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Il Medioevo in movimento: architettura, religione e politica della temporalità nella Libia coloniale

Keywords

Medievalism, Italian imperialism and Fascism, Mediterranean mobility, Secular–ecclesiastical interactions, Catholic missionary activity

Abstract

By tracing the anatomic and anachronic displacement of the Middle Ages onto the material and ontological fabrication of colonial Africa, this article probes the mobilisation of the past in imperial and religious politics. Foregrounding temporality and secular–ecclesiastical relations over individual agency and coloniser–colonised dichotomies, it focuses on Libya as a critical arena of expansion and tension between Italy and the Catholic Church. Ecclesiastical architecture, particularly the Cathedral of Tripoli (1928), charts the passage from the distance separating the “two Romes” to their apparent convergence with the advent of Fascism and ultimately the subsumption of religion within the regime. Reconstructing the rise—and crisis—of a striking displacement of the medieval into modes of coloniality, the article problematises future- and antiquity-oriented characterisations of Italian imperialism. The past—above all Francis of Assisi—functioned as a medium of negotiation in attempts to reconcile religion with empire and nationhood, underpinning the circulation of architectural forms and, through mythopoeic narratives of maritime exchange, spatial compression. Temporal mobility sustained the regime’s Mediterranean vision and generated a trans-Mediterranean condition, which recoded the sea from barrier to conduit—symbolically drawing Africa closer to Europe and bringing Italy closer to the Church.

Biography

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The Middle Ages on the Move: Architecture, Religion, and the Politics of Temporality in Colonial Libya

On 6 January 1932, Epiphany, Giacinto Tonizza, head of the Franciscan missionary region of Italian Tripolitania (Libya) and patron of Tripoli's Cathedral of the Sacro Cuore di Gesù, consecrated its bells¹. Their inaugural pealing once installed in the campanile, intended for Easter, was publicised as timed to coincide with a *political* event on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean basin on 11 February: Benito Mussolini's visit to Pope Pius XI, marking the third anniversary of the reconciliation between the Italian State and the Catholic Church². Embodying mobility across land, sea, and time, the cathedral effected an anatomic and anachronic displacement of the Middle Ages into modern spatialities from Europe to Africa, while reiterating nineteenth-century asymmetries between Northern Italy and the Mezzogiorno³. It was characterised as Romanesque by Saffo (Antonio) Panteri of Lucca, its architect⁴. Laid on 14 January 1923 (the year of *Vers une architecture*), and inaugurated on 24–25 November 1928 (the year of the First Exhibition of Rationalist Architecture), the edifice may appear to be not merely anachronic but anachronistic⁵. This article takes the cathedral as a lens of refraction through which to chart the displacement of the medieval onto the sphere of politics, particularly those of empire and religion⁶. By problematising its spatial and temporal orientations, the edifice emerges as a polysemic, *longue durée* essay on the Middle Ages. Placed in conversation with political culture and a broader return of the past, this essay proves to be less anachronistic than it first appears, revealing a dramatic attempt to project two systems of power—each uniquely grounded in Rome—onto a global stage, with Africa as a privileged arena of interaction.

The entanglement of medievalism and colonialism presents a spatio-temporal paradox: the mobility of pre-colonial temporalities within spatial configurations integrated with the geopolitics of modernity⁷. The paradox is especially acute in the context of Italy's imperial enterprise. The historiography of colonial Libya has long acknowledged architectural heterogeneity while foregrounding the complexities of modernism⁸. As temporality has receded into the background in favour of individual agency and the dialectics of tradition and innovation, as well as of vernacularism and import, a distinctly future-oriented horizon has come to the fore. Set against the intersecting fixation on antiquity of fascist imperial discourse, the emphasis on modernity risks rendering alternative temporalities less visible⁹. Within this framework, colonial ecclesiastical architecture—and the cathedral itself—though propagated throughout the fascist era and routinely noted in the

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¹ Giacinto Tonizza to W. M. Van Rossum, Tripoli, 12 January 1932, Archivio Storico de Propaganda Fide (ASPF), NS, vol. 1160, f. 4.

² V. U., "Nel terzo annivers. della conciliazione: Suono inaugurale delle nostre campane," *Famiglia Cristiana* 9, n. 3 (1932): 78. *Famiglia Cristiana* was a monthly periodical established in Tripoli.

³ For the anachronic as layered temporality and the agency of mobility, see Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (Zone Books, 2010); Alina Payne, ed., *The Land between Two Seas: Art on the Move in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, 1300–1700* (Brill, 2022).

⁴ Saffo Panteri, "Lo stile della nuova cattedrale," *Sacratissimo cordi Jesu*, special issue of *Famiglia Cristiana* 5, n. 12 (1928): 11.

⁵ Tonizza to Bernardino Klumper, Tripoli, 20 January 1923, Archivio Storico Generale dell'Ordine dei Frati Minori (ASGOFM), SM 343, fasc. 1923–1924, n. 1; Tonizza to Pietro Gasparri, Tripoli, 13 December 1928, Archivio Apostolico Vaticano (AAV), Segreteria di Stato, rub. 331, fasc. 4, f. 192.

⁶ On the reactivation of the past, see Giulio Carlo Argan, ed., *Il revival* (Mazzotta, 1974).

⁷ On the historiographical and historical contexts of colonial medievalism, see Tommaso Zerbi, "Field Notes on The Colonial Middle Ages: Prolegomena to Architecture between Medievalism and Italian Imperialism," *Architectural Histories* 13, n. 1 (2025): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.16995/ah.17195>.

⁸ For a representative selection, see Mia Fuller, *Una modernità apparente: L'architettura coloniale italiana dal Mediterraneo all'Africa orientale* (Viella, 2025); Kay Bea Jones and Stephanie Pilat, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Italian Fascist Architecture: Reception and Legacy* (Routledge, 2020); Susanna Bortolotto and Renzo Riboldazzi, eds., *Urbanistica e architettura moderne alla prova della contemporaneità: Sguardi sulle città coloniali e di Fondazione* (Altralinea, 2018); Vittoria Capresi, *L'utopia costruita: I centri rurali di fondazione in Libia (1934–1940)* (Bononia University Press, 2009); Giuliano Gresleri and Pier Giorgio Massaretti, eds., *Architettura italiana d'oltremare: Atlante iconografico* (Bononia University Press, 2008); Brian L. McLaren, *Architecture and Tourism in Italian Colonial Libya: An Ambivalent Modernism* (University of Washington Press, 2006).

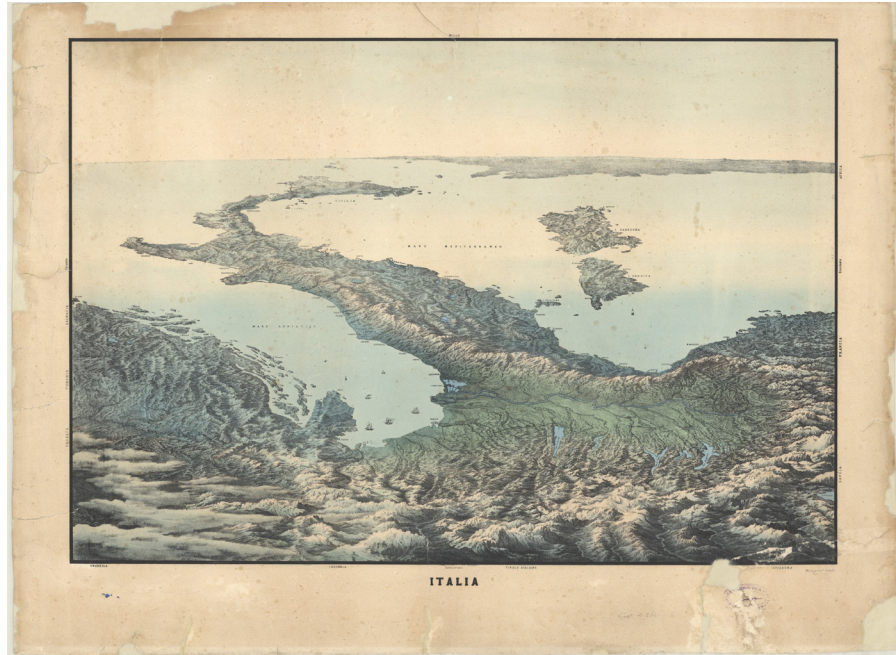
⁹ Samuel Agbamu, *Restorations of Empire in Africa: Ancient Rome and Modern Italy's African Colonies* (Oxford University Press, 2024); Brian L. McLaren, *Modern Architecture, Empire, and Race in Fascist Italy* (Brill, 2021).

5.1

F. Corbetta, north-south perspective view of Italy and the Mediterranean Sea, extending to North Africa, 1853–1861. Società Geografica Italiana, Rome.

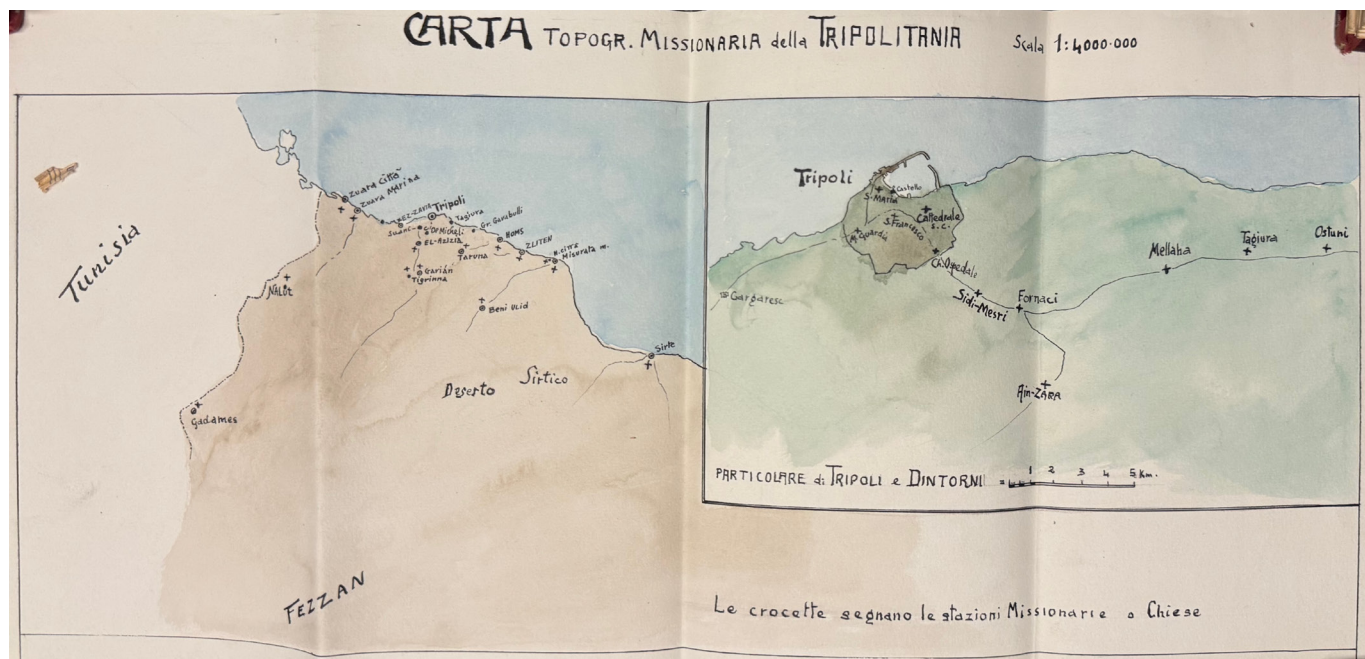
5.2

Mediterranean Sea. Vessel in the foreground with the city of Tripoli in the distance, 1936. Archivio Luce Cinecittà, Rome.



contemporary literature, has remained somewhat elusive, more so than in scholarship on other modern empires¹⁰. Correspondingly, the narratives of the Church's expansion and its tensions with the State have been eclipsed by those of national expansion and coloniser–colonised dichotomies. The article addresses these lacunae by approaching neo-medievalism as an index of the interconnectedness of politics and responses to the past. It draws on extensive textual and visual documentation, including materials from the Archivio Apostolico Vaticano, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Archivio Storico de Propaganda Fide, Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Archivio Storico Generale dell'Ordine dei Frati Minori, and Archivio Storico Provinciale dell'Ordine dei Frati Minori di Lombardia. Crucially, though patron and architect remain in view,

¹⁰ See, for instance, Francesco Prestopino, "Nota storica sulle missioni di Libia," in *Città di fondazione e plantatio ecclesiae*, ed. Pasquale Culotta, Giuliano Gresleri, and Glauco Gresleri (Editrice Compositori, 2007), 280–9.



the analysis—aligned with critiques of agency-centred architectural history—takes temporality as its operative framework. By foregrounding the medieval past in terms of Reinhart Koselleck’s “space of experience” against which a “horizon of expectation” was formed, this emphasis yields a more nuanced understanding of architecture’s negotiation of political challenges: the Church’s global expansion, its survival within a modernising society, and tensions with the State¹¹. The advent of Fascism marked a juncture at which missionary and colonial expansion appeared to converge, foreshadowing the rapprochement between the two Romes¹². It prompted a surge in architectural production and the displacement of the medieval—a shift that, together with the Church’s independence, came under mounting strain from the late 1920s. The Middle Ages functioned as a medium of negotiation in efforts to reconcile a religious agenda with a national, imperial one. Integral to this process was the association of Francis of Assisi with a mission that was at once evangelical and colonial. Although pre-modern Italy lacked both empire and political unity, the medieval articulated a distinctly Italian character, with ecclesiastical architecture emerging as a principal site of national materialisation. Temporal mobility underpinned a circulation of architectural forms from metropole to colony and a spatial compression achieved through mythopoeic narratives of trans-Mediterranean exchange invoking precedent, continuity, and return. As shall be revealed, medievalism sustained the regime’s “Mediterraneanism” and generated a distinctive trans-Mediterranean condition that recoded the sea from barrier to conduit, symbolically drawing Africa closer to Europe and bringing Italy closer to the Church¹³.

A Tale of Two Romes

The Church's institutional and missionary geography is less visible on maps than that of nation-states. When inscribed cartographically, it operates beyond the logics and borders of statehood and coloniality. The Apostolic Vicariate of Libya, erected in 1913 and entrusted to the Franciscan Province of Lombardy, remained a single jurisdiction until its division into the Vicariates of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in 1927¹⁴. This contrasts with the colonial arrangement, whereby the colonies of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, established with the Italo-Turkish War (1911–1912), were unified as Italian Libya in 1934. In Italy, Church–State relations were singularly complex: national formation brought about the coexistence of two opposed institutions in Rome. While the Church sustained an anti-

5.3

Geographical map of the Apostolic Vicariate of Tripolitania, not before 1935. Archivio Storico Provinciale dell'Ordine dei Frati Minori di Lombardia, Milan.

¹¹ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (The MIT Press, 1985), 267–88.

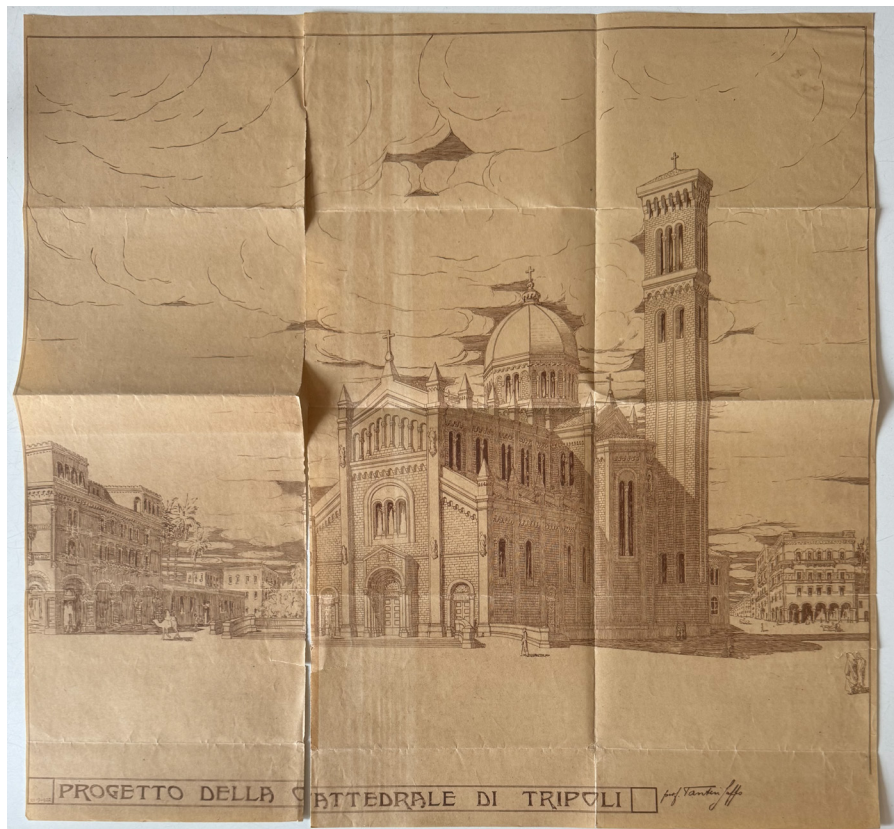
¹² On the evolving relationship between religion and colonialism, see Andrea Tarchi, "The Regulation of 'Mixed' Marriages in Colonial Libya: At the Crossroads of Nationalism, Religion, and Race," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 23, n. 4 (2022): 497–517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2022.2152801>; Eileen Ryan, *Religion as Resistance: Negotiating Authority in Italian Libya* (Oxford University Press, 2018); Giovanni Sale, *Libia 1911: I cattolici, la Santa Sede e l'impresa coloniale italiana* (Jaca Book, 2011); Vittorio Ianari, *Chiesa, coloni e Islam: Religione e politica nella Libia italiana* (Società Editrice Internazionale, 1995).

¹³ Mia Fuller, "Mediterraneanism: French and Italian Architects' Designs in 1930s North African Cities," in *The City in the Islamic World*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Renata Holod, Attilio Petruccioli, and André Raymond (Brill, 2008): 983–98.

¹⁴ The complexity of missionary jurisdiction is reflected in Cyrenaica's status: although part of the Vicariate of Libya until formal division, it had been entrusted to Genoa by 1913. Valentino Barile, report, Tripoli, n.d. May 1918, ASGOFM, SM 343, fasc. 1917–1919, n. 8.

5.4

Saffo Panteri, design for the Cathedral of the Sacro Cuore di Gesù, ca. 1922. Archivio Centrale dello Stato – Ministero della Cultura (protocollo n. 2020/2026), Rome.



¹⁵ “[le autorità] non fecero nulla di tutto quello che avevano promesso.” Tonizza to Camillo Laurenti, Tripoli, 17 March 1920, ASPF, NS, vol. 667, f. 248; Ryan, *Religion as Resistance*, 63–9, 103–6.

¹⁶ Ryan, *Religion as Resistance*, 159–61.

¹⁷ Bonaventura Rossetti to Girolamo Gotti, Tripoli, 9 May 1912, ASPF, NS, vol. 520, ff. 225–228; Rossetti to Carlo Monti, Rome, 7 May 1912, Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASDMAE), MAI vol. II, b. 150/31, fasc. 140, n. 17/10.

¹⁸ By the time of the Italian occupation, the mission was reportedly well established in Tripoli, Benghazi, Homs, and Derna by the time of the Italian occupation. Tonizza to Van Rossum, Tripoli, 16 July 1927, ASPF, NS, vol. 921, ff. 238–260.

national posture, anticlericalism permeated Italian politics both at home and abroad, and Catholic expansion was often resisted. In Libya—more than in previous ventures in Eritrea or Somalia—missionary structures benefited more readily from conquest, yet friction with colonial authority persisted into the 1910s¹⁵. Fascism marked a point of departure, reaching a point of inflection with the Lateran Pacts (1929)¹⁶. Under Pius XI, abandoning efforts to dissociate mission from nationalism, the Church moved from a position of principled distance to one of embedment within the colonial enterprise. The parallel expansion of the two Romes appeared to converge around the alignment of Catholicism with *italianità*, with Africa serving as a laboratory for rapprochement.

These dynamics are legible in the architectural record, where convergence can be found in ecclesiastical construction, foreshadowed by the Apostolic Prefect Bonaventura Rossetti’s (1907–1913) hope that colonisation would enable new churches, especially one in Tripoli¹⁷. In Libya,

Franciscan activity and ecclesiastical fabrications predated colonialism¹⁸. In Tripoli, the Cathedral of the Sacro Cuore di Gesù would supersede the nineteenth-century Santa Maria degli Angeli. This earlier cathedral, whose façade was subsumed by the surrounding fabric, speaks volumes about the discretion of the Catholic presence under Ottoman rule¹⁹. The plan to render it more visible, to be accomplished through the clearance of the forecourt in 1926, echoed the spatial violence of fascist *sventramenti* in Italy and signalled the new ecclesiastical confidence of the colonial project²⁰. Since the beginning of colonisation, an increase in church-building activity can be observed. From the 1920s to the 1930s this momentum matured into an extensive programme across Libya, employing construction as a structural instrument of symbolic control, reshaping existing centres and founding new ones²¹. Ecclesiastical architecture both reflected and structured patterns of settlement and internal movement while mediating ties with the metropole and the papacy²².

The spearhead of the programme was the new cathedral. Upon his arrival in Tripoli, Lodovico Antomelli, the first apostolic vicar of Libya (1913–1919), became preoccupied with ecclesiastical architecture, chiefly with the erection of a cathedral “worthy of the importance of the Libyan conquest,” and negotiated with the government²³. It was his successor Tonizza—similarly committed to religious construction—who conceived the final project and brought it to completion alongside the Vicar’s Palace and Mission House, laying the foundation stone as apostolic vicar of Libya (1919–1927) and consecrating the bells as apostolic vicar of Tripolitania (1927–1935)²⁴. A letter expressing the hope of taking the final drawings to Italy and a dated transverse section—signed, like the accompanying longitudinal section, by Panteri and the engineer Giulio Cesare Monticelli, responsible for the scheme’s execution—indicate that the project was not fully developed before 1921 but was largely complete by October 1922²⁵. Site levelling began in December, though the foundation ceremony was deferred until January²⁶. Tonizza expected to have the building under roof by 1926²⁷. However, the nave roof and dome remained incomplete at the end of that year, and the latter was still under construction in the summer of 1927²⁸. In the autumn, plastering, flooring, stained-glass windows, and the altar were still outstanding, yet by February 1928 Tonizza was confident that the church would be inaugurated in October²⁹. Postponed to November, the inauguration was followed by work on the campanile—still at foundation level in December—and this was completed in 1932³⁰.

The cathedral owed less to Tonizza than it did to the fascist reconfiguration of colonialism, marked by accelerated imperial policy, advancement of religion, and intensified architectural production—particularly in Libya, alongside the promotion of tourism³¹. The cautious support of Governor Luigi Mercatelli (1920–1921) was consolidated into stronger backing that persisted across a series of fascist administrations³². Tonizza was praised for demonstrating that “those who are truly Christian know, in every circumstance, how to unite devotion to the Fatherland with that to God”³³. Panteri, rendering gratuitous service to the vicariate in the hope of securing a knighthood, also worked for the government³⁴. Appointed sub-lieutenant of the territorial militia of the military engineers in 1919 and employed by the administration, by 1929 he was serving as a lieutenant stationed in Tripoli, underscoring continuity with the early colonial proximity between ecclesiastical

¹⁹ An attempt to build a church in Derna before colonisation was associated with the killing of a missionary by Ottoman authorities. Tonizza to Van Rossum, Tripoli, 6 April 1925, ASPF, NS, vol. 822, f. 693.

²⁰ Although Mussolini, who visited the cathedral in 1926, was (inconsistently) credited with ordering its liberation, plans for the operation had long been discussed. Vittorino Facchinetti, “Cronaca della missione francescana in Tripolitania dalla occupazione italiana ai nostri giorni (1911–1945),” 1945, Archivio Storico Provinciale dell’Ordine dei Frati Minori di Lombardia (ASPOFML), Sezione Provinciale, b. 170 D–E, fasc. D/6; Tonizza to Van Rossum, Tripoli, 22 April 1926, ASPF, NS, vol. 921, f. 22; Tonizza to Laurenti, Tripoli, 17 March 1920.

²¹ “Le chiese in Tripolitania,” n.d., ASPOFML, Sezione Missioni, armadio 28, scaffale 4, Ricerche di archeologia di P. G. Ravasi.

²² Brian L. McLaren, “Tourism and Mobility in Italian Colonial Libya,” in *Middle Eastern and North African Societies in the Interwar Period*, ed. Kate Fleet and Ebru Boyar (Brill, 2018), 78–96.

²³ Barile, report; Lodovico Antomelli to Gotti, Tripoli, 10 May 1914, ASPF, NS, vol. 548, ff. 216–218.

²⁴ Facchinetti, “Il vicariato apostolico di mons. Giacinto Tonizza,” part one and part two, n.d., ASPOFML, Sezione Provinciale, b. 170 D–E, fasc. D/10a–b; Vincenzo Montini to Klumper, Tripoli, 9 November 1921, ASGOFM, SM 343, fasc. 1921–1922, n. 16.

²⁵ Tonizza to Van Rossum, Tripoli, 27 April 1921, ASPF, NS, vol. 702, ff. 356–358; Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), MAI, Gabinetto e Uffici Afferenti, b. 44, fasc. 3/13.

²⁶ Bernardino Bigi to Klumper, Tripoli, 21 December 1922, ASGOFM, SM 343, fasc. 1921–1922, n. 17.

²⁷ Tonizza to Van Rossum, Tripoli, 6 December 1924, ASPF, NS, vol. 822, f. 615.

²⁸ Tonizza to Van Rossum, Tripoli, 17 December 1926 and 9 July 1927, ASPF, NS, vol. 921, ff. 161–162, 230.

²⁹ Tonizza to Van Rossum, Tripoli, 2 December 1927 and 8 February 1928, ASPF, NS, vol. 921, ff. 295–296, 314.

³⁰ Tonizza to Francesco Marchetti Selvaggiani, Tripoli, 13 December 1928, ASPF, NS, vol. 921, f. 375.

³¹ Brian L. McLaren, “The Ambivalent Space(s) of Tourism in Italian Colonial Libya,” in *Enhancing the City: New Perspectives for Tourism and Leisure*, ed. Giovanni Maciocco and Silvia Serrelli (Springer, 2009), 221–43.

³² Luigi Mercatelli to Tonizza, Tripoli, 10 May 1921, ASPF, NS, vol. 702, f. 354.

³³ Giuseppe Volpi to Tonizza, Tripoli, 24 December 1922, ASPF, NS, vol. 822, f. 416.

³⁴ Knighthood was granted at Tonizza’s request. Tonizza to Gasparri, Tripoli, 30 August 1928, AAV, Segreteria di Stato, rub. 311, fasc. 4, f. 182.

5.5

Tripoli. Cathedral of the Sacro Cuore di Gesù under construction, with the Vicar's Palace and, beyond, the Governor's Palace site, ca. 1924. Archivio Storico Provinciale dell'Ordine dei Frati Minori di Lombardia, Milan.

5.6

Tripoli. Cathedral of the Sacro Cuore di Gesù, with the Vicar's Palace, Mission House, and, beyond, the Governor's Palace, ca. early 1930s. Archivio Storico Provinciale dell'Ordine dei Frati Minori di Lombardia, Milan.



³⁵ "Arma del genio," *Ministero della Guerra Bollettino Ufficiale* 21 (1919): 1757–1759; *Annuario Ufficiale delle Forze Armate del Regno d'Italia* (Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1938), vol. 2, pt. 2, 707.

³⁶ On Monticelli and Panteri, see Ezio Godoli and Milva Giacomelli, eds., *Architetti e ingegneri italiani dal Levante al Magreb, 1848–1945* (Maschietto Editore, 2005), 245, 257–8.

³⁷ Panteri, "Lo stile della nuova cattedrale."

³⁸ Tonizza to Van Rossum, Tripoli, 22 December 1921, ASPF, NS, vol. 702, ff. 694–696; Volpi to Luigi Federzoni, Tripoli, 15 January 1923, ASDMAE, MAI vol. II, b. 150/31, fasc. 141, n. 28/3.

³⁹ The site was ceded to the vicariate on 7 March 1932. ASDMAE: MAI vol. II, b. 150/31, fasc. 140, n. 28/2; CSC sez. II, b. 14, n. 90.

⁴⁰ On Volpi's programme, see McLaren, *Architecture and Tourism in Italian Colonial Libya*, 22–6.

and military activity³⁵. His collaborator Monticelli worked for the public works department of Tripolitania, further indicating how church-building operated within a shared colonial network³⁶. While the Church sought alignment with the State, the government was integrating religion into the colonial order. The cathedral stood at the nexus of the two Romes. Though Panteri credited Tonizza with its authorship, Italian authority—especially Governor Giuseppe Volpi (1921–1925)—proved decisive³⁷. Tonizza hoped to lay the foundation stone around Christmas 1921, but Volpi rejected the site that had been agreed upon with Mercatelli, instead insisting on isolation and increased visibility³⁸. Though Church-led, the project, which rose on *demanio* land, was fundamentally State-driven³⁹. In implementing the urban masterplan envisaged but never realised in the 1910s, Volpi also elevated religion to a prominence scarcely compatible with the politics of Liberal Italy⁴⁰. By ensuring the cathedral's dominance over Tripoli's skyline and situating it southeast of the historic city, behind his seafront development and along Corso Vittorio Emanuele III—a principal artery later anchored by the Governor's Palace—he foregrounded the sacred within



5.7

Tripoli. Cathedral of the Sacro Cuore di Gesù, interior, not before 1930. Archivio Storico Provinciale dell'Ordine dei Frati Minori di Lombardia, Milan.

5.5, 5.6 the colonial landscape while visually aligning Christian and secular authority. Widespread support extended beyond Volpi, who intended to finance most of the project⁴¹. Tonizza acknowledged that the government bore the larger share of the cost⁴². Fundraising campaigns likewise cast ecclesiastical architecture as the product of a shared commitment⁴³.

At the intersection of flows of capital, including reported contributions from the Muslim and Jewish populations, the cathedral was underwritten less by tensions with the colonised than by internal dynamics⁴⁴. Discourse on the indigenous population receded—beyond their presence at public ceremonies, admiration, and menial labour—in favour of a focus on the coloniser, a hierarchy made explicit in a set of acknowledgements that, after extended praise of the Italian protagonists, concludes with a photograph of the “Arab workforce.” The Church oriented itself more towards the settler community and Italy than towards missionary conversion. For the administration, in turn, religion became an integral component of colonial transposition.

What had begun as a Church-led initiative supported by the government, as suggested by Volpi's

⁴¹ Tonizza to Klumper, Tripoli, 3 April 1922, ASGOFM, SM 343, fasc. 1921–1922, n. 4. The king ratified support from the Fondo per il Culto on 28 December 1924. ACS, Leggi e decreti dello stato, Regno di Italia, scatola 534, n. 2188.

⁴² Tonizza to Van Rossum, Tripoli, 2 December 1927.

⁴³ Contributors were sought in the colony, the metropole, and abroad. A fundraising subscription was promoted in *Famiglia Cristiana*.

⁴⁴ “Riconoscenza,” *Sacratissimo cordi Jesu*: 43–5.

5.8

Tripoli. Cathedral of the Sacro Cuore di Gesù under construction, 1927. Archivio Centrale dello Stato – Ministero della Cultura (protocollo n. 2020/2026), Rome.



presence at its foundation, had, by inauguration, under Governor Emilio De Bono (1925–1928), been subsumed within fascist ceremony⁴⁵. Behind this were new anxieties: the administration's request for the presence of a cardinal at the ceremony—which Tonizza unconvincingly assured was “entirely and exclusively religious” rather than political—was poorly received in the Vatican, which saw it as State interference in religious authority, signalling an uneasy accommodation on the eve of the Lateran Pacts⁴⁶.

The transformation is most evident in print. The cathedral was projected into a trans-Mediterranean institutional horizon. What had originated as cautious rapprochement had, by completion, become the “new fascist realisation in the colony”⁴⁷. State support amplified the scale and reach of ecclesiastical expansion while reframing a popular undertaking within imperial narratives. The government requested from Tonizza a report detailing the construction activity pursued in Tripolitania until the early 1930s⁴⁸. Religious architecture was readily incorporated into narratives of fascist achievement⁴⁹. The dual advance of colonial rule and missionary activity was cast as a distinctive national mark, sustaining claims of Italian exceptionalism in relation to other European powers⁵⁰. By the time of the campanile's inauguration, the religious sphere had been openly absorbed into fascist policy.

Religion, Fascism, Neo-Medievalism

Laid out on a Latin-cross basilica plan with a nave, two aisles, and a vast crossing—legible externally in its *a salienti* façade and projecting dome—the cathedral is governed by a resolutely retrospective gaze. This orientation—strengthened by the dominance of the round arch, from the three portals to the interior beyond—permeates typology, architectural features, ornament, and materiality. Visually, the recession of the reinforced-concrete structure in favour of an evocation of monumental stone construction, together with a deliberate disguising of limestone masonry as alternating bands of ashlar, suggests that, even where a dialogue with modernity was entertained, it remained subordinated to the past⁵¹. The designation of the cathedral as Romanesque reads like an exclamatory interruption within Italian non-ecclesiastical colonial architecture and Tripoli's urban fabric. Yet the edifice formed part of two interrelated phenomenologies discernible across Italy's African colonies during the 1920s: a turn towards the Middle Ages as a temporal horizon endowed with ubiquitous

⁴⁵ “La solenne inaugurazione ufficiale della nuova Cattedrale di Tripoli,” *L'Avvenire di Tripoli*, 27 November 1928.

⁴⁶ AAV, Segreteria di Stato, rubrica 311, fasc. 4, ff. 184–191; ASPOFML, Sezione Missioni, armadio 28, scaffale 2, Lettere dei missionari.

⁴⁷ “La nuova realizzazione fascista in colonia,” *L'Avvenire di Tripoli*, 22 November 1928.

⁴⁸ Tonizza to Bonaventura Marrani, Tripoli, 20 May 1932, ASGOFM, SM 345, fasc. 1932, n. 133.

⁴⁹ “Riassumendo, diciamo che nel decennio fascista furono restaurate e completate due vecchie chiese (la vecchia Cattedrale di Tripoli e la chiesa di Homs), e furono costruite dalle fondamenta, oltre la nuova Cattedrale di Tripoli [...], altre 13 chiese e cappelle.” Angelo Piccioli, *La nuova Italia d'oltremare* (A. Mondadori, 1934), 1338.

⁵⁰ “Mentre altrove nelle Colonie più fertili di altre Nazioni è sempre vivo il malcontento e lo spirito di rivolta, specialmente dove il laicismo ha tolto all'azione civilizzatrice l'opera superba e cristiana del missionario, nelle colonie italiane, il progredire e il rinsaldarsi del nostro progresso è accompagnato dal progredire e dal rinsaldarsi della propaganda missionaria.” F. T., “La Cattedrale della Tripolitania,” *L'Oltremare* 3, n. 1 (1929): 32 (32–3).

⁵¹ “La Cattedrale di Tripoli,” *L'Architettura Italiana* 24 (1929): 138–40.



5.9

Tripoli. Lungomare Volpi and the Cathedral of the Sacro Cuore di Gesù, set between the Bank of Italy and the Governor's Palace, 1937. Archivio Luce Cinecittà, Rome.

agency—a process of medievalisation—and a renewed assertion of religion as an active principle of social and cultural order—a process of sacralisation.

Beyond architecture, engagements with the medieval persisted across the fascist era⁵². Architecturally, this found expression in a broader absorptive logic of heritage, both in Italy and abroad, most evidently the Italian Dodecanese⁵³. Comparable manifestations extended to the formal colonies: the Castle of Tripoli, reworked under Volpi, was framed—despite its layered history—as a medieval fortress liberated by Italy, reinforcing a narrative that erased Ottoman rule⁵⁴. Yet the intervention complicates any straightforward characterisation of the project as medievalist, while the explicit medievalisation of heritage in colonial Africa remained limited, even when the heritage itself was medieval⁵⁵. Despite this limitation, neo-medievalism, encompassing both secular and religious projects, assumed a prominent role in shaping the colonial built environment, more so than in the metropole.

In the 1930s, as eloquently shown by Charles Burdett, Christian eschatological thought permeated the fascist representation of Libya: the regime was presented as the harbinger of a new order, yet one whose legitimacy derived from centuries of religious belief and a teleological conception of time⁵⁶. Extending this insight, architecture exposes how, in the 1920s, the sacred emerged as a key signifier of an eschatological vision, while the medieval past acquired a distinctive temporal authority through which futurist aspirations were projected. If, for Emilio Gentile, Fascism invested politics with a religious dimension, the built environment made visible the extent to which it politicised religion⁵⁷. As mutually reinforcing categories, the sacred and the medieval structured a colonial neo-medievalism that cohered around two trajectories, at times interlocking, the former prevalent in ecclesiastical and the latter in non-ecclesiastical architecture: the evocation of Christian precedents and of non-Christian, chiefly Islamic, ones⁵⁸. Major works—including the Governor's Palace—drew on conceptions of medieval Islamic architecture and were often described as Moorish⁵⁹. These echoes appeared across secular and religious architecture. Fascist rule, while violently repressive, cultivated an image of accommodating cultural difference, particularly Islamic practice⁶⁰. Panteri and Monticelli worked simultaneously on the cathedral and on the Sidi Hamuda Mosque in Tripoli, participating in Fascism's mosque-building programme—the material articulation of a putative fascist Islam⁶¹. The stark disparity in scale between the commissions underscores the symbolic asymmetries embedded in this apparent openness to alterity.

⁵² Marina Bernardi, "Il Medioevo e l'Italia fascista: Al di là della 'romanità,'" *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 102 (2022): 485–90.

⁵³ D. Medina Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected: Architecture, Spectacle, and Tourism in Fascist Italy* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); Monica Livadiotti and Giorgio Rocco, eds., *La presenza italiana nel Dodecaneso tra il 1912 e il 1948: La ricerca archeologica, la conservazione, le scelte progettuali* (Edizioni del Prisma, 1996).

⁵⁴ Mario Corsi, "Il Castello di Tripoli," *Il Secolo XX* 23, n. 11 (1924): 759–64; Aida M. Ejroushi, "Hidden Influences: Exploring the Red Castle Restorations during the Italian Colonization of Libya," *Journal of Planning History* 22, n. 1 (2023): 26–46.

⁵⁵ Mikael Muehlbauer, "An Italian Renaissance Face on a 'New Eritrea': The 1939 Restoration of the Church of Abreha wa-Atsbeha," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 78, n. 3 (2019): 312–26.

⁵⁶ Charles Burdett, "Italian Fascism, Messianic Eschatology and the Representation of Libya," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 11, n. 1 (2010): 3–25.

⁵⁷ Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio: La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista* (Laterza, 1993).

⁵⁸ On cross-cultural encounters and the past, see Mark Crinson, *Empire-Building: Orientalism and Victorian Architecture* (Routledge, 1996).

⁵⁹ The palace was described as "un tipo di architettura mediterranea riportata dal fondo del medioevo arabo al nostro tempo." Piccioli, *La nuova Italia d'oltremare*, 862.

⁶⁰ Ryan, *Religion as Resistance*.

⁶¹ "Moschea di Sidi Hamuda – Tripoli," *L'Architettura Italiana* 21, n. 12 (1926): 136–9. Dozens of mosques from across the colonies were incorporated into propaganda celebrating the regime's achievements. Piccioli, *La nuova Italia d'oltremare*, 1354–6.

Colonial architecture differed from its metropolitan counterpart in the centrality accorded to the Middle Ages across the architectural landscape—a distinction evident in fascist governmental design, where neo-medievalism enjoyed a prominence overseas unknown in Italy. Beyond the colonies and the built environment, the medieval past had, in the 1910s, become a privileged point of reference within Catholic circles, providing a temporal framework for ideological negotiation and resistance to a modernising society⁶². Certain religious orders, such as the Franciscan, were especially receptive to medievalism by virtue of their medieval origins and legacies⁶³. Tonizza himself, while extolling the Middle Ages, criticised the Renaissance’s revival of pagan ideals—a critique that reflected a common truism at the time⁶⁴. The insertion of the cathedral into a Franciscan genealogy centred on Francis of Assisi, the medieval “restorer of churches,” underscores an intimate connection between neo-medieval architecture and the order, particularly in overseas territories under its administration⁶⁵. In the metropole, although church building remained a domain in which neo-medievalism persisted into the fascist era, the medieval occupied a less privileged position within a more heterogeneous temporal landscape⁶⁶. This tendency is exemplified by Marcello Piacentini’s *Sacro Cuore di Cristo Re* in Rome, which, whilst negotiating a broad historical inheritance, engaged with modernity. It also extended to the Franciscans: the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi was completed with a façade explicitly drawing on the early modern past. Overseas, ecclesiastical projects likewise drew upon a range of temporalities, yet neo-medievalism occupied a commanding position, proliferating through—and beyond—the major religious undertakings realised in Africa and the Dodecanese in the 1920s. Within this wider body of architecture, both Tripoli’s revivalism and the broader recourse to the Middle Ages—which furnished a potent vocabulary for the representation of Catholicism in non-Christian lands—take on a greater sense of coherence.

Missionary neo-medievalism already had precedents in Libya, finding materialisation in early colonial and even pre-colonial architecture such as Santa Maria degli Angeli. In the 1920s, however, the neo-medieval spread widely across the church-building programme both in Libya and beyond. Tellingly, the technical drawings of “the principal church to be erected in Tripoli” as envisioned in 1913, preserved in Milan, show a classicising design⁶⁷. The replacement of this early proposal with neo-medievalism points to the ascendancy of the Middle Ages in the fascist era—and to a shift beyond the particularism of the province administering the vicariate towards a broader framework for both missionary and colonial practice.

Italian Mobility

As the missionary Middle Ages were increasingly intertwined with the colonial Middle Ages, neo-medievalism bound Christian assertion to a national dimension. Religion mediated the “double” time of the nation, to use a term of Homi K. Bhabha, by narrowing the distance between the “pedagogical” and the “performative”⁶⁸. The cathedral stands out, both in Tripoli and within Italy’s colonial architecture, for assembling a defiantly Italian, rather than broadly Christian, character. More overtly national than State-sponsored projects—often cloaked to

⁶² Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri, “Il medievalismo e la Grande Guerra in Italia,” *Studi Storici* 56, n. 2 (2015): 270–6 (251–76).

⁶³ Tommaso Calì and Roberto Rusconi, eds., *San Francesco d'Italia: Santità e identità nazionale* (Viella, 2011).

⁶⁴ “Per tutto il medio evo non vi furono più che rappresentazioni sacre, i così detti misteri, che ebbero per scopo di commuovere il cuore e rendere più devoto l'animo dei fedeli. Ma venne il così detto Rinascimento che rimise in auge divertimenti e idee pagane.” Tonizza, pastoral letter, n.d., ASPOFML, Sezione Missioni, armadio 29, scaffale 3, Lettere pastorali dei vescovi.

⁶⁵ “Il restauratore di chiese,” *Sacratissimo cordi Jesu*: 25–7. For an instance of neo-medievalism materialising under a different order, see Claire Dillon, “Transforming Cefalù in Mogadishu: The Arabo-Normanna Cathedral of Italian Somalia and the Façade of ‘Peaceful Conquest,’” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 84, n. 3 (2025): 368–85.

⁶⁶ On Italian ecclesiastical architecture, see Luigi Monzo, *Croci e fasci: Der italienische Kirchenbau in der Zeit des Faschismus* (Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2021).

⁶⁷ ASPOFML, Sezione Missioni, armadio 27, scaffale 5.

⁶⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994), 139–70.

soften the force of colonialism—the cathedral reflected the Church’s search for affinity with Italy rather than with the colonised, instrumentalising *italianità* to cast its cause as national. In the 1920s, the Middle Ages were reactivated as a repertory aligning Christianity with Italian nationhood. Long entangled with Italy, medievalism became for the Church a mediating temporality of reconciliation, increasingly open to fascist capture. Central to this resignification was Francis of Assisi: a figure embedded in the particularisms of the order and long characterised as Italian, now reframed mythopoeically as the vehicle of national aspiration⁶⁹. From a controversial text on *Il patriottismo del cavaliere umbro* (1916), Vittorino Facchinetti—who would become Tonizza’s successor as apostolic vicar—in particular advanced Francis as a nodal point of convergent valences⁷⁰. The characterisation of Francis as the “most saintly of Italians and most Italian of saints”—culminating in his designation as patron saint of Italy in 1939—gained traction in the 1920s. Publications abound with mythopoeic assertions of Francis’s *italianità*, a hinge between Fascism and the Church. This symbolic fusion was staged in Italy and overseas during the Franciscan centenary of 1926, when the cathedral was expected to be completed and the “liberation” of Santa Maria degli Angeli was celebrated⁷¹.

The cathedral, associated with the simplicity and humility of the order, also possessed an Italian dimension beyond its order-specific frame. The medieval past carried a capacity to materialise religious difference, both within and beyond the Italian colonies. While furnishing a Christian imprint on European colonialism, it provided a framework through which architecture could assume distinctive national meanings in the Scramble for Africa. Discourse surrounding the cathedral largely avoided engagement with the non-Christian population, turning instead to notions of nationhood. Since the nineteenth century, the Romanesque had been invested with both national and religious values, yet occupied an unstable position between secular contexts wary of its confessional charge and ecclesiastical ones reluctant to recognise State authority⁷². It emerged in Tripoli as the tradition capable of binding these polarities in a project of unusual prominence bearing the Church’s imprint of a national style⁷³. According to Panteri, the medieval past evoked by Tonizza’s project expressed the “vigorous Italian genius” in continuity with Roman architecture⁷⁴. Once credited with the capacity either to foster or to challenge national cohesion, the Middle Ages were reactivated as the afterlife of ancient Rome and Christian inheritance—a nexus of sacred and national values.

Colonial assertion was channelled through the trans-Mediterranean circulation of the Middle Ages, materials, and networks⁷⁵. The cathedral relied heavily on local resources, yet these were structurally embedded and visually suppressed: much of the fabrication made use of local stone, masked with finishes linking the building to Italy⁷⁶. Alternating marble-and-stone bands were intended to clad the exterior; instead, it was painted in pale yellow and brick-red tones⁷⁷. The design rejected local affiliations in favour of transplantation. The enterprise drew on regions across Italy: Etna pine was used for the foundations; the Turin firms Catella and Albano Macario supplied the portals and the stained-glass windows; the Monaldi firm of Rome supplied an altar bearing Attilio Selva’s Pietà⁷⁸. Yet the cathedral embodied a double imposition—that of the coloniser and of a northern Italian vision—that reinscribed nineteenth-century North–Mezzogiorno hierarchies, now

⁶⁹ Calìo and Rusconi, *San Francesco d’Italia*.

⁷⁰ Facchinetti, “Le mie disavventure come pubblicista,” 1945. ASPOFML, Sezione Provinciale, b. 170 D–E, fasc. D/1a.

⁷¹ *Famiglia Cristiana* 3, n. 12 (1926).

⁷² On neo-medievalism and nationhood, see Guido Zucconi, “Un’architettura comunale per l’Italia unita,” in *Una nazione giovane: L’Italia dei palazzi municipali, 1861–1911*, ed. Isabella Balestrieri and Marco Folini, special issue of *Studi e Ricerche di Storia dell’Architettura* (2024): 65–73.

⁷³ “La nuova cattedrale,” *Famiglia Cristiana* 5, n. 1 (1928): 3–4.

⁷⁴ Panteri, “Lo stile della nuova cattedrale.”

⁷⁵ Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Hom, eds., *Italian Mobilities* (Routledge, 2015).

⁷⁶ “La Cattedrale di Tripoli,” 138–40.

⁷⁷ Panteri, “Lo stile della nuova cattedrale”; F. T. “La Cattedrale della Tripolitania”: 32.

⁷⁸ “La Cattedrale di Tripoli”: 138; “Riconoscenza”: 44–5.

rendered paradoxical given the latter's centrality to Mediterranean routes. From its realisation to its furnishing, with the monstrosity supplied from Milan, it displays affinities with Lombardy, homeland of the vicariate's order and tied to the colonial administration⁷⁹. Tonizza assigned the works to Bergamo-based ACESA⁸⁰. The design draws on Lombard Romanesque architecture in typology, features, and ornament: a basilica Latin-cross plan, a *salienti* façade with pronaos, blind arcading, triple portals, a dome with an arcaded drum, and an emphasis on brick and polychromy. This reveals an imbalanced Italian transplantation that delineates boundaries both political and spiritual. Just as colonial expansion paralleled the religious partition of Africa by religious orders and their regional divisions, its architecture mapped this alternative cartography. Like Asmara Cathedral in Eritrea (1923), administered by Lombard Capuchins and shaped by Lombard Romanesque, Tripoli projected a northern Italian ecclesiastical geography onto colonial space.

The project, however, was framed as Italian in ambition. Lombard provenance was subsumed within a claim to national totality, cemented through the fusion of northern and central Italian trajectories. Reconciling these dimensions suited Tonizza, a central Italian integrating into the Lombard-centric vicariate. Panteri, who was from Tuscany, described the cathedral as bearing “the character of Tuscan–Lombard Romanesque architecture”⁸¹. The project nonetheless extended beyond micro-historical reasoning. Lombard and Tuscan medieval architecture—as Florentine in the formation of the national language—had long exceeded regional particularity through their association with Italian identity. Echoes of Lombardy and Tuscany functioned less as constraints than as nodes of *italianità*. The campanile was framed as a pan-Italian type⁸². Panteri described the Romanesque as Lombard in origin yet Italian in diffusion, absorbing Byzantine and Islamic stimuli⁸³. This characterisation is borne out most clearly in the Pisan tradition: Tripoli's dome seemingly mediates between those of Pisa, Siena, and Florence. Bichrome banding, light, and the coffered nave likewise align with Tuscany more than Lombardy. Yet, from plan to dome, its affinities reach beyond the Romanesque towards Gothic and Renaissance trajectories, most notably the Cathedral of Florence. Architecture compressed time—beyond the temporality Panteri assigned to the Romanesque between the eighth and thirteenth centuries—space, and traditions into a national unicum. A telling trace appears in Tonizza's 1921 pastoral letter, in which he states that modern monuments could scarcely rival the cathedrals of the past, citing Florence, Orvieto, Milan, Siena, and St Peter's—reinforcing the marginalisation of the Mezzogiorno⁸⁴. While colonial ecclesiastical architecture adhered more closely to national inflections than secular building, the cathedral was one of the most ambitious initiatives, politically and visually, avoiding a central precedent and presenting a diachronic synthesis. It combined stylistic, temporal, and spatial plurality in a unified articulation.

Trans-Mediterranean Continuity

Inserted within the broader inquiry into the Mediterranean that shaped fascist culture abroad and at home, the Middle Ages claimed a central role in colonial Africa⁸⁵. Breaking with Tripoli's prevailing urban orientations to face Italy and the sea, the cathedral was conceived in direct conversation with the basin, receptive to it and projecting across water and land alike⁸⁶. As a

⁷⁹ Tonizza to Van Rossum, Tripoli, 8 February 1928.

⁸⁰ Tonizza to Van Rossum, Tripoli, 6 December 1924. Tripoli's Risveglio took over from ACESA to complete the works. “Riconoscenza”: 44.

⁸¹ Panteri, “Lo stile della nuova cattedrale.”

⁸² P. C. B., “I campanili in Italia,” *Famiglia Cristiana* 9, n. 1 (1932): 2–4; Ing. Serrani, “Il nostro campanile,” *Famiglia Cristiana* 9, n. 1 (1932): 5–9.

⁸³ “Nata sulle rive dell'incantevole lago di Como tale forma d'arte, che fu geniale continuazione dell'architettura romana, dilagò per le vie d'Italia e subendo di regione in regione influenze locali diverse, dalle bizantine alle mussulmane, lasciò tracce meravigliose nelle nostre città.” Panteri, “Lo stile della nuova cattedrale.”

⁸⁴ Giacinto Tonizza, *Lettera pastorale per la quaresima del 1921* (Tip. Bartolomei Leonello, 1921), 13.

⁸⁵ Ignacio G. Galán, *Furnishing Fascism: Modernist Design and Politics in Italy* (University of Minnesota Press, 2025), 197–238.

⁸⁶ “La nuova Cattedrale di Tripoli,” *L'Avvenire di Tripoli*, 6 June 1928.



5.10

Tripoli. Cross of the Cathedral of the Sacro Cuore di Gesù with the Mediterranean in the distance, not before 1927. Archivio Storico Provinciale dell'Ordine dei Frati Minori di Lombardia, Milan.

5.11

Tripoli. National Eucharistic Congress, 1937. Private collection.



beacon of faith, civilisation, and *italianità*, with its dome proclaiming “the grandeur of Catholic and Italian Rome,” the edifice asserted its symbolic command from afar⁸⁷. Its visibility and religious and political function as a mediator between institution and public positioned the cathedral to foster an Italian and Catholic society spanning both shores of the sea. This potential—made explicit in Facchinetti’s first pontifical mass as vicar in 1936, which combined religion with imperial proclamation—culminated in the 1937 National Eucharistic Congress in Tripoli, the first such Catholic gathering held overseas⁸⁸.

Medievalism exceeded a broad Mediterraneanism, activating a trans-Mediterranean condition premised on continuity between the sea’s two shores. Medieval Italy, despite lacking empire and political unity, acquired intensified colonial connotations from the 1920s through the mythicisation of a special relationship with the sea and Africa⁸⁹. Temporal mobility, while underpinning the circulation of architectural traditions such as the Romanesque from metropole to colony, compressed them spatially through mythopoeic narratives of trans-Mediterranean exchange, promoting a rhetoric of continuity, precedent, and return.

The medieval reach of the Franciscans was mythologised within a framework of Mediterranean and African expansion. Publications by Tonizza’s collaborator Costanzo Bergna and others stressed Francis’s travels across the Mediterranean and into Africa, his engagement with Islam, the dispersal of friars along the African coast, and the fact that Corrado of Ascoli passed through Libya in 1274, casting contemporary Franciscans as the inheritors of this mission⁹⁰. Francis was mythologised as an agent of Christian universality and a proto-colonial precursor. For the centenary Mussolini cast the Franciscans as “missionaries of Christ and missionaries of *italianità*”⁹¹. This convergence extended into the religious sphere, where Franciscan memory shifted from mere coexistence with the reactivation of Roman dominion to becoming its instrument: Bergna proclaimed the Franciscans heralds of faith and *romanità* in Africa, present on the *mare nostrum* seven centuries before the empire⁹².

Roman Libya—an early site of Christian expansion as evoked at the foundation-stone ceremony for Tripoli Cathedral—presented a paradigm of return, imperial continuity, and secular-ecclesiastical rapprochement⁹³. The medieval likewise became implicated in an emergent Mediterranean imaginary. Tonizza envisioned the cathedral as embodying the resurgence of Italian genius after the fall of the (Western) Roman Empire⁹⁴. Despite drawing on entrenched conceptions of the medieval in continuity with the classical rather than as a rupture, neo-medievalism took on an imperial value that aligned ecclesiastical and Mediterranean ambitions in ways that were absent at unification. Propaganda claimed that the cathedral, built on land once under Roman rule, recalled the Comacine masters who had worked for the Fatherland, one devoted to reviving Rome’s greatness and affirming the vitality of the Italian race⁹⁵. The Romanesque was advanced as the architectural expression of a latent Italian dominion.

A maritime orientation guided the cathedral’s symbolic lineage. While Panteri located the Romanesque origin at Lake Como, the project’s Tuscan allusions were anchored to a broader Mediterranean geography. Fascist discourse evoked the medieval influence of “Italian” powers

⁸⁷ “La nuova cattedrale,” *Famiglia Cristiana* 3, n. 12 (1926): 251.

⁸⁸ ASGOFM, SM 345, fasc. 1934–1935, n. 142; Giorgio Tosco, “Al crocevia fra Chiesa, Fascismo e colonialismo: Il Congresso Eucaristico di Tripoli (1937),” *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà* 30 (2017): 283–314.

⁸⁹ Medievalism and ideas of a pre-Ottoman return gained momentum with the Italo-Turkish War. Giuseppe Gerola, “Le tradizioni italiane nei monumenti di Rodi,” *Italia!* 2, n. 4 (1913): 245–50.

⁹⁰ Costanzo Bergna, “S. Francesco e le missioni,” *Famiglia Cristiana* 3, n. 12 (1926): 248–50; “I ricostruttori della Chiesa Cristiana in Tripolitania,” *L’Avvenire di Tripoli*, 25 November 1928.

⁹¹ “Il VII centenario della morte di San Francesco: Il messaggio dell’on. Mussolini agli italiani all’estero,” *Il Legionario* 2, n. 49 (1925): 2 (2–3).

⁹² Costanzo Bergna, “I figli di S. Francesco d’Assisi araldi di fede e di romanità in Africa,” *Famiglia Cristiana* 14, n. 8 (1937) to 15, n. 9 (1938).

⁹³ Massimiliano Munzi, *L’epica del ritorno: Archeologia e politica nella Tripolitania italiana* (L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2001); Facchinetti, “Il vicariato apostolico di mons. Giacinto Tonizza,” part one, f. 14.

⁹⁴ Panteri, “Lo stile della nuova cattedrale.”

⁹⁵ “La nuova cattedrale,” *Famiglia Cristiana* 5, n. 1 (1928): 3–4.

across the sea and Africa, presenting Italy's colonial ineptitude as a belief of foreigners who had forgotten that the Italians—"travellers, navigators, pioneers, and colonisers"—were "heirs not only to Rome but also to the far more recent and glorious republics"⁹⁶. The expansion and economic reach of the Normans and the maritime republics into Libya were subjected to mythopoeic elaboration⁹⁷. A publication issued for Antomelli's elevation to apostolic vicar already highlighted the historical presence of Roger II, Venice, Genoa, and Pisa⁹⁸.

While the Tuscan echoes in Tripoli may point to ideas of transmarine continuity, the question is less whether Tonizza consciously sought to transmit the notion of an African return through medieval precedent. Rather, the cathedral appears to be less anachronistic when situated within these broader trajectories of religious agency, continuity with *romanità*, and maritime power. Architecture inscribed religion within an imperial genealogy and transformed the Mediterranean into a field of projection. Temporal mobility—underwriting a Christian, Italian, and colonising society—recoded the sea from barrier to conduit, symbolically drawing Africa closer to Europe and Italy closer to the Church.

Temporality on the Cusp

Religion and medievalism prefigured the turn to mass colonisation. The cathedral's role as a catalyst for mobility was made explicit when the Minister of the Colonies led a committee for a national pilgrimage for its inauguration⁹⁹. The initiative was not successful, nor were the aspirations of State and Church in Libya. Unsurprisingly, given the explicitness with which it articulated *italianità* and Christianity, the cathedral—now a mosque—underwent extensive post-colonial recodification. Yet critical attitudes predated post-coloniality, some emerging before completion among secular bodies such as the General Directorate of Antiquities and Fine Arts and the Ministry of the Colonies¹⁰⁰. Florestano di Fausto, who was rising within the imperial architectural establishment, proposed a makeover featuring a new façade that would have effaced the building's medievalist character¹⁰¹. A self-proclaimed champion of Mediterranean inflection, he was unwilling to recognise such value in the cathedral¹⁰². His attitude reflected a broader adherence to vernacularism and the ascendancy of antiquity and the future in preference to the Middle Ages. For di Fausto, the arch—which remained a defining feature of the cathedral in the proposed remodelling—was a motif that "could not be excluded from any architecture" and that evoked the enduring legacy of Rome¹⁰³. Ultimately, rather than reworking Panteri's creation, the government reframed it through the square¹⁰⁴. The intervention culminated in di Fausto's Istituto Nazionale Fascista della Previdenza Sociale, interposing a classicist-modernist filter between cathedral and sea—while registering the enmeshment of temporal and political transformations¹⁰⁵.

The transition to the 1930s brought the stronger materialisation of forward-and antiquity-looking currents and a totalitarian, imperial turn. Attitudes towards stylistic revival are best understood in this context. Tonizza's project was fundamentally imbalanced: despite appealing to *italianità*, it projected a vision no less Catholic than Italian, even an "outdated, discordant, and merely academic example of religious architecture"¹⁰⁶. Never assimilated into the architectural establishment,

⁹⁶ Carlo Rocca, "I sovrani d'Italia in Tripolitania," *Rivista d'Italia e d'America* 6, n. 5 (1928): 197 (196–200). The colonial trajectory of the medieval reached its apex in Camillo Manfroni, *I colonizzatori italiani durante il Medio Evo e il Rinascimento*, 2 vols. (Libreria dello Stato, 1933).

⁹⁷ *Tripoli e Bengasi: Le città nostre d'oltremare, Le cento città d'Italia illustrate* 276 (Sonzogno, 1929), 2; Costanzo Bergna, *La missione francescana in Libia* (Nuove Arti Grafiche, 1924), II.

⁹⁸ *Nella solenne consacrazione episcopale di mons. fr. Lodovico Antomelli* (Ambrosiana, 1913), 19.

⁹⁹ Segretario Generale to Marrani, Milan, 14 September and 19 November 1928, ASGOFM, SM 344, fasc. 1928, nn. 34, 42. The Vatican endorsed a pilgrimage as suited to the "Crociata per il trionfo del Sacro Cuore nei paesi musulmani." AAV, Segreteria di Stato, rub. 311, fasc. 4, ff. 176, 178.

¹⁰⁰ "I due [Arduino Colasanti e Nestore Leoni] sono stati poco soddisfatti della nostra costruzione [...]. [...] Temo che in dette critiche vi sia qualche fine recondito." Tonizza to Van Rossum, Tripoli, 12 March 1928, ASPF, NS, vol. 921, f. 330.

¹⁰¹ Piccioli, *La nuova Italia d'oltremare*, 880–6.

¹⁰² Brian L. McLaren, "The Architecture of Tourism in Italian Libya: The Creation of a Mediterranean Identity," in *Italian Colonialism*, ed. Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 167–78.

¹⁰³ Florestano di Fausto, "Visione mediterranea della mia architettura," n.d., ACS, Archivi di Famiglie e di Persone, Governatorato della Libia, b. 22.

¹⁰⁴ Emilio Lavagnino, "Note di architettura coloniale," *Rivista delle Colonie Italiane* 5, n. 3 (1931): 190–4.

¹⁰⁵ Italo Balbo to Bruno Biagi, Tripoli, 21 February 1936, ACS, Archivi di Famiglie e di Persone, Governatorato della Libia, b. 22.

¹⁰⁶ Ferdinando Reggiori, "Architetture per la nostra maggiore colonia," *Dedalo* 11, n. 18 (1931): 1360 (1339–61).

5.12

Tripoli. Cathedral of the Sacro Cuore di Gesù and the former Istituto Nazionale Fascista della Previdenza Sociale, not before 1943. Archivio Storico Provinciale dell'Ordine dei Frati Minori di Lombardia, Milan.



Panteri was cast by the Church as a devout Christian but by the State as a drawing instructor more than an architect¹⁰⁷. The design, realised under a religious rather than secular leadership, unlike elsewhere, retained specific ties to territory and order, remaining closer to ecclesiastical and Lombard initiatives than to State programmes¹⁰⁸. Romanesque forms could serve fascist narratives yet remained difficult to detach from their Christian orientation. In Tripoli and beyond, the years surrounding the imperial proclamation saw colonial religious architecture subsumed within a universalising, Roman, and futural vision. Classicism and modernism materialised an architectural continuum that, extending from the secular to the sacred and from Italy to Africa, advanced a novel configuration of fascist eschatology.

Conclusion

As the Middle Ages traversed time, they became imbricated with Catholic universalism, Italian nationalism, and empire-building, facilitating the transmutation of the Mediterranean from a barrier into a conduit. The rise of Fascism reverberated in Africa, which in turn became a circuitous pathway for the rapprochement between secular and religious authorities. The Cathedral of Tripoli stands as a nexus of these dynamics, complexly bound to an attempt to foreground religion—both

¹⁰⁷ Tonizza to Gasparri, Tripoli, 30 August 1928; Arduino Colasanti and Nestore Leoni to Federzoni, Rome, 4 April 1928, ACS, MAI, Gabinetto e Uffici Afferenti, b. 44, fasc. 3/13.

¹⁰⁸ Relevant parallels include the Franciscan Church of the Sacro Cuore in Busto Arsizio, the Church of Lissone, and several examples in Milan, including the reworked San Babila.

socially and physically—while drawing Italy towards the Church and the African continent towards Europe. It opens onto a heterogeneous field of meanings that cuts across distinctions between the missionary and the colonial, the provincial, national, and imperial, and the order's particularist and universalist currents, thereby suggesting that architecture is best understood through its complex negotiation of multiple—at times overlapping and often competing—registers of identity. Across the arc of the project, a double transformation unfolded: temporally, medievalism lost ground to modernism and classicism; politically, the distance between Church and State gave way to a relationship of subordination.

Where the Middle Ages functioned as a shared space of experience against which a common horizon of expectation was formed, the 1930s marked the fracture of that relation, as modernism and classicism projected a new totalitarian horizon. Yet in colonial Africa the medieval continued to operate as a temporal resource, including in ecclesiastical architecture, less through direct quotation than through cross-temporal hybridity. This was sustained through the enduring invocation of Francis of Assisi. In Tripoli, Facchinetti consecrated a new Church of San Francesco in 1936¹⁰⁹. Backed by Governor Italo Balbo (1934–1940) as part of a renewed programme of church building across Libya and designed by di Fausto, the edifice fused medievalist rhetoric—materialised in the pictorial work of Achille Funi—with a modern-classical idiom, further embedding Franciscan memory within the colonial present¹¹⁰. The hold of the Middle Ages outlasted the crisis of stylistic revivalism, both within and beyond the formal colonies, as exemplified by the church inaugurated in Rhodes in 1939. Oriented towards the modern, it nonetheless retained a medieval referent through its dedication to Francis of Assisi. Across the Italian imperial project, medievalism thus persisted in protean form as a living space of experience, its legacy distilled in the elevation of Francis as patron saint of Italy at the apex of empire.

¹⁰⁹ Facchinetti to Pietro Fumasone Biondi, Tripoli, 25 July 1937, ASGOFM, SM 345, fasc. 1934–1935, n. 148.

¹¹⁰ Balbo to Facchinetti and Candido Moro, Tripoli, 1 June 1939, ACS, Archivi di Famiglie e di Persone, Governatorato della Libia, b. 25, fasc. 174.