

Searching for ‘Italianità’ in the Dodecanese Islands (1912–1943). Some Considerations on Art, Architecture and Archaeology through the Works of Hermes Balducci

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Abstract : The rediscovery and promotion of fourteen islands in the Aegean Sea – renamed the Dodecanese Islands – annexed to Italy as a military possession while formally under the dominion of the Ottomans, might be considered another phase in the search for an Italian identity. From 1912 to 1943 these islands experienced Italy’s ambiguous presence as invaders and colonizers. This paper aims to highlight the concept of *Italianità* through the works of Hermes Balducci, one of the protagonists of Italian colonial architecture in the Dodecanese Islands. To this end and using lesser-known material, this case study intends to recreate and redefine the past of the Italian presence on these islands and provide an interesting point of view in the search for a lost and rediscovered Italian spirit.

Keywords: Dodecanese, Italian possession, Italianità, Hermes Balducci

1. Introduction

The archaeological and architectural traces in the Dodecanese Islands are striking in the historical stratification that has formed since ancient times: Greek and Hellenistic temple ruins; palaces and mosaics from the Roman period; early Christian and Byzantine churches; walls, fortifications and houses from the era of the Knights of St John; Ottoman mosques with dome structures and slender minarets, baths and public fountains, are just some examples of the tangible richness of the islands’ cultural heritage. How Italy dealt with this heritage is probably one of the most original stories in the colonial experience of the Kingdom of Italy and the Fascist empire in the Mediterranean. While partially drawing on already known material, this paper nevertheless aims to offer new keys of interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon from an architectural and archaeological point of view.

The cultural policies undertaken by the Italians in the Dodecanese Islands in the period 1912–1943 and their reflections on art and architecture have long been considered a marginal topic in Italian studies, and mainly perceived as part of an immensely uncomfortable past. This discomfort is unavoidably connected to the imperialist vision and policies of those years, both in the first period of

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Italy as a new colonial power—as it rose up among the other European states—and later following the upsurge of Fascism with all its despicable consequences.

It is only in recent decades and with an open mind to understanding the inner contradictions, ambiguities and mistakes of the Italian policy of that period—especially in the dramatic years of the Fascist regime—that scholars from different disciplines have started to analyse this peculiar colonial past while considering the contributions of the Italians to the history of this area of the Mediterranean. Several researchers are trying to separate the ideology from the tangible remains of that time, namely cultural heritage that needs to be acknowledged and preserved today, to reframe the experience of Italy in the Dodecanese between the first decades of the twentieth century until the dissolution of the colonial empire. Moreover, many scholars, some of whom Greek, have analysed Italy's contribution to the islands' present assets from the point of view of urban planning, architecture and archaeology, highlighting its potentiality for tourist purposes. In general, in their opinion, the Italians' work on the cultural heritage did not just benefit the former occupiers but the present-day local communities of the Dodecanese too (Doumanis 1997; Antoniadis 1994; Fuller 1988).

The recent research in this direction includes the significant work edited by Jones and Pilat on the legacy and reuse of Fascist-period architectural spaces (Jones and Pilat 2020), in which several authors make a wide-ranging analysis of concepts like *Italianità* and *Romanità*, while enquiring about the built legacy of the Fascist regime in the contemporary debate. Another important publication edited by prominent Italian scholars collects several essays on the concept of *Mediterraneità*, while exploring the many art-, photography- and architecture-related aspects of the Italian experiences in the Mediterranean Sea (Maglio, Mangone, and Pizza 2017). Furthermore, a new monographic work focuses exclusively on the presence of the Italians in the Dodecanese Islands. The book's author, Valerie McGuire, underlines the uniqueness of the Italian colonial experience and discusses the case of Italy and its overseas empire in terms of national identity, claiming that Italy's modern nation-state was “at the nexus of different imperial and cultural economies that emerged in and around the Mediterranean basin during its period as a colonial sea” (McGuire 2020, 9). In another very recent work, Troilo investigates the re-appropriation of all of those traces of the past—in this case concerning the Italian experience in Rhodes and the Dodecanese between 1912 and 1943—by analysing the contribution of Italian archaeology to the definition of the imaginary of European imperialist practice starting from the end of the nineteenth century (Troilo 2021).

In order to correctly frame the main topic of this paper about the search for *Italianità* during the Italian colonial experience, it should be said that the main motivations driving the scholars in that period were directly linked to the will to unearth common roots between the ancient Mediterranean civilizations and the modern European state of the 1920s and 1930s.

Indeed, at that time scholars were principally interested in the classical age in order to rediscover the ancient roots of western countries, the essence and authenticity of architecture and the whole culture developed by the Greek, Hel-

lenistic and Roman civilizations, especially in the Southern Balkans as well as in so-called “Asia Minor”. On the contrary, very little effort was made to dig into and properly study the local art and architecture and the unwieldy “recent” Muslim past that characterized those regions.

If we keep a distance from the Euro-centric and nationalist visions that characterized that period, we can look at the dynamics of those years with different eyes. Today, with our increased awareness of the multifaceted and complex reality of the Mediterranean basin, its history and identity, it can be helpful to reread the written accounts and memories left by some scholars or travellers to better analyse the topic without any bias. As McGuire notices: “Studying the importance of empire during the Liberal period, and the continuities between nationalism and Fascism may also stand to reveal the complexity of contemporary postcolonial Italy’s relationship to its imperial past” (McGuire 2020, 11).

2. Historical background

On 4 May 1912, the Italian troop landing on the island of Rhodes was a direct consequence of the war between Italy and the Ottoman Empire in Libya, known as the *Guerra italo-turca* (Italo-Turkish War). The islands of the southern Aegean Sea, renamed the Dodecanese to separate them from the Sporades, were occupied by the Italian forces as a military operation to keep the Ottoman army under pressure on the Libyan front. By occupying and claiming these islands as a temporary possession, under the name of the *Possedimenti Italiani dell’Egeo*, the Italians wanted to stop the flow of weapons and other war supplies from Turkey towards the Cyrenaica region in Libya, one of the last Ottoman outposts in northern Africa. From the perspective of a new colonizer, the Italians also saw the islands as a strategic foothold for their expansionistic policy, forecasting an enlargement of the Italian possessions along the Turkish coasts and the Anatolian hinterland. In the same year, the Ottomans were involved on another front in south-eastern Europe, which led to the First Balkan War, during which the western borders of the Ottoman Empire started to be redefined. Italy saw this event as an opportunity to further weaken the sultan’s dominion over the Mediterranean lands.

From 1912 to 1943, the civic and public administration of the islands was taken care of by a series of military governors, whose political approach can be seen to change after the rise of Fascism in Italy.¹ The former ambassador to Czechoslovakia, Mario Lago, was governor of the Dodecanese Islands for 13 years (1923–1936), pragmatically showing some respect for the local nationalities and groups who inhabited the islands. As McGuire says in her analysis of the cultural achievements under Lago’s administration:

¹ Listed in chronological order, the governors of the new Italian possessions were: Giovanni Ameglio (1912–1920), Felice Maissa (1920–1921), Alessandro de Bosdari (1921–1922), Ugo Sabetta (1922), Mario Lago (1922–1936), Cesare Maria De Vecchi (1936–1940), Ettore Bastico (1940–1941) and Inigo Campioni (1941–1943).

Lago's cultural initiatives were by design complementary to the tourism program and the larger desire to preserve the Oriental aspect of the islands. [...] both historiography and local memory have tended to register Lago's rule as one of benign intervention and even cultural patronage (McGuire 2020, 204).

Things altered dramatically in the following years, however, owing to the authoritarian Fascist regime's desire to give the colonies a more "Italian" imprinting. From 1936 to 1940 the governorship was held by Count of Val Cismon Cesare Maria De Vecchi. He maintained a harsh rule over the Dodecanese possessions, imposing an exaggerated observance of Fascist ceremonial and showing little respect for the customs, habits, traditions and rights of the Greek, Turkish and Jewish communities, thus also prompting a break from the Ottoman tradition (Orlandi 2013).

This shift was marked by the gradual "optimization" of the archaeological excavations and architectural interventions for tourism purposes, and the symbolic and ideological use of monuments in order to evoke imperial Rome and exalt the regime. Considering the architectural style of the new buildings and those undergoing renovation, De Vecchi decided to remove all traces of "oriental and exotic taste" from the buildings built by his predecessor only a few years before (Pignataro 2013). As a consequence of this radical about-turn imposed by the new governor, the aim of the new architecture in Rhodes and on the other Aegean islands was to have a "strong" and "pure" Roman and Fascist imprint. This work of "purification" was emblemized in the dismantling of all the oriental decoration from the Grande Albergo delle Rose (Grand Hotel of the Roses) built in Rhodes by Michele Platania and Florestano Di Fausto between 1925 and 1927 (Orlandi 2010, 94).

At the outbreak of World War II in 1939 and until 1943, De Vecchi was replaced by new governors. In this delicate period the political and social conditions of the islands changed considerably. Italy and Germany entered the war on the same side and then in just under a year Mussolini declared war first against Albania and then Greece. After Italy signed an armistice with the Allies in 1943, Germany took control of the islands until the end of the war, defeating the Italians as well. After 1945 the islands came under British military occupation for two years, before the completion of their annexation to Greece.

3. Searching for *Italianità*

In order to strengthen the ties with the motherland and give an "Italian" imprinting to the islands during the occupation, many architects, engineers and planners were sent from Italy to the Aegean islands to work on several urban, infrastructural and architectural projects to plan, design and redesign the new possessions according to the government's ideas. Later on, during the Fascist *Ventennio* and when the control of the islands was sealed with the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923–1924, the idea to revitalize this area of the eastern Mediterranean through a programme of new architecture and infrastructure, in order to

make it more “Italian” and realize the dream of a Fascist *modernità*, was placed high on Mussolini’s agenda (Orlandi and Ivkowska 2020).

At the same time, scholars, restorers and archaeologists undertook missions to the Dodecanese Islands to study and restore what were then perceived as the ancient traces of “Italian civilizations” left prior to the Ottoman conquest. Their task was to document and potentially restore some early Christian, medieval and Byzantine architectural structures, as well as—though not so extensively—examine and analyse the Turkish and Muslim architecture left there by the previous conquerors.

In the name of the possessions’ supposed past *Italianità*, not clearly identified but attributable to the period of the ancient Knights of Rhodes and the medieval allure of the islands, the Italians carried out an architectural programme of reconstructions based on historical remains and archaeological excavations on all the islands of the Dodecanese and especially in the city of Rhodes, seen as the new capital and centre of the eastern Mediterranean.² As pointed out by Troilo in her recent research:

[...] il terreno della mistificazione e della riscrittura simbolica ha reso evidente la strumentalità di operazioni volte all’appropriazione di oggetti e spazi che, in questo contesto specifico, portarono anche all’invenzione di una città, Rodi italiana, vetrina del paese nel Mediterraneo (Troilo 2021, 11).³

There is already an exhaustive literature on the contributions of Italian architects, engineers and archaeologists to the Dodecanese Islands. I will not go into the details of this research here, but for a correct and general overview of the covered topics, the principal texts are: Petruccioli (1992), Colonas (2002) and Maglio (2014).

Concerning the past of the Dodecanese, the Italian cultural policy dealing with the archaeological and monumental heritage started between 1912 and 1913, immediately after the occupation of the islands, and continued non-stop during the Fascist era until the German occupation in 1943. The investments

² Among the prominent Italians working in the islands at that time we can briefly mention the chief engineers of the public works management, Giuseppe Miari (1885–1969), chief from 1929 to 1937 and Giovanni Tacconi (1894–1954) who worked there first in 1921 and again in 1937, after his predecessor. The protagonists of the architectural scene were: Florestano di Fausto (1890–1965), Pietro Lombardi (1894–1984), Mario Paolini (1902–1954), Rodolfo Petracco (1889–1979), Armando Bernabiti (1900–1970), Giovanni Battista Ceas (1893–1975), Oriolo Frezzotti (1888–1965) and Vittorio Mesturino (1895–1979). The archaeologists and scholars who contributed to the studies about the past of the islands were: Amedeo Maiuri (1886–1963), Alessandro della Seta (1879–1944), Luciano Laurenzi (1902–1966), Mario Segre (1904–1944), Giulio Jacopi (1898–?), Hermes Balducci (1904–1938), Giuseppe Gerola (1877–1938), Federico Halber (1857–1930) and Luigi Morricone (1906–1979).

³ “[...] The terrain of mystification and symbolic rewriting underlines the instrumentality of these operations whose aim was to take possession of objects and spaces, in this specific context leading to the invention of a city—Italian Rhodes—as a showcase for the country in the Mediterranean.”

were mainly directed towards cultural activities leading to the establishment of the Italian Archaeological Mission; the realization of large excavation and restoration campaigns, surveys and measurements of the most important monuments; the creation of museums and archaeological sites; in-depth research on the artistic and architectural heritage; and the birth of important institutions, such as the Soprintendenza di Rodi (Superintendence of Rhodes) and the Istituto Storico-Archeologico FERT.⁴ The name of the institution comes from a Latin acronym, for *Fortitudo Eius Rhodum Tenuit* (“His strength kept Rhodes”),⁵ used as a motto during Fascism to further emphasize the connections and continuity of Italian culture in the islands from the period of the Venetian colonies through to the Knights of St John.⁶

At the beginning of the 1930s, a guide was prepared by the Touring Club Italiano in order to promote the islands to tourists. The preface of this important publication was written by none other than Governor Mario Lago:

Gli italiani che visiteranno Rodi e le Isole minori non dovrebbero mai dimenticare che questo possedimento ha principalmente un valore morale e storico. È l'Italia stessa che ritorna in Oriente, riaprendo con vigore una tradizione che non è mai stata dimenticata. In qualche modo Rodi dovrebbe diventare - e in realtà lo è già di fatto - la capitale degli Italiani nel Levante (Touring Club Italiano 1930, 3).⁷

In 1912, the Ministry of Public Education assigned Giuseppe Gerola an important archaeological mission, which was followed by a second one in 1914:

⁴ Over 20 years, these institutions collected and classified all the studies and research done during the Italian occupation of the Dodecanese Islands. After the war, part of this rich and incredible material was sent to be relocated in different state archives in Italy. Part was sent to Greece, where the Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene (SAIA) still preserves a huge collection of these original materials in Athens, including pictures, drawings, sketches and diaries. In Rhodes, the Archaeological Institute of Aegean Studies (AIAS), under the direct supervision of the Greek Ministry of Culture and the Rhodes Ephorate of Antiquities of the Dodecanese, preserves part of the FERT archives and library. The AIAS building is still the same that the Italians used for FERT almost one century before, on the corner of the Strada dei Cavalieri and the square in the centre of the old town of Rhodes. On the history and the role of FERT in Rhodes, see Santi (2018).

⁵ According to some sources and legends, the motto FERT belonging to the Ordine Supremo della Santissima Annunziata (Supreme Order of the Most Holy Annunciation) was adopted for the first time by King Vittorio Amedeo II (1666–1732) from the House of Savoy, to connect his name to that of one of his ancestors, Count Amedeo di Savoia, who in 1314 succeeded in keeping the Turks away from Rhodes and thus avoiding its conquest.

⁶ For instance, the major restoration and “cleaning” works in Rhodes concerned almost all those buildings with references clearly oriented towards the “glorious medieval past”, such as the Ospedale dei Cavalieri, Albergo d’Italia, Armeria, Albergo di Provenza and Palazzo Alvernia.

⁷ “The Italians who will visit Rhodes and the minor islands should never forget that this possession has mainly a moral and historic value. It is Italy itself that comes back to the Orient, vigorously reawakening a tradition that has never been forgotten. Somehow Rhodes should become—and somehow it is already a reality—the capital of the Italians in the Levant.”

the main purpose of these early missions was to make a study, census and survey of all the medieval buildings located in the islands. Through numerous studies, Gerola reconstructed the medieval and Christian image of the city, which contrasted with the “oriental” layout that had shaped the island for almost four centuries during the Ottoman era. As a result, he listed the entire urban fabric of Rhodes as monumental heritage. In the spring of 1914, Amedeo Maiuri was invited to Rhodes to replace Gerola as the general director of the restoration work for the Hospital of the Knights.⁸ On that occasion, Maiuri was also appointed superintendent of the monuments to supervise and organize long-term archaeological missions on the island. At this point, the Hospital of the Knights was transformed into a museum, the Regio Museo dell’Ospedale dei Cavalieri, and Maiuri started to plan a precise programme to be followed in the following years. According to Troilo:

[...] l’accentramento in un’unica persona dei tre incarichi pose le basi per un’azione integrate che si tradusse nell’estensione delle ricerche già avviate, nell’allestimento degli oggetti in una sede adeguata, nel restauro di numerosi edifici presenti all’interno della cinta muraria (Troilo 2021, 150).⁹

As a consequence, in the following years research was carried out not only on the island of Rhodes but in all the Dodecanese, boosting the knowledge of the past of this area of the Mediterranean.

At the same time, considerable urban, infrastructural and architectural initiatives, like the construction of roads and bridges, hotels, summer resorts, sport facilities, golf clubs, thermal and bath resorts, were among the biggest achievements of a very ambitious project started by Governor Mario Lago to reshape the islands. In 1923, architect and engineer from northern Lazio, Florestano Di Fausto was appointed head of the Office for Architecture and City Planning in the Dodecanese. Due to his active role as a politician in the Catholic Popular Party and his relations as a technical expert and consultant for the Italian Foreign Ministry, Florestano Di Fausto soon became a leading figure in the Italian architectural panorama abroad. In his lengthy career, he designed and constructed several buildings all over Europe, in South America and in the Italian overseas territories around the Mediterranean, such as Albania and the North African colonial area of Libya (Miano 1992, 56; Godoli and Giacomelli 2005, 143–74).

In his Dodecanese period between 1923 and 1936, Florestano Di Fausto designed some of the most important buildings on the islands. He mixed architectural elements borrowed from the Italian tradition and medieval and Venetian references with modern features and both vernacular and Islamic

⁸ Amedeo Maiuri (1886–1963) was a pupil of SAIA, an explorer in Crete and inspector of the Museo Archeologico in Naples.

⁹ “The centralization of these three tasks in a single person laid the foundations for integrated action, resulting in the extension of the research that had already begun, preparation of the exhibition of the finds in a suitable location and restoration of numerous buildings found within the walls.”

architectural language, reflecting his predilection for a historical and eclectic architectural language (Orlandi 2010). Among his architectural works in Rhodes, we can mention the Catholic cathedral of St John (1924–1925), the Palazzo del Governo (1926–1927), the Circolo Italia (1925–1927), the Regina barracks (1924–1926), the post office (1927–1928), the new market (1936), and the abovementioned Grand Hotel of the Roses (1925–1927). Di Fausto’s predilection for a historical and eclectic language, inspired by the Gothic Palazzo Ducale in Venice and the medieval architecture of the Knights of St John can be seen in the architectural layout of the Palazzo del Governo in particular (Orlandi 2010, 94).

Throughout the Fascist period many other architects helped to find new—sometimes contradictory—architectural languages to encompass the Levantine heritage, modern Italy and the Mediterranean atmosphere (Rocco and Livadiotti 1996; Maglio 2014).

It must be underlined that all these urban transformations were a direct consequence of the ambivalent Italian policy in the islands. Constantly shifting between a sort of mystification of ancient Roman and medieval Italian roots, they literally reinvented a past for the sole use of propaganda and to conjure up a fascinating Levantine, Mediterranean and “oriental” atmosphere, kept alive mostly for tourist purposes. These contradictory aspects in the approach to urban planning and architecture were put in place at the same time and the Dodecanese became a testbed for new Italian colonial architecture.

By adopting several architectural languages, from oriental and “Moresque” to rationalist and “*Novecento*”, Italian architects aimed to define a sort of *Mediterraneità* that could keep all of the different styles used glued together. On one hand, we can see how architects like Florestano Di Fausto or Pietro Lombardi dealt with the local culture and oriental traces, and from another point of view it can be observed how other architects—like Armando Bernabiti or Rodolfo Petracco in some important projects such as the Teatro Puccini (1936–1937) or the Thermal Hotel (1937)—developed the concept of *Italianità*, by combining cladding stones and reinforced concrete in the same building.

A similar approach, mainly used in archaeology, restoration and historical research, was introduced to some historical buildings to bring back the chivalric “spirit” of the islands. This is the case of the Palazzo del Gran Maestro, entirely rebuilt by architect Vittorio Mesturino between 1937 and 1940 from a few ancient ruins belonging to the medieval palace of the Grand Master Helion de Vileneuve (1319–1347), erected when the Crusaders conquered the island. As for the image of Rhodes that needed to be promoted in Italy, McGuire stresses that:

In the final phase of their rule, the Italians no longer imagined Rhodes as a “home away from home,” but as a facsimile of a forgotten Crusader era. The focus on archaeological projects in Rhodes and Kos in the late 1930s also helped to bring the wider rhetoric of a new Roman Empire in Africa and the Mediterranean into the urban fabric and cultural landscape of Italy’s possessions in the Aegean (McGuire 2020, 138–39).

4. Hermes Balducci and his works in the Dodecanese Islands

A young scholar in the 1930s, here Hermes Balducci is considered a case study for his thought and vision, works and contribution to artistic, architectural and archaeological studies in the Dodecanese.¹⁰

Hermes Balducci (Figure 1) enrolled in the School of Engineering at the University of Pavia, where he graduated in chemistry (1925) and later in chemistry and pharmacy (1927). In the meantime, in 1925, he enrolled in the School of Civil Engineering, first in Padua, then at the Milan Polytechnic, where he graduated in 1928, and then acquired professional qualifications. He began his academic career as early as 1925, when he became teaching assistant to Professor Sebastiano Giuseppe Locati, lecturer in drawing in the School of Ornamental Design and Architecture at the University of Pavia. He kept this position until 1933, when he was appointed professor of applications of descriptive geometry; in 1934 he qualified as professor (*libera docenza*) in ornamental design and architecture and monument surveying, and the following year, due to the retirement of Professor Locati, he was appointed to teach drawing at the Faculty of Mathematical, Physical and Natural Sciences, a position he kept until his sudden, premature death caused by typhoid fever on 13 February 1938, at the age of just 34 (Orlandi 2013; Orlandi 2019).

Considering his short life, Hermes Balducci's interests branched out into many areas of knowledge, such as design and construction, geometry, photography, ornamental and technical drawings, mineralogy and geology. Moreover, he combined research and professional collaborations in the field of the restoration of monuments, particularly from the medieval and modern eras, with many works in Pavia—such as a design proposal for the southern wing of Palazzo Broletto; the restoration of Castello Visconti, the church of San Lazzaro and Teatro Frascini; a survey of the crypt of St Eusebius; and the design for the monumental ossuary in the cemetery—as well as the rest of Italy. He was also author of several publications about survey techniques and the restoration of major monuments, like the monographic works on Castello Visconti and the churches of San Lazzaro and San Giacomo della Cerreta in Pavia (Orlandi 2013).

Hermes Balducci arrived at the Istituto Storico-Archeologico FERT in Rhodes as a fellow in 1930, appointed by the local Italian institutions to work on the archaeological and architectural heritage. Unlike many of his colleagues, he had no training as an archaeologist, but under the supervision of experts such as Giulio Jacopi and Luigi Morricone he soon became a prominent and trusted figure among the Italians working overseas.¹¹

¹⁰ Hermes Balducci was born in Fano on 27 October 1904, son of architect Giuseppe Balducci from the town of Forlì and Elina Omiccioli, daughter of a landowner. After the separation of his parents in 1914, he spent his childhood in a college in Switzerland, before returning to Italy to start and complete his education first in Pavia and later in Padua and Milan.

¹¹ A recent exhibition titled *Hermes Balducci Pinxit – Pavimenti a mosaico da Coò* was held at the Palace of the Grand Master in Rhodes from 27 July 2019 to 30 April 2020, promoted by



Figure 1 – Hermes Balducci (1904–1938). Private collection

In a period of almost eight years between 1930 and 1937, Balducci travelled several times from his hometown of Pavia to the Dodecanese Islands: he visited and worked on Rhodes, Kos and Samos to document the traces of previous civilizations, his major interests concerning classical architecture, the Byzantine period, the Middle Ages and the Knights of St John. During this work experience in the Levant, Balducci meticulously worked on numerous drawings, sketches, measurements and notes on the conservation and restoration of ancient monuments, making precise surveys and pertinent observations, often supported by astonishing photographic campaigns.¹²

SAIA, the Italian archaeological school in Athens and the Rhodes Ephorate of Antiquities of the Dodecanese (Michaëlidu and Papi 2019). The exhibition presented a collection of 55 mosaic watercolours painted by Balducci, relating to an archaeological campaign in Kos headed by Luigi Morricone between 1935 and 1937, highlighting Balducci's extraordinary talent as an engineer and archaeologist.

¹² The publications by Hermes Balducci on these topics are as follows: *Il santuario di Nostra Signora di tutte le Grazie sul Fileremo presso Rodi*, with preface by Giuseppe Gerola, Pavia: Tip. Edit. Artigianelli, 1931 (Balducci 1931); *Orme del Rinascimento italiano in Rodi al tempo dei cavalieri*, Pavia: Tip. Edit. Artigianelli, 1931; *Pianta del Teatro, frammenti e restituzione del*

His most relevant studies include the work under the direction of Giulio Jacopi between 1930 and 1931 on the remains of the proto-Byzantine basilica and the medieval church built on the site of the temple of Athena in the ancient acropolis of Ialysos, on Mount Filerimos (Orlandi 2019, 23). Balducci's publications on archaeological excavations clearly state his intentions to revive the pure Christian spirit of the island, neglected for centuries under the "infidel" Ottoman domination and now unearthed, waiting to be studied and restored in a proper manner:

Presso Trianda, dalla parte Sud Ovest, si erge il colle cosiddetto del Fileremo, il cui Santuario coi suoi ruderi giunge sino a noi dal Medio Evo pieno di una rinomanza mista di storia e leggenda. Era in una sua nicchia che veniva custodita una Santa immagine di Nostra Signora per più di due secoli, simbolo e baluardo avanzato di tutta la cristianità (Balducci 1931, 5).¹³

The leitmotiv of the reappropriation of the Christian past and symbols is also emphasized by Balducci in another publication about the survey of some ruins belonging to the church of Santa Maria del Borgo (Figure 2) in Rhodes town, an example of a unique artefact still existing of the glorious chivalric past of the island:

È questa, dunque l'unica chiesa che, per quanto in rovina, ci possa dare nella maniera più sensibile, certa prova dell'esistenza in Rodi di una particolare Architettura Religiosa Cavalleresca, darcene le caratteristiche stilistiche e strutturali, e trasportarci idealmente a quei tempi di ardente Fede e di leggendario Valore che segnano le pagine più belle, gloriose nella storia dell'isola (Balducci 1933a, 68).¹⁴

In the conclusion of this very detailed essay on the state of art of the ruins of Santa Maria del Borgo, Balducci stated the idea that the Italians—as the new rescuers of the Dodecanese—were responsible for keeping the memory of the church alive and preserving this great symbol for the entire Christian community of Rhodes:

Tempio di Apollo Eretimio (Rodi): dieci tavole con breve testo esplicativo, Rhodes: Istituto storico-archeologico, 1932; *La Chiesa di S. Maria del Borgo in Rodi fondata dal gran maestro Helion de Villeneuve: la Cattedrale di Rodi, la Chiesa di Santa Caterina della Lingua d'Italia*, Pavia: Tip. L. Rossetti, 1933 (Balducci 1933a); "La casa dell'Ammiraglio Fra Costanzo Operti in Rodi", *Ticinum* 2, February 1933, 1–9 (Balducci 1933b) and *Basiliche protocristiane e bizantine a Coe (Egeo). Conferenza tenuta per invito del Reale Istituto di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte in Roma, Palazzo Venezia, il 15 maggio 1936-XIV*, Pavia: Tip. L. Rossetti, 1936.

¹³ "On the south-west side, near Trianda, is the hill of Filerimos, whose sanctuary with its ruins come down to us directly from the Middle Ages, filled with a mixed reputation of history and legend. It was in one of its niches that a holy image of Our Lady was kept, for more than two centuries, as a symbol and bulwark of all Christianity."

¹⁴ "Therefore, this is the only church that, although in ruins, can most sensitively give us certain proof of the existence in Rhodes of a particular chivalric religious architecture, give us its stylistic and structural characteristics, and ideally transport us to those times of ardent faith and legendary value that mark the most beautiful, glorious pages in the island's history."

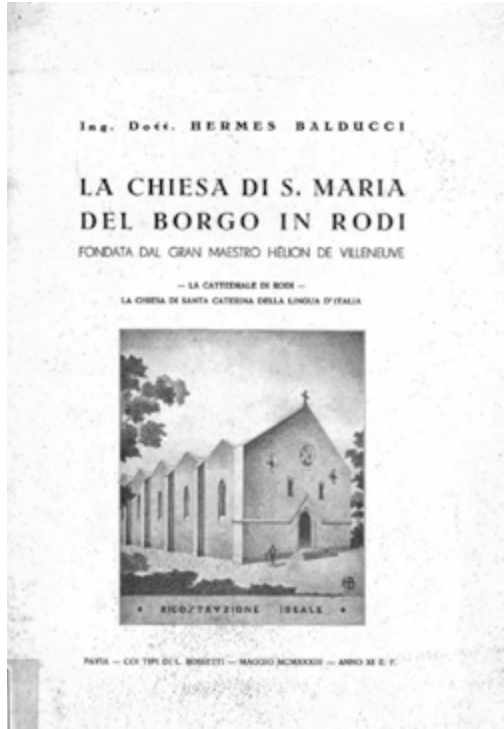


Figure 2 – Front cover of the book *La Chiesa di S. Maria del Borgo in Rodi* by Hermes Balducci (1933). Private collection

Gli imponenti e venerandi avanzi di Santa Maria del Borgo sono per noi unico e chiaro, esempio, vero e prezioso cimelio di una produzione artistica religiosa, i cui termini erano fino ad oggi quasi del tutto sconosciuti in Rodi. [...] [Bisogna] consolidarne le parti superstiti in modo che abbiano per secoli ancora a testimoniare visibilmente in Rodi dell’alta Pietà, dei suoi Cavalieri e della Loro edilizia Sacra, non meno che della Nostra reverente sollecitudine e gelosa cura (Balducci 1933a, 8–11).¹⁵

Wherever it was possible not just to recognize some vague Christian or medieval traces but actually pinpoint a specific building or artefact that belonged directly to an important Italian personality of the past, Balducci expressed himself

¹⁵ “The important and venerable ruins of the church of Santa Maria del Borgo are for us a unique and clear, true and precious example of an artistic and religious production, the like of which was hitherto almost completely unknown in Rhodes. [...] [It is necessary] to consolidate the surviving parts in such a way that for centuries they will bear visible testimony in Rhodes to the great piety of [the island’s] Knights, their sacred building, and not least our reverent solicitude and jealous care.”

with enthusiastic tones, emphasizing the idea of a strong Italian national identity through history with even more force. This is the case of the medieval-style restoration of quite a modest stone house belonging to a member of the Operti family, Costanzo Operti, an important figure of the early sixteenth century and admiral of the Christian fleet, who was directly connected to the Christian league for the defence of the Mediterranean coasts against the Turks.¹⁶ The project for the restoration of this house is celebrated by Balducci in an essay on this building and his contribution to the survey and design process:

Una nuova benemerenzza si aggiungerà forse tra breve alle tante già guadagnate dal Governo di Rodi che con fervida ed operosa passione, regge S. E. il Senatore Mario Lago. E se essa è modesta in confronto alle altre magnifiche del recente passato, pure questa per noi italiani desta una particolare interesse, perché fa vibrare le corde del sentimento e del giusto orgoglio Nazionale (Balducci 1933b, 1).¹⁷

Further on, he continued in the same passionate way:

[La casa di Costanzo Operti] porterebbe inoltre in Rodi un contributo di doveroso ricordo ad un Italiano che a sua volta fu d'onore alla Patria e renderebbe più evidente e decoroso questo lapideo testimonio, ora mutilo, ad ulteriore tangibile dimostrazione di un passato che tanto ci appartiene (Balducci 1933b, 9).¹⁸

Beside these interests relating to the revival of the ancient classical or medieval “Italian past”, a considerable part of Balducci’s research in Rhodes was dedicated to the study of the vernacular Turkish houses and Ottoman art and architecture,¹⁹ showing his curiosity for “the other” culture, even though he still supported the ideology of the Italians’ superiority over the Turks. However, his interest was genuine, and his work was careful and serious, using appropriate sources from other scholars, such as Albert Gabriel—who studied Rhodes a few years before

¹⁶ The Operti were an important family from Fossano, of which Fra Costanzo Operti was undoubtedly one of the greatest exponents, certainly for his role in the Mediterranean as admiral of the Rhodian fleet against the Turks. See Adriani (1853, 450–56).

¹⁷ “A new merit will perhaps soon be added to the many already earned by the government of Rhodes which, with fervent and industrious passion, is ruled by His Excellency, Senator Mario Lago. And if it is a modest [house] compared to the other magnificent ones of the recent past, this too for us Italians arouses particular interest, because it vibrates the strings of sentiment and the right national pride.”

¹⁸ “[The house of Costanzo Operti] would bring to Rhodes a contribution of dutiful remembrance to an Italian who was a man of honour to his homeland, and it would make this stone building—now in ruins—more evident and dignified as a further and tangible demonstration of a past that strongly belongs to us.”

¹⁹ On this topic, Hermes Balducci produced an exhaustive 190-page monographic work, accompanied by original drawings and pictures: *Architettura turca in Rodi*, with preface by Giulio Jacopi, Milan: Editore Ulrico Hoepli, 1932 (Balducci 1932); an article on the typology of the local Turkish houses: “Casa turca in Rodi”, *Ticinum* 8, August 1933, 1–7; and another article on the ceramic crafts in another village on the island of Rhodes: “L’industria artistica che risorge in Rodi”, *L’Artista Moderno* 5, 1931, 95–100.

him—or the descriptions of Ottoman Constantinople and its architecture left by the Sardinian diplomat Antonio Baratta a century earlier (Orlandi 2013).

By sharing interests towards Muslim-Turkish culture, and not only towards unearthing the “Italian” past, Hermes Balducci directly entered the debate about the role of the “oriental” and Muslim architecture in contrast to the concept of *Italianità* and *Romanità* in a conquered land like the Dodecanese. As pointed out by Colonas, during the 1930s, when the Fascist regime encouraged architects to “clean up” all the oriental or local formal architectural features of buildings from previous decades to replace them with a new style more appropriate for the propaganda and directly linked to the *Romanità* or to the Knights of St John, Balducci clearly declared:

Bisogna in ogni modo riconoscere che cupole e minareti danno un'impronta tutta affatto particolare alla città; e se si crede che uno dei compiti principali dell'architettura, in un territorio di conquista, sia quello di esprimere tangibilmente e durabilmente la personalità del dominatore, dobbiamo pur riconoscere che queste semplici e se si vuole modeste costruzioni marchiano profondamente la città di Rodi. Onde se dallo studio del passato deve trarsi valido consiglio per l'avvenire, dobbiamo ancora giungere ad una conclusione che sbocca logica e a cui ebbi già per altra via ad accennare: L'arte edilizia odierna di Rodi deve essere sistematicamente di ispirazione, di sentimento prettamente italiani, dobbiamo darle un'impronta della più schietta Romanità (Balducci 1932, 190).²⁰

Therefore, it has been seen how, as a young FERT fellow, Balducci wrote some sleek and peremptory words clearly opposing the idea of “assimilation” by adaptation to the *genius loci*, instead insisting on the need to shape the conquered territories to their own (alleged) image for political and colonial reasons.

5. Conclusions

Far from being an exhaustive essay on the architectural work of the Italians in the Dodecanese Islands, this paper wants to emphasize how in the Italian cultural milieu the image and perception of the newly acquired Mediterranean islands were manipulated and adjusted accordingly by the Fascist propaganda in seeking historical legitimization for their conquest. The efforts and results of the studies and works carried out by the Italians in those years are today to be necessarily reinterpreted and revisited from a different perspective, as evidence of a search for *Italianità* and *Romanità* in these islands. It can be seen how the

²⁰ Colonas presents a partial translation of the quoted excerpt from Balducci's *Architettura turca in Rodi* (1932, 190): “We should accept that domes and minarets convey an image that is anything but characteristic of the city. [...] We believe that one of the primary duties of architecture in an occupied territory is to express the personality of the conqueror tangibly over a long term. The art of modern construction in Rhodes systematically must be purely of Italian inspiration and sentiment; it must promote the stamp of *Romanità*” (Colonas 2002, 56).

search for archaeological traces of the islands' medieval "Italian" past was one of the main issues pursued by Italy in those years—especially in the 1930s—both among scholars and in the practice of archaeology and restoration in the field, as the case study of Hermes Balducci testifies. In his essays and studies there are often references and insinuations about a sort of "Italian superiority" over the Levantine and Ottoman world of the past centuries and decades; steeped in rhetoric and nationalism, his works convey all his enthusiasm in searching for *Italianità* even in the most remote islands of the southern Aegean Sea.

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