

“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

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate the development of a shared sense of identity and community that occurred in Italy from its unification until the end of the colonial empire, and its traces in the republican period. This nation-building process will be examined by analysing Italy’s relationship with the early modern age of the Peninsula and its pre-unification travellers to the East. We will see how the production and dissemination of an Italian national consciousness and sentiment was based largely on the construction of a “mythical past” through exhibitions, collections, printed works, magazines and institutes dedicated to magnifying the “exploits” of travellers and explorers in the East, from Marco Polo to Giuseppe Tucci.

Keywords: Italian colonialism, Italian nation-building, Giovanni Gentile, Giuseppe Tucci, IsMEO

This work examines the appropriation of the “Italian” past for political purposes along with the alleged, constantly asserted “exploits” of “Italians” throughout time and their intertwining with political and cultural colonialism (and its justification) and Italy’s foreign policy, especially in the 1930s. The aim of this study is to highlight the nexus between the competition for status at the international level and the domestic political outcomes of cultural policies connected to Italy’s need to build a national legitimacy and identity and a frame for its imperial aspirations. The paper investigates the uses of “Italian history” and the process of developing an “Italian narrative” around the “mythical” figures of travellers to the East from the early modern period. In fact, the liberal State, and later the Fascist regime, appropriated not only the ancient Roman past but also the medieval era and the Renaissance (Lazzaro and Crum 2004; Lasansky 2004) to create a canon of “*italianità*”. This discourse remained alive for many decades and, as we will see, often returned as a theme, in close connection with the political and cultural life of modern Italy. In particular, the chapter will focus on IsMEO, an institute founded in the Fascist period by Giovanni Gentile and Giuseppe Tucci, as the Fascist State decided to finance tensions and tendencies that had already been ongoing for some considerable time, albeit in an unorganized manner, and point them in a single direction. At the heart of the Fascist plan for Italy was the belief that Fas-

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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*, © Author(s), CC BY 4.0, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-579-0.04, in Beatrice Falcucci, Emanuele Giusti, Davide Trentacoste (edited by), *Rereading Travellers to the East. Shaping Identities and Building the Nation in Post-unification Italy*, pp. 29-64, 2022, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 978-88-5518-579-0, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-579-0

cist foreign policy was simply a path to rebuild an (imaginary) “Italian empire” that already existed. This determination was combined with a desire to confirm that Italians had arrived “first” in a particular place (on a mountain top, in an inaccessible city, on a distant island). The study will consider the use of scholarship, exhibitions, collections, printed works, magazines and institutes in the creation of a “scholarship of empire” whose aim was to magnify the past and present of Italy, and its relationship with the East, presented as a seamless continuum.

1. Italian Orientalism: the unification of the Kingdom of Italy and interest in the East

In 1878 Florence was chosen as the site of the Fourth International Congress of Orientalists organized by Secretary-General Angelo De Gubernatis (1840–1913), professor of Sanskrit at the Istituto di Studi Superiori. On that occasion, scholars of “the Orient”¹ from Europe—and beyond²—gathered in the former capital of the recently unified Kingdom of Italy (Brilli 2010).

Florence was one of the most prominent intellectual centres in Italy and home to the Regio Istituto di Studi Superiori Pratici e di Perfezionamento, modelled on the Collège de France (Garin 1959). An abiding interest in oriental studies was evidenced by the presence in the city of the Società Italiana per gli Studi Orientali (later the Accademia Orientale), founded by Michele Amari (1806–1889), patriot and scholar of Muslim Sicily, with De Gubernatis as secretary (Campana 2001). When the Società was founded in 1871, in the *Annuario della Società Italiana per gli Studi Orientali* Amari proclaimed his wish to continue a tradition that had its roots in the Middle Ages:

Il genio italiano che nel Medioevo s’era volto il primo all’oriente con intendimenti commerciali e politici, e poi nel Risorgimento delle lettere e delle arti s’era spaziato spensieratamente per tutti i campi dell’intelletto ed avea colti anch’esso i suoi frutti negli studi orientali, si trovò disarmato e prigioniero dopo la pace del 1815. [...] L’Italia maledisse e cospirò, mentre gli altri studiarono lieti: essa ha poi combattuto; ha atteso all’ordinamento politico [...] (Amari 1872, iv).³

¹ It is not easy to determine what the “Orient” was at the time (just as it is difficult for post-colonial scholars to identify it even today). In this paper I will therefore use “Orient” in the meaning proposed by the authors themselves: as the essay goes on, it will become evident how this notion was intended to qualify the Italians who used it much more than the lands it defined. For a problematization of the term “Orient” and Orientalism, see the “Introduction” to this volume.

² For example, participating in the work of the congress from India was José Gerson da Cunha (1844–1900), physician and intellectual; the correspondence between De Gubernatis and Gerson da Cunha is held at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (BNCF), Manoscritti, Carteggio Angelo De Gubernatis. On the complex relationship between the two, see Lowndes Vicente (2009).

³ “The Italian genius, which in the Middle Ages had been the first to go to the East with commercial and political intentions, and then in the Risorgimento of letters and the arts had ranged carefree through all fields of the intellect and had also reaped its fruits in oriental studies, found itself disarmed and imprisoned after the peace of 1815. [...] Italy cursed and conspired, while others studied happily, fought and waited for political order [...]”

In addition, the “new” Florence intended to be heir to the tradition of the Medici Oriental Press established in 1584 (Saltini 1860). Many journals addressing the “East” were published at that time: *Rivista Orientale* (1867), *Bollettino degli Studi Orientali* (1876) and *Giornale della Società Asiatica Italiana* (1885) (Rosi 1985; Iannello 2001), and “Eastern” collections of great artistic and archaeological significance could also be found in the city (Anastasio 2017; Curatola 2018; Diana 2018). After Paris (1873), London (1874) and St Petersburg (1876), Florence seemed to be the logical city to host the next congress of orientologists, and it did not fall short of expectations, making a name for itself as a moment of fundamental importance for Italian oriental studies.

A rhetoric strongly linked to the “mythical” travellers of the early modern age developed following the Florentine congress. Scholars presented these travellers as role models for every Italian who, at the end of the nineteenth century, wanted to look outside national borders and, in particular, towards an undefined East⁴ (for an interesting profile of European travellers to the East at the turn of the century, see Behdad 1994).

One of the congress attendees was Giuseppe Sapeto (1811–1875), a missionary and explorer in the Horn of Africa since 1837. In 1869, on behalf of Raffaele Rubattino’s shipping company, Sapeto purchased the Bay of Assab, which became the first Italian overseas possession when it was ceded to the Kingdom of Italy in 1882. Sapeto attended the conference with a paper on Ethiopian languages and catalogues of geez scrolls and was elected vice-president of the first section of the congress (Congresso Internazionale degli Orientalisti 1881). While Sapeto’s role in Italy’s colonial expansion is well known (Del Boca 1976, 34), it is interesting to note his reference to Marco Polo as the “ideal Italian” and the constant point of reference for every traveller (Maraini 1951, 27):

Dio volesse, che questo mio lavoro invogliasse alcuno Italiano a viaggi proficui a ogni guisa di scienze; che pur troppo dai nostri giorni la schiatta dei Marco Polo è al tutto spenta, e nessuno v’ha ch’io sappia, il quale allettato dall’amor della scienza, dia l’addio all’Italia per viaggiare in luoghi ricchi di produzioni naturali, di monumenti, d’iscrizioni, o di preziosi manoscritti, i quali da lui studiati recassero alla storia naturale, all’etnografia alla geografia, alla storia, alla filologia utili scoperte, che facessero meritevole la nostra patria di sedere accanto alle altre nazioni più dotte d’Europa in questo genere di studi, come per la sua savia politica è stata riputata degna di convenire nei consigli alla diplomazia (Sapeto 1941, 252).⁵

⁴ For example, several Italian authors expressed their great expectations for the opening of the Suez Canal, which would “restore” Italy’s privileged position in trade, creating new opportunities for profitable exchange with the East (Lyttelton 2021). On the importance attached to the Suez Canal in the 1930s, see Sammarco 1939.

⁵ “God willing, this work of mine might induce some Italians to travel profitably in every way of science: nowadays the lineage of Marco Polo is completely extinct, and there is no one who, tempted by the love of science, bids farewell to Italy to travel to places rich in natural

De Gubernatis himself, a man of anarchist and internationalist ideas (Bocchi 2013) who was not involved in Italian colonial policy (Lowndes Vicente 2009), could not help but express his regret that:

Le Indie furono, senza alcun dubbio, come l'America, rivelate all'Europa da soli italiani condannati poi ad udire che il tal capitano portoghese, il tal capitano spagnuolo avevan scoperta nuova terra e occupata nel nome del suo sovrano (De Gubernatis 1875, 10).⁶

De Gubernatis lamented the undeservedly subordinate position of Italians: a “race” of travellers who did not see their efforts recognized. Indeed, he emphasized the value of “Italian” travellers to the East from the pre-unification era throughout his scholarship, in works such as *Memoria intorno ai viaggiatori italiani nelle Indie Orientali dal secolo XIII a tutto il XVI* (1867), *Gli scritti del padre Marco della Tomba, missionario nelle Indie Orientali* (1878)⁷ and *Roma e l'Oriente nella storia, nella leggenda e nella visione* (1899). De Gubernatis was not alone in making such complaints. For example, in his book *Degli antichi navigatori e scopritori genovesi* (1881), the historian from Genoa Michele Giuseppe Canale (1808–1890) celebrated the eastward-bound travellers of the Republic of Genoa, but complained that they were in the service of the Portuguese. Proud Venetian patriot and historian Guglielmo Berchet (1833–1913) undertook to write a history of relations between the Venetian Republic and Persia, published in 1865 (Berchet 1865); similarly, Niccolò Di Lenna worked at the beginning of the twentieth century to enhance the reputation of Venetian travellers such as Giosafat Barbaro (1413–1494) and Ambrogio Contarini (1429–1499) (Di Lenna 1914, 1921).

De Gubernatis set up an oriental exhibition during the congress of 1878, asking the participants of the congress to contribute to it with donations and loans (*Catalogo dell'Esposizione Orientale 1877–1882*), and making the visit to the exhibition a central moment of the conference. The exhibition also included references to well-known travellers of the early modern age: for example, there were artificial versions of bezoars used as medicines, brought from Goa in the sixteenth century by Florentine Filippo Sassetti (1540–1588) and loaned by the

productions, monuments, inscriptions or precious manuscripts, which would bring useful discoveries to natural history, ethnography, geography, history and philology, and make our country worthy to sit next to the other most learned nations of Europe in this kind of studies, in the same way as for its wise policy it has been deemed worthy to take part in diplomatic talks.” As we will see, it is no coincidence that in 1941 the volume *Viaggio e missione cattolica fra i Mensa, i Bogos e gli Habab: con un cenno geografico e storico dell'Abissinia*, published by the Holy Congregation of Propaganda Fide in 1857, would be reprinted and made known to the general public by the Istituto per gli studi di politica internazionale (ISPI).

⁶ “The Indies were undoubtedly, like America, revealed to Europe by the Italians alone, who were then condemned to hear that a certain Portuguese or Spanish captain had discovered a new land and occupied it in the name of his sovereign.”

⁷ Marco Tomba (1726–1803) was a Capuchin friar who served as a missionary in northern India; he was also part of the mission to Tibet financed by Propaganda Fide.

Museo di Fisica e Storia Naturale in Florence. Sassetti was a figure of particular importance in the writings of De Gubernatis, who considered him a true "pioneer" of Italian oriental studies and the first to establish a relationship between Sanskrit and European languages (De Gubernatis 1886, 153–81). Additionally, the exhibition was also loaned the portrait of Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), a legendary figure at the time, recognized as one of the greatest missionaries to China, by the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide in Rome.

The Museo Indiano of Florence was set up in 1886 on the basis of the original group of objects collected by De Gubernatis for the exhibition (Donati 1887; Jacoviello 1998; the museum would later be incorporated into the Museo di Antropologia e Etnologia, Ciruzzi 1990).⁸ Located on the second floor of the Istituto di Studi Superiori in Piazza San Marco, the museum was inaugurated for the first time in the presence of the royal family (*La Nazione* 1886) and for a second time upon presentation of the catalogue and a plaque in honour of Filippo Sassetti (*La Nazione* 1887). In his inaugural speech, De Gubernatis once again recalled the glorious "Italian travellers" to the East, explicitly referring to a tradition of the medieval and modern ages (De Gubernatis 1887).

Ultimately, the Fourth Congress of Orientalists returned "travellers to the East" to prominence in the post-unification era, although interest in them had never been truly dormant, and, at the same time, comprehensive works such as Pietro Amat Di San Filippo's *Bibliografia dei viaggiatori italiani ordinata cronologicamente ed illustrata* (1874) contributed to the expansion of the list of "noteworthy Italian travellers".

Such interest in this peculiar category of travellers was undoubtedly heightened by contingencies, such as the beginning of colonial expansion (Del Boca 1976), commercial travel and exploration (Surdich 1985; Di Meo 2021),⁹ as well as the influence of theories on Aryan settlement and diaspora, and the establishment of the first national chairs of oriental languages¹⁰ in Italy (De Donno 2019).

⁸ The same years saw the completion of the house-museum of Frederick Stibbert (1838–1906) in Florence: it counted 36,000 objects, including European painting, furniture and decorative arts, Japanese and Chinese porcelain, and European and non-European arms and armour.

⁹ Vittorio Arminjon's (1830–1897) travels to Japan and China in 1866; Pietro Savio (1838–1904) and his twelve trips to Japan starting in 1867; Torino Luchino Dal Verme's (1838–1911) voyage to the Far East on board the *Vettor Pisani*; Vittorio Sallier de la Tour (1827–1894), minister plenipotentiary in Japan; Alessandro Fè d'Ostiani (1825–1905), ambassador to Japan and the Chinese Empire from 1870 to 1877; Enrico Alberto d'Albertis (1846–1932) and his many travels to the East. For an interesting case study on Italian traders in Japan, see Turina 2021: due to a disease that affected European silkworms in the 1850s, Italian silkworm egg merchants travelled to Japan for decades; some of them settled in Yokohama, playing an important role in the diffusion of Japanese objects in Italy and contributing to the development of knowledge about Japan.

¹⁰ Gaspare Gorresio (1808–1891) was the first holder of a Sanskrit chair at the University of Turin as of 1852. Antelmo Severini (1828–1909), the first lecturer in sinology and iamatology in the whole of Italy, taught Far Eastern languages from 1863 at the Regio Istituto Studi Superiori; the first Japanese language course was launched in 1873 at the Regia Scuola

The dawn of the twentieth century, the conquest of Libya and the advent of Fascism accelerated and gave a new ideological depth to the rereading and re-interpretation of the Italian traveller to the East, culminating in the birth of the Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO).

2. The new century: nationalism, Fascism and the colonial paradigm

The new century opened for Italy, following its participation in the Eight Nation Alliance during the Boxer Uprising, with the acquisition of the Chinese concession in Tianjin in 1902 (Di Meo 2015). The acquisition of this small port (“cittadina modello” and “zona d’Italia in Oriente”, as described by *Giornale Luce*)¹¹ fostered Italy’s relations with the Far East (Chiminelli 1903; Nocentini 1904; Trafeli 2012),¹² bringing it into the limelight for the wider public and popularizing its narrative in newspapers, magazines, postcards, photographs and even board games (Comberati 2012; Clerici 2018; Villa 2012). While in Italy the small concession served to awaken interest among non-specialists in the Far East, in Tianjin streets, squares and statues were dedicated to the most famous “Italians” who had ever travelled to China: Matteo Ricci and Marco Polo (Marinelli 2007).¹³ Polo was claimed as authentically Italian (but also extolled locally as a Venetian emblem, Volpi 1926) and presented as the ultimate expression of a successful explorer, allowing Italy to boast an international legitimacy far older than its few years as a unitary state would actually allow. Interestingly, the name chosen for the concession newspaper published in Italian in Shanghai in 1939–1941 was *Il Marco Polo: Rassegna italiana per l’estremo oriente*.¹⁴

As noted above, the fascination with the Far East and its popularization is evident in the emergence of Far Eastern collections,¹⁵ as is the case of the Chiossone Museum in Genoa, for example. The museum, boasting one of the largest collections of Japanese art outside Japan (about 15,000 artefacts), opened to the public in 1905 and was named after Edoardo Chiossone (1833–1898), engraver

Superiore di Commercio in Venice. In 1885, famous linguist Ignazio Guidi (1844–1935) was appointed chair of Abyssinian History and Languages, set up by minister Coppino following the occupation of Massawa: the colonial enterprise formally made its mark on Italian academic Orientalism. Giuseppe Gabrieli, Giorgio Levi Della Vida, Francesco Beguinot, Carlo Conti Rossini and Enrico Cerulli were all trained at Guidi’s school.

¹¹ *Giornale Luce* B/B0697, *Visita alla città di Tien-Tsin*, Istituto Nazionale Luce, 19/06/1935.

¹² An interest already cultivated in the last decades of the nineteenth century by central figures in Italian culture and politics of the time, such as Giuseppe Ferrari (1811–1876). See Minuti 2021.

¹³ A statue to Marco Polo (with the visible dedication “a Marco Polo 1254–1324”) is also framed in the short film *Giornale Luce* B/B0698, *Festa della celebrazione dell’Intervento della Concessione Italiana a Tien Tsin*, Istituto Nazionale Luce, 19/06/1935.

¹⁴ Some works that relaunched the concession in the Fascist press in the years of the empire were Pistolese 1935 and Cesapi 1937.

¹⁵ Carrying on and adapting a tradition of private collections of oriental art and curiosities that had been in existence long before the unification of Italy, see Abbattista 2021.

at the emperor's court, who had donated his collection of oriental art objects to the Accademia Ligustica di Belle Arti in Genoa in 1898 (Marcenaro 1971). The collection aroused the admiration of Chiossone's contact, De Gubernatis who claimed that it included the most beautiful bronzes in the world. Indeed, such was De Gubernatis' admiration that he considered transforming his "Museo Indiano" into a "Museo Asiatico" with the participation of the Genoese (Iannello 2001, 346). In 1907 Francesco Lorenzo Pullè (1850–1934), Risorgimento patriot and professor of Indo-European philology, founded the Museo Indiano in Bologna with findings he brought back from his trip to the First International Congress of Far Eastern Studies held in Hanoi (1902), and his later travels to India (1904) and Indochina (1905) (Verardi 1988; Villa 2016). The museum was created with the aim of documenting "lo studio della storia e delle arti nei rapporti commerciali e civili dell'Italia coll'Estremo Oriente". Among the highlights of the collection, it was said "si ammira il *Ramayana* edito dall'abate Gorresio sotto gli auspici di Carlo Alberto nel 1848, edizione che costò la bellezza di 400.000 lire" (*L'Archiginnasio* 1907, 156–57). Disciple of De Gubernatis in Florence, Pullè perfectly embodied the generation of orientalists working at the turn of the century. His scholarship clearly marks the passage from works such as *Un capitolo fiorentino d'indologia del secolo XVII* (1898) committed to reconstructing relations between pre-unification Italy and the East (albeit in a celebratory key), to the exaltation of Italy's civilizing role in *Le conquiste scientifiche e civili dell'Italia in Oriente dall'antichità ai tempi nuovi* (1912), and a clear stance in favour of colonial expansion, building on the long tradition of exploration of proto-Italian travellers, in *Gli studi orientali e la espansione coloniale* (1914).

Moreover, a convergence between nationalism and a fascination with the East can be seen in the literary production of one of the fathers of Italian nationalism, journalist Enrico Corradini (1865–1931), who founded the Associazione Nazionale Italiana. From the pages of *Il Regno* (Nello 2020), Corradini celebrated the Japanese as perfect warriors in an article entitled "Susume" (the Japanese word for "forward", the battle cry of the Japanese troops then, in 1904–1905, engaged in conflict against the Russians, Corradini 1904a).¹⁶ In a further article entitled "Una nazione" Corradini praised the cult of the emperor and the perfect balance between individuality and collectivity in Japanese society, admiring "la religione degli eroi e della natura [...] gli eroi sono popolo del passato, la natura è la patria" (Corradini 1904b). Not only men of letters but also men of science

¹⁶ Nationalist and later Fascist intellectuals showed an immense fascination with the Japanese, their martial arts and the rhetoric relating to their spirit of sacrifice (Tucci 1939; Hofmann 2015; Raimondo 2018; Basilone 2019). This fascination would grow in the 1930s, culminating at the time of the drafting of the Tripartite Pact. Fascist intellectuals also discussed the problem of how to create a racial policy that would include the Japanese within the Aryan doctrine (Monserrati 2020). Julius Evola (1898–1974) was one of many who wrote about the peculiar intertwining of spirituality and the Japanese imperial idea in *Asiatica*, the journal of the Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente edited by Giuseppe Tucci (Evola 1940; Iacovella 2001).

began to express an interest in “recovering” a “privileged” relationship with the Far East (Guareschi 1904, 449–54; Vacca 1912).

The Italo-Turkish War (1911–1913) and then the First World War marked a further awakening, this time political rather than literary, of interest in the East.¹⁷ Geographer and geologist Giuseppe Stefanini (1882–1938), professor at the Regio Istituto di Studi Superiori in Florence and later a well-known explorer of Somalia with Nello Puccioni, wrote about the situation of the decaying Ottoman Empire:

L'atteggiamento equivoco della Turchia, determinatosi fin dai primi giorni della guerra [...] raggiunse una prima fase culminate allorquando, per suggerimento forse della Germania, abolì le Capitolazioni. Il provvedimento colpiva direttamente gl'interessi dell'Italia in Oriente (Stefanini 1919, 141).¹⁸

While praising figures such as Antonio “Bey” Figari (1804–1870), pharmacist and naturalist who worked for over 50 years in the service of the Ottoman governors of Egypt (Stefanini 1921), Stefanini warned Italian politicians against the risks of pan-Islamism and called for the protection of Italy's centuries-old interests in the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁹ It is precisely from this point of view that one can read the blossoming of documentation on Venice's centuries-old presence in the Balkan peninsula, the Dodecanese islands and Cyprus, which were thus claimed to be “long-standing Italian” (Baldacci 1917; Magnante 1925, 1929; Silva 1927; Giorgi De Pons 1929; Bertonelli 1930). The erudite study *I viaggiatori veneti minori: studio bio-bibliografico* (funded by the Società Geografica Italiana, with a dedication to the Count of Misurata, Giuseppe Volpi, Donazzolo 1929) introduced over 400 little-known Venetian travellers, many of them to the East, presenting them as evidence of the legitimacy of contemporary Italian political stances. Historian Raffaele Ciasca (1888–1975), later to become president of the Istituto per l'Oriente in the 1950s and 1960s, even went so far as to write about the “storia coloniale italiana medioevale e moderna” (Ciasca 1937, 169).

With Benito Mussolini's rise to power, the strategy in the East developed hand in hand with the new foreign policy (Hughes 1953), which saw Italy exploit tensions between other countries (especially between the United King-

¹⁷ The Commissione per lo studio delle questioni islamiche d'interesse coloniale was set up in 1914. It included scholars and orientalists Carlo Alfonso Nallino (1872–1938), in 1921 among the founders of the Istituto per l'Oriente in Rome and its periodical, *Oriente Moderno*, and David Santillana (1855–1931), an Italianized Tunisian Jew, appointed professor of Muslim law at the University of Rome in 1913 (Cianferotti 1984; Strika 1984; Gabrieli 1993; Soravia 2005).

¹⁸ “Turkey's equivocal attitude, determined from the first days of the war [...] culminated when, perhaps at the suggestion of Germany, it abolished the Capitulations. The measure directly affected Italy's interests in the East.”

¹⁹ In the early years of the twentieth century, Enrico Insabato (1878–1963), historian of Islam in Egypt, advocated the utility of “pro-Islamic politics” (Baldinetti 1997). The periodical *Avvenire Arabo*, edited by Nallino, was created to this end and to directly meet the needs of Fascist propaganda towards Arab countries (Nallino 1932).

dom and its colonies) by unscrupulously inserting itself among the chessboard of alliances in the Mediterranean area and beyond (Collotti 2000; Quartararo 2001; Arielli 2010).

The acceleration of Italian penetration into China at the beginning of the Fascist era is evidenced by the opening of the Italian Bank for China in 1924 and the foundation of the first "*fascio*" in China in 1926, a year before Galeazzo Ciano's arrival. In his role as ambassador to China, Ciano worked to make the Chinese know and appreciate Fascism, using tools such as the Italo-Chinese League, created in 1932 (and later absorbed by IsMEO), and insisting on the creation of a Fascist corporate law course at Shanghai University (Moccia 2014, 114–15; Lasagni 2019). In the meantime, the circulation of Chinese-themed works grew exponentially (De Giorgi 2010).

Regarding India, the converging exaltation of the figures of Gandhi²⁰ and Mazzini, which had already begun in the liberal era (De Donno 2008), was joined by a certain fascination with characters such as B. S. Moonje and Subhas Chandra Bose (De Felice 1988; Casolari 2020),²¹ an interest in Buddhism (Formichi 1923) and the presentation of the Italian Risorgimento, in continuity with Fascism, as an anti-imperialist phenomenon of emancipation, to which colonial subjects could look for inspiration (Borsa 1942; Formichi and De Carlo 1942).²² Between December 1928 and January 1929, the Italian Naval League organized a three-month cruise in India and Ceylon. Members of Italian high society, including businessmen, politicians and Edda Mussolini, the Duce's daughter, took part in the trip (Casolari 2020, 33).

Once again, museums and temporary exhibitions provide us with a good indicator of how the construction of the "myth of the pioneers" (Della Valle 1931) accelerated under Fascism: travellers, geographers, explorers, but also inventors and scientists were co-opted as (proto-)Italian "champions" for legitimization purposes by the regime's propaganda machine (Canadelli, Beretta and Ronzon 2019; Carli 2021). The Fascist regime manipulated aspects of Italy's cultural and

²⁰ Gentile wrote the preface to the Italian translation of Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography, published by Treves in 1931.

²¹ Contacts with Subhas Chandra Bose were a fundamental moment in the strategy of Fascist Indian politics. Chandra Bose, politician and central figure in India's struggle for independence, who was head of a pro-Japanese government (the Azad Hind government) allied to the Axis during the Second World War, sought the support of Mussolini and Hitler to free India from British rule. Bose visited Italy and met Mussolini and Tucci, with whom he collaborated on cultural initiatives, as well as acting as spokesman for the Italian cause in Ethiopia. Here it is worth highlighting the role of IsMEO, which published the translation of his book, *La lotta dell'India (1920–1934)*, that had appeared in English in 1935. The Italian edition of 1942 was enriched by an appendix in which the author summarized the events from 1934 to 1942.

²² An important event in this context was the visit to Italy in 1925 and 1926 of Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, who was received with full honours by Mussolini and held in high esteem by Fascism, until Tagore made clear his aversion to the regime (Kundu 2015).

scientific heritage from all periods (Lazzaro and Crum 2004), striving to create the ultimate visual hegemony, by fusing elements of the past and the present.

The first Esposizione Nazionale di Storia della Scienza, held in Florence in 1929 with over 9,000 scientific exhibits from some 80 cities and over 200 private and public lenders, brought the issue of safeguarding the national historical scientific heritage to the attention of the general public, while emphasizing the central role played by science in constructing Italian cultural identity (Barreca 2016). One of the focal points of the exhibition, portrayed on many postcards and pictures, were the globes of Venetian Vincenzo Maria Coronelli (1650–1718), the most renowned geographer and cosmographer of his time (Bonelli 1960). At the Mostra dell’Aeronautica (*Esposizione dell’aeronautica italiana* 1934) in Milan in 1934, the “hall of pioneers” housed objects and writings by Leonardo da Vinci, Father Francesco Terzi Lana, Tiberio Cavallo, Fausto Veranzio and Don Paolo Andreani. The same year, at the Exposition du Sahara at the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro, the Italian pavilion hosted Genoese explorer Antonio Malfante’s 1447 map of the Moroccan Sahara and Medici adjutant Benedetto Dei’s 1470 map of Timbuktu (*Le Sahara Italien* 1934). Again, in Paris in 1937, Galileo’s telescope was displayed in the Italian section of the exposition “Arts et techniques dans la vie moderne” (Campagne, Gauthier, and Zahar 1937). An entire exhibition dedicated to Italian genius and inventions (with particular reference to Leonardo da Vinci, Beretta, Giorgione and Canadelli 2019) was held from 9 May to 1 October 1939 in Milan (*Mostra di Leonardo da Vinci e delle invenzioni italiane* 1939). The Leonardesque exhibition was reprised in 1940 in New York and in 1942 in Tokyo. In Japan, the purpose of the exhibition was to demonstrate that Leonardo borrowed elements from Asian cultural tradition (Takuwa 2019).

Lastly, the Mostra Triennale delle Terre d’Oltremare held in Naples in 1940 was a crucial event for Fascist propaganda (Arena 2011). The many pavilions and special exhibits included the Padiglione dell’Espansione Italiana in Oriente (designed by Giorgio Calza Bini)²³ and a pavilion dedicated to the maritime republics with a 1:1 scale reproduction of the Venetian galley allegedly commanded by Admiral Marco Querini during the Battle of Lepanto (*Prima Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d’Oltremare* 1940). The Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente was asked to participate with

²³ The building was adorned with bas-reliefs by sculptor Luigi Scirocchi depicting the meeting between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, missionaries in the East and a Roman fleet sailing the Asian seas. The courtyard, featuring two Chinese and Japanese gardens, gave access to Marco Polo’s tower. In the tower, panels depicted the diplomatic relations established between Rome and China from the second to fourth centuries and continued by displaying miniatures of Marco Polo’s *Il Milione*; in the centre of the tower was a showcase displaying the oldest editions of the book. Inside, bas-reliefs depicted important milestones that had consolidated the relationship between the East and Italy, such as the foundation of the Collegio dei Cinesi, later renamed Università L’Orientale, and the nineteenth-century Italian explorations of Odoardo Beccari in India and Malaysia and General Paolo Crescenzo Martino Avitabile in Iran.

una mostra che visibilmente documenti i rapporti dell'Italia con i paesi del Medio ed Estremo Oriente dai tempi di Roma ad oggi. [...] Tale esposizione mostrerà come gli italiani siano stati i pionieri della penetrazione occidentale in Estremo Oriente, e illustrerà le tracce da essi ivi lasciate che sebbene quasi del tutto ignorate sono tanto frequenti ed importanti da rivendicare all'Italia un giusto primato.²⁴

Among the many manuscripts on display, it seems fitting to mention that there was also a 1523 manuscript by Venetian traveller Alessandro Zorzi who travelled around the Mediterranean and the Red Sea (Almagià 1936).

In the 1930s, important collections of oriental art and ethnography were made available to the public, such as the collection of Carlo Puini (1839–1924), a scholar of East Asia²⁵ who had taught Chinese language and literature in Florence. His personal collection of about 150 bronze Asian art objects was purchased by the Castello Sforzesco museum of art and archaeology in Milan in August 1926. In fact, in 1920 companies became established in Milan, such as the company of Enrico Bonomi, which specialized in importing objects for armchair Orientalists and collectors from the Far East since 1920. The museum purchased a series of Japanese objects from Bonomi to add to the ethnographic collection (Vitali 1926; Comune di Milano 1995). Opened in 1932, the Indian Missionary Museum of the Capuchins of Montughi in Florence was another step in the popularization of objects, stories and images from the Far East: the collections, originating from the mission stationed in Agra, India, and consisting of manuscripts, fabric samples, flora, fauna, clothing and jewellery, were put on display by the archaeologist and anthropologist Paolo Graziosi (1907–1988) (*Il Museo Missionario Indiano dei Cappuccini di Montughi* 1932).

At his death in 1932, tireless traveller Captain D'Albertis²⁶ donated the castle at Mongalletto and its collections to the city of Genoa. The castle (today known as the Museo delle Culture del Mondo) was his home.²⁷ He imaginatively en-

²⁴ "An exhibition that documents Italy's relations with the countries of the Middle and Far East from Roman times to the present day. [...] This exhibition will show how the Italians were the pioneers of western penetration into the Far East, and will illustrate the traces they left there, which, although almost completely ignored, are so frequent and important as to claim Italy's rightful primacy." *Fondazione Roma Sapienza (Biblioteca di Filosofia, Villa Mirafiori, Rome), Fondazione Giovanni Gentile (FGG), "Giovanni Gentile 1882-1945", s.5 "Attività Scientifica e Culturale", ss.4 "IsMEO", sss.2 "Attività", u.7 "Attività didattica e scientifica", "Attività dell'IsMEO. 1938".*

²⁵ Puini's interest in Tibet could not fail to include the study of one of the "pioneers" of Italian exploration in the area: Ippolito Desideri (1715–1721), considered to be Europe's first Tibetologist (Puni 1904).

²⁶ On one of his most famous voyages, on the occasion of the fourth centenary of the discovery of America, he retraced Christopher Columbus's route using only the means of navigation available in the fifteenth century: the quadrant and the nautical astrolabe, which he reconstructed himself (D'Albertis 1893).

²⁷ Built between 1886 and 1892, the inauguration coincided with the celebrations for the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus (Tabet 1924).

riched it with exotic, neo-Gothic and Hispano-Moorish references, as well as the reconstruction of a nautical cabin, probably to signify the castle as a ship. Along with ethnographic and archaeological artefacts collected by D'Albertis on his travels, arranged with showcases, panoplies and hunting trophies in the style of a cabinet of curiosities, the museum housed model ships, instruments and nautical charts, a photographic archive and a library (Bush 2017).

One of the many scenarios reconstructed by the museum was the “Turkish Salon”, where ornaments, jewellery, weapons, vases, sofas and lamps could be spotted under the heavy ceiling curtain, between hookahs and ostrich eggs (Orlandi 2009). In the catalogue, compiled by the captain himself, as highlighted by Orlandi (526), the objects are simply classified as “oriental” (e.g. “Vaso Orientale”, “Pantofole Orientali”, “Tavolino Orientale”, “Lampadario Orientale”).

The museum of the Società Geografica Italiana, located in Rome's Villa Celimontana since 1924, included an entire room dedicated to Matteo Ricci, alongside contemporary explorers such as Vittorio Bottego (particularly beloved by the Fascists) and Luigi Amedeo di Savoia (De Agostini 1958).

These collections, and others, along with the printing and circulation of new works and re-editions of works dedicated to travelling to the East, the production and dissemination of artwork, postcards and photographs, contributed to making “the Orient” “familiar” and “close”. Now, after investigating the direction taken by Fascism in its relations with the East, demonstrating how the Orient was becoming ever closer and more familiar to Italian politicians and citizens, and outlining the progressive acceleration in the construction of the myth of the “pioneers”, I will show how all these instances converged in the foundation of a central institute for Fascist cultural policy: IsMEO.

3. Giovanni Gentile, Giuseppe Tucci and the birth of IsMEO

With the birth of the Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, existing efforts were coordinated and consolidated. If attempts to inscribe “mythical” travellers in a tradition of Italianness had already been noted in the liberal era, with the advent of Fascism this operation was taken to a new level of organization.²⁸

IsMEO came about from the collaboration of two figures: Giuseppe Tucci (1894–1984), experienced explorer, historian of religions and Orientalist, who was interested in giving his missions an institutional framework and financial support (Nalesini 2011), and philosopher Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944), the greatest ideologue of Fascism and author of the reformed system of public education. As we shall see, Gentile was interested in the more theoretical aspect of the conciliation between East and West, which Italy was to embody (Gnoli

²⁸ “La nostra azione ha proceduto per troppo tempo in modo parziale e senza coordinazione. Occorre stringere rapporti diretti sia personali sia con istituti in modo da preparare le file per un'azione più efficace in un prossimo futuro [...]. L'Italia deve diventare il porto dell'Europa e per l'Asia”. FGG, “Giovanni Gentile 1882–1945”, s.5 “Attività Scientifica e Culturale”, ss.4 “IsMEO”, sss.2 “Attività”, u.7 “Attività didattica e scientifica”, undated typescript.

1994; see Albertina 1984 for an overview of Gentile's activities as an "organizer of culture").²⁹

From the outset, the institute qualified as a body that was absolutely consistent with the regime, financed directly by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (which the Duce took over as of 1932) and placed under the direct control of Mussolini, who appointed its advisors (Ferretti 1986; Di Giovanni 2012).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, also thanks to the spread of mountaineering as a sport³⁰ (with the "politicization of the mountains" and the instrumentalization of sport in general: Pastore 2003; Pastore 2004; Canella Giuntini 2009), a series of professional and amateur, scientific or unscientific Italian expeditions ventured to Asia in an attempt to explore its remotest regions, such as Tibet.³¹ The best-known of these twentieth-century Italian explorers,³²

²⁹ It is not the purpose of this paper to examine the lives and works of these two figures. For a reconstruction of their biographical and intellectual profiles, see Turi 1995; Crisanti 2020.

³⁰ Osvaldo Roero di Cortanze, who travelled extensively in Asia, published *Ricordi dei viaggi al Cashemir, piccolo Tibet e Turkestan in varie escursioni fatte da Osvaldo Roero dei marchesi di Cortanze dall'anno 1853 al 1875* on his return. The volume, written in hope of "far nascere in alcuni dei nostri connazionali il desiderio di visitare quelle regioni" (1881, 133), opened with a dedication to Vittorio Emanuele II, "primo alpinista d'Italia". The first Italian expedition to Central Asia in the twentieth century was organized by Prince Scipione Borghese (1871–1927, famous for his victorious participation in the Peking-Paris raid in 1907) to Tien Shan in 1900. The expedition was prepared with the help of Vittorio Sella (1859–1943), alpinist, photographer and great connoisseur of the region, which he had visited on several occasions in 1889, 1890 and 1896. In 1913 the wool entrepreneur and amateur mountaineer Mario Piacenza (1884–1957) planned and financed an expedition to the Suru region (Kashmir Himalaya): he visited Ladakh together with Cesare Calciati (1885–1929), touching the twin peaks of Nun Kun and Z3, known in Italy as Cima Italia. Piacenza managed to meet the Grand Lama of the Hemis monastery and document on film the Set-Chu ceremony, held every twelve years in honour of Padmasambhava, the master who spread Buddhism in the Himalayas. The documentary material and studies on his mountaineering activities, as well as the collection of objects he brought back from his expedition to Ladakh are kept at the Museo della Montagna in Turin, which he directed from 1945 to 1957.

³¹ In 1909, the Duke of the Abruzzi (1873–1933), accompanied by Sella, and doctor and explorer Filippo de Filippi (1869–1938), organized and directed a scientific mountaineering campaign in the K2 region. Nevertheless, in 1913–1914 de Filippi and geologist Giotto Dainelli (1878–1968) organized an expedition to Karakoram: the expedition benefited from funds from the Società Geografica Italiana (SGI, which still preserves many of the materials, including photographs, of the expedition today), the Istituto Veneto per le Scienze, le Arti e la Letteratura, and the Royal Geographical Society. Exploration expeditions of any kind were viewed favourably by Fascism. In 1929 the Duke of Spoleto (1900–1948), funded by the City of Milan and sponsored by the SGI and the Club Alpino Italiano, organized an expedition to the Karakoram together with geologist Ardito Desio (1897–2001). Florentine scholar Dainelli returned to Tibet in 1930 with an important expedition to the Siachen Glacier, reporting it in his diary which is still preserved in the SGI library. On this occasion, Dainelli was the first to follow the length of the Siachen to Rimu pass, giving it the name "Colle Italia" (De Filippi 1912, 1924; Calciati 1930; Dainelli 1924, 1932; Savoia Aosta and Desio 1936; Fiory Ceccopieri 1981; Surdich 2009).

³² And one of the most closely followed by the British secret services during his missions (Bargiacchi 2009).

who—by his own admission—followed in the footsteps of famous explorers such as Matteo Ricci and Cassiano Beligatti (1708–1791, Capuchin missionary who travelled to Bengal, Tibet and Nepal), was Giuseppe Tucci (Tucci 1947, 65).

In 1931, after returning from a five-year-long trip to Asia, Tucci (who had been a member of the Accademia d'Italia since 1929) presented a report to Mussolini and the then minister of foreign affairs, Dino Grandi, to illustrate the results he had obtained and propose the creation of an institute to support large-scale scientific projects in the East:

Tale istituto dovrebbe avere un carattere esteriore culturale sul tipo dell'istituto buddistico di Leningrado o della Società degli amici dell'Oriente di Parigi, o della società indiana di Berlino; ma di fatto dovrebbe svolgere un'opera più complessa che non fosse semplice scambio di cultura.³³

Having just returned from India, Tucci was busy working on his *Indo-Tibetica* and disseminating the results of his mission, writing articles for the *Corriere della Sera*, *Le Vie d'Italia* and *L'Illustrazione Italiana*. In an article for the latter weekly, titled *La spedizione scientifica Tucci nell'India, Nepal e Tibet*, Tucci wrote that Italy had contributed like no other country to the knowledge of Tibet through the explorations of Osvaldo Roero di Cortanze, Filippo de Filippi, Giotto Dainelli, the Duke of the Abruzzi, and, of course, his own (Tucci 1931, see also Tucci 1936).

On 16 February 1933, IsMEO was officially established as a non-profit organization by Royal Decree number 142. The Fascist government decided to devote a great number of resources and energies to the project. The institute's aims included developing cultural and economic relations with the countries of central, eastern and southern Asia (Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente 1934, 3–4). In particular, it provided scholarships (with the undeclared aim of “indoctrinating” the young scholarship holders arriving in Italy from various parts of Asia), offered student and teacher exchange programmes, organized conferences and publications, and promoted language courses. IsMEO reflected these declared aims in its structure: while Gentile was president, the vice-presidency was shared between Tucci and the Count of Misurata, Giuseppe Volpi (1877–1947), former minister of finance in the 1920s, who represented the economic interests behind the foundation of the institute.

A few years later, during a speech at the inauguration of the Comitato Lombardo per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, Gentile recalled the institute's beginnings, saying that IsMEO:

³³ “Such an institute should have a cultural character along the lines of the Buddhist Institute in Leningrad or the Society of Friends of the Orient in Paris, or the Indian Society in Berlin; but it should perform a more complex task than the simple exchange of culture.” FGG, “Giovanni Gentile 1882-1945”, s.5 “Attività Scientifica e Culturale”, ss.4 “IsMEO”, sss.2 “Attività”, u.7 “Attività didattica e scientifica”, “Relazione presentata da G. Tucci al capo del governo B. Mussolini, Rome, March 1931”.

incontrò subito le simpatie degli uomini di cultura e insieme degli uomini della finanza, dell'industria e del commercio. Talché si ebbe presto la certezza che la nuova istituzione rispondeva ad un bisogno reale del paese, e non era una di quelle invenzioni fittizie (Gentile 1937, 5).³⁴

At the time of the institute's first meeting on 21 December 1933, Tucci had returned to Tibet and then Nepal,³⁵ and was therefore unable to attend. The opening speeches were delivered by Gentile and Filippo de Filippi, who gave a lecture entitled *I viaggiatori italiani in Asia* completely centred on the concept of the continuity of Italians' presence in the East, from Marco Polo to the Duke of Abruzzi, whom IsMEO was now sponsoring (De Filippi 1934).³⁶

The following day, on 22 December 1933, Mussolini gave his famous "Oriente e Occidente" speech in front of an audience of Asian students during the Roman Week of Oriental Students:

Ricordo che qualcuno disse, e che molti dopo di lui, ripeterono: 'East and West will never meet'. Questa affermazione è smentita dalla storia. Venti secoli or sono Roma realizzò sulle rive del Mediterraneo una unione dell'occidente con l'oriente che ha avuto il massimo peso nella storia del mondo. E se allora l'occidente fu colonizzato da Roma, con la Siria, l'Egitto, la Persia, il rapporto fu invece di reciproca comprensione creativa. Questa unione fu il motivo fondamentale di tutta la nostra storia. Da essa sorse la civiltà europea. Questa deve oggi ritornare universale, se non vuole perire. L'unità della civiltà mediterranea, che era oriente ed occidente, creata da Roma, è durata per molti secoli. Poi i traffici, deviati verso altri mari, l'afflusso dell'oro, lo sfruttamento di ricche regioni lontane furono la condizione di nascita di una nuova civiltà a carattere particolaristico e materialistico, civiltà che fu situata fuori del Mediterraneo. Da allora i rapporti

³⁴ "It immediately found favour with men of culture as well as men of finance, industry and commerce. It soon became clear that the new institution responded to a real need in the country and was not one of those fictitious inventions."

³⁵ It is perhaps no coincidence that the 1933 expedition to western Tibet promoted by the Reale Accademia d'Italia (Tucci and Ghersi 1934), the first carried out by Tucci after the founding of IsMEO, was filmed by Istituto Luce cameramen, giving it undoubtedly greater notoriety and publicity (Argentieri 1979). A documentary called *Nel Tibet occidentale* (D048406) was produced by the Istituto Nazionale Luce using footage shot by Captain Eugenio Ghersi (1904–1997) during the five-month expedition from June to October 1933 (Nalesini 2008; Ghersi 2016). In addition to this documentary, intended for cinema release, the Istituto Nazionale Luce also made newsreels, two of which are still preserved (*L'esplorazione del Tibet. Interessanti visioni della spedizione scientifica dell'accademico Tucci* (1934), B040506 and *Tibet. La spedizione dell'accademico Tucci nel Tibet. Suggestive visioni di paesaggi e di costumi* (1934), B040606). The 1933 expedition was the first in which Tucci used film alongside photographs. Indeed, from then on, until his last expedition to western Nepal in 1954, Tucci wanted to document all of his journeys with film footage so as to facilitate the dissemination of the results obtained. Pietro Francesco Mele's *Tibet Forbidden*, based on Tucci's 1948 expedition, won the prize for best short film at the Venice Biennale in 1949.

³⁶ FGG, "Giovanni Gentile 1882-1945", s.5 "Attività Scientifica e Culturale", ss.4 "IsMEO", sss.2 "Attività", u.7 "Attività didattica e scientifica", "Alla seduta inaugurale".

dell'occidente con l'oriente divennero esclusivamente di subordinazione e si limitarono ai semplici rapporti materiali. Cessò ogni vincolo spirituale di collaborazione creativa. Si formò e si diffuse l'opinione di un'Asia nemica dell'Europa, mentre, in realtà, si trattava di una particolare mentalità formatasi in certi Paesi di Europa, che era incapace o indifferente a comprendere l'Asia. Per essa l'Asia era solo un mercato di manufatti, una fonte di materie prime. Questa civiltà a base di capitalismo e liberalismo nei secoli scorsi ha investito tutto il mondo. [...] Oggi Roma e il Mediterraneo, con la rinascita fascista, rinascita soprattutto spirituale, si volgono a riprendere la loro funzione unificatrice. È perciò che la nuova Italia - questa Italia - vi ha qui convocati. Come già altre volte, in periodo di crisi mortali, la civiltà del mondo fu salvata dalla collaborazione di Roma e dell'oriente, così oggi, nella crisi di tutto un sistema di istituzioni e di idee che non hanno più anima e vivono come imbalsamate, noi, italiani e fascisti di questo tempo, ci auguriamo di riprendere la comune, millenaria tradizione della nostra collaborazione costruttiva (Mussolini 1933, 127–28).³⁷

In his speech, Mussolini addressed some central themes in Fascist propaganda: from the “return of Rome” (Munzi 2001) to its ancient Mediterranean provinces, to the “civilizing mission” of “*romanità*” (Visser 1992; Gentile 1997), and the discrediting of the other European colonial powers (France, but especially Great Britain).³⁸ More innovative, however, was the attempt to present Italy as a

³⁷ “I remember someone saying, and many after him repeated: ‘East and West will never meet’. This statement is refuted by history. Twenty centuries ago on the shores of the Mediterranean Rome brought about a union of the West with the East that has had the greatest impact on the history of the world. And while the West was then colonized by Rome, with Syria, Egypt and Persia, the relationship was one of mutual creative understanding. This union was the fundamental motive of our entire history. From it arose European civilization. Today, it must become universal again if it is not to perish. The unity of the Mediterranean civilization, which was East and West, created by Rome, lasted for many centuries. Then the traffic, diverted to other seas, the influx of gold, the exploitation of rich distant regions gave the conditions for the birth of a new civilization with a particularistic and materialistic character, a civilization that was located outside the Mediterranean. From then on, the relationship between the West and the East became one of subordination and was limited to simple material relations. All spiritual ties of creative collaboration ceased to exist. The opinion of Asia as the enemy of Europe was formed and spread, when in fact it was a matter of a particular mentality formed in certain countries of Europe, which was incapable of or indifferent to understanding Asia. For them, Asia was only a market for manufactured goods, a source of raw materials. This civilization based on capitalism and liberalism has affected the whole world over the past centuries. [...] Today, Rome and the Mediterranean, with the Fascist rebirth, which is above all a spiritual rebirth, are resuming their unifying function. It is for this reason that the new Italy—this Italy—has summoned you here. Just as at other times, in times of mortal crisis, the civilization of the world was saved by the collaboration of Rome and the East, so today, in the crisis of an entire system of institutions and ideas that no longer have a soul and live as if embalmed, we, Italians and Fascists of this time, hope to resume the common, age-old tradition of our constructive collaboration.”

³⁸ On a cultural level, the competition was geared towards letting competitors in the East know that “Italians” had already been present in the region for a long time: in 1932 an English translation of the manuscript by Jesuit missionary Ippolito Desideri, *An Account of Tibet*,

place of synthesis between West and East, a concept very dear to Gentile.³⁹ While traces of ancient Rome could still be seen in the East (Tucci 1940), it was important to focus on the present. In *L'Italia e l'Oriente*, Gentile pointed out the similarities between Italian Fascism and "oriental philosophy" as both represented the struggle of "nations with a soul" against nations without one, recognizing Indians and Italians as brotherly peoples owing to their shared lack of materialism.

On 18 March 1934, Mussolini returned to the subject, clarifying that Italy's historical objectives were Asia and Africa, and hoping that the nature of Italy's peaceful intentions would not be misunderstood:

Non si tratta di conquiste territoriali, e questo sia inteso da tutti vicini e lontani, ma di una espansione naturale, che deve condurre alla collaborazione fra l'Italia e le genti dell'Africa, fra l'Italia e le Nazioni dell'Oriente immediato e mediato. [...] L'Italia può fare questo; il suo posto nel Mediterraneo, mare che sta riprendendo la sua funzione storica di collegamento fra l'Oriente e l'Occidente, le dà questo diritto e le impone questo dovere; non intendiamo rivendicare monopoli o privilegi, ma chiediamo e vogliamo ottenere che gli arrivati, i soddisfatti, i conservatori non si industrino a bloccare da ogni parte l'espansione spirituale, politica, economica dell'Italia fascista (V.V. 1934).⁴⁰

In order to proceed with the dissemination of these ideas of closeness between Italy and the East, in 1934 IsMEO inaugurated the *Lecture orientali* series at Gentile's Sansoni publishing house. Publication of the institute's *Bollettino* began in 1935, the following year becoming the bi-monthly *Asiatica*, published until 1943 (from 1950 to 2009 it was published as *East and West*). IsMEO's activities branched out further when it moved to the prestigious Palazzo Brancaccio in 1936, where a library was opened and a first nucleus of oriental art objects

was published by Filippo de Filippi (De Filippi 1932). On a political level, an informant of the regime reported that in March 1940 he had heard Tucci discussing disruptive actions against the British: "S.E. Tucci, in via confidenziale, raccontava che il Duce, per scopi di alta politica, avrebbe desiderato rendere noie e preoccupazioni all'Inghilterra provocando agitazioni e movimenti separatisti nelle Indie inglesi, sperando - d'accordo con Gandhi ed altri agitatori nazionalisti indiani, o di altre caste, di poter aggravare i rapporti fra le Indie e l'Inghilterra". Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Ministero dell'interno, Direzione generale di pubblica sicurezza, Divisione polizia politica (1927-1944), fascicoli personali: "Tucci, Giuseppe", busta 1382, "Roma, 8 marzo 1940".

³⁹ FGG, "Giovanni Gentile 1882-1945", s.2 "Manoscritti gentiliani (1891-1944)," Discorso 143: "Discorso in Campidoglio per l'inaugurazione dell'Istituto per il Medio e Estremo Oriente (21 dicembre 1933)".

⁴⁰ "It is not a matter of territorial conquests, and this is understood by all those near and far, but of a natural expansion, which must lead to collaboration between Italy and the peoples of Africa, between Italy and the nations of the immediate and mediated East. [...] Italy can do this; its place in the Mediterranean, a sea which is resuming its historical function of linking the East and the West, gives it this right and imposes this duty on it; we do not intend to claim monopolies or privileges, but we do ask and want the arrivistes, the self-satisfied and the conservatives not to take it upon themselves to block the spiritual, political and economic expansion of Fascist Italy from all sides."

began to come together (often as a result of ambassadorial gifts; a collection of oriental manuscripts was also gifted to the institute by Tucci).⁴¹

Moreover, as of 1936, IsMEO, whose board members counted Istituto Luce president, Giacomo Paulucci di Calboli (1887–1961) (1939, 1942), regularly sent news bulletins on cultural, political and economic topics related to the East to the EIAR (Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche) radio broadcasting body.

In the meantime, the war in Ethiopia alienated Italy from the sympathies of many Indian nationalists (Procacci 1984) and so the regime's (and therefore the institute's) attention increasingly shifted to the Far East and Japan (Ferretti 1995).⁴² Consequently, in 1935 Italy entered economic relations with the Manchukuo and political-military relations with Chiang Kai-shek's China (Gentile 1935).⁴³ Figures such as Harukichi Shimoi (1883–1954), a Japanese language teacher at the Orientale in Naples, an "*ardito*" during the First World War, then a "*legionario*" in Fiume, acted as a "mediator of Fascism" in Japan, convincing Japanese politics to support Italy during the invasion of Ethiopia and contributing to the political rapprochement between Fascist Italy and imperial Japan (Majoni 1937, Hofmann 2015).

The acquisition of Ethiopia, a territory sometimes deemed "oriental",⁴⁴ was a widely celebrated event.⁴⁵

⁴¹ The institute's museum, which included Giuseppe Tucci's collections from Nepal and Tibet put together since 1928, opened to the public in 1958. In 2016 its collections were moved into the new Museo delle Civiltà (MUCIV), the collections (over 40,000 pieces) being transferred to the new EUR premises together with those of the former Museo Coloniale. All of this followed what had already happened at the institutional level: the Istituto Italo Africano (IIA, founded in 1906) and IsMEO merged in 1995 into a new institute called IsIAO (Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente), also dissolved in 2012. The library of the former IsMEO, and then IsIAO, is now rehoused in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Rome (Falcucci 2021).

⁴² The progressive approach to Japan is well documented in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs files, Archivio Storico Diplomatico Ministero Affari Esteri (ASDMAE), "Affari politici (1931–1945)", "Giappone", b. 9, f. "Propaganda culturale". The documentation proves the initiative taken by the Japanese, with diplomat Sigimura getting in touch with Gentile. See also FGG, "Giovanni Gentile 1882–1945", s.5 "Attività Scientifica e Culturale", ss.4 "IsMEO", sss.2 "Attività", u.7 "Attività didattica e scientifica", "Problemi giapponesi". Gentile would argue that IsMEO brought Italian politics closer to Japan, and not the other way around, Ferretti 1986.

⁴³ FGG, "Giovanni Gentile 1882–1945", s.5 "Attività Scientifica e Culturale", ss.4 "IsMEO", sss.2 "Attività", u.7 "Attività didattica e scientifica", "Ideali della Cina moderna".

⁴⁴ A trip to Italian East Africa was the prize for a competition for young university students held at IsMEO in 1940. FGG, "Giovanni Gentile 1882-1945", s. 5, "Attività scientifica e culturale [post 1910-1940]", ss. 4. "Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente [settembre 1932-ottobre 1942]", sss. 2 "Attività [settembre 1932-ottobre 1942]", u. 5, "Pro-Memoria".

⁴⁵ The Museo Etnologico Missionario inside the Convento di San Francesco in Fiesole, founded by Friar Ambrogio Ridolfi (1875–1966), contains objects from Egypt and China, brought to the monastery by missionaries who collected them with the help of Egyptologists such as Ernesto Schiaparelli (1856–1928). One year after the proclamation of the empire, on 9 May 1937, the monks of the Florentine monastery requested to install a plaque on the wall of the monastery commemorating the presence of two monks in Ethiopia (Alberto da Sarteano and Tommaso Bellacci) as early as the fifteenth century, in the attempt to establish a logical continuity between this medieval event and the Italian conquest of Ethiopia.

Mentre sul finire del XV secolo Cristoforo Colombo e Amerigo Vespucci, che diede il suo nome al nuovo continente, lo scoprirono per gli interessi stranieri, i pionieri italiani del XIX secolo hanno dischiuso per la loro patria la parte etiopica dell'Africa (Reck 1940, 137).⁴⁶

The historical justification for the aggression against the country of the Negus was even traced by some to Andrea Corsali (1487), who was in Ethiopia in 1517 on the instructions of Lorenzo de' Medici (Guida 1941).

In the years immediately following the proclamation of the empire, many intellectuals strove to direct Italian ambitions towards the Orient (Masi 1936; Nava 1937; Zanon 1938), while dispelling the myth that Italians had never dealt with the Far East:

Un'altra leggenda, intanto, deve essere sfatata, e cioè che gli italiani non si siano mai occupati dell'Estremo Oriente. La rievocazione di alcune, fra le grandi figure di missionari, di pionieri, di artefici, noti ed ignoti, che hanno aperto all'Occidente le vie dell'Oriente, serve a dimostrare come la coscienza italiana sia sempre stata vigile e desta al senso di queste realtà che oggi il mondo è chiamato a vivere. Da Marco Polo a Benito Mussolini, la valutazione dei problemi determinati dal contrasto fra le caratteristiche delle due civiltà, l'orientale e l'occidentale, acquista una sempre maggiore aderenza a queste realtà che troppi hanno voluto ignorare [...] Le orme d'Italia nell'Estremo Oriente sono tracciate profondamente ed esprimono la comprensione, l'eroismo, il sacrificio; sono esse che segnano l'itinerario che la civiltà dovrà percorrere per il raggiungimento delle mete che si elevano oltre le nebbie delle rivalità mercantili ed oltre il pantano delle illusioni dei cultori dello status quo ad ogni costo (Catalano 1937, 6, 26).⁴⁷

In his book, Catalano contextualized well-known explorers, such as Colombo and Magellano, with more obscure ones like Fra Giovanni da Pian del Carpine (1182–1252), Giovanni da Empoli (1483–1518), Matteo Ricci, Niccolò Longobardi (1565–1654), Caterino Zeno (1450), Gerolamo de Angelis (1567–1623), Antonio Pigafetta (1480–1531) and Alessandro Malaspina (1567–1623), affirming their Italianness and positioning them in a continuity culminating in the Fascist empire.

⁴⁶ "While at the end of the fifteenth century, Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci, who gave his name to the new continent, discovered it for foreign interests, the Italian pioneers of the nineteenth century opened up the Ethiopian part of Africa for their homeland."

⁴⁷ "In the meantime, another legend must be clarified, namely that Italians have never been concerned with the Far East. Remembering some of the great missionaries, pioneers, and known and unknown creators who opened the roads leading East up to the West serves to demonstrate how the Italian conscience has always been alert and awake to the sense of these realities that the world is called upon to experience today. From Marco Polo to Benito Mussolini, the evaluation of the problems caused by the contrast between the two civilizations of East and West is increasingly in tune with these realities that too many have wanted to ignore [...]. Italy's footsteps in the Far East tread deeply and express understanding, heroism and sacrifice; they mark the route that civilization will have to follow to reach the goals that rise above the mists of mercantile rivalry and beyond the quagmire of illusions of lovers of the status quo at all costs."

At the inauguration of the Comitato Lombardo per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente on 14 February 1937, Gentile highlighted Italy's proximity to Japan and their spiritual sympathy as two "nazioni vive, dialettiche entrambe". For Gentile, Shintoism and Fascism were both opposed to Americanization and atheistic Bolshevism. He defined Japan as "laborioso, instancabile, tenace, forte della sua fede e della coscienza del suo grande avvenire [...] naturale alleato dell'Italia" (Gentile 1937).⁴⁸ In 1939, Japan and Italy formalized their already well-established collaboration with a cultural agreement.⁴⁹ In the 1941 editorial in *Asiatica, Saluto al Giappone*, Japan was described as

una grande nazione che in meno d'un secolo si è svegliata, alzata in piedi e messa in cammino per creare una nuova storia. Ancora una volta "ex Oriente lux": e dagli estremi confini del più vecchio mondo una nuova umanità avanza. Sulla sua bandiera è scritto: nuova Asia. E vuol essere un'Asia che, senza rinunciare al suo passato altamente umano e vitale, si assimili alle conquiste spirituali dell'Europa.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ After Buddhism, Shinto also aroused the interest of Fascism; this was mirrored in the lectures given at IsMEO by Yotaro Sigimura (1884–1939), Japanese ambassador in Rome, and the publication of his book *L'Evoluzione del Giappone* in the *Lecture orientali* series in 1936. In the spring of 1937, just a few months before the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, Tucci gave a speech in the presence of Baron Okura, president of the Japanese Friends of Italy association at the Italian-Japanese Institute (*Giornale Luce* B/B1079 *L'istituto italo-nipponico*, 21/04/1937). The IsMEO-based Amici del Giappone association, with Paulucci de Calboli as its president (and Tucci as its vice-president, something that would later be used as an indictment in the Tucci purge trial; Crisanti 2020, 360), was born in 1941 (De Calboli 1940). ASDMAE, Affari politici 1931–1945, Giappone, b. 23, fasc. "Rapporti culturali", *Telespresso* n. 901312/103 da Ministero della Cultura Popolare a Ministero Affari Esteri, 3 February. There was also a Venetian section of the association, which hinged around Ca' Foscari (Donadon 2019). On 6 November 1937, Italy acceded to the Anti-Comintern Pact signed by Germany and Japan the year before, which formed the first embryo of the Tripartite Pact that would be formalized on 27 September 1940. Cultural initiatives continued: in 1937 Karl Haushofer (1869–1946), German general and geographer, gave a lecture at IsMEO entitled "Parallelismo nello sviluppo dell'Italia, della Germania e del Giappone" (Haushofer 1937), the travelling Fascist Exhibition was set up in Japan in the same year, and in spring 1940 two Italian cultural institutes were inaugurated in Tokyo and Kyoto. The association's journal, *Yamato*, was published in 1941–1943. Edited by Pietro Silvio Rivetta (1886–1952), professor at the Orientale University in Naples, it had an editorial board formed by Tucci and ambassador Giacinto Auriti (1923–2006), who wrote most of the articles.

⁴⁹ "Tucci elogia molto le capacità e doti dell'Ambasciatore giapponese a Roma mi dice che l'Accademia ed egli, nella qualità di vice presidente, ha accettato di buon grado le pressioni che gli venivano fatte dall'ambiente dell'Ambasciata di ospitare in Italia, per un ciclo di conferenze nelle Università uno dei maggiori giuristi del Giappone celebre professore di Diritto Commerciale al suo paese in cambio egli invierebbe in Giappone un nostro scienziato per un ciclo di conferenze; [...] egli secondo diceva iersera, avrebbe intenzione di proporre S.E. Fermi [...] o un cultore di biologia studi che interessano enormemente il Giappone e che hanno profondi cultori da noi per es. il Prof. Pende." ACS, Ministero dell'interno, Direzione generale di pubblica sicurezza, Divisione polizia politica (1927–1944), fascicoli personali: "Tucci, Giuseppe", busta 1382, "memoriale riservato, 8 dicembre 1935".

⁵⁰ "A great nation that in less than a century has woken up, stood up and set out to create a new history. Once again 'ex Oriente lux': from the far reaches of the oldest world a new humanity is advancing. On its flag is written: new Asia. And it wants to be an Asia that, without re-

The idea of a close relationship between the two countries was once again reaffirmed by looking back at the past: the exhibition organized in 1942 at the Farnesina, with memorabilia relating to the printing of Latin and Italian works by missionaries in Japan in the 1600s and recollections of Japanese embassies to Rome in 1598 and 1613 (Tucci 1940), was intended to strengthen the historical ties between the two countries, highlighting their long duration, and legitimize Italian ambitions in the East, by once again identifying "pioneers" (Sarti 2015).

During the 1940s, publications dedicated to Italian pioneers, from the most erudite to those aimed at the general public, continued unabated: *Relazioni della Toscana Granducale con la Reggenza di Tunisi (1818–1823)* (Riggio 1940); *Marco Polo* (Dainelli 1941, published in the *I grandi italiani* series, a popular collection of biographies supervised by Luigi Federzoni for UTET); *Arabia Felix e Itala Gens* (Sertoli Salis 1942); and *L'Africa di Livio Sanuto, geografo veneto del '500* (Lefevre 1942) are just some examples.

In those years, partly due to competition from the Nazi Reich, whose leadership was at least in part interested in Tibet,⁵¹ Tucci vigorously reaffirmed the primacy of Italian explorers in the region he loved above all others (De Rossi Filibeck 2008). In a speech at the University of Kolozsvár (today Cluj-Napoca, at the time part of the Kingdom of Hungary), he strongly emphasized that despite not reaching the actual city of Lhasa, Odorico da Pordenone (1280–1331), a Franciscan friar and missionary explorer who travelled through India and China (where he spent three years in Beijing), was the first European to ever report its existence (Tucci 1942a).

Almost obsessive references to Italian achievements can also be found in *Indo-Tibetica IV*, published by the Reale Accademia d'Italia in 1941:

Che del resto l'Italia si occupi di Tibet è naturale perché furono proprio gli italiani che per primi fecero conoscere all'Europa l'anima di questo popolo così devoto agli ideali religiosi (Tucci 1941, 2).⁵²

nouncing its highly human and vital past, assimilates itself to the spiritual achievements of Europe." Ideas also reiterated in Gentile (1942).

⁵¹ A German expedition to Tibet was carried out from April 1938 to August 1939 under the auspices of the SS Ahnenerbe (SS Ancestral Heritage Society), and led by German zoologist and SS officer Ernst Schäfer (1910–1992). The expedition was the subject of the documentary *Geheimnis Tibet* or *Lhasa-Lo. Die verbotene Stadt* (1943) directed by Ernst Schäfer and Hans-Albert Lettow. The objective of the expedition, which enjoyed Himmler's support, was the racial categorization of the indigenous peoples of inner Asia. During the research trip, Bruno Beger (1911–2009), racial anthropologist who worked for the Ahnenerbe, carried out numerous anthropometric measurements of the indigenous population, trying to find "skeletal remains of earlier Nordic immigrants" and "the Nordic race among the population" (Engelhardt 2004; Neuhaus 2012, 106–7). Schäfer and his team brought with them from Tibet around 2,000 ethnological objects, 20,000 black-and-white photographs, 2,000 colour photographs and 16,000 metres of black-and-white film footage (on the Nazi-Tibet connection in popular culture, see Engelhardt 2008).

⁵² "It is only natural that Italy should be concerned with Tibet, because it was the Italians who first introduced Europe to the soul of this people so devoted to religious ideals."

It was a view that Tucci had already vehemently expressed:

è una verità all'estero troppo spesso dimenticata che gli italiani furono i primi a riaprire le vie dell'Oriente appena le tenebre dell'alto medioevo cominciarono a diradarsi [...], ragioni pratiche di mercantare e irrequieto spirito di avventura subito dopo la pavidità attesa del Mille, guidarono viaggiatori audaci per le strade medesime sulle quali Roma s'era protesa [...]. Su tutte le opere e relazioni italiane e straniere premezza per sicurezza e profondità di giudizio quella di Desideri [al quale dobbiamo] il primo sorgere degli studi tibetani (Tucci 1938, 435, 444).⁵³

Tucci also emphasized the figure of the missionary Orazio della Penna (1680–1745) as the last “foreigner” in Tibet for centuries, and author of the first Tibetan dictionary, before the return of “Italia nuova” (Tucci 1938, 446).

At the time of the Armistice of Cassibile, the activities of IsMEO, by then with branch offices in Milan, Genoa, Turin, Venice, Trieste and Bari offering courses on oriental languages and cultures, were largely interrupted.⁵⁴ However, despite the uncertain conditions in Italy in 1943, Tucci wrote to Gentile about the institute: “L'IsMEO non cadrà [...]. L'Italia non deve rinunciare all'Oriente se vuole vivere”.⁵⁵ Just one year later, Gentile had been killed by Florentine partisans and Tucci put under scrutiny by the purge commission (his trial is accurately described in Crisanti 2020). IsMEO had fallen, but only temporarily.

4. “Un popolo di navigatori, di trasmigratori”: the post-war period and the survival of the myth of travellers to the East

Tucci's removal from all institutional positions was short-lived, and as early as 1946 he was reinstated to the chair of Religions and Philosophy of India and the Far East in Rome, which he held until his retirement in 1969 (Crisanti 2020, 397). In 1947 Tucci also became president of IsMEO, a position he held until 1978 (becoming honorary president in 1979). Gentile, on the other hand, was effectively removed from the institute's official history.⁵⁶

⁵³ “It is too often forgotten abroad that the Italians were the first to reopen the roads to the East as soon as the darkness of the early Middle Ages began to fade [...], practical reasons of mercantile advantage and a restless spirit of adventure immediately after the fearful expectation of the Thousand guided bold travellers along the same roads on which Rome had expanded [...]. Of all the Italian and foreign works and reports, the one by Desideri [to whom we owe] the first emergence of Tibetan studies, stands out for its certainty and depth of judgement.”

⁵⁴ See the correspondence between Gentile and the dean of Ca' Foscari, Alfonso de Pietri-Tonelli, on the establishment of IsMEO branches: Ca' Foscari Fondo Storico (Venezia) - Serie Rettorato, “Scatole lignee” (1912–1966), b. 30, f. 3, “Corsi per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (ISMEO) (1942–1944)”, 308107–308475.

⁵⁵ FGG, “Giovanni Gentile 1882–1945”, s.1 “Corrispondenza”, ss.2 “Lettere inviate a Gentile (1882–1944), u.5742 “Tucci Giuseppe (9 agosto 1919 – 7 aprile 1944)”, 17 August 1943.

⁵⁶ For instance, see the three-volume work dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the institute, from which Gentile is totally absent. The death of Tucci, who passed away shortly before the release of the volumes (published in 1985–1988), resulted in an even more extensive celebration of the explorer, beginning from the name *Orientalia Iosephi Tucci Memoriae Dicata*.

From 22 to 25 May 1950, the Convegno Nazionale su problemi orientali conference was held at Palazzo Brancaccio. The following were selected as discussion topics:

- 1) Le cause e i motivi comuni dei movimenti e delle mutazioni determinatesi o che si stanno determinando nei paesi del Medio ed Estremo Oriente
- 2) Possibilità di collaborazione economica tra paesi dell'Asia e l'Italia fondata sulla complementarità attuale o potenziale di risorse interessi e scopi.⁵⁷

IsMEO's work resumed, starting with a project that had remained unimplemented due to the war, namely the *Il Nuovo Ramusio* editorial collection. Giovanni Battista Ramusio (1485–1557) had been a diplomat and geographer of the Republic of Venice and is believed to be the author of one of the first geographical treatises of the modern age, *Delle navigationi et viaggi*. The treatise, published in three volumes between 1550 and 1559, collected more than 50 memoirs of journeys and explorations from classical antiquity to the sixteenth century, from Marco Polo to Vespucci and the great African explorations. With the reference to the Venetian geographer and the tradition of the Republic of Venice in its new publishing series, IsMEO intended to publish accounts of the eastern travels of "great Italians" (Beonio-Brocchieri 1957).⁵⁸

Tucci and Gentile believed that Ramusio's work had been left for so long without any continuators, that "gli italiani a tal punto dimenticarono di averne per primi aperte le vie dell'Oriente".⁵⁹ The *Nuovo Ramusio* project was conceived in 1941.⁶⁰ It was to be chaired by Gentile, and the steering committee was to have

⁵⁷ "1) The common causes and reasons for the movements and changes that have or are taking place in the countries of the Middle and Far East. 2) Possibilities of economic cooperation between Asian countries and Italy based on the current or potential complementarity of resources, interests and aims." ACS, Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Affari Generali 1926–1954, b.16, f. 13, "Convegno Nazionale su problemi orientali".

⁵⁸ A trend that can also be observed in the strictly colonial sphere: in the early 1940s, the Ufficio Studi of the Ministry of Italian Africa was working on a series entitled *Grandi Italiani d'Africa* (also referred to in the documentation as *Grandi Africani d'Italia*) published by Vallecchi: Archivio Storico Diplomatico Ministero Affari Esteri (ASDMAE), ex Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (MAI), "MAI vol. IV 1855–1962", ex Ufficio Studi MAI, b. 6, f. 16. "Collana I Grandi Italiani d'Africa". The following titles were published in the series: *Vita di Antonio Cecchi* (1940), *Le memorie di Carlo Piaggia* (1941), *Il diario eritreo di Ferdinando Martini* (1942), *Vita di Guglielmo Massaia* (2 vols. 1943–1944) and *L'uomo che donò un impero: vita ed opere di Pietro Savorgnan di Brazzà* (1944). Although already in the making, many other volumes, such as those on Miani, Matteucci or Gessi, were not published.

⁵⁹ FGG, "Giovanni Gentile 1882–1945", s. 5, "Attività scientifica e culturale [post 1910–1940]", ss. 4. "Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente [settembre 1932–ottobre 1942]", sss. 2 "Attività [settembre 1932–ottobre 1942]", u. 6 "Pubblicazioni (settembre 1932–gennaio 1943)", "Il Nuovo Ramusio".

⁶⁰ FGG, "Giovanni Gentile 1882–1945", s. 5, "Attività scientifica e culturale [post 1910–1940]", ss. 4. "Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente [settembre 1932–ottobre 1942]", sss. 2 "Attività [settembre 1932–ottobre 1942]", u. 6 "Pubblicazioni (settembre 1932–gennaio 1943)", "Promemoria. Fondazione per la pubblicazione degli scritti dei viaggiatori italiani in Asia ed Africa", 21 October 1941.

included Tucci, Daineli, Pasquale d'Elia (1890–1963) and Ethiopianist Enrico Cerulli (1898–1988), earmarked to edit the never published volume *Documenti sui rapporti tra Italia ed Etiopia nel Rinascimento*.⁶¹

Publication of the *Nuovo Ramusio* actually began in 1950, under the scientific direction of Tucci, and continued until 1973. The first volume in the collection was the book that should have been published in 1942, *Liber peregrinationis di Jacopo da Verona* edited by Ugo Monneret de Villard (1881–1954), which recounted the Augustinian monk's pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the second half of 1335. In its introduction we once again find the idea of Italy as a bridge between East and West. The titles published in the series were: *I Missionari Italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal* (seven volumes published between 1953–1956) edited by Luciano Petech (1914–2010), *Il libro dei conti di Giacomo Badoer (Costantinopoli 1436–1440)* (1956) edited by Umberto Dorini and Tommaso Bertelè, *Viaggi di C. Federici e G. Balbi alle Indie orientali* (1962) edited by Olga Pinto (1903–1970), *Le navigazioni atlantiche del veneziano Alvise da Mosto* (1966) edited by Tullia Gasparini Leporace (1910–1969), *I viaggi di Pietro Della Valle: lettere dalla Persia* (1972) edited by Franco Gaeta (1926–1984) and *Viaggi in Persia degli ambasciatori veneti Barbaro e Contarini* (1973) edited by Raimondo Morozzo Della Rocca (1905–1980), Maria Francesca Tiepolo (1925–2020) and Laurence Lockhart. A project by Roberto Almagià (1884–1962), which was not brought to light, also envisaged a new edition of Ramusio's *Navigazioni et Viaggi*, purged of all content dedicated to non-Italian travellers.⁶²

Moreover, between 1942 and 1949 it was the same Pasquale d'Elia, interested in the history of missiology and relations between China and the West, who began to publish his three volumes of *Fonti Ricciane: documenti originali concernenti Matteo Ricci e la storia delle prime relazioni tra l'Europa e la Cina (1579–1615)* with the Accademia d'Italia and later with the Accademia dei Lincei (Lincoln Academy).

At the time of its conception, Tucci wrote about the new series:

L'Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente e la Libreria dello Stato intraprendono oggi la pubblicazione integrale e scientifica delle opere dei più grandi viaggiatori italiani e dei documenti che portano luce sui rapporti che le nostre genti ebbero con l'Oriente, e la intitolano dal nome glorioso di Ramusio. Questa pubblicazione documenterà la parte avuta dall'Italia come tramite di cultura fra l'Oriente e l'Occidente e la importanza della sua missione unificatrice corrispondente nel campo ideale a quel suo protendersi nel mare come un ponte gettato a congiungere i continenti. Gli scritti dei nostri pionieri che dettero all'Europa notizia delle più remote civiltà, cercarono comprenderne i più segreti

⁶¹ FGG, "Il Nuovo Ramusio".

⁶² GG, "Giovanni Gentile 1882–1945", s. 5, "Attività scientifica e culturale [post 1910–1940]", ss. 4. "Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente [settembre 1932–ottobre 1942]", sss. 2 "Attività [settembre 1932–ottobre 1942]", u. 6 "Pubblicazioni (settembre 1932–gennaio 1943)", "Promemoria sul progetto di una nuova edizione del Ramusio".

caratteri e diffusero in Oriente le scienze occidentali e tentarono avvicinamenti d'arte finalmente pubblicati in degna veste e con un completo apparato critico, metteranno pienamente in luce la mirabile attività della nostra stirpe, la quale non scavò fra i popoli incomprensione né accaparrò ingiusti privilegi di labili potenze, ma umanisticamente cooperò ad uno spirituale incontro tra Occidente e Oriente.⁶³

The celebration of travellers continued in the 1950s and 1960s, also outside the *Nuovo Ramusio*: the more popular publishing series *La conquista della Terra. Esploratori ed esplorazioni* by UTET, edited by Giotto Dainelli, published *Esploratori e alpinisti nel Caracorùm* (1959), *Il Duca degli Abruzzi. Le imprese dell'ultimo grande esploratore italiano* (1959), *Missionari e mercadanti rivelatori dell'Asia nel Medio Evo* (1960) and *Il passaggio di nord-ovest* (1961).

Although forced to give up their colonial empire and their foreign policy ambitions (also) in the East, Italian intellectuals did not seem ready to give up what anthropologist Lidio Cipriani in his book *Dal capo al Cairo* defined as the Italians' "doti innate", namely the ability to triumph everywhere as explorers and conquerors (Cipriani 1932, 628). In fact, at the very moment of the fall of the colonial empire and the loss of the colonies, the Italian Orientalist school highlighted its complex relationship with colonialism and the difficulty in untangling one from the other.

While the changes taking place resulted in the prime exaltation of "local history" (see, for example, Tucci's almost obsessive reference to travellers from the Marche region, and from Macerata especially, such as Ricci and Beligatti, Giovanni Francesco da Camerino, Domenico da Fano, Gregorio da Lapedona, Tranquillo da Apecchio, Costantino da Loro, Floriano da Jesi, Ciriaco d'Ancona and himself: Tucci 1942b; Tucci 1947; D'Arelli 1998; Garzilli 2006), IsMEO did not give up celebrating "great Italians" such as Marco Polo (*Oriente Poliano* 1954; Tucci 1954) or the Venetian Niccolò Manucci (Tucci 1963).

In 1949 Tucci published *Italia e Oriente*, a volume entirely dedicated to the concept of rereading proto-Italian travellers in the East, with the aim of incorporating them into a national narrative. The path from the earliest to the most recent explorers of the East, culminating with Dainelli and Tucci himself, was traced back to Emperor Augustus and Prester John, via Giovanni da Pian del

⁶³ "The Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East and the Library of the State are today undertaking the integral and scientific publication of the works of the greatest Italian travellers and the documents that shed light on the relations that our peoples had with the East, and entitling it after the glorious name of Ramusio. This publication will document the role played by Italy as a cultural intermediary between East and West and the importance of its unifying mission, which ideally corresponds to its reaching out into the sea like a bridge that joins the continents. The writings of our pioneers, who gave Europe news of the most remote civilizations, sought to understand their most secret characteristics, spread western sciences to the East and attempted artistic approaches, finally published in a dignified format and with a complete critical apparatus, will fully highlight the admirable activity of our race, which did not cause incomprehension among peoples or grab unjust privileges from labile powers, but cooperated humanistically in a spiritual encounter between East and West." FGG, "Il Nuovo Ramusio".

Carpine, Giovanni de' Marignolli, Francesco Balducci Pegolotti commercial agent of the Compagnia de Bardi, Antonio Pigafetta, Filippo Sassetti, the Vecchietti brothers, Jesuit Antonio Rubino, Pietro Della Valle, Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri, Lazzaro Papi and many more.

In the introduction to the volume Tucci wrote:

Dopo le grandi imprese coloniali e la prepotente espansione dell'Europa in tanta parte del mondo, e soprattutto in Asia, sembra che sia stata del tutto dimenticata la parte avuta dall'Italia, sia nello svelare i misteri dell'Oriente, sia nel diffondere in quelle terre il pensiero e l'arte dell'Occidente. Né sarà male in tempi così tristi come quelli che seguono una guerra perduta, quando non pure gli stranieri, ma gli stessi Italiani non risparmiano vituperi ed umiliazioni alla patria ferita, rievocare certe nobili opere dei nostri maggiori. Tanto più conviene farlo perché non si tratta di conquiste avventurose e rapaci, ma di un generoso e illuminato scambio di cultura, confortato da un vivo senso di umana comprensione; e difatti leggendo queste pagine si vedrà quanto ai nostri missionari e viaggiatori vada debitrice la conoscenza che l'Europa ha lentamente acquistato dell'Asia e come non poche siano le tracce che il pensiero, l'arte e la cultura italiana, e, attraverso l'Italia l'Occidente in genere, hanno lasciato in Oriente (Tucci 1949, iv–v).⁶⁴

According to Tucci, Italy had never sought to obtain colonies in Asia with the desire to overpower them, but rather always moved with civilizing and generous intentions, unlike the other European powers (Scarfoglio 1937; Gnoli 1994, 226). It was a die-hard myth in the post-war period, fomented not only by the veteran officials of Italy's former African colonies (Del Boca 2005). Once again by presenting Italy as "mistreated" by the other European powers, Tucci intended to celebrate his country, defending it from the same Italians eager to forget its "noble deeds" accomplished all around the world.

Tucci did not abandon his celebratory intentions in the new Italian Republic and went on seeking continuity between the "Italians" of the past and those of the present.⁶⁵ In an undated letter addressed to Giulio Andreotti (1919–2013),

⁶⁴ "After the great colonial enterprises and the overbearing expansion of Europe in so much of the world, and above all in Asia, it seems that the part played by Italy, both in unveiling the mysteries of the East and in spreading the thought and art of the West in those lands, has been completely forgotten. Nor will it be a bad thing in such sad times as those following a lost war, when not only foreigners but the Italians themselves do not spare the wounded country any vituperation or humiliation, to recall certain noble works of our greatest. It is all the more appropriate to do so because it is not a question of adventurous and rapacious conquests, but of a generous and enlightened exchange of culture, comforted by a lively sense of human understanding; and in fact, upon reading these pages, one will see how much our missionaries and travellers are indebted to the knowledge that Europe has slowly acquired of Asia and how many traces Italian thought, art and culture, and, through Italy, the West in general, have left in the East."

⁶⁵ The institute's range of action did not seem to shrink, but rather broadened: for instance, in the 1970s a series dedicated to Italian travellers in Indonesia was launched in collaboration with the Jakarta Centre for Italian Culture, publishing *Lettera di Giovanni da Empoli* (1970) and *L'Indonesia nella relazione di viaggio di Antonio Pigafetta* (1972).

leader of the Democrazia Cristiana (DC) party and three times prime minister, who himself authored the book *Un gesuita in Cina. 1552–1610: Matteo Ricci dall'Italia a Pechino*, Tucci wrote:

Le sono grato non per me ma per gli studi che coltivo e che in tal guisa, continuando una tradizione antica dal tempo del Desideri e del Beligatti, restano un privilegio degli italiani [...] ciò naturalmente accrescerà, in Oriente, prestigio alla scienza italiana.⁶⁶

IsMEO's activities continued even after the end of Tucci's presidency: from 1979 the institute operated under the leadership of Iranist Gherardo Gnoli (1937–2012), who later became the first president of the Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (IsIAO), established after the unification of IsMEO with the Istituto Italo-Africano and active until 2012. Works celebrating Tucci's IsMEO and "his direct heirs" (Gnoli 1994) and the Italian presence in the East continued to be published by the institute (e.g. Menegatti 2005), alongside more technical works on the results of excavations and manuscript studies (Gnoli 1983).

Recently the acronym IsMEO has been taken over by the Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l'Oriente of Rome, which is often referred to as the "new IsMEO". The "new IsMEO" has also resumed publication of *East and West (New Series)*: "after almost a decade of silence, with this first issue of the 2020 Volume. This is exactly seventy years after Giuseppe Tucci, in his quality of president of IsMEO, began, with his *Foreword* contained in the first pages of the first issue of *East and West* 1 (1950), his dialogue between East and West".⁶⁷ In 2019, the new institute also launched the publishing series *Il Nuovissimo Ramusio*.

Whether Tucci is still considered a "paramanguru" (Garzilli 2012, xxii) nowadays or not, his (and Gentile's) legacy remain alive and the rereading and resemantization of the works of Italian travellers and scholars in the East certainly continues.

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⁶⁶ "I am grateful, not for myself, but for the studies that I foster and that in this way, continuing an ancient tradition from the time of Desideri and Beligatti, remain a privilege of the Italians [...] this will naturally increase the prestige of Italian science in the East." Letter from Giuseppe Tucci to Giulio Andreotti in Garzilli 2012, II: 1028–1029.

⁶⁷ IsMEO, "East and West" <<https://www.ismeo.eu/east-and-west/>> (2021-12-21)

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