

New Perspectives on Nation-building and Orientalism in Italy from the Risorgimento to the Republic

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Rereading Travellers to the East. Shaping Identities and Building the Nation in Post-unification Italy stands at the crossroads of different research fields. Its main goal is to offer a new historiographical perspective on travel literature, the question of nation-building in post-unification Italy and the history of orientalism and oriental studies. In this introductory essay, we will discuss the angles from which we have tackled these three large areas and how we propose to join them together. Before we do so, however, it may be useful to make some preliminary remarks on the scope of this volume.

Traditionally, travel literature calls for a discussion of its role as a source for the times and spaces in which it was produced, in terms of both its authors and readers and its usually multi-layered content, whether it concerns geography, peoples or ideas. The aim of this volume is to focus on the rereadings to which early modern travel literature, spanning from the late Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, has been subjected by different actors involved in the political, economic, cultural and intellectual life of post-unification Italy. This specific focus has allowed us to highlight how early modern travel literature has been mobilized, reinterpreted and reused for political and ideological purposes in the context of the formation and reformation of collective identities.

While this approach to travel literature implies a careful appreciation of the specific contexts and periods in which these sources originated, the main time

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frame of our analysis of rereadings includes broadly speaking the first century of existence of Italy as a unitary state: from the period of the political unification of the Italian peninsula—the Risorgimento—to the so-called liberal age of the Kingdom of Italy and from the Fascist regime to the first decades of the republic. Such a long-term perspective, often split into different time frames, spanning very different political and cultural periods, allows us to discuss ruptures and changes as well as continuity and persistence as characterizing features of the patterns of rereadings.

Travel inevitably connects different communities and polities. Trite though it may be, this point implies that any study of travel literature, and its rereadings even more so, should consider the relations between the different human spaces touched by the travellers' experience. This volume focuses on the relations between the polities of the Italian peninsula and those of Asia, or the lands that early modern Europe called the Orient, the Indies or the Levant. As we will discuss in more detail below, this perspective provides new insights into the history of orientalism in Italy: a topic that, if understood in the all-encompassing sense fashioned by Edward Said's works, has only recently started to draw considerable scholarly attention. However, it is impossible to disentangle this set of relations from the larger context of intra-European contacts and the connections between Europe and Asia. This is especially relevant for post-unification Italy, when intense exchanges and conflicts took place between Italy and other European countries, both within Europe and on the stage of European expansionism in Asia. A case in point, which is worth mentioning even though it is not discussed in this volume, is the construction of the Suez Canal, which was marked by intense international competition (Surdich 1982; 1992). In this sense, on the European side of the problem, this volume can offer an outline of a shared but conflicting history of the political and cultural legacy of travel literature. Before we discuss these issues in detail, however, it is necessary to present a methodological frame of the foundational notion of "rereading".

1. Rereading

From a methodological point of view, we have adopted an open approach to rereading, in the sense that we are eager to show that this kind of analysis is applicable to different fields of expertise and scholarly traditions. In our understanding, rereading can be thought of in such ample terms that it can be deployed even by drawing on the most traditional of theoretical approaches to history and history writing. In fact, if rereading is a process through which pre-existing texts acquire new forms and new meaning according to the present reader's needs and positions, that is to say, it is a process of actualization, then even the time-honoured and much-cited adage by neo-idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) that all history is contemporary history can be used to methodologically inform analysis of the rereadings. This, at least, is the position taken by one of our authors, Alessandro Tripepi. In fact, such methodological openness also reflects the different disciplinary backgrounds of the

authors of this volume: from sinology to the history of architecture, from the intellectual history of orientalism to the history of early modern diplomacy, from colonial museology to Italian studies. In this context, the most important tools to analyse rereadings are also the most basic of the historian's craft: a philological approach to the texts and their successive iterations, studied and discussed in their respective historical context.

However, it is useful to discuss some of the methodological tools that can be used both to interpret rereading as a cultural practice and to underpin its study in a historical perspective. It is also important to say that, in actual fact, this distinction has a merely operational value, since we understand our own analysis of rereadings as rereadings in their own right. From this point of view, the toolkit provided by constructivist approaches is most useful. While the study of travel literature can aim to discuss the historical reality embedded in these texts, by distinguishing what is fact from what is fiction or interpretation, focusing on rereadings implies that everything surrounding, contained and circulated in the text—prefaces, footnotes, reviews, excerpts, paraphrases, the material aspects of editions and reeditions, and so on—contributes in a decisive way to what meanings it is given. In other words, the historical meaning of each piece of travel literature is culturally and socially constructed by readers through a large array of tools, one of which is the practice of reading itself. In this perspective, it should come as no surprise that one of our authors, Aglaia De Angeli, has drawn upon the critical and theoretical contributions provided by Jacques Derrida in *De la grammatologie* (1967) and by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (1970) in order to grasp rereading as a multi-layered process of interpretation and appropriation of travel literature.

Another reference that may be particularly useful in our case is the concept of *réemploi* as defined by Michel de Certeau throughout his work, first published in 1980, *L'invention du quotidien* (Certeau 1990). Certeau wrote about uses, appropriations and re-employment as the “tactiques” utilized by ordinary people while interacting with objects, products, texts and ideas. Certeau emphasized the subversive potential of such “tactiques” vis-à-vis the “strategies” deployed by the dominant classes, thus presenting what is commonly thought of as passive consumption as a different kind of production (Certeau 1990, xxxv–liii). Certeau also concentrated on reading as a creative practice determined by such “tactiques”, so much so that he came to call it “braconnage” (“poaching”; Certeau 1990, 239–55).

While the post-unification Italian actors that we discuss were almost always part of the dominant classes, their discourses about “Italian” travellers were often framed in revanchist terms, thus betraying the profound inferiority complex of the new Italian elite: against the more solid national narratives, not to mention the stronger economies, fully-fledged academic traditions and larger colonial empires of other European countries such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany, the Italian actors struggled to move from a position of perceived inferiority and historical dispossession to the place in the world that Italy allegedly deserved. Thus, they often framed the rereadings and reuses of early modern travellers as disrupting what they perceived to be the previous interpretations:

the travellers that were once considered to be “Venetian”, “Genoese”, “Florentine” and the like, and especially known for their services to “foreign powers”, as in the case of Columbus and Spain, were now increasingly perceived and presented as “Italians”. This interpretation depended closely on selecting which documents to publish, how to publish them, in what kind of institutional context, editorial setting and with what paratexts, reformulations, paraphrasing, etc. In this sense, the concept of *réemploi* is useful to underline the different scales of the rereadings and to emphasize both the different purpose of this practice and the different standing of the social groups employing it. At the international level, on the one hand, rereadings of travel literature were useful to subvert images of Italy perceived as negative and undeserved. At the domestic level, on the other hand, they were instrumental to the creation of a pedagogical narrative to be imposed on the nascent “nation” regardless of class difference. In fact, authors engaging in the practice of rereading did not only address scholars and researchers, but aimed to speak to a wider audience, which probably included both middle and working classes. These issues thus demand that we engage critically with the question of nation-building and national identity in the Italian context.

2. Nation-building

The essays in *Rereading Travellers* highlight the multiple, fragmented and negotiated nature of the processes involved in national identity-building, which are understood as the result of political, diplomatic, commercial and cultural encounters and clashes involving what are often very distant countries. These processes are studied over multiple temporalities and at different scales, in order to show how national identity is built through the continuous reworking of the past experiences of different societies (Bollati 1983). In this sense, the emerging national community is the result of the re-translation of these different experiences into a unified narrative. Italian political unity was only achieved in 1861, after centuries of political fragmentation and foreign domination. As stated by John Foot (2003), after the unification the Italian state found legitimation extremely difficult to obtain. Once unity was achieved, the pursuit of status on the international stage combined with the need to secure an Italian identity at an internal level, in a territory that until then had been politically and culturally fragmented.

In their seminal collection of essays, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger effectively underlined the spread of cultural practices in relation to the need for social cohesion and nation-building and how this intertwinement impacted on the perceptions and representations of a shared history. As Benedict Anderson (1983) pointed out, thinking of oneself as a member of a national public—envisaged as a large “family” or “community”, but made up of thousands or millions of people, most of whom one will never meet—is an impressive feat of the imagination. Mosse’s innovative anthropological approach to nationalism and his discussion of myth, liturgy and ritual as national legitimation has been crucial in understanding the emergence of European nationalisms, not least in Italy. As Mosse highlights, it was through

myths that the people participated in the worship of themselves as a nation (Mosse 1975). As for other countries across the globe, Italian nation-building also rested heavily on a game of appearances: how Italians saw themselves was increasingly connected to (the discussion of) how foreigners saw Italy. The work of Stuart Hall (1996) clearly demonstrates how much is important for nationalism to build an identity that is strong in the eyes of others.

At least since the historiographical renewal brought about, among others, by the works of Franco Venturi (1973), the events of the century leading to the Risorgimento and the Risorgimento itself have been placed in the context of cultural exchanges involving European and extra-European intellectuals, travellers, politicians and revolutionaries. In this historiographical frame, the question of Italian nation-building has been discussed, for example, by analysing the role played by the “invention” of a “national” past, from the medieval city-states and their prosperity and freedom to the Renaissance and the subsequent “decline” brought about by foreign domination; or by examining the intersections of religious and political discourses in the context of the struggle for “independence” and national unity (Banti 2000, 2006). The question of Italian identity and nation-building is still a heated topic of discussion both outside and inside academia (see e.g., Raimo 2019; Benigno and Mineo 2020).

However, limited attention has been paid to the problem of the construction of national identity through early modern travellers from the peninsula, or, in other words, those who came to be considered as the manifestation of the particular “spirit” of Italy—the *genio italico*. As Silvana Patriarca noted (2010), Risorgimento Italy was often critiqued as the Italians were believed to be indolent and effeminate, the opposite qualities to those of the travellers, increasingly presented as exemplary, brave and adventurous, that the Italians should emulate.

Italy’s first African War (1880–1896) pitted the young and ambitious Italian nation, the “Least of Europe’s Great Powers” (Labanca 2015), against the Ethiopian empire. As Finaldi (2009) argues, the outcome was a humiliating defeat for Italy, but notwithstanding Italy’s disastrous first colonial experience, the idea of “empire” entered the minds of the Italian people. Italy felt the need to compensate for losses and a lack of relevance in the international arena by referring to a glorious past and characters—travellers, explorers and inventors—known to all, from whom Italians could legitimately claim to descend. The phenomenon of the construction and “accumulation” of the “myth of Italian travellers” in the East, from Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci to Giuseppe Tucci and Giotto Dainelli, is as a multidirectional use of the past spanning from the liberal and Fascist regimes to the proclamation of the republic and present-day Italy. This myth conveys an idea of Italianness that we could provocatively compare to other imperial ideas shaped around the qualities of a given community, such as those discussed by Anthony Pagden for early modern Spain, Great Britain and France (Pagden 1995). The very existence of “Italian” travellers doing great deeds throughout the ages implied the historical continuity of a national character incarnated in the travellers and helped the dominant classes—those doing most of the readings—to propose the nation a fitting role, or destiny, for their expectations.

The national use of travellers is visible at a more practical level too. For instance, as is widely known, Fascist Italy used the “Roman” image of the Mediterranean Sea as *Mare Nostrum* as rhetorical justification for its hegemonic claims over the area. In a similar way, the past experiences of travellers from the Italian peninsula came to be reread in order to lay claim to, build and eventually justify a large array of political, military and economic operations in areas which were completely outside the scope of the country’s foreign policy. Thus, rereadings of travellers can be understood as the meeting point of two apparently distinct historical but mutually supporting phenomena: the overarching project of nation-building and the short-term goals of foreign policy. As we discuss below, travellers are connectors between two or more human polities: in this sense, rereading travellers was as instrumental for Italian nation-building as it was for fashioning collective identities for the other communities to which the travellers seemingly connected the Italian rereaders.

It should be remembered, however, that despite their great success, such nation-oriented rereadings also met with resistance, as is shown for example by Antonio Gramsci’s remarks about the fundamental cosmopolitanism of early modern “Italian” travellers, in a veritable critique of the kind of rereadings that we intend to study (Gramsci [1949] 1966, 55–66). Gramsci’s insightful critique suggests that such interpretative resistance should not be regarded as episodic. Indeed, travel writing in Italian has acquired different meanings and played different intellectual, cultural and political roles across the centuries, with cosmopolitan and national (re)readings often available at the same time (Hester 2008, 2019). Although our study focuses on nation-oriented rereadings, it is important not to lose sight of the social and political polysemy of travel literature as a subject of further study.

3. Travel and travellers

Travellers and travel literature have been an object of literary and historical enquiry at least since the beginning of the twentieth century. The open character of travel literature as a genre allows for virtually endless interpretative possibilities and lends this body of texts to the most diverse methodological stances. This state of things is well exemplified by the different traditions of scholarly study of travel literature that have spawned along national or intellectual boundaries. For instance, in the French-speaking tradition, the works by Friedrich Wolfzettel (1996) and Daniel Roche (2003) respectively exemplify the application of the Foucauldian concept of *discours* to travel literature and the attention to both material structures and *mentalités* typical of later interpreters of the *Annales* school of historiography. The extreme richness and complexity achieved by “travel writing studies” in recent decades can also be clearly seen in the plethora of companions, handbooks and introductions produced in the Anglosphere. Furthermore, this scientific literature is of interest with regard to its organizational and methodological principles. For example, the recent *Cambridge History of Travel Writing* (Das and Young 2019) is organized first of all by time frames: one chapter is dedicated to antiquity, two chapters to the Middle Ages, two to

the early modern age, and one chapter each for the last three centuries starting with the eighteenth century. Then a series of chapters mostly conceived along national, geographical or national-linguistic lines follow suit, with chapters on travel writing labelled as “Arabic”, “from Eastern Europe”, “in French” and “African”, purportedly sewn together in “a global context”. The last section, about “perspectives on travel writing”, first expounds the newly acquired importance of “locality” in historical studies, then takes a more traditional approach to the different forms of travel writing (letters, diaries, etc.), while the final chapters discuss some of the most heated methodological and theoretical topics of travel writing studies, such as gender, translation and ecocriticism. Similarly rich and multifarious expositions can also be found in a number of other pieces of scholarly literature (see e.g., Thompson 2011; Pettinger and Youngs 2020).

In order to shape our conception of travellers, we started from the fundamental open-endedness of both travel literature and the scholarly tradition revolving around it. As is widely recognized, in the great majority of cases, travelling is not all that travellers do (at least until very recent times): for a start, the Holy Trinity of early modern travellers’ classification is “diplomats, merchants and missionaries”. We are often taught that the eighteenth century added scientists to the category and that the nineteenth century saw the awakening of mass travel, aka tourism. While such definitions are historically and contextually significant, and even more so for each specific rereading, what is relevant for us is the conception of travellers as people in motion, connecting one place or one community to another, in a specific historical setting as well as in historiography and the collective memory. Such a loose definition of travellers allows us to comprise among others merchants and colonial administrators, missionaries and diplomats, scholars, scientists and exiles under this heading, and even those historical figures that we are not accustomed to thinking of as travellers, due to the uniqueness of their situation (such as the case of the Lebanese emir, Fakhr al-Din Ma’n, or the Knights of Rhodes). In other words, travellers, and the traces they left or the traces left for them, are meeting points and places of identity.

It is evident that this methodological position shows something that we have already discussed above: in submitting travel literature to this kind of analysis, at the level of both our definition of travellers and the connections established between travel literature, orientalism and nation-building, we are ourselves making and proposing a rereading of these sources. As such, it is evident that for all its scientific soundness, this operation is inescapably linked to the needs and expectations of present-day research in the humanities, not to mention larger political and societal issues, from the rise of new forms of nationalism to the all-important role which multiple Asian countries have come to play on the international stage in the last two decades.

4. Orientalism and oriental studies

Until recently, the intellectual appropriation of the “Orient” performed by modern Italian culture was a relatively unexplored terrain. This volume sets out

to promote innovative approaches to this subject by engaging in a creative dialogue between scholarly traditions connected to oriental studies and studies on orientalism in Italy.

The amount of scholarly literature that has piled up both before and especially since Said's ground-breaking essay on *Orientalism* (Said 1978) is such that any comprehensive treatment of the subject in the short space of this introduction would inevitably misfire.¹ The discussion of *Orientalism* and its legacy has nearly evolved to the status of a literary genre in itself, but it is nonetheless necessary to clarify where *Rereading Travellers to the East* stands with respect to the multifarious and apparently endless theoretical and methodological debates revolving around the issue of orientalism. Said's many critics have convincingly argued that the main force behind the development of "orientalism", taken in its scholarly manifestation, was neither the colonizer's lust for power and riches, nor the "Enlightenment project" epitomized in the *mission civilisatrice* (e.g., Irwin 2006; App 2010). The Middle Eastern focus of Said's analysis was misleading considering the much more varying experiences of other Asian polities located farther East. Almost anything that happened before that fateful day in which Napoleon set foot in Egypt runs counter to the monolithic portrait of the orientalizing West given by Said and his followers (e.g., Philipps 2014). In some important cases, the construction of a specific vision of the Orient was the result of cooperation between the dominant classes on the two sides of the imperial divide (e.g., Raj 2001). To all this we may add that the all-encompassing perspective of Said's conception of orientalism has often had a blurring rather than clarifying effect on the connections between the professional and disciplinary development of the academic field of oriental studies on the one hand, and the many different manifestations of orientalism in the arts or in popular literature on the other. On the contrary, only an operative distinction between "academic" and "extra-academic" orientalism can lead to a sound analysis of the actual entanglements between the two fields. What is most important for us, however, is the contradiction between Said's portrait of a monolithic West and his narrow focus on British, French and American dealings with the Orient. This contradiction has encouraged the production of many valuable works analysing contexts and backgrounds left out from Said's viewpoint: the study of orientalism in the German-speaking world,² for instance, has had a great hand in nuancing the characterization of orientalism as a western political and intellectual phenomenon. What about Italy?

¹ For a review of the main critical reactions to Said's *Orientalism*, the books by A.L. Macfie (2000) and Daniel Varisco (2007) are still useful.

² The literature on German-speaking orientalism has greatly expanded over the last 20 years, tackling specific questions such as the entanglements between orientalism, philology and race theories between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See, among others, the works of Pascale Rabault-F Feuerhahn (2008), Suzanne Marchand (2009) and Ursula Wokocek (2009).

First of all, it is important to remark that the Italian-speaking scholarly landscape includes different disciplinary traditions within which it has been possible to analyse the relations between Europe and Asia as a subject of intellectual and cultural as well as political history, by drawing upon several other resources than Said's work.³ Even in the more narrow field of oriental studies, the tradition of disciplinary self-reflection and self-representation that Italian "orientalists" share with their European counterparts has developed into different strands of intellectual and institutional history of oriental studies, which by no means take Said's thesis as their defining trait.⁴

However, Said's global impact on the history of the humanities has undoubtedly pushed many Italian scholars to engage critically with his work and arguably played a significant role in encouraging them to take part in the ongoing reshaping of the study of orientalism. This development can be seen, for instance, through many of the essays collected in the three-volume project edited by Gabriele Proglia (2012). At the same time, scholars active in the field of Italian studies abroad have also contributed to the study of orientalism in modern Italy in the perspective explored by Said and his more constructive critics, like in the case of Barbara Spackman's important studies about female Italian travellers to the East (recently gathered in Spackman 2017).

On the other hand, the very recent special issue of the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* edited by Rolando Minuti and Adrian Lyttelton ("Italy's Orient") conveys the relatively widespread scholarly position according to which while not ignoring the legacy of Said's work, any analysis of the history of orientalism and oriental studies should be based on a philological attention to the texts and a strong historical sensibility towards the political and intellectual context in which these texts were produced (Lyttelton 2021; Minuti 2021). At the same time, it is important not to lose sight of the analogies, connections and similarities in the ways of dealing with the Orient found all over Europe—in a word, the transnational nature of any cultural development across the modern age, an issue that Minuti and Lyttelton discuss in terms of the construction of "Europeanness" (Minuti 2021, 106). The essays collected in *Rereading Travellers to the East* share this methodological approach, in the sense that only a careful discussion of text and context can lead to the conclusion that any western—in our

³ We are thinking, for example, of Franco Venturi's seminal essay on oriental despotism (Venturi 1960), or about the tradition of studies on *alterità* ("otherness") that drew upon a critical appraisal of Said as well as Tzvetan Todorov's work (in particular Todorov 1982) in addition to well-established strands of research about religious difference and tolerance (see e.g., Rostagno 1983; Abbattista and Minuti 2006; Formica 2012; Tarantino 2012; Santus 2019; Tarantino and von Wyss-Giacosa 2021). To this we may add the perspective on oriental studies in terms of history of historiography developed by Fulvio Tessitore (2008) among others.

⁴ If the works of Arabist Francesco Gabrieli (1975, 1993) are a case in point from both before and after Said's *Orientalism*, a useful example is provided by the essays collected in *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* XCIV 1 (2021), such as those by Mastrangelo, Lo Turco and Crisanti.

case Italian—“gaze” on the East may have been part and parcel of a hegemonic project. The importance of context, understood as a specific political, social, cultural and material setting, is particularly evident in the case of Italy, where the often unique features of its different urban communities impacted significantly on how scholarly traditions and ways of dealing with Asia developed, as is discussed in Filipa Lowndes Vicente’s study on orientalism in Florence for instance (2012). However, for our case, we have to place emphasis on a study of orientalism “in the national context”.⁵

Several specific features of the history of Italy as a unitary state and an “imagined community” in the making—the process of unification, its faltering but brutal colonial expansion, the rise and establishment of Fascism, the constitution of the Axis and the abrupt shift to the republic and democracy—impacted heavily on “Italian” ways of dealing with Asia, both in the present and at the level of the historical reconstructions of “Italian” contacts in the past. What is more, a relative commonality of language going back to well before the unification made it comparatively easy to project into the past the Italianness of both the travellers and their relations with Asia.

Some of these specific features are precisely what encourages us to not lose sight of the fact that some of the methodological strong points espoused by Said and later propagated by postcolonial studies are still valid and even useful for a discussion of the Italian case. In the first place, the “nexus of knowledge and power”, or the connection between orientalism and imperialism, presented by Said as the cornerstone of European dealings with Asia (Said 1978, 1–28), is crucial to our work insofar as it is indeed possible to document relevant instances of this connection. Secondly, the notion of “imaginative geography” (Said 1978, 49–73) is just as important. Scholars operating both inside and outside postcolonial studies have made it clear that our concepts of geographical space, including the continents (Lewis and Wigen 1992), or what we are used to calling East and West, “have never been free of myth and fantasy” (Hall 1992, 185). In more general terms, their validity ultimately depends upon the political, intellectual and material conditions of their very production (Grataloup 2018). Within the perspective that we have chosen, the issues raised by imaginative geographies concern both the East and Italy. The focus on travellers allows us to show a distinct way of “creating” both of these spaces: the Orient that we are dealing with was mostly materialized (and brought to the attention of the Italian reading public) through references to specific spaces and times in which Italy itself could be materialized by means of the travellers’ passage—and vice versa. While Italy as an idea is stretched beyond its (mobile) geographical boundaries, many different Orients are summoned and the traditional tropes constituting its image—wealth and decadence, ignorance and wisdom, barbarity and civilization—are arranged in specific forms according to (the rereading of) each traveller’s expe-

⁵ The expression is taken from the series of essays edited by Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich between the 1980s and 1990s; see e.g., Porter and Teich (1981).

rience. Finally, the fundamental interplay between the Self and Other, identity and difference, that forms such an important part of Said's work and is also quite familiar to many different Italian scholarly traditions, is extremely relevant for our work too, since we intend to show the extent to which rereading travellers, aiming to enhance their "Italianness", contributed to nation-building processes. In this sense, our work fits the perspective explored by Fabrizio De Donno's important study of Italian orientalism, in which Italian dealings with the Orient are connected to the formation of nationhood (De Donno 2019).

5. Women as travellers

Before discussing the content of the papers, it may be useful to address the important question of woman as travellers. Akhimie and Bernadette have pointed out how early modern women's travel has traditionally been construed as an "absent presence" due to the general ban on women's movement outside the domestic sphere (2019, 1). In fact, the mobility of men was made possible by the stability of women (Mazzei 2013, 58). Nevertheless, the travels of European women constitute a topic that has certainly attracted the attention of historians over the years (Corsi 1999; Rossi 2005; Khoo-Lattimore and Wilson 2016). In the papers collected in this volume, however, the presence of women is extremely limited, if not completely absent, for several reasons.

Even though the figures of some European female travellers developed into myths, like the Viking explorer Gudrid Thorbjarnardóttir or the pilgrim Egeria, the presence of female long-distance/intercontinental travellers was extremely limited in early modern times and linked to specific circumstances. For instance, Jeanne Baret (1740–1804) was probably the first woman to circumnavigate the globe as a member of Louis Antoine de Bougainville's expedition in 1766–1769, but she did so disguised as a man, enlisted as assistant to the expedition's naturalist, Philibert Commerçon (Dunmore 2002). Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that even if women travellers did exist, they left very few traces (Maćzak 1994, 215). More certainly still, we can affirm that even if some of them left documentation, their travels were reread in later periods to a much lesser extent than those of their male colleagues.

For many centuries, few women were allowed to follow their diplomatic husbands on their travels. Of these, a particularly famous case is that of Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762), who from 1716 to 1718 travelled as the wife of the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, in what was the golden age of the "grand tour" (Kostova 2001; O'Loughlin 2018; Geurts 2020; Tosi 2020). Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the picture of female travellers to the East began to change (Ciafardoni 2021), with many contributing significantly to the ever-changing genre of travel literature, such as Esther Stanhope (1776–1839), credited with carrying out pioneering excavations in the Ottoman Empire (the archaeological excavation of Ashkelon in 1815), who left six volumes of memoirs printed after her death. The British writer Gertrude Bell (1868–1926), who studied modern history at Oxford University, spent several

years travelling extensively in Iran, Syria and Iraq, and during World War I was recruited by the British Intelligence Service in Cairo, working with the famed T. E. Lawrence supporting the Hashemite dynasties (Cohen and Sharp Joukowsky 2006). As regards the Italian case (of which a systematic account can be found in Frediani, Ricorda, and Rossi 2013), women travellers between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were often simply wives following their husbands in the Italian colonies (Camilotti 2015). As noted by Scriboni (1996, 306), the travels of women met with prejudice and suspicion, and therefore they were mainly accompanied by family members (fathers, husbands, brothers), lest their African voyages jeopardize their chastity. This is the case of Rosalia Pianavia-Vivaldi Bossiner, wife of Colonel Pianavia-Vivaldi, who travelled for three years in Eritrea between 1893 and 1896, publishing the diary *Tre anni in Eritrea* (1901), accompanied by the pictures she took herself. Likewise, Amelia Pigazzi, wife of explorer Giuseppe De Reali (1877–1937), accompanied him to the Congo in 1925, collecting her impressions in the published diary *Alcuni appunti del mio viaggio al Congo* (1925), or the wife of big-game hunter, writer and director Vittorio Tedesco Zammarano (1890–1959), accompanied him on his Somali travels, immortalized by him in the feature film *Il sentiero delle belve* (1932). And again, accompanying German painter Fritz Berthold, who had been invited to paint the landscapes of the Somali colony in the 1930s by Governor Maurizio Rava, was his wife, Virginie Neuhaus, who published her book of memories *Nella più lontana terra dell'Impero* (1937).

Still, some female travellers left their mark, including a literary one, on the history of Italian travel to the East. Princess Cristina Trivulzio di Belgiojoso (1808–1871) aristocrat and Risorgimento supporter, in exile on account of her active role in the failed Roman Republic of 1848, Belgiojoso lived in Anatolia for five years, where she authored the books *La vie intime et la vie nomade en Orient* (1855) and *Asie Mineure et Syrie, souvenirs de voyage* (1858) (Ricorda 2011). Amalia Nizzoli (1805–?) travelled to and resided in Egypt, moving there with her family when she was thirteen, entrusting her impressions of the country to her memoirs *Memorie sull'Egitto e specialmente sui costumi delle donne orientali e gli harem, scritte durante il suo soggiorno in quel paese* (Scriboni 1996; Spackman 2017). Particularly interesting is the case of Giuseppina Croci (1863–1955), a spinning mill worker in Lombardy. In 1890 she left for Shanghai to train Chinese women in the use of mechanical spinning machines, and stayed there for five years, returning to Italy with a large sum of money. Her diary, written during the 37 days she spent sailing from Genoa to Shanghai, is kept in the archives in Pieve Santo Stefano (Piastra 2013). Elisa Chimenti (1883–1969), writer and ethnographer, recorded and translated the oral traditions of Moroccan women: her family emigrated to Tunis in 1884 when she was an infant and she spent her whole life in North Africa, opening in 1914 an Italian school in Tangeri, where she died in 1969. In her extremely unusual case, the journey is that from the “East” to Europe, where she travelled, mainly to Germany, for research purposes (Cederna 2019).

To sum up, the absence of rereadings of travel literature written by women in this volume is mainly explained by the fact that this kind of text was extremely

rare in the chronological time frame in which travel literature later subjected to rereadings was produced, namely the early modern age; on the contrary, the period in which women acquired increased mobility and started publishing travelogues instead fell in the period which interests us for its rereadings more than for its own travel literature. In fact, despite being much less present in the East than their male counterparts, while female travellers may not have left traces that were reinterpreted and reread, they were nevertheless involved in the practice of rereading themselves: as Falcucci notes in her work in this volume, Olga Pinto (1903–1970), Tullia Gasparrini Leporace (1910–1969) and Maria Francesca Tiepolo (1925–2020) all worked on the editions of the *Nuovo Ramusio* travel literature series. While Pinto was vice-director at the Biblioteca dell'Istituto di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte in Rome (Gabrieli 1971), and Gasparrini Leporace worked at the Biblioteca Centrale Nazionale in the same city, Tiepolo worked as an archivist and for the superintendence in Veneto. Further studies could determine whether there were differences in their rereading operations compared to their male counterparts. Moreover, the perspective of this volume suggests considering the “gender strand” in travel literature studies as a case of “mass” rereading of these texts, an aspect also deserving further investigation.

6. The contributions

The papers collected in this volume reflect the transdisciplinary approach discussed above and are founded on a large array of different sources. The first contribution, written by Beatrice Falcucci (*“Rievocare certe nobili opere dei nostri maggiori”: the Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO) and the “Myth” of Italian Travellers to the East*), offers a long-term perspective on the general question of rereading travellers to the East in post-unification Italy, while focusing on the activities of one of the Italian powerhouses of oriental studies, the Rome-based Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO). In particular, Falcucci’s study aims to investigate the development of a shared sense of identity in Italy—from its unification until the end of the colonial empire, without neglecting its traces in the republican period. Falcucci shows how the production and dissemination of an Italian national consciousness was based largely on the construction of a “mythical past”, through exhibitions, collections, printed works, magazines and institutes dedicated to magnifying the “exploits” of early modern “Italian” travellers and explorers in the East, from Marco Polo to Giuseppe Tucci. In so doing, the paper touches upon several issues discussed in more detail in the subsequent papers.

In his paper, Fabrizio De Donno (*Rereading Italian Travellers to Africa: Precursors, Identities and Interracial Relations in Narratives of Italian Colonialism*) discusses a number of writings about Africa by travellers which are reread, both historically and by the author, in order to construct and deconstruct Italian colonial identity. De Donno focuses on Cesare Cesari’s *Viaggi africani di Pellegrino Matteucci* (1932), in which Matteucci is portrayed as a precursor of Fascist colonialism, and a contributor to Fascist “colonial science”. The essay then moves

on to explore the more recent rereading by Angelo Del Boca and Igiaba Scego of respectively Indro Montanelli's *XX Battaglione Eritreo* (1936) and Enrico Emanuelli's *Settimana nera* (1961). In bringing these texts together, the essay shows that their rereading maps the transformations of Italianness from colonial to postcolonial times and reveals how colonial identity relied on a series of gender, racial and sexual tropes of exploration and conquest.

Alessandro Tripepi introduces us to the Far East in *Unsheathing the Katanas. The Long Fortune of the First Two Japanese Embassies in Italy: Rediscovery and Rereading between Continuity and Discontinuity (1873-1905)*. At the end of the nineteenth century, Italy welcomed an official Japanese embassy. Its aim was to integrate the country into the new world scene it was entering; it was also the starting point for diplomatic and political relationships that would evolve into the infamous Tripartite Pact in the late 1930s. However, this "first" contact took place in the context of the increasing international rivalry in the Far East that ultimately led to the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). Caught in a web of political, economic and industrial interests, some Italian actors took this encounter as an opportunity to rediscover, or rather invent, the long history of Italo-Japanese contacts through the study of early modern Japanese "ambassadors" visiting Italy.

Aglaia De Angeli moves from Japan to China in *Lodovico Nocentini: A Rereader of Modern Italian Travellers to China*. In 1882 sinologist Nocentini published a biography of Matteo Ricci, the most famous Jesuit active in China between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nocentini's work was the first comprehensive biography of Ricci not written by a fellow cleric. Nocentini's rereadings of Ricci's experience and works, mediated through the writings of other authors, provided a significant understanding of the origins of sinology and the role of Matteo Ricci, as an early modern Italian traveller, in the relations between China and the West. De Angeli examines Nocentini's rereadings through concepts and theories derived from the writings of Vladimir Nabokov, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, coming to understand Nocentini's work as a process of interpretation and re-interpretation, as well as appropriation of the original meanings of Jesuit writings.

The contribution of Luca Orlandi (*Searching for 'Italianità' in the Dodecanese Islands (1912-1943). Some Considerations on Art, Architecture and Archaeology through the Works of Hermes Balducci*) offers a different insight into the "East". Indeed, in his paper, Orlandi discusses how the search for the nation's identity might also have passed through the enhancement of the "Italian" past of the 14 Aegean islands—the Dodecanese—annexed by Italy during the Italo-Turkish War (1911–1912). In particular, Orlandi examines the work of the young engineer Hermes Balducci, who well represents the ambiguous attitude of the colonizers during the Fascist period, between an interest in the different manifestations of the multi-layered cultural landscape of the islands and the strong tendencies to "Italianize" both their historical past and current aspect.

With his essay *Medici Ambitions and Fascist Policies. (Re)reading the Relations between Italy and the Levant in the 1930s through the Historiography on Fakhr al-Dīn II*, Davide Trentacoste provides a new reading of Fascist foreign policy in the Middle East. Through the analysis of Maronite father Paolo Carali's work

on Lebanese Druze emir Fakhr al-Dīn Maʿn (d. 1635), the author offers new insights into how Fascist Italy tried to create a historical narrative in support of its ambitions in the region, and in particular Lebanon. While the story of the relations between the Lebanese emir and the Grand Duchy of Tuscany has been told many times, the aim of this contribution is to discuss Carali's work as part of Fascist propaganda which set out to historically justify Fascist ambitions in the Levant by creating the myth of the civilizing effects of the contacts between Fakhr-al Din and Tuscany, narratively absorbed into "Italy" for the occasion.

In *An Italian Hero for China. Reading Marco Polo in the Fascist Era*, Laura De Giorgi gives an overview of the readings of Marco Polo's enterprise offered to the Italian public opinion during the Fascist era. The story of Marco Polo was adapted to the needs of patriotic pedagogy, the propaganda of Fascist values and colonial aspirations and the attempt to redefine Rome's political, economic and cultural role in the world. In a complex intertwining of academic and popular readings, the Venetian traveller was transformed by the official discourse into a symbol of Italianness in China and used to stress Italy's distinctive identity in comparison with the other Western powers. Although the Chinese reception of this discourse was limited at that time, this process certainly contributed to establishing Marco Polo's iconic significance in Sino-Italian cultural diplomacy later in the twentieth century.

In the last essay of the volume, *The Idea of Italian Travellers to Iran. Scholarly Research and Cultural Diplomacy in Post-war Italy*, Emanuele Giusti discusses the historical formation of "Italian travellers to Iran" as both a popular idea and scientific category. In the three decades after the Second World War, Italy and Iran were both going through profound transformations and entered a phase of intense political, economic and cultural relations. In this context, scholarly interests and political agendas jointly contributed to a representation of past travellers as the manifestation of an imagined and almost eternal connection between the two civilizations. This representation served to rhetorically enhance the role played by both countries in the history of mankind, and the contribution Italy and Iran could still give to humanity as nations among nations. However, Giusti argues that these events have also left their mark on how the history of connections between Italy and Iran, and the history of Iranian studies in Italy, are perceived and represented in scholarly milieus.

Finally, in his afterword, Giovanni Tarantino addresses the topic of Western representations of China by applying the notion of rereading to a wide variety of sources and media, including ballet and, in particular, a typically twentieth-century manifestation of the travel experience, namely the documentary, in this case *Chung Kuo/China* by Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni (1972). Paying attention to both Western and Chinese rereadings, Tarantino highlights how the practice of rereading can both support strategies of "assimilation and domination", but also give rise to stories "of restitution, reparation and beauty".

These papers can be read in many ways. The order in which we have just listed the chapters broadly follows the chronology of the rereadings, spanning from the unification to the first decades of the republic, and allows both continuities and ruptures to be traced in the patterns in which the travels are reread. While

the “Italianness” of the travellers is never forgotten, from the late nineteenth century to the 1970s, the urgent need that the heirs of the Risorgimento felt to fashion a national past was compounded by the systematization and escalation of the hegemonic or imperialist uses of this past during the Fascist regime, to then give way to the cosmopolitanism of nations typical of the days of the economic miracle. In this way, an analysis of the rereadings over the long term offers new insights into both Italian nation-building and the country’s relations with Asia.

However, other interpretive perspectives can be adopted. For example, it is not rare for travellers to be reread in the context of strong economic opportunities, as is shown by the sale of armaments to Japan discussed in Tripepi’s paper or the all-important oil agreement between Italy’s ENI and Iran referred to by Giusti. The papers by De Giorgi and De Angeli and the afterword by Tarantino all deal with the relations between Italy and China; however, De Angeli discusses the kind and scope of the rereadings available in the nascent disciplinary field of sinology in Italy, while by analysing rereadings offered to a wider public through newspapers and popular literature, De Giorgi offers an insight into the effects of those rereadings that mixed a scholarly perspective with the clear intent to produce an impression on the masses. Tarantino, for his part, highlights the fault lines that could emerge around a specific travel experience and its filmic representation, at a time when conflicting political groups in a variety of countries were making their own rereadings. Another perspective could be taken from the papers dealing directly with the Mediterranean, like those of Trentacoste and Orlandi. While the historical reality of the presence of the “Italian” states in the early modern Mediterranean was one of fragmentation and rivalry, experiences as different as those of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and the Knights of Rhodes, not to mention Venice, Genoa or the papacy, were flattened into a uniformed national narrative, creating the myth of an “Italian” Mediterranean past. Last but not least, the papers by Falucci and De Donno show the profound intertwining between the practice of rereading travellers and the establishment of colonial projects and forms of identity, confirming the fluidity of any notion of the “Orient” one more time. Moreover, their perspective expounds the inextricable entanglement of rereadings with the legacy of colonialism, in the sense that the myth of “Italian travellers” has left a mark on the national conscience which is impossible to separate from the colonial past, perhaps the main field of application of the hegemonic discourse fashioned around the travellers of the past.

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