

Fascist Ecologies, Colonial Natures: An Environmental History of the Italian Imperialism (1922–1945)

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This project will examine the environmental history of the relationship between Italy and its African territories—Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somaliland, and Libya—during the era of fascism from 1922 to 1945. It will triangulate three different historiographical concerns: the historiography of Italian colonialism, African environmental studies, and environmental history of colonies and empires.

The new countries, considered by Mussolini to be “virgin territory” waiting to be transformed into Italian territory, provided the ideal circumstances to create and test new ideas—successfully or not—on how to shape new socio-natures. After decades of inner reclamation and colonization, African countries became the testing ground for government programs that could experiment away from the constrictions of the fatherland. The colonial periphery represents a useful vantage point to explore the concept of “regeneration” from a cultural and material perspective. Adopting this new perspective on Italian colonialism in Africa enables us to highlight the largely implicit geographical rhetoric relating to the unknown promised land. Indeed, especially after the foundation of the Italian Empire (1936), the Mediterranean has been described by existing scholarship as a space to celebrate Italian primacy. Economic, social and political histories of Italian colonialism in Africa are firmly rooted in nature framing and appropriation.

The fascist colonization scheme severely impacted on the ecologies of communities and places, and the project will try to deal with environmental transformations addressing three research paths from a cultural and material perspective:

1. The urban planning of Addis Ababa exemplifies fascism’s broad efforts to reshape spatial order in several parts of its empire, including Rome. From a cultural perspective, the Addis Ababa plan was devised to translate the concepts of progress, order, hierarchy, and racial segregation in the territory. From a material perspective, Addis Ababa completely changed its cityscape: founded in 1889, the Ethiopian capital was anything but a blank slate and was a garden city until 1936. Moreover, Addis Ababa possesses an impressive story of urban planning on the African continent.
2. Farming in Africa is affected by colonization, and European plant and animal species were brought in by Italian colonizers. This practice responded to a distinctive strategy of the authoritarian regime—settler colonialism—which aimed at embedding Italian rural communities in African areas considered empty. This phenomenon was initially tested in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania but it did not meet the expectations of human, plant, and animal groups despite previous demographic and scientific surveys.
3. The search for resources such as copper, gold, granite, marble, and potash represents a conventional chapter of any history of imperialism and, to some extent, it has come to symbolize colonial practices of exploitation and expropriation. In 1936, a national agency launched a campaign of exploration, investigation, and exploitation of Eritrean ores, which had until that point remained mostly unexplored. Despite the propaganda, public investments, and modern equipment in use, the results continued to be disappointing and mining activities generated phenomena that, until then, had not been experienced: protests by local communities, significant deforestation, pollution, and new race and ethnic relations.

These trajectories show the dangerous cooperation between science, technology, power, hierarchy, and ideology.