

Rereading travelers to the east: shaping identities and building the nation in post-unification Italy

edited by Beatrice Falucci, Emanuele Giusti, and Davide Trentacoste, Florence, Firenze University Press, 2022, 222 pp., €16.06 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-5518-578-3.

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To cite this article: Anthony L. Cardoza (2023) Rereading travelers to the east: shaping identities and building the nation in post-unification Italy, *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 38:2, 291-293, DOI: [10.1080/09518967.2023.2267874](https://doi.org/10.1080/09518967.2023.2267874)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518967.2023.2267874>



Published online: 13 Dec 2023.



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BOOK REVIEWS

Rereading travelers to the east: shaping identities and building the nation in post-unification Italy, edited by Beatrice Falcucci, Emanuele Giusti, and Davide Trentacoste, Florence, Firenze University Press, 2022, 222 pp., €16.06 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-5518-578-3.

This collection of essays provides a sweeping overview of the travel literature in the early modern period of Italian diplomats, merchants, missionaries, and scholars in China, Japan, the Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean, as well as its reinterpretation and repurposing by the newly founded Italian nation's elites in the decades from 1870 to 1945. While they cover quite a wide range of circumstances and experiences internationally and on the home front, the contributions all point to the construction of a "mythical past" that glorified the exploits of these travellers for political and ideological purposes by promoting a new national narrative and highlighting Italy's distinctive identity in comparison to that of the other major European powers. The essays collectively offer a new perspective on two of the principal topics that have dominated historical scholarship on modern Italy, since the crisis of the Christian Democratic system and the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s: the fragile identity of the nation as a "imagined community" and a collective sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the stronger economies and colonial empires of its European counterparts.

The multi-disciplinary approach of the contributors allows them to look at how exhibitions, collections, printed works, magazines, and institutes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries served to construct traditions and continuities between ancient, medieval, and early modern city states and the newly unified Italian nation. In this fashion the travel literature was reread to magnify the pioneering exploits of Venetian, Genoese, and Florentine travellers in shaping European colonialism, as well as as Italian models of bravery and adventure that embodied the new country's imperial aspirations, its glorious and continuous national past, and deeply rooted collective identity.

Despite these shared objectives, the processes and goals of re-reading travel literature necessarily reflected the varied circumstances encountered by explorers and missionaries in different parts of the East. Thanks to the prominence of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci, and Venetian adventurer Marco Polo, China receives special attention in the collection, with three essays devoted to the re-readings of their works by post-unification Italian journalists, intellectuals, and government spokesmen. In the case of Ricci, Aglaia de Angeli's contribution examines the first secular biography written in the 1880s by Lodovico Nocentini, who downplayed the Jesuit's role as a missionary, portraying him instead as a Humanist and scholar who pioneered cross-cultural knowledge between China and the West, establishing Italy's ostensible primacy as the centre of European sinology. The re-readings of the Fascist era gave more attention to Marco Polo, whom the regime portrayed as the heroic embodiment of "Italian-ness" in China and the pioneer of modern Western Europe's presence in the Far East. On the domestic front, the figure of the Venetian explorer contributed to Mussolini's ultra-nationalist pedagogy by providing Italian youth with an inspirational model of the new Fascist male.

Internationally, he demonstrated Italy's longstanding superiority over exploitive great powers like England and France, with its history of ostensibly friendly and supportive relations with China and its people.

Re-readings of Italian travellers in Japan, on the other hand, reflected very different historical experiences and political aspirations. Until the mid-nineteenth century, Italy and Japan had virtually no contact after the two and half centuries following the expulsion of Christian missionaries in the early 1600s. As the Japanese state reopened to the West and moved to reintegrate into the international system, earlier trips to the island by Jesuit missionaries and visits by young Japanese princes to the Italian peninsula were rediscovered and re-read to promote new economic and political relations between the two countries. Their burgeoning ties found expression in Italy's support for Japan's military campaigns against Russia, Korea, and China in the opening decades of the twentieth century, culminating in the Fascist regime's alliance with Imperial Japan in the Second World War.

The bulk of the remaining essays look at Italian travellers in Africa, the Middle East, and the eastern Mediterranean. In the case of Africa, Pellegrino Matteucci's writings on his expeditions to the Sudan and Ethiopia in 1870s employed gender, racial, and sexual tropes of exploration and colonial conquest that Fascist propagandists re-interpreted to advance their own agenda of forging a "great colonial" empire. Matteucci's premature death from a fever after one of his voyages also led them to transform him into a heroic martyr for the patria, whose travels celebrated the masculinity and virility of Italians. Following a similar pattern, the re-reading of relations between the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and the territories of the Lebanon and Syria in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries served to legitimize the same "national community's" ambitions in the region and challenge French primacy in the 1930s. Closer to home, Italy's military annexation of the Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean Sea after the Italo-Turkish War of 1912 led to a more ambitious re-reading of the past. Despite the architectural presence of Greek, Hellenistic, Roman, Christian, Byzantine, and Ottoman structures, the Fascist regime moved aggressively to showcase the common roots of modern Italy and the Mediterranean civilizations. New architectural and infrastructural projects restored ancient traces of Italian civilization, while marginalizing Greek, Turkish, and Jewish legacies. In this fashion, monuments became ideological and symbolic devices that evoked Imperial Rome to glorify Fascism and the historical legitimacy of its conquest of the islands.

The collection concludes in the post-1945 era with essays on Italy's relations with Iran and Communist China.

For the most part, the contributions reveal more about the grandiose aims and aspirations of the Liberal and Fascist re-readings and reinterpretations of travel literature to the East rather than the concrete results they achieved. Despite the steadfast efforts to claim the great Venetian, Tuscan, and Jesuit explorers as "Italians" and show the deep historical connection between Italy and the East, the enduring strength of local identities and regional identities on the peninsula and the socio-economic limitations of the country precluded any significant bolstering of national identity and its relative position among the Great Powers of Europe prior to 1945. Nonetheless, the collection does offer compelling evidence on the mentality of Italy's political, cultural, and social elites, especially their fears and insecurities during an era of dramatic changes and growing national rivalries on the European continent. For their part, the co-editors of the volume provide an

invaluable introductory chapter, which helps to tie together essays that cover geographically dispersed and diverse countries by laying out the common methods, themes, and issues of the contributions. Moreover, as the 256 bibliographical citations attest, *Rereading Travellers to the East* should be an invaluable source of information on published scholarship in the field. The book would benefit, however, from some serious stylistic editing and revision. There is excessive repetition of the same points and arguments, while too much space is wasted by the authors preannouncing what they are going to cover instead of just diving into their analysis. These shortcomings aside, this work offers a new and valuable contribution to the literature on the first century of the new Italian nation-state.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518967.2023.2267874>



L'expérience du Levant à l'automne de la Renaissance. Le "Voyage de Constantinople", by Étienne Jouhaud, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2021, 608 pp., €87 (hardback); €49 (paperback), ISBN 978-2-406-10844-3

In this copious volume, winner of the Prix Diane Potier-Boeàs of the Académie française 2022, Étienne Jouhaud describes in three well-documented parts the new relations that European travellers established with the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the Renaissance, which, in his view, was partly responsible for the evolution of European travel accounts and the image of the empire reported in the West. Jouhaud's inquiry is based on a varied sample of travel accounts, in particular on the four Turkish letters written in Latin by one O.G. de Busbecq from Flanders (1520–1591), alongside the travelogue of Philippe du Fresne Canaye (1551–1610), a French Protestant who wrote his account in Italian; that of Jean Palerne (1557–1592), a Catholic attached to the service of François de Valois, and written in French; the account of the English Protestant George Sandys (1578–1644); and lastly the journal of Pietro Delle Valle (1586–1652), whose letters written over 12 years to his friend Schipano would form a travelogue of considerable substance. The first part of the book focuses on the evolution of the political context after the Battle of Lepanto (1572), and the advent of new practices in the writing of travelogues aimed at promoting a singular experience that highlights the knowledge and relationships acquired by the authors, all belonging to the cultivated European nobility, during their journeys. While at the beginning of the sixteenth century, anyone applying for a position in the diplomatic service was required to build a "network of sociability established in distant lands" (121), the situation changed at the turn of the seventeenth, precisely at the time when the noble European practice of the Grand Tour was established. This secular form of travelling – quite distinct in nature from the earlier medieval pilgrimage – would over the centuries become a key stage for European aristocrats eager to further their intellectual and cultural education. Travelling abroad was a sign of the *honneste homme* (i.e. the French ideal of the educated and civilized nobleman in the