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# How Landscapes Make Science: Italian National Narrative, The Great Mediterranean, and Giuseppe Sergi's Biological Myth

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## Abstract

The perception and representation of landscape are not natural facts but are cultural constructions of human agents. In this chapter, I aim at deconstructing the role of pre-classical archaeology of Eastern Mediterranean in the process of Italian nation building between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. In particular, I focus on how a substantial group of Italian intellectuals deployed archeological discoveries to construct the Mediterranean as a representational space, which eventually served as a platform for their nationalistic political discourses. To this end, I discuss the spreading of these new conceptions in the Italian cultural debate at large. A prominent figure in this debate was Giuseppe Sergi. By reconstructing his views on the connections between national identity and biology, I demonstrate the considerable performative effect of the Mediterranean as a symbolic space and source of meaning on Italian culture. Furthermore, I argue that this new role of the Mediterranean resulted from a negotiation between the archaeological discovery of pre-classical past and the political aspirations of those scholars who opposed Italian foreign and interior politics of the period.

**Keywords:** nationalism, racism, Mediterranean studies, spatial turn, cultural geography, Giuseppe Sergi, Italian fascism

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most significant historiographical developments of the last decade of the twentieth century is the so-called “spatial turn”. This turn was anticipated by Henri Lefebvre in his 1974

essay *La production de l'espace*<sup>1</sup>, in which he argued that space as a methodological variable is historically and culturally constructed. In particular, Lefebvre distinguishes three categories: (1) spatial practices, (2) representations of space, and (3) representational spaces. The latter is defined as an experienced space, that is, a space perceived and experimented through symbolic associations [1: p. 40]. In 1989, Edward Soja pushed Lefebvre's ideas a step further and argued that representational spaces are produced in a social context [2: pp. 10–11]. Subsequently, cultural historians deployed the concepts introduced by Lefebvre and Soja to the problem of defining cultural identities of communities and individuals—a problem in turn related to the symbolic action of producing national, social, and cultural boundaries [3]. In particular, many writers pointed out that the concepts of identity and cultural heritage are also essential to the elaboration and symbolic appropriation of experienced spaces [3: p. 2, 4: p. 6].

Furthermore, the studies on the psychological perception of space highlighted that representations of a territory derive from the cultural acknowledgement of the landscape [5: p. 69]. This acknowledgement is never completed but is always revised, reconfigured, and recalibrated by the fleeting historical context. In other words, landscape exists only as a historical object. Being socially, culturally, and politically constructed, space is interpreted differently at different times, and different “mental horizons” can be ascribed to each of these interpretations.

During the better part of the long nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the Mediterranean served as a mental horizon and represented an effective source of meanings for the national aspirations of some Italian intellectuals, patriots, nationalists, politicians, and scientists. More specifically, the Mediterranean constituted the hinge of theories on the origin of nations aiming at countering the strong influence of Northern European narratives centered on Germans and Aryan peoples. It is important to realize the far-reaching political implications of these intellectual projects: ultimately, the “Mediterraneanists”<sup>2</sup> intended to challenge the continental hierarchies, to undermine Italy's alliance policy, and to revamp Italian nationalism.

The leading advocate of Mediterraneanism was the anthropologist, psychologist, and pedagogue Giuseppe Sergi (1841–1936). A dominant and unconventional figure in the cultural life from the Unification (1861) to the rise of Fascism (1922), Sergi was a fierce upholder of Darwinism, rebuilt the Italian Anthropological School in Rome (1893), and led it unchallenged for 50 years. Also as a fervent anti-German, he questioned the policy of alliances pursued by the Italian Government and the Royal House. Much later, his “left racism” (anti-German but not anti-Semite) was looked upon with embarrassment during the Fascist years. Thus, the deconstruction of Sergi's Mediterraneanism is key to understanding the role of the Mediterranean mental landscape in the Italian culture at the turn of the century and its connections with the larger European social, political, and cultural context.

<sup>1</sup>Here I refer to the 1991 English edition.

<sup>2</sup>Let me add a word of caution. Recently, this term was used to indicate a group of British anthropologists who elaborated a derogatory image of modern Mediterranean society [6]. However, in this essay I use the term in the original meaning, which refers to scholars who held the existence of cultural, social, ethnical, or biological features common to the peoples inhabiting the Mediterranean region.

My main thesis is that this role changed importantly at this historical junction. In particular, within the archeological debate, the Mediterranean landscape became a representational space that could be used to fuel an alternative view of the Italian national identity *vis-à-vis* the pan-Germanism propounded by many Northern European scientists. This analysis is the first step of a broader research project on the social and cultural construction of the Mediterranean archeological landscape in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

I begin with a reconstruction of the social and cultural context in which Sergi elaborated his view of the “Great Mediterranean” (Section 2). I briefly discuss the evolution of the Pelasgian myth. According to this myth, often related to the Homeric epic, the Pelasgians were a people of the Eastern Mediterranean who constructed enormous buildings during the Bronze Age. Several Italian writers, for example, Monsignor Cesare Antonio De Cara (Section 3) and Giuseppe Sergi himself in his early works, believed that it was the Pelasgians who brought to Italy the civilization, which eventually paved the way to the greatness of Rome and Italy itself. More importantly, they saw a direct connection between Pelasgian “cyclopean buildings” and the walls of Tiryns, Mycenae, and Troy, thus tightly intertwining archeological landscape, ancient history, and national narrative. As evolutionary biology grew in influence, the Mediterranean landscape assumed new meanings preparing racial theories and colonial policies (Section 4). Within this context, the Mediterranean ceased to be perceived as a periphery of the emergent nations (i.e., France and Germany) and became the identity center of a new national project in the immediate wake of the Unification of the Kingdom of Italy (Section 5). It was the beginning of a long wave which eventually sustained, albeit not always in a consistent way, the Fascist myth of the Mediterranean (Mussolini’s “Aryan and Mediterranean Rome”). However, the Fascist appropriation of the Mediterranean myth was possible only by turning upside down the Mediterranean narrative propounded by the intellectuals of the late nineteenth century (Section 5).

## 2. An ancient mental landscape

As early as the eighteenth century, the Mediterranean became the site in which archaeology—and thus antiquity—turned into the “image of reality itself” [7: p. 113]. The process began with the rediscovery of the ancient canon by architects and sculptors [7: pp. 113–115]. Subsequently, also under the spell of the social practice of the *Grand Tour*, which ascribed to the Mediterranean a natural aesthetic superiority [6], archaeology and landscape formed a binomial closely linked to the idea of Mediterranean identity. It was however during the Romanticism and the pan-European nation building process [8] that the central role of the Mediterranean was consolidated.

During the People’s Spring (1848), archaeological heritage was integrated in the discourses on the identity ambitions of the people living by the Mediterranean and fighting for independence. For example, in his *Primato morale e civile degli italiani*—a sacred book for the Italian cause—the philosopher and patriot Vincenzo Gioberti (1801–1852) described ancient ruins as “fossils of nations”, that is the most venerable and revered vestiges of the existence of a nation [9]. Relating landscape and culture, Gioberti highlighted that the geographical and naturalistic features of the Italian environment were ideal for the development of the ancient Pythagorean wisdom.

However, a crucial breakthrough happened in the second half of the nineteenth century. The emergence of Darwinism and the rediscovery of Nordic prehistory moved the origin of peoples considerably back in time. This process stimulated a competition among European nations, which prompted Italian intellectuals to reclaim pre-Roman traditions as a way to re-read archaeological sites. This process also facilitated the rise of new sciences, anthropology, and prehistoric archaeology (or “paleethnology” in Italian parlance), dedicated to account *scientifically* of Italian pre- and proto-history [10].

As a consequence of the concomitance between the institutionalization of Italian anthropology and paleethnology and the establishment of the state, the nation building process affected the features of prehistoric archaeology in multiple ways. First, prehistoric research focused particularly upon the issue of national origins, a tendency that Italian intellectuals shared with other European nations [11]. Much of the narratives produced by this research constituted, therefore, a pre-mythistory of the Italian nation [12]. Secondly, the institutionalization process of the prehistoric disciplines was greatly enhanced by their ability to fit several political goals of the new state [10]. Finally, anthropologists and archaeologists played a crucial pedagogical role at a national level, not only by reviving topics and ideas of Italy’s mythical past but also by introducing the pre-Roman landscape in the Italian cultural imagery.

During the 1870s and 1880s, pre-Roman studies were dominated by the so-called Pigorinian paradigm, named after Luigi Pigorini (1842–1925). According to this theory, Italy, like Central European nations, was colonized by Aryan peoples who migrated from the North into the Italian Peninsula and were the ancestors of the Latin civilization. The Pigorinian paradigm was perfectly aligned with the alliances policy of the Government and the Royal House, which favored Austria and the German Confederation. Toward the end of the century, however, a new paradigm emerged, which aimed at reaffirming Italy’s Mediterranean identity. As a consequence, the upholders of this new view questioned the Italian policy of appeasement to German Powers and advocated the alternative alliance with the Triple Entente [10, 13].

The resonances between the Mediterraneanist paradigm and the eighteenth-century tradition inspired by the classical artistic canon and the practice of the Grand Tour determined a particularly favorable reception of these new ideas by Italian architects, who saw themselves as the heirs of this tradition [7: pp. 111–115]. A vocal spokesman of the necessity of rediscovering the heritage of the pre-Roman civilization was Gaetano Koch, President of the Associazione Artistica fra i Cultori di Architettura [14: pp. 35–36; 45], who, in an open letter to the Minister of Education, invited the Government “to plough a field [the research in pre-Roman archaeology] in which other nations reaped and continue to reap lush harvest” [15: p. 65].

The support of the Associazione di Architettura to the archeological research should not come as a surprise. Born in a nationalistic climate to promote the study of architecture as the “first among the arts”, the Associazione also organized appreciation excursions to the national monuments as a contribution to the patriotic education of the general public [16: p. 162]. Architects were not alone in their efforts. In general, while in the first part of the nineteenth century, pre-Roman archeology was exclusively a leisure activity for a handful of learned philologists and artists;<sup>3</sup> in the final decades of the century, it surged to become a national cause and a battlefield of numerous intellectuals.

<sup>3</sup>As an early example see Ref. [17].

### 3. The pillars of the Mediterranean: when the (archaeological) reality overcomes the myth

Koch's letter does not only reveal a growing interest for archaeology among Italian intellectuals: it is also an excellent window on the changing cultural geography of the last years of the nineteenth century. The excavations of Schliemann at Hissarlik and Mycenae, of Evans at Crete, and, above all, the first Italian archaeological missions in Eastern Mediterranean headed in 1884 by Federico Halbherr (1857–1930) contributed enormously to turn the cultural imagery toward east. Like many other Mediterraneanists of the time, Koch sees in the “neglected peoples of High Syria and Cappadocia” recently rediscovered the veritable ancestors of the Latin civilization and calls for a systematic comparison between Italian pre-Roman remnants and “the monuments of Greece and Asia Minor” [15: pp. 64–65].

Koch was therefore alluding to a profound shift in the Mediterranean landscape, which now consisted of some well-determined foci: Peloponnese, continental Greece, Crete, and finally, Asia Minor. This remarkable enlargement of the classical Mediterranean geography built on the archaeological discoveries in the East and in the Mesopotamian region included “High Syria”, which was to be intended as the area including “all peoples from the shores of Eastern Mediterranean to Euphrates and along the shores of the Eastern, Western, and Northern Euxine Sea” [18: p. 447].

On the narrative side, this geography was justified by an ancient myth common to many tales on the origin of Italian cities: the Pelasgian myth. Until mid-nineteenth century, the term “Pelasgian” was used by Italian scholars to refer vaguely to alleged pre-Roman ruins. After the discovery of analogous constructions in the Eastern Mediterranean regions, the meaning of the term changed importantly and began to indicate a specific semantic and cultural connection between cyclopean buildings in both areas. An interesting “scientific” description of these cyclopean constructions can be found in a study dedicated to the archeology of Calabria and penned by a local lawyer named Luigi Grimaldi. Grimaldi distinguishes two chronological phases. In the first phase, walls are constructed by big irregular polygonal blocks without concrete, while in the second phase, the constructors use “more regular blocks, hammered or chiseled” [19]. This distinction, originally propounded by Louis-Charles-François Petit-Radel [20], was widely accepted and appropriated by professionals and amateurs alike as one can see in the works of the members of the Italian Alpine Club, one of the associations that contributed the most to the construction of the Italian national landscape [21].

Although often opposed by the Italian palethnological school [22: p. 263], the Pelasgian myth was held by some Catholic scientists and philosophers, mostly contributors to *La Civiltà Cattolica*, a Jesuit journal institutionalized by Pope Pius IX in 1866 and reconfirmed by Pope Leon XIII in 1890. The main upholder of the Pelasgian myth was certainly Monsignor Cesare Antonio De Cara (1835–1905). A Jesuit and an orientalist [23, 24], Monsignor De Cara authored a ponderous three-volume work on the origin of the Hethi-Pelasgians and their civilizing actions [18]. According to De Cara, the Pelasgians migrated westbound from Asia Minor through the Mediterranean and brought civilization not only to the people living by the sea but also to the people of Southern, Eastern, and Northern Europe [18: pp. 124–125]. This narrative dovetailed nicely with the Catholic view and had the merit to enlarge the

eighteenth-century classical narrative both spatially and chronologically, without antagonizing the religious orthodoxy. The hypothesis of the Asian origin of civilization tallied with the Biblical tale according to which post-deluge civilization first appeared in Asia.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, in their attempts to integrate the new scientific discoveries and some aspects of modernity with the Catholic discourse [26] and in contributing to disseminate within the Catholic circles, a new geography of civilization derived from the new prehistoric archeology and anthropology, De Cara and his colleagues ultimately aimed at reassessing the historical mission of Catholic nations in Southern Europe.

As I have mentioned above, a crucial step in the process of re-imagining the Mediterranean identity and its fundamental role in the development of the European civilization was the discovery of Cretan remnants by Evans and Halbherr. As De Cara wrote:

*At Crete it ends the migration of the Hethi-Pelasgians from the Asian continent to the Aegean Islands, a migration of central importance for the ethnography of Mediterranean peoples, for the introduction of the first civilization and for its role in the development of next civilizations in Greece and Italy [18: p. 211]*

As a beacon flashing in the night, Crete seemed to illuminate the path to civilization and Mediterranean identity, and the new discoveries unleashed in Italy (and elsewhere) a real Cretomania [27].

Thus, toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Pelasgian architecture became the central representation of the environment, a sort of “national fiction” of the landscape underlying the Mediterraneanist discourse.<sup>5</sup> The cyclopean walls represented the umbilical cord still joining the civilization of the Peninsula with Mycenae, Tiryns, and Troy. They were a monument, but also a narrative of the common origins of modern Italians and the great peoples of the pre-Greek antiquity.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Koch’s dream of an Italian archeological mission fully devoted to the study of the Pelasgian walls came finally true. In Norba, the most significant Pelasgian site of the Peninsula, archeologists Raniero Mengarelli and Luigi Savignoni tried hard to trace some decisive resemblance between the chalky blocks in Lazio and the walls of Mycenae, Tiryns, and Troy. Eventually, their hopes were disappointed. The excavations revealed that the site dated between VIII and IV BC, and this was a great predicament for the Pelasgian hypothesis [22]. Nevertheless, Norba remained firm in the imagery of the intellectuals and became part of the Roman epic toward the unification of Italy [30: p. 559].

#### 4. Giuseppe Sergi and the Mediterraneanist anthropology

The archaeological discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean and the renovation of the Pelasgian hypothesis encouraged a new account of the origin of the European civilization, an

<sup>4</sup>For example, De Cara considered the Hethi-Pelasgian civilization as Chaldeian-Assirian, thus establishing a clear analogy with the Biblical civilization [25: p. 105].

<sup>5</sup>In this way, the Italian case reminds closely the Irish [28] and Scottish [29] ones: national identity and origins were linked to a new perception of antiquity encapsulated in the contemporary space which now included more than just Roman ruins.

account that countered head-on the results of the excavations in Scandinavia and Germany. Furthermore, in the closing years of the nineteenth century, these new discoveries determined a shift both in the ideal borders and in the perception and meanings of the Mediterranean geography. For even after the dismissal of the Pelasgian hypothesis, many Italian intellectuals maintained the view of the Mediterranean as the cradle of civilization. This position was part of an ongoing debate in Italian culture. Throughout the century, two cultural idioms<sup>6</sup> defining identity faced each other: the Aryan idiom, born in the 1850s and supported by linguists and orientalist, and the Mediterranean idiom, hinging on the heritage of classical antiquity and revived by the discovery of pre-Greek Aegean civilization [31: pp. 77–78].

The foremost upholder of the Mediterranean idiom was Giuseppe Sergi (1841–1936). Born in Messina (Sicily) in the Bourbon Kingdom, Sergi actively partook the Risorgimento and fought with Garibaldi in the battle of Milazzo (17–24 July 1860). Back to Messina, he studied philosophy and then ancient languages (Greek and Sanskrit), pedagogy, and psychology. Enlightened by Darwin's work, Sergi deepened his knowledge of physical anthropology and evolutionistic biology. He rose to the chair of anthropology at the University of Bologna and then moved to Rome where he founded (1893) and headed the Roman Society of Anthropology for 50 years. An atheist and an anticlerical, Sergi was first fascinated by socialism but then became a leftist and opposed the unbalanced, pro-North industrial development of Italy.

Sergi's fame was primarily due to his original classification of human species and races combined with a morphological method for the classification of skulls, which required only a minimal amount of anthropometric information and standardized the measurement of cephalic index.<sup>7</sup> In the 1890s, Sergi's new classification method led him to suggest the existence of a new race not included in previous classifications. More importantly, he was explicit in considering this race as "the morphologically most beautiful [one] ever appeared in Europe" [32: p. 45].

Sergi's "invented" race was included in the "Mediterranean" branch of the larger species called (by himself) Euro-African. The qualification of Mediterranean referred to the geographical context in a twofold way: it concerned the origin of the race as well as its basin of diffusion. Moreover, the qualification was studiously differentiated from the more customary term "Latin race", a term that was no longer associated with the greatness of Rome but rather, and in a derogatory sense, with the Latin people of Europe (Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, and French) and America. As it was an anthropological commonplace to regard them as naturally "indolent" people as opposed to the entrepreneurial and active Nordic ones,<sup>8</sup> it comes as no surprise that Sergi wanted to distance himself from the expression "Latin race" [34]. By contrast, the term "Mediterranean" evoked a larger context both geographically—because it reached out the Eastern regions—and culturally—because it was linked to the eighteenth century aesthetic ideals of the *Grand Tour*. Moreover, one should stress the double ideological

<sup>6</sup>By cultural idiom it is here meant a set of ways to understand identity through the organization of the human interactions in terms of we/others, internal/external, inclusion/exclusion and so on.

<sup>7</sup>Roughly, the cephalic index is the ratio between the length and the width of the skull and it was customarily deployed to classify human races.

<sup>8</sup>A very similar dynamics was described by Edward Said in Ref. [33].

meaning of the term. On the one hand, it was connected with several themes of the positivist and Darwinist traditions, such as the emergence of a post-Christian, rationalist, and materialistic society [27: p. 4]. On the other, it encapsulated a formidable alternative to the Aryan myth not only championed by German scientists but also popular among other European intellectuals, poets, and artists [35]. This narrative about the North as a mythical homeland of a superior people can be found largely in German anthropology and archaeology—fields in which German and French scholars took an unchallenged leadership.

Building on the authority of Tacitus' *Germania* [36, 37], German scholars advocated the ideal of the Aryan people hardened by the rigidity of the climate and the harshness of the territory and thus suitable to dominate over the European continent [38: pp. 45–71]. These Herderian accounts stressed the strong link between blood and land, between race and *Urheimat* (original homeland) but also rely on the negative construction of the “other” [38] in this case the Mediterranean people. According to the pan-Germanic view, the Mediterranean climate favored a weak physique and an idle attitude, unfitting modernity and leadership.

In Europe, the discussions about the Aryan superiority permeated the national debate. As a consequence, non-German intellectuals tried hard to prove that their own nation belonged to the Aryan race (see, e.g., the English debate on Celts and Saxons, the French one on Celts and Franks, and so on [39]). Italy was no exception: Luigi Pigorini, the head of the Italian palethnological school, was actively engaged in the debate [10]. However, Italy also hosted a diffused discomfort for the downgrading of the Mediterranean mores implicit in the commitment to the Aryan paradigm.

Sergi quickly became the leader of the opposition. More than this, he did not confine himself to challenge the Aryan anthropological hegemony but brought forward a counter-paradigm, which won approval in Italy as well as abroad, especially in English-speaking countries.<sup>9</sup> Sergi's work on the Mediterranean myth was detailed in a number of books published by Fratelli Bocca, one of the most prestigious publishers of the time [42: pp. 115–142] and in numerous articles in *La Nuova Antologia*, a major cultural journal, whose programmatic goal was to promote Italy's cultural and scientific renaissance [43]. The gist of Sergi's theory concerns a new account of the origin of the Italian nation. As early as the 1870s, the common wisdom among Italian prehistoric scientists was that Italy was first populated by a series of migrations along the North-South direction. This view entailed that the original nucleus of the Italian people, from which Romans would eventually descend, was Aryan and Asian [44: pp. 25–30, 45]. By contrast, Sergi held that the original nucleus came from Central-Eastern Africa and migrated to Southern Italy through the Mediterranean. Thus, Sergi's theory turned upside down the cultural geography underlying Italian nationalistic discourses. He explicitly replaced an Aryan-centric geography, with a new account in which the superior race was biologically and culturally Mediterranean.

On the anthropological side, the theory of the Mediterranean race did not abandon the aesthetic preference for dolichocephaly but contested that it was an Aryan character. Instead,

<sup>9</sup>An emblematic case is the economist William Zebina Ripley (1867–1941), professor at Columbia, MIT, and Harvard, who endorsed and circulated Sergi's classification in Ref. [40]. Ripley's knowledge of Sergi's theory derived mainly from Ref. [41] and from several articles appeared in *The Monist*.

Sergi claimed that dolichocephaly was a distinctive feature of the Mediterranean people, which was later scattered throughout Northern Europe during the very first invasion of the Euro-African people. These people brought it to Europe culture and metals [34, 46: pp. 193–194] and dominated the continent until the arrival of the Aryans in the Neolithic Age. This invasion of “barbaric” people led to such deep reshuffling of the human species that no nation in Europe would be racially uniform ever since. It was nevertheless possible to distinguish between areas of racial domination of the Aryans (Central Europe) and the Euro-Africans, divided into a Northern (Scandinavia, British Isles) and Mediterranean branch [47].

The change of the geographical context implicit in the theory of the Mediterranean race had deep socio-political implications. The traditional paradigm according to which Rome had Aryan origins provided a firm background to the alliance policy with Austria and the German Confederation pursued by the Government and the King [13: p. 54]. By contrast, Sergi’s theory heralded the central ideal of the Risorgimento further fuelled by, at the end of the nineteenth century, irredentism<sup>10</sup>: anti-Germanism [48: pp. 228–230]. According to Sergi, the natural allies of Italy were the Mediterranean France and the Nordic England, which shared the same racial background.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. The Great Mediterranean

In spite of his great admiration for Anglo-Saxon people [34], Sergi’s cultural geography and mental horizon remained firmly anchored to the Mediterranean basin. This was probably due to two main factors. The first reason was due to Sergi’s insular origin. In Sicily, his birthplace, the Mediterranean is the one and only border, but it is an open one: ever since antiquity, it connects the world, making Sicily one of those islands “actively involved in the dealings of the outside world” [51: p. 147]. For Sergi, thus, the Mediterranean was at the same time a separation from and a connection to his Italian homeland. Second, Sergi’s cultural background was imbued with pre-Roman and Pelasgian discourses as one can see from his first work dedicated to the ancient wisdom of Pythagorean philosophy [52]. References to the Pelasgian myth can be found in Sergi’s anthropological works at the beginning of the twentieth century and, above all, in *The Mediterranean Race* [53: pp. 169–170] to show, following De Cara, that the origin of the Greek civilization was not “in the primitive beliefs of the so-called Indo-Europeans” but “in the Mediterranean itself” and perhaps only partially in the valleys of Tigris and Euphrates [53: p. 172]. Furthermore, Sergi linked the Pelasgians not only to classical Greece but also to ancient Italian populations such as the Etruscans, considered by him “of a Mediterranean type” and “true and genuine Italici” belonging “to the Pelasgic branch” [53: p. 183].

A Pelasgian mental landscape hinging on cyclopean constructions persisted in the cultural imagery of the Mediterraneanists even after the abandonment of the Pelasgian hypothesis.

<sup>10</sup>For the connection between irredentism and the shift to the Mediterranean context see Ref. [13: p. 56].

<sup>11</sup>During the *fin-de-siècle* crisis [49], Sergi swerved again toward the idea of a decadence of the Latin nations [34], but he solved the problem of the Euro-African superiority by ascribing a guiding role to England. Later, he restated the superiority of the Mediterranean race on the occasion of France’s and Italy’s victory in WWI [50].

For example, Sergi claimed that masonry in general was a purely Mediterranean business. Shortly after the discovery of the Roman origin of the walls of Norba, he held that “until Roman age, Aryans did not know masonry for houses and temples [...]. We know who was the masters of stonework and masonry in Northern Europe, that is the Romans” [46: p. 194]. Thus, cyclopean architecture and masonry are singled out as characteristic elements of the Mediterranean identity. Once again, the archeological landscape and the geographic context are merged in a discourse on the civilizing action of the Mediterranean people.

More than this, the geographical and ideological role of the sea becomes stronger as Sergi's thought evolves. While in his first works, the Mediterranean was primarily a background against which the epic of civilization took place, later he would begin to consider the Mediterranean as the sole geographical element that really contributed to the emergence of the European civilization. For example, in *Arii ed Italici*, he showed a conciliatory attitude by conceding that the use of metals—particularly bronze—was introduced by Aryans migrating from Asia [41]. However, a few years later in *The Mediterranean Race* and *Gli arii in Europa e in Asia*, Sergi excused himself for the previous concessions and assumed a more rigid stance. Building on Montelius' work [54], he affirmed that Tacitus' Germans were not particularly skillful with metals and, above all, triumphantly announced an alleged proof that metals came “from the South and especially from Mediterranean” [46: p. 195]. It is important to stress that Sergi always uses the comprehensive term “Mediterranean” to indicate the geographic source of the major elements of European culture (language, writing, metallurgy, scientific discovery, artistic, and architectonic expressions). In this way, he constructs an imagined space inseparably intertwined with the concepts of civilization and culture.

In this context, Italy assumed a relevant role in the dissemination of civilization in Europe, particularly in virtue of its geographical position—at the convergence of East and West—and its seas, such as the Adriatic Sea:

*Eastern Mediterranean is larger [than Western] and can be divided into partly autonomous seas, which, like branches, serve as easier communications for the mainland. So is the Adriatic Sea, which is separated from Western Mediterranean by the diaphragm of the Italian Peninsula. In this way, it shares East and West, a true communication vehicle for Man's product of the land. [47: p. 17]*

The concept of Mediterranean is extended by Sergi in an unprecedented manner. While De Cara and other Mediterraneanists enlarged geographically the area to include the shores of Asia Minor and the Black Sea, Sergi overlaps the concepts of Mediterranean, culture, and civilization. This extension relied heavily on Sergi's own anthropological discoveries during a scientific journey through the Mediterranean and was fed by a number of direct observations of skulls sent to him from archeological missions in the Mediterranean<sup>12</sup> and in the Middle East<sup>13</sup> as well as an enormous collection of anthropological photographs. As a consequence, the geography of the Mediterranean, meant as the container of the millennial history “of a great race” [56: p. 310], was progressively enlarged:

<sup>12</sup>For example, the correspondence between Federico Halbherr and Sergi reveals that samples of skulls found in Crete were dispatched to Sergi to be classified. He did not fail to spot there the features of his Mediterranean race.

<sup>13</sup>Sergi was the only anthropologist to study (and to classify as Mediterranean) the skulls found in 1904 by Raphael Pumpelly (1837–1923) in Turkestan [55, 56: pp. 98–99]. His report was published entirely in the second volume of Pumpelly's *Exploration in Turkestan* [57: p. 445–446].

One can affirm that the dominating race, which solely generated the great civilizations in a vast area of the Earth including the Mediterranean basin, with the European peninsulas, Northern Africa and particularly Egypt up to Nubia, Syria, Asia Minor and the Western territories, the valleys of Euphrates and Tigris up to Mount Zagros and Mount Elam, was the race I call Mediterranean, divided and fractioned in several branches, some of which, the three main ones, originated their own civilizations, regardless of their age or temporal priority, which did not have any effect. [56: p. 310]

Such a big extension expressed Sergi's own mental image as one can see from a map designed by Sergi himself and published in *Gli arii in Europa e in Asia*. The map represents the spreading of the Euro-African species and served as an illustration of Sergi's idea of the Mediterranean basin as a crucial factor in determining the biological and anthropological features of the Mediterranean race (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Sergi's reconstruction of the spreading of the Euro-African species in the Middle East and Asia.

It is important to notice the hypothetical status of this map. At the time of its publication (1903), Sergi had not yet collected a complete set of anthropological data about Middle East and India. Therefore, by arranging the space according to new meanings and forms of appropriation, Sergi's map encapsulates a symbolical reconfiguration of a physical entity, that is, it makes it a cultural space. Moreover, a map communicates a geopolitical vision, a true project about the world, mirroring its author [58: p. 77]. Even before describing the territory, a map describes its author's gaze, its cultural geography [59]. As we shall see, by deconstructing the meaning of Sergi's map, one can find a clear anti-German message because maps—and this map in particular—are never value free for a positivist such as Giuseppe Sergi.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the cartographic communication acts at the epistemological level as an instrument to reinforce and disseminate Sergi's message [60: p. 55]. At first sight, the functions of the map were (1) to show the extension of the Mediterranean symbolic imagery toward East and (2) to gather populations hitherto understood as different (e.g., Semitic and Hamitic people, Mediterranean and Indian people, etc.) in a single human group. Yet, if we look into the mental landscape of the author, a third function emerges.

To deconstruct the political and ideological project that grounds this representation, one needs to look at the evolution of Sergi's work. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Sergi attacked vigorously the last pillar of the Aryan hypothesis: the language. In a series of works, he stressed a connection between the Mediterranean and Euro-African race and the ancient populations of the Indian and Persian areas. His ultimate goal was to prove that the Indo-European *Ursprache* had been elaborated by the Indo-Iranian branch of the Euro-African race, that is, it was a creation of the Mediterranean race [61]. After masonry, arts, metallurgy, philosophy, and culture, Sergi aimed at dispossessing the Aryan people—and then Austria and Germany—of the last vestige of superiority.

## 6. Mediterranean *Urheimat*

In 1926, 4 years after the Fascism's rise to power, Sergi formulated the definitive version of his idea of Mediterranean. According to him, the ancient Mediterranean world was divided into three parts: (1) the Asian Mediterranean World (Syria, Asia Minor, Armenia, and even India); (2) the African Mediterranean World (Egypt<sup>15</sup>); and (3) the European Mediterranean World [56: p. 131–132]. These three parts surrounded the Mediterranean “like a divine lake” [56: p. 131]. On the shores of this lake, the longest-running civilization emerged at Crete, then in Greece, and finally in Italy. The Roman Empire made the Mediterranean civilization truly universal and cover all parts, Italy being “placed at the center between West and East” [56: pp. 316–317].

Thus, in the Fascist era, the myth of Rome, so dear to the patriotism of Risorgimento [62], was linked with the epic of the superior race. This connection, however, should not deceive.

<sup>14</sup>See Ref. [60: p. 53]: “Maps cease to be understood primary as inert records of morphological landscapes or passive reflections of the word of objects, but are regarded as refracted images contributing to dialogue in a socially constructed world (...) Maps are never value-free images; except in the narrowest Euclidean sense they are not in themselves either true or false.”

<sup>15</sup>The reference to Egypt comes directly from the anticlerical tradition of the Italian masonic tradition in the Enlightenment [62], which was then resumed by positivism. This tradition evoked the ancient Egyptian wisdom as opposed to the Pope.

Sergi's discourse remained strongly anti-German, overtly opposed to Mussolini's ideology. The Duce's goal was to fuse together the Aryan and the Mediterranean line.<sup>16</sup> Yet Sergi did not revise his position against the Aryan mythology but kept on working on his own myth of the Great Mediterranean. His distance from the Fascist regime can be clearly seen from the preface of his 1926 books dedicated to the greatness of the Mediterranean race. Instead of aligning himself to the regime, he thundered that the eagerness to follow a leader was "useful for social life, but it is also harmful because it leads to servility and any kind of turpitudes when it is developed through selfishness and personal advantage." He added that "sometimes it happens, and we cannot ignore it, that, especially in periods of great social and political upheavals, not the best, but the boldest men seize violently the leadership of a people." Eventually, these boldest men lead to "the decadence if not the ruin of the nations" because they are "inept and ill-prepared" to leadership [56: p. IX].

It is therefore clear that, superficial resemblances aside, Sergi's Mediterraneanist ideology was substantially different from Fascism's. His view was a positivist renewal of the patriotic interpretation of the Roman myth filtered through Vico, Gioberti, and the archeological debate on the Pelasgian hypothesis. Yet Sergi did not confine himself to combining the old topic with the archeological explorations of Eastern Mediterranean. The truly original feature of his discourse was its scientific character. Sergi was an active player in the debate on the soft-inheritance theory, that is, the attempt to combine Darwin and Lamarck. According to this theory, external factors such as nutrition and environment might affect the process of species and variety formation. "One needs to keep in mind that human events depend on biological as well as on environmental factors" wrote Sergi in 1926 [56: p. VI]. The soft-inheritance theory provided Sergi with the causal nexus between the Mediterranean geography and the emergence of a superior race. Furthermore, he could make a biologically informed use of Taine's philosophical reflections on the relation between milieu and people and Gioberti's thoughts about the favorable conditions for culture offered by the Italian climate and geology:

*The Mediterranean provided the most favorable conditions for the development of civilization and a more cosmopolitan civilization than the one emerged in the valleys of the great rivers. (...) To these conditions, one may add those that made the Mediterranean one of the happiest regions of the world, that is the temperate climate, the fertility of the soil, the abundance of any production. As soon as one exits this fortunate basin, one finds deserts (...) or the inhospitable regions of the ancient world, those in Center Europe and Scythia. [32: p. 12]*

As his research went on, this theme became more prominent. He tried to show the existence of an original geographical Mediterranean overlapping the ancient Mediterranean culturally defined. According to Sergi, the sequence of geological eras actively affected great climatic changes and "the formation and retrocession of a large Asian Mediterranean, the Aral, the Caspian, and the Black Sea being its main remnants" [55: p. 305]. As "like in any human group, each type is self-contained and biologically in its natural place" [63: p. 145], it was obvious to conclude that the Mediterranean, "one of the happiest regions of the world", hosted the superior race.

But the Mediterranean myth intruded even more on Sergi's scientific work. Following the theories according to which the sea was the original locus of life, he held that man appeared

<sup>16</sup>See, for example, Mussolini's discourse at the Municipal Theater in Bologna on 3 April 1921 in which he stated that the birth of Fascism answered an intrinsic need of our "Aryan and Mediterranean stock."

along the neoteric fauna “in Africa, toward the center of the Mediterranean and his evolution took place or at least manifested itself in Western Europe; hence, the center of human origin was situated between Africa and Western Europe, i.e., a European-Mediterranean center” [56: pp. 8–9]. Ultimately, the Mediterranean was not only the cradle of civilization but also the site that determined the species generation process that detached the genus homo from primates. By intertwining evolutionary biology, archeological discourses, and geographical landscape, Sergi constructed a narrative that surpasses by far the national borders and became an epic of a race and a place, both essential factors of the civilizing action. In this way, the Mediterranean surged to the role of *Heimat* of civilization. This idea reminds closely Braudel’s analysis that the Mediterranean history boiled down to a history of the relation between man and environment marked by long-term processes [64]. According to Braudel, ever since Lower Paleolithic, the Mediterranean civilization coalesced around processes that made it a “continual renaissance” [7: p. 107]. The idea of a cyclic Mediterranean renaissance was also part and parcel with Sergi’s historical-biological vision, which led him, essentially a pacifist, to applaud Italy’s renaissance after the end of the first World War [10].

## 7. Conclusion

There are geographical spaces that are also mental spaces and representational spaces possessing one or more symbolic meanings. As these meanings can then be adapted to social, cultural, and political agendas, interpretations of spaces are context- and community-dependent. Hence, cultural history creates interpretations of interpretations. In this essay, I have tried to deconstruct the Italian intellectuals’ gaze on the Mediterranean from the end of the nineteenth century to the advent of Fascism. I have left aside the dynamics related to the creation of the Mediterranean colonial space, which will be dealt with in another essay. Instead, I have primarily focused on the cultural and scientific construction of the Mediterranean landscape as a way to define the Italian identity *vis-à-vis* other European powers.

For most of the Italian Mediterraneanists, the Mediterranean myth was mainly an answer to the Aryan narrative—and that entailed an opposition to the foreign politics of the Government and the King. Somewhat ironically, it was the success of the Aryan myth and the German archeology and anthropology that facilitated the acceptance of the Mediterranean paradigm in Italy for the major Mediterraneanists opposed the alliance with German powers either on religious grounds (De Cara) or for patriotic and ideological reasons. It was then at the turn of the century that the Mediterranean became an “amphibious concept”, that is, a concept that lived in different social, political, and cultural contexts [6].

The new Aegean-Anatolian archeology and the dissemination of pre-classical archeological imagery contributed decisively to the construction of the Mediterranean representational space. First, they got rid of the old narratives based on ancient mythology (e.g., the Pelasgian myth). Second, they promoted the *mise en valeur* of the pre-Roman cultural heritage, which was, for the first time, appropriated by intellectual élites and nation builders.<sup>17</sup> Third, the intertwining

<sup>17</sup>It is important to notice that pre-Roman archaeology was later annihilated by the Fascist regime, which, by contrast, based its propaganda on the myth of Imperial Rome.

of the concepts of Mediterranean and civilization set the stage for a further extension of the geographical borders of the Mediterranean itself. In this national scenario, the originality of Sergi's theories lies in his integration of the new archaeological and anthropological discoveries in a biological structure. In this way, he created a cultural construction able to keep together a narrative of the nation and a narrative of the landscape. While this idea belonged to the tradition of Taine and Gioberti, Sergi added a causal nexus between human evolution and environment.

To the historian's ear, this role of the Mediterranean sounds very close to another classic of historiography, that is Braudel's Mediterranean. At the beginning, this comparison might appear far-fetched, but it can also be a useful analytical tool to shed light on the features of the Mediterranean representational space. For De Cara and other Catholic intellectuals, the Mediterranean was a site of passage of civilization from Asia to the Catholic nations and its importance lay in the re-assessment of the role of Catholic nations *vis-à-vis* Protestant ones. For the atheist Sergi, by contrast, the Mediterranean was a site of irradiation and played a dramatic role in the narration of the origins of the Italian civilization. While in Sergi's first works, the Mediterranean is something midway between a scenography and an actor, in his later books it acquires a more active presence in molding, biologically and environmentally, the only race able to produce and disseminate civilization. This view is somehow close to Braudel's according to whom the Mediterranean is a full-fledged actor facilitating encounters, clashes, and exchanges. Yet, contrary to Braudel, Sergi believed that the Mediterranean shapes not men's lives but men's bodies and minds.

However, the most conspicuous difference between Sergi and Braudel concerns the theme of plurality. Braudel's Mediterranean is a process: "What is the Mediterranean? It's a thousand things together. It is not a sea, but a succession of seas. It is not a civilization, but a series of civilizations piled up one upon the other (...) a primeval crossroads" [65: p. 8]. For Sergi, instead, the Mediterranean is a basic unit of his epistemology, a method of inquiry, a structure, and a framework. One can then conclude that, for some Italian intellectuals, the Mediterraneanism was an identity ideology that permeated the analysis of reality and conditioned the process of comprehension and apprehension of the physical geographical and the symbolic space.

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