

3 Mediterranean Imaginaries

Europe, Empire, and Islam in the Nineteenth Century

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In 1912, the French writer Paul Bruzon offered a standard account of what he believed empire implied for the nations of Europe. Each people, he contended, had a particular geographical space in which to expand and spread their ‘civilisation’. The Anglo-Saxons had held sway in North America while the Russians were actively working to extend their domination across Central Asia and the historic homeland of the Slavs. ‘For France, the path of destiny opens on to the Mediterranean’, Bruzon claimed. ‘Inheritor of the Greek genius and Latin might, it has a duty to preserve its absolute empire on the Classical sea’. At the time, the *présence française* was well established across much of North Africa. In 1830, France had taken Algeria, establishing a settler colony on the shores of the southern Mediterranean. A half-century later, it declared a protectorate over Tunisia. At the time Bruzon wrote, France was engaged in securing its latest conquest in Morocco. These formal possessions were matched by a strong commercial and cultural presence in the Levant as well as diplomatic ties to the Ottoman Empire and Egypt. In these Mediterranean ventures, France was simply ‘following the path traced by [its] forefathers’, Bruzon contended.¹

Yet if Bruzon saw the Mediterranean as a specifically ‘French’ space, others might well contest such claims. In 1860, the Spanish poet and statesman Gaspar Núñez de Arce insisted that ‘in Italy and Spain the Mediterranean sounds a hymn to antiquity. Who is capable of discerning the destinies that providence has reserved for us on this sea that extends like a lake between the most fertile and lush regions of the world?’² At the time Núñez de Arce posed this question, Spain was embroiled in a war with Morocco, and his allusion to Spain’s Mediterranean ‘destiny’ was tied specifically to new aspirations to create a Spanish empire in the Sharifian kingdom. In late 1911 when Italy launched an invasion of Ottoman Libya in a bid to grab its own piece of the North African pie, the Italian Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti offered an unapologetic rationale for the illegal seizure of territory, citing Italy’s historic ties to Roman Africa. ‘Italy has always considered as its vital interest the equilibrium of political influence in the Mediterranean’, he stated triumphantly before the Italian parliament. The country could not ‘renounce the mission imposed on it by history, its geographical situation,

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and its social circumstances'.³ While French imperial ideologues were inclined to see the Mediterranean as a historically French space, Spain and Italy clearly understood the region to be their own natural sphere of influence. René Millet, former Resident General of Tunisia, foresaw the tensions that these competing claims might produce. 'When France set foot on the other bank of the Mediterranean', he insisted in 1908, 'it was necessarily inevitable that she would collide with the ambitions of her two Latin sisters, Italy and Spain'.⁴

Geopolitical struggles aside, the arguments presented by French, Spanish, and Italian imperialists all drew upon a common set of perceptions and rationales. They were first and foremost linked to imperial imaginaries that naturalised claims to territory and land in Mediterranean Africa. Secondly, they evoked reflexive ideas of a Classical heritage, associating the sea with the civilisations of antiquity. This trope was a mainstay of imperialist discourse during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, validating historical claims to land through the cultivation of a Latin identity and tradition.⁵ It was also tied to an idea of European selfhood whereby the Mediterranean was both the 'cradle' of European civilisation and a space where it could be spread.⁶ This outlook imparted a conceptual unity to a maritime region that possessed a remarkable internal diversity, one which present-day scholars inspired by methodologies in transnational and global history have begun to recover.⁷ Nineteenth-century Europeans were not ignorant of the diversity to be found in Mediterranean societies. Nonetheless, they persisted in seeing it as a space defined by impervious cultural and religious boundaries. Much as the French writer Paul-Albert Simone stated in 1867, the Mediterranean was 'a point of necessary contact between all human races' while also a civilisational battleground. 'Christianity and Islam, two adversaries that since the destruction of Rome and Carthage up to the present have disputed the Empire of the Mediterranean are [...] prepared to commit any violence to attain their traditional objectives', he stated.⁸ Their various interpretations – ranging from a unitary Eurocentric conception of the sea to the idea of a 'liquid continent' populated by different peoples and cultures – suggest that the Mediterranean was and remains part of an imaginative geography that has been repeatedly revised and reconceptualised to accommodate specific political and cultural projects.

How might we reconcile these differing interpretations, the one stressing European agency, the other arguing for a more pluralist and diverse space of encounters? As a nexus of entanglement, the Mediterranean was often subject to multiple interpretations, especially as European powers attempted to establish colonies and lay claim to imperial dominion along the shores of Africa and the Near East. Yet within this imperial space, European states fashioned and re-fashioned national identities to accommodate the particularities of Mediterranean diversity in order to legitimise claims to empire throughout the region. This is particularly salient given that the Mediterranean was never a wholly 'European' space. The east and

south were part of a broader Muslim and Ottoman world which sat at the crossroads of Africa, Europe, and Asia.⁹ As Ottoman power declined over the course of the century, European expansion into the Mediterranean and its engagement with the Muslim world altered perceptions of European selfhood while simultaneously reinforcing ideas of ethnic and religious alterity central to the imagining of a European community. While the ‘clash of civilisations’ paradigm or notions of Oriental otherness have typically been employed to evaluate Europe’s engagement with Islam, imperial imaginaries tell a different story.¹⁰ The nineteenth century was an age of rampant nationalism among European elites, but it was also the age of high imperialism, and these two phenomena were not independent of one another.¹¹ Nation-building and empire-building shared many discursive boundaries, and Mediterranean empire-building was no exception.¹² As powers ‘nationalised’ their empires in the nineteenth century, concepts of Mediterranean Islam and Arab identity were incorporated into articulations of national-imperial identity. European nation- and empire-building had a trans-Mediterranean component. By examining identity formation in this way, we may gain new insights into how European identities were constructed, projected, and instrumentalised. We can also recontextualise Europe’s relationship with Islam and the Muslim world.¹³ Rather than rigid constructs of European ‘self’ and Muslim ‘other’, a closer examination of Europe’s Mediterranean entanglements reveals the fluidities that shaped understandings of nationality and European selfhood in an age of high nationalism and imperialism.

‘A Half-Way House Between Europe and Africa’

In the autumn of 1859, Madrid seethed with wild energy. On 22 October, the Spanish prime minister, Leopoldo O’Donnell y Jorris, stood before parliament to address a foreign policy issue that had recently attracted national attention. Berber tribesmen had engaged Spanish soldiers at Ceuta, a small fortification on the Moroccan coast held by Spain since the seventeenth century. The territory was one of many garrison towns along the Moroccan littoral that serviced Spanish merchant vessels and sheltered a small population of soldiers, missionaries, traders, and convicts.¹⁴ In themselves, these garrisons possessed limited commercial value for Spain, although they were guaranteed by international treaty. More galling was the fact that the new Moroccan Sultan, Muhammed IV, was unwilling to rein in the rowdy tribes and accommodate Spanish security concerns. After weeks of futile negotiations with Fez, the Spanish government opted for a military response. Punctuating an otherwise dry speech with an outburst of patriotic fervour, O’Donnell declared: ‘With our weapons in our hands, we are going [to Africa] to demand satisfaction for the insult offered to our flag’.¹⁵

The response was immediate. The declaration of war unleashed an outpouring of patriotic nationalism as people gathered in the streets, shouted

‘Death to the Muhammadans!’ and launched conscription campaigns on behalf of the soldiers preparing to depart for Morocco. Yet despite the clamour of the religious and nationalist fervour that arose in 1859, another theme was clearly evident as well. ‘Today Spain offers a sublime sight that Europe contemplates with admiration’, the journalist Manuel Ibo Alfaro stated. As Alfaro saw it, a victorious war and expansion into Africa was crucial to the task of ‘raising ourselves in the estimation of Europe’.¹⁶ This thought was clearly on the mind of Gaspar Núñez de Arce also, who likewise understood the impact war would have on Spain’s international reputation. The objective was clear: ‘To reconquer with a daring blow the esteem of Europe, accustomed to see in us a Spain of civil wars, *pronunciamientos*, ministerial crises, and disorder’. It was only with militarism and ‘bold gestures’ that Spain would prove itself the equal of other modern nations of Europe.¹⁷

These declarations said much about how Europeans viewed the Mediterranean as well as Spain’s place within it. The Mediterranean was perceived by many observers as a liminal space situated between European civilisation and the shores of a barbarous African continent. Passing through the sea by boat on his way to Egypt in 1877, the British writer Edwin De Leon spotted Malta, describing it as a ‘half-way house between Europe and Africa’.¹⁸ Visiting Ceuta as a war correspondent during the Hispano-Moroccan War of 1859–1860, the French travel writer Charles Yriarte likewise remarked upon the mixed atmosphere found in the coastal port settlement, claiming: ‘It is not yet Africa. However, it is no longer Spain either’.¹⁹ This liminality was typically extended to Spain itself. Many romantic travellers who visited the country during the early nineteenth century had drawn attention to the traces of Al-Andalus dating from the period of Moorish rule in Iberia between the eighth and fifteenth centuries. The palatial ruins of the Alhambra and the former Great Mosque of Córdoba in the south built by the Muslim dynasties that had ruled medieval Iberia were among the ancient curiosities most visited by travellers and became objects of fascination for a generation of Romantics.²⁰ Prominent writers like Washington Irving and Théophile Gautier had taken note of the ‘oriental’ features of Spanish life and history.²¹ ‘Blood, manners, language, ways of living and fighting, everything in Spain is African’, claimed Marie-Henri Beyle, better known by the *nom de plume* Stendhal. ‘If the Spaniard were a Muslim he would be a complete African’.²²

Spaniards themselves were conflicted when it came to their historical identity and culture. The country’s Catholic heritage was considered a key – if not *the* essential – mark of Spain’s national identity.²³ Yet as romantic writers produced lyrical accounts of their travels through Andalusia, Spanish scholars were similarly beginning to focus on Spain’s Arabo-Moorish past to understand their own national roots. During the 1820s, the historian José Antonio Conde wrote the first complete history of Al-Andalus, accenting the achievements of the medieval Arabs and underscoring the contribution

of Muslim scholarship to the preservation of Classical knowledge and the sciences.²⁴ As director of the Escorial Library in Madrid, Conde had access to its extensive collection of Arabic manuscripts, which provided the basis for his study. His seminal work linked medieval Al-Andalus with classical Arab civilisation, ascribing to Iberian Islam its own unique culture and past while simultaneously tracing the contours of a particularly Spanish Islamic inheritance. Subsequent generations of so-called 'Arabists' developed this line of argument over the coming decades, drawing attention to the Moorish influences on Spanish literature and music, and on Provençal poetry. Collectively, they urged Spanish scholars to see Arab culture as a part of their own national heritage and patrimony.²⁵

The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of Arabist historiography in Spain, with chairs in Arabic studies created in the major Spanish universities by mid-century.²⁶ Spanish Arabists were responding to evolving ideas of romantic nationalism fashionable in the post-Napoleonic period. As French and German scholars began to conceptualise the nation as a community bounded by shared cultural and historical factors, intellectuals across the continent busied themselves with charting ethnic genealogies and categorising archaeological ruins in order to validate claims to nationhood. The model of the *Kultur* nation stressed cultural roots and continuity over time. Taking this to heart, elites engaged in an emotional search for the primeval traces and visible markers of a past that would reveal the particular qualities and characteristic of their own national communities.²⁷ In turning to Iberia's past, Spanish romantics came to appreciate its mixed inheritance and exceptional cultural diversity. They rediscovered – or more accurately *reinvented* – an Oriental and Moorish past repressed by Spain's traditionally exclusive Catholic patrimony and claimed it as their own.²⁸ For Spaniards, recognition of an Arab past was part of the discovery of the nation and hence integral to its path towards modern nationhood. As Spain began its push into Morocco in 1859, elites grappled with their country's Muslim heritage while also endeavouring to project an image of themselves as a European nation. Paradoxically enough, desires to forge a new North African empire would demonstrate that these tensions were not mutually exclusive. Claims to modern European selfhood were often directly linked to a recognition of Spain's Muslim past.²⁹

In the wake of the abortive Moroccan expedition of 1859–1860, a growing number of colonial interest groups emerged that would continue to champion the cause of a Spanish Africa. José de Carvajal, who was associated with the influential *Sociedad Española de Africanistas y Colonistas*, insisted: 'We are going to develop in the public mind a lively desire and firm resolve favourable to our historical and ethnographic claims in the Moroccan question'.³⁰ His colleague, Joaquín Costa, similarly implored audiences attending the colonial society to 'petition vigorously' and make their desires for Spain's imperial mission known to the government and general public alike.³¹ For Costa, a well-regarded social theorist and leading

figure in such circles, European expansion into Africa was of vital importance. 'The problem of Africa is the problem *par excellence* of our century', he insisted. 'To work in it is to contribute to the spread and strengthening of European civilization; it is to contribute to the formation of contemporary history'.³²

It was not simply that colonial lobbying was reviving dreams of imperial grandeur or giving expression to pent-up nationalist desires. The message communicated by these so-called *Áfricanistas* was also novel and drew upon the groundwork laid by earlier Arabist scholars. 'Spanish civilisation recognises Muslim civilisation as its immediate antecedent', Costa explained.³³ *Áfricanistas* emphasised the historical continuities between Spain and Africa, explaining them through new scholarly disciplines like anthropology and human geography that lent their claims an air of scientific validity. The leading geographer and colonial advocate Francisco Coello reminded the public of the 'numerous links' that united Spain and Morocco. Citing geographical and cultural affinities, Coello argued that in light of centuries of Arab rule in Iberia, 'there has always existed a great similarity and harmony between the destinies of the two people'.³⁴ Geographical proximity and a common history even placed Spain in a better position vis-à-vis France when it came to exercising influence over the Muslim peoples across the Mediterranean, some argued. These views became more pronounced as Spain wrestled with France for control in the region. According to Gumersindo Azcarate, a philosopher and jurist who taught at the Free Institution of Education in Madrid, there was 'no point of contact between French and African civilisation'. Spain was the natural link. 'Between the refined customs of France and the barbarism and primitive customs of Africa there are those of Spain, at once cultured and primitive'.³⁵

Áfricanistas consciously repurposed the image of 'Oriental' Spain and channelled it into a new imperial project centered on Muslim Africa. Costa famously extended the connection between Spaniards and the Arabo-Berber populations further, insisting there existed an 'ethnic kinship' between the two peoples. Centuries of Celtic migrations across the Straits of Gibraltar coupled with the Arab invasions of the middle ages had resulted in racial mixing and a strong 'instinctive affection' between Spaniards and North Africans. 'The Moors and Spanish are brothers that belong to a common Mediterranean race', Costa declared confidently.³⁶ Arguments rooted in ethnicity and race seamlessly papered over long-standing cultural and religious differences, suggesting that the conflicts between Christians and Muslims were neither ineradicable nor even as significant when compared with the deeper ties forged by race and blood. In Costa's view, the Moroccans were not 'immune to all progress' and with the proper guidance could reverse their cultural decline and regenerate themselves. Naturally, this stewardship fell to Spain, a country currently in the process of regenerating itself. In renewing its links with the Arab past, Spain would assist in

reviving a decadent Muslim culture. ‘The Spanish nation must [...] found in Córdoba a new Rome and in Granada a new Athens, and it must do it independently of all political considerations’, Costa professed.³⁷

Costa’s allusions to a ‘common Mediterranean race’ and the founding of a new Rome and Athens were telling. Spanish imperialists were devising a colonial discourse within a Mediterranean context. Yet these colonial aspirations were never divorced from the rhetoric of a ‘civilising mission’ employed by competing European powers, allowing Spanish critics to claim equality with other continental nations. ‘There is a spirit which animates all European nations, [and] that is the civilising spirit’, stated Martín Ferreiro y Peralta at a gathering of the Spanish Geographical Society in 1883. Spain, he admitted, had been slumbering in a ‘prolonged lethargy’. But, he continued, ‘it has now awakened in the light of modern civilisation, and, like all enlightened nations [...] feels vague but irresistible impulses that drag it into the general current’.³⁸ In embracing this ‘civilising spirit’, Spain was acquiring the modern and European attributes it coveted. ‘The duty of Europe is to civilise, modifying where it can, transforming where it is necessary’, Carvajal declared. ‘This is Spain in respect to Morocco’.³⁹

Tensions between Spain’s European and Muslim qualities had been evident within Spanish nationalist discourses since the early nineteenth century. By the 1880s, however, these tensions had managed to come together within a peculiar colonial ideology that affirmed Spain’s European identity through its unique connection to the Muslim Mediterranean world. It was not merely that Spaniards could choose to depict themselves as African or European depending on the context.⁴⁰ These two aspects remained intertwined in the Spanish colonial imagination, shaping a particular vision of the nation that emphasised Spain’s cultural and ethnic hybridity as a Mediterranean society. Spain became an embodiment of Mediterranean liminality, that conspicuous ‘half-way house between Europe and Africa’.

‘We Are by Necessity a Muslim Power’

Spanish claims to a Mediterranean and Arab inheritance were hardly unusual in the political climate of the 1880s. In many ways, they were a response to the ‘new imperialism’ manifesting itself across Europe during the period. As powers began to clamp down on territories and expand their influence, imperial rhetoric began to change and with it the cultural identities of empires themselves.

France’s conquest of Algeria commencing in 1830 had a considerable impact on reflexive conceptions of the nation as France consolidated its hold over the territory. Already by the early years of that decade, writers were referring to the settler colony as a ‘New France’ and spoke of *la France transméditerranéenne*, imagining an imperial nation-state straddling the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea.⁴¹ The journalist and Algerian colonist Clément Duvernois summed up these attitudes in 1858, contending,

‘Algeria is not a colony. Nobody has considered it such for a long time’.⁴² Writing at roughly the same time, the colonial publicist Jules Duval argued that Algeria should be thought of as a new region or Mediterranean ‘province’ of the French nation. ‘In our day internal oceans are links rather than barriers between people’, he argued. ‘They do not destroy the unity of states’.⁴³ These outlooks persisted over the next century. Speaking at a colonial congress in 1908, René Millet informed audiences that North Africa should be seen as a ‘new overseas France’ and an ‘extension of the mother country on the other side of the Mediterranean’.⁴⁴ This mindset was not peculiar to French colonial officialdom, Millet believed, but entrenched in the outlooks of the settler population. ‘For them, the French fatherland does not end at Marseilles. It extends across the other bank of the Mediterranean’. Colonial patriots had but one aspiration, he believed: ‘[The] construction of a new France on the debris of Roman Africa’.⁴⁵

Yet this conception of a Trans-Mediterranean France characterised by an eminently Latin heritage and harking back to the ruins of Roman Africa would be subjected to competing visions of empire as the years passed. The 1880s marked a moment of reflection for many French imperial ideologues. French republicans, only recently having come to power in the country, were ruminating over what empire meant for the nation. The early part of that decade witnessed debates regarding how to square the universal and egalitarian principles cherished by republican ideologues with the realities of France’s great imperial status. Politicians spoke in broad terms of spreading ‘civilisation’ to benighted societies and outlined a brand of colonial republicanism that was theoretically consistent with their liberal-democratic values, but these proposals were by no means unanimously accepted by all.⁴⁶ Moreover, it was difficult to deny that the character of France’s imperial domain was changing as well. With the seizure of Tunisia in 1881, French elites were acutely aware of the fact that imperial expansion was acquiring a more pronounced Mediterranean orientation, but this also implied that the empire was becoming exceedingly Muslim in its composition. New geostrategic considerations also had an impact on the cultural identity of empire in France. In 1882, diplomats looked on with anxiety as Britain occupied Egypt, thereby acquiring a foothold in the eastern Mediterranean. If Egypt had never been a formal French colony, it was nonetheless a ‘moral colony’ for France, the explorer and travel writer Gabriel Charmes argued that same summer. Since the Napoleonic expedition, it had been a centre of French ideas and cultural influences that had served to connect France to the East. A British presence on the Nile signalled the potential defeat of France’s long-term Mediterranean goals, an outcome France could not abide. ‘Whether we regret or celebrate it, France is a great Muslim power and the only Arab power of Europe after Turkey’, Charmes stated bluntly. ‘Since the day that we went down and installed ourselves on the coast of Algeria, we ceased to be exclusively a Christian country. We became in addition an Islamic nation’.⁴⁷

This claim, offered as justification for France's sustained presence in Egypt, resonated among various French elites over the coming years as political circles and the public alike became more aware of the nation's imperial commitments. Taking stock of France's expanding empire on the Mediterranean in 1881, the philosopher Paul Laffitte readily confessed: 'We are [...] a Muslim nation'.⁴⁸ Such assertions found credence with parts of the political establishment as the years passed. Writing over a decade after Laffitte, the leading republican politician Émile Combes concurred with his assessment. 'The possession of Algeria by our army made this country a second France, but a Muslim France', he remarked. 'Our protectorate in Tunisia confirms and expands this new character of our domination. We are by necessity a Muslim power [...] The cause of Islam is in part our cause'.⁴⁹ Colonial officials and publicists who had enthusiastically supported France's expansion across Africa and the Mediterranean had little trouble espousing the new rhetoric of Islamic sovereignty. Taking stock of France's colonial possessions in 1899, Alfred Le Chatelier, editor of the *Revue du Monde Musulman* traced the sinews of French power stretching from Morocco to Tunisia and into Senegal and Chad. 'France is an African Muslim power', he concluded.⁵⁰ 'There can be no doubt about it', insisted the retired colonial military official, Ludovic de Polignac, echoing Napoleon in Egypt a century earlier. 'Our natural penchant is toward Islam. The French are true Muslims'.⁵¹ Walking through the Tunisian and Algerian displays staged for the 1900 Universal Exposition, Parisian observers were inclined to accept that France was indeed the 'Muslim power' it claimed to be. Staring up at the reconstructed mosques and pondering France's role in the Orient, the writer Gaston de Wailly could not help but ask: 'Are we not a great Muslim nation, given our vast African colonies?'⁵²

Assertions that France was a 'Muslim power' or even a 'Muslim nation' by virtue of its colonial holdings in Africa found expression in a wide array of colonial discourses. Writing in 1904, the Algerian newspaper *El Misbah* run by the Muslim Benali Fekar endorsed these claims in an effort to persuade the colonial authorities that natives were not hostile to French rule. 'By a mysterious shift, France, after having been one of the foremost European and Catholic powers, has become, by dint of circumstance, the first among the African and Muslim powers', it claimed.⁵³ Seeking to influence colonial officials and win their consent for native integration within the empire, Benali was consciously flattering his readers and appealing to their sense of national pride by hinting that there was something particularly French in this 'mysterious' shift. His attempt to sway the colonial government was telling when it came to how imperialists interpreted the idea of *la France musulmane*. For numerous colonial publicists, the task of reconciling Islam with modernity was seen as one especially suited to France's particular genius and universal values. As the publicist Napoléon Ney insisted, France was 'the only country in Europe' which 'by virtue of its exceptional position' could bring the two opposing civilisations of

Europe and Islam together for the ‘benefit of humanity’.⁵⁴ France’s special position vis-à-vis Islam was persistently contrasted with that of the other European nations, which stood accused of national particularism and ethnocentrism. If France did not want to ‘descend to the ranks of Spain and Portugal’, Philippe Grenier warned, it was essential that it ‘work toward a rapprochement between the two races’ in its colonial domains.⁵⁵ It was precisely France’s ability to assimilate Islam and, by proxy, the diversity of the Mediterranean, which made it exceptional among the nations of Europe.

Grenier’s profession of faith in French universalism was all the more revealing given his public position at the tail end of the nineteenth century. A provincial doctor from the commune of Pontarlier who had been elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 1897, Grenier was also a Muslim convert. During his run for office, Grenier had aligned his religious and political identity closely, making Islam a centrepiece of his campaign. In speeches, Grenier drew comparisons between the revolutionary principle of *fraternité* and the teachings of the Qur’an. He supported the cause of Algerian civil and political equality, claiming indeed to defend ‘the rights of [his] coreligionists’ living on French soil. Upon his electoral victory, he made it known that he would wear the Maghrebin *gandoura* and *burnous* in the chamber and conduct himself as his faith dictated.⁵⁶ As France’s first and only Muslim public official, Grenier was in a unique position to carve out a place for Islam in French public life, and he used his political office to this end. During legislative sessions at the Palais Bourbon, he performed elaborate rituals that included repeated kneeling, kissing the steps of the National Assembly, and other outward demonstrations of piety. He even took to conducting the ceremonial washing of his feet on the banks of the Seine, drawing large crowds of spectators.

Journalists and officials alike criticised Grenier’s ‘exaggerated’ and ‘ostentatious’ displays of his faith, referring to him as ‘the Mohammedan’, ‘the Muslim deputy’, and even ‘the Turk from Pontarlier’.⁵⁷ Yet others grasped the deeper significance of Grenier’s performative demonstrations of faith. For the African explorer and dignitary Ferdinand de Béhagle, Grenier’s entrance into public life as a Muslim and self-proclaimed spokesperson for France’s Algerian subjects offered a promising hint of things to come. His election, Béhagle declared, ‘will remind our legislators that France possesses 16 million Muslim subjects, and perhaps his virtue will make them understand that [our Muslims] are more than just material resources and have the right to find a place for their laws in our codes just as they have already found a place under our flag for their children’.⁵⁸ According to Béhagle and others, Grenier’s election represented a dramatic episode in a wider debate concerning Islam and the French Empire at the end of the nineteenth century. Observers elsewhere speculated as to whether Grenier’s election appeared a sign of things to come. *The Crescent*, a British newspaper dedicated to global Muslim affairs, thus ran an open letter to the editor which asked: ‘Will France be Mohammedanised?’ According to the author, the prospect now seemed likely.

Empire was eliciting a debate on the very nature and character of French national identity by the turn of the century, one ineluctably tied to France's perceived role in the Muslim Mediterranean. Assertions that France was a 'Muslim power' were naturally a bitter pill for Catholics to swallow, especially given the aggressive secularism promoted by the republican government then in power. 'We do not admit that France should be considered as a great Muslim power with no regard for its essentially Catholic traditions', the Catholic paper *L'Univers* objected in 1890.⁵⁹ As events like the Dreyfus Affair increased tensions between the Catholic community and the government over the coming decades, the issue of whether France was a 'Muslim power' became a debate on the nation itself. In 1905, Catholics balked when the state promulgated legislation announcing the separation of church and state, effectively ending the *concordat* and with it the state pensions and salaries provided for French clerics. 'The republic is no longer Catholic in France, but it is Muslim in Algeria', the Archbishop of Saint-Dié, Alphonse-Gabriel Foucault, seethed.⁶⁰ Catholic polemicists spared no ink in criticising and lampooning the government for its insistence that France, the 'eldest daughter of the Church', could seriously be considered a 'Muslim power'. The idea was written off as 'absurd', 'anti-national', and 'disgraceful', a complete betrayal of France's heritage and traditions.⁶¹ Yet even clerical writers found themselves unable to ignore the fact that the Mediterranean empire was changing the conversation on French national identity. As Maurice Landrieux, Bishop of Dijon, claimed in 1913, 'Islam is at our door [...]. France – *la France tout court* – is permitted to amend [...] the concept of the French nation'. In his estimation, the fact was clear: 'France is, in fact, a great Muslim power!'⁶²

'Latin Sisters' or Colonial Adversaries?

The fact that Spanish and French imperialists showed a willingness to project alternative identities and revise national narratives in accordance with empire-building projects suggests the importance they invested in the Mediterranean empire. Efforts to 'nationalise' empires entailed a simultaneous act of reimagining the nation. 'Mediterraneanism' – if such a term can be permitted – was being written into European national-imperial imaginaries, providing a distinct geographical context for the elaboration of national discourses, history, and memories that transcended continental Europe. Yet the Mediterranean was always a versatile concept, eliciting a variety of competing Mediterranean imaginaries that informed understandings of the self.

Writing to the French minister of education in the early 1890s, an archaeological expert working in Tunisia drew attention to the many Roman ruins scattered across the country. In his view, these ruins were being ignored by the native Tunisian government, their neglect condemning them to eventual destruction in the long term. France had an obligation to maintain and

conserve these traces of the past, especially since they furnished a ‘lesson for the present’, in the expert’s opinion. The vestiges of Roman rule could in fact assist France in its colonising efforts. ‘Our interests are not only reattaching ourselves to the Romans [...]. We are suffused by their civilisation. Everything that is fashioned by their mores, habits, and state of mind as well as their processes of government and colonisation is indispensable for us to know and recover with the greatest precision’.⁶³ Simply put, French colonisers saw a benefit in resurrecting the Classical Mediterranean past and pressing it into the service of colonialism. Not only would they learn from the lesson of their ancient colonial predecessors how to dominate Africa. France was assuming a role as the custodian of the Classical past, imposing a ‘Latin’ reading of the Mediterranean on the region, one that would by the same token efface the non-Western Arab past.⁶⁴

Appeals to a Classical Latin inheritance were employed to naturalise European rule in Africa, but they likewise fed into national imaginaries and nation-building projects as well. French activists in Algeria readily promoted a Latin identity for the European community of *colons*, claiming that the mixed French, Spanish, and Italian populations found in North Africa made up a ‘Latin race’ that would inevitably come together as a single European people populating the African continent. Enthusiasts like the journalist Marc-Andrée Gromier spoke of creating a ‘Mediterranean Zollverein’ to compete with the Teutonic commercial union on the continent and implored the three predominant Latin nations of Europe to seek union through ‘their common heritage and glory’ to stave off Germanic and Anglo-Saxon domination. ‘United [the Latin people] can and must become the most powerful and brilliant civilising force’, Gromier insisted.⁶⁵ The *colon* Louis Bertrand, one of the foremost proponents of *Latinité* in Algeria, similarly warned of the danger posed by ‘Germanism’ to Western Europe as anxieties over German militarism grew during the first two decades of the twentieth century.⁶⁶ In meeting this threat, he believed that the ‘Latins of Africa’, a racial community composed of migrants coming from the various nations of the northern Mediterranean, would provide the force and vigour essential to rejuvenating an effete French civilisation.⁶⁷ Despite the obvious national context in which Bertrand developed his ideological perspective, his prescription for national revival was based upon a certain vision of Mediterranean diversity. *Latinité* rested upon an idea of a multi-national Latin people bound by commonalities of race, creed, and culture. It proposed a specific conception of European association which emphasised Latin solidarity against competing races and civilisations battling for supremacy on the European continent and in the imperial world at large.

Although those subscribing to the *Latinité* movement appealed to the shared past and memories linking France, Spain, and Italy – Europe’s three ‘Latin sisters’ – in reality colonial rivalries typically revealed the divisions separating the three nations, each of which saw itself as the rightful heir

to the Mediterranean's Latin heritage. Italian political elites and intellectuals made little secret during the late nineteenth century of their desires to carve out an empire in Africa. With Italian expatriate communities existing in places like Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt, many imperial publicists believed that Italian expansion into the Mediterranean was only natural.⁶⁸ Italy was after all an 'emigrant nation', to use Mark Choate's telling phrase, and yet by the turn of the century, Italy still did not possess any formal settler colonies of its own. Tunisia, with its large Italian population, had appeared to be the logical place to establish one, but these aspirations were bitterly disappointed in 1881 when France occupied the Tunisian Regency and established a protectorate over it. In the late 1880s, Liberal policy-makers invested hopes in overseas colonial settlement as a remedy to mass emigration. Africa would be a land where Italy might 'direct all that mass of unfortunates who run to America in search of fortune', as the Italian Prime Minister Francesco Crispi stated.⁶⁹ Attempts to carve out colonies in Eritrea and Ethiopia during the 1890s had ended in military disaster, however, leading pro-imperial spokesmen by the early twentieth century to look towards Ottoman Tripolitania as the last viable place for colonial expansion in Africa.⁷⁰

Italian politicians readily evoked historic memories of Roman rule in Africa to naturalise claims to the region, often referring to North Africa as Italy's *quarta sponda* (fourth shore). Pro-imperial lobbies looked back to the past, drawing attention to the era of 'classical colonialism' and Roman expansion and presenting it as a model for the future.⁷¹ These new colonial aspirations blended with right-wing nationalist revival movements gathering momentum at the turn of the century that celebrated Italy's Classical heritage. 'Our story begins in Rome' as the nationalist writer Enrico Corradini explained in 1914, 'and Roman history is but the first chapter in our blood from eighteen centuries of ancestry and culture'.⁷² By 'resurrecting' this Roman heritage, Italy would, according to Corradini, become a world power once again. Unsurprisingly, Corradini was one of the most vocal supporters of Italian efforts to invade and colonise Ottoman Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in 1911–1912, believing the territory would provide a space, given Italy's excess population, for Italians to live their lives in the free, agrarian manner of their forebears.⁷³ Articulations of Italian national identity, prescriptions regarding the health of the nation, and empire-building projects converged in 1911 as the Italian government invaded Ottoman Libya and pledged itself to fulfil Italy's historic mission in the Mediterranean.⁷⁴

The Italo-Ottoman War quickly undercut any notions of sororal amity that might have existed between Europe's 'Latin sisters'. As the Tunisian journalist Henri Tridon noted, France 'a great Islamic power *par excellence*' would now have to compete with Italy in the region, 'and a shared influence is without doubt a diminished influence', he concluded.⁷⁵ The Italian newspaper *La Stampa* similarly gave short shrift to the idea of Latin

cooperation, claiming in 1912 that Italy shared few affinities with France. 'An Italy seeking to expand into the Mediterranean can only have France for its natural enemy', it stated.⁷⁶ Carlo Pisani, a lieutenant in the reserve Italian forces, was blunt when it came to the actualities of colonial realpolitik. 'Know that the affinities of race count for nothing when the interests of our Italy are at stake. France is not a sister to us, but a future prey'. Pisani went on to suggest that once Italy had completed its occupation of Tripolitania, Italians would seek to unite the province with their compatriots in Tunisia, warning that 'international morality will count for nothing before the necessities of Italian expansion'.⁷⁷

If Italian critics naturalised claims to the region through an emphasis on their Latin heritage, policy analysts were not above borrowing pages from the colonial playbook when it came to securing their dominance in Libya, albeit giving it a Latin twist. Drawing historical examples from Roman colonisation, critics insisted that Roman policies of integration and assimilation could provide a working colonial model for the region. The Roman Empire had ruled over a diverse, multi-ethnic population in the past, employing strategies of association to govern its empire. Italy could do the same when it came to governing North African Arabs. Military officials attempted to appease Arab opposition to the invasion by making the case for a paternalistic Italian rule rooted in Classical notions of imperial integration. In early 1912, General Carlo Caneva issued a proclamation to the native Tripolitanians claiming that even though Italy was Catholic it harboured no ill intentions towards Muslim inhabitants. 'Italy is your father because it wed itself to Tripolitania, your mother', he asserted.⁷⁸ The pro-colonial publicist Mario Ratto argued that Italy should draw examples from French and British experiences in colonising Muslim societies as well as look to the past, auguring a policy of 'association' that would integrate European and Arab subjects. In an article drafted for the *Revista Coloniale* in 1913, Ratto took a jab at Spain and France, stating that Italy would show itself the foremost 'Arabophile' among the colonial powers. 'We alone can succeed [in Libya] because we alone are the sincere Arabophiles of Europe'.⁷⁹ Emphasising Italy's history of Classical colonisation and traditions of former imperial integration, pro-colonial spokesmen were making a case for an Italian version of Mediterranean empire-building and with it asserting Italy's status as a great European imperial power in the modern era.

Much as Spanish imperialists looked to an Islamic Iberian heritage to highlight their cultural and racial ties to the region, Italian imperialists found it useful to stress their Latin credentials as the ground for Mediterranean expansion. History, cultural identity, and national memory were all deployed in this process, stamping prevailing notions of *italianità* with an eminently colonial character. Empire-building encompassed an array of competing discourses, and at times blended conceptions of the Classical and Islamic Mediterranean together. In an age of 'high imperialism', claims to European great power status relied upon possessing an

empire, and such practices routinely invited creative re-imaginings of national narratives and histories. Yet they also entailed re-imagining the Mediterranean as a national-imperial space as well.⁸⁰ These imaginative geographies held out the prospect of forging novel forms of European unity rooted in perceptions of Latin solidarity, but they also had the potential to foment sharp national divisions as imperial rivals laid claim to territories and upset what one French authority deemed the tenuous ‘Mediterranean equilibrium’.⁸¹

Conclusion

Mediterranean empire accompanied various acts of self-fashioning as elites and publicists alike reformulated the cultural identities of their respective empires to fit the particularities of the Mediterranean world. In doing so, empire and nation came together in interesting ways as imperial ideologues crafted national narratives and identities that served to naturalise claims to African territory. ‘Nationalising’ empire not only entailed expanding the idea of the nation across new imperial geographies. It also involved corresponding acts of re-imagining the nation as it was recast across imperialised space.⁸² Empire-building elicited a search for the Mediterranean within, bolstering claims of European inclusion and national exceptionalism as the situation warranted. While nations are imagined communities, they are hardly singular constructs. National representations encompass a range of competing interpretations that are historically contingent and context-dependent. Examining the multiple registers of nation-building and identity construction is a telling reminder that nationalisation was neither an exclusively internal process nor a purely continental phenomenon. European nation-building possessed Trans-Mediterranean and Pan-European components as identities were constructed, projected, and instrumentalised for various ends. A closer examination of Europe’s Mediterranean entanglements reveals the fluidities that shaped understandings of nationality and European selfhood in the age of high nationalism and imperialism.

If the Mediterranean constituted one of the many imaginative geographies in which European identity formation occurred, it also transcended notions of clashing civilisations and occasionally eroded stark European-Muslim dichotomies typically used to evaluate Europe’s engagement with Islam. Notions of self and other were never contained within strict Orientalist binaries, especially as proponents of empire elaborated visions of the nation capable of embodying the diversity found within the Mediterranean. Whether by tracing the roots of an alleged Islamic inheritance or by asserting claims to a Muslim imperium, Europeans experimented with ways of integrating Islam even as they sought to better control and discipline Muslim societies. This is not to imply that ‘Mediterraneanism’ should be equated with an acceptance of multiculturalism. Religious, cultural, and racial divisions assuredly persisted. Even as imperial ideologues promoted

conceptions of imperial nation-states straddling the Mediterranean basin, they refused to countenance equality between European and Muslim subjects. ‘Time will efface certain differences and establish some similarities’, as the writer Henry de Castries explained, ‘but complete assimilation between Europeans and natives will never come to pass’.⁸³

The shortcoming associated with expressions of European *Musulmanité* stems from the fact that it remained a purely colonial construct intended to instrumentalise Islam for presumptively imperial ends. While *Latinité*, its imperial counterpart, was espoused by imperialists and anti-colonial radicals alike, feeding into imperial fantasies just as much as visions of a liberated ‘Latin America’ by the mid-nineteenth century, *Musulmanité* failed to acquire a similar global resonance.⁸⁴ It remained bound to a vision of European empire, competing with Pan-Islamic unity movements that arose in places such as Istanbul, Cairo, and Beirut during the nineteenth century. Despite its failure, exploring the many ways in which the Mediterranean altered perceptions of European selfhood in the age of imperial expansion provides a historical backdrop to current articulations of European diversity and integration today. As European societies contend with calls for multiculturalism and face increased migratory flows coming from the southern and eastern Mediterranean, it appears that national and European imaginaries are once again in a state of flux.⁸⁵ The tensions and dialogic relationships that have historically bound Europe to the Mediterranean remain omnipresent, even if they have acquired new meaning and significance within a post-colonial Europe.

Notes

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