



Field notes on The Colonial Middle Ages: Prolegomena to Architecture between Medievalism and Italian Imperialism

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Imperialism matters, particularly in architectural history. But does medievalism also matter in our field? The reverberations of the medieval in post-medieval architecture are often seen as inconveniences or of peripheral interest in evolutionist, if not modernist, versions of architectural history. Yet the Middle Ages traverse non-medieval spatialities and temporalities, contributing to phenomena like colonialism. The essay proposes that imperialism's exchanges with medievalism can be excavated at the intersection between architecture and the reception, revision, and resurgence of the medieval past — particularly as it unfolded in the construction of the Italian Empire in Africa and the Mediterranean between 1911 and 1936 — and thereby problematise the prevailing associations with modernism. A more balanced view of the ties between the Middle Ages and the post-medieval period highlights the modernity of responses to the past and draws attention to architecture between these responses and imperialism in cases other than the Italian one.

Keywords: Architecture; medievalism; imperialism; colonialism; Italian Empire; Middle Ages



Oxymora, Complexities, Pervasiveness

The ‘colonial Middle Ages’ is a potent oxymoron. When pondering architecture and imperialism, one does not typically think of responses to the Middle Ages. As a cross-disciplinary subject these responses are known beyond architectural history under the rubric of ‘medievalism’ (D’Arcens 2016). While imperialism is one of the most debated notions in our field, medievalism is foremost associated with literary and medieval studies. There is also a substantial body of architectural historical literature associated with responses to the Middle Ages that focuses in particular on stylistic revival, a topic that has recently seen an upsurge of interest in areas outside of medieval revivalism and architectural history (Bolzoni and Payne 2018). Architectural history, however, while it has long tackled imperialism, lacks a tradition of dealing with medievalism as a sub-discipline. Medievalism remains conspicuously undertheorised within the discipline.

The construction of the Italian Empire presents a fascinating case for bringing architectural history and the study of medievalism closer together. Rooted in 19th-century colonial ambitions, the Empire became more defined during the 1911–1912 Italo-Turkish War and assumed full form with Mussolini’s imperial proclamation in 1936. The architecture of this period that witnessed the advent of fascism and modernism in Italy and its former colonies is customarily seen in architectural history as standing in direct contrast to the revivalism of the long century of historicism. Thus, it is not surprising that scholars do not primarily associate the architecture of the period with, for example, a building like Saffo Panteri’s Tripoli Cathedral (1928) in Italian Libya (1911–1943) (Figure 1) that in its medieval allusions gazes towards the past but with a building like Giuseppe Pettazzi’s Fiat Tagliero (1938) in Asmara, Italian Eritrea (1889–1947) that with its cantilevered roof embodying aerial dynamism looks to the future. By focusing more closely on Italy’s former colonies in Eritrea, Somaliland, Libya, and the Dodecanese during the 25 years of empire building we can develop a counter-narrative that brings the medievalisms of imperialism to the fore but that also remains open to broader spatialities and temporalities.

The idea of a colonial Middle Ages is further complicated by the fact that imperialism often conjures the period spanning from the early modern era to the present, with the modern era taking centre stage, rather than medievalism or the medieval period. Imperialist inclinations and relations can, of course, be discerned in pre-modern times, the Roman Empire in antiquity and the Venetian and Genoese presence in the Middle Ages being two examples. However, the notion of colonialism itself is not usually associated with the medieval period. The ‘discovery’ of the ‘New World’ in 1492 serves as a twofold threshold that symbolises both the twilight of the Middle Ages and the beginning of colonality. The ‘pre-colonial’ era can be identified as one of the

pillars on which imperialism was constructed, and themes related to its emergence are explored in other fields such as literary studies (Davis and Altschul 2020). Beyond its responsibility to delve into pre-modern colonial attitudes, including forms of medieval colonialism (Georgopoulou 2001), architectural history must also grapple with the paradigm that delineates the relationships between post-medieval colonialities and medievalities (i.e., qualities of being medieval). These relationships can be construed as an interplay between imperialism and medievalism, or as colonial medievalisms.



Figure 1: Saffo Panteri, Tripoli Cathedral, Libya, completed in 1928. Postcard, 14.9 × 10.6 cm. Courtesy of the author.

The colonial Middle Ages is a complex phenomenon that originates in a spatio-temporal paradox: the translation of a pre-colonial era to times and spaces that transcend the medieval world and that are integrated with the geopolitics and dynamism of imperialism. Architectural history shows that although the colonial Middle Ages is explicitly related to the medieval, it is both temporally and spatially displaced, that is, anachronic and anatopic, respectively. The Tripoli Cathedral, described by an Italian periodical of expansionist propaganda as exemplifying Tuscan-Lombard Romanesque

style (FT 1929: 32), transposes a medieval idiom beyond its temporalities (i.e., the medieval era) and spatialities (i.e., central and northern Italy).

Similar analyses can be extended to other buildings in Italian colonial contexts, both formal and informal. According to contemporary periodicals, architect Florestano Di Fausto's Palazzo del governo (1927) in Rhodes, Italian Dodecanese (1912–1947), was in the style of Venice's Palazzo ducale ('L'opera' 1929: 2136) (**Figure 2**). Antonio Vandone's Cattedrale di Mogadiscio (1928) in Italian Somaliland (1905–1941) was thought to have been inspired by Arab-Norman constructions in Sicily, specifically the Duomo di Cefalù (Meregazzi 1928: 25) (**Figure 3**). These examples draw the 1920s closer to the Middle Ages through the transposition of medieval idioms. Yet the anachronistic and anatomic qualities of colonial medievalisms are not just stylistic but demonstrate the broader spatial-temporal relevance of the medieval in relation to imperialism, ultimately revealing that a symbiosis between architecture and medievalism can act as a formidable conduit for communicating and enacting notions of power and empire.



Figure 2: Florestano Di Fausto, Governor's Palace, Rhodes, Greece, completed in 1927. Postcard, 13.9 × 8.8 cm. Courtesy of the author.



Figure 3: Antonio Vandone, Mogadishu Cathedral, Somaliland, completed in 1928. Postcard, 13.8 × 8.8 cm. Courtesy of the author.

In architecture, medievalism is largely associated with stylistic revival (e.g., the Tuscan-Lombard Romanesque, Sicilian Arab-Norman, and Venetian Gothic). Yet the architectural manifestation of medievalism amounts to more than just a translation of medieval building styles, which is an inherently complex phenomenon in own right due to the act of transferring itself and its openness to hybridity. It also encompasses the fluid ways post-medieval architecture can embody the medieval (see Zerbi 2022).

An illuminating example is the triumphal arch of Carlo Enrico Rava, realised in Mogadishu for a royal visit in 1934 (**Figure 4**). Although not convincingly attributable to a stylistic revival, the arch is intrinsically neo-medieval owing to its transmogrification of medieval Islamic architecture. Arnaldo Cipolla (1935: 309–310), an Italian colonial propagandist, notes that ‘the sides of the arch reproduce [...] the Jama Mosque, the oldest [mosque] in Mogadishu’. Colonial neo-medievalisms, like neo-medievalisms more broadly, embrace the complex and hybrid ways the medieval can manipulate form and space including by way of dialogue with other ‘-isms’. The form and rigour of Rava’s arch and its reference to the mosque signify a dialogue with classicism, modernism, and orientalism.



Figure 4: Carlo Enrico Rava, triumphal arch, Mogadishu, Somaliland, completed in 1934. Postcard, 14.7 × 10.3 cm. Courtesy of the author.

The colonial Middle Ages also reflects attitudes towards the medieval built environment instanced in the transformation of the Rhodes castle — a 14th-century palace for the Knights Hospitaller — into the Palazzo del governo and Italy's foremost overseas royal palace (1940) (**Figure 5**). Colonial propaganda presented it as a 'formidable chivalric structure' ('Archeologia' 1940: 657).

An understanding of architecture in relation to the cultural dynamics and policies of medievalism and imperialism is critical to understanding the colonial Middle Ages. Examples like the arch and cathedral in Mogadishu need to be interpreted in terms of their mythologisation of both medieval Islamic history and the encounter between coloniser and colonised, a mythologisation epitomised in the presentation of the 'Sword of Islam' to Mussolini during his trip to Libya in 1937 that contributed to fascist Italy's glorification as a defender of Islam (Wright 2005).

The colonial Middle Ages exerts a wide influence. A core constellation of neo-medievalisms in Libya, Eritrea, Somaliland, and the Dodecanese highlights the Mediterranean and Africa as critical spaces of architectural imagining, while the

Italian concession of Tianjin demonstrates its reach beyond the immediate vicinity of the Italian state. It transcends the space and time of Italy's imperialism, presenting a truly global and diachronic framework for understanding the post-medieval. Spatially, architectural examples of a state's imperialism can be found in its colonies, whether formal or informal, within the imperialist state itself, and in states beyond (as seen in the transposition of the medievalism associated with the British Empire to European countries beyond Britain's direct influence). Temporally, examples are found not only in the buildings of modern empires but also in buildings that date to the inception of colonialism (e.g., Catedral de Santa María la Menor in Santo Domingo, the first cathedral built in the Americas) and to the contemporary period. The concept of the colonial Middle Ages enables medievalism to serve as a way to advance understanding of the critical issue of imperialism.



Figure 5: Vittorio Mesturino, Castle of Rhodes, Greece, completed in 1940. Postcard, 13.9 × 8.9 cm. Courtesy of the author.

Architectural History, Imperialism, Medievalism

Driven by post-colonial theory, colonial, post-colonial, and decolonial studies have become among the most vibrant sub-disciplines of architectural history over the past four decades (Crawford 2023; Osayimwese 2021; Volait 2017). Scholars have shifted

focus from a binary coloniser-colonised discourse to the complexities, contradictions, and spatial and visual implications of encounters between authority and otherness. The Black Lives Matter protests cast a spotlight on urban environmental injustice but raised even more pressing questions about imperialism outside of traditional colonial contexts (James-Chakraborty 2022; McLaren 2021). These questions, speak to the central issues of our time and have been the focus of conferences held by the EAHN, SAH, and SAHGB.

The study of British imperialism has been a trailblazer in the architectural historical research on imperialism, including in the efforts to go beyond the exploration of modernism. Mark Crinson's 1996 *Empire Building*, which pioneered the study of informal empire, offers a groundbreaking account of the entanglements of the built environment, imperialism, and responses to the past in the context of the 'Orient', while Alex Bremner's 2013 *Imperial Gothic* explores the historical interplay between the built environment, imperial assertion, and responses to the Middle Ages by focusing on a manifestation of neo-medievalism in the form of the Gothic Revival. But — despite some exceptions, such as Daniel E. Coslett's (2023) research on French Carthage — the work on these intersections has nearly disappeared into a blind spot of architectural history.

That blind spot is, as I have suggested, medievalism studies. Scholarly attention to medievalism across various disciplines surged beginning in the 1970s with the formalisation of medievalism studies, but within this interdisciplinary realm, architectural history has remained relatively underrepresented, drawing less attention than disciplines such as literary and medieval studies. Responses to the past do not naturally serve as an epistemic point of departure for our discipline. Approaches to the subject matter of architectural history that are evolutionist and positivist if not 'operative' in Manfredo Tafuri's (1980: 141–163) sense of the word have often dismissed historicism, treating it as marginal, a mere side issue in the development of contemporary architectural theories and practices. Yet I find medievalism — encompassing neo-medievalism, practices of reception of the medieval, and attitudes towards the medieval built environment — to be pervasive, persistently topical, and at the foundational core of architectural history as a discipline.

By embracing the colonial Middle Ages — and casting a spotlight on the study of responses to the past more broadly (particularly in the context of an ongoing crises in academia of the study of pre-modern eras) — we can further efforts aimed at bridging the gaps at the intersection of architectural history and medievalism studies, thereby stimulating discourse on an 'architectural history of medievalism'.¹ This endeavour involves addressing frictions with classicism and orientalism and investigating amorphous relationships with style and modernity (Sternberg 2012).

Italian Empire Building and Beyond

Although Italian colonial architecture and its relationship to imperial politics has been subject to less scrutiny than the colonial architecture of other European countries (particularly that of the Atlantic empires) owing to a perception of it as being just a stylistic laboratory for modernist experiments whose achievements were eventually incorporated into architecture back ‘home’, a good body of scholarship does exist (Bader 2016; Bortolotto and Riboldazzi 2018; Colonas 2002; D’Amia 2012; De Pretto and Wurzer 2024; Denison, Ren and Gebremedhin 2003; Fuller 2006; Jones and Pilat 2020; McLaren 2006; Von Henneberg 1996). Yet, both within and beyond architectural history, there have only been brief mentions and partial considerations of the links between Italian colonialism and the Middle Ages (Perotti 1999; Iacono 2021), the bulk of architectural scholarship focusing instead predominantly on *razionalismo* (modernism’s encounter with classicism). It is not surprising, as Italian colonialism is often associated with fascism, which is in turn associated with *modernità* and *romanità* (Agbamu 2024), although there are notable departures, particularly in heritage studies (Medina Lasansky 2004). Cesare Bazzani’s modernist-classicist design for the Stazione marittima di Napoli (1936) whose goal was to reinforce the city’s and Italy’s roles in the Mediterranean epitomizes this connection. That the link between Italian colonialism and the Middle Ages has tended to be overlooked is also unsurprising given that the neo-medievalism of the 20th century has been the subject of relatively few inquiries (Borngässer and Klein 2022). Italy’s own neo-medievalism of the same period has often been overshadowed by modernist-centred views.

A counter-narrative that unpacks the visual and symbolic dimensions of medievalism and empire across Italy’s former colonies and problematises the prevailing associations of colonialism and imperialism with post-medieval history along with those of the built environment from the first half of the 20th century with modernism promises to shine a spotlight on the relationship between the built environment, politics, and responses to the Middle Ages.

Exploring whether the colonial Middle Ages transcends the spatialities and temporalities of Italy’s former colonies, calls for multiple efforts across space, time, architectural and stylistic manifestations, and specialities, as resisting the dominance of operative, evolutionist, and positively construed architectural histories is never easy. However, the ongoing efforts of architectural historians alongside other scholars to tackle decolonisation (Belmonte 2024) and the politicisation of the pre-modern past that is pervasive in the contemporary world give us hope that architectural history, today more than ever, has an opportunity, even the responsibility, to do so.

Note

¹ My work aiming to foster discourse on an architectural history of medievalism includes papers at the 2019 SAHGB workshop and at the 2021 ICOM conference, as well as the organisation of a SAH 2023 virtual session titled 'Neo-Medievalism Studies: New Directions for Architectural Historians', 2023 research seminars held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, the 2024 conference 'After the Middle Ages (Reception, Remnants, Revival): Architecture and Medievalism' co-organised with Tanja Michalsky at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, and a SAH 2025 session titled 'Post-Medieval: Afterlives, Preservation and Loss of the Medieval'.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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