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Italian Abolitionism in Late and Post-Ottoman Libya (1890-1928)*

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Abstract
This paper focuses on Italian abolitionism in Libya framing the actions of consular offices, Ottoman administration, colonial authority, Catholic missions and antislavery committees in a trans-imperial perspective. It investigates Italy's imperialist strategies in the Mediterranean area through antislavery mobilization. After analyzing the importance of antislavery networks for Italian colonial purposes, it then discusses how abolitionism and antislavery actions affected enslaved people's mobility in the central Mediterranean, focusing on the case of the mission for manumitted children in the outskirts of Benghazi and the (failed) project of its relocation to the Eritrean colony in 1910.
This paper aims to assess not only the Italian antislavery activities carried out after the Anti-Slavery Conference of 1890 but also the persistence of slavery in Libya throughout the colonial period.

Keywords: Abolitionism, Antislavery, Libya.

In spite of the Ottoman *ferman* (imperial decree) issued by Sultan Abdulmejid I in 1857 and the anti-slavery conference of 1890, the slave trade from sub-Saharan Africa to and through African Mediterranean regions continued right up to the late 1920s (Toledano 1982: 192). The long demise of slavery during the 19th and 20th century in North Africa depended mainly on the waning of trans-Saharan routes than on abolitionist measures, often violated. In fact, although declining, slavery in Libyan regions was persistent enough that the *wali* (Ottoman provincial governor) of Tripoli Ahmad Racim Pasha had to issue in 1896 a new law declaring the abolition of slavery and the punishment to

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enslavers (Al Taleb 2015: 172-3). In Libya, scholarship on this topic has been concerned more with the economic and quantitative side of slavery (Wright 1992; Daw Ahmed 2009; Abu Al Khir 2016; Al Taleb 2015) than with foreign antislavery actions and their colonial strategies.

Many researchers agree on the importance of Benghazi in the slave trade (Cordell 1977: 21-36; Toledano 1982: 230-1; Wright 2007), but specific analysis on the persistence of slavery in local contexts and the dynamics of abolition has focused more on western Libya than on the area's eastern regions (Daw Ahmed: 2009; Al Taleb 2015). Deconstructing the Eurocentric abolitionist narrative and colonial chronology, this analysis focuses mainly, but not exclusively, on Benghazi using Italian records from consular and missionaries' archives, which have been largely understudied.

The city of Benghazi and its surroundings are a crucial place to observe and analyze the strategies of several actors involved in antislavery actions. Alongside the Italian consular offices, the Italian Catholic missions and the local committees of the Italian Antislavery Society (IAS) played a prominent role in this undertaking. Italian antislavery action in Benghazi included not only repression of the slave trade, but it aimed at exerting control over the mobility of enslaved persons and managing those who were manumitted. Studying Italian abolitionism in Libya thus reveals an imperialist aim to intervene in the internal affairs of the Ottoman administration, undermining its authority (Forclaz 2015; Pétré-Grenouilleau 2015: 7-23). Thanks to the role Benghazi played as a terminal point of the caravan trade from sub-Saharan Africa, the Italian vice-consular office there gained privileged access to information on sub-Saharan Africa (Cordell 1977).[1] As a crossroad of the caravan trade, Benghazi was a gateway to African hinterlands[2] for Italy's imperialist aims. Even though the persistence of slavery after colonial invasions is a thriving topic in historiography (Lovejoy 2011; Rossi 2017), until now the Italian-Libyan case has been neglected.[3] Challenging the colonial chronology, this research assesses the continuity of different forms of slavery and its legal outcomes as well as slave-trading after the Italo-Turkish War up to the late 1920s.

Antislavery Actions in a Context of Imperial Rivalry

In November 1903, Saad Ben Mohammed and Frag Ben Mussa, two enslaved persons[4] of 11 and 14 years old from the Wadai region, managed to escape from their enslavers and went to the Italian vice-consulate in Benghazi. The vice-consul offered refuge to the two young men and, having been told the story of their enslavement, acquired information on the caravan slave trade and its actors.[5] Afterwards, the vice-consular office asked for and obtained from local Ottoman authorities letters of manumission for the two young men, with the validation of the Italian consular authority.[6] The anti-slavery conference of 1890 declares in its third article the direct responsibility of the signatory power, in this case the Ottoman Empire, for the suppression of the slave trade in the territories under their rule; allowing with the fourth article the possibility of cooperation with other missions, associations or foreign powers (Mulligan 2013: 149-70).[7]

Until the beginning of the 20th century, runaway enslaved people in Libyan area usually asked for help from British consular authorities to obtain manumission.[8] The historical role of Great Britain in abolitionism might have attracted those claiming manumission (Boahen 1964; Toledano 1982: 91-123), since during the first half of the 19th century England played an important role in the antislavery campaign and pressured the Ottoman Empire on this topic (Miers 1975; Toledano 1982: 91-5; Quirk 2011: 21-112). However, it was in the interest of the Italian authority to let people know that its agents too could act with the local administration to manumit enslaved persons.

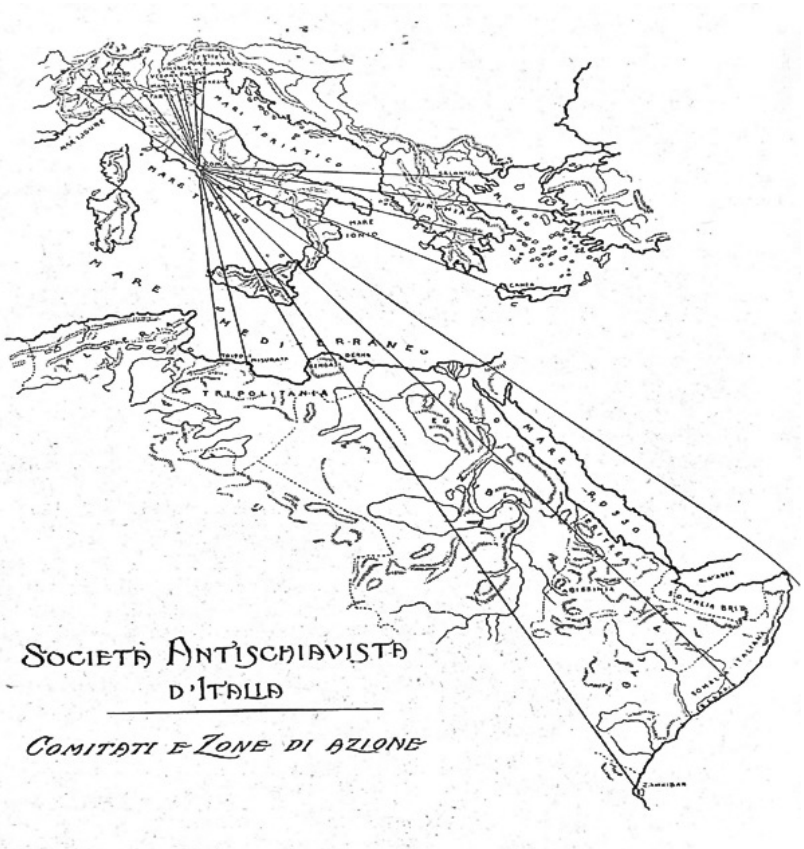
In fact, after the French invasion of Tunisia in 1881, Italy started to look towards Libya as a target for its imperial ambitions (Larfaoui 2010). Towards this end, Italian consular authority challenged the British hegemony over manumissions in Libya.[9] The Anti-Slavery Conference affirmed the possible cooperation of all signatory powers to work towards ending slavery, enabling Italian authorities to be involved, even though manumission - no matter if claimed through British, Italian or other consular authorities - had to be officially issued by the local Ottoman administration. In this way, Italian authorities intervened in Ottoman internal affairs, acting as an external and international intermediary between people escaping from enslavement and the local authority.

Since the conference in 1890, the antislavery actions of foreign actors had been tied to issues of national prestige and imperialist aims (Forclaz 2015). The Italian consular authority did not act alone in the repression of the slave trade in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica; rather, it collaborated with the second main actor of this story, the Italian Antislavery Society, which started as a local committee in Palermo in 1888 and was officially founded as a national society in Rome in 1889 (Ettorre 2012). The founder, Filippo Tolli, was a politician engaged in the Catholic movement and directed the society from 1892 until his death in 1924. At its foundation, the IAS drew its members in Italy from the nobility and clergy.[10] The local agents of the IAS in Libyan cities were mainly notables: in Tripoli the local agent in 1900 was Giunio Bissi, a merchant[11]; in Derna, it was Giuseppe Farruggia, an agent of Navigazione Generale Italiana and British consular agent; and in Benghazi it was Luigi Ellul, a Maltese merchant.[12] The IAS justified its actions in the Ottoman African provinces of Tripoli and Benghazi with the mandate of the international antislavery societies congress (Forclaz 2015: 31-6), which took place in Paris in 1890, after the Brussels conference. The participation of Ottoman Empire representatives at the Brussels Conference in 1890 (Erdem 1996) and their absence, two months later, from the congress of antislavery societies in Paris is notable.

The mandate of the IAS in these regions seems to follow an imperialist agreement of European powers over Africa.[13] However, an initial distrust troubled the relationship between the Italian consulate and IAS actors in Libya. The distrust came from the religious origin of the IAS and the involvement of the Catholic Church, in particular the French Cardinal Lavigerie,[14] in this movement. France and the Catholic Church were, at

the end of the 19th century two main enemies of the Italian government led by Prime Minister Francesco Crispi. In addition to the ongoing conflict regarding the Roman Question between the Italian kingdom and the Catholic Church, which started in 1871, French-Italian rivalry increased after the French invasion of Tunisia in 1881 and the *customs war* of 1887 (Serra 1967; Milza 1981; Quagliariello 2011). At its beginning, the IAS, supported by Lavigerie, was surveilled by Italian authorities (Ettorre 2012; Di Meo 2017).[15] In 1891, the Italian government took information on the members of the IAS national board, and of their local committees. Alerted by the services of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of the Interior gained access to the IAS correspondence and assessed that "the members of the Antislavery association belong to the intransigent clerical party and they receive directions from France and especially from Cardinal Lavigerie,"[16] making specific reference against "the agents that in Tripolitania work for the French government".[17]

Fig. 1: Italian Antislavery Society's area of action



Source: Bollettino Società Antischiavista d'Italia, gennaio-febbraio 1910, anno XXIII, n 1, p.24.

In the last years of the 19th century, the IAS did not carry out significant activities in Libya. Meanwhile, the turn of Italian foreign diplomacy after Italy's defeat by Ethiopian forces at the Battle of Adwa in 1896 created favorable conditions in Italy for political appeasement with France as well as with the Catholic Church in colonial issues (Storti and Negoussie 1985; Aquarone 1989). In fact, in 1898, the Italian consul in Tripoli asked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for further information about the IAS, whose existence he had just discovered, stating his mistrust of the IAS local committee considering that slavery in Tripoli "almost doesn't exist".[18] The consul's mistrust was concerned more with the lack of communication and the need for such an association in Libya than the French and Catholic involvement in this matter. Two years later, after having obtained enough information on this subject, the consul wrote back to the Minister of Foreign Affairs that the IAS local committee - even though linked to the Church and to France - was not against Italian interests in the region.[19]

The political easing of relations between the Italian state and the Church continued especially for missionaries' activities, as confirmed by the activities after 1890 of the National Association to Assist Italian Missionaries in the Middle East and Africa (NAIM) (Nuzzaci 2012; Turiano and Summerer 2020). In addition, in 1905, the apostolic prefect in Tripolitania, Father Bevilacqua, asked to change the protection of the Franciscan Catholic mission from the French to the Italian consular authority and he obtained this objective in January 1907 (Bergna 1924). During this easing of tensions, at the beginning of the 20th century, the IAS collaborated with Italian authorities in antislavery actions in Libya and beyond. In fact, the IAS and the Catholic missions became one of the actors of the *Italian pacific penetration* in Libya during the first decade of the 20th century, as demonstrated also by their tight connection with the major player of this strategy, the Banco di Roma that was the financial intermediary between IAS, missionaries and the local context[20].

Controlling Slavery and Mobility from Benghazi to Izmir

The IAS aimed to collaborate with consular authorities in the repression of the slave trade. As members of a private society, the IAS agents did not have any power to manumit enslaved people or to arrest enslavers but only to inform the authorities of any activity related to slavery that they witnessed or knew about. The practice of human trafficking using ships from the port of Benghazi to Istanbul was a well-known fact for the Italian authorities.[21] The main activities of the IAS and its local committees were to inform the consular offices about human trafficking, periodically report on this matter and make proposals to further the repression of the slave trade. A significant part of this work concerned the acquisition of information about the mobility of black persons to discover the trafficking of enslaved persons. During the first decade of the 20th century, the IAS not only founded several committees in Africa and the Mediterranean area operating in countries under Italian colonial rule (at that time, Eritrea and Somalia)[22] and in

Tripolitania and Cyrenaica,[23] but also, in 1909, founded offices in Izmir, Thessaloniki and Piraeus because these were docking harbors for steamers arriving from Libyan ports.[24] These local committees were tightly connected, and they created a wide web with the means for quick communication and mobilization. In September 1903, the IAS report from the Benghazi committee described the arrival of a slave trade caravan with 18 enslaved persons. Fearing discovery, the caravan guides changed the route they were taking to get to Egypt but the committee of Benghazi had already alerted the IAS agents in Egypt.[25]

Usually, the circulation of information and alerts within the IAS network served the Italian consulates, which were solicited to intervene in the repression of slave trade caravans and to obtain manumission for enslaved persons by working with Ottoman authorities. In January 1907, in the Port of Izmir, an Ottoman ship was searched after an alert from the IAS local committee, which had been warned in turn by the Benghazi committee.[26] The presence of black passengers on ships departing from Benghazi was sometimes sufficient to raise suspicions in IAS agents, who then warned the committees in the places where these ships were destined. The racial Eurocentric bias considered *black people* and *enslaved (or former enslaved) persons* as overlapped classifications even though the variety of internal conditions as well as the relationship between the two categories differed considerably in North Africa[27].

The IAS rapidly acquired such a significant role in this matter within the Italian administration that the consulates directly informed the IAS committees on antislavery issues.[28] In just a few years, the consular authorities passed from mistrust to open collaboration with the IAS. The information collected by the local IAS committees was then sent to the central board of the society, which presented in its bulletin all the IAS activities, statistics of manumitted enslaved persons, communication and news from all operating areas and beyond, including also news from foreign antislavery societies. Through this publication, the IAS created a concrete form of an antislavery global network.

The network, the bulletin and the IAS congresses were spaces not only for sharing and collecting information and news but also for discussing proposals and strategies. The control and repression of the mobility of enslaved persons were among the main concerns of the IAS. In 1903, the IAS central board agreed to provide and forwarded to the Minister of Foreign Affairs a report written by Father Giuseppe Bevilacqua, apostolic prefect in Libya, in which he proposed some measures to face the maritime slave trade from Libyan shores[29]. According to Bevilacqua, black passengers, even though Ottoman citizens, should obtain authorization from European consular authorities to board steamers leaving from Tripolitania and they should declare to these authorities their domicile of arrival.[30] Another point noted in this report concerned the granting of consular protection for manumitted enslaved persons in Libya, to avoid their acquisition of Ottoman citizenship after the official manumission by local authorities.

Bevilacqua's proposal, supported by the IAS Central Board, aimed to undermine Ottoman authority by putting all black persons departing from Ottoman harbors under a kind of foreign protection and control. In the IAS strategy, the antislavery actions were intertwined with tight control over black mobility in the Central-Eastern Mediterranean, assessing implicitly that all black people were enslaved and under the will of an enslaver, likely a Muslim Ottoman. The entire IAS campaign was greatly informed by an Islamophobic and anti-Ottoman bias (Di Meo 2017: 96). Catholic missions and IAS agents, as well as consular agents, agreed in accusing the Islamic religion and Ottoman administration of fostering or protecting slavery.[31] Although the Italian authorities agreed with the anti-Ottoman and Islamophobic bias of Bevilacqua's report, however, they could not adopt its proposals because the Ottoman Empire was among the signatory powers of the anti-slavery conference. Imposing consular protection over a person manumitted in a foreign territory, whose country of origin did not have consular representation, was against the Anti-Slavery Conference Act, which affirmed the responsibility of a signatory power to ensure manumission and protection of enslaved persons in its own territories or colonies.[32] This meant that the enslaved and manumitted persons in Ottoman Libya, coming from countries with no consular representation in the Empire and not under European colonial powers, had an Ottoman protection and were under Ottoman rule. Because the majority of enslaved persons in Libya came from Wadai and the Lake Tchad region (Wright 2007), not yet totally occupied at that time (end of 19th century) by colonial powers, the IAS wished a prompt European occupation of this sub-Saharan region to put manumitted persons in Libya under the protection and control of the respective consular office.[33] Concerning the control of black mobility, Bevilacqua's proposal could not have been accepted for the same reasons of the unsuitability of such control in a territory under Ottoman jurisdiction. It was a common understanding of the Italian authorities, the IAS, and missionaries operating in Libya, that Ottoman officials were complicit in human trafficking from Africa.[34] Moreover, according to Italian authorities, in many cases, black passengers showing manumission letters to the border police were likely enslaved people whose documents of manumission would be retired by the enslaver at their arrival. Most of the time the enslaved persons were declared as domestic servants or as part of the family by Ottoman officials.[35] Even though one of the main points of the IAS was that slavery persisted because of the Ottoman Empire and Islam, asserting the moral superiority of the Christian religion and European civilization, the reality was different. In a report written in 1907, the consul had to admit that some cases of trafficking happened also in Italian steamers.[36]

In 1908 and 1909, the Belgian Friar Paolino Lickens, an IAS local agent in Benghazi, publicly denounced in newspapers and in the IAS bulletin that the Italian shipping company Navigazione Generale Italiana had transported enslaved persons in its steamers. The Italian Navy Minister denied these allegations, asserting that all black

passengers presented the required documents, and the company could not be held responsible for the truthfulness of their manumission status.[37] Moreover, the vice-consulate undermined the allegations, attesting that the Belgian friar's report was full of exaggerations and that his anti-Italian feelings were well known in Benghazi, according to the consular agent.[38] In order to avoid a scandal, the Italian Navy ministry announced to the ministry of Foreign Affairs that a consular authorization would be asked from black passengers who wanted to board Italian steamers.[39] If the Italian consulate could not enforce its authority in an Ottoman territory, it could impose its own rules on the Italian steamer company that connected Benghazi to Central Mediterranean harbors.

This centralization sometimes created other problems, such as in 1910 when an Italian steamer denied the boarding of Messud Ben Mohammed from Benghazi because his travel document was not certified by the Italian consulate but by the British one. Some days later, the Italian consulate allowed the passenger to board the steamer to Tripoli, pointing out the lack of communication between consulates regarding their letters of manumission. What is striking in this case is the terminology used in the note of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, assessing that Messud, a manumitted black person, had to reach his Italian "master" in Tripoli.[40] The case of a European "master" with domestic enslaved persons was not an isolated case. Domestic slavery, officially condemned by the IAS and one of the main accusations against the Ottoman administration, was practiced in local European households too and unofficially tolerated by Italian consular authorities. The tolerance and persistence of domestic slavery is a well-documented fact during the early 20th century.[41] In 1909, the Italian consul in Benghazi assessed human trafficking as the real problem, rather than domestic slavery, which, according to him, did not cause any trouble.[42] The Italian ambassador in Istanbul wrote about the inconvenience of a campaign against domestic slavery in Ottoman Libya, proposing to denounce it when the time came to accuse the Ottoman government.[43]

Alongside international relations, another main consideration about manumission in foreign territories was how to deal with manumitted persons. The IAS network, jointly with consular offices, could identify the cases of trafficking from Benghazi to Izmir, but what then? The Italian ambassador in Istanbul suggested that the manumission campaign should preferably aim at the black children in Benghazi, instead of manumitting enslaved people in Istanbul or Izmir, leaving them in poor conditions and earning the resentment of the Ottoman ruling class.[44] A cautious evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of antislavery actions was a shared practice by imperialist and colonialist powers (Goodman 2013). Alongside the repression of the slave trade and the control over the mobility of manumitted persons, antislavery actions dealt with the management of the manumitted persons, supervising and training them within humanitarian projects often linked with religious missions backed by imperialist aims.[45]

From Benghazi to Turin, from Scicli to Massawa: Colonial Mobility within the Italian Imperial Project

In 1904, in a suburb of Benghazi called Fwayhāt (الفوايهات), the Congregation of Saint Joseph (Dotta 2011) established its mission for manumitted black children, who were called "Moretti" in the Italian sources (Ghedini 2020: 92-102). The mission had a male and a female section (the latter managed by the Sisters of Charity of Immaculate Conception). In both, children were taught Italian, handcrafting and Catechism.[46] Most of the manumitted children hosted in the mission came from Wadai, Bornu or from the areas of lake Tchad, and for this reason they were legally under Ottoman jurisdiction. In the wake of Italian imperial aims in Libya, consular authorities supported the mission, which was funded by Propaganda Fide, the IAS and the NAIM.[47] As an outcome of Italian antislavery actions in this Ottoman *wilāya* (province), the mission aimed at educating manumitted children about Italian civilization and creating a black community attached to Italy. To foster this link, the mission sent some Moretti to the motherhouse of the Congregation of Saint Joseph in Turin.[48] But the proselytism of the mission attracted the hostility of the Muslim population and worsened the mission's security.

The Fathers wished for European colonial rule instead of the Ottoman administration, framing their mission in a future Italian colony.[49] This case study widens our understanding of Italian imperialism in Africa beyond its chronological and spatial divisions. The Benghazi area could be seen already as part of the Italian colonial project even before the actual invasion in 1911. The Fwayhāt mission framed the training of black manumitted children within the Italian colonial project - the Moretti had to be involved in Italian aims: "[b]enché non ancora battezzati amano e praticano la nostra Santa Religione, si mostrano amanti della nostra patria, dell'idioma nostro [...] questi Fanciulli che nel loro inno tanto affettuosamente cantano: 'Dal tricolor redenti - a chi redento giace - farem gloriosa face - de l'Africa il fior'".[50]

In 1910, disappointed by the lack of an Italian occupation and wishing to move within an Italian imperial framework, the Congregation of Saint Joseph headed to the Italian colony of Eritrea.[51] To accelerate the training of the Moretti, the director of the mission, Father Apolloni, proposed to move them to Italy for one or two years.[52] The idea of an Italian period of training and education before the children went to Eritrea came from a proposal entitled *Sull'incivilimento degli Schiavi Turchi* written in 1910 by Father Bevilacqua, former apostolic prefect of Tripolitania and General Commissar of Minor Friars of Val di Noto (South-East Sicily).[53] He proposed to move the Moretti to Sicily, more precisely, in Scicli for the men, and in Spaccaforno for the women, both in Ragusa province[54]. The project aimed to create an institute for Moretti in Sicily and make it a point of passage from Ottoman Libya to the colony of Eritrea. Bevilacqua's Sicilian project was supported by the Congregation of Saint Joseph. In the meantime, the NAIM, supported by the IAS, planned the foundation of an institute in Arkiko, near

Massawa, with agricultural lands in other Eritrean places like Cheren, Gura plan and Adi Ugri.[55] The IAS, even though it was not against the Sicilian institute, declared it would financially support only the Eritrean one promoted by the NAIM. The consular authority in Tripoli persuaded the ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome that the better solution was to support only the Eritrean side of the project, planning - after its establishment - the transfer of Moretti from Benghazi directly to Eritrea, avoiding the "Sicilian passage" for the risk of death, of "homesickness", and illnesses.[56] Probably, the Fathers of the Congregation of Saint Joseph were more in favor of the Sicilian passage proposed by Bevilacqua because of their ongoing strategy of sending Moretti to their housemother in Turin for education and training.[57] Even though the entire project of transferring the Benghazi mission to Eritrea was not realized, owing to the Italo-Turkish War, which changed the geopolitical context, this idea shows us a peculiar colonial connection within the framework of Italian imperialism. The entire Benghazi mission revealed a new approach to black mobility that was not just about control and repression, but also about the integration and use of Moretti in colonial Italian spaces through a trans-imperial approach.

Unexpected Outcomes and the Persistence of Slavery in Post-Ottoman Libya

After the end of the Italo-Turkish War in 1912, the Italian colonial occupation was effectively limited to the shores, leaving the inland regions to autonomous forms of self-government (Gaber 1983; Vandewalle 2012: 24-30; Anderson 2014: 117-21; Baldinetti 2014). Alongside the slow and precarious Italian occupation of Libya, this in-between context, when the territory was not yet completely under colonial administration but was no longer under Ottoman control, was somehow closer to the previous customs. Challenging the traditional colonial framework, this paper considers the hinterlands of Tripolitania, Barqa and Fezzan as post-Ottoman spaces, rather than Italian colonial ones, until the total military conquest in 1931 (Ahmida 2011; Labanca 2012). A large part of the Libyan hinterland was effectively occupied only in the late 1920s, so considering all of this territory as a colonial space since 1912 could lead to anachronisms and misunderstandings regarding the local relations of power.

The post-war context facilitated the resumption of the slave trade, even among the Fathers of the mission. Although before 1911 the Fathers wished for an Italian intervention to stop the slave trade and human trafficking, after the colonial invasion they bought young enslaved women, stimulating the slave trade, to strengthen their religious project of settlement of black Christian families.[58] The Fathers bypassed the colonial administration, acquiring what they needed beyond the Italian occupied zone and consequently paying a higher price to bribe the border security guards.[59] The slave trade came back in an even more unexpected and surprising way: in 1915, among the children of the Fwayhāt mission there was a 7-year-old Italian child, sold by his

father, a Friulan bricklayer, to an "Arab". After finding out about this, the director of the mission, Father Umberto Pagliani, obtained custody of the child for the mission from the Military Command.[60]

Although such unexpected forms of slavery took place, the old ones were far from extinguished. In fact, in the report of the journalist Ulderico Tegani, written in 1920, he estimated that hundreds of enslaved persons were kept in slavery in Benghazi households (Tegani 1922: 123). The abolitionist narrative that underpinned the Italian colonial war in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica against the Ottoman Empire, revealed its weakness in the persistence of slavery not only beyond the colonial borders, but also within Italian occupied zones.

The persistence and the tolerance of slavery under Italian colonial rule is confirmed by the legal enforcement of the outcomes of the - formally abolished - legal relation of slavery. In 1915, the death in Marsa Susa of Giuma ben Bu Bakr al-Sudani without direct heirs[61] started a legal struggle regarding his inheritance. Aescia and Ghariba, daughters of Mohamed ben Hag Ali el Scerif, claimed Giuma's inheritance considering the fact that Giuma's mother, Khadigia, was an enslaved servant of their father. The Qadi of Tripoli supported the claim of Scerif's daughters, but the regional tribunal refused it. Among the motivations of the Italian Court, it was stated that with Italian occupation all the legal relations of slavery were abolished.[62] Scerif's daughters filed an appeal to the court, stating that the decision of the Qadi was pursuant to the Islamic law.[63] The court had to take into account the existence of the Islamic legal institution of the *walā'* ',[64] a form of patronate that subsisted between the former master and the former slave, even after manumission. The court considered that this legal institution, as derived from slavery, was contrary to the civil rule and to Italian civilisation,[65] but on the other hand, in a quite contradictory way, also stated that the abolition of slavery cannot in fact automatically cease the institutions that originally derive from it. In favor of maintaining this legal outcome of slavery, Italian colonial jurisdiction also regarded other colonial contexts, such as Algeria and India, to underpin the slow and gradual abrogation of these norms.[66] In a note sent to the Governor of Tripolitania in August 1916, the president of the Court of Appeal of Tripoli, William Caffarel, suggested caution in the first years of occupation and to avoid any trouble caused by an intervention in local Islamic law.[67] Thus, despite the fact that the Italian court recognized this legal institution as an outcome of slavery, it did not want to abolish it. Upholding the appeal of Scerif's daughters, the Italian jurisdiction applied and enforced a legal outcome of slavery. In line with colonial jurisdiction practices, this case revealed how the necessity of negotiation with the colonial context greatly changed some initial legal assumptions (Martone 2002: 3-62; 2016; Gazzini 2012).

In the late 1920s, notwithstanding the repressive fascist policies and control over mobility in Libya (Volterra and Zinni 2021), some forms of slave trade still existed. On 14 January 1928, the Italian police arrested five Fezzanis who had trafficked

enslaved persons in the Shati and Mizda regions, and who were heading to Tripoli to sell a little girl, Ráhmatu. The news circulated in the local and foreign press, accusing Italy for the persistence of slavery in the Italian colony. To cover up the scandal, the District Attorney Giacomo Ebner opened an inquiry to investigate the scale of the phenomenon. A legal inquiry under fascist rule did not allow an open investigation, especially since the District Attorney wanted to do it only to confirm the rightfulness of colonial authority and to appease foreign public opinion (Ebner and Mondaini 1940: 12). Nevertheless, the District Attorney had to admit during his inquiry that Italy did not control all the territory the fascist government claimed. In addition, even in this context, a colonial prudence was evoked to avoid any trouble in the ongoing military operations in those areas (Ebner and Mondaini 1940 :14-15). Taking into account the post-Ottoman character of these spaces and the autonomous administration of South Fezzan, the District Attorney answered to the hypothetical critique of the jurisdiction of Italy in these spaces, asserting that in any case slavery was abolished also by the Ottoman Empire, legitimizing Italian jurisdiction through the past Ottoman rule. In his inquiry, he overtly defended the Italian actions against slavery denying the existence of "real" slavery in its dominions but in this defense it emerged how domestic slavery was tolerated (Ebner and Mondaini 1940: 51). Eventually, the condemnations concerned human trafficking - highlighting several times the rarity of this crime in the Italian colony - but not enslavement, considering that the victims were already enslaved when the traffickers acquired them (Ebner and Mondaini 1940: 61). Quite paradoxically, the main juridical motivation concerned the fact that since slavery did not exist in the Italian colony, enslaved persons had to come from foreign countries, and their arrested *masters* were not technically enslavers but traffickers.

During the late Ottoman period, Italian consular agents were involved in the repression of the slave trade and obtained information from manumitted enslaved persons, but that was no longer the case during the fascist colonial period. After asserting, illogically, the specious impossibility of committing enslavement because it was abolished in Italian colonial territories, the District Attorney did not want to interrogate the victims of enslavement and trafficking, not considering Ráhmatu as an adequate source (Ebner and Mondaini 1940: 61).The repression of the slave trade and the control over black mobility were used by Italian authorities before the invasion of Libya in order to undermine Ottoman rule and to legitimize its intervention. In the late 1920s the denial of the phenomenon implied a total exclusion of the victims whose depositions could jeopardize the assumptions of colonial rule.

Conclusions

After more than 15 years of Italian rule, the possession of all Libyan territories was still not effective and the abolition of slavery was incomplete. Both of these failures were covered up by the rhetoric of the fascist regime. The abovementioned cases confirms

that the end of the slave trade in Libya was a very slow process and that slavery still existed in the late 1920s. The case of Italian abolitionism in Libya before the Italian invasion shows us how antislavery actions were imperialist tools aimed at undermining Ottoman authority. Moreover, this paper shows not only that there was a plurality of players in antislavery actions but also that their trans-imperial connections bypassed the national-imperial unities. The sphere of action of IAS committees extended from Italian colonial areas to Ottoman ones as well as the project of relocation to Massawa of the Moretti of Benghazi. Although, before 1912, Italian actions accused Ottoman authorities of tolerating slavery and aimed at interfering with Ottoman authorities by controlling black passengers, after the Italian occupation the antislavery players adopted a different approach that encompassed negotiation and denial of the phenomenon during the fascist period. For a better understanding of the persistence of slavery after abolition and the colonial invasion, this paper considered Libya during the early Italian occupation as a post-Ottoman place, rather than an Italian colonial one, to stress the legacy and continuity of slavery, challenging the precolonial/colonial dichotomy. Alongside the persistence of slavery after 1912, there existed a sort of tolerance from Italian authorities, which was previously considered a flaw of Ottoman rule. Concerning the issue of slavery, Italian colonial rule learned, enforced and acquired some Ottoman policies. In 1928, as stated in Ebner's inquiry, the previous Ottoman law became the legal source to justify Italian intervention and repression in Libyan region.

This contribution on African Mediterranean slavery during imperialism improves our understanding of abolitionism as a space of conflict and negotiation in which different imperial powers enact control over human mobility. In addition, this paper analyzed and disarmed the eurocentric abolitionist rhetoric, identifying the imperial and colonial interests behind it and demonstrating the enforcement of slavery outcomes after the colonial occupation. The importance of dismantling the Eurocentric rhetoric of humanitarian interventions matters still today. The rhetoric of a *Libyan Hell* prevalent in Italian and European public opinion since 2015 and used to denounce the mistreatment of migrants rarely is accompanied by a critique of the European migrant detention centers or the slavery-like conditions of the migrant workforce in European societies. This contribution on Italian abolitionism in Libya points out in conclusion that abolitionist rhetoric (the past as well as the current one) can be used as a moral justification to sustain unequal relations of power, reevoking the shield of the *civilizing* mission behind the sword of imperialism that adds chains instead of breaking them.

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Notes:

1 - Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri - Archivio Storico del Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (ASMAI), vol. II, pos. 102/2 Relazioni dell'Italia con la Senussia, f. 1905.
2 - This is also confirmed by the Italian records; see ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 102/2 Relazioni dell'Italia con la Senussia, f. 1905. Concernging the role played by Sanusi Order in the Wadai - Benghazi slave route see Cordell (1977) and Wright (1992).
3 - Regarding the aftermaths of abolition in post-emancipation societies see Cooper (1997) and Cooper, Holt and Scott (2014).
4 - This paper uses the term *enslaved person* rather than *slave* not only to restore human dignity to individuals subjected to the enslavement process but also to stress their agency in the struggle to acquire personal autonomy and freedom.
5 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/4, f. 1903, Liberazione due schiavi negri, letter from the Vice-Consulate in Benghazi to the Consulate in Tripoli, Bengasi, 7 November 1903.
6 - *Ibid.*
7 - For the original document see General Act of Brussels, 1890, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.35112104560067&view=1up&seq=6, (last accessed on 19 October 2022).
8 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/3, f. 16 Repressione della tratta degli schiavi (1900), Società Antischiavista, Vice-Consul in Benghazi to Minister in Rome, 28 October 1900, Benghazi.
9 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/4, f. 20 repressione della tratta (1904), Letter from Vice-Consul in Benghazi to Consul in Tripoli, 29 September 1904.
10 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/2, f. 1891-2, Confidential report of the Police Commissioner to the Minister of the Interior, Rome, 19 November 1891.
11 - Archivio dell'Ordine dei Frati Minori di Lombardia, Segretariato per le missioni, Libia (AOFM, Libia), Lettere Prefetto - Secolari (1903-1912), Tripoli, 6 September 1904.
12 - Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASDMAE), Consolato d'Italia a Tripoli, b. 3, Consular report to the Minister, Tripoli, 19 October 1900.
13 - *La nostra sfera d'azione antischiavista*, "Bollettino della Società Antischiavista Italiana", XXIII, 1, January - February 1910.
14 - About the outstanding role of the French cardinal in the repression of the slave trade, see Renault (1994) and Clarke (2019).
15 - ASDMAE, Consolato d'Italia a Tripoli, b. 3, f. 11, 26 November 1898.
16 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/2, f. 1891-2, Note of the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Consular Office in Tripoli, 26 November 1891 (translated by the author of the article from Italian).
17 - *Ibid.*
18 - ASMAI, vol II, pos 155/3, f. 1898, Letter of the Consul to the Minister in Rome, Tripoli, 22 January 1898.
19 - ASDMAE, Consolato d'Italia a Tripoli, b. 2, Tripoli, 19 October 1900.
20 - Archivio dell'Associazione Nazionale per Soccorrere i Missionari Italiani (AANSMI), 20 - Libia, f. B (1908-1911).
21 - Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Documenti Diplomatici: Serie LXXI - Tripoli, 1895*, Bengasi, 27 aprile 1895, p. 136.
22 - ASDMAE, Rappresentanza Diplomatica in Turchia - Ankara 1829-1938, b. 72, f. 4 Tratta degli Schiavi, Hodeida, 10 December 1897.
23 - *La nostra sfera d'azione antischiavista*, "Bollettino della Società Antischiavista Italiana", XXIII, 1, January - February 1910.
24 - *Ibid.*
25 - *Atti della Società antischiavista d'Italia - La Società antischiavista italiana in Tripolitania*, "Bollettino della Società Antischiavista d'Italia", XVI, 7-8, July-August 1903, p. 26-7.
26 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/4, f. 1907, Izmir, 20 January 1907.
27 - Alongside the phenotypic features, lineage, gender, age, religion, geographical origin and skin color played a major role in the enslavement, discrimination as well as in the emancipation process, disaggregating a monolithic understanding of a "black slavery" (Hall 2011: 30) especially in North African area (El Hamel 2014: 62). As demonstrated by Al Taleb (2015: 167-8) the sexual relationships between masters and female enslaved persons were common in Libyan region and the acknowledgment of the offspring could generate black heirs.

28 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/4, f. 1906, Izmir, 21 July 1906.
29 - AOFM, Libia,Carteggio Missione Consolati Europei 1777-1908, f. Corrispondenza del Prefetto Apostolico, Father Giuseppe Bevilacqua da Barrafranca, Conferenza sopra la schiavitù in Tripolitania, 24 May 1899.
30 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/4, f. 1903, Tripoli, 14 November 1903.
31 - *Come estirpare lo schiavismo*, "Bollettino della Società Antischiavista d'Italia", XXIII, n. 3, May-June 1910, p. 58.
32 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/4, f. 1904, from Italian Ambassador in Paris to Minister of Foreign Affairs in Rome, 13 March 1904.
33 - *Come estirpare lo schiavismo*, "Bollettino della Società Antischiavista d'Italia", XXIII, n. 3, May-June 1910, p. 58.
34 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/4, f. 1907, From Consul in Tripoli to Minister in Rome, 19 April 1907.
35 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/5, f. 1909, Minister of the Navy to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 15 May 1909.
36 - *Ibid.*
37 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/5, f. 1909, Minister of the Navy to Foreign Affairs, Rome, 15 May 1909.
38 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/5, f. 1908, Benghazi, from vice-consul in Benghazi to the Minister in Rome, 25 November 1908.
39 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/5, f. 1909, Minister of the Navy to Foreign Affairs, Rome, 25 February 1909.
40 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/5, f. 1910, Pro-memoria sull'incidente riguardo al liberto Messud Ben Mohammed, s.d.
41 - For a general overview, see Fisher and Fisher (2001). The dynamics and the persistence of domestic slavery is documented in the North African region: for Libya, especially Tripolitania, see Al Taleb (2015); for Tunisia see Montana (2013) and Larguèche (2003: 330-339). Regarding Morocco, see Goodman (2012, 2013) and El Hamel (2014). Concerning the Egyptian-Sudanese case, see Powell (2003). Regarding the persistence of slavery in late modern Italy, see Bonazza (2019).
42 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/5, f. 1908, Benghazi, from vice-consul in Benghazi to the Minister in Rome, 3 July 1908.
43 - ASMAI, vol. II, pos. 155/5, f. 1908, Italian Ambassador to Minister in Rome, Istanbul, 19 May 1908.
44 - *Ibid.*
45 - As a general reference about the link between antislavery and imperialism, see Forclaz (2015). Concerning the French case, see O'Donnell (1979) and Bouche (1968). For the British case, see Clark (1995).
46 - This was a common practice shared by European antislavery missions in Africa during the colonial period. For the North-Eastern African case, see Powell (2012). For the case of the Pères Blancs in North and West Africa, see Shorter (2011).
47 - AANSMI, 20 - Libia.
48 - Archivio della Congregazione dei Giuseppini (ACG), 5.2 Comunità e Opere, Bengasi, 2.1/B, letter of Father Girolamo Apolloni to Friar Maurizio Chamossi, 15 June 1907.
49 - ACG, 5.2 Bengasi, 0.5 B, letter of Father Girolamo Apolloni to the President of Collegio degli Artigianelli in Turin, 11 May 1910.
50 - AANSMI, 20 - Libia, B - Bengasi, Padri Giuseppini (1908-1911), letter of Father Umberto Pagliani to Ernesto Schiaparelli, Benghazi, 20 November 1910.
51 - *Ibid.*
52 - ACG, 5.2 Bengasi, 0.5 B, letter of Father Girolamo Apolloni to the President of Collegio degli Artigianelli in Turin, 11 May 1910.
53 - See Bevilacqua, *Sull'incivilimento degli Schiavi Turchi*, Syracuse, 1910.
54 - *Ibid.*
55 - ASMAI vol. II, pos. 155/5, f. 1910, Rome, IAS report to Minister, 23 March 1910.
56 - ASMAI vol. II, pos. 155/5, f. 1910, Letter of the Consul to the Minister, Tripoli, 22 April 1910.
57 - AANSMI, 20-Libia, B-Bengasi, Padri Giuseppini (1912), Letter of Father Girolamo Apolloni to Ernesto Schiaparelli, Rome, 28 October 1912.
58 - ACG, 5.2, Bengasi, 2.4 Corrispondenza del P. Pagliani Umberto col p. Giulio Costantino, Benghazi, 28 January 1913.

59 - ACG, 5.2, Bengasi, 2.4 - 2.7, Letter of Father Francesco Airale, Benghazi, s.d. (1912?).
60 - ACG, 5.2, Bengasi, 2.4 - 2.7, Letter from Father Francesco Airale to Father Girolamo Apolloni, 20 January 1915.
61 - Probably from *bilad al Sudani*.
62 - Corte d'Appello per la Libia, *Giurisprudenza Coloniale (1915-1919*), p. 90. About slavery abolition in Italian occupied Libya see Calchi Novati (1990).
63 - Corte d'Appello per la Libia, *Giurisprudenza Coloniale (1915-1919*), p. 90.
64 - Walā' al-'itq is defined as "a legal tie arising from manumission" by Hallaq (1990: 79-91). About the historical context and development of this legal institution see Bernards and Nawas (2005), who define that institution as "servile patronate".
65 - Corte d'Appello per la Libia, *Giurisprudenza Coloniale (1915-1919),* p. 92.
66 - *Ibid.*, p. 93.
67 - *Ibid.*, p. 237.

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