus and the Dodecanese in the British and Italian empires respectively during the interwar period. A third section will focus on the alignment of British policy in Cyprus on that, Italian, in the Dodecanese while a last section will underscore the specificity and distinctiveness of the latter, with its emphasis on a particular fascist chronopolitics and biopolitics.

From ‘Pawns to Queens’? Consolidating European Sovereignty in the Eastern Mediterranean¹¹

The occupation of both Cyprus and the Dodecanese, by the United Kingdom and Italy respectively, had been a tactical move within larger geopolitical manoeuvres. In June 1878, the prime minister of the United Kingdom had obtained from Sultan Abdülhamit II the right to administer Cyprus as a means to honour his country’s alliance with the Sublime Porte against the Russian threat. Italian forces had taken hold of the Dodecanese in May 1912 in order to force the Ottomans to yield, during their war of conquest of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. The fate of these islands had been put in balance several times thereafter. In 1915, the British foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, had offered Cyprus to Greece, in exchange for that country’s participation to the First World War. While the offer was rejected and never repeated, it did illustrate the fact that at least until that time, the island was, for British authorities, an ‘inconsequential possession’.¹² Under the pressure of Italy’s wartime allies, Minister of Foreign Affairs Tommaso Tittoni had signed in 1919 an agreement with Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos providing that Greece would support Italian imperial claims in Albania and Anatolia and would in exchange be handed the Dodecanese, with the exception of the island of Rhodes.

The Greek-Turkish War (1919–22) and the final settlement of the ‘Eastern Question’ in 1923 transformed the position of Cyprus and the Dodecanese, within the British and Italian empires respectively. With the advance of Kemalist forces dispelling their plans of expansion in Anatolia, the Italian government officially denounced the Tittoni-Venizelos agreement in August 1922.¹³ In the wake of the First World War, the United Kingdom had acquired League of Nations mandates over Palestine and Mesopotamia, carved out of the Ottoman Empire and consequently Cyprus became a useful link between Egypt and these new dependencies, a position that explained its ‘promotion’ to the status of ‘Crown Colony’ in 1925. Finally, in the July 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, that replaced the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, Turkish authorities renounced all claims on Cyprus and the Dodecanese.

These diplomatic decisions created an illusion of clarity that was all but denied on the ground. Conventional guarantees between the United Kingdom, France and Italy brought some limitations

¹⁰ Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan, ‘Introduction: Refiguring Imperial Terrains’, in Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan and Peter C. Perdue, eds., *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007), 5; Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda’, in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1–56; Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order. Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5–7.

¹¹ In this subheading I am paraphrasing from Philip Carabott’s article, ‘“Pawns that Never Became Queens”: The Dodecanese Islands, 1912–1924’, *Kámpos: Cambridge Papers in Modern Greek*, 4 (1996), 1–27.

¹² Andrekos Varnava, *British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878–1915: The Inconsequential Possession* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

¹³ The minister of foreign affairs of the previous government, Carlo Sforza, had previously denounced the agreement in 1920 but this was officially confirmed by his successor in 1922.

to these powers' sovereignty over their Eastern Mediterranean possessions. Hence, article two of the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres provided that if and when the United Kingdom decided to hand Cyprus to Greece, Italy would do the same with the Dodecanese.¹⁴ In addition, in article four of the 23 December 1920 Franco-British convention, settling the borders of the territories placed under mandate, the British government undertook to seek French approval before ceding Cyprus to any other power.

This mutually binding right of oversight was further complicated by the fact that the *status civitatis*, or political identity, of Cypriots and Dodecanesians remained in abeyance for quite some time. Both British and Italian authorities did take immediate steps to terminate the regime of capitulations until then in force. As the work of scholars on legal pluralism shows, unravelling what Will Hanley called the regime of 'multiple sovereignties', ending extraterritoriality (including jurisdictional immunity and tax exemptions) which benefited the citizens or *protégés* of different Western powers was a standard procedure whenever an Ottoman province fell under European control.¹⁵ This, incidentally, induced many beneficiaries of this regime of exception to contemplate departure.¹⁶ It did not, however, contribute to specifying the political identity of Cypriots or Dodecanesians, or the nature of their juridical link with their new metropolises. The United Kingdom had obtained from the Sublime Porte the right to 'occupy and administer' Cyprus, but Cypriots remained Ottoman subjects until 1914. They only acquired British nationality under the 'British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act 1914–1922', after the United Kingdom annexed the island in retaliation for the Ottoman Empire's entry into the First World War at the side of the Central Powers. Dodecanesians, on the other hand, simply 'remained Ottoman subjects until the coming into force of the [1923] Lausanne Treaty'.¹⁷ For the time that it lasted, this indeterminacy challenged the exclusive jurisdiction, and therefore sovereignty, of the two colonial powers over both people and territory.

This became clear when Cypriots and Dodecanesians formulated claims over property located in other provinces of what used to be the Ottoman Empire and who, in order to maximise their chances at obtaining satisfaction, appealed to different governments, including that, much to the dismay of British and Italian authorities, of Greece.¹⁸ In seeking ways to face this challenge, Mario Lago, the first governor of the Dodecanese to serve under the fascist regime, thus wrote, in 1924:

It would be interesting to see if similar cases of claims for properties belonging to inhabitants of Cyprus or of Arab countries detached from Turkey and located in Anatolia have emerged and the manner in which the French and British governments have decided to handle them vis-à-vis Turkish authorities. Indeed, and I wish to insist on this point, it is crucial to ensure that

¹⁴ With the exception of the island of Rhodes, where a referendum would be called on the question of *enosis*.

¹⁵ Will Hanley, 'When did Egyptians Stop Being Ottomans? An Imperial Citizenship Case Study', in Willem Maas, ed., *Multilevel Citizenship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 91–4. The literature on the complication induced by the regime of capitulations and extraterritoriality is extensive but recent influential works include Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881–1938* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Extraterritorial Dreams. European Citizenship, Sephardi Jews and the Ottoman Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016); Jessica M. Marglin, 'Extraterritoriality and Legal Belonging in the Nineteenth-Century Mediterranean', *Law and History Review*, 39, 4 (2021), 679–706.

¹⁶ Joseph Viscomi, 'Mediterranean Futures: Historical Time and the Departure of Italians from Egypt, 1919–1937', *Journal of Modern History*, 91, 2 (2019), 341–79; Angelos Dalachanis, *Ακυβέρνητη Παροικία. Οι Έλληνες στην Αίγυπτο από την κατάργηση των προνομίων στην έξοδο 1937–1962* (Heraklion: Crete University Press, 2015), 35–8.

¹⁷ Filippo Espinoza, 'Quando i Castelrossini divennero Italiani. Sudditanza, protezione e cittadinanza sulle due sponde dell'Egeo (1915–1923)', in Marcella Aglietti, ed., *Citizenship Under Pressure. Naturalisation Policies from the Late 19th Century Until the Aftermath of World War I* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2021), 61; Sabina Donati, *A Political History of National Citizenship and Identity in Italy, 1861–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 138.

¹⁸ Luca Castiglioni shows that, as far as the Dodecanese was concerned, another event that forced Italian authorities to rethink the political identity of their subjects was the arrival in the archipelago of Anatolian Greeks fleeing the persecution of the advancing Turkish forces; see 'No More Greeks: Contrasting Identities in the Italian Dodecanese', in Simona Berhe and Olindo De Napoli, eds., *Citizens and Subjects of the Italian Colonies: Legal Constructions and Social Practices, 1882–1943* (London: Routledge, 2021), 202–22.

Dodecanesians do not get the impression of being less favourably treated than Cypriots, Syrians, Iraqis, Palestinians, etc., as this would, of course, harm our prestige.¹⁹

The threat related to this jurisdictional ambiguity was compounded by the fact that in both settings, colonial authorities had to face an organised Greek irredentist movement promoting *enosis*, or the union of these islands to mainland Greece. In Cyprus, British authorities had created, for reasons this article will examine later, a series of institutions, which enabled secular and religious leaders of the Greek-Orthodox demographic majority to promote this ideology. In the Dodecanese, the confrontation between Italian military authorities and Greek-Orthodox community leaders over *enosis* was more violent, culminating with the ‘Bloody Easter’ of 1919 when a nationalist protest on Rhodes, the main island of the archipelago, ended with several casualties (including two fatalities) and with the deportation of the Archbishop of Rhodes in 1921.²⁰

If we are to believe the memoirs of Sir Ronald Storrs, who served as governor of Cyprus between 1926 and 1932, the Italians had been much more resolute in meeting these apparent challenges to their sovereignty over the Dodecanese:

Under Fascist Italy Hellenism was being systematically and scientifically extinguished. The very name of Dodecanese, being Greek, had been suppressed and supplanted by *Le Isole Egee*, the Aegean Islands. Nationalities had similarly become religions; you spoke not of Greeks, but of *Ortodossi*, not of Turks but of *Mussulmani*. One Greek flag only floated throughout the Islands – upon the Greek consulate in Rhodes . . . [A]s the Italian flag was lowered at sunset all passers-by were compelled to salute it, stepping from their cabs or cars if necessary for the purpose.²¹

Storrs had formed these impressions of Italian rule in the Dodecanese, which he contrasted with the ‘weak’ British regime in Cyprus, after an official visit to the archipelago upon the invitation of his ‘excellent friend’ and counterpart, Senatore Mario Lago.²² Beyond Storrs’s personal views, most British colonial officials were intrigued by what they perceived as a successful Italian method of administration in the Dodecanese. This interest, which persisted throughout the 1920s and even, despite growing diplomatic tensions between the United Kingdom and Italy, throughout the 1930s, translated into official policy changes in Cyprus.

Ruling over Mediterranean Societies

British interest for Italian governance in the Dodecanese derived from a number of factors, the most obvious being the assumption that Cypriots and Dodecanesians – as far as the local Greek-Orthodox demographic majorities were concerned – were ethnically the same. And while the Italians had adopted, as Storrs noted, a scrupulous policy of Italianising all toponyms (and patronyms) that sounded dangerously ‘Greek’, this did not change their impression, which they shared with their British counterparts, that they were dealing with a population that was for the most part Greek-speaking, Greek-Orthodox, with extensive connections, of a secular or religious nature, to Greek diasporic communities. In many ways, this perception had inflected, albeit in different ways, British and Italian rule in Cyprus and the Dodecanese respectively.

¹⁹ Cited in Alexis Rappas, ‘Propriété et souverainetés impériales et nationale dans la Méditerranée orientale de l’entre-deux-guerres’, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 64, 3 (2017), 74.

²⁰ This irredentist cause was consistently publicised by the numerous Cypriot and Dodecanesian diasporic associations, often acting together, in Athens, Egypt (Alexandria and Cairo), London, Paris or New York.

²¹ Sir Ronald Storrs, *The Memoirs of Sir Ronald Storrs* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1937), 508. For an analysis of the Italian measures mentioned in Storrs’ memoirs, see Castiglioni, ‘No More Greeks’.

²² Alexis Rappas, ‘The Transnational Formation of Imperial Rule on the Margins of Europe: British Cyprus and the Italian Dodecanese in the Interwar Period’, *European History Quarterly*, 45, 3 (2015), 467–8.

Hence in 1882, four years after their occupation of Cyprus, British authorities created a legislative council to which the islanders, separated in two electoral colleges, ‘Christian’ and ‘Muslim’, could return representatives. This, combined with the existence of liberal press laws and the fact that the administration of primary and secondary education was left in the hands of the leaders of the island’s various religious communities contributed, as so many scholars have shown, to a profound politicisation of the island along nationalist lines.²³ Government officials went on record to justify this liberalism on account of the Cypriots’ ‘whiteness’.²⁴ Such representation was ideological, more than just rhetorical, but it was enmeshed with considerations of a broader geopolitical nature. Hence, Prime Minister Gladstone, responsible for granting Cypriots these trappings of democracy, had denounced the occupation of Cyprus by his predecessor, Benjamin Disraeli, as dishonourable.²⁵ Once in power, however, his government refused to return Cyprus to the Ottoman Empire, on the grounds that ‘[n]o Christian community has ever fallen back under Turkish rule, having once definitely [been] freed from it, since the [1683] siege of Vienna’.²⁶ Even against the background of such colonial racist hierarchies, Cyprus’s was an unusually liberal regime, comparable to those in force in Canada or Malta (the latter obtaining representative government in 1887). It was consistent, however, with that implemented earlier by the United Kingdom in another ‘Greek’ island setting, the Ionian islands, where a bicameral legislature existed under British rule (1815–64).²⁷

Italian perceptions of their Dodecanesian subjects were on the surface similar and similarly entwined with a broader geopolitical vision. Yet the practical implications of such representations were vastly different from the British case. Valerie McGuire shows persuasively how even prior to the Italian occupation in May 1912, the archipelago had featured prominently in the writings of leading nationalist intellectuals such as Gabriele d’Annunzio, Giuseppe Sergi, Edmondo de Amicis, Enrico Corradini or, later, Luigi Federzoni, as holding a possible solution to the Risorgimento’s unresolved problem, namely the ‘Southern Question’. This discourse operated a displacement of ‘the South’ into the Aegean, as the Dodecanese became Italy’s imperial *limes* where civilisation faded out into the exotic and Europe blended with the Levant, or ‘the Orient’. This in turn could enable a better absorption of the Mezzogiorno into the national community.²⁸

In the 1920s, these theoretical considerations served well political leaders who attempted to redefine Italy’s regional role in the Eastern Mediterranean following the upheavals of the First World War and the Greco-Turkish War. Hence Orazio Pedrazzi, an ambitious journalist and staunch supporter of the fascist regime who would have a glowing career as a Member of Parliament and diplomat, wrote:

The people [*popolazioni*, in reference to the Orthodox, Muslim and Jewish communities] of the Dodecanese are not people of colour. They do not need to be civilized, they only need to be assisted. If we were to turn the islands into a colony [*colonia*] we would profoundly offend the inhabitants and above all we would pervert the nature of the dependency [*possedimento*] . . .

²³ The literature on this topic is very vast but a good starting point is Rebecca Bryant’s *Imagining the Modern: The Cultures of Nationalism in Cyprus* (London: IB Tauris, 2004) and Paschalis Kitromilides, *Insular Destinies: Perspectives on the History and Politics of Modern Cyprus* (London: Routledge, 2020).

²⁴ Intervention by Foreign Secretary Earl Granville, House of Lords Debate, 28 July 1882 vol. 273 cc17–26: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1882/jul/28/motion-for-papers> (last visited 15 May 2022).

²⁵ W.N. Medlicott, ‘The Gladstone Government and the Cyprus Convention, 1880–85’, *Journal of Modern History*, 12, 2 (1940), 186.

²⁶ Cited in George S. Georghallides, *A Political and Administrative History of Cyprus, 1918–1926. With a Survey on the Foundations of British Rule* (Nicosia: Cyprus Research Centre, 1979), 43.

²⁷ Sakis Gekas, *Xenocracy. State, Class and Colonialism in the Ionian Islands, 1815–1864* (New York: Berghahn, 2017), 51–78; Robert Holland and Diana Markides, *The British and the Hellenes. Struggles for Mastery in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1850–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 13–80. Incidentally, this Ionian precedent, and the fact that it was Gladstone himself who, as chancellor of exchequer and former Lord High Commissioner of the Ionian Islands, had advocated for their cession to Greece, further fueled hopes in Cyprus for union with the ‘motherland’.

²⁸ Valerie McGuire, *Italy’s Sea: Empire and Nation in the Mediterranean, 1895–1945* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 37–87.

Libya can be an end in and of itself. The Dodecanese cannot be an end in itself . . . The Dodecanese . . . should serve our economic, cultural and political expansion in the Levant, it will be . . . a beacon of culture, a sanctuary for all [Italian] migratory colonies in the East.²⁹

The representation of Dodecanesians as not being ‘people of colour’, and the project of using the archipelago as a base for the exercise of what we would today call soft power in the ‘Levant’, followed the collapse of Italian dreams of territorial expansion in Anatolia with the rise of the Turkish nationalist movement. Not able to annex Anatolian territory, Italy fell back on a well-proven policy examined by Mark Choate and Joseph Viscomi consisting in influencing the numerous Eastern Mediterranean ‘Italian’ or ‘Franco-Levantine’ communities, which were also, tellingly, referred to as colonies (*colonie*).³⁰ Italianity (*Italianità*), the alleged cultural link between these *colonie* and the metropole, allowed the latter to project imperial claims far beyond the territory under its direct sovereignty. This context would also increase the geopolitical importance of the Dodecanese within the Italian Empire and turn mere perceptions about its inhabitants into a policy, which went even further than what the British had done in Cyprus.

On the one hand, the Italian regime in the Dodecanese, even before the advent of fascism, was, by any measure, repressive. Elections, at the village and municipal levels, were swiftly abolished and power was centralised in the hands of the ‘Governatore’. In addition and somewhat contradicting Pedrazzi’s statement to the effect that the Dodecanese was not a ‘colony’, Italian authorities, perhaps replicating the policy, so thoroughly studied by Roberta Pergher, they had implemented after the First World War in Trieste and the Trentino and in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, used settler colonialism to consolidate their sovereignty on the archipelago, a process that implied large-scale expropriations.³¹ On the other hand, however, by an October 1925 decree-law, they devised an Aegean citizenship (*cittadinanza egea*) for the Dodecanesians, which safeguarded their customary rights and placed them at the helm of the Italian colonial hierarchy.³² In 1933, Italian authorities facilitated the access of Dodecanesians to the full, metropolitan Italian citizenship. Comparable experimentations in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica had been part of a tactical, and short-lived, attempt to reduce local resistance.³³ Nothing like the *cittadinanza egea* existed elsewhere in the Italian Empire.³⁴ Filippo Espinoza convincingly argues that in creating it, Italian authorities had imitated the institution devised by their French rivals for the inhabitants of Kastellorizo (Castelrosso), one of the Dodecanesian islands they briefly occupied before ceding it to Italy (1915–21).³⁵ Davide Rodogno sees in this ‘citizenship’ a sign of deference on the part of Italian authorities for a population they considered culturally proximate.³⁶ However that may be, observers of the time were quick to understand the practical

²⁹ Orazio Pedrazzi, *Il Levante Mediterraneo e l'Italia: La Turchia porta chiusa. L'assetto del Dodecaneso. I mandati in Siria ed in Palestina. Il Sionismo. Tramonto cattolico in Terrasanta* (Milan: La Grafica Moderna, 1925), 41–2.

³⁰ Mark Choate, *Emigrant Nation. The Making of Italy Abroad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 13–17 and Viscomi, ‘Mediterranean Futures’, 341–3.

³¹ Roberta Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire. Sovereignty and Settlement in Italy's Borderlands, 1922–1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

³² On the *cittadinanza egea*, see Vittorio Alhadeff, *L'ordinamento giuridico di Rodi e delle altre isole italiane dell'Egeo* (Milan: Soc. An. Istituto Editoriale Scientifico, 1927), 62–74; Luca Pignataro, *Il Dodecaneso Italiano, 1927–1947. I-L'occupazione iniziale, 1912–1922* (Chieti: Solfanelli, 2011), 21–9; Filippo Marco Espinoza, ‘Fare gli Italiani dell'Egeo: Il Dodecaneso dall'Impero ottomano all'Impero del fascismo’, PhD Thesis, Università degli Studi di Trento, 2017, 245–51; McGuire, *Italy's Sea*, 141–94.

³³ Donati, *Political History*, 130–3 and Florence Renucci, ‘La strumentalizzazione del concetto di cittadinanza in Libia negli anni Trenta’, *Quaderni fiorentini per la storia del pensiero giuridico moderno*, 33–4, 1 (2004/5), 319–42.

³⁴ Ester Capuzzo, ‘Sudditanza e cittadinanza nell'esperienza coloniale italiana dell'età liberale’, *Clio: rivista trimestriale di studi storici*, 31, 1 (1995), 90–3.

³⁵ Espinoza, ‘Quando i Castelrossini divennero Italiani’. See also his ‘An Italian Nationality for the Levant: Citizenship in the Aegean from the Ottoman to the Fascist Empire (1912–36)’, in Simona Berhe and Olindo De Napoli, eds., *Citizens and Subjects of the Italian Colonies. Legal Constructions and Social Practices, 1882–1943* (London: Routledge, 2021).

³⁶ Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 52–3.

implications of this citizenship. Vittorio Alhadeff, a prominent lawyer and a scion of one of the wealthiest Rodesli (Rhodian Jewish) families, thus wrote that the October 1925 decree ‘demonstrated that Italy thereafter considered anything related to the islands and their inhabitants as a matter of pure domestic law’.³⁷ It had the additional benefit, of course, to clarify the jurisdictional ambiguity mentioned in the first section of this article.

Ann Laura Stoler writes that all imperial formations have always relied on ‘scaled genres of rule that produce and count on different degrees of sovereignty and gradations of rights’.³⁸ And, as scholars of legal pluralism have noted, differences in the institutions and administrative practices from colony to colony often reflected the conditions in which a territory and its inhabitants had been brought into the fold of empire.³⁹ Colonial perceptions of the local populations were also, as this section aimed to suggest, decisive in justifying a certain method of rule and in the creation of specific legal instruments to serve that purpose. Interestingly, on the basis of comparable representations of their Eastern Mediterranean subjects, the United Kingdom and Italy designed vastly different institutions. As mentioned earlier, however, by the mid-1920s, British authorities were considering Italian methods as more efficient in ruling Dodecanesians than theirs had been with Cypriots. Gradually in the 1920s and more decisively so in the 1930s, they simply duplicated a number of their Italian counterparts’ policies.

The Italian Dodecanese as Administrative Toolbox for British Cyprus

For reasons that will be addressed in the last section of this paper, British colonial authorities remained entirely oblivious to the Italian claims of a shared cultural identity with their Eastern Mediterranean subjects. What interested them was what they perceived as an efficient combination between political authoritarianism and economic development lying at the core of Italian rule. Renowned British archaeologist Stanley Casson reckoned, in a 1936 article published in the prestigious *Fortnightly Review*, that the thousands of tourists who visited Cyprus after having seen Rhodes would probably feel quite unimpressed by the British administration’s utter neglect of both people and monumental sites which contrasted with Italy’s meticulous care for the Dodecanese.⁴⁰ In 1939, former Governor of Cyprus, Sir Richmond Palmer, stated, in a lecture he gave at the Royal Central Asian Society:

When other Mediterranean Powers spend freely on development and other port facilities in their Mediterranean possessions, such as Tripoli and Rhodes, Cypriots are apt to think that there must be something wrong with Great Britain if she cannot do the same for Cyprus after all these years, especially in view of the fact that Cyprus is a much more fecund field for development than either Tripoli or Rhodes.⁴¹

³⁷ Alhadeff, *L’ordinamento giuridico di Rodi*, 66.

³⁸ Ann Laura Stoler, ‘On Degrees of Imperial Sovereignty’, *Public Culture* 18, 1 (2006), 128.

³⁹ Lauren Benton, ‘From International Law to Imperial Constitutions: The Problem of Quasi-Sovereignty, 1870–1900’, *Law and History Review*, 26, 3 (2008), 595–620.

⁴⁰ ‘Από της αρχαιότητας μέχρι σήμερα. Ρόδος και Κύπρος. Σύγκρισις των δύο διακυβερνήσεων’, *Ελευθερία*, 27 and 30 May 1936. See also, ‘Κύπρος και Δωδεκάνησος-Άρθρα του Άγγλου αρχαιολόγου κ. Στάνλεϋ Κάσσον’, *Δωδεκανησιακή*, 15 Jan. 1936. In the words of the French vice-consul in Larnaca, ‘[i]t seemed that, while ruling Cyprus, the United Kingdom showed no interest whatsoever in the island, which it merely kept as a pawn potentially exchangeable against other parts of the Ottoman Empire, and also, in order to prevent her competitors from occupying it’, Vice-consul’s official dispatch, ‘Importance de Chypre comme poste d’observation’, 16 Aug. 1919, Centre des archives diplomatiques de Nantes 378PO CH59 *Chypre vice-consulat, correspondance générale*, 1901–1932. The Italian consul in Cyprus made almost exactly the same point on several instances seventeen years later; see, for example, Italian consul in Cyprus’s dispatch, 7 Dec. 1936 ‘Notizie di interesse militare su Cipro’: ‘After more than 50 years of British occupation, all, or almost all, of the government services are in fact still located in the run-down offices built during the Turkish administration and the hospital (practically the only one in the entire island) is still built on clay’, Archivio storico diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (henceforth ASDMAE) *Affari politici, 1931–1945, Cipro*.

⁴¹ Cited in Rappas, ‘Transnational Formation’, 488.

As already mentioned, this acknowledgement partly owed to the belief that the Italians had found a permanent solution to Greek irredentism, seemingly earning the acquiescence of their subjects through a combination of repression and welfare. In the late 1920s, Governor Storrs attempted to implement a few Italian-inspired measures. One of them was the 1928 law on pious foundations (*Evkaf*), which brought the latter, as the most influential institution of the Muslim community, under government control. Another one, was the 1929 education law, inspired by a similar 1926 Italian law, which divested Orthodox and Muslim education boards of their control over elementary schoolteachers, who thus became government employees. The 1929 education law radicalised the Greek-Orthodox opposition to British rule and contributed to Storrs's undoing. In October 1931, a year marked by economic crisis and a protracted tension between the governor and the legislative council, an island-wide revolt in the name of *enosis* culminated with the burning down of Government House.⁴² No doubt this was humiliating but more cynical observers in the Colonial Office likened it to a 'godsend' that would justify the abolition of all of the island's representative institutions, from the legislative council – an 'exasperating and humiliating nuisance' according to Storrs – to the municipal and village councils, which British authorities felt had stood in the way of their 'benevolent rule'.⁴³ If the regime they had established in 1882 in Cyprus was among the most liberal in all of their possessions, the one that took shape after 1931 was arguably the most authoritarian.

In the 1930s, British colonial authorities in Cyprus more clearly aligned their policy on that of their Italian counterparts in the Dodecanese. The broader context behind this convergence was the global economic crisis following the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the widespread belief in European political and administrative circles that authoritarian regimes, communist and fascist, had more efficiently weathered the storm. As fascist or quasi-fascist organisations were mushrooming across Europe including in the continent's largest democracies, the mainstream elite, even when democratic at heart, believed they could borrow a leaf or two from the fascist book.⁴⁴ In 1937, right on the heels of the Abyssinian crisis, fifteen Conservative Members of Parliament created an Anglo-Italian Parliamentary Committee, meant to revive relations of trust between the two countries and also study fascist governance.⁴⁵ One of the most influential British administrators of the time, Secretary to the Imperial Cabinet Sir Maurice Hankey, thus wrote, upon returning from Italy, in glowing terms about the achievements of fascism in that country: 'What Garibaldi and Cavour began, Mussolini had completed'. In the fascist experiment 'the nation had found itself'.⁴⁶ This quote highlights both the strength but also the limitations of the appeal of fascism as a regime suitable not to the United Kingdom itself, but rather to unruly Mediterranean societies – Italy included. What seemed transposable to these settings was the high degree of executive authority fascists enjoyed, which enabled them to fast-track, without time lost in fruitless deliberations, reforms ultimately considered necessary and beneficial to the community.⁴⁷ This, incidentally, tied in well, from a conceptual perspective, with the post-First World War understanding of imperial rule as trusteeship and the prevalence of *mise en valeur*, the notion, that is, that European domination could no longer satisfy itself with

⁴² The most detailed account of the build-up to the 1931 uprising is provided by George S. Georghallides, *Cyprus and the Governorship of Sir Ronald Storrs: The Causes of the 1931 Crisis* (Nicosia: Cyprus Research Centre, 1986).

⁴³ Diana Markides and George S. Georghallides, 'British Attitudes to Constitution-Making in Post-1931 Cyprus', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 13, 1 (1995), 68.

⁴⁴ Alastair Hamilton, *The Appeal of Fascism: A Study of Intellectuals and Fascism* (London: Blond, 1971), 275–90; Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent. Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 136–40.

⁴⁵ A series of British intellectuals, with Ezra Pound at their head, were meticulously cultivated by the Italian Ambassador in the United Kingdom, Dino Grandi; see Claudia Baldoli, *Exporting Fascism. Italian Fascists and The United Kingdom's Italians in the 1930s* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 97–128.

⁴⁶ Cited in Lawrence R. Pratt, *East of Malta, West of Suez. Britain's Mediterranean's Crisis, 1936–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 94.

⁴⁷ Italian Ambassador's official dispatch, 16 Feb. 1934, ASDMAE *Affari politici, 1931–1945*, Gran Bretagna, Busta 8.

the preservation of law and order but should also be, perhaps mainly, about promoting economic ‘development’ in the societies under colonial control.⁴⁸

It is noteworthy that this interest in fascist methods of imperial rule increased at a time when Anglo-Italian diplomatic relations were deteriorating rapidly.⁴⁹ In the wake of the invasion of Ethiopia, the declaration of the Italian Empire (*impero italiano*) in 1936 and the League of Nations’ sanctions, Italy drew closer to Hitler’s Germany.⁵⁰ Mobilising a discourse full of references to the Roman *mare nostrum* and to Italy’s Mediterranean destiny, the fascist government undertook to challenge French and British positions throughout the Middle Sea.⁵¹ In the 1930s, British authorities confronted anti-colonial resistance in practically all of their Mediterranean possessions and almost everywhere Italian interference was easily perceptible. Fascist agents were fanning the flames of resistance in Egypt, Malta and Palestine during the Great Arab Revolt (1936–9).⁵² In 1936, fascist authorities undertook the transformation of the Dodecanesian island of Leros into a fortified military base, inducing the British to briefly consider doing the same with Cyprus.⁵³ Even though the United Kingdom and Italy signed the Gentleman’s Agreement in 1937 and the Easter Accord in 1938, the British Foreign Office decreed, somewhat perplexingly, that Italy ‘cannot be counted on as a reliable friend but in the present circumstances need not be regarded as a probable enemy’.⁵⁴ In these circumstances, British intelligence-gathering concerning Italian administrative methods could not take the overt, public and even cordial form they had in the 1920s. The British consul in Rhodes and the Italian consul in Nicosia, who were in the 1930s recruited from the intelligence services, provided much information, although they were placed under the surveillance of the local police.⁵⁵ More interestingly, perhaps, is the fact that despite official displays of hostility, active relations between

⁴⁸ The expression ‘*mise en valeur*’, which can be better translated using a paraphrase, such as ‘promoting the value of’, is of course that of French politician and one-time colonial governor of Indochina Albert Sarraut, *La mise en valeur des colonies* (Paris: Payot, 1923). For a review essay on the French case, see Robert Aldrich, ‘Imperial Mise en Valeur and Mise en Scène: Recent Works on French Colonialism’, *The Historical Journal*, 45, 4 (2002), 917–36.

⁴⁹ See footnote 5 for relevant bibliographical references.

⁵⁰ Salerno, *Crossroads*, 11 and Guillen, ‘Relations’, 151–6.

⁵¹ Arielli, *Fascist Italy*, 17–18; Rodogno, *Empire*, 47. See also Juliette Bessis, *La Méditerranée fasciste: L’Italie mussolinienne et la Tunisie* (Paris: Karthala, 1981), 125. For a compilation of references by Mussolini to Italy’s Mediterranean destiny, Enrica Costa Bona, ‘“Partite Storiche” tra l’Italia e Francia nel Mediterraneo’, *Il Politico*, 58, 3 (1993), 455–87.

⁵² For Italian fascist activities in Egypt see Viscomi, ‘Mediterranean Futures’ and Marta Petricoli, *Oltre il mito. L’Egitto degli Italiani (1917–1947)* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2007), 321–57. For Malta, Claudia Baldoli, ‘The “Northern Dominator” and the *mare nostrum*: Fascist Italy’s “Cultural War” in Malta’, *Modern Italy*, 13, 1 (2008), 5–20, and Henry Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience* (Valletta: Midsea Publications, 1979). See also Vice-consul for Greece in Malta, dispatch no. 22, 25 Feb. 1927, to minister of foreign affairs, Διπλωματικό και Ιστορικό Αρχείο του Υπουργείου Εξωτερικών (Diplomatic and historical archives of the Greek Foreign Ministry) 1927/21/1 *Περί Αγγλίας*. For the restriction of the use of Italian in Malta, see Italian consul in Malta’s dispatches to ministry of foreign affairs, Italy, 22 Aug. 1934 and 20 Sept. 1934, ASDMAE. *Affari politici-Gran Bretagna*, 1931–1945. Same file, Italian consul in Malta’s report, ‘La questione maltese’, 2 Sept. 1934. For Palestine, and more generally anti-British Italian initiatives in the Arab world, see Arielli, *Fascist Italy*, 35–7; Callum A. McDonald, ‘Radio Bari: Italian Wireless Propaganda in the Middle East and British Countermeasures 1934–38’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 13, 2 (1977), 195–207; and Renzo de Felice, *Il fascismo e l’Oriente. Arabi, ebrei e indiani nella politica di Mussolini* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988), 18–9 and 30–1.

⁵³ *Daily Telegraph*, ‘Italy Builds Fortress in Mediterranean. Naval and Air Base on Island Said to be Second Only to Gibraltar with Easy Reach of Suez Canal’, 11 June 1938. ‘Η Κύπρος θα μεταραπή εις μεγάλην βρεταν. βάση’, *Νέος Κυπριακός Φύλαξ*, 20 June 1936; ‘Η Κύπρος ως ναυτική και αεροπορική βάση της Μεγάλης Βρετανίας’, *Ελευθερία*, 3 July 1936; ‘Η Κύπρος ως βάση εις την Μεσόγειον’, *Πάφος*, 1 Oct. 1936; Rosaria Quarataro, ‘Imperial Defence in the Mediterranean on the Eve of the Ethiopian Crisis (July–Oct. 1935)’, *The Historical Journal*, 20, 1 (1977), 208–9.

⁵⁴ O.E. Sargent, Foreign Office, minute, 6 Apr. 1938, National Archives, Foreign Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office records from 1782 (henceforth FO) 371/22367 *Political: Southern: Greece*. Salerno argues that the ‘Gentleman’s Accord’ was signed from a British position of weakness, Salerno, *Crossroads*, 20. For the ‘Easter Accords’, *ibid.*, 50. For the background see Colletti, *Fascismo*, 3, 29–80.

⁵⁵ ‘Appunto per il Ministro Buti. Oggetto: Console britannico a Rodi’, 19 May 1936, ASDMAE *Affari politici, 1931–1945, Dodecaneso, Busta 11*, 1936; Italian consul’s official dispatch, 13 Nov. 1936, ASDMAE *Affari politici, 1931–1945, Cipro, Busta 1*, 1931 and *ibid.*, 16 July 1937, ASDMAE *Affari politici, 1931–1945, Cipro, Busta 2*, 1937.

British and Italian colonial authorities were maintained, albeit at the infra-state level, as the following example will show.

Most of the measures implemented in the 1930s by the British in Cyprus bear the stamp of Italian administrative methods, to the extent that a bureaucrat at the Colonial Office opined that ‘the Government of Cyprus are becoming imbued with the political philosophy of Mussolini’.⁵⁶ Laws were thus passed in 1933 and 1935 bringing the content of primary and secondary school education under administrative control. The press was subjected to sweeping censorship. Finally, taking their cue from their Italian counterparts, the British began interfering in the affairs of the Cypriot Orthodox Church, arguably one of the most powerful, socially influential institutions in the island.⁵⁷ Yet when the deteriorating economic situation and the resulting labour mobilisation appeared threatening to the status quo, both in metropolises and colonies,⁵⁸ the one aspect that attracted European bureaucrats to fascism was corporatism. This presented itself as a third way between capitalism and communism and was premised on the notion that society constituted an organic whole. Harmony between the different social classes would be ensured through corporations, in which representatives of both employers and workers would be brought together. Faced with the exponential growth of organised labour in Cyprus, British officials sought ways to solve the problem at its root, namely by slowing down the proletarianisation of the landless peasantry. In 1934, Brewster Joseph Surridge, then district commissioner of the Cypriot district of Larnaca, undertook at his own expense a trip to Italy with the intention of meeting officials of the Ente Nazionale Fascista delle Corporazioni, the organism overseeing all twenty-one corporations in Italy. The British official was allegedly so impressed by what he saw that upon his return to the island he pleaded with the governor for, and was granted, the responsibility to develop cooperative societies in Cyprus on the Italian model. Four years later, in 1938, Surridge decided to undertake a new trip to Italy, this time sponsored by the Cyprus administration, with a view of studying corporatism as applied to the fishing industry.⁵⁹

Naturally, according to the Italian consul, such a visit could make of Surridge ‘an increasingly useful element to serve our propaganda among Cyprus’s government officials who until now are, in their great majority, animated by hostile feelings towards fascist Italy’.⁶⁰ It has been argued that as a late-coming and therefore insecure imperial power, Italy often compared its colonial policy-making to that of its rivals; its imperialism, it is said, was ‘largely imitative’.⁶¹ Yet as the examples examined here suggest, Italian authorities were simultaneously aware of the appeal of their imperial model and consistently contrasted their supposedly respectful and beneficial rule to that, allegedly neglectful, of their French and British rivals.⁶² In the early 1930s, diasporic Dodecanesian and Greek Cypriot newspapers took notice but disparaged this appeal of the Italian model. ‘[W]e insist’, read an article published in

⁵⁶ H. H. Duncan, Colonial Office, minute, 22 June 1938, National Archives, Records of the Colonial Office, Commonwealth and Foreign and Commonwealth Offices (henceforth CO) 67/283/16 *Cyprus. Appointments to the Executive Council 1938*.

⁵⁷ For Italian interferences in the affairs of the Dodecanesian church, the main reference remains Cesare Marongiu-Buonaiutti, *La politica religiosa del fascismo nel Dodecaneso* (Napoli: Giannini Editore, 1979). See also Castiglioni, ‘No More Greeks’. For British interferences in the affairs of the Orthodox church in Cyprus, Alexis Rappas, *Cyprus in the 1930s: British Colonial Rule and the Roots of the Cyprus Conflict* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 123–51.

⁵⁸ Thomas, *Violence, passim*.

⁵⁹ Secretary of state for the colonies, confidential dispatch to the governor of Cyprus, 19 Nov. 1934, CO 67/257/16 *Cyprus. Cooperative Credit Societies. Appointment of a Registrar, 1934*.

⁶⁰ Italian consul’s dispatch, 11 May 1938 ‘Missione informativa del Direttore delle Società Cooperative presso il Governo di Cipro’, ASDMAE *Affari politici 1931–1945, Cipro*, Busta 3.

⁶¹ Arielli quoting Christopher Seton-Watson, *Fascist Italy*, 9. See also on this point Choate, *Emigrant Nation*, 12 and 17; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, ‘Modernity is Just Over There: Colonialism and Italian National Identity’, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 8, 3 (2006), 381; David Rodogno, ‘Le nouvel ordre fasciste en Méditerranée, 1940–1943: présupposés idéologiques, visions et velléités’, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 55, 3 (2008), 144. For an Italian acknowledgement of this discrepancy of experience, see the article published by Dino Brogi under the title ‘Per una Italia coloniale’, in the fascist organ of the Dodecanese, the Rhodes-based *Messaggero di Rodi*, on 13 Mar. 1931.

⁶² Arielli, *Fascist Italy*, 40.

Dodekanisiaki, the Athens-based organ of the Dodecanesian youth, ‘in believing that British policy in Cyprus has been, since the First World War, a true copy of Italian administrative methods in the Dodecanese’,⁶³

This was, however, an exaggeration. While the decisive influence of Italian methods over British policy in Cyprus is undeniable, this was not by any means a case of wholesale duplication. Rather, British colonial authorities treated the Italian administration of the Dodecanese as a toolbox, from which they could retrieve some useful ideas. A major hindrance in completely aligning their rule on that of their rivals was of an economic nature. In effect the irony was that *mise en valeur* gained credence in British colonial circles precisely at the time of the Great Depression, namely when ‘[f]unds for longer-term investment evaporated’.⁶⁴ As a result, in the 1930s British authorities implemented mostly institutional, as opposed to economic or financial, reforms in Cyprus, with rather dubious political dividends. By contrast, Italy deployed onerous construction works, lavishly using metropolitan funds, namely Italian taxpayer money, a source British officials were extremely reluctant to resort to.⁶⁵ More importantly, however, and as the following and final section aims to show, British authorities remained completely oblivious to the ideological underpinnings of fascist rule in the Dodecanese and specifically their mobilisation of a chronopolitics and a biopolitics clearly intended to achieve the assimilation of the islanders into the Italian national community.

Building a European Mediterranean Community: Fascist Chronopolitics and Biopolitics

In Cyprus, the October 1931 revolt brought about a major transformation in British official representations of the island’s inhabitants. Whereas up until the 1920s British colonial officials would acknowledge the local population as ‘Greek’ and ‘Turkish’, such terms, again following the Italian example, were thoroughly purged from the official correspondence and replaced with ‘Orthodox’ and ‘Muslim’ respectively. Cypriots were more broadly equated to other Mediterranean populations of an ‘Asiatic’ or ‘Oriental’ rather than ‘European’ stock.⁶⁶ In 1936, reflecting on the resistance British imperial rule met in Malta, Cyprus and Palestine, Sir Arthur Dawe, head of the Pacific and Mediterranean department at the Colonial Office, thus wrote of the local populations:

The people are excessively addicted to scandal and intrigue. They are always ready to throb with hysteria about petty politics and in the political sphere are much more destructive than constructive. The Romans before us found them a stiff-necked, hot-headed lot, subtle and difficult to govern.⁶⁷

This representation of Mediterranean populations as intellectually sophisticated but unruly formed part of an old and tried repertoire. As shown by Thomas W. Gallant and Sakis Gekas, British officials had already resorted to it when they tried to counter the lively movement for *enosis* in the Ionian

⁶³ ‘Οι Ιταλοί διδάσκαλοι των Άγγλων’, *Δωδεκανησιακή*, 1 and 16 May 1933. In the same newspaper, “Κύπρος-Δωδεκάνησος Β”, 16 Nov. 1933. For other such iterations of an assimilation of the British policy in Cyprus with that of the Italians on the Dodecanese in the diaspora press, see Peter S. Lambros, ‘Cyprus under England and Dodecanese under Italy demand union with Greece’, published in *Ελληνικός Ασπρη-Greek Star*, Chicago, 13 Nov. 1931, ASDMAE *Affari politici 1931–1945 Dodecaneso*. See also translated excerpt of article published in *Hestia*, Athens, under the title ‘Cyprus and the Dodecanese’ and reproduced verbatim in British Ambassador in Athens’s dispatch 28 Oct. 1927 to Foreign Office, transmitted to governor of Cyprus, FO 286/993 *Position of Turkish subjects in the Dodecanesian islands*, 1927.

⁶⁴ Thomas, *Violence*, 4.

⁶⁵ Nicholas Doumanis, *Myth and Memory in the Mediterranean: Remembering Fascism’s Empire* (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 146.

⁶⁶ This is a recurring trope in writings by British colonial officials in the 1930s. Telling examples include: Governor Palmer, secret dispatch, 23 Jan. 1934, CO 67/253/8 *Administrative Staff: Vacancies, etc. 1934*; Chief Justice Sir Charles F. Belcher, unpublished typewritten manuscript, p. 279, Brit.Emp.s.347, *Reminiscences of Sir Charles F. Belcher, former colonial judge*.

⁶⁷ Cited in Rappas, ‘Transnational Formation’, 484.

Islands during the first half of the nineteenth century.⁶⁸ What is certain is that Mediterraneanness functioned – similarly to Orientalism – as an otherising device for British officials, one justifying the exercise of colonial rule.⁶⁹ This was not lost on Cypriots who, brazenly breaking solidarity with other colonial peoples, openly protested against being treated like ‘the nomads of Oceania’.⁷⁰ It was also exploited by Italian authorities, who, opposed to their British counterparts, referred to Mediterraneanness (*mediterraneità*) in positive terms. ‘In fact, the English’, wrote the Italian consul in Nicosia in 1937:

have isolated themselves completely from the rest of the population and, as ‘superior beings’, have refused to maintain the least social contact with anyone who is not ‘British’ by birth and blood. Hence every lesser English civil servant – whose father may be a bartender in London – feels it his right and duty – once he arrives here – to show the most profound contempt even to noble Cypriot families, whose names go back to the Crusades or the Venetian domination.⁷¹

Mediterraneità was a polysemic term in fascist Italy. It was a concept, as Claudio Fogu explains, rallying Italian artists and rationalist architects who sought to ‘distinguish themselves from their Northern European rivals and to fence off the increasingly worrisome accusations of *esterofilia* (love of everything foreign) levied against them by the ever more vocal proponents of an official fascist style responding to the idea of *romanità* (Romanity)’.⁷² In official colonial discourse, McGuire argues, *mediterraneità* functioned as a chronotope designed to resolve two paradoxes besetting fascist ideology: the ambiguous relation between modernity and past, both of which were officially extolled; and the distance required by a colonial form of rule over a population with which, nonetheless, Italians claimed a familiarity.⁷³ More prosaically, it was, in Mussolini’s increasingly martial declarations, a metaphor for fascism’s imperial ambitions, comparable to that of the fourth shore (*quarta sponda*), when referring to Libya (see Figure 1).

In contrast to their British rivals then, the Italians used the Dodecanese to strategically dim, or blur, assumed cultural differences between themselves and Mediterranean societies in a bid to increase the appeal of their own imperial model of governance. Governor Mario Lago, in the preface he wrote for a 1930 guide book, thus stated that the ‘Orientals, who share with us so many affinities and for this reason are accessible to our civilization and our culture, need to be convinced that modern Italy [*l’Italia d’oggi*, i.e. fascist Italy] knows how to organize a country and generate wealth just like all the great Western powers’.⁷⁴ The Dodecanese, the smallest province of the Italian Empire, was attributed an immense propaganda value. It was ‘the sea-girt, insular jewel in the crown of an empire that was closely tied to the idea of the sea – and to the wealth and identity that the sea had historically brought with it’.⁷⁵

As the source from which Lago’s citation is taken indicates, the one medium Italian authorities consistently used for propaganda purposes was tourism. From the beginning of their rule over the archipelago, Italian authorities had conducted extensive sanitary works, road building, the construction of flashy administrative buildings, which contrasted greatly with the paltry British record in that domain

⁶⁸ Thomas W. Gallant, *Experiencing Dominion. Culture, Identity, and Power in the British Mediterranean* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 15–55; Sakis, *Xenocracy*.

⁶⁹ On the commensurability of Mediterraneanism with Orientalism, see Michael Herzfeld, ‘The Horns of the Mediterraneanist Dilemma’, *American Ethnologist*, 11, 3 (1984), 439–54.

⁷⁰ Achilles K. Aimilianides, ‘Ἐλευθερος τύπος εν ελευθερα πολιτεια’, *Ανεξάρτητος*, 9 July 1939 and Achilles K. Aimilianides, ‘Το σύνταγμα’, *Ανεξάρτητος*, 15 Aug. 1939. For an example from the Dodecanesian diaspora, ‘Η ανελευθερα ιταλική διοικήσεις εις τα Δωδεκάνησα’, *Νέος Κυπριακός Φύλαξ*, 31 Jan. 1935.

⁷¹ Italian Consul in Cyprus’s dispatch, 22 Feb. 1937, ASDMAE *Affari politici, 1931–1945, Cipro*.

⁷² Claudio Fogu, ‘Futurist mediterraneità between Emporium and Imperium’, *Modernism/modernity*, 15, 1 (2008), 25.

⁷³ McGuire, *Italy’s Sea*, 90–100.

⁷⁴ Mario Lago, ‘Prefazione’, in Touring Club Milano, *Rodi e le minori isole italiane dell’Egeo* (Milano, 1930), 3.

⁷⁵ McGuire, *Italy’s Sea*, 3. See also Espinoza, ‘Fare gli Italiani’, 172–80.



Figure 1. 'The Italian people is the only great people that is entirely Mediterranean'.
 Source: 'Messaggero di Rodi', 20 June 1940.

in Cyprus. The swiftness and efficiency with which the capital town of Kos was reconstructed after it had been severely damaged by the 1933 earthquake was an architectural feat.⁷⁶ As many Dodecanesians remember, such works considerably improved their living conditions.⁷⁷ Yet the most onerous constructions had been made to serve Italy's imperial interests, in their military and cultural form, and were therefore focused on the islands of Rhodes, Kos and Leros. The first two islands in particular were destined to become important touristic destinations for Europeans to experience the thrills of a domesticated Orient. The baths of Kallithea built by Pietro Lombardi perfectly embody this policy, borrowing as they did from Roman, Byzantine but also Ottoman architectural styles.⁷⁸

Beyond their touristic potential, the architectural styles with which Italian authorities experimented in the Dodecanese also reflected a shifting chronopolitics, a politics of time that is, meant to legitimate Italian rule in the Dodecanese both by invoking (rather than evoking) the past and by emphasising the vitality of Italian rule in the present. Recently, among a number of scholars, Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos and Natasha Wheatley have underscored the tight connection between power and time, and the fact that '[p]olitical reorganization . . . can be understood as temporal reorganization'. Most exemplary of the 'co-constitution of [the] temporal and political orders' in the Dodecanese was the Palazzo del Governatore – the Governor's residence and offices – designed by Florestano di Fausto and built in 1926–7 in front of Rhodes's main harbour, close to the medieval town.⁷⁹ This combined rationalism and modernism with decorative elements meant to evoke Islamic architecture, and,

⁷⁶ For the construction works, see Doumanis, *Myth and Memory*, 44–51. Concerning the earthquake, subfile 'Terremoto nell'Egeo' with all dispatches and photographs in ASDMAE *Affari politici 1931–1945 Dodecaneso*, Busta 5; and Luca Pignataro, *Il Dodecaneso Italiano 1912–1947-II Il Governo di Mario Lago 1923–1936* (Chieti: Solfanelli, 2011), 341–58.

⁷⁷ Doumanis, *Myth and Memory*, 44.

⁷⁸ McGuire, *Italy's Sea*, 96–109.

⁷⁹ The citations are taken from Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos and Natasha Wheatley, 'Chronocenosic: An Introduction to Power and Time', in Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos and Natasha Wheatley, eds., *Power and Time: Temporalities in Conflict and the Making of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 3.

through this, Italy's destiny in the Orient. The clearest reference, however, was to the Palazzo Ducale in Venice, as it signified Italy's return as a 'thalassocracy' or a maritime empire.⁸⁰ By contrast, Cyprus's government house, built on the ashes of the one burnt during the October 1931 uprising, was imposing, but its blend of references to local architecture and English Gothic had nothing of the Palazzo del Governatore's symbolic power.

This hypostatisation, rather than commemoration, of a carefully selected past, was perceptible in monument restoration as well. Of the numerous monuments left by the archipelago's successive overlords, Italian archaeologists of the Istituto Storico Archeologico (FERT) prioritised research on, and restoration of, the ones that allegedly proved the uninterrupted involvement of 'Italians' in the Levant, from the Romans to the seaborne empires of Venice and Genoa through the Knights Hospitaller.⁸¹ Representative of this was the restoration in 1937–40, by Vittorio Mesturino, of the Palace of the Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes, where Governor Cesare Maria De Vecchi, Lago's successor, had chosen to relocate his headquarters. Scholars have underscored how creative this 'restoration' had been, based on an irreverent conflation of time, as Roman vestiges were brought in to decorate a Gothic medieval structure.⁸² But this was in character with fascist chronopolitics as it had been practised around the Italian sovereign space. It illustrated, as numerous scholars have shown, a very Nietzschean, monumentalist, perception of the use of history. 'The past', write Esposito and Reichardt, 'became a malleable material at one's disposal to use for the present'.⁸³ The purpose of this archaeological activity and of the style used in fascist architecture in the Dodecanese was to produce a 'rupture in time, breaking through historical strata to establish an unmediated, simultaneous experience of Roman [and other glorious stages of 'Italian'] past and fascist present (and future)'.⁸⁴ Fascist chronopolitics then, was premised on a rejection of 'clock time', the idea of time as linear and progressive, and embraced instead a concept of simultaneity between fascist modernity and selected, illustrious, moments of the past.⁸⁵

Reflected in the handling of the built environment, this chronopolitics was also perceptible in official representations of the local population. According to the writers of the previously mentioned guide prefaced by Governor Lago, the very language spoken by Dodecanesians was a medium actualising the past within the present:

As far as the vocabulary is concerned the most striking feature is the abundance of sounds of Italian origin or taken from Italic dialects, profuse in the entire Eastern Mediterranean, but especially in these islands where the successive rule of the Genoans, the Venetians, the Knights were longer-lasting, and where one can still find Italian banks and warehouses and where the Italian merchant navy dominated unrivalled for a long time.⁸⁶

The local population were therefore themselves vestiges of an immediately invocable, actualisable past, one that, again, unearthed a transtemporal, paligenetic connection between the 'Italian' Dodecanese of the past and the fascist Italy of the future. It is therefore somewhat seamlessly that such

⁸⁰ McGuire, *Italy's Sea*, 101–2.

⁸¹ Espinoza, *Fare gli Italiani dell'Egeo*, 173.

⁸² Georgios Karatzas, 'On the Physical and Discursive Articulation of the Heritage Space of the City of Rhodes', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 28, 1 (2019), 33–53. Espinoza, *Fare gli Italiani dell'Egeo*, 361.

⁸³ Esposito and Reichardt, 'Revolution and Eternity', 39–40. Nietzsche had written that 'only if history can be transformed into a work of art will it perhaps be able to preserve instincts or even evoke them', *Second Untimely Meditation: On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 95–6. 'Il fascismo fa la storia, non la scrive [Fascism makes history, it does not write it]' seemed to echo a famous fascist motto, cited in Claudio Fogu, 'The Fascist Stylisation of Time', *Journal of Modern European History*, 13, 1 (2015), 100.

⁸⁴ Joshua Arthurs, 'The Excavatory Intervention: Archaeology and the Chronopolitics of Roman Antiquity in Fascist Italy', *Journal of Modern European History*, 13, 1 (2015), 53. See also Fogu, 'Fascist Stylisation of Time', 102.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 108. Roger Griffin, "'I am no Longer Human. I am a Titan. A God!": The Fascist Quest to Regenerate Time', in Matthew Feldman and Roger Griffin, eds., *A Fascist Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 21.

⁸⁶ Touring Italiano, *Rodi e le minore isole italiane dell'Egeo* (Milan: 1930), 35.

representations of Dodecanesians in turn became the ground for the gradual development of a biopolitics specific to the archipelago, and which aimed at assimilating the islanders. Just like time, they became the material to actualise the new fascist men.⁸⁷ Again, nothing remotely similar existed in British Cyprus. Mention has already been made of the *cittadinanza egea*, the *sui generis* citizenship granted to the inhabitants of the archipelago in the name of their alleged ‘whiteness’. By the mid-1930s, much more decisive steps were taken in the direction of ‘Italianising’ the local Greek-Orthodox population and one medium used – aside from strong incentives to join fascist organisations or the imposition of Italian as the sole language of education – was mixed marriages, namely unions between Italian officials and Dodecanesian women.

In Cyprus, mixed marriages were usually frowned upon and perceived as a threat to the colonial official’s impartiality in a multicultural society inhabited by Orthodox-Christians, Muslims and other smaller denominational groups. Often it was the case that British officials who married locally were transferred to some other colony. Italian authorities in the Dodecanese seemed to have at first shared these concerns, especially given the fact that women who married Italian officials had to convert to Catholicism, which often created tensions with the local religious leaders and caused the bride to be ostracised. Such cautions were set aside, however, as it became apparent that the plans for settler colonialism had all but failed by the early 1930s.⁸⁸ The policy of biological assimilation of the Greek-Orthodox population into the Italian national community was pursued more earnestly as the *impero italiano* took a racialist turn in the 1930s, particularly in the wake of the conquest of Ethiopia.⁸⁹

From the mid-1930s onwards, the official organ of the Italian administration in the Dodecanese, *Messenger of Rhodes (Messaggero di Rodi)*, began running a series of anti-Semitic articles under the telling titles of ‘race’, ‘Semites’ and ‘Jews’.⁹⁰ There was, that newspaper claimed, a radical difference between ‘European Mediterranean people and oriental or African Mediterranean people’.⁹¹ As Aliza Wong suggests in her work, biological racism had already a long pedigree in Italy by the 1930s. From the work of positivist criminologist Cesare Lombroso in the 1870s to that of his counterpart Alfredo Niceforo in the 1910s and 1920s, this division between ‘European Mediterranean people’ and ‘African Mediterranean people’ had specifically served scientific circles to ‘explain’ the perceived backwardness of the Italian South.⁹² What changed in the late-1930s was that the government itself had embraced biological racism, in its Nordicism form, as advocated by the head of the Italian Racial Office, Guido Landra.⁹³ It began to inform Italian policy in its colonies, the Dodecanese

⁸⁷ Stefanos Geroulanos, ‘The Temporal Assemblage of the Nazi New Man: The “Empty” Present, the Incipient Ruin, and the Apocalyptic Time of *Lebensraum*’, in Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos and Natasha Wheatley, eds., *Power and Time: Temporalities in Conflict and the Making of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 177.

⁸⁸ Concerning British officials marrying Cypriot women, see Rappas, *Cyprus in the Thirties*, 62. For Italian attitudes towards marriage between Italian men and Dodecanesian women, see Alexis Rappas, ‘Mixed Marriages in the Fascist Aegean and the Domestic Foundations of Imperial Sovereignty’, in Ulrike Lindner and Dörte Lerp, eds., *New Perspectives on the History of Gender and Empire. Comparative and Global Approaches* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 31–58.

⁸⁹ The fascist organ of the Italian administration in the Dodecanese, *Messaggero di Rodi*, thus published on 6 July 1936 an article by Franco Casetti entitled ‘Razzismo’, which connected racial awareness in Italy to the conquest of Ethiopia. See also Luigi Goglia, ‘Note sul razzismo coloniale fascista’, *Storia contemporanea*, 19, 6 (1988), 1225; Esmonde Robertson, ‘Race as a Factor in Mussolini’s policy in Africa and Europe’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23, 1 (1988), 39–40; Gene Bernardini, ‘The Origins and Development of Racial Anti-Semitism in Fascist Italy’, *Journal of Modern History*, 49, 3 (1977), 431–53; Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, ‘D’une persécution l’autre: racisme colonial et antisémitisme dans l’Italie fasciste’, *Vingtième siècle*, 55, 3 (2008), 116–37.

⁹⁰ Among other examples, ‘Note d’attualità. La razza bianca’, *Messaggero di Rodi*, 6 June 1936; Franco Casetti, ‘Razzismo’, *Messaggero di Rodi*, 6 July 1936; ‘Fisionomia razziale della Nazione italiana. Concetto fascista del razzismo’, *Messaggero di Rodi*, 15 July 1936.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Aliza S. Wong, *Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy, 1861–1911. Meridionalism, Empire, and Diaspora* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 47–77.

⁹³ Fabrizio De Donno, ‘La razza Ario-Mediterranea: Ideas of Race and Citizenship in Colonial and Fascist Italy, 1885–1941’, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 8, 3 (2006), 397 and 405; Aaron Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy* (London: Routledge, 2002), 38–9, 44–9 and 53–85; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities. Italy, 1922–1945*

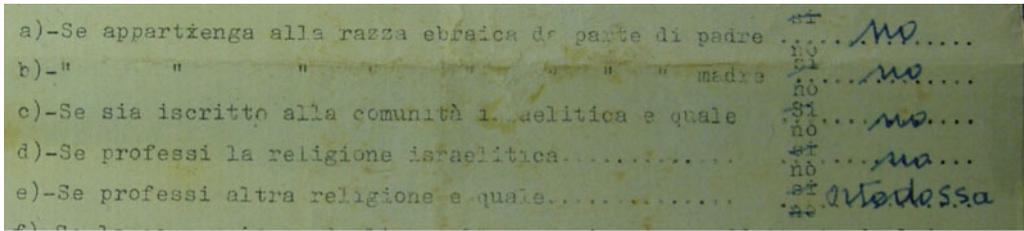


Figure 2. Extract of a certificate of non-Jewishness.

Source: GAK Undated ¼ extract of the certificate for Zappo Giorgio, enclosure into official government report, 21 Feb. 1939.

included. Following the passing of the 1938 measures for the defence of the Italian race (*provvedimenti per la difesa de la razza italiana*), the small Jewish community of Rhodes was systematically discriminated against. Dodecanesian Jews were barred from practising certain occupations and were forbidden to engage in matrimonial union with non-Jews. In fact, before contracting a marriage, a member of any other Dodecanesian community, Muslim or Christian, had to obtain an official document from the authorities, certifying that they were not from ‘razza ebraica’ (see Figure 2).

Indeed, a significant consequence of official anti-Semitism in the Dodecanese was that it cast all non-Jewish islanders into the ‘Aryan’ category, thus making them fully assimilable to Italy. It seems that in the Dodecanese, to paraphrase Roberta Pergher, Italian authorities had found a way to ‘square’ the fascist obsession with ‘national cohesion with rule of non-Italian lands and peoples’.⁹⁴ Such territories, once expurgated from the new official ‘other’, were to simply be nationalised. The Dodecanese was therefore to be considered as an integral part of Italy and no longer an imperial dependency. Nothing comparable had ever been contemplated for Cyprus.

Conclusion: At the Crossroads of two Mediterraneans

Following the injunction of scholarship on imperial formations to consider European colonial policy-making as an adaptable process, one that resulted from mutually constitutive influences between metropole and colony, nation and empire and across imperial borders, this article revealed a moment of convergence between the policies enacted by the British in Cyprus and the ones implemented by the Italians in the Dodecanese. One major impulse was the challenge of Greek irredentism shared by both colonial powers in their Eastern Mediterranean, insular dependencies. Another one was the recasting of imperial rule as trusteeship in the interwar years and the imperative of economic development this entailed in the context of the Great Depression. As a result, British authorities drew inspiration in their administration of Cyprus from Italian rule in the Dodecanese, specifically from what they perceived there as being a successful combination of political authoritarianism and public welfare. To a certain extent then, fascist authorities had been successful in using the archipelago to enhance Italy’s credentials as an imperial power worth emulating.

Emulation is not, however, imitation, and the article also calls attention to the very substantive differences between the British and Italian imperial experimentations in the Eastern Mediterranean. British official correspondence started to invoke more regularly the Cypriots’ ‘Mediterraneanness’ in the 1930s, particularly after the 1931 uprising. But this notion was meant as an otherising rhetorical device, a synecdoche for a series of alleged cultural flaws – propensity for intrigue, restlessness, dishonesty – which Cypriots supposedly shared with other Mediterranean colonial subjects, such as the Maltese, the Arabs or the Jews and which justified the exercise of an Italian-inspired, authoritarian rule. By contrast Italian authorities had embraced *mediterraneità*, a polysemic term in official

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 124–9; Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare. Storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), 414–20.

⁹⁴ Pergher, *Mussolini’s Nation-Empire*, 2 see also 18, 70.

discourse, as a means to strategically blur the divide between rulers and ruled and convert the small Dodecanesian dependency into a beacon of Italian imperial influence throughout the Middle Sea and the 'Orient'. The chronopolitics used in official discourse, architecture and archaeology for that purpose led, with the racialist turn of the 1930s, to a biopolitics aiming at the assimilation of Greek-Orthodox Dodecanesians into the Italian national community. Just as the United Kingdom sought to finally turn Cyprus into a British colony, Italy was seeking to nationalise the Dodecanese.

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