



# The Garden and Its Enemies: Agrarian Knowledge and Colonial Violence Through Two Photographic Archives of Italian Libya

## Abstract

This paper draws on two sets of colonial photographs as primary sources to examine Italian agronomy's appropriation of Libyan agrarian knowledge after the 1912 conquest, while exposing agriculture's disciplinary function in the 1930–1933 repression of Libyan resistance.

The first set comprises photographs from the 1913 agro-economic survey by the Franchetti Mission in Tripolitania (western Libya). I argue that photography served multiple purposes within the survey. Images of monumental Roman oil presses opened the report, inviting Italian readers to legitimize a return to once-Roman lands. Yet they also captured local agricultural practices running counter to the survey's central claim, which accused local populations of being 'enemies of the gardens' and—due to their prevalent pastoral and nomadic lifestyle—of causing the region's desertification. Thus, the investigation simultaneously disqualified and appropriated local knowledge.

The second series consists of photographs attached to the *Relazione sugli accampamenti* (Reports on the Encampments), documenting the concentration camps in which all nomadic and semi-nomadic populations of Cyrenaica (eastern Libya) were deported and confined in 1930. In addition to rows of tents lined up and surrounded by barbed wire, these photographs show vast vegetable gardens where many prisoners were forced to work. These gardens reveal the faithful adoption of the Libyan irrigated garden technique (*sanìa*), as well as Italian authorities' intent to permanently redesign Cyrenaica's ethnic and socioeconomic makeup by fixing the once-nomadic shepherds to the lands to which they were deported—thus excluding them forever from Libya's best lands and erasing their distinctive way of life.

Taken together, these visual archives illuminate the entanglement of epistemic and material violence in Italian colonialism in Libya, restoring agency to Libyan agrarian culture and shedding light on the Cyrenaica genocide.

## Keywords

Italian Colonialism, Libya, Labor and Land, Agronomy and Colonialism

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[Cover] “Twenty-five wells irrigate the vegetable gardens”. ASDMAECI, Ex Ministero Africa italiana, vol. V, Materiale recuperato a nord, b. 5, fasc. 20. Governo della Cirenaica, Commissionario regionale di Bengasi, Relazione sugli accampamenti, 28 July 1932.

### The asphodel and the dunes

“An undertaking that once seemed impossible has been successfully completed. The desert has been conquered, and its defeat is owed to a brilliant innovation conceived by our technicians..”<sup>1</sup> Thus wrote the journalist Achille Saitta (1898–1981) in one of the last issues of the magazine *L’Africa Italiana*, celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the conquest of Libya. The ingenious idea to which he referred was the deployment of vegetation in grid-like systems capable, through their root networks, of both surviving in the desert and “harnessing” shifting dunes. The myth of Italian achievement in Libya, however—through the transformation of landscapes and ecologies, and the establishment of agricultural settlements—rested on a dual colonial violence, both material and epistemic.

In the Italian colonial imaginary of Libya built over a thirty-year-long period with the aim of fostering the invasion, there were neither desert nor dunes but, rather, incredibly fertile lands, rich in springs and ancient Greek-Roman history.<sup>2</sup> The arid climate of the region and its deserts, however, emerged as central concerns in the reports compiled by the commissions that studied the agrological and economic conditions of Tripolitania in the spring of 1913, only a few months after the Italian invasion (1911) and the official Ottoman retreat (1912). Especially emblematic were the observations resulting from the mission led by rural economist and politician Leopoldo Franchetti (1847–1917), organized by the *Società Italiana per lo Studio della Libia* (Italian Society for the Study of Libya).<sup>3</sup>

Although Franchetti’s survey has often been cited for its characterization of Libya’s land as “not friendly to man,” the report not only provided an overall positive assessment of the prospect of turning the region into an outlet for Italian landless peasants, but also offered a sharp narrative in which at least three important

points emerged.<sup>4</sup> The first focused on soil quality and highlighted the differences between Italian and Libyan soils, the latter characterized by a significant presence of loose, sandy terrain. The second point was about history, and addressed the widespread presence of Roman ruins scattered across the countryside. The third concerned local populations, and their role in shaping the Libyan landscape. All three points, supported by images, together built a seemingly cohesive argument calling for a new *scientific approach* to colonization—that is, experimental and rational, as Franchetti argued.<sup>5</sup>

This search for scientific methods helps explain the central role that photography assumed in the survey. Although the text did not explicitly mention it, the sheer scale of the photographic apparatus—more

4. *La Missione Franchetti*, 27–28.

5. *Ibid.*, 27–28.



Figure 1. “Rows of asphodel (bellus) planted to consolidate loose soil against the wind (Tarhuna)”. Società italiana per lo studio della Libia, *La Missione Franchetti*, table 17.



Figure 2. “Detail of the previous figure.” Società italiana per lo studio della Libia, *La Missione Franchetti*, table 18.

1. Achille Saitta, “Tre decenni di progresso economico sulla quarta sponda,” *Africa Italiana: pubblicazione mensile dell’Istituto fascista dell’Africa italiana* 37, November–December–January, 1941–1942 (1942): 60–65.
2. From the 7th century BCE, Greek colonies appeared along the Libyan coast, beginning with Cyrene (founded 631 BCE). After Rome’s destruction of Carthage (146 BCE), the region came under Roman rule. Conquered by the Vandals in the 5th century, it fell to Arab forces in the mid-7th century during the Islamic Caliphate’s expansion. By the 16th century, it had been incorporated into the Ottoman Empire.
3. Società italiana per lo studio della Libia, *La Missione Franchetti in Tripolitania (Il Gebel); indagini economico-agrarie della Commissione inviata in Tripolitania dalla Società italiana per lo studio della Libia* (Fratelli Treves, 1914).



Figure 3. “Bellus (*Asphodelus microcarpus*)” *La Missione Franchetti*, table 117.

than 350 photographs distributed across just over 600 pages of text—signaled its function as a new technical instrument capable of deploying an objective, measuring gaze over the conquered lands. A close reading of the survey, however, reveals that words and images flowed closely together, yet retained a certain autonomy, almost forming two complementary, at times countervailing narratives. The visual one introduced, commented on, or accompanied the text and, occasionally, allowed viewers to glimpse what words left unsaid—or denied what words said.

Franchetti’s concern for soil quality occupied the initial part of the text. As he observed, the portion of Tripolitania subject to the climatic influence of the Mediterranean Sea presented itself as a vast expanse of grassy steppe, interrupted by areas of sandy, rocky, or stony soil. The landscape ranged from soils comparable in firmness to those of average tenacity in Italy to areas so loose that they took on a distinctly sandy character, commonly referred to as dunes, composed of fine material easily lifted and transported by the wind. In the following pages, the agronomist Oberto Manetti (?-1918)—later head of the Agrarian Services of Cyrenaica—explained why this feature of the Libyan landscape was viewed as particularly troublesome. Inconsistent soils not only hindered the cultivation of the areas they covered but also threatened adjacent cultivated lands due to wind-blown sand. More broadly,

mobile dunes prevented a stable and permanent organization of the land: cultivated fields but also roads and railways were all at risk of being swept away by even a gust of wind, despite the scale of investments made on the terrain. It was necessary, Manetti claimed, “to definitively fix the dunes and the loosest soils,” or—invoking a central notion in the Italian political debate under both post-unification and Fascist politics—to reclaim (*bonificare*) the land: that is, by “stopping the loose sands,” breaking “the force of the winds,” and “fixing” the sands to the ground.<sup>6</sup>

How to do it was therefore one of “the most urgent and main questions to solve.”<sup>7</sup> Possible solutions were “artificially creating small stable dunes to be inserted into the natural ones, bringing mud to the site to encourage the development of spontaneous vegetation,” building palisades “with branches and poles,” or planting vegetative windbreaks.<sup>8</sup> An answer though, came from the photographs, which reveal the detailed cataloging of Tripolitania’s shrub species, with particular attention to asphodel used in rows “to delimit a property and hold back the sands.”<sup>9</sup> Yet although Italian agronomists later scaled this local strategy into vast checkerboard patterns—claiming to have found the solution to tame the desert—the survey relegated explanations of its use in Tripolitania to photo captions. This effectively excluded analysis of both the landscape practice and asphodel’s

6. Oberto Manetti, “L’avvenire dell’agricoltura sul Gebel,” in *La Missione Franchetti in Tripolitania (Il Gebel)*, indagini economico-agrarie della Commissione inviata in Tripolitania dalla Società italiana per lo studio della Libia (Fratelli Treves, 1914): 467-518. Emphasis added.
7. Manetti, “L’avvenire dell’agricoltura,” 490.
8. *Ibid.*, 488.
9. *Ibid.*, caption to table 122.



Figure 4. “Asphodel root system.” *La Missione Franchetti*, table 118.



Figure 5. “Dimensions of the senam at Abiar Milgha, represented in figure 3”. *La Missione Franchetti* (Fratelli Treves, 1914), table 1.



Figure 6. “Senam near Abiar Milgha”, “Senam SW of C. Tarhuna.” *La Missione Franchetti*, tables 3, 4.

crucial role from the main text. Local knowledge was simultaneously appropriated and silenced.<sup>10</sup>

### The work of man

Although Italian botanists and agronomists identified loose sands as the most insidious feature of the Libyan landscape and, as a result, Franchetti foregrounded them in his opening argument, photographs of dunes were not the images that opened the survey. Rather, the report opened with a dimensioned drawing of an imposing ancient Roman oil press (*senam*) (Figure 5). This was followed by another drawing reconstructing the press’s missing parts, and then by photographs of other monumental Roman oil presses at various locations on the plateau behind Tripoli. Franchetti’s choice was certainly not accidental. Although soil quality formed his core technical concern, Libya’s monumental Roman ruins added symbolic depth to his argument. These ruins offered readers a vantage point to contrast historical periods and foster Italian ‘belonging’ to the region—a typical colonial claim to legitimate return.<sup>11</sup>

Yet Franchetti went further, interpreting the remains as evidence of vegetation that once covered the steppe, now largely barren and dotted with dunes. In a section titled “The Work of Man,” he stated that—as Roman-era oil presses scattered across the countryside and

ancient literature attesting to the region’s oil exports confirmed—the Tripoli plateau must once have been covered with olive trees. Although the reasons and timing of the following environmental deterioration, with the loss of most of the trees, were “still controversial,” Franchetti admitted, “[w]hether they were due to the Arab invaders or to the offensive return of the Berber pastoralism, or to both, the indigenous agrarian economy” was certainly at fault to have “adapted” to this deterioration rather than resisting it.<sup>12</sup> “After more than a millennium of deforestation,” Franchetti concluded—unequivocally accusing both the Arab and Berber populations—“spontaneous tree vegetation is scarce and limited.”<sup>13</sup> As a result, the plateau was a great undulating expanse, green and blooming in spring, but “sad and monotonous due to the almost total lack of trees.”<sup>14</sup>

Besides the absence of trees, Franchetti identified the lack of masonry buildings as another defining feature of the Libyan countryside and a marker of the primitiveness of its inhabitants. As he noted, almost the entire population, “rich and poor, powerful and humble,” lived in “low, dark tents.”<sup>15</sup> Other typical forms of housing in the area—in addition to the less common brick structures with courtyards and flat roofs—included two types of underground dwellings. The first consisted of units with an opening at ground level, generally reinforced with stonework; the second comprised the so-called “troglodyte dwellings,” well-shaped spaces deeply dug into the rock, taking advantage of its horizontal stratification and the alternation of hard and soft layers.<sup>16</sup>

10. On colonialism’s epistemic violence see especially Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988); Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

11. See, for example, Susan Raven, *Rome in Africa* (Routledge, 1993); Stephen L. Dyson, *In Pursuit of Ancient Pasts* (Yale University Press, 2006).

12. *La Missione Franchetti*, 10.

13. *Ibid.*, 18.

14. *Ibid.*, 13.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 9.



Figure 7. “On the summit of Ras Neb”. *La Missione Franchetti*, table 112.

Observations about how Tripolitania’s people lived on and used the land were the text’s only direct engagement with local populations, since the survey did not include an ethnographic component. Nevertheless, many photographs depicted not only landscapes, plants, and flocks but also people—Franchetti himself, soldiers accompanying the mission, or local inhabitants and guides—often serving as scale references. Yet, considering the whole series of photographs, these presence seems also to suggest a sharp demarcation between colonizers and colonized. The colonizers are typically depicted alone, standing upright in a frontal and active posture—looking,

touching, indicating, smelling, and often holding a stick. In contrast, the colonized are frequently shown in groups or sitting, and facing away from the camera, as if to suggest passivity or laziness. Indeed, not a single photograph shows a farmer at work. Not surprisingly, Franchetti concluded his argument on the work of man stating that the “less advanced” Arab civilization that succeeded the Roman one had “certainly found in the indigenous pastoral tribes converted to Islam effective allies in returning to a predominantly pastoral economy the lands that Roman tenacity and capital had already secured for agriculture.”<sup>17</sup>

Accordingly, the only option was to reconquer the lands that pastoral populations had lost to agriculture. Building on a military metaphor, it was necessary to “patiently and methodically guard the land and the climate” in what he defined as a “scientific war.”<sup>18</sup> Following the example of already consolidated empires, this meant constructing a new form of scientific infrastructure: a network of botanic gardens, experimental stations, and test fields located across the colony—and in close connection with similar facilities in Italy—for studying climates, soils, and plants, and fostering their circulation, acclimatization,

17. *La Missione Franchetti*, 29.

18. *Ibid.*, 48.



Figure 8. “Apricot tree, palm tree, and grapevines in a *ginan* near Ghelil (Msellata).” *La Missione Franchetti*, table 235.



Figure 9. “Lush winter pastures near Butauil (Tarhuna).” *La Missione Franchetti*, table 209.



Figure 10. “A beautiful almond tree in a ginan near Abiar Milgha (Tarhuna).” *La Missione Franchetti*, tables 228.

and propagation.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the report carefully catalogued the types of soil, plants, trees, livestock, and farming techniques observed by the scientific expedition. As for the asphodel and its uses, the images captured the use of the widespread native *Zizyphus* bush to shield small fruit trees, olive trees, or other crops from wind and herbivores through fences of dry thorns; the use of channels dug into the earth to direct and retain winter rainwater around tree roots, ensuring their sustenance; and the forms of dry (*jinan*) and irrigated (*sanìa*) cultivation (Figure 11).

### The desert gardens

Oberto Manetti described in detail this last aspect of the local agricultural practices, and praised it as “truly rational and certainly superior to many empirical systems used in Europe.”<sup>20</sup> As in most of the Arab world, Manetti argued, the “indigenous farmers” used a single method to distribute water for irrigation of their crops: the land was divided into rectangular beds (*gedulât*), separated by small banks, and flooded via an open channel (*saqiya*) roughly dug along the lines of maximum slope. This earthen channel ran from a masonry water distribution tank (*jabiya*) to the beds. Each bed ranged between 9 and 2.5 square meters, with the size decreasing, as the distance from the well increased, to better conserve the irrigation water. The beds were arranged in longitudinal series, all served by the same small *saqiya* which, together with others,

was fed by a main channel connected to a larger carrier *saqiya* that conveyed water from the large collection tank. This, in turn, received water from the well.<sup>21</sup>

Despite Manetti’s accurate description of the Libyan irrigated garden technique (*sanìa*), only two photographs in the entire survey depicted it—neither a close-up— accompanied by an analytic drawing of the water flow (Figure 12). Given that this was an agronomic survey, this choice proves quite surprising and—perhaps even more than the silence on asphodel—testifies to an attempt to marginalize, or, through Gayatri Spivak’s reading of Foucault, “disqualify as inadequate” the colonized culture.<sup>22</sup> The immediate adoption of the *sanìa* technique by Italian agronomists, however, is attested by photographs of the nurseries of the *Reale Istituto Sperimentale Agrario della Tripolitania* at Sidi Mesri, the ‘experimental’ research center established in 1914 following the Franchetti Mission’s recommendations.<sup>23</sup>

Italian technicians from the Agrarian Office of Cyrenaica—another scientific institution created in response to the mission’s recommendations—adopted the same cultivation technique twenty years later when—during the campaign to definitively crush Libyan resistance to Italian rule—Colonel Rodolfo Graziani (1882–1955) called upon them to establish large cultivated fields in the semi-desert plain south of Benghazi. The region had been chosen as the final destination for the forced deportation that, during the summer of 1930, cleared the entire population from the

19. The argument was developed in Oberto Manetti’s chapter: Oberto Manetti, “L’avvenire dell’agricoltura sul Gebel,” in *La Missione Franchetti in Tripolitania (Il Gebel)*; indagini economico-agrarie della Commissione inviata in Tripolitania dalla Società italiana per lo studio della Libia (Fratelli Treves, 1914), 467–518.

20. Oberto Manetti, “Organizzazione agraria degli indigeni,” in *La Missione Franchetti in Tripolitania*, 295.

21. Manetti, “Organizzazione agraria degli indigeni,” 297.

22. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 281.

23. Guido Mangano, *Il R. Istituto Sperimentale Agrario della Tripolitania. Nel primo anno della sua attività (1914-15)* (Istituto Agricolo Coloniale Itaitano, 1916), table 18.



Figure 11. "Irrigated gardens at Ain Turki in Garian. Gedulât soil at the bottom left". *La Missione Franchetti*, table 180.

Gebel Akhdar (the Green Mountain). To repress anti-colonial guerrilla warfare by severing all possible links between civilians and armed groups, the Italian army forced the nomadic pastoral tribes living on the plateau to move toward the coast and confined them to fenced areas on nearly desert land. Indeed, after the Italian conquest of Libya, resistance to colonial rule had never completely ceased. Rather, in Cyrenaica, unified under the leadership of the Sanusi brotherhood, it was

supported by the entire population, which supplied the fighters with food, weapons, and men. As General Guglielmo Ciro Nasi (1879–1971) wrote in an article for the Italian army magazine introducing counter-insurgency operations in Libya: "It is not an army that we must defeat, but an armed population that we must subdue, disarm, and pacify."<sup>24</sup>

In December 1928, in a clear attempt to assert full control over all Libyan territory, dictator Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) appointed General Pietro Badoglio (1871–1956), Chief of the Armed Forces, as Governor-General of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. In September 1929 he appointed General Emilio De Bono (1866–1944) as Minister of Colonies; and in January 1930, Colonel Rodolfo Graziani (1882–1955) as vice-governor of Cyrenaica, tasked with crushing the resistance. The violent repression that followed culminated in the deportation and internment of all nomadic and semi-nomadic populations of Cyrenaica in nineteen fenced concentration camps outside the fertile plateau, mostly in the semi-desert region south

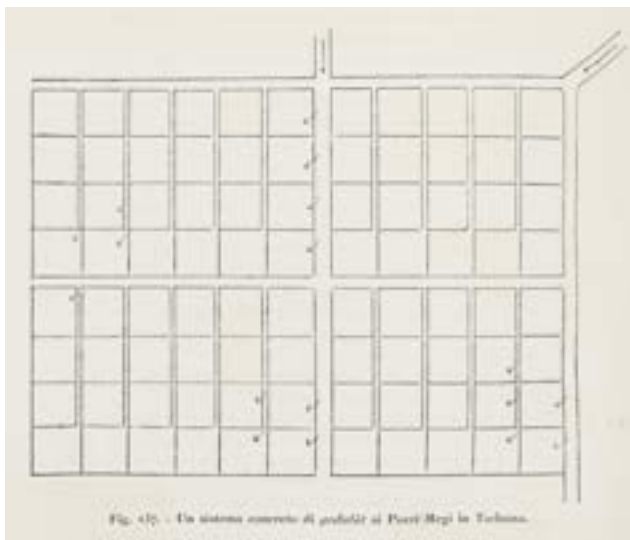


Figure 12. "A realized gedulat irrigation system at the Megi Wells, Tarhuna." *La Missione Franchetti*, table, 137.

24. Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito (henceforth, SME), Libya. L13, 256/7. Typed pages by Guglielmo Ciro Nasi, described by the inventory as "tactical lessons for the War School." Guglielmo Ciro Nasi, "La guerra in Libia," *Rivista Militare Italiana* 1, January (1927).



Figure 13. “Sidi Ahmed el Magrun camp. An aspect of the Braasa neighborhood...”; “...and of the Dorsa neighborhood,” c. 1932. ASDMAECI archives.

of Benghazi, between 1930 and 1933. The expression *campi di concentramento* (concentration camps) first appeared in a January 1930 telegram from De Bono to Badoglio, in which the minister suggested that the governor resort to this strategy, and then again in other documents by the civil and military authorities.<sup>25</sup> Immediately denounced by the rising Pan-Arabist anti-colonial movements, the camps were defended by Fascist propaganda, including several publications by

25. Archivio Storico Diplomatico Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (henceforth, ASDMAECI), Ex Ministero Africa italiana, pos. 150/21/90. Telegram by De Bono to Badoglio, 10 January 1930. First cited in Giorgio Rochat, “La repressione della resistenza araba in Cirenaica nel 1930–31,” *Il movimento di liberazione in Italia* 110, (1973): 3–39.

De Bono and Graziani, as “welfare works.”<sup>26</sup>

Since the early 1970s, the history of these ephemeral tent camps—which left few traces on the ground but in which a third of Cyrenaica’s population and nearly all of its livestock died from hunger, disease, executions, and every form of violence—has been brought to light through careful research, largely based on the oral testimony of camp survivors.<sup>27</sup> Still, although what soon emerged took the form of a genocide—the intentional destruction of a population’s physical, biological, and cultural patterns of life—this violence has never been fully recognized by Italian authorities. For this reason, the second group of photographs I want to focus on is that attached to the *Relazione sugli accampamenti* (Report on the Encampments) compiled in July 1932 by the Regional Commissioner of Benghazi, appointed by the colonial government to oversee the camps.<sup>28</sup>

Although the reliability of this report—specifically its textual and visual descriptions of facilities such as schools and medical clinics—has been widely contested by camp survivors, it remains one of the few official documents concerning the camps’ structure and organization. Furthermore, while the relevance of a few classrooms or a nursing ward has rightly been questioned in camps that held over twenty thousand people—almost thirty-five thousand in the case of the largest, El-Agheila—amid filth, hunger, and violence witnessed by all survivors, my attention turns to a hitherto overlooked aspect of the report and its photographic apparatus: the establishment of desert gardens. The existence and relevance of these gardens, as sites of forced labor, are confirmed both by the photographic record and by survivors’ testimony.

Drawing attention to the vast system of desert vegetable gardens—promoted and repeatedly invoked

26. Emilio De Bono, *La nuova Italia d’Oltremare. L’opera del fascismo nelle colonie italiane. Notizie, dati, documenti raccolti d’ordine di S.E. de Bono, Ministro delle Colonie* (Mondadori, 1934), 196.

27. In addition to Rochat see: Eric Salerno, *Genocidio in Libia. Le atrocità nascoste dell’avventura coloniale italiana (1911-1931)* (SugarCo, 1979); Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia* (Mondadori, 1986); Gustavo Ottolenghi, *Gli italiani e il colonialismo. I campi di detenzione italiani in Africa* (SugarCo, 1997); Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya: Shar, a Hidden Colonial History* (Routledge, 2020).

28. ASDMAECI, Ex Ministero Africa italiana, vol. V, Materiale recuperato a nord, b. 5, fasc. 20. *Governo della Cirenaica, Commissionario regionale di Bengasi, Relazione sugli accampamenti*, 28 July 1932. Thirty typed and signed pages, but with an illegible signature. Attachments: a plan of the camp type [missing]; 32 photographs 13x18 format; 4 panoramic photographs.

by Graziani in both confidential documents and published books, and described in detail by the 1932 report's photographs—I hope to shed light on the long-term project underlying the wartime camp measure. Indeed, while the use of prisoners' own tents did not signal an intent to permanently settle the deported populations in these sites—where almost nothing else was built—the complex infrastructure required for the gardens, especially the digging of wells and the water distribution network, points to a substantial land transformation project. This project complemented the initiative of agricultural settlement targeting the green plateau.

As historian Federico Crespi has pointed out, by deporting the entire population of the Gebel Akhdar and confining them in fenced camps outside the plateau, Colonel Graziani's counterinsurgency operations made Cyrenaica's most fertile lands available to Italian agronomists and settlers. As early as 1932—before the camps were dismantled—these lands were handed over to the newly established *Ente per la Colonizzazione della Cirenaica* (Agency for the Colonization of Cyrenaica, or ECC), the first parastatal agency tasked with creating agricultural settlements for Italian peasants to be relocated to the colony. This land allocation in itself reveals the deep connection between the military operations and the broader Italian effort to redesign the region's ethnic and spatial makeup by turning it into an outlet for Italian peasants. Yet the desert gardens shed further light on the fate reserved for the Libyan populations who survived the camps.<sup>29</sup>

### Permanent Temporariness

The *Relazione sugli accampamenti* and its pictures documented in detail the creation of the vast vegetable gardens at Soluch, one of the largest concentration camps and the site where the imam and resistance leader Omar al-Mukhtar (1858-1931) was hanged on September 16, 1931, in front of over twenty thousand prisoners. Tellingly, all the photographs attached to the report, collected in an album with captions commenting on each of them, bear the mark of the Italian photographer based in Benghazi Gaetano Nascia (1889–1963). The meticulous step-by-step documentation of the gardens—which must have required the photographer's periodic return to the camp—can only be explained by Colonel Graziani's particular interest in this specific aspect of the camps: namely, the use of gardens as tools to “re-educate” the



Figure 15. “Horticultural experiment in Soluk. Once the rock has been removed...”; “...the plots are outlined.” c. 1932. ASDMAECI archives.

nomadic population to a sedentary way of life.<sup>30</sup>

As Graziani noted, the gardens, differing in size yet present in every major camp, were realized under the direction of the Agricultural Services of Cyrenaica. In his May 1931 report to Badoglio and De Bono on the setting up of the camps, describing the organization of Soluch, Graziani claimed, “[t]his plantation will also have significant importance for the agricultural valorization of the area, because it dispels the legend that the Soluch territory was not susceptible to agricultural valorization.”<sup>31</sup> Graziani's enthusiasm for this result, an impressive plantation of twenty hectares in a rocky desert area, is also clearly expressed in the pictures' captions: “...and the cultivation of the land

29. On the history of the *Ente per la Colonizzazione della Cirenaica* see especially: Federico Cresti, *Non desiderare la terra d'altri. La colonizzazione italiana in Libia* (Carocci, 2011).

30. ASDMAECI, Ex Ministero Africa italiana, pos. 150/22, f. 98. Graziani to De Bono, report n. 1058, 2 May 1931. Oggetto: sistemazioni delle popolazioni nomadi trasferite, 7-8.

31. *Ibid.*, 2.

that previously seemed impossible becomes reality.”<sup>32</sup> Yet the plantation grew further. According to the 1932 *Relazione*, it had expanded to fifty hectares.<sup>33</sup> Considering that, as the pictures show, all the work—from stone removal to water collection using the ancient Arab-invented water-lifting wheel called *noria*—was carried out manually and relied solely on human and animal energy, and given that the average size of agricultural holdings in Italy today is around eleven hectares, the scale of the plantation was certainly imposing.<sup>34</sup> Why, then, this great commitment, carried on even after the capture of the leader of the resistance and the immediate cessation of all insurgency efforts that followed?

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32. ASDMAECI, Ex Ministero Africa italiana, vol. V, Materiale recuperato a nord, b. 5, fasc. 20. *Governo della Cirenaica, Commissionario regionale di Bengasi, Relazione sugli accampamenti*, 28 July 1932. Image caption.
33. *Ibid.*, 21.
34. Data on the average size of agricultural holdings in Italy are drawn from the latest agricultural census: Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT), 7° *Censimento Generale dell'Agricoltura* (Rome: ISTAT, 2022).

In the book *Cirenaica pacificata*, drawing on decades of Italian agronomists' descriptions of the nomadic shepherd as cause of the region's deforestation, Graziani argued: “[Nomads] are enemies and destroyers of agriculture. Everywhere the nomad has passed, he has destroyed woods, trees, and fields.”<sup>35</sup> Because of this “nature” of theirs, “nomads have no justification and no right to claim to remain in areas of certain development, such as those of the Cyrenaica Gebel.”<sup>36</sup> And he concluded, “they must rather be excluded forever, leaving room for the thousands and thousands of Italic arms that reach out towards this direction, anxious to return to tilling and fertilizing this ancient Roman land.”<sup>37</sup> Where, then, were the concentration camp survivors supposed to go when all the liberation fighters surrendered? As Graziani unapologetically observed, the gardens had to play a crucial role in “fixing” the population to the “reclaimed” Sirtica

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35. Rodolfo Graziani, *Cirenaica pacificata* (Mondadori, 1932), 123.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*, Emphasis added.



Figure 16. “..and the cultivation of the land that previously seemed impossible becomes reality.” ASDMAECI archives.



Figure 17. “The ‘noria’ system used for lifting water.” ASDMAECI archives.

land.<sup>38</sup>

Drawing on a well-established metaphor, Graziani likened the fighting populations to patients in need of a doctor, “[h]ow blessed is the work of the surgeon who binds the creature he must save (...) this battle in which the Government has become involved in Cyrenaica will be blessed as the most meritorious among all undertakings.”<sup>39</sup> What exactly needed to be “cured”? Graziani’s argument continued with a statement that clarifies his effort not only to crush the rebellion but also to tame the Bedouins’ nomadic lifestyle.

*The endless lines of the typical goat and camel wool tents that were hidden along the ridges of the Gebel—living coffins of a wild people, obstacles to the expansion of the most civilized of peoples,” he claimed, “now align themselves under the blazing sun, almost in plans of future cities, in the territory of the Hesperides. Above the low, brown array, where the lines of a regular road system can be*

*seen, the buildings of the school and the clinic dominate.*<sup>40</sup>

Camps were, in Graziani’s imagination, almost like future cities, with an orderly layout designed for full visibility and dominated by public institutions of re-education: disciplinary sites designed to control and permanently confine the former nomads outside the region’s most fertile lands.

As the photographs show, producing labor as something separate from family life, carried out in specific and fixed locations, was therefore one of the camps’ aims. Thus, the cultivation of cash crops, like other tasks, formed part of the inmates’ mandatory routine—both to provide for themselves and, from Graziani’s perspective, to “educate” them toward a sedentary lifestyle.<sup>41</sup> As the Benghazi Commissioner confirmed, “[a]ll the (...) populations lead the same life and the same activities; mainly agricultural

38. Ibid., 117, 123. Also ASDMAECI, Ex Ministero Africa italiana, pos. 150/22, f. 98. Graziani to De Bono, report n. 1058, 2 May 1931. Oggetto: sistemazioni delle popolazioni nomade trasferite, 9.

39. Graziani, *Cirenaica pacificata*, 117.

40. Ibid.

41. ASDMAECI, Ex Ministero Africa italiana, pos. 150/22, f. 98. Graziani to De Bono, report n. 1058, 2 May 1931. Oggetto: sistemazioni delle popolazioni nomadi trasferite, 7-8.

activity with special attention to horticulture.”<sup>42</sup> Not surprisingly, the captions from the photo album, probably realized on Graziani’s request, indicate the Soluch gardens not only as “indigenous,” but as “experimental.”<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusions

The photographs in Franchetti’s Tripolitania survey and the *Relazione sugli accampamenti in Cyrenaica* expose the dual violence—epistemic and material—that defined Italian colonialism in Libya. Examining these images, this paper reveals the simultaneous disqualification and appropriation of Libyan agrarian culture by Italian technicians, along with its weaponization to exclude Cyrenaica’s shepherds from their best lands and eradicate their nomadic lifestyle forever. While offering new evidence on the genocide of Cyrenaica’s highland populations, however, the images also recuperate and foreground the beauty and wisdom of traditional Libyan agrarian practices. The *sanìa* technique—so crucial to the desert gardens—enabled the uniform distribution of precious water across varying distances from the well, relying solely on gravity—alongside intensive groundwork and continuous maintenance—to transform arid, rocky lands into landscapes of green allotments. Thus, these photographs not only unmask colonial violence but also illuminate the ingenuity of Libyan agrarian knowledge.

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42. ASDMAECI, Ex Ministero Africa italiana, *Relazione sugli accampamenti*, 8.

43. *Ibid.*, Photographic album attached to the report.