

Steaming across Mussolini's 'Roman Lake'
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After the First World War, “the Italian people longed for the Mediterranean, ... the Roman lake on which the ports of Venice, Trieste, Genoa, Naples, and Amalfi shone, the ports from which imperial galleons and republican warships set sail to conquer the world.”¹

Throughout the Fascist *ventennio*, the Mediterranean played a key role in the Italian imagination. Collective memory of Italian leadership in the ancient Mediterranean Roman world and perceptions that the Mediterranean formed a locus for the assertion of power in Europe drove Italian Fascist commercial aims, political aspirations, foreign relations, cultural policies and leisure priorities. This paper demonstrates how publicity materials disseminated by the major Italian shipping lines in Italy and abroad reflected the Fascist government's vision of the sea and Italy's role in conquering the Mediterranean. Shifts in the steamship companies' depictions of the Mediterranean and Mediterranean peoples can be divided roughly into four periods, 1922-1926, 1926-1931, 1931-1935, and 1935-1941. While some of the changes in the style of publicity materials can be traced to technological advances in printing and the development of mass marketing strategies, the shifts in image and perspective mirror shifts in Fascist priorities and foreign policy aspirations.

Mussolini's imperialist vision and aims to conquer the Mediterranean for Fascist Italy have been the focus of several studies of Italian foreign policy of the interwar period. Well-documented are Mussolini's grandiose proposals for the extension of Italian political and

¹ Corrado Moschitti, “Per il disciplinamento delle fiere campionarie in Italia,” Congresso nazionale per l'espansione economica e commerciale all'estero, 4-8 novembre 1923 (Naples, Francesco Razzi, 1923), 9.

economic hegemony across the “Roman Lake” and the inevitable failure of Fascist plans due to the lack of resources, power, foreign intervention, and even Italian political will.² Italy’s Mediterranean identity and its relevance to Fascist racial ideas and policies with regard to Jews and colonial peoples has captured scholars’ attention in recent years.³ “Mediterraneanism” has even been cast as the basis for a Fascist typology that differs from the German model.⁴ Less studied is the impact of Mussolini’s exploitation of the myth of the Italian Mediterranean to construct an image of Italian rejuvenation and prestige for public consumption and to justify support for Italian intervention in Mediterranean lands far from modern Italy’s shores.⁵ While Fernand Braudel’s classic work on the Mediterranean focuses on the end of the Mediterranean world in the early modern period, for Italians the importance of the Mediterranean was not eclipsed. Italy’s historic relationship to the Roman empire and the Mediterranean formed a basis for claims in the Risorgimento era and into the Fascist period. Spain, the Netherlands, France, and England turned toward development across the Atlantic, but the Mediterranean remained and remains the Italian focus.

Scholars debate the ideological integrity of Italian Fascism, and many suggest that pragmatism and opportunism rather than ideological commitment guided Mussolini.⁶ Despite scholars’ uncertainty as to the solid foundations for Fascist thought, nationalism and centralization constituted core tenets of Fascist governance throughout the twenty years that Mussolini remained in power. The Mediterranean provided a reminder of past glories, a focus

² See Aristotle A. Kallis, *Fascist Ideology and Expansionism in Italy and Germany, 1922-1945* (London, 2000), 168-81, for a relatively recent discussion on the Mediterranean and the collapse of Italian Fascism.

³ See, for example, Aaron Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy* (Routledge, 2002) and Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, *Italian Colonialism* (New York, 2005).

⁴ Charles F. Delzell, *Mediterranean Fascism* (New York, 1970).

⁵ One tentative step in this direction is taken by Nicolas Doumanis, *Myth and Memory in the Mediterranean* (New York, 1997) focusing on Italy’s relationship to Greece and claims to the Dodecanese.

⁶ For example, in his classic work *Mussolini’s Roman Empire* (New York, 1976), Denis Mack Smith categorizes Mussolini’s foreign policy aims and his emphasis on the creation of a Roman empire in the development of Fascism.

for national identification, and a sea of opportunity for Italians living inside and outside Italy's borders.

Steamship promotion priorities and publicity for the Mediterranean changed little from 1922 to 1926. In the 1920s, the Fascist government promoted Mediterranean commerce as part of the recovery and reconstruction of the nation after the war. Publicity materials for travel to the Mediterranean tended to offer bucolic sun filled scenes, touting the trip from Italy using the "sunny southern route."⁷

Continuity with the prewar shipbuilding programs and programs initiated under post-World War I liberal governments were evident in Lloyd Sabaudò's concentration on its *Conte* line from 1921, before the Fascist takeover, well into the Fascist period until consolidation in 1932. The *Conte Rosso*, launched in 1921 as the "largest and fastest Mediterranean oilburner," catered to "the wonderlands of the Mediterranean." Following quickly on the heels of this *Red Count* were the *Conte Verde*, *Conte Grande*, and *Conte Biancomano* (*Green Count*, *Great Count*, and *Count Whitehand*), making clear, by 1927, the Italian nationalist intent of the Lloyd Sabaudò line in the Risorgimento (Italian Unification) tradition. The naming of the ships highlighted the Italian tricolor at the same time that they honored historic figures linked to the Savoy dynasty, the monarchical family of the modern Italian state.⁸

In the early 1920s, Cosulich lines' Mediterranean routes were served by such ships as the *Martha Washington* (originally of the Austro-Americana line, interned at New York during World War I and returned to Cosulich in 1922) and *President Wilson*, clearly a nod to American ingenuity and influence. At commercial trade fairs in Italy, focus fell on maritime trade and

⁷ Various bulletins, Navigazione generale Italiana, Genoa, later Italian Line, June 1935, the Collection of Steamship Ephemera, The Library at the Mariners' Museum, Newport News, VA, MS15 Box 144..

links in two regions. Padua served as the northern node for commerce, an entrepôt for trade from the Adriatic and Ligurian seas to Central Europe. Naples served as the focus of attention in the south, a hub for commerce in the Mediterranean.

The consolidation of the power of the regime and the reorientation of foreign policy with the resignation of Foreign Minister Salvatore Contarini in 1926 brought changes to the steamship industry. Increasing militancy in foreign affairs was linked to an increasingly strong hold in the domestic arena. Mussolini's attention turned to cultural priorities. Among them, rapprochement with the Catholic Church and the Papacy in Rome was given high priority. Consonant with this policy, steamship lines emphasized Italian service to the Holy Land. In 1926, Cosulich line began offering two to three week cruises of the Mediterranean, including stops in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. The company advertised the trips "to the land where Christian Europe meets Mohammedan Africa."⁹ Figures astride camels with holy sites in the background graced publicity that aimed to entice leisure travelers and pilgrims to use Italian lines.

At the same time, Italian attention shifted to the campaign to secure and "save" (in the name of Catholicism and civilization) populations on the nation's borders. Fiume or Rijeka, the former Hungarian port championed by D'Annunzio and joined to Italy in 1924, became a particular target of Fascist attention. In 1925, the Italian National Institute for Economic Expansion Abroad organized an exhibition in the city. Ostensibly initiated to spur recovery of the city's trade networks, its major purpose in emphasizing the port and Fiume's relations to the sea was to affirm Italian hegemony in two ways. First, emphasis on ties to the sea linked the city to the coastal towns and the Italian peninsula rather than lands to the interior dominated by Slavs.

⁸ Conte Grande for Amadeus V, 13th century foundation of dynasty, Conte Verde named for Amadeus VI 1334-1383, Conte Rosso for the colors of his son Amadeus VII, 1360-1391, Conte Biancamano Humbert I - Count of Moriana known as "white hands" in the 11th century.

Second, emphasis on Italian rather than Slavic culture reinforced cultural priorities and the “saving” of coastal populations from uncivilized, (albeit in this case largely Catholic) Slavs.

Emphasis on commercial recovery in the early 1920s gave way to concentration on commercial expansion abroad by the late 1920s. Commercial trade fairs and maritime initiatives evolved to support the imperial aspirations of the Fascist government. Padua and Naples continued to emphasize maritime trade. At the Padua Fair in 1927, A Sea Pavilion dominated the space. But, promotion of Italy’s commercial and cultural links to the sea was no longer reserved to specific locations. Commercial maritime initiatives proliferated, both inside Italy and abroad. The Fascist government initiated a Trade Samples Fair in Tripoli in 1927. In 1929, Trieste hosted a Gold Coast Exhibit. In 1930, Bari emerged as the site for a Fiera del Levante highlighting trade ties to the Near East. In 1932, Trieste inaugurated its own Mostra del Mare (Sea Exhibition) focusing on trade in the Adriatic.

In 1928, Cosulich introduced the *Saturnia* and *Vulcania*. The ships’ names themselves recalling the powerful Roman deities Saturn (ruler of the universe) and Vulcan (god of fire and metal-working) represented a clear departure from precedent and indicated imperial priorities. Italia- Society of Navigation, Genoa followed this trend with the launching of the *Augustus* and the *Rex*, a steamship launched in 1931 and lauded as a technical marvel that captured attention in 1933 for its record-breaking trip between Gibraltar and New York in 4 days, 13 hours, and 50 minutes.¹⁰ Lloyd Sabauda commissioned the *Conte di Savoia*, and in 1932 the ship was launched under the unified Italian banner, touted as the beautiful sister to the more powerful and technically advanced *Rex*.

⁹ Cosulich Line brochure, Collection of Steamship ephemera, The Library at the Mariners’ Museum, Newport News, VA, MS15 Box 63.

¹⁰ *Rex* brochure, Italian Line, 1933, the Collection of Steamship Ephemera, The Library at the Mariners’ Museum, Newport News, VA, MS15 Box 144.

In their design and marketing, *Saturnia* and *Vulcania* supported Fascism's emphasis on Italy's civilizing mission as well as Mussolini's intention to establish Italian leadership in the steamship building field. Each ship boasted a chapel, touted as "a central feature of the ship," and the *Saturnia* and *Vulcania* were advertised as the "only vessels in the world authorized to carry the Blessed Sacrament on board at all times."¹¹

Commercial expansion abroad went hand in hand with emphasis on Italian's civilizing and imperial mission in the Mediterranean throughout the early 1930s. In 1930, Italian lines cooperated in an exhibit dedicated to Italy's "imperial grandeur" at the Belgian Colonial, Maritime and Art Exposition.¹² Italy's Catholic role figured prominently in steamship cruise offerings, including a 1932 Eucharistic Congress Cruise sponsored by Cosulich that originated in New York and Boston and made its way via France to Dublin, the site of the Congress.¹³

From 1931 to 1935, images in steamship lines' publicity focused on bolder ships and cleaner lines, reminiscent of the monumental style becoming popular in Fascist architecture. Renderings promoted the idea of strength and efficiency of Italian vessels, meeting economic priorities and setting new modern technological standards. "Corporatization" and centralization of the Italian economy and the eventual campaign for autarky accelerated the consolidation of regional shipping lines into national shipping companies. Publicity reflected Fascist consolidation of the shipping sector to form what was touted as a more efficient, resourceful, and logical administrative centralization of various lines to better promote national interests. The changing image of a ship on the cover of Lloyd Triestino's handbook clearly demonstrated the

¹¹ *Eucharistic Congress Cruise* brochure, Collection of Steamship ephemera, The Library at the Mariners' Museum, Newport News, VA, MS15 Box 63.

¹² Robert Rydell, *World of Fairs* (Chicago, 1993) discusses the Belgian exposition. *Il Piccolo*, the Triestine daily carried articles with detailed plans for Italian participation, 27 and 28 March 1929.

¹³ *Eucharistic Congress Cruise* brochure, Collection of Steamship ephemera, The Library at the Mariners' Museum, Newport News, VA, MS15 Box 63.

progression of Fascist priorities.¹⁴ The 1922 image of the steamship is closely replicated in the 1928 handbook. Both depict the steamship *Helouan*, named for the city Helwan in modern day Egypt.¹⁵ By 1928, the *Helouan* has clearly been refitted, and rides a bit higher in the frame, commanding more of the field of view. But in both cases, the ship steams under the banners of Lloyd Triestino and the halberd of Trieste with the Italian flag obscured. The ship, accompanied by seagulls, departs a port, vaguely visible in the distance. A shift in priorities is evident in the cover text, Lloyd Triestino “Steam Navigation Company, Trieste,” is, by 1928, advertised with the “quickest routes to Greece, Constantinople, Palestine, Egypt, India, and to the Far East,” shifting attention to links to the eastern Mediterranean.

The 1931 text mirrors that of 1928, with a change only from Constantinople to Istanbul. The image, however, is radically different. The *Victoria*, a ship named to signal Italy’s ascendancy, has replaced the *Helouan*. *Victoria* is clearly a more modern model; no longer belching steam, it glides across the ocean against the background of an azure sky dotted with white clouds. Gone too are the images of the port in the background and the seagulls. Neither Lloyd Triestino’s nor Trieste’s banner is shown. Not even an Italian flag is evident to detract from this “clean” image of Italian mastery of the sea. Further, the image is presented as a true work of art with the depiction signed by the artist P. Klodic.¹⁶ Lloyd Triestino’s “General Itinerary” booklet for 1933 is similar in its feel, sleek, clean, nameless steamships line up against a nondescript background.

In 1932, Italian shipping lines were consolidated at Genoa. By 1935, coordinated efforts and consolidated lines focused attention on Italian conquest of the Mediterranean based on

¹⁴ Covers of the three handbooks, from 1922, 1928 and 1931 are reproduced from the Collection of Steamship Ephemera, The Library at the Mariners’ Museum, Newport News, VA.

¹⁵ Lloyd triestino, 1912-1937.

historical claims to the “Roman Sea.” A bulletin of the new Italian Line entitled “The Ships and Men of the Italian Line” outlined Fascist intentions. Referring to Italy’s “twenty centuries of shipbuilding,” it claimed the link to the sea as Italy’s “natural heritage. Her mastery of it, through her ships and her sailors [as] a great and lasting tradition.”¹⁷

National promotion of maritime commerce and fairs and exhibitions held throughout the country in the 1920s and early 1930s were centered in Genoa by the mid-1930s. As the *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* promoted the Fascist government’s priorities and power in Rome, the *Mostra del Mare* in Genoa grew into annual celebrations of the country’s maritime power and achievements.¹⁸ Steamship publicity reflected the turn toward militarization and aspirations for conquest evident in the exhibitions. A comparison of images of the covers of the Italian Line’s *SS Roma Mediterranean* cruise brochures of 1934 and 1937 demonstrates the shift from promoting travel to exotic, yet civilized regions of the eastern Mediterranean to emphasis on the primitive and backward culture of the eastern Mediterranean lands and populations. On the cover of the 1934 edition, an attractive woman, dressed in western clothing carries a water jug in a provocative pose on a bare shoulder through an outdoor café or market where men of a variety of cultures appear to be dining in the shadow of classical Roman columns. By 1937, this woman has been replaced by an entirely veiled figure relegated to the background in a street scene depicting shepherds and robed men and a donkey in a narrow sidestreet of eastern flavor.¹⁹

Depictions of black Africans with emphasis on their pastoral or primitive culture also appear

¹⁶ Paolo Klodic de Sabladokj, noted Triestine artist whose work focused on maritime subject and ships. His work was featured in a maritime art exhibit and in the Italian Coast Guard bulletin *Notiziario della Guardia Costiera* 4:4(2002).

¹⁷ “The Ships and Men of the Italian Line,” bulletin Italian Line, June 1935, the Collection of Steamship Ephemera, The Library at the Mariners’ Museum, Newport News, VA, MS15 Box 144.

¹⁸ On the importance of mostre to the construction of Italian history under Fascism, see Claudio Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary* (Toronto, 2003). On the sea exhibitions, see Maura Hametz, “Excellent Citizens, Perfect Italian: The Triestines and the Fairs, 1920-1954,” (PhD Diss., Brandeis U, 1995), 168-72.

with greater frequency after 1935 and the Fascist foray into Ethiopia. By implication, these were the populations that Italy should conquer to colonize and assist in civilization, and the lands to which Italian steamships would carry the civilizers.

This paper offers only a taste of the way in which from 1922 to 1941, Fascists employed visions of the Mediterranean as a basis for promoting a unified vision of Italy, Italy's role in Europe, and place among the international powers. Visions of the Italy as a nation linked to and by the Mediterranean Sea continue to resonate with populations inside and outside Italy today. The success of the 1991 film *Mediterraneo*, directed by Gabriele Salvatores, testified to the continuing allure of the Mediterranean for Italians. The film's stereotypical depictions of regional types in characters of soldiers from all over Italy who reached understandings and grew together while stranded on an island in the Mediterranean during World War II was immensely popular in Italy. Yet, the resonance of the metaphor of the unification of Italy through shared experience and the allure of the Italian relationship to the sea was also strong enough to translate across national boundaries. The film won acclaim abroad, including the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Oscar for the Best Foreign Language Film 1991. The roots of Italy's association with the Mediterranean lie in Rome's historic links to the Roman Empire and Roman predominance over the sea. Italy unified in the nineteenth century with Mazzinian visions that portrayed Italy "encircled by the Alps and the sea, [with] boundaries marked out by the finger of God for a people of giants."²⁰ But, the modern association of Italy and the Italians with the Mediterranean owes much to Fascist efforts to nationalize Italians and centralize Italy,

¹⁹ Navigazione generale italiana, Italian line, The Collection of Steamship Ephemera, The Library at the Mariners' Museum, Newport News, VA, MS15 Box 144.

²⁰ Giuseppe Mazzini, "To the Young Men of Italy," 1848, reproduced in *The World's Famous Orations*. Continental Europe (380–1906), 1906, available at <http://www.bartleby.com/268/7/43.html> [accessed 13 April 2006].

to Mussolini's government's promotion of the Mediterranean as a unifying factor in the creation of a national, as opposed to regional or local, identity.