

Fascist colonialism: the archaeology of Italian outposts in western Ethiopia (1936-1941)

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ABSTRACT

Despite the relevance of material culture in the politics and culture of Italian Fascism (1922-45), this phenomenon has rarely been approached from an archaeological point of view. In this article, I argue that archaeology can provide new insights into the study of this particular version of totalitarianism. I will show the connections that an archaeological study of fascism has with some concerns of historical archaeology, such as colonialism, power, conflict, and race. For this, three Italian military sites in Ethiopia will be examined.

KEYWORDS

Italian Fascism; Second World War; colonialism; archaeology of the contemporary past.

INTRODUCTION

The archaeology of colonialism has grown exponentially during the last decade (e.g. Lyons and Papadopoulos, 2002; Stein, 2005; Van Dommelen, 2006). This growth has gone hand in hand with the development of postcolonial theory in the social sciences. Post-medieval colonialism in particular has attracted enormous interest, due to its global character, the great diversity of cultural encounters, the richness and variety of data, and its decisive influence in shaping our present world (Orser, 1996; Hall, 2000). However, a large number of archaeological studies focus on early modern colonialism. Research on the second wave of European colonialism (from the 1870s onwards) is scarcer and the twentieth century is seldom considered (but see Hall, 2000; Lucas, 2005). Another line of research that is witnessing a remarkable growth is the archaeology of contemporary conflicts. War, class struggle, political repression, dictatorship, and genocide are some of the topics studied by this kind of archaeology (Schofield et al., 2002). Strangely enough, fascism has been overlooked so far—although a PhD thesis on the topic is nearing completion (Samuels, forthcoming). Archaeologists have focused on doing a critical historiography of the discipline under fascism (e.g. Munzi, 2004), but have mostly ignored the important role played by material culture in the construction of fascist society—including design, urbanism, industrial technology, monuments, archaeological remains, and landscape (see Lo Sardo, 1997; Munzi, 2004; Pizzi, 2005; Fuller, 2007).

In this article, I intend to draw attention to those two exciting fields of research—20th century colonialism and fascism. The aim is to explore some possibilities offered by the study of Italian imperialism from the point of view of material culture and to show the intersections with other areas of historical archaeology. An archaeology of fascist colonialism can contribute with relevant data to understand some of the central concerns of the discipline, including issues of identity, race, ethnicity, power, domination and resistance (Lawrence and Shepherd, 2006), as well as the “four haunts” of historical archaeology, as proposed by Charles Orser (1996, pp. 57-88): global colonialism, Eurocentrism, capitalism, and modernity.

ITALIAN COLONIALISM IN EASTERN AFRICA

The late unification of Italy in the late 19th century left the country in a disadvantaged situation to undertake a colonial adventure. Italian colonialism was late and fraught with difficulties and failures (Goglia and Grassi, 1981): Eritrea and part of Somalia were annexed in 1890, but Libya was not conquered until 1911 and the occupation faced an enormous resistance that could be put down only with extreme violence. The most significant failure was the conquest of Ethiopia: Italy was routed in 1896 by King Menelik's army in Adwa. After the battle and the Italian retreat, this country emerged as the only territory in Africa not to be colonized by a foreign power. Although the defeat buttressed the anti-colonial feelings of many Italians, for some it was considered a motive of national shame. The affront was revived for political purposes after the fascist coup of 1922. Mussolini used Ethiopia as a means of reinforcing his power and bringing the Italians together against a common (imagined) enemy. The dictator saw a war against Ethiopia as an occasion to reconstruct the Roman Empire, alleviate economic problems derived from overpopulation and unemployment in Italy by establishing settler colonies in the Horn of Africa, and reshape Italian identity by buttressing new fascist values: manhood, aggressiveness, self-assurance and warrior qualities (Ben-Ghiat, 2001, pp. 171-187).

The war was unleashed on October 3 1935 with a *casus belli* fabricated by the Italians (Del Boca, 1969, pp. 19-20). Mediation by the Society of Nations proved to be pointless and Italy invaded the African with an army of over 200,000 soldiers. The novel use of an immense firepower—provided by tanks, mass artillery support and bombers—made Adwa impossible to repeat for the Ethiopians. They were ruthlessly shattered by a technologically superior enemy, which did not hesitate to use all means at their hands, including poison gas (Del Boca and Rochat, 1996). In May 1936, King Haile Selassie left for exile in Britain. Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia came to be part of what was baptized *Africa Orientale Italiana*—Italian East Africa (FIGURE 1).

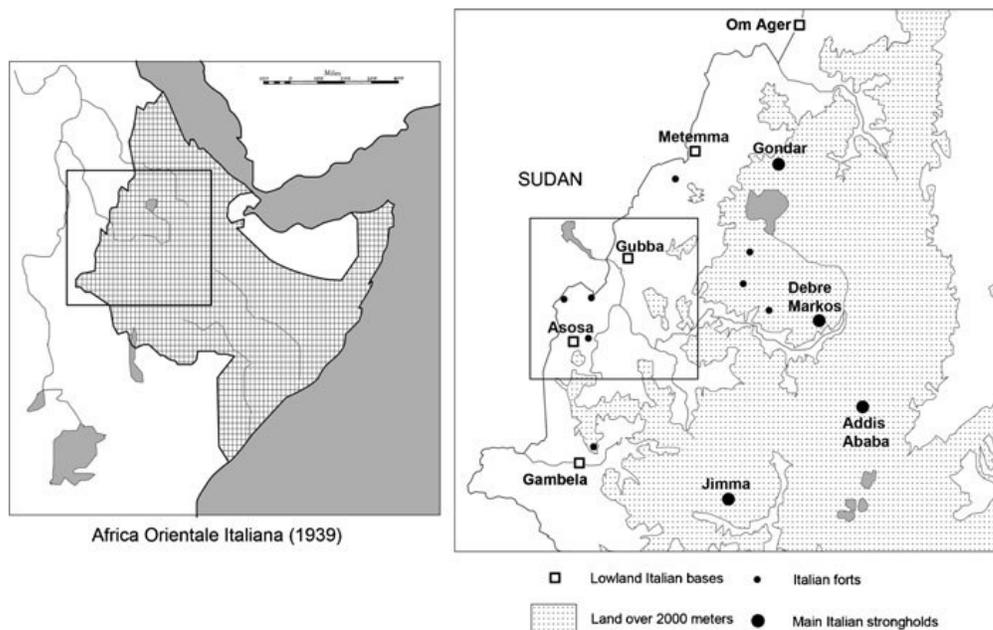


Figure 1. Italian Eastern Africa before the beginning of the Second World War and detail of western Ethiopia, with places mentioned in the text

The occupation was far from easy for the Italians. Although they maintained almost 300,000 troops in the country, they never managed to take firm hold of Ethiopia, which is an ethnically and geographically complex country. The engineering and industrial projects undertaken turned out to be ruinous for the public funds and the project to settle peasants from Italy was an absolute failure (Haile Larebo, 1994). Although a few thousand emigrants arrived, far from being able to feed Italy, they had to be fed themselves (Sbacchi, 1997, pp. 104). Abyssinian patriots led an unremitting guerrilla war against the occupying forces (Hinton, 2007), which led the Italians to react with bloody reprisals and, eventually, to take refuge in a few well-defended towns. Even in the capital of the country, Addis Ababa, a spirit of siege prevailed: the city was surrounded with barbed wire and concrete forts (Sbacchi, 1985, p. 183). By January 1941, when Britain launched the invasion of Ethiopia (Barker, 1966; Orpen, 1969), Italians were completely discouraged in the hostile environment. They were terrified of the foreseeable reprisals from the Ethiopians, after five years of ruthless occupation. This helps explain the numerous surrenders and easy defeats that they suffered at the hands of much less numerous allied forces. On November 27 1941, General Nasi surrendered his troops in the ancient capital of Ethiopia, Gondar, putting an end to the Italian adventure in East Africa.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF FASCISM IN ETHIOPIA

Despite the apparent overabundance of historical sources, archaeology can provide interesting insights into fascist colonialism due to several reasons. First, there is a problem with the nature of our data. A notable amount of research exists on juridical, economic, administrative and political aspects of *Africa Orientale Italiana* (e.g. Del Boca, 1969, 1992; Sbacchi, 1985; Haile Larebo, 1994, 2005); cultural aspects, however, are seldom taken into account—except racism, which is also political and juridical (Sbacchi, 1985, pp. 167-175; Del Boca, 1992, pp. 231-252). There are also very detailed accounts of the war operations, published among others, by the Ufficio Storico dell'Esercito (1971) and the War Office (1942). One may think that another perspective might be gathered from diaries, memories and personal accounts on the conflict and the colony written by people involved in the events. However, this is only partially so. Most of the personal narratives are surprisingly technical, especially in the case of soldiers, in that they describe in extreme detail the military operations in which the author was involved—good examples of this rather dull literature are Di Lauro (1949) and Torrigliani (2004). The same similarity between official and private accounts occurs in other texts and personal recollections collected by historians (Taddia, 2005, p. 217), which is of great interest because it problematizes the divide between history and memory (Nora, 1984). Scarce attention is paid to aspects of daily life, except work, which occupies a central place in the narratives of “poor whites” (Labanca, 2001: xxviii-xxx). Besides, we face continuous attempts at self-justification and romanticization. Most of the autobiographies recently published in Italy try to “pacify”, “rehabilitate” or “vindicate” the past (Labanca, 2001: xi). The dominant spirit, remarks Nicola Labanca, is that of lyricism and denial of responsibility: “the most quotidian deployment of the repressive machine and the control of colonial order are absent. It seems... that the Italian overseas was ruled by consensus and cooperation” (Labanca, 2001, p. xxx; also Taddia, 2005). The Ethiopian side of the conflict is even worst represented, since it lacks the rich popular writing of the colonizers and oral studies are few and have come late (Taddia, 2005, pp. 215-216; Hilton, 2007). Similar biases occur with photographs (e.g. Mignemi, 1982; Palma, 1999; Del Boca and Labanca, 2002): there are very few images of farms, campsites and forts, as opposed to war machinery,

soldiers posing, and exotic landscapes, animals and natives. Indigenous troops are also notably absent or misrepresented in many accounts, despite being the majority of the troops involved in the conflict—200,000 Africans (including Somalis, Eritreans, Lybians and Ethiopians) versus 91,000 Italians (Boca, 1969, p. 255).

Secondly, written documents are only partially preserved. Thus, the Italian military historians who elaborated the official history of the war in Eastern Africa admitted that the diaries of the Italian military operations could not be consulted because they disappeared during the war (Ufficio Storico, 1971, p. 4). In the case we are dealing with, many isolated outposts produced almost no documentation. Given the large extent of Ethiopia, the brief and thin occupation of the country by the Italians and the sudden and catastrophic end of the colony, it is not difficult to understand that many documents vanished or were never produced in the first place. Also, as a secondary theater during the World War, Ethiopia has generated a somewhat limited bibliography. As one eyewitness of the conflict remarked, “Press correspondents usually find little to say about [minor theaters]. Historians sniff at them, and bestowing on them the most perfunctory treatment hasten back to their main theme” (McDonald, 1957, p. vii). The relevance of archaeology is even greater for the Ethiopian side: the study of the guerrilla fighters and their families could benefit from research on the remains of their campsites and refuges.

A third archaeological contribution has to do with material culture in general. Fascist architecture and urbanism has been investigated by some architectural and art historians (Cresti et al., 2004; Fuller, 2007), but archaeology, with its experience in built environments and the use of space, has much to contribute to the debate. Colonial cities in East Africa preserve interesting examples of fascist architecture and urban planning (cf. Schiassi, 1942), whose study might be extremely informative for the study of colonialism in general. However, archaeologists are also interested in less monumental forms of architecture, such as farms, roads and cemeteries, which are often overlooked by other scholars, but may be more telling of the colonial experience of common Italians (FIGURE 2).



Fig.2 The tomb of Silvio Durante, a worker (operaio), killed during the construction of a road near the Blue Nile gorge. Thousands of workers died or fell seriously ill during construction works in Ethiopia. The number of casualties among local workers, although presumably higher, is unknown.

Finally, archaeology can help to show the fate of fascism and its absurdity through its material remains—the ruins of a hollow imperial dream. Ironically, futurism, one of the intellectual pillars of fascism, decried ruins and dusty museums, and praised modern, gleaming technology (Marinetti, 1909). Besides, Italian fascism—as it is often the case with totalitarian ideologies—emphasized youth, progress and permanent renovation as paramount values. In line with this thought, a huge effort of modernization was carried out and Ethiopia was endowed with infrastructures, including some 3,500 km of roads. People, however, tend to forget that these infrastructures were built not out of a philanthropic impulse, but in order to control the country and facilitate its economic exploitation. Fascism not only constructed a powerful image of a progressive colonialism, but, as other contemporary colonialisms, it emphasized the humane side of the whole enterprise (Lauro, 1940). This has had a durable effect in the collective imagination of the Italians. It is popularly considered that the Italian activities in Africa were not as sinister as those of other European powers (Labanca, 2001; Del Boca, 2005). According to a widely shared belief, the tolerant Mediterranean spirit of the Italians made racism unfeasible. While this might be true at the personal level, as a nation, their behavior was as racist as that of any other colonial power.

Italian scholars, most notably Angelo del Boca (1969, 2002, 2005) and Alberto Sbacchi (1997), have worked hard to deconstruct this romantic vision. Nevertheless, Del Boca (2002, p. 113) complains that “The removal of the phenomenon of colonialism in the culture of the country [Italy], with the abuses, crimes and genocides related to it, is almost total”. Contemporary testimonies, documents and some photographs (e.g. Mignemi, 1982, pp. 180-188, 207-211) eloquently inform us about the true nature of this historical episode. Indiscriminate massacres, mutilation and emasculation of corpses, widespread execution of resistance fighters, torture and confinement of Ethiopians in concentration camps (including women and children), use of poison gas at a mass scale, and air bombings are some of the worst aspects of fascist colonialism.

Archaeology can contribute to deconstructing “good fascism”, by exploring concentration camps, places of massacres, and mass graves, but also by “de-monumentalizing” totalitarianism. Both Nazism and Fascism were fond of lofty, metaphysical monuments, which stood as metaphors for power and triumph (Pizzi, 2005; S. MacDonald, 2006). I want to emphasize different experiences and call attention to other places, which, rather than victory and progress, evince fear and retreat. By looking at the ugly, the squalid and the banal, and opposing it to the sublime object of ideology (Žižek, 1989), a counter-image of fascism can be produced, very different to that promoted by Mussolini and his henchmen. For that doing, I will focus here on three fortified outposts located in the region of Benishangul-Gumuz, in western Ethiopia.

THE WAR OF THE END OF THE WORLD

If the Eastern African front was a secondary scenario of the World War, the area of western Ethiopia certainly was the periphery of the periphery. However, marginal and isolated places may be ideal environments to grasp the gist of colonialism and its weaknesses and also to obtain another perspective of relevant historical events, such as fascism and world war. Frontiers and outposts can be considered essential to the colonial experience of Europeans. “Ethiopia was actually the *frontier*”, wrote author Roberto Ducci (quoted in Del Boca, 1992, p. 219). In a sense, all settlements built by colonialists can be considered outposts, isolated fortifications that try to bring security, both real and psychological, to the foreigners. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that

European posts have captured the attention of postcolonial scholars (Wyrick, 2003), but, as it is often the case with postcolonial studies, the image of posts and borders that these students offer us is one devoid of materiality. It is more a trope of discourse than a real, lived thing. I want to go beyond narration and try to recover the material side of frontier experiences during the colony.

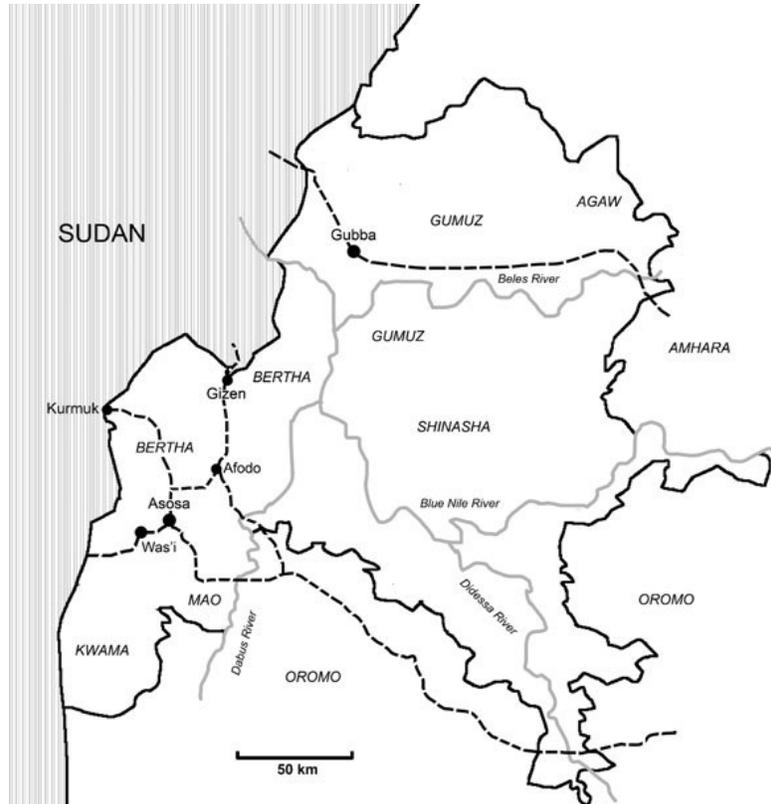


Fig.3 The region of Benishangul-Gumuz with the main roads and outposts of the Italian period. In capitalized italics, the name of the ethnic groups that inhabit the area.

During a research project carried out in 2006 and 2007 in the frontier between Sudan and Ethiopia, I had the occasion to study the remains of three Italian sites in the region of Benishangul-Gumuz (FIGURE 3). This is a lowland area of around 50,000 square kilometers, divided into two by the Blue Nile. The landscape of Benishangul-Gumuz is undulating and covered by a thick savannah and bamboo woodland. The local inhabitants are mostly swidden-cultivators belonging to the Nilo-Saharan family: the Bertha to the south of the Nile and the Gumuz to the north. During the Italian occupation, the north was comprised in the Amhara Region, and the south in the Galla and Sidama Region—the Italians dismantled the old administrative divisions in Ethiopia and created others based on ethnicity. The local ethnic groups of Benishangul-Gumuz were not recognized, though, for being too “primitive”. The region attracted Europeans even before the invasion of 1935, due to its gold resources, renown since Antiquity (Pankhurst, 1968, pp. 231-237). During the brief Italian occupation, gold deposits were explored in Ondonok, near the Dabus River, an affluent of the Nile (Desio, 1940). Remains of the premises (houses and a mine), belonging to the *Società Mineraria Italo-Tedesca* (Quaranta, 1939, pp. 66-67) are still preserved in a place called Signore

Washa—that is “Mister’s Cave”. Unfortunately, the area where Signore Washa is located has been troubled for quite a while and this has prevented its study.

Despite its borderland location, the military (and civilian) presence in Benishangul-Gumuz was scant, because it was thought that the main allied attack on Ethiopia would come from further north, in the area of present day Eritrea, and from the south, through Kenya—as it actually happened (War Office, 1942; Barker, 1966; Orpen, 1969). The region was occupied by small forces and played mostly a secondary part in the conflict. Many border posts and bases were even abandoned before the enemy was on sight. Nonetheless, it has to be noted that the zone north of the Blue Nile (Metekel), was chosen to bring Emperor Haile Selassie back to Ethiopia. Gideon Force, commanded by Major Orde Wingate, trudged through the rough terrain of Metekel, to restore the emperor its throne (McDonald, 1957; Shirreff, 1995; Bierman and Smith, 1999). The mission entered Ethiopia on January 20 1941 and participated in minor battles and skirmishes between the frontier and the Ethiopian Highlands. The terrain was prepared by Mission 101, directed by Colonel Sandford, who arrived in Ethiopia a few months before and operated from the inside debilitating the Italian defenses. Gideon Force and Mission 101, along with a large number of Ethiopian patriots, were in charge of neutralizing the belt of Italian forts that dotted the western edge of the Highlands (Shirreff, 1995). After the fall of Debre Markos, on April 4 1941, the way was open to the capital of the country, Addis Ababa. The city was eventually liberated on April 6 by South African troops coming from Kenya, under the orders of General Cunningham (Orpen, 1969). By the month of June, only a few Italian strongholds remained in the country: Dembidollo and Jimma (Ufficio Storico, 1971, pp. 279-286) in the south and Gondar (Del Boca, 1969, p. 261) in the north.

Other clashes occurred south of the Blue Nile, all of them limited encounters related to a secondary invasion route towards Addis Ababa. The allied troops involved here were a Belgian Congolese battalion (Werbrouck, 1946), the King’s African Rifles (Gandar Dower, 1944, pp. 48-49), and the Sudan Defence Force (Gifford, 1943). The role of Ethiopian patriots (Shirreff, 1995; Hilton, 2007) was vital all over the region in the Italian defeat. Asosa, the main town of this borderland area, was liberated on March 11 1941.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

Most of the outposts established by the Italians along the border with the Sudan were isolated, undermanned and poorly armed. Thus, the 300-km border between Metemma and Gubba was defended by only 1,500 soldiers (Di Lauro, 1949, p. 61). The forces that held the frontier were mostly colonial troops recruited in Africa, along with some irregular retinues provided by local chiefs. These detachments were called *bande* (Amanuel Sahle, 1988; Zorzetto, 2003) and were commanded by Italian officers. The real Italian defense was garrisoned in the Ethiopian Highlands, which harbored much more and better troops, including all the *Camicie Nere*, the Black Shirts, formed by Italian citizens belonging to the Fascist Party (Shirreff, 1995, p. 40). This in itself talks eloquently of the Italian perspectives in Ethiopia, more related with pure survival than with spreading fascism and civilization. During the survey of the central tract of the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderland, my colleagues and I documented three Italian lowland outposts: two of the sites (Was’i and Afodo) are located south of the Blue Nile, in the Asosa zone, another one (Gubba) to the north of that river, in the Metekel zone.

Was'i (Asosa)

Asosa, the capital of Benishangul, was the main town occupied by the Italians in the area. The town, located on a wide plateau, and its surroundings hosted a sizeable Italian garrison of 4,000 soldiers—the 10^a Brigata Coloniale—in command of Colonel Giuseppe Cloza and Major Venturini (Mockler, 1977, p. 427). The Brigata was composed of four colonial battalions, eight 65 mm guns (two batteries), a company of light tanks, 72 light machine guns, 24 heavy machine guns, and an ambulance (Werbrouck, 1946, pp. 56, xiv). Besides Somali, Eritrean, Amhara and Tigrean soldiers (Werbrouck, 1946, p. 57), the Italians counted with some local Oromo. From Asosa departed one of the only two offensives launched by the Italians against the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan: in mid-October 1940, Lieutenant Colonel Rolle invaded the neighboring country with a *banda* of 1,800 soldiers (Ufficio Storico, 1971, p. 45; Shirreff, 1995, pp. 47-49). Nevertheless, he was forced to withdraw soon and from that point on, the Italians remained on the defensive. Asosa had an airstrip, several buildings for administration, a hospital, two storehouses, and living quarters for the military and civilian staff (Anonymous, 1941, p. 35). The border near the town was dotted with small, fortified camps located in strategic places for controlling the roads and trails coming from Sudan to the Ethiopian Highlands. The Italian structures in Asosa have been mostly destroyed—some already during the war (Anonymous, 1941, p. 35; Werbrouck, 1946, p. 59)—or have been strongly transformed. However, my colleagues and I heard about a military post in a remote area near the border with Sudan whose existence is not documented elsewhere, not even in the detailed maps published by Werbrouck (1946), the commander of the Belgian-Congolese battalion that took Asosa from the Italians. We managed to find the Italian fortifications in Was'i, along a road improved by the Italians. At only 18 km as the crow flies from the Sudanese border, this outpost is one of the westernmost sites of the fascist presence in Eastern Africa. The site is built along a rocky spur; it is defended with dry-stone parapets with loopholes, and has a superb visibility (FIGURE 4).



Fig.4 The stone parapet in the fort of Was'i.

Apart from the parapets, there are two dugouts and a short trench excavated in the outcrop. The aim of this camp was to control the Sirokoli (Sherkole) Valley, which is a natural route into the Asosa plateau, still used by the Bertha who go to Sudan for trading. The camp probably hosted a detachment of the *banda* unit that controlled the Sirokoli Valley from the neighboring village of Mahdi. The men probably rotated every week, as we know from other outposts (Werbrouck, 1946, p. 57). The site was thoroughly mapped and surveyed but the only finds were some minute fragments of thin green glass (FIGURE 5). Although the main force of the Belgian-Congolese battalion actually entered the plateau further to the south, a detachment was sent to take hold of the Sirokoli Valley, through the road defended by this outpost. No combats were reported (Werbrouck, 1946, p. 56), a fact which is consistent with the lack of spent war material. The site provides a well-preserved example of the Italian fortification methods and an image of the anti-climax which was the fascist military experience in western Ethiopia: a long wait and a fast retreat.

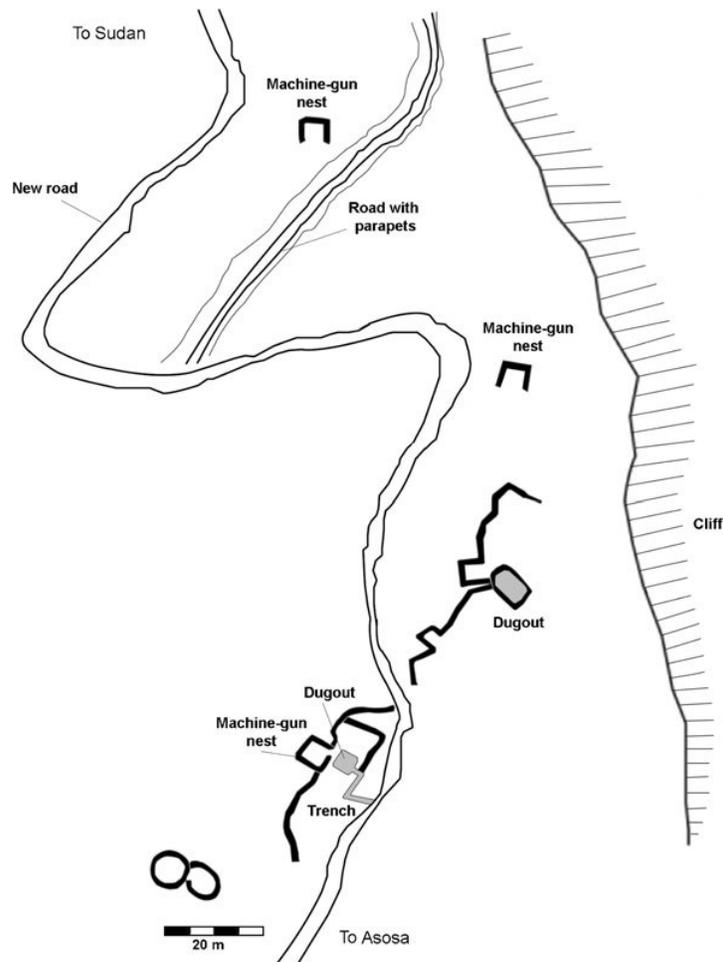


Fig.5 Map of the fort of Was'i.

Afodo

Afodo is the other site in the Asosa zone that I was able to investigate. Afodo or Afodu is a generic name given to a ridge located to the northeast of Asosa, which towers over the plain that stretches out toward Sudan. An outpost was established here to control the principal access to the neighboring country: a road that led to the important border town of Gizen and from there to Khartoum. The old road was improved and a bridge over the Sherkole River was begun, but it was never completed. Afodo was occupied by a *banda* (ca. 250-300 men), belonging to the 4^o Gruppo Bande di Frontiera, and the 10th Battery (Werbrouck, 1946, pp. 56, xiv). The outpost consisted of a series of fortified positions, two of which, at least, were set upon the well-preserved remains of Turco-Egyptian forts, which were improved with bamboo *sangars* (barricades) (Gifford, 1943, p. 158). We have no data on the forts, which might have been built in the mid-19th century. Afodo ridge was witness of the only relevant battle in Benishangul-Gumuz, which took place on March 8 1941. According to allied figures, the Italians lost 118 soldiers (50 killed, 68 prisoners), whereas the Sudanese force commanded by British officers suffered four dead and 31 wounded (Werbrouck, 1946, p. 55 n. 1). After the battle, the Italian troops withdrew to the Dabus River, where they had another brief encounter with allied troops, and finally ended up in Dembidolo, where remnants of the Italian army surrendered by the end of June 1941 (Ufficio Storico, 1971, pp. 284-285 and sch. 33).

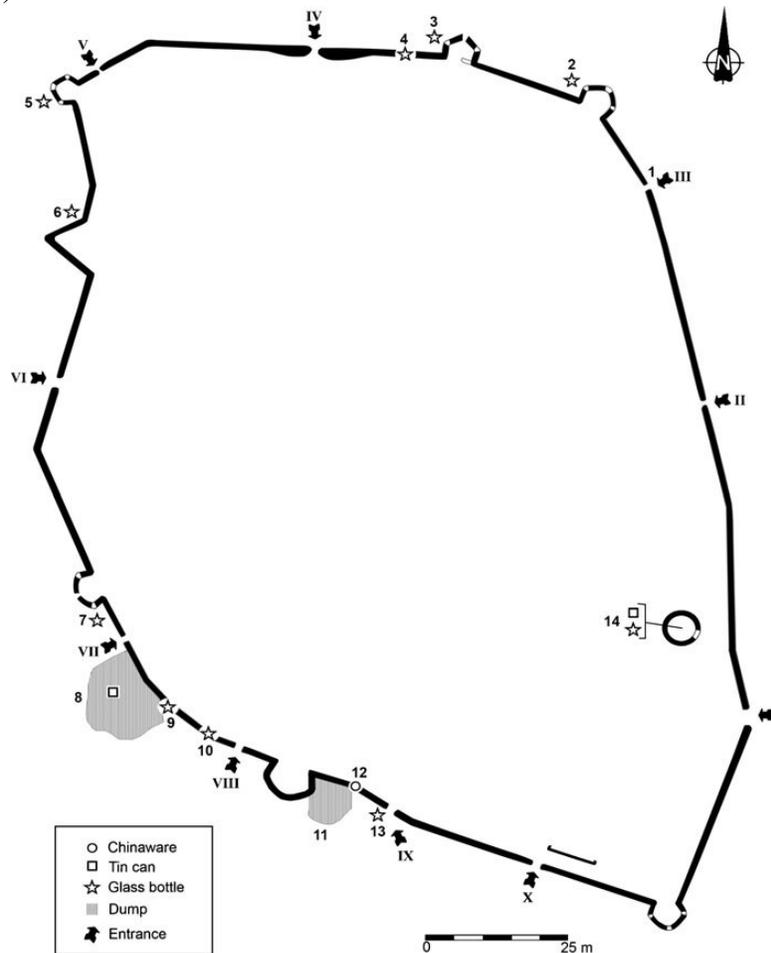


Fig.6 Map of the largest Turco-Egyptian fort at Afodo.

Two Turco-Egyptian forts were surveyed and mapped (FIGURE 6). The small one did not yield any items, but the other furnished a large collection of materials, mostly glass bottles, some tin cans, and white ware (FIGURE 7). When the small finds were plotted onto the map, the use pattern of the fortress became evident: soldiers spent most of their time in the bastions, and the southwest segment of the fortification was the area more intensely occupied. Part of a round stone house from the Turkish period was also excavated. Fragments from wine bottles and a tin can turned up near the surface. The forts were probably *campi famiglie*, where the askaris lived with their families. The presence of women and children is attested among the colonial troops in Benishangul-Gumuz (Werbrouck, 1946, p. xiv) and elsewhere (Volterra, 2005). Oral data were recovered in the nearby village (As'ido): apparently, the memory of the Italian occupation erased the previous Turco-Egyptian one. The construction of the fort was in fact attributed to the Italians and the place itself was called *campo* (campsite). The name *banda* was mentioned by one of the informants during our conversations for referring to the colonial troops garrisoned at the forts.

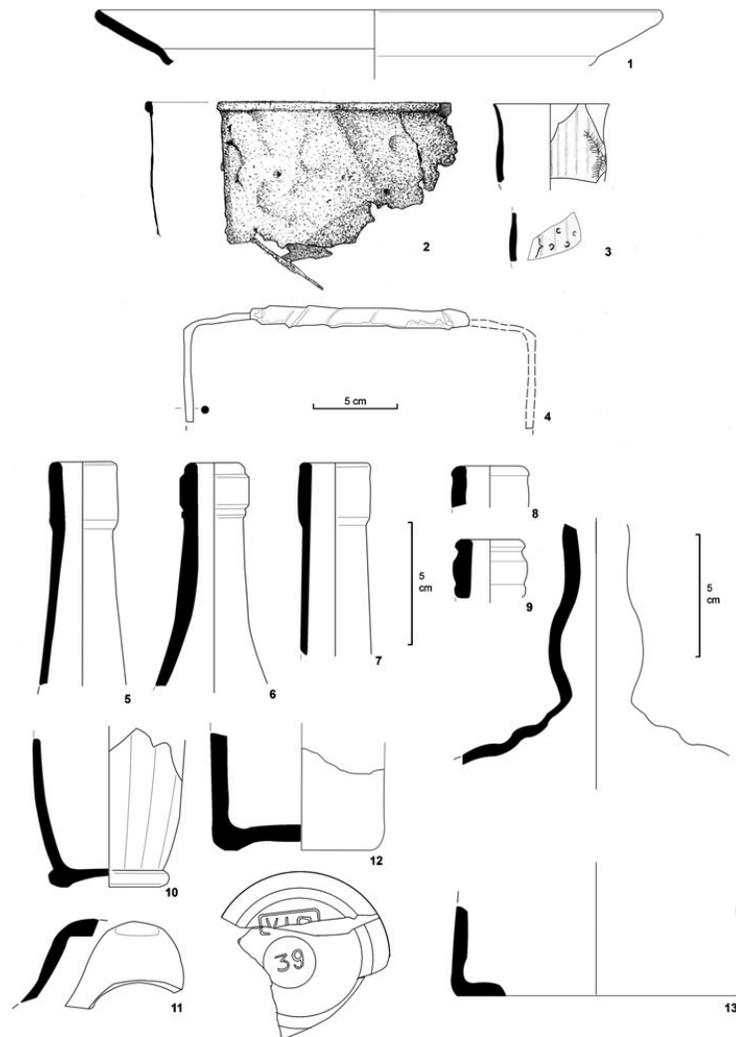


Fig.7 Archaeological materials recovered in the fort of Afodo. 1–4: Whiteware, tin can and iron handle. 1 comes from the perimeter wall, 2 from the round house inside the fort, 3–4 from the road. 5–13: Glass bottles. 5–7 and 10–12 were found in the southern trac tof the wall; 8–9 and 13 on the road that gave access to the base.

Gubba

The third site object of our research is the *presidio* of Gubba. The old sultanate of Gubba was annexed to Ethiopia as late as 1902 (Marcus, 1963). The place was ruled by the descendants of the local Funj dynasty, related to the Sudanese Kingdom of Sennar (1504-1821) (Spaulding, 1987). At the time of the Italian invasion, the man in power was Hamdan Abu Shok (Garretson, 1980), who had a palace perched on a hill close to the town (FIGURE 8, A). Gubba's overlords obtained important revenues from the gold and slave trade.

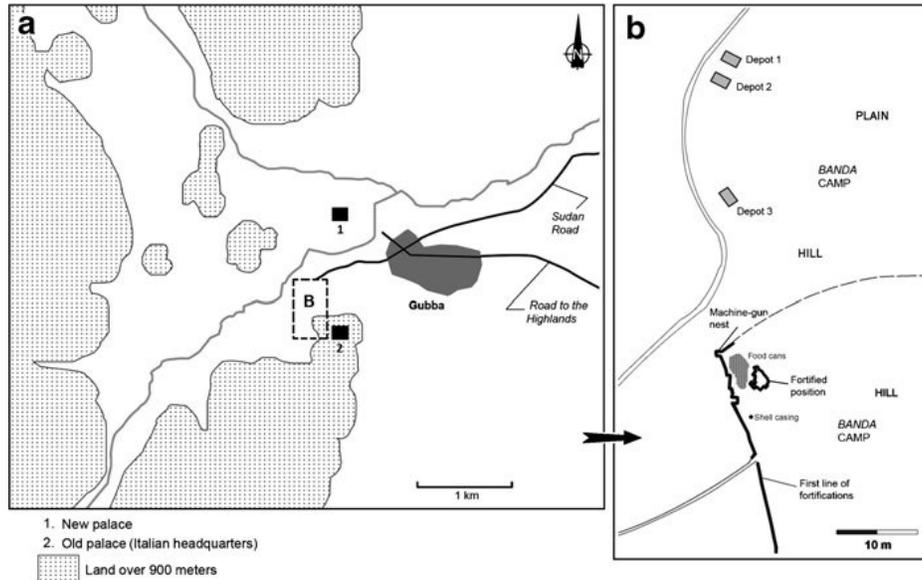


Fig.8 Map of Gubba (a) and detail of the outer belt of Italian fortifications (b).

When the Italians arrived, they decided to use Hamdan's palace as their headquarters. The palace—that enjoyed an excellent visibility over the surroundings, the town and the main road—became the central office of the *commisariato* for the region and the army established their campsite in the surroundings of the palace. The detachment in charge of the place was the *2^a Gruppo Bande di Confine* (Steer, 1942, p. 83; Zorzetto, 2003, p. 167) under the orders of Major Quigini (Mockler, 1977, p. 426). “Heavy” weapons were limited to four machine-guns (Di Lauro, 1949, p. 61). As in Was'i, the fortifications consisted of parapets (low masonry walls), not trenches, due to the rocky nature of the terrain. Unlike Was'i, the walls here were not arranged in zigzag, but in a crenellated layout, and they did not have loopholes either. There were two lines of fortifications: one was defending the lower terrace of the hill and the other enclosed the palace compound on top of the hill (FIGURE 8B). Besides, three ammunition depots were built. Strangely enough, the depots were built *outside* the fortifications, along the road that led to the palace from the north (which was broadened by the Italians). This means that they could easily be taken by an attacking force, but it would avoid much trouble in case of bombing: in fact, although the place was bombed in several occasions, two of the depots were saved (FIGURE 9).

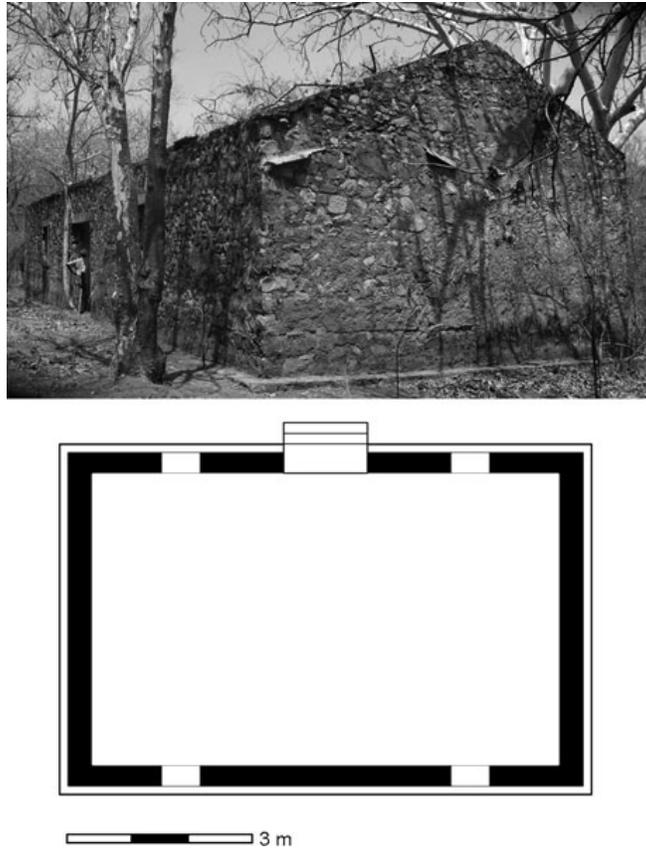


Fig.9 Photo and plan of one of the Italian warehouses in Gubba.

The site was littered with hundreds of artifacts related to the Italian presence (FIGURE 10), from which we collected 50 representative items for further study: tin cans (from Italy, Norway and Eritrea), wine bottles, white ware, a shower head, a truck light, a tin bucket, several pieces of metal scrap, fragments from an electric battery, a spent cartridge, and a bayonet scabbard. Most remarkably, a Ford Model A, from around 1930 was discovered (FIGURE 11). This may have belonged to Hamdan Abu Shok—George Steer (1942, p. 74) notes that the former Funj rulers “now go around in Ford V.8’s carrying umbrellas”—but it was probably requisitioned by Italian officers. Meaningfully, war artifacts are rather scant (FIGURE 10, n. 5-7). Despite our careful survey, only a single shell casing could be identified in the lower terrace. It belongs to a 6.5 x 52 mm cartridge, dated 1934, which was the type of round fired by the M-1891 Mannlicher-Carcano carbine, the standard infantry rifle throughout the 1930s and 1940s in the Italian army. The other military artifact is a bayonet scabbard, which probably belonged to a Mauser. The *bande* were typically given a variety of weapons, some of them very old, as opposed to the metropolitan troops. Weapons, then, were also part of the system of differences that ordered the colonial world. Photographs of the period sometimes reflect this heterogeneity (e.g. Zorzetto 2004, p. 168). The bayonet was found along with fragments of an electric coal battery near the palace to the north. Pieces from a German electric coal battery were also located in the lower terrace (FIGURE 10, n. 5), next to food cans and a shattered metallic bucket. If anything, these artifacts are a humble tale of globalization: Germany, Norway, Italy and the United States are present in a remote border enclave in Ethiopia in 1940. However, they warn

us that globalization is not just a historical process marked by intercultural encounters, local appropriations of alien commodities and hybridization, but also a political phenomenon, fostered by war and predatory capitalism (González-Ruibal, 2008).

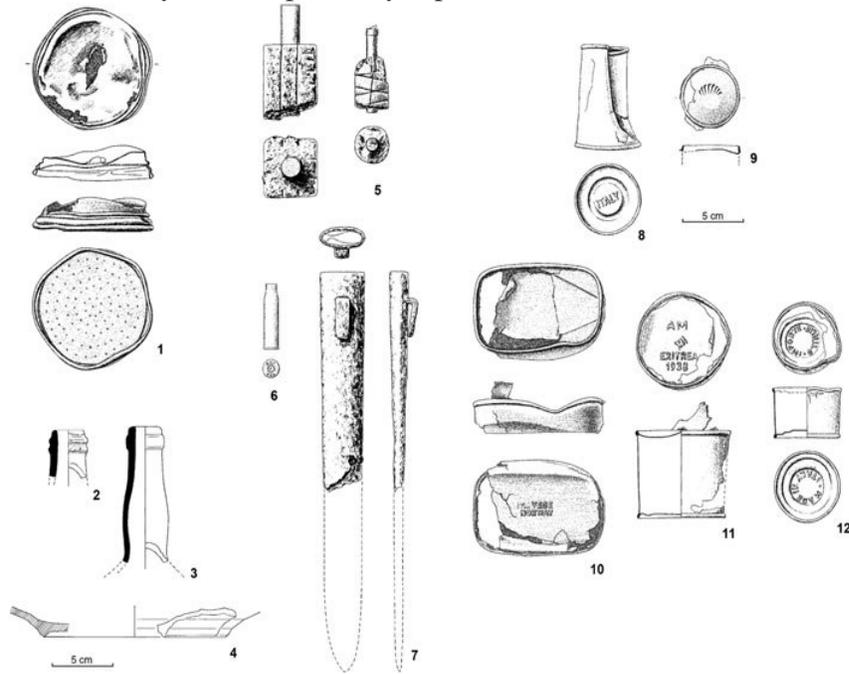


Fig. 10. Artefacts and Ford model T from Gubba.

The *presidio* at Gubba was vacated on January 10 1941 after several bombing raids by allied airplanes between October 1940 and January 1941 (Rosenthal, 1941, p. 81; Steer, 1942, p. 88). They were carried out by Blenheims of the Escadrille Française Libre, based in Cameroon and Chad. Aerial bombings affected also other Italian strongholds (Longmore, 1946, p. 4684). The idea was to undermine the Italians' morale. In Gubba, the bombings were certainly effective. They razed the palace to the ground (FIGURE 12) and the defenders' spirit collapsed. Fear of being surrounded by enemy troops, the continuous harassment by the patriots, and the spread of diseases broke the

colonial army's capacity of resistance. By the end of their stay in Gubba, Major Quigini ceased sending patrols out of town (Steer, 1942, p. 83), 22 soldiers had deserted, and the *commissario*, wounded during a bombing raid, had to be evacuated (Steer, 1942, p. 88). The outpost was abandoned without a battle. The troops that held Gubba escaped to the south, to the Shogali ford on the Blue Nile (Mockler, 1977, p. 426-427), where they met other troops in their retreat to the Highlands.



Fig.12. Remains of Abu Shok's palace with evidence of aerial bombing.

COLONIALISM, LANDSCAPE, MATERIAL CULTURE

Postcolonial theory, based on literary and cultural studies, seems to overemphasize the discursive operations of colonialism (e.g. Bhabha, 1994, pp. 94-131). Even when material culture is taken into account, it is often approached from a literary point of view. Fascist colonialism, in particular, is now the focus of a growing research on cultural productions—literature, cinema, art and architecture (Ben-Ghiat, 2000; 2001; Palumbo, 2003). However, it is obvious that colonialism was much more than narratives and images: material culture played an outstanding role in creating and disciplining colonial subjects and shaping the rulers' identity. I will use the sites of Afodo and Gubba described above to propose an archaeological interpretation of fascist colonialism.

The most obvious inference at Gubba has to do with the spatial organization of the site. Space, in its most material dimension, was paramount in every colonial enterprise. It is not surprising that Frantz Fanon began *The Wretched of the Earth* by commenting on space: "The colonial world is a compartmentalized world", writes Fanon (2004, pp. 3-4), "[t]he colonist's sector is a sector built to last, all stone and steel. It's a sector of lights and paved roads... The colonized's sector... is a world with no space, people are piled one on top of the other, the shacks squeezed tightly together".

Bhabha (1994, pp. 100-101) notes that colonial discourse had as a predominant strategic function “the creation of a space for ‘subject peoples’ through the production of knowledges in terms of which surveillance is exercised”. This space of subjection was much more physical than Bhabha’s text allows us to think. Although Italian efforts to enforce a strict racial divide were never totally accomplished (Sbacchi, 1985, pp. 167-168), attempts at segregation were obvious in the cities enlarged and refurbished by the Italians (cf. Schiassi, 1942), but also in settler farms, military bases and the smallest outposts.

Colonial order in Gubba is remarkable for its transparency. Bhabha (1994, p. 157) argues that “the acknowledgement of authority depends upon the immediate – unmediated – visibility of its rules of recognition as the unmistakable referent of historical necessity”. According to this author, “Transparency is the action of distribution of differential spaces, positions, knowledges in relation to each other, relative to a discriminatory, not inherent, sense of order” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 155).

Order was materialized in Gubba’s landscape in three levels. The summit of the colonial hierarchy, embodied in the Italian *commissario* and his retinue, occupied the palace of the old native rulers. This was a twofold astute maneuver. On the one hand, seizing the slavers’ mansion fitted well the fascist rhetoric, since the Italians presented themselves as the liberators of the oppressed peoples of Abyssinia (Sbacchi, 1985, p. 14). For this reason, Italian generals stressed in their proclamations the banning of slavery: one of Marshall Badoglio’s manifestos reads: “Slavery is an advance of ancient barbarity and where the Italian flag waves there cannot be slavery” (quoted in *L’Italia in Etiopia*, 1936, p. 187). It is worth mentioning that Benishangul and Gubba were actually mentioned by Mussolini in one of his inflammatory newspaper articles, as victims of Abyssinia (Mussolini, 1936).

On the other hand, by occupying the palace it was made obvious to everybody in the area who the new bosses were. For a predominantly illiterate society like the Gumuz, a material statement of this sort was forceful and direct enough. Besides, it also fitted the colonialists’ self-image. In his colonial handbook, Raffaele di Lauro writes: “The colonial government is naturally an aristocratic government, an elite government; it is the expression of the State that dominates, of the race that has won” (Di Lauro 1940, p. 53). In a similar vein, Marshal Graziani harangued his troops saying, “Prepare yourselves to measure in the colonies your force as dominators and your power of *condottiere*” (LeHourou, 1994, p. 50). Mussolini himself considered that empires are conquered by arms, but kept by prestige (Sbacchi, 1985, p. 167). This sort of aristocratic government was materially performed in different rituals of power (FIGURE 13).



Fig.13. The Prince of Piemonte disembarking in Somalia in 1928 (after Del Boca and Labanca 2002, p. 65)

The locals, then, had to see the Italians not only as a superior race, but as a superior class as well. The presence of a shower head in the palace compound might be meaningful in this context: cleanliness was a mark of class and white superiority and the colonized was often caricatured as a dirty savage (Anderson, 1995; Burke, 1996, pp. 17-34). The use of white ware, attested in Gubba and Afodo, was also part of the production of differences, since it reinforced the civility of the foreigners, who used clean individual dishes instead of filthy communal pots. At the same time the use of showers and white ware were undoubtedly related to practices of everyday life that reassured the colonizers psychologically.

Similar strategies were at work in Afodo. Here, the Italians were occupying a place that was heavily connoted. The Turco-Egyptian forts were important landmarks in the cultural landscape of Benishangul: foreign places of power linked to the slave trade. By occupying the forts (the only substantial buildings in the whole region) and giving them new use, the Italians were presenting themselves as fighters against slavery and, at the same time, they were linking themselves to generations of alien rulers. As in Gubba, their rule was embodied in the historicity of the landscape and thus naturalized. The physical occupation of meaningful places was fundamental for the production of a colonial order based on the constant reworking of similarities and differences. The same appropriations occur elsewhere: in Asosa, the Italian buildings were erected beside the palace of Sheikh Khojele, paramount chief of Benishangul and slave trader (Abdussamad Ahmad, 1999, pp. 437-438). In Gondar, the capital of Ethiopia in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Italians designed a monumental and rationalist *piazza* which was connected by a landscaped avenue to the castles of the Abyssinian kings.

As it has been mentioned, the second level in Gubba, below the palace, was occupied by the *bande*. Steer (1942, p. 88) pointed out the presence of around 130 huts in the area below the mansion, “neatly dispersed in brushwood squares”. Traditional compounds in most of Eastern Africa have irregular, curved shapes. The use of a square grid is an obvious manner of disciplining the natives, widely used by colonial power since the 16th century. The *banda* camp acted as a place for creating colonial subjects in

several ways: it mixed together people belonging to different ethnic groups, it changed their language (Italian was the *lingua franca*), it separated them from the local population, and it transformed their material habits (cf. Volterra, 2005, pp. 165, 173). This separation, which is obvious in Gubba, is also very clear in Afodo, where the askaris lived physically separated from the indigenous inhabitants of the region by the walls of the Turco-Egyptian fort. In the case of Gubba, the status of the colonial troops was further reinforced by the meaningful oppositions between palace/huts and the high/low emplacement of the residences. The intermediate position of the colonial troops, halfway between the foreign power and the local population, was metaphorically expressed through their middle location between the Italian hilltop and the native town of Gubba. The town was where the houses, shops, and brothels of the Ethiopians were located. Still a fourth space could be pointed out: that of the majority of the local Gumuz population, living in scattered villages around the town. After all, the “locals” of Gubba were in a good proportion traders, artisans and officials from other parts of Ethiopia and Sudan. This fourth level is what figures as a neutral, almost invisible background in most historical accounts: it is hardly ever referenced in the history of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. I will refer to this in the next section.

Colonial power and its anxieties, however, are also obvious in the artifacts recovered at the sites. The most conspicuous finds are tin cans (Gubba) and glass bottles (Afodo). The containers recovered in Gubba and Afodo were for meat, fish and probably tomato. Also, the remains of two wine bottles were located during the survey in Gubba and dozens in Afodo. Here, besides wine, a large variety of bottles, belonging to different liquors and alcoholic beverages, appeared. The consumption pattern implied by the bottles is similar to the European and very different to the collective drinking parties, using large communal vessels, prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa. This practice also contributed to mark off the askaris and locate them in a third space, which was neither that of the locals’ nor the colonizers.

There is nothing remarkable in tin cans and bottles turning up in military sites. What is more strange is them appearing in the specific contexts that I am studying. An enormous logistical effort had to be made to bring supplies to this isolated outpost: The Eritrean ports were situated well over a thousand kilometers away and were only communicated by roads, most of them dirt tracks. What surprises most is not the logistical effort as its pointlessness from a practical point of view. Only a handful of Italians lived in Gubba and Afodo. The colonial presence was overwhelmingly represented by Ethiopians and Eritreans. They would have been very glad to keep on with their customary eating and drinking habits. Yet they were provided with European foods and drinks at an enormous cost. Actually, neither colonial nor Italian soldiers consumed local food except in case of starvation. Eritrean veterans interviewed by Alessandro Volterra noted that, by the end of the war in 1941 and during a siege, they were so hungry that they all, including the Italians, ended up eating the Ethiopian fermented pancake: *injära* (Volterra, 2005, p. 119). Whereas one explanation to the logistical deployment could be the rigid bureaucratic system of the Italian army and administration, another likely explanation is that food and drink, especially wine, were being used to “civilize” the natives. It was also a strategy to underpin the difference between colonial troops and the rest of the population, to foster the dependence of colonial servants from the colonizers, and to create a *sprit de corps* among the alienated indigenous soldiers. This was reinforced by the use of white ware, dishes and coffee cups, related to European consumption habits.

Along with food, cloth is the other way in which colonialism was inscribed in its subjects. Cloth plays an ambiguous role. Thus, although askaris were given uniforms,

they helped characterize them as exotic Others, with a mixture of European, local and vaguely “Oriental” elements that fitted the colonial imagination (see Zorzetto, 2004) (FIGURE 14).



Fig. 14. Askaris belonging to the 4° Gruppo Bande di Frontiera, somewhere near Asosa. Most of them go barefoot and many have necklaces with Christian crosses over the uniform, probably because they are in a predominantly Muslim area (after Zorzetto 2003, p. 168)

Interestingly, there are local reports of Italians not wanting natives to dress European-style (Volterra, 2005, p. 154). Colonial literature also reveals this uneasiness toward the dressed native: Raffaele di Lauro bemoans the “puerile and grotesque need of imitating the white” shown by Eritreans and Somalis dressed in European style (Di Lauro, 1940, p. 24). This is a nice example of mimicry, the copy that calls into question the colonial gaze (Bhabha, 1994, p. 121-131): dressing like a white, for many Eritreans was a mode of resistance against segregationist policies. The more obvious element through which hierarchy was enforced in the military was footwear: the lack of boots was one of the strongest differences in relation to metropolitan troops and it was felt as a humiliation by the askaris (Volterra, 2005, pp. 153-155). The same desire to civilize but not too much was clear in the *banda* camp in Gubba: the layout was European, but the local element was maintained in the brushwood fences.

The ambiguous process of civilization encouraged by the Italians was perhaps too successful: the local inhabitants of Benishangul always refer to members of the occupation forces as Italians, notwithstanding the fact that a large proportion of them were actually Africans. This reveals the drama of the identities *inbetween* created by the colonial encounter (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 54-56): perceived as alien by their supposed kinsfolk, they are never fully assimilated to the colonial culture either.

THE SUBALTERN’S EXPERIENCE

If we are asked to name some of the protagonists of the Second World War, we naturally think of the British, Americans, Germans and Italians. The Gumuz, Bertha or Ingessana certainly do not come to mind. However, they, along with other so-called “tribal peoples”, were deeply involved in the conflict, not as passive spectators, but as protagonists as well. They were often unwilling actors in a conflict that was not theirs,

but sometimes they found in that alien war an occasion to fight for their liberty, their rights and their beliefs.

The indigenous inhabitants of western Ethiopia are, nevertheless, systematically marginalized in accounts of the war. They are, at best, a risible anecdote: “A visiting Staff Officer was shocked to see a secret message being sent off in clear by the hand of a naked Gummuz [sic] tribesman”, comments Colonel Gifford (1943, p. 157). At worst, they are regarded as unpredictable “primitives” whose actions have to be punished with an iron hand: summary executions, by both fascists and Allies, are not rare (Shirreff, 1995, p. 49). In general, there is a perception that the local “tribesmen” belong to Natural History: they are picturesque elements in the African landscape, like baobabs, elephants, or crocodile-infested rivers. This attitude is perfectly obvious in the colonial photographs that I mentioned at the beginning of this article: frightened or distrustful natives, naked or in exotic attire, are portrayed along with wild animals and tropical landscapes. Comparisons with animals are frequent. Gifford (1943, p. 159) remembers that “As battle was joined, [Bertha] women with babies and children broke out in all directions—rather like rabbiting in late spring with muzzled ferrets”. Georges Steer (1942, p. 61), referring to the Gumuz, writes: “Sitting like monkeys in the forks of trees, they reported every convoy beating through the grass”. “Primitives”, “savages”, “negroids” or “Stone-age peoples” are some of the clichés employed to describe the Gumuz or the Bertha, when they are mentioned at all. Their land is just the setting for colonial powers—Italy and Britain, secondarily Ethiopia—to play the Big Game.

Thus, Bierman and Smith (1999, p. 151n) bemoan the killing of an allied agent, Arnold Weinholt, who was bringing arms to Mission 101, by the “stark-naked warriors of a xenophobic Stone Age tribe whose capacity to wage war the Italians had advanced a couple of millennia by teaching them to use firearms”. The anonymous “Stone Age tribe” is the Gumuz (Shirreff, 1995, p. 45). This gap is very eloquent of the perception of the local inhabitants as undifferentiated beings. Steer, otherwise sensible for the African cause, wittily scorns the Gumuz for changing sides: “The Gumz [sic] were a perfect political barometer. As the Italians had proved their superiority by taking Gallabat, which after Metemma was the biggest city in the whole world, the Gumz were now spying for the Italians” (Steer, 1942, p. 61). The Italian officers themselves were baffled by the loyalty shown until the end by the *negroidi dei bassopiano* (lowland negroids) to whom they considered inferior, unintelligent people (Di Lauro, 1949, p. 135). The fascists, as well as the Allies, did not bestow any agency on the indigenous populations. The colonialists could hardly imagine that local groups could have their own agenda, dictated by their needs, politics, moral knowledge, and historical experience.

The conflict had local ramifications that colonial authors from both sides overlooked. The presence of the colonizers aggravated the political and ethnic rifts that crisscrossed the local societies and the resulting situation turned out to be more ambivalent and complex in the frontier than in other parts of Ethiopia. Among the elites, what we see is the bargaining for power and privileges to which the rulers of Benishangul-Gumuz had grown accustomed for centuries (cf. Triulzi, 1981; Tsega Endalew, 2006, pp. 35-75). Some chiefs, like the Agaw ruler, Zäläk’ä Liku (Abdussamad Ahmed, 1999, p. 439; Tsega Endalew, 2006, pp. 66-67) joined the resistance against the Italians, whereas others, such as the Bertha Sheikh Khojele Al-Hassan, at first collaborated with them. The early support offered by Khojele, to the Italians was undoubtedly motivated by his hatred toward the British, who hampered his slave trade with the Sudan and imprisoned Sitt Amna, his wife and also a slave trader (Abdussamad Ahmad, 1999, p. 149). For Khojele and many other aristocrats, the

alliance with the new masters provided another source of social differentiation on which to base their power: a set of distinctions that was negotiated through material culture among other things. To the emblems of rank conferred by the Ethiopian kings, new forms of regalia were added. Thus, as a souvenir of the alliance between Sheikh Khojele and the fascists, several Italian slate records of the late 1930s are still in the possession of his family. Modern weapons, however, were the main reward sought by chiefs from the invaders. Khojele Al-Hassan eventually contributed large sums to the cause of the emperor and his family managed to remain in power after the return of Haile Selassie. His palace was burnt down by the Italians as a reprisal (testimony of Al-Hassan Abdurrahim Khojele, December 17 2007).

For Zäläk'ä Liku the struggle against the Italians was, at the same time, a vindication of his feudal privileges and his right to enslave the Gumuz. Duri Demeke (village of Bowla Dibas'a, Gublak wereda, March 7-8 2006), an 85-year old Gumuz, remembered the slave raids conducted by Zäläk'ä and other chiefs before 1936: they enslaved women and children, killed the men and looted the villages. It is not strange, therefore, that the Gumuz did not complain about the Italians arriving to the region. However, those areas that were beyond the Italian control were still raided. Zäläk'ä captured slaves in remote places. These practices were probably not seen as incompatible with the general struggle for national liberation. After all, many patriot chiefs did not consider true human beings the recently conquered peoples of the lowlands (Abdussamad Ahmad, 1999, p. 439).

The reactions of the common folk vary. Some of the Gumuz not only collaborated with the Italians, but also joined the fascist army—often forcibly. Many Gumuz were later persecuted by patriots for their collaboration with the invaders. The changing sides of the Bertha and Gumuz commoners that exasperated the Europeans may be explained as a strategy of resistance developed by populations who have been accustomed to be conquered, enslaved and looted over the centuries (Fernández, 2003; Tsega Endalew, 2006). For them, it was mere survival that was at stake. Within the Bertha, the Islamized groups (Watawit and Mayu), tended to collaborate with the Italians (Steer, 1942, pp. 72-81), and some of them still remember the short Italian period as the best in history (testimonies gathered by Andreas Neudorf, SIL linguist, Asosa, February 26 2006). The Bertha regarded the Ethiopian highlanders with bitterness, as they had invaded their land, burnt their villages and crops, and killed many only a generation before the arrival of the fascists. The reaction of many communities facing the Italian occupation, however, was to escape, following a millennium-old tradition in the area (Fernández, 2003). This is what the Gumuz living south of the Blue Nile did, although they later returned and “gave their hands to the Italians” (James, 1977, p. 11)—probably as soon as they saw that they were against slavery. What is obvious is that the indigenous groups did not respond homogeneously to the Italian invasion. Their behavior depended on their relations of power, local alliances and ethnic status. Hence, the image of the conflict that we obtain is more complex, murky and ambiguous than is usually transmitted, as it is always the case with colonial situations (Van Dommelen, 1997, p. 306).

Despite different reactions, the cultural memory of the Italian presence is strikingly similar everywhere in Benishangul-Gumuz. In Afodo, the remembrance of the colonial occupation seemed to be focused on the abuse of drinking: one of our informants (Abbas Ahmed, village of As'ido, Menge wereda, December 17 2007), told us that “they drank everything: wine, whisky, beer, *areki* [local liquor]”. Another informant (Awed Algämär, town of Mankush, Gubba wereda, March 13 2006) commented amusingly that in the 1980s, the Italian cemetery was dug for treasures, but

only an empty bottle of whisky was found. The Italian presence at Was'i, on the other hand, was linked to a folk song in which the Italian troops were scorned as cowards, who fled in the presence of the enemy. The song is often interpreted by the Bertha living in the surroundings during weddings and other celebrations (Andreas Neudorf, Asosa, February 26 2006). The image of the former colonizer, then, is anything but glorious. It is certainly at odds with the idea of the white as morally and intellectually superior and responsible for civilizing inferior races. Archaeology and ethnography arrive to the same conclusions from different sources.

Their fame as cowards and drunkards notwithstanding, the Italians have been transformed in legendary beings. They have been incorporated into the ideational landscape of Benishangul-Gumuz in manifold ways, but their presence is most often linked to gold. The Italian and local production of myths come together in this symbol: “the *padroncini* departed for Abyssinia went in search of an imaginary treasure” (Le Houerou, 1994, p. 24). As I said, the Italian tombs in Gubba were excavated because people thought that gold might be found there. Near Afodo, the remains of the Italian bridge were perforated by local villagers in search for the precious metal, too. Finally, Signore Washa, a gold mine, has become the best-known and most mythologized Italian place in Benishangul. The Bertha all over the region believe that the mine is a dangerous place inhabited by evil spirits. Ironically, the modernist and supremacist European conquerors of the region have become a sort of traditional African myth.

CONCLUSION: DECONSTRUCTING FASCISM

In this article, I have described the material remnants of fascist colonialism in the western borderland of Ethiopia. I have used the evidence to cast light on the Italian occupation of the country and, at the same time, I have offered a peripheral vision of the Second World War, in a postcolonial attempt to rewrite history from the margins and recover subaltern experiences. Although we often assume that when it comes to the Second World War or Fascism, archaeologists have little to offer, given the overabundance of written sources, the fact is that narratives based on material culture can still provide alternative perspectives, which focus on everyday practices, ignored places, and subaltern voices. In Africa, the good preservation of recent sites, along with the use of textual data and a wealth of oral sources, may allow us to produce richly textured stories that complement, or even challenge, official accounts. Such an approach is especially pertinent in this continent, which has been so often marginalized by historians of global events.

Moreover, the study of fascist colonialism in Africa may contribute to our understanding of colonialism in general, by showing connections and resemblances with other historical periods. Some themes of Italian colonialism appear elsewhere, such as the use of material culture to discipline the Other—with very ambiguous results—and to achieve psychological security in an alien environment. The interesting point about fascist colonialism is its excessive character: if colonialism after the late 15th century is an essentially modern phenomenon, fascist colonialism is supermodern—and therefore exaggerated (González-Ruibal, 2008): in its rhetoric, its ambitions and its technologies of social engineering. Unlike similar phenomena at that time, fascist colonialism was an especially straightforward form of imperialism, as it was not couched in the liberal rhetoric of other countries.

I have explored here the other side of the imperial dream. Although the three sites studied in this article were marginal outposts, they are representative of the fascist experience as a whole in Eastern Africa. They are far removed from the imperial rhetoric of Mussolini, that stressed aggression, decisiveness and action, and far also

from the arrogant image of pervasive monumental and engineering works that official photographers captured and politicians used as propaganda. Was'i, Afodo and Gubba are fortified isles in a hostile sea: they tell us about a pointless defense, enervating inaction and, finally, a retreat without honor. The fact that the archaeological evidence of the Italian rule in Ethiopia is represented mostly by forts is not mere chance: they were the quintessence of the unstable occupation of the country.

Was the fascist colonial experience exceptional? In a sense, all colonialisms are fascist, in that they are based on racial injustice, authoritarianism, strongly hierarchical values, the continuous production of inequalities, the political justification of predation, and both physical and symbolic violence (cf. Mbembe, 2000). The materialization of colonialism was, therefore, not very different from other countries. Italy actually drew upon the British Kenya and South Africa to implement its racial policies (Haile Larebo, 2005: 87). Colonial cities, outposts and farms are not dissimilar at first sight: monumentality and segregation are prevalent everywhere (Van Dommelen, 2006, pp. 112-114). The feelings of isolation and fear that so clearly marked the Italian experience in Ethiopia was not privative of fascism either. Furthermore, the sensation of perpetual instability and danger is characteristic of most modern colonialisms that are based on extreme sociopolitical asymmetries and racial divides. In the case of South Africa in the 18th century, for example, "People who owned property and slaves lived in perpetual fear of attack—a paranoia considerably in excess of the recorded incidents of resistance and rebellion" (Hall, 2000, p. 136). The Italian colonizers' terror was out of proportion, too, as proved by the great leniency with which they were treated by Ethiopians after their surrender in 1941. Racist stereotypes that portrayed Africans as blood-thirsty savages—the staple of colonial fantasies—were deeply ingrained in the colonizer's mind and proved disastrous to the conquerors by undermining their morale. Sbacchi (1985, p. 97) notes that even "Farm houses were built close together in military strategic positions, with surrounding walls and defensive works": constant fear deeply affected the fabric of everyday life and shaped the construction of the colony; a world of citadels, fortresses, and defended outposts and farms.

One of the possibilities of the archaeology of the contemporary past is to undermine the ideological constructs of modernity whose mundane materiality has been concealed (González-Ruibal, 2008). In the case of fascism, this implies demonumentalizing the phenomenon and help manifest its trivial and vulgar material side. Roberto Paribeni, director general of Italian Antiquities, once wrote: "I am not exaggerating when I say that the archaeologist who will search after two thousand years in some colony for evidence of English dominion, the traces of the tennis-playing fields and the light cottage having been destroyed, will be able to collect only some empty whisky bottles" (quoted in Munzi, 2004: 82). I have not waited two thousand years to study twentieth century imperialism. Ironically, the archaeological remains of the glorious Italian empire in Africa have turned out to be very much what Paribeni expected British colonial sites to be: a sordid wasteland of broken bottles.

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