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"Per la grandezza della Patria" Places of memory outside Italy: the Libyan case¹

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Our intent is to bring attention to the current historiographical debate on Italian colonialism, with particular reference to the Libyan case, that is, a point of view which has not been properly studied and exploited yet. The present text is going to be a small contribution, a new drop in the ocean, within the great renewal process of Italian studies on colonialism³.

The main objects of this analysis are small monuments, graves and cemeteries built in the Libyan territory by Italian soldiers and by the work of the Italian civilian genius as a memento of the events and the necessary sacrifice made in the name of "la grandezza della patria"⁴ [Pasi 1914, 8]. By means of the testimony of the "Prima escursione nazionale in Tripolitania"⁵, which was promoted by the Touring Club Italiano and took place in 1914, we will put in evidence the nature of these places, their perception to the eye of the visitors and finally how they became the first Italian places of memory in the new colonial lands of the reign.

This thesis is also going to prove that despite the economical and demographical reasons beneath the public excursion – such as the chance of exploitation the lands and the emigration issue – the organizers longed to bring to light the recently finished conflict and to homage the Soldier and the Victory by visiting the places that hosted such events.

It will not thus be possible to talk about the places of memory in Tripolitania without thoroughly analyzing their respective information sources too. Places and information sources are strictly linked because the excursion itself is the main input offered by the T.C.I. and the 430 trippers joining the project.

In January 1913 the T.C.I. announced for the first time the intention to call a National Excursion to Libya. The trip organizers immediately specified that it was not going to be a leisure travel, rather "desideriamo compiere un'escursione di penetrazione cosciente e

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¹ Quotes from sources I have left in their original language but I reported my own traslation on the respective notes

³ For a framework on the renewal of the Italian colonial studies, please see: Labanca, *Perchè ritorna la «brava gente». Revisioni recenti sulla storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana*, in Del Boca (a cura di), *La storia negata. Il revisionismo e il suo uso politico*, Neri Pozza Editore, Vicenza, 2009 now in Labanca, *Oltremare. Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana*, Il Mulino 2002, pages. 7-15

⁴ "The home country's greatness"

⁵ "The first national excursion in Tripolitania"

sapiente"⁶, because the whole thing must acquire "un significato altissimo di italianità"⁷ [1913: 1913, 1].

Therefore, the excursion is not addressed to those who see Libya as a place for solace or relax; it is instead carried out because of a higher value, that is, a deep patriotism within all the participants. Italy, being an imagined community, plays a main role in these events.

Hence, in addition to Labanca's explanation, who maintains that the purpose of the excursion is "dimostrare che la colonia era ormai pacificata e che le sue terre non erano affatto quello "scatolone di sabbia" denunciato dagli oppositori anticoloniali"⁸ [Labanca: 2000, 66], there is a whole facet of military-patriotic rhetoric and rituality to be taken into account; a facet that lies outside mere economical factors and deserves an in-depth study.

The first element to analyze is the route roamed by the caravan, or at least the part of it which arouses interest⁹.

In its program and itinerary presentation, the Touring states that great importance will be given to the part of Tripolitania which might "interessare dal punto di vista turistico, agricolo e commerciale"¹⁰, but right after it clarifies that "Nè mancherà la nota patriottica: la visita, cioè, ai luoghi sacri ad ogni cuore italiano perchè bagnati dal sangue dei martiri e di eroi, e la consegna dei gonfaloni delle città italiane alla nuova sorella, che riafferma oltre il mare tutta l'energia e tutta la virtù del "latin sangue gentile".¹¹ [L'escur.: 2, 1914, 75].

In the two days following the Solunto¹²'s entrance in the Tripolitan port, the 430 participants were taken to visit Tripoli's hinterland. Which monuments, graves, battlefields or war cemeteries did they visit? How were they perceived? What effects did they provoke in the visitors?

When excursionist Doct. Paolo Pasi turned back to Italy, he wrote some useful travel memories. In a chapter emblematically named "Visioni di morte e di gloria"¹³, he recounts the visit to an area of Tripoli's oasis crossed by a small military rail, where "fatti d'arme memorabilissimi durante i primi tempi della nostra occupazione"¹⁴ [Pasi: 1914, 10] took place.

In this place "interessante in modo affatto speciale per l'aspetto e per le memorie che vi si connettono"¹⁵ [Pasi: 1914, 10], it is perfectly intelligible how the environment acts on the subject and transmits its memory; let us read what Pasi wrote after finding himself in front of the empty battlefield: "Procedendo, i ricordi si presentano più impressionanti; si cammina per un campo di battaglia e si resta coll'animo attonito; lunghi tratti di trincee fatte con tronchi di palme, ancora intatte, cosicchè a mala pena si credono abbandonate ed indifese; un gruppo di case crollate, delle quali resta solo qualche muro, e, accanto alle rovine, alcune modeste tombe che ricordano i valorosi, i quali, mentre facevano opera umana mendicando feriti, furono assaliti dagli Arabi e caddero sopraffatti"¹⁶ [Pasi, 1914, 10]. It is to be remarked

⁶ "We desire to carry out a proper and self-conscious penetrative excursion"

⁷ "a very high significance of italianity"

⁸ "To show that the colony was pacified by that time and its lands were not a "big sand box" at all, as anticolonialist opponents would denote"

⁹ Due to space issues I had to make a rigid selection of the places and events I deemed as interesting, inevitably leaving the rest out to a temporary oblivion.

¹⁰ "be interesting on a touristic, agricultural and commercial point of view"

¹¹ "a patriotic facet will not be missing: that is, the visit to places sacred to any Italian hearts because once dipped in the blood of martyrs and heroes, and the delivery of Italian cities' gonfalons to the new sister (i.e., Libya), which reaffirms overseas all the energy and the virtue of the "latin gentle blood"

¹² Is the name of the steamer chartered by T.C.I. to cross the Mediterranean

¹³ "Visions of death and glory"

¹⁴ "memorable military events during the first stages of our occupation"

¹⁵ "interesting especially because of its appearance and the memories that connect to it"

¹⁶ "As you walk on, memories grow more impressive; you walk through a battlefield and your heart is left dazed; long stretches of trenches made out of intact palm trunks, so that they barely feel abandoned and undefended; groups of collapsed houses whose only remains are a few walls, and

how the person presents the memory as his own. As if, by walking among these palm trunks and crumbling houses, the memory of the military facts sprang in the individual's conscience; just as if Pasi had actually been on the field during the battle. Which is hard to believe. Pasi never directly attended that battle; still, he can bring the deeds back to life through the messages communicated by this rubble, these wrecked walls, these small graves left to testify what previously happened in this site.

The connection between the individual's personal memories and the battles becomes even more evident in this second account by Pasi: "Su questa nuda altura si raccolgono le più commoventi memorie, e rovine e ricordi. Qui le tombe sempre ornate di fiori [...] qui la moschea di Henni, ridotta dai nostri cannoni ad un mucchio di rovine [...] qui il famoso pozzo nel quale gli Arabi con furore barbaro avevano gettato i soldati italiani che avevano fatto a pezzi ed ai quali avevano strappati gli occhi"¹⁷ [Pasi: 1914, 10].

Through the anaphoric "qui" ("here"), Pasi draws a map - a staged path if you will - of the main events from this battle. But there is more. The various "qui" are also integrated by details that only exist as shared memory, handed down knowledge, conveyed collective memory.

Pasi's last account mentions the site of Henni, where the entire caravan stopped off in the cemetery to lay some bronze crowns in remembrance of the fallen ones¹⁸.

Among the other stages we can mention Zanzur's oasis, where you could find small "tombe, segnate da obelischi e da modesti monumenti, ove riposano i soldati nostri caduti in uno dei più memorabili e brillanti fatti d'arme"¹⁹ [Pasi: 1914, 11], and the visit to the small cemetery of Gargaesc, where a tiny crown was laid at the foot of a small monument surmounted by a cross²⁰.

The last stage chosen by the T.C.I. that we are going to consider is the small town of Homs, where a small monument was erected: "In memoria e per ammirazione dei valorosi compagni caduti per la grandezza della patria, si volle dal Presidio erigere un ricordo permanente. Esso venne costruito in piazza 12 giugno, ed inaugurato in questo stesso giorno anniversario del combattimento dei "Monticelli". Il piccolo monumento è alto metri 7.50; ha la forma di obelisco che si erige su doppia base di sezione quadrata con angoli smussati ed è in conglomerato di calcestruzzo"²¹ [Marieni, 1914, 19]. The caravan laid a commemorative

next to the ruins a few modest graves that remind the valiant ones who were assaulted by the Arabs and fell as they were doing good deeds by healing the wounded.

¹⁷ "On this bare hill, the most moving memories and ruins gather. Here [lie] the graves, always adorned with flowers [...] here [lies] Henni's mosque, reduced to a heap ruins by our cannon [...] here [lies] the famous well where the Arabs threw with barbaric fury the Italian soldiers whose bodies had been torn apart and whose eyes had been ripped out."

¹⁸ In one of the bronze crowns there is a writing in epigraphical style which reads: «ai caduti nei combattimenti dal XXIII ottobre al XIX dicembre MCMXI le consorti degli ufficiali dell'XI.° bersaglieri raccolte nella medesima preghiera questa corona bagnata di lacrime mandano dalla città italiana che ultima essi salutarono» («to those fallen in the fights from october 23rd to december 19th 1911 the spouses of the officers of the Bersaglieri [infantry soldiers] gathered in the same prayer send this crown dipped in tears from the last Italian town to which they said goodbye» in S.C. Johnson, *La conquista della Libia nelle medaglie*, Stabilimento per le arti grafiche Alfieri & Lacroix, Milano 1914, p. 27

¹⁹ "graves marked by obelisks and modest monuments, where our soldier, fallen in one of the most memorable and brilliant war event, are resting"

²⁰ M. Tedeschi, *La carovana del Touring in Tripolita*, in *Rivista mensile del Touring Club Italiano*, Giugno, 1914 p. 370.

²¹ "In memory and admiration of the valiant fellows fallen in the name of the homeland greatness, the erection of a permanent souvenir was requested by the garrison. It was built in "12th June" square, and it was inaugurated in that same day, anniversary of the "Monticelli" fight. The small monument is 7.5 meters tall; it is obelisk-shaped and it stands on a square-sectioned double base with rounded off corners and made in concrete."

crown below this monument as a remembrance of the soldiers fallen in that dire "episodio di barbarie" ("barbarous deed") [Pasi: 1914, 32].

Moreover, a cemetery reminds the blood toll that the country had to spill: "I morti riposano nel piccolo cimitero di Homs, nel cui mezzo un monumento reca incisa la scritta: o morti gloriosi\con l'onda del mare\vi bacia la patria."²² [Tedeschi: Riv T.C.I., 1914, 373].

Here we have the first attestation of places of Italian memory in foreign lands. The present text does not have presumptions to reach any conclusions concerning this issue; its only purpose is to draw attention on a topic that gains specific characteristics for the very fact that it is applied to a foreign land and not to Italy itself.

A place of memory in a foreign land necessarily implies new questions and new answers. For instance, what is the relation between the site and the Italians emigrated to the colony? How do the natives – who are the majority of the local population, of course – relate to this rubble?²³ What are the aesthetical and pragmatological similarities and differences between the places of memory in Italy and in the colony?

It is plain and evident – as Lablanca says – that the places of memory serve a function in describing a now pacified landscape.

Aleida Assmann in her work about cultural memory maintains that the lieux de memoire, in their own essence, "segnalano una discontinuità", because "Qui c'è ancora qualcosa di presente, che però rende visibile un'assenza; c'è ancora qualcosa di contemporaneo, che segnala, tuttavia, in primo luogo il suo essere passato"²⁴ [Assmann: 2002, 343].

It is hence understandable that the previously analyzed obelisks, graves and ruins serve an implicit function in showing the war's past, by means of memory in its most immediate essence: its non-presence, its belonging to the past. They consequently show the pacification of the colony.

The tight relation that binds the excursion and the place of memory proves to be strong even before the departure from Naples' harbour. In fact, from the pages of T.C.I.'s magazine it is deducible that all the participants to the excursion received a considerable amount of various gadgets before the departure: some of these have a pragmatic nature and they are strictly related to the excursion, as the hat in "colonial" style donated by Società Anonima²⁵ G. Vergeat and a box of sheet soap in order to compensate for the lack of hygienic means during the trip.

Other gifts seem to belong to a more symbolic nature, rather than to utility as an end in itself. An example is a medal expressly coined for the excursion, which replicates the Cyrenaic coin minted during the Greek domination in the 6th century Before Christ²⁶.

In addition, three volumes were given to each of the 430 excursionists. A guide donated by the Ministry of Colonies²⁷, a volume by Giuseppe Ricchieri about Libya, donated by T.C.I., and a book, "La conquista della Libia nelle medaglie", where Stefano Carlo Johnson's numismatic collection is replicated.

²² "The deads rest in the small cemetery of Homs, in whose center a monument has this carved writing: "oh glorious deads\with the sea's wave\the homeland kisses you."

²³ A. Assmann, *Ricordare. Forme e mutamenti della memoria culturale*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2002 p. 343

²⁴ "signal a discontinuity", because "Here [that is, in that very place] there is still something present, which nonetheless reveals an absence; there is still something contemporary, which nonetheless signals first of all its belonging to the past."

²⁵ "Società Anonima" is a wording that used to indicate public limited companies in the first decades of the 20th century.

²⁶ S. C. Johnson, *La conquista della Libia nelle medaglie*, Stabilimento per le arti grafiche Alfieri & Lacroix, Milano 1914, p. 91

²⁷ La rivista mensile del Touring Club Italiano, Aprile 1914 p. 232. This is the Tripoli e dintorni. Piccola guida della Tripolitania settentrionale con la descrizione dei principali itinerari. Further hints in reference to this text can be found in Labanca, *La Libia nelle guide turistiche italiane* in E. Castelli, D. Laurenzi(a cura di), *Permanenze e metamorfosi nell' immaginario coloniale in Italia*, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, Napoli 2000, p. 66

Johnson owned a quite considerable collection of medals related to the Libyan war; the book is intended not just to trace in broad terms the fundamental stages of the war through the medals: by analyzing and explaining them one by one, it aims at emphasizing the "heroic" role of the soldiers who sacrificed themselves for the homeland greatness.

The volume was specifically conceived and produced for the excursionists. We know about this because the book, among the analyzed relics, contains also the medal coined and handed out to the participants of the excursion and the bronze crowns subsequently laid below Henni's monument²⁸.

The tight relation that exists between military patriotism, the excursion and the visit to the places of memory proves to be evident in the book's inscription, written by Stefano Carlo Johnson to the participants: «Ai soci\del "Touring Club Italiano"\diretti alle ricuperate terre\della Libia\per onorare la virtù dei caduti\riaffermare il culto della patria\Stefano Carlo Johnson\con solidarietà di consocio\ed amore di raccoglitore\offre»²⁹. In short, it is manifestly written that the excursion - besides the unmentioned economical intents - has the foremost interest of "riaffermare il culto della patria" (reaffirming the worship of the homeland) and "onorare la virtù dei caduti" (honouring the virtue of the fallen ones). Honours that is fulfilled through the collective visit to the places of memory³⁰.

The preparations, the emphatic language used by the T.C.I.'s magazine, the equipment and the visit itself to the places of sorrow and sacrifice concur in giving vigour to Italian patriotism. A kind of patriotism which is often divided between a merciless imperialism and a blunt romanticism, but still finds a common denominator in war and in the figure of the soldier-martyr. This is how Mario Isnenghi recalls the indissoluble bond between the ideals of nation, collective memory and war: "Le forme pubbliche della memoria privilegiano l'epica. Molta di questa Italia di pietra agita spade e bandiere"³¹ [Isnenghi: 2005, 323].

²⁸ S. C. Johnson, *La conquista della Libia nelle medaglie*, Stabilimento per le arti grafiche Alfieri & Lacroix, Milano 1914, p. 27

²⁹ "To the members\of "Touring Club Italiano"\bound for the retrieved lands\of Libya\to honour the virtue of the fallen ones\to reaffirm the worship of the homeland\Stefano Carlo Johnson\with the solidarity of a member\and the love of a gatherer\offers"

³⁰ From the text I have deliberately left out the to describe the ceremony of delivery of banners from many Italian cities. The analysis of this important ceremony would require a study in itself.

³¹ "Public forms of memory favour the epic. A large part of this Italy of stone waves swords and flags

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