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# The changing role of historic town of Rhodes in the scenario of Ottoman and Italian rules in the light of the iconographic sources

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# The changing role of historic town of Rhodes in the scenario of Ottoman and Italian rules in the light of the iconographic sources

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## Abstract

Rhodes was the Hospitaller stronghold until the early modern age. It went through an urban and architectural evolution under the Ottoman and Italian rules. Iconography until the twentieth century shows the search for medieval souvenirs in the Islamic town, the creation of a travel destination and the shifting of the symbolic-geographic idea of city, linked to a new attitude towards built heritage. We will trace the changing role of the historic town in Turkish and Italian ideology and practice.

## L'evoluzione del ruolo della città storica di Rodi nello scenario dei governi ottomano e italiano alla luce delle fonti iconografiche

Rodi fu roccaforte degli Ospitalieri fino alla prima età moderna. La città visse un'evoluzione urbana e architettonica durante il dominio ottomano e italiano. L'iconografia fino al XX secolo mostra la ricerca di *souvenirs* medievali nella città islamica, la creazione di una meta di viaggio e lo slittamento dell'idea simbolica-geografica di città, legata al nuovo atteggiamento rispetto al costruito. Studieremo il ruolo mutevole della città storica nell'ideologia e nella pratica turca e italiana.

**Keywords:** Architectural heritage, propaganda, iconography.  
Patrimonio architettonico, propaganda, iconografia.

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## Introduction

At the end of the Balkan War in 1912, all the Aegean islands except for Rhodes were freed from Ottoman rule (1522-1912). The conflict for the possession of Libya brought the Italian occupation of the Dodecanese islands and Kastelorizo, which was ratified in the same year by the first Treaty of Lausanne. In particular, the landing at Rhodes proved to be an easy task, considering that a Turkish garrison of only 1,200 soldiers was on the island at that time. A second treaty of Lausanne in 1923, one year after the March on Rome of the fascist militias, allowed Italy to assert its sovereignty over the Southern Sporades. Rhodes became part of the colonial ambitions of Italy because it was the last large island remained available, in the perspective of the construction of a colonial empire in Libya, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Albania, rather than for its morphological features and its economic opportunities. In fact, not only the town of Rhodes itself was poorly connected to the rest of the island, but also the only trades with the neighboring regions were held in its harbor, aimed at exporting a large number of raw materials compared to the few export of vegetables and other manufactured products from oil, silk and leather [Ciacci 1991].

In the space of a decade, the Italians inaugurated several restorations as well as new building operations in the old town of Rhodes and out of its medieval walls, after that the Turkish rule had deeply modified the appearance of the Hospitaller stronghold. On April, 28th 1920 a Royal Decree established the limits of the so-called 'Zona Monumentale', that is the historic town and the area outside the walls: this strong legal act was aimed at protecting the old town from

any transformation, but later it actually authorized new urban operations concerning the old buildings. It also legitimated the construction of a new city north of the medieval walls. More than fifty years later, in 1988, the medieval town of Rhodes was inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List: even if equally concentrating on the architectural heritage dating back to medieval and modern periods, this represented a quite different delimitation both for modalities and goals, trying to protect all the historic urban layers in the walled town. Therefore, given a so changeable condition of the built heritage of Rhodes over nearly a century, our aim is to observe how the role of this heritage changed, focusing on the delicate transition from the Ottoman to the Italian rule, both for the urban and the political-economic space. Like other islands in the eastern Mediterranean area, Rhodes was at the middle of several conflicts in the course of its history: architectural traces constitute a field of study still barely explored and iconographic sources can help us in this analysis. They make it possible to bring together several points of view on the same subject and to recognize the intentions, the ideologies and the practical aspects of the operations carried out on built heritage over the time, as well as the expectations, the goals and the cultural framework of those who visited and observed that heritage. The study of both these aspects also makes us understand how that heritage has come down to us.

### **The built heritage dating back to the Hospitaller period**

Rhodes was the Order's first capital, after the first occupations of Acre and Cyprus, and before the founding of Birgu (later named Vittoriosa) and Valletta on Malta. The Knights of Saint John imposed a fortress-monastery on the previous Byzantine town, as well as the Latin catholic worship to the Greek one, but the terms of this transaction are still little known. The continuity of use and the historic events over the centuries often make difficult to retrace the history of buildings. The Hospitaller town plan retained its earlier division into two main fortified areas: the Order's district or *castrum* to the north, the village or *burgus* to the south, where the Greeks were the majority. A Jewish community occupied the eastern area of the *burgus*, but we do not know the limits of their neighborhood. The street of the market as well as the walls divided the two main parts; in the *castrum* there was also the fortified Magistral Palace. While the whole *castrum* area remained almost unchanged over the time, the Knights expanded the *burgus* and its fortifications until the middle of the fifteenth century. The system of fortifications, in particular, was built with ramparts and towers and was divided into several sectors: each of them was defended by one of the Tongues of the Order [Kollias 1998]. The Hospitaller buildings and palaces in the *castrum* were hierarchically organized along the Street of the Knights. At the eastern foot of the street, there were the Latin cathedral with the Latin Bishop's residence, the hospital and the auberges of Auvergne and England Tongues; at the western top, there were the Conventual church and the already mentioned Magistral Palace; along the same street, there were the prestigious auberges of France, Italy and Spain Tongues. The Knights occupied the existing structures in the area, before building new palaces: the auberges too acquired an independent configuration (for the first time in the Order's history) after several operations of fusion and acquisition during the first century when the Knights were in Rhodes [Luttrell 2003].

Written and iconographic sources show a general lack of monumentality and a great diversity of urban monuments in Rhodes, probably due to the need to set up a fortress-town more than to a lack of resources: several buildings were founded or adapted after 1309 and probably were not so different from the previous Byzantine ones. The *burgus*, in particular, had an undifferentiated urban fabric, full of small houses and gardens. Private buildings mostly had flat roofs, while a

colored roof marks the churches, as if to underline the two religions: Latin churches had sloped roofs and the Greek ones featured a dome on a drum. There were few monumental buildings, such as a Metropolitan church, a Latin parish and the Greek Metropolitan's residence [Luttrell 2003]. Fifteenth-century iconography<sup>1</sup> and travel accounts confirm architectural sobriety and mostly focused on logistical and military structures, especially walls and harbors. Except for the Order's palaces, churches were the greatest part of the urban built heritage: public and private places of worship, variously mentioned as *ecclesie* or *capelle*, were numerous inside and outside the walls.<sup>2</sup> We can group them into five typologies according to their plan: there were single-aisle churches, which were often flanked by rooms, as well as cross-shaped (both those central-plan and cross in square) buildings, tetraconch churches and basilicas. They look generally sober and typically small. Here, the mixture of Byzantine and Gothic architectural elements is quite visible. The first mainly concern single-aisle and cross-shaped places of worship: here we still find semicircular barrel vaults, semi-circular apses with a polygonal outer profile and a dome on a drum. Sometimes are found decorated niches and drums, eventually showing more resources and skilled masons. Gothic elements, meanwhile, are usually found in the basilicas: ogive barrel or ribbed vaults and a triangular front were quite common, although they are today very rarely preserved [Maglio 2011].

### The Islamization process of the town during the Ottoman period

The urban and architectural evolution of the Hospitaller town of Rhodes started soon after the Ottoman conquest in 1522, when the whole island became a peripheral territory of the Empire and lost a great part of its strategic importance. Because of the rarity of Turkish sources, a few specific contributions (mostly in Greek or Turkish language) concern Ottoman Rhodes and its urban space. However, the analysis of western travel narratives, iconography and surviving buildings, which represent the most accessible sources, gave us the opportunity to shed light on the Islamization process put in place in the town and the island during four centuries. The Ottoman urban policy in Rhodes, as it usually happened in the peripheral territories of the Empire, was marked by the adaptation of existing structures: together with the reuse of medieval civil and religious buildings, the appropriation of space was put into effect by occupying some important urban places and by building up there new religious architectures.

Mediterranean and Middle-eastern Islamic cities are traditionally based on the market (*çarşı*) as an 'empty center' surrounded by the Friday Mosque and other public buildings, usually a bedesten, a madrasa and a hammam [Cuneo 1986]. The organization of the *çarşı* reflected the same logic of the souk in the North-African area that is a real enclosure opened to the inside, guarded and closed by gates, which was developed with successive additions of shops. With their regular disposition, shops constructed the fronts of the street market and formed the economic center of the city [Yerolympos 2007]. Such a model was exported to Rhodes and the town was adapted to the needs of the new inhabitants. The Ottomans exploited the existing structures and turned the urban places of worship, into mosques (*djami* or smaller *masdjid*), houses and warehouses. In some preeminent urban places, they founded the principal mosques and some hammam, and managed other urban structures (a madrasa, an *imâret*, the market itself, several prayer rooms and houses) by reusing the existing buildings. The town of Rhodes was centered on the market street since the Byzantine age: it retained its role during the Ottoman period, but it was actually re-planned as a closed independent district, where some pious foundations were created with the system of *vakıf*. Characterized by number of public buildings, the *çarşı* street stretched east to west, from the Friday Mosque up

<sup>1</sup> Paris, BnF, ms. lat. 6067 (G. Caourosin, *Obsidionis Rhodiae urbis Descriptio*, 1482), ff. 18r, 30v, 58r, 68v. Karlsruhe, Landesbibliothek, cod. St. Peter pap. 32 (K. Grünemberg, *Bericht über die Pilgerfahrt ins Hl. Land*, 1486), ff. 20v-21r.

<sup>2</sup> See some relevant documents in Malta, National Library: cod. 53 (*Liber Bullarum*, 1497), ff. 11v-12r, "ecclesia Sancti Michaelis Castelli Rhodi" and f. 28r, "ecclesiam siue capellam Sancti Simeonis"; cod. 362 (*Liber Bullarum*, 1450), f. 183v, "capellam siue ecclesiam Sancti Elefterij".

to the sea gate [Manoussu-Della 2001]. Moreover, the Ottomans probably organized the urban fabric of Rhodes in several residential units (*mahalla*) centered on a mosque, a school, a café or a fountain: each mahalla was like a closed elementary district [Cerasi 1988]. The mahalla in Rhodes related to the existing urban pattern and probably took the name of some reference mosques: we assumed that each *djami* of the town at least was the center of a *mahalla* (eventually limited by the main urban streets), and that this role could have been attributed to some of the most prestigious *masjid* too [Maglio 2012]. The new founded mosques had their qibla oriented between 35° and 54° north-east, although the exact inclination was fixed as the direction of the Kaaba in Makkah and should be 56° north-east. These mosques were a real breaking element in the extremely regular urban fabric of the Hospitaller town, which retained the Greek urban layout oriented 5° north-west. The surrounding urban fabric retained its own orientation, but the establishment of new larger monuments modified the existing blocks. Indeed, the mosques occupied a great part of them, causing the suppression of the northwestern edge of these blocks: the result was the creation of irregularly shaped squares, where ablution fountains were built and a tree connected with the worship was planted.

The Jews generally occupied the Hospitaller houses, but the Ottomans took possession of the most prestigious mansions of the town. Buildings suffered everywhere from blockages and superelevations: additional windows and wooden *mashrabiyya* gave roads an oriental look; plaster layers covered the stone façades, changing the typical coloring of the town; the existing courtyards were used as gardens. Suburban open areas, starting from the moat outside the Hospitaller walls, housed Ottoman and Jewish cemeteries, plenty of decorated gravestones [Guérin 1856]. Some public functions, instead, were moved outside the walls: the migration of the political center towards the periphery was a common phenomenon in the Arab towns conquered by the Ottomans. This paved the way for a subsequent urbanization of the area north of the medieval walls from the nineteenth century on, starting from the suburbs of more ancient origins.

If urban fortifications remained almost unchanged, the main transformations concerned the medieval religious buildings. The Turks founded seven *djami*, which are mostly surviving today, having a typically Ottoman plan and structure: one or more squared domed rooms, with a columned porch (*remak*) endowed with small *mibrâb*, and one or more tall minarets. The mosques in Rhodes, with those built in Ioannina, Thessaloniki and Athens, represent the most relevant examples of religious architecture dating back to the classic Empire period (sixteenth-seventeenth centuries) [Ottoman architecture 2008]. This particular architectural typology was developed in the fourteenth century in Iznik and Bursa with Seljuk prototypes and was reproduced with an increasing monumentality in Istanbul and the Balkans until the sixteenth century. Skilled builders and masons were involved in the construction of the mosques in Rhodes, but we don't know anything about it. We assumed the existence of architectural and decorative elements coming from the central Ottoman Empire and the Iranian area, blended to Byzantine influences [Maglio 2011].

In addition to new buildings, the existing churches suffered from a systematic transformation and restyling. Those in the so-called “Turkish district”, that is the old core of the *burgus*, were turned into mosques and some of them were later abandoned or incorporated in religious foundations. Christian places of worship in the eastern part of the *burgus* and in the Jewish district, instead, were mostly transformed into houses. Anyway, the external and internal surfaces were covered with colored plaster layers lying on cocciopesto and mortar; the interior space was modified by inserting a pulpit (*minbar*) and one or more prayer niches (*mibrâb*), which sometimes were the only decorative elements [Gabriel 1923]. For example, in the former Latin cathedral, renamed Kantouri *djami*, the

Ottomans built a minaret, two fountains and an elegant porch with three domes and vaulted spans. In eight former Christian churches, then, a new *qibla* wall was built, while in three prayer rooms the *mibrâb* was certainly carved in the existing masonry. In any case, the prayer niche was quite variably oriented compared to the direction of the Kaaba in Makkah and went from 30° to 89°: maybe for the need to adapt time and building requirements to the existing buildings, rather than because of a lack of resources and skilled workers.

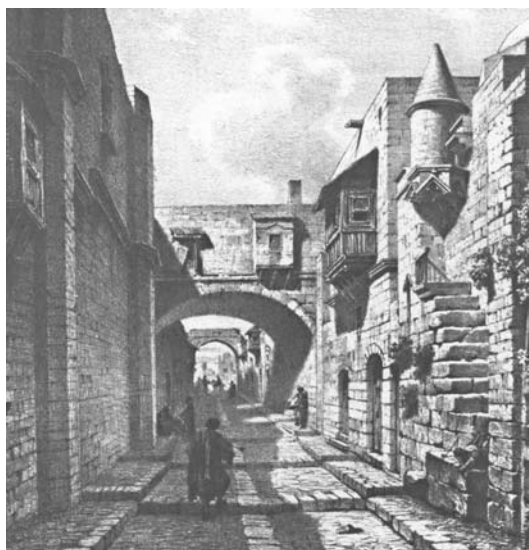
In conclusion, the urban skyline significantly changed since the first century of Ottoman rule in Rhodes: the numerous minarets belonging to the new founded mosques and to the former churches had to be the greatest visual and symbolic signs of a new rule and worship.

### **Ottoman Rhodes: a souvenir town or a decadent town?**

Iconography of the Ottoman town of Rhodes dating back to the late sixteenth century generally reflected a little or no knowledge of the places and sometimes resumed images dating back to the late fifteenth century. Images depicted a poorly characterized town with towers and rare crescents on the top of improbable bell towers (like drawings by Martino Rota in 1572 and Simone Pinargenti in 1573 show), or a distorted urban shape up with no harbors (see the images by Jacob Garnich in 1615 and Angelicus Maria Myller in 1735). Travel accounts were often based on hearsay information, such as the one written by George Sandys, an English poet and diplomat (1658). Starting from the eighteenth century, instead, precise representations of the town and its buildings multiplied. They were published in travel narratives, tourist guides and magazines: in this way, they contributed to spread knowledge of the late Ottoman town and to make it a travel destination for an increasing number of people. Iconography generally tended to illustrate the search for medieval souvenirs within the Islamic town, which was now decadent. In fact, a political-economic crisis and the opposition of the major European powers accompanied the period of stagnation of the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century: it involved all the conquered territories in an inexorable decline. In the second half of the nineteenth century, moreover, several earthquakes hit the island of Rhodes (in 1851 and 1863); the explosion of an ammunition dump destroyed what remained of the Conventual church and several civil buildings in the *castrum* (1856); finally, a serious fire damaged the town market and paralyzed trade for months (1864). Degradation and isolation worsened when the island became a place of exile for political prisoners and intellectuals, who were locked up in the Magistral Palace, and for quarantine: a *lazzaletto* was built outside the town, north of the walls [Guérin 1856].

To the eyes of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European travelers, poverty and depopulation outwardly marked the whole town. According to Marie-Gabriel de Choiseul-Gouffier, a French Ambassador in Istanbul who was in Rhodes in 1776, “la plus grande partie de la ville est déserte» [Vatin, Veinstein 2004; Aloï 2008, 63]. Nineteenth-century travel narratives all describe a town in decline, and abandoned, where the Ottoman architecture and civilization had overlapped, crushing it, to the Byzantine and Hospitaller built heritage. Moreover, travelers made usually the same limited visit itinerary: the two harbors, the former *castrum* and the Street of the Knights (with the ruined Magistral Palace, the former Conventual church and the Latin cathedral, the hospital and the surviving auberges), the town walls observed by the moat, the square of the market and sometimes the Greek suburbs.

Bernard Rottiers, a French colonel who stayed in Rhodes in 1825-26, published a detailed report with several pictures. He was a privileged visitor since the Ottoman bey allowed him to visit and portray the Conventual church turned into mosque, but he had to keep away from the other



mosques of the town and from the urban walls. The old Conventual church, in particular, was in ruins and the drawings represented it “comme il était au moment où il fut converti en mosquée, n’ayant pas voulu y introduire les ornemens qui le défigurent aujourd’hui” [Rottiers 1828, 284-305]. Rottiers also visited the Turkish cemetery, which was north of the town. In 1842 Charles Cottu, a French Royal advisor, described the whole island as plunged into “une léthargie profonde”: the harbor of Rhodes was deserted and the Street of the Knights, an essential place to visit, appeared “déserte, remplie d’herbes et de pierres roulantes, [...] un amas de maisons turques ou juives” [Berchet 1985, 331-343]. In 1844, the French orientalist Eugène Flandin confirmed the state of abandonment of the main religious and civil Hospitaller monuments. Nineteenth-century pictures in travel accounts, finally, in a full orientalist spirit, return us an Islamic town, finding its new fascination in a ruined and decadent art and architecture.

In the first, by Flandin, the Street of the Knights is depicted in its section where there were the auberge of Spain Tongue on the left and the small church of St. Michael on the right: the elliptical dome and the minaret at the end of a short staircase can be seen for the latter one. We also note, in the foreground and in the distance, several wooden balconies.

The second image, by de Choiseul-Gouffier, is part of a view embracing the commercial harbor of Rhodes: it seems important to stress the co-existence of Hospitaller elements (walls, towers and urban gates) and Ottoman features (domes, slim minarets and barracks built between the walls and the harbor), which define a harmonious whole of an oriental town.

### Different representations of built heritage during the Italian period

At the dawn of the Italian occupation, the economic situation of the town of Rhodes was largely unchanged: according to Italian sources until the first half of the twentieth century, the whole town was “un misero borgo levantino” decayed together with the Ottoman Empire [L’Italia a Rodi 1946, 2; Balducci 1932, 11-12]. Written and iconographic sources dating back to the Italian period until more recent times provide different images of the town and its monuments, giving us various points of view. On one hand, there are the travel reports until the ‘30s, giving a vivid description

Fig. 1: E. Flandin, *Street of the Knights*, 1844.

Fig. 2: M. De Choiseul-Gouffier, 1783, *The commercial harbor* (<http://www.mapmogul.com>).



and a perspective more or less consistent with the Italian one, between orientalist curiosity and excitement for the new colonial projects.

The Italian geographer Giotto Dainelli was in Rhodes in 1920 and made a clear distinction between the ‘Oriental Rhodes’ and the ‘Italian Rhodes’. In the first one, he recognized the charm of a foreign world, rich in cultures, languages and activities, during his visit of the streets of the *burgus*: “quel mondo orientale che esercita una così sottile attrattiva”, as well as “quelle botteghe di caffè, ad osservare tutti quei tipi, – di turchi, di ebrei, di greci, di levantini, di europei, ai quali si mescola qualche uniforme di marinaio e di soldato nostri, – e ad ascoltare quella specie di torre di Babele delle molte lingue parlate”. However, Dainelli also outlined the contrast between that charming world and the one that was under construction just outside the northern town walls: “per le finestre illuminate del ‘Circolo d’Italia’ mi arriva la musica grottesca di un fox-trott”. In the ‘Italian Rhodes’, therefore, Dainelli found a great and urgent need for renewal, in order to recover the Hospitaller built heritage and achieve a stronger process of political, commercial and cultural development.

The town of Rhodes had to become a springboard to Italian colonial empire in Turkey and beach tourism seemed to be the major key to make the town a pole of attraction for the whole eastern Mediterranean area [Dainelli 1923, 10-56].

On the other hand, there were travelers interested only in Medieval and Ottoman buildings. It is the case of as the French journalist and orientalist Henriette Célarié, who travelled to Rhodes in the early ‘30s. She focused on the ruins, such as those of the Magistral Palace, whose she said that “il ne reste qu’un mur lézardé, des créneaux décapités”. She was also impressed by the so-called turqueries, as well as by the Turkish women and the former Latin cathedral, still used as a mosque and having nothing Turkish but its minaret. Her position was clear, since she definitely loved the oriental charm of the medieval town: “Pourquoi être l’ennemie de ce qui fait mon plaisir actuel? Avec leurs dômes peints, leurs minarets effilés, leurs beaux ifs fièrement plantés, les Osmanlis ont répandu sur la vieille ville des chevaliers un air d’orientalisme et de turquerie qu’on n’attendait pas et qui ravit, qui enchante” [Célarié 1933, 15-29].

Finally, there is a wide scientific production where writings, images and photographs were required to show and celebrate restoration, building and touristic activities carried out inside and outside the walled town by the Italians: in this way, propaganda combined with scientific and cultural interests. In particular, iconography dating back to the first half of the twentieth century looked at the Hospitaller town with new eyes and purposes, especially from the moment when the Italians planned to build a brand new town next to it.

The photos published by two Italian authors sent to Rhodes, Giuseppe Gerola and Arturo Faccioli, in a joint purpose of information and propaganda, give a quite objective image of historic and architectural heritage of Rhodes [Faccioli 1913; Gerola 1914]. Italy based its expansionist policy in the Levant on the recovery of the Roman Empire legacy, with the aim of restoring a supposed Mediterranean entity where an ‘Italic zone’ and an ‘Aegean zone’ were complementary and the concept of Mare Nostrum returned to be a central ideological-strategic axis for the fascism [Roletto 1939].

In this sense, we can say that a critical approach was mostly missing in the literary and iconographic production during the Italian period. Hospitaller Rhodes was intended to return to be a Christian rampart under the fascism and finally became a true laboratory of new Italian urban and architectural practices. What was the Italian idea of heritage and the strategies underlying such projects? How did iconography support those political and building activities?

### Historic buildings and new projects: the shifting of a city

In the framework of a rethinking project involving the town of Rhodes and its surroundings by the Italians, first were considered the monuments of classical antiquity and dating back to the Hospitaller period: they were the only ones to be recognized as purely Roman and Italian. Following extensive archaeological campaigns, the ancient ruins were reassembled in a new Archaeological Museum, housed in the former Hospital of the Knights since 1916. As for the Hospitaller monuments, restorations generally provided to remove the Turkish additions considered to have no historical and artistic value, and integrated missing elements in order to achieve a philological reconstruction of a supposed medieval facies [Roletto, 1939, 33]. This procedure became systematic and altered the original buildings, which today are inevitably 'distorted' in an attempt to give a picture close to their original appearance. An example of more careful restoration, however, is represented by the auberge of France Tongue, which was restored by the French architect Albert Gabriel, coming from the École française d'Athènes, in 1913. His work, although it tended to delete the Ottoman items, was based on the respect of the preexisting building, also on the basis of an accurate preliminary drawing including the architectural elements to safeguard or repair [Gabriel 1923, vol. 2].

Elsewhere, however, Italian restorations in the *castrum* (1914-1943) often became real reconstructions. Concerning the Magistral Palace, for example, we know that rather arbitrary decisions intended to rebuild the destroyed parts of the monument and to return a pure Italian Renaissance appearance deeply altered the whole building [Mesturino 1978; Presenza 1996]. As for the Christian churches of the town, the first Italian works removed the Ottoman plaster layers, uncovering

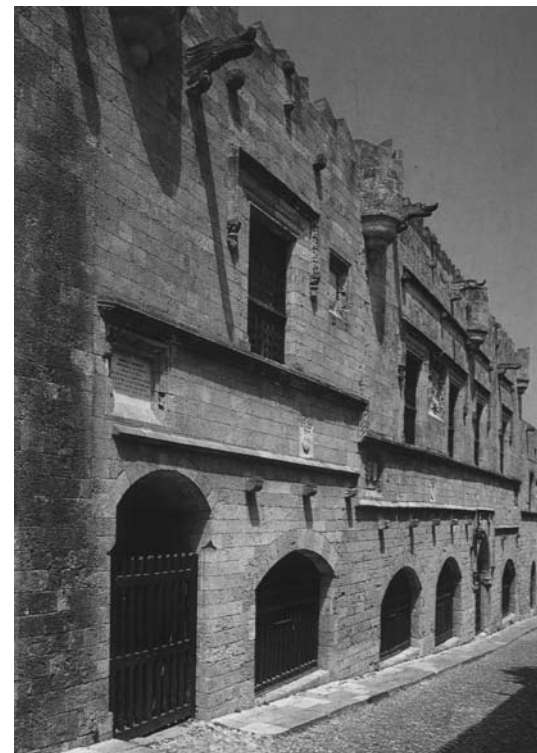
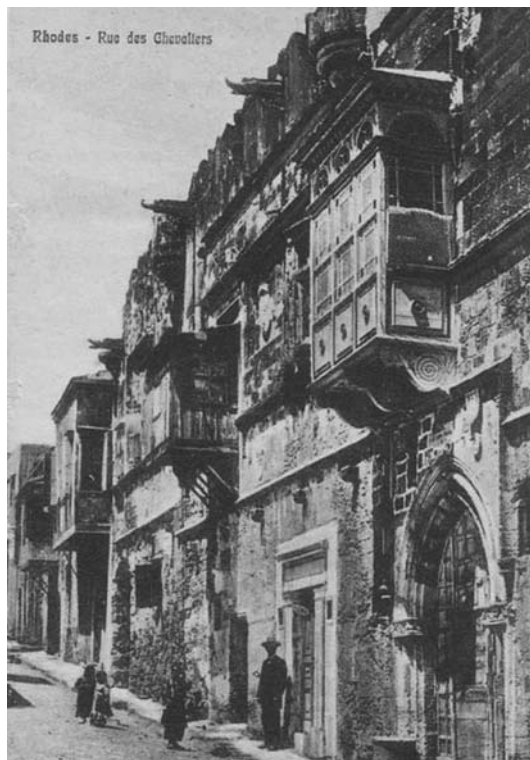


Fig. 3-4: The auberge of France Tongue before restoration, postcard of 1912 and today (author's photo, 2009).



Fig. 5: The urban mosques (postcard of 1934).

Fig. 6: St. John's gate with Hospitaller coats of arms (postcard of 1914).

Fig. 7: A view of the Foro Italico (postcard of 1930).

the old masonry and remains of medieval frescoes. Ciacci [1991, 11] stated that a good part of the Hospitaller architectural heritage in the walled town is today a true 'false' and that after 1920 it became like a monument to contemplate. However, it is to be said that those restoration strategies were in accordance with the common practices of the beginning of the twentieth century, inherited by Viollet-Le-Duc, aimed at restoring the stylistic unity of a monument although its original forms were not exactly known. After the end of the Second World War, the Ephorate of the Dodecanese also carried out the systematic restoration of Christian churches. I believe that the most significant matter was the a priori removal of Turkish elements in the civil buildings: other visual elements, in fact, remained and Ottoman buildings were preserved or restored, also because of the presence a large Turkish community in the town [Miglioli, Savino 1987, 167]. Several minarets and ablution fountains, but also some *mibrâb*, stood out as 'foreign' annexes and were often depicted in magazines and postcards. In an image of 1934 we can see, from those on the foreground, the minarets of the little Borouzan *masdjid* (the former St. Kyriaki church), of the Redjep Paşa *djami* and of the Sultan Mustafa *djami* (those minarets then collapsed) and of the Friday Mosque, the Suleimāniyyeh *djami*: all of them have a cylindrical section, a balcony and a conical ending. Based on the first topographic map of Rhodes, dating back to 1917, the Royal Decree n. 32 of 1920 established the borders of the 'Zona Monumentale' as a completely no-building area: the walled town, the Hospitaller fortifications and the area outside the moat were equally concerned. Turkish and Jewish cemeteries outside the walls were removed and the whole area became a green belt [Miglioli, Savino 1987; Ciacci 1991]. The historic town was actually isolated from any subsequent planning action: Medieval surviving elements were once more like souvenirs of the past, now restored to life. The conservation of architectural heritage was an opportunity, perhaps even a pretext, to carry out a large-scale project showing the authority of colonial Italy. In conjunction with the decree, a 'new' town began to be built north of the walls "con belle vie alberate, grandi piazze, giardini e passeggiate panoramiche, verso la Punta di Rodi, facendo centro sull'antico porto delle galere" [*L'Italia a Rodi*, 12]. Moreover, after the First World War, the walled town proved inadequate to the needs of the Italian community and to its social and administrative functions. The new settlement in the Foro Italico, as they renamed the entire area, was established along the bay of the military harbor, where the Turkish konak and other major buildings – houses and offices of the Ottoman Empire – had already housed the first Italian administrative and military offices since 1912. Starting from 1925, a monumental waterfront was created, in line with the contemporary projects in Tripoli and Algiers [Piccioli 1933], as a new 'container' of monuments and public buildings. There were the Government Palace, having an imaginative 'Venetian Gothic' style; the hospital and the Casa del Fascio; the new polygonal shaped market, with oriental architectural forms as a modern *çarşı*; the church of St. John, having the hypothetical forms of the Medieval Conventual church; several barracks and schools, the Bank of Italy, the Post Office and the Puccini theater. A new city took shape, combining distant and different architectural styles, while the 'new' Magistral Palace stood out in the background. In order to turn the town into a touristic center, an airport was built and the harbor of Rhodes was renewed. Transformations in the northern end of the island also began in 1933: the nineteenth-century Cretan neighborhood and the Catholic cemetery were eliminated, in order to build squares and gardens, as well as the Institute of Marine Biology and the Albergo delle Rose, together with a second luxury hotel, the Albergo delle Terme. However, despite the 1936 master plan intended to concern the whole suburban area, by integrating the smaller existing villages, the historic town of Rhodes and the new town, only a complete road network was actually created, without information about public areas and services [Aloi 2008;



Miglioli, Savino 1987]. Finally, the fascistization of existing and new-planned buildings after 1936, which intended to be “una bonifica totalitaria, spirituale e materiale del Possedimento” [Sertoli Salis 1939, 3], altered in many cases the original oriental and exotic forms. Architects generally imitated the Hospitaller architecture, as in the Magistral Palace; elsewhere, geometric structures and pure volumes, typical of fascist architecture, replaced the former eclectic style. It is the case of the Casa del Fascio and the Albergo delle Rose: in the hotel, in particular, in the space of a decade, the porch with small domes and columns, the spirals, the oculi, the decorations and the wall coverings left the place to an austere, stone square-shaped building. In other buildings, such as the Government Palace, the War stopped those proposed changes [Miglioli, Savino 1987, 222-227]. The town of Rhodes, then, was definitely ‘reinvented’ with the aims of propaganda and tourism: the historical Hospitaller and Ottoman heritage was largely exploited and a new identity, the Italian town, was juxtaposed and overlapped a posteriori in the collective imagination: a true shifting of symbolic-geographic idea of city. These transformations, as we have seen, can be read throughout the Italian period in texts and the images. Postcards until the ‘50s continued to convey two different faces of Rhodes, the historic and the Italian, as a double ‘oriental’ and ‘colonial’ reality that was always closer to the readers. In some Italian magazines such as “L’illustrazione Italiana» and “La Lettura», then, the Italian economic and urban projects were constantly in the foreground, with special issues on Rhodes in 1926 [Ciacci 1991].

### Conclusions

In the eyes of the readers, there was an already consolidated image of an Italian colonial town in full development, where Hospitaller-Turkish history and modernity (new architectures, but also new technologies and transport) equally participated in building a new urban identity. Concerning the evaluation of Italian activity in Rhodes, the great economic, political and cultural expectations were realized only in part: the Italian town, intended to be the ‘eastern rampart’ of a rising empire, remained isolated, even if it prepared the ground for a subsequent renewal [L’Italia a Rodi 1946; Aloï 2008]. In the light of iconographic and photographic sources, it is possible to understand not

Figg. 8-9: Albergo delle Rose in its former appearance. Postcard after 1925 and after restorations, postcard after 1936.



only the transformations of Rhodes architectural heritage, but also the transformation of the idea of heritage. The original Hospitaller elements, in fact, such as carved coats of arms, urban gates and monuments, were always the most frequently portrayed, as shown by postcards of the first half of the twentieth century and by drawings [Presenza 1996; Gabriel 1923]. The symbols the Ottoman heritage, instead, were variously considered: iconography shows that some of them were removed because they were considered with no value, while others were preserved, as we saw, like minarets, which gave the urban skyline a fascinating oriental appearance.

After the first decrees of expropriation in 1923, the first cadastral map of the historic town was elaborated in 1928: it emphasized the desire to 'freeze' Medieval Rhodes and anticipated a new type of intervention, which actually changed the idea of heritage connected to the town. The master plan of the historic town drawn in 1934, in fact, went far beyond the principles put in place by the decree of 1920. It classified all the civil and religious urban monuments, also chromatically distinguished from the rest of the urban fabric, but also graphically represented new planned activities that had nothing to do with the respect of the structure of the historic town. In the plan obtained by the redesign of the original master plan, in fact, we can see that two main operations were planned: the isolation of the major religious buildings of Christian and Ottoman origin, which were expected to be surrounded by geometrically planned green spaces; the redesign of entire blocks and minor roads, up to the demolition of some residential areas of the town to open new squares and large streets. Therefore, the same town concerned by the Royal decree of 1920 became in fact an urban laboratory. A few operations were effectively carried out only in the market street (*çarşı*), removing some shops, and in the nearby church of St. Mary of the *burgus* (1940-1944), which was blocked by Ottoman houses. In particular, here the apse area was isolated through the opening of a new road, running through the old Jewish district as far as a new urban gate. Iconography can yet help us in reconstructing the elements of the historic town that no longer exist: missing or altered monuments demolished or bombed during the Second World War [Gerola 1914; Gabriel 1923]. In this way, it can be possible to investigate urban space and architectural forms in Rhodes, such as religious topography and residential architecture, which remain poorly explored. Through iconographic sources, it is possible to retrace the identity of the historic town of Rhodes surviving today. Over the last three centuries, the town was at the same time a guardian and a destroyer of its own identity: cancellation and reinvention, preservation and destruction, respect for the past and its use for other purposes, are responsible for which parts of the urban heritage have been preserved or lost.

Fig. 10: Plan of Rhodes with the relevant planned operations from the 1936 Master plan of the historic town (by author).



Walls and  
historic urban  
fabric



Planned new  
urban streets and  
blocks



Planned new  
squares and  
gardens



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