

Mediterranean Mobilities Between Migrations and Colonialism



edited by
Gabriele Montalbano

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Mediterranean Mobilities

Between Migrations and Colonialism

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BARBARA DE POLI

At the Origins of Egyptian Nationalism:
The Political Role of Italian Freemasons in 19th-Century Egypt

Se l'amor della patria è delitto
Siam rei tutti, siam pronti a morir!

Verdi, *Aida*, act II, scene II

As post-colonial studies emphasise, the colonial history of the Middle East and North Africa (and colonial history in general) is strongly influenced by the Western gaze on events and by the relationship of subordination triggered by imperialism; as a consequence, it is inclined to focus on the history of the colonizer much more than on the history of the colonized.¹ Moreover, Western colonial history tends to focus on the relationship between the colonizing power and the colonized, often losing sight of or neutralising the complexities of relations that could be established among local inhabitants and European communities other than the politically dominant group. Yet, those communities could have a considerable influence on the global course of events, especially in the very important phase of political and institutional changes that took place between the 19th and 20th centuries.

With regard to the Italian community of Egypt, several scholars – mainly Italian – have highlighted the relevance of its social and institutional function until the 1870s, and its contribution to the modernisation of Egypt.² For instance, members of the community founded and supervised

1. Barbara De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto: I miti, gli immaginari, la storia*, Milan, Jouvence, 2018.

2. *L'Italia e l'Egitto: dalla rivolta di Arabi pascià all'avvento del fascismo (1882-1922)*, ed. by Romain Rainero and Luigi Serra, Settimo Milanese, Marzorati, 1991. For a critical

the postal service, superintended public security and the health service, were trusted doctors and pharmacists of the Khedive family, renowned architects, and some held important positions in ministries. In addition to the intellectual and economic elite, the presence of people of Italian origin belonging to various social strata, employed in the most disparate jobs (including quite a few individuals dedicated to delinquency and illegal trafficking), in no way detracts from the fact that the community as a whole had a notable impact on contemporary Egyptian society. Nevertheless, its presence and role are not taken into account by the international historiography of colonialism, basically because Italy was excluded from the “scramble” for Egypt. Even P. J. Vatikiotis, in his 572-page *History of Modern Egypt*,³ which can be considered the most comprehensive book on the topic, barely mentions Italy.

Still, the Italians of Egypt had a significant weight, also in relation to the British Protectorate, especially if one follows the traces of the masonic experience in the country and investigates the origins of Egyptian nationalism. I must specify that this study does not derive from my interest in the Italian community in Egypt; instead, it originates from my studies on Freemasonry in the country as a socio-political phenomenon.⁴ The foundation and diffusion of masonic lodges in Egypt have an undoubted imperialist matrix, but the progressive affiliation of Muslims with the lodges, especially after the establishment by Italian Freemasons of the Egyptian Grand Orient, transformed the institution into a place through which passed cultural and political experiences of the greatest national importance. Precisely following the traces of the lodges founded by Europeans in the country, an unexpected role of Italians emerged – at least of one group of Italians active in the masonic milieu –, who were

analysis of Italian historiography on the Italian community in Egypt and its role, see *Italian Subalterns in Egypt Between Emigration and Colonialism (1861-1937)*, ed. by Costantino Paonessa, Louvain-La-Neuve, Presses Universitaires, 2021; and Anthony Santilli, “Penser et analyser le cosmopolitisme. Le cas des Italiens d’Alexandrie au XIX^e siècle”, *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome – Italie et Méditerranée modernes et contemporaines*, 125/2 (2013), <https://journals.openedition.org/mefrim/1516#ftn1>.

3. Panayiotis J. Vatikiotis, *The History of Modern Egypt: From Muhammad Ali to Mubarak*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991.

4. De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*; Barbara De Poli, “Italians, Freemasons and the Dawn of Egyptian Nationalism”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 27 (2022), pp. 786-813.

very relevant in the political sphere and above all in their relations with Egyptian proto-nationalism.

The history of Freemasonry in the Middle East has certainly never been deemed a major topic for academic research agendas. Nevertheless – even if a broad in-depth work is waiting to be written – many studies have been published on specific personalities, environments or regions that show how Freemasonry worked as an imperialist tool.⁵ Moreover, in the vast majority of cases, masonic lodges depended on foreign Orients and the masonic orders linked to the colonising powers enjoyed a privileged position and experienced greater expansion. However, the history of independent Freemasonry in Egypt, closely intertwined with that of the Italian community, highlights how the history of colonialism should be read not only through macro-dynamics but also through apparently marginal phenomena, which in fact can reveal unexpected connections that were capable of decisively influencing the course of events.

This chapter aims to briefly recall those “unexpected connections” that made the role of Italian Freemasons relevant in the first ideological phase of Egyptian nationalism and to highlight some little-known aspects of the imperialist and anti-imperialist dynamics in Egypt.

The political involvement of the Italian Freemasons

Italian commercial outposts were established on the southern shore of the Mediterranean since the Middle Ages, but only during the 19th century did the Italian community become so huge as to constitute the

5. Cf. De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*; Xavier Yacono, *Un siècle de franc-maçonnerie algérienne, 1785-1884*, Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose, 1969; Georges Odo, *Les Francs-Maçons au Maroc sous la III^e République*, Paris, Editions Maçonniques de France, 1999; Thierry Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes, et francs-maçons en Islam*, Paris, Maisonneuve, 1993; Thierry Zarcone, *Secret et sociétés secrètes en Islam: Turquie, Iran et Asie centrale XIX-XX siècles. Franc-Maçonnerie, Carboneria et Confréries soufies*, Milan, Archè, 2002; Emanuela Locci, *La massoneria nel Mediterraneo: Egitto, Tunisia e Malta*, Rome, Bastogi, 2014; Eric Anduze, *La franc-maçonnerie au Moyen-Orient et au Maghreb fin XIX^e-début XX^e siècle*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2005; Jean-Marc Aractingi, *Histoire mondiale de la Franc-Maçonnerie en terre d'Islam*, 2 vols, Paris, Erick Bonnier, 2016. In Arabic: Jurjī Zaydān, *Tārīkh al-Māsūniyya al-‘ām*, Beirut, Dār al-Jīl, 1982; Ḥusayn ‘A. Hamāda, *Al-Adabiyyāt al-māsūniyya*, Damascus, Dār al-Wathā’iq, 1995; and Ḥusayn ‘A. Hamāda, *Al-Māsūniyya wa-al-Māsūniyyūn fi-l-Watan al-‘Arabī*, Damascus, Dār Qatība, 1989.

second largest immigrant group in the country after the Greeks.⁶ As already mentioned, the large Italian community was made up of people of different origins and backgrounds; here I will focus on a specific group, also certainly a heterogeneous one, but characterised by a very strong political commitment: the Risorgimento exiles. Many Italians who reached Egypt through successive migratory waves came after the failure of the Carbonari movements of 1821 and Mazzini's movements of 1830 and 1848;⁷ as the journalist Gioacchino Volpe put it in the early 1920s, those men:

in the age of the Italian political insurrections, found there, as elsewhere, a vent for their unfulfilled desire for a free world or a refuge from persecutions, after failed, repressed insurrections, unfortunate wars. [...] Men of strong political and sectarian passions, almost all Freemasons, who have contributed not a little to giving those colonies the imprint they still retain today [...].⁸

Mainly settled in Alexandria, the Risorgimento exiles soon became involved in local masonic activities, founding, in 1830, an authorised Scottish rite lodge that, according to the Freemason historian Stevenson Drane, was called Carbonari Lodge and immediately manifested political intents, so much so that “its activities becoming suspect, it was closely watched by the Government, and its meetings were held in perfect secrecy”.⁹

Later, in the 1860s, subversive activities of Italian lodges were acknowledged by local and foreign institutions. On 19 November 1868, the Chancellor of the Consulate General of France in Egypt, A. Dobignie, wrote in a note:

The greatest enemy of regular Freemasonry in Egypt is to be found in the irregular lodges. In the ranks of these, all Italian, we count up the public

6. Lucia Carminati, “‘Improvising and Very Humble’. Those ‘Italians’ Throughout Egypt That Statisticians and Historians Have Neglected”, in *Italian Subalterns*, ed. by Paonessa, pp. 31-52.

7. Ersilio Michel, *Esuli italiani in Egitto, 1815-1861*, Pisa, Domus Mazziniana, 1958.

8. Volpe, *Egitto ed Italiani d'Egitto*, as quoted in Romain Rainero, “La colonia italiana d'Egitto: presenza e vitalità”, in *L'Italia e l'Egitto: dalla rivolta di Arabi pascià all'avvento del fascismo (1882-1922)*, ed. by Romain Rainero and Luigi Serra, Settimo Milanese, Marzorati, 1991, pp. 125-173: 128.

9. Stevenson Drane, F. D., “Freemasonry in Egypt (Part I)”, *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, 81 (1968), pp. 209-223: 210.

agitators and the accomplices of every evil. The Consul General of Italy told me that within these lodges he had no agent and that they served as a refuge for all those wanted by public justice.¹⁰

As historian Jacob Landau ascertained, in some reports sent to diplomatic and consular representations in Egypt in the years 1868-1870, the Italian lodges were compared to beehives, full of destabilising and criminal political members who were accused of conspiring against the royal house in Italy and of favouring delinquency in the Egyptian cities, protecting bandits and murderers.¹¹ Moreover, Italian Masons were upholding the right to the throne of Prince Halīm, son of the Albanian General Muhammad ‘Alī who was destined to inherit the Egyptian Crown after Ismā‘īl, only two months older than himself – according to the rules of the time. But in 1866 Ismā‘īl excluded Halīm from the succession decreeing his son as his heir and, since then, Halīm led subversive activities against the ruling family.

Halīm – who had graduated from a military college in France and who had good relationships with intellectuals, the French and the Italians – had soon joined Freemasonry as a member of the Pyramids Lodge, founded in 1845 and attached to the Grand Orient of France.¹² In 1864, he was designated by the Grand Orient of France to lead the newly established Supreme Council of the Grand Orient of Egypt of the Rite of Memphis,¹³ hence becoming the first Muslim in Egypt and the Islamic world in general to attain the grade of Grand Master. However, in 1868 he had to abandon the assignment, being forced into exile by the Khedive Ismā‘īl under the accusation of having conspired with the support of some Italian Masons. From 1868 he found refuge in Istanbul, where he continued to plot against the Khedivé: again in 1869 Ismā‘īl accused Halīm of a failed conspiracy against his life, and in 1876 he complained expressly to the Italian consul de Martino because of the support Italian Masons were providing him.¹⁴

10. *Note sur la franc-maçonnerie en Eyppte*, quoted in Jacob M. Landau, “Prolegomena to a Study of Secret Societies in Modern Egypt”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1/2 (1965), pp. 135-186: 165-166.

11. Landau, “Prolegomena”, pp. 140-141.

12. Zaydān, *Tārīkh al-Māsūniyya al-‘ām*, pp. 151-152.

13. Francesco F. Oddi, “Il passato il presente, l’avvenire”, *Memfi risorta*, 1 August 1875, pp. 527-532: 528.

14. Landau, “Prolegomena”, pp. 148-149.

The bond between Halīm and the Italians was not limited to subversive activities: with the exile of the prince, the Grand Orient was put to sleep, but its legacy was taken up four years later by a Turin-born engineer of Catholic education,¹⁵ Solutore Avventore Zola. Notwithstanding the dubious reputation of Italian Freemasons, the figure of Zola stands out for his exceptional role in the development of Freemasonry in the country. According to De Grimaldi-Regusse, Zola struggled for the Risorgimento cause by fighting nineteen battles for the “*grandeur* of Italy” before emigrating to Egypt in 1862. There, after taking possession of his paternal inheritance, he ventured into business, creating a “brilliant and fortunate” position in the Alexandrian society of the time.¹⁶ He also affiliated with the Pyramids Lodge,¹⁷ where he probably first met Prince Halīm, with whom he forged a relationship that would last some time.

On November 1872, Zola received the task of re-founding the Grand Orient and on 21 March 1873 he was proclaimed Grand Master of the Shrine of Memphis, Grand National Orient of Egypt.¹⁸ The process gave rise to the first national masonic organism in the region, mainly led and frequented by Italians and local citizens (Italian was the official language, along with Arabic), autonomous from any foreign jurisdiction, which obtained the protectorate of the Khedivé in exchange for the guarantee that it would “never deal with politics without being invited by the Head of State”.¹⁹ In the next ten years it became the most important masonic institution of the country. In 1876, after having obtained a Scottish Rite license, Zola founded the National Grand Lodge of Egypt, which would turn out to be the most successful Orient in the Near East, and one of the rare masonic institutions to be led by Muslims.²⁰

15. Joseph Sakakini, *Rapport concernant l'irrégularité de la Gr... L... d'Egypte*, s.l., 1910, p. 4.

16. A. De Grimaldi-Regusse, *Mémoire a l'appui de la réclamation judiciaire de M. S. Zola contre la Grande Loge Nationale d'Egypte*, Cairo, Imprimerie Elzévirienne R. Bandieri, 1890, p. 5.

17. Zaydān, *Tārīkh al-Māsūniyya al-ām*, p. 152; Sakakini, *Rapport*, p. 4.

18. Drane, “Freemasonry in Egypt”, p. 211.

19. Solutore A. Zola, *Sunto Storico sul Grande Oriente Nazionale d'Egitto*, s.l., 1883, p. 11.

20. That process was indeed very complex and not without conflicts between the newborn Grand Orient of Egypt, some Italian Orients and later between the Grand Orient itself and the Grand Lodge. De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*, pp. 65-101; 141-152; De Poli, “Italians, Freemasons”.

If the role of Italians was pivotal for the history of Egyptian Freemasonry, this was not their most important legacy for Egyptian society.

The spread of Risorgimento ideals

During Ismā‘īl’s reign, investments in major public works and infrastructure and investments in the cultural sector went hand-in-hand as Cairo was transformed into a city where one could breathe the air of European capitals.²¹

It is therefore not surprising that the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869 was accompanied by the notes of the Egyptian March of Strauss, composed for the occasion, and Ismā‘īl himself commissioned Verdi to write a special work for the new Cairo Opera House: *Aida*, an opera that the composer chose to set to music starting from the original subject of the French archaeologist Auguste Mariette, first director of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. On 24 December 1871, the Khedive court, the Egyptian political elite and many men and women of European origins attended the premiere of Verdi’s opera, following the libretto written by the Risorgimentist Antonio Ghislanzoni (which the audience could read in Italian and French), in which the term “homeland” (*patria/patrie*) appears 23 times.²² Translated into Arabic with *watan*, in those years the word – which previously referred merely to the birthplace of a person – began to take on that political-romantic connotation that would define attachment

21. “The aspect of Cairo, of this true and first city of the Orient, is stupendous as soon as one sets foot inside it: one enters the new quarters, and therefore, the first impression is that of a new capital, destined for a splendid future, in which the beauty of this marvellous oriental nature appears to be happily grafted onto our civilization”. Filippo Filippi, *Musica e musicisti. Critiche, biografie ed escursioni*, Milan, Brigola, 1876, p. 340. Beside the new town there was “the native city, still essentially pre-industrial in technology, social structure, and way of life”: Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018, p. 98.

22. For the original libretto see *Aida. Libretto*, The Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2010657556/> or <https://www.loc.gov/resource/musschatz.10954.0/?sp=7>. Edward W. Said (*Culture and Imperialism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 114) analysed *Aida* in the context of orientalist representations generated by imperialist policies, as an “historical experience of overseas domination” but did not dwell on the intersections and did not grasp the other political potential of the work.

to one's country in the decades to come,²³ also semantically marking the process of nation-building which in the Near East led to the construction of nation-states, passing through the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and colonisation.

It was precisely in the 1870s that the nationalist and anti-imperialist ideas that laid the foundation of modern Egypt began to take shape. The Khedive's debt policies were at the origin of the first Egyptian movements, which aimed to overthrow Ismā'īl and reduce European influence, returning Egypt (the homeland) to the Egyptians, sole heirs of the magnificent pharaonic civilisation.²⁴ While Ismā'īl's work to modernise the country was leading the state treasury towards bankruptcy,²⁵ fueling discontent across all social strata, various secret conspiratorial organisations were being organised, gathering military, notables and landowners, intellectuals, ulema and members of the Assembly.²⁶ Many of these plotters were also Freemasons, including two prominent intellectuals at the time, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muhammad 'Abduh.²⁷ Another Freemason particularly active in the anti-Khedive campaign – and a supporter of Prince Halīm – was the famous Egyptian playwright and journalist James Sanua (Ya'qūb Sanū').²⁸ Sanua was born in Cairo in 1839, the son of a Jewish immigrant from Livorno in Italy and a Cairene Jewish woman. In 1853 Sanua reached Livorno where he spent almost two years completing his studies in political science and

23. Cfr. Ulrich Haarmaan, "Watan", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden, Brill, 2012, sub voce; Jacques Couland, "Wataniyya", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden, Brill, 2012, sub voce; Tobias Heinzelmann, "Die Konstruktion eines osmanischen Patriotismus und die Entwicklung des Begriffs vatan in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts", in *Aspects of the Political Language in Turkey*, ed. by Hans-Lukas Kieser, Istanbul, Gorgias Press, 2002, pp. 41-52.

24. A few decades later, this became the central concept of Egyptian territorial nationalism (Israel Gershoni, James P. Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900-1930*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986).

25. David Landes, *Banchieri e Pascià. Finanza internazionale e imperialismo economico*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 1990.

26. Jacob M. Landau, *Parliaments and Parties in Egypt*, Tel-Aviv, Israel Oriental Society, 1953.

27. De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*, pp. 109-119; 127-132.

28. Jacob M. Landau, "Abu Naddara, an Egyptian Jewish Nationalist", *The Journal of Jewish Studies*, 3 (1952), pp. 30-44; Irene L. Gendzier, "James Sanua and Egyptian Nationalism", *Middle East Journal*, 15/1 (1961), pp. 16-28; *Biography*, Abou Naddara Collection website, <http://kjc-sv036.kjc.uni-heidelberg.de:8080/exist/apps/naddara/biography.html>.

international law.²⁹ It is very likely – as Irene Gendzier believes – that it was first Sanua’s father who infused him with the sense of homeland, but Langone proved that it was in Livorno that Sanua imbibed the ideals of Mazzini’s Young Italy organisation.³⁰

After his masonic initiation, which took place in Egypt on 25 February 1868 (he was admitted to the Concordia Lodge, attached to the United Grand Lodge of England but working in Italian, and reached the rank of Master on 24 December of the same year), in 1874 Sanua spent a further study period in Italy. Upon his return, he created two groups with a political aim: the *Mahfil al-taqaddum* (Circle of Progress) and the *Jam‘iyat muhibb al-‘ilm* (Society of Lovers of Knowledge), which held weekly meetings where the participants discussed literature and history, and especially the modern history of France and Italy. The meetings of the Society of Lovers of Knowledge were also attended by the young officer Ahmad ‘Urābī, who gave some lectures there.³¹ Both the associations were banned by the authorities no later than three years after their establishment, but according to various testimonies their activity was the matrix of the future Egyptian National Party which aimed at returning “Egypt to the Egyptians”.³²

The National Party, *Hizb al-Watan*, and the political organisation Young Egypt, *Misr al-Fatāt*, were the first Egyptian political groups that fostered what Sabry defined as the “Egyptian national spirit”, actually founding the nationalist movement. In particular, the National Party published, on 4 November 1879, a *Manifesto* stating that:

As it is, this government has no truly Egyptian ties, its base is artificial. The Powers alone contributed to its formation. The nation has nothing to do with it [...]. The Nilotic nation cannot accept a state of affairs that delivers it, without appeal, to a supervision which is dangerous for its autonomy and which leaves the exploitation of its wealth to irresponsible foreign elements,

29. Angela Langone, “L’arabo anziano. (The Old Arab). A Forgotten Book by Ya‘qūb Sanū’”, *Rhesis. International Journal of Linguistics, Philology and Literature*, 7/2 (2016), pp. 50-87: 61.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Juan Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt’s ‘Urabi’s Movement*, Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 1999.

32. Edouard Guillon, *Notes pour l’histoire de notre temps: L’Egypte contemporaine et les intérêts français*, Grenoble, Gratiery, 1885, p. 27.

enjoying immunities and privileges in which it does not participate [...]. The country must be administered by Egyptian individuals of its own choice.³³

John Ninet, who claimed to have participated in the French drafting of the *Nationalist Manifesto* of 1879, indicated his friend Sanua as editor of the movement's magazine of the same name,³⁴ and Sanua's political activism – also conveyed through the pages of the journal he founded, *Abū Nazzāra Zarqā*, one of the most important newspapers of the time – cost him exile. On 30 June 1878, Sanua left Cairo for Paris. Meanwhile, in Egypt, the embryo of a revolt was being prepared. In the organisation of the demonstration of 18 February 1879 against the economic manoeuvres of the government – considered the beginning of the nationalist action – the Star of the East Lodge (over time attended also by Sanua and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī) seems to have played a leading role. In this regard, Sabry wrote:

This lodge, which brought together in its enclosure the representatives of the ruling and cultivated classes, promoted the exchange of ideas between men who were aware of the political underbelly and the secrets of the government, and created between them a bond of solidarity. [...] From this solidarity originated the riot of February 18 [1879].

He adds a little further:

The demonstration of February 18 which was a beginning of action is, to a certain extent, the work of Freemasonry which played a role in the movement of the last two years of the reign.³⁵

When, to quell the spirits of the Egyptians, Ismā'īl decided to reduce the annual interest paid to foreign creditors, on 19 June 1879 Great Britain and France forced him to abdicate in favour of his son Tawfiq, who became, in fact, the screen through which British rule of Egypt was exercised, exasperating the masses by continuing to oppress them. The revolt broke out in the autumn of 1881 under the leadership of 'Urābī, with the ultimate purpose of overthrowing the Khedivate. Tawfiq took refuge in Alexandria, protected by Great Britain and France, which feared that the

33. Mohamed Sabry, *La genèse de l'Esprit National Egyptien*, Paris, Librairie Picart, 1924, pp. 175-176.

34. John Ninet, "Origins of the National Party in Egypt", *The Nineteenth Century*, 13/71 (1883), pp. 117-134: 128-131.

35. Sabry, *La genèse de l'Esprit National*, pp. 142-143.

‘Urābī government would refuse to pay its debts and prevent any Western interference. The city was bombed by British gunboats on 11 July 1882, and two months later Cairo was occupied, ‘Urābī exiled to Ceylon and Lord Cromer appointed Governor-General of Egypt.

Italian Freemasons also participated in these events, as Zola himself narrated in his historical summary:

In the events that desolated the country in 1882 and which horrified the world, Freemasonry, through its individual Members, took the most active part in the affairs of the State and served as an adviser to the Illustrious and August brother Teufich Kedive of Egypt; and at the extreme moment of danger for the Mohamet-Aly Dynasty, We and the Grand Master of the Grand National Lodge Illust. Br. Raffael Borg, we found ourselves in the place of danger (in the Garden of Ismailia) with a force of a thousand men, in order to defend and protect the life of our brother Teufich.³⁶

However, not all Masons shared the same political positions. While Zola demonstrated his loyalty to Tawfiq, respecting his masonic pact with the Khedivial family, the Italian Risorgimento tradition could more easily bring other Italian Masons to support the ‘Urābī uprising.³⁷ Probably ‘Urābī was not initiated to Freemasonry, even if he attended some Italian initiatives at the presence of prominent Freemasons,³⁸ but his companion, the officer Mahmūd Sāmī Pasha al-Bārūdī, who led the government from February to May 1882, was certainly a Freemason.³⁹ And in Italy, Menotti Garibaldi (a Freemason as well), son of Giuseppe and Anita, was apparently organising an expedition to ‘Urābī’s rescue.⁴⁰

The testimony of Broadley, the British attorney who at the time supported the cause of ‘Urābī and who was his defense lawyer after the failure of the revolts in 1882, appears as a further confirmation of the role that Italians and Italian Risorgimento culture may have played, through the lodges, in the genesis of Egyptian nationalism:

36. Zola, *Sunto storico*, p. 13.

37. The political differences between Freemasons that emerged in this circumstance were probably at the origin of Zola’s resignation in 1883 and the decline of the Grand Orient of Egypt. De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*, pp. 91-101; 132-134.

38. Rainero, “La colonia italiana d’Egitto”, pp. 156-157.

39. Vatikiotis, *The History of Modern Egypt*, p. 136.

40. Wilfred Blunt, *Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt*, London, T. Fisher Unwin Adelphi Terrace, 1907, p. 363. For an in-depth study of the masonic events of those years, see De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*, pp. 65-141.

Although none of the leaders of the National party belonged to the brotherhood, a large number of their subordinates were among its most active and zealous members. Sheikh Abdu had been made Master of his Lodge, and many of the Deputies in the Egyptian Chamber had hastened to join the craft. The “hungry after justice”, as Rifat (also a Mason) usually described the Egyptian patriots, found a strange fascination in the mystic tie which was to unite all men in the common bond of liberty, and believed the same machinery which had helped the Italians in their struggle for freedom and unity would materially assist the Egyptian cause.⁴¹

Some concluding remarks

The close connection between the Italian Freemasons, Risorgimento culture and the birth of Egyptian nationalism highlighted here raises some historiographical questions.

As mentioned above, in general Freemasonry accompanied and often favoured colonial penetration in the Middle East and North Africa. In Egypt, too, and except for some lodges founded to accommodate eminent Muslim personalities (such as the Pyramids and Star of the East), the masonic initiation of the Arabs in the French and British lodges was gradual and, at least in the initial stages, raised numerous explicitly racist objections.⁴² In this framework, the role of Italians appears to have been decisive in opening the lodges to Egyptians, thus transforming Freemasonry from an instrument of imperialist penetration into an anti-imperialist battle den. This convergence was likely favoured by the drive to spread Risorgimento ideals, but also by the fact that the Italian government (at that time engaged in the national unification process) had no colonial ambitions towards Egypt, and the Egyptian Italian community was supposedly aware that British or French colonisation would have reduced its influence in the country.⁴³

41. Alexander M. Broadley, *How We Defended Arabi and His Friends: A Story of Egypt and Egyptians*, London, Chapman and Hall, 1884, p. 262.

42. *Compte-rendu de l'Assemblée Maçonnique tenue à l'Or du Caire le 16 et 17 Janvier 1867*, Alexandria, Imprimerie Française Mourès, 1867, p. 24; De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*, pp. 56-64; Barbara De Poli, *Freemasonry and the Orient: Esotericisms between the East and the West*, Venice, Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2019, pp. 68-72; Bruno Etienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie, suivi de Soufisme et Franc-maçonnerie*, Paris, Dervy, 2008.

43. Rainero, “La colonia italiana d’Egitto”, pp. 132, 133, 150; Joseph John Viscomi, “The Beginning of the End for the Italiani d’Egitto”, *Daedalus*, 5 (2014), pp. 101-120,

Undoubtedly, on the strategic level, the efforts of the Italian Freemasons did not prevent the establishment of the British dominion, and the Egyptian events prove that, on the contrary, it was rather the political developments that determined the fate of masonic jurisdictions and Freemasons in the country: in 1879 the British Grand Lodge did not hesitate to expel al-Afghānī who was campaigning against European imperialism, and after 1882, with the establishment of the veiled Protectorate, the Grand Orient of Egypt, still headed by Italians, experienced a decline that soon led to marginalisation. On the other hand, the National Grand Lodge of Egypt, which originated from a split in the Grand Orient by the will of Zola, led by Muslims and close to the British, experienced an extraordinary expansion, becoming the most important autonomous Masonic Orient in the Middle East.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, if the Italian masonic experience waned, the ideological contribution of Risorgimento culture to the development of Egyptian nationalism produced long-lasting effects, testifying to the importance of Italian Freemasons as fundamental agents of change on the ideological level. Certainly, in the same years, the idea of “love for the homeland” was beginning to make its way even in more traditional cultural contexts – for example in the works of Rifā‘a al-Tahtāwī⁴⁵ – but the Italian Freemasons contributed to building the nationalist response to the British and French occupation, disclosing as early as the 1870s those ideological features, absolutely secular, that would characterise the Egyptian territorial nationalism dominating political discourse in the first half of the 20th century.⁴⁶

There is no doubt that nationalist principles were propagated from Europe to the Middle East in the view of imploding the Ottoman Empire, but what happened in Egypt (and what would occur similarly in Turkey at

https://www.unical.it/portale/strutture/dipartimenti_240/dsps/ricerca/daedalus/pdf24/05_Viscomi.pdf.

44. At the height of its fortune, in 1927, the Grand Lodge had 59 lodges across the country with thousands of adherents, as well as 17 attached lodges in the Syro-Lebanese region (‘Alī Shalash, *Al-Yahūd wa-al-māsūn fī Misr*, Cairo, Al-zahrā’ li-al-i’lām al-‘arabī, 1986, p. 238; *Proceedings of the National Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of Egypt*, s.l., 1925, p. 3; “Ateliers travaillant sous l’obédience de la Grande Loge Nationale d’Egypte”, *Bulletin annuel de la Grande Loge Nationale d’Egypte*, Cairo, 1927, pp. 26-29).

45. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*, London, Oxford Paperbacks, 1970, pp. 75-80.

46. Well in advance of the ideological developments identified by Gershoni and Jankowski (*Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs*).

the beginning of the 20th century, favoring the Young Turk Revolution)⁴⁷ highlights connections between Italians and local inhabitants that were much more complex than mere dominion and subordination.

Italian Risorgimento followers and members of Freemasonry in Alexandria and Cairo were *sui generis* a subaltern group: they enjoyed the privileges of European minorities⁴⁸ but became increasingly marginalised compared to the French and British. They constituted an intellectual and economic upper class but were often politically problematic, repeatedly accused of fomenting unrest. They were linked to members of the royal family in disgrace but conveniently close to the Khedive as well, and they often attended marginal (or irregular) masonic lodges. However, this same community was at the origin of the most powerful masonic institutions in the Middle East and contributed to the ideological definition of the first Egyptian nationalist movements. In contrast to the logic of conflict and antagonism that largely defined both colonial and postcolonial studies, the study of the masonic experiences proved to be crucial for highlighting a different process, as the lodges of Alexandria and Cairo of the time were a place of inter-community relations between Europeans and Egyptians and a privileged channel for the exchange of ideas and sharing of interests.⁴⁹ This

47. Between the 1860s and 1880s, Italian Freemasonry in Turkey was mainly spread by the Carbonari who emigrated following the movements of 1820-1821 and 1848. At the beginning of the 20th century, in particular the Macedonia Risorta Lodge in Thessaloniki, would soon become decisive for the Young Turk movement, becoming the logistic refuge of future revolutionaries. Through the Italian Masons, the Young Ottomans first, the CUP and the Young Turks later, were inspired by the Carbonari system, adopting their passwords, ceremonies and oaths. See Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, pp. 210-11; Zarcone, *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, p. 25; Hamāda, *Al-Adabiyāt al-māsūniyya*, pp. 309-416; Angelo Iacovella, *Il triangolo e la mezzaluna: I Giovani Turchi e la massoneria italiana*, Istanbul, Istituto italiano di cultura, 1997; Ettore Ferrari, “La Massoneria italiana e la rivoluzione turca”, *Acacia*, 2 (1910), pp. 121-131.

48. On capitulations, see Eleonora Angella, “Italiens au Caire à la fine su XIX siècle: quelques notes sur les subalternes et la justice”, in *Italian Subalterns*, ed. by Paonessa, pp. 53-78.

49. Evidence of a daily life made up of inter-community relationships can be also found especially among the most disadvantaged classes, as emerges from the police archives of Alessandria, and among high-ranking families active in the commercial sector. In the second half of the 19th century, the members of the Alexandria General Produce Association were called Salvago, Menasce, Ralli, Aghion: they were the “cream” of Alexandrian society, which met in the very exclusive Club Santo Stefano, for a long time chaired by an Armenian son of an Egyptian prime minister; the vice presidents were a Jew