

# **REPRESENTING HISTORICAL NARRATIVES IN THE URBAN SPACE. THE MAKING OF THE HERITAGE SPACE OF RHODES (1912-1950).**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rhodes (the capital city of the Dodecanese island complex) was an Ottoman town with no perceived heritage space or predominant built heritage paradigm to represent a common past. Following political changes, it would become a testing ground for two different political regimes, in their effort to articulate ideology, imprint notions on social organisation of the present, and consolidate political hegemony by using History. A colonial empire that turned to fascist ideology and a republican nation-state dedicated to western ideals would promote specific built typologies to heritage monuments, and remodel the walled city, so as to verify their view on the history of the place. This paper deals with the urban interventions of the Italian colonial and Greek interim administrations (1912-1943 and 1947-1950, respectively) on the walled part of the ancient city and the important role of the media in diffusing new articulations on the local history and in propagating the significance of built heritage brought forward by each administration.

## **Historical background**

The Dodecanese island complex was seized by Italy from the Ottoman Empire during the Italian-Ottoman wars (1912). The islands were formally annexed to the Italian state as a 'Possession', following the Lausanne Treaty (1923), and remained under Italian control before they were incorporated to Greece in 1947 according to the terms of the Paris Peace Treaty (1947).

## **THE WORK OF THE ITALIAN COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION (1912-1943)**

The Italian administration began implementing its urban heritage preservation agenda even during the 'uncertain' period of provisional control (1912-1924), when it restored key buildings of the walled city in a manner highlighting their association with the medieval Order of St John, thus underpinning the medieval origins of the city. In addition, it developed a legal framework that controlled every private intervention to buildings it considered as historically significant. Incorporation of the islands to the Italian state (1924) provided the necessary legal means that enabled the Italian administration to intensify its urban transformation programme, and to compile an urban plan (1926) for a new colonial city around the walls. Architectural and urban interventions were planned, designed and overseen by local colonial institutions, such as the 'Superintendency of Monuments and Excavations', the 'Office of Architecture', and the 'Directorate of Public Works'.

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### The creation of the heritage space of Rhodes

Within almost 30 years, from the identification of potential heritage buildings<sup>1</sup> and the restoration of the highly symbolic *Hospital of the Order of St John*<sup>2</sup> to the finalisation of the last regulatory plan (1942) just before the surrender of the Italian forces (3/9/1943), the image of several parts of the walled city would have been altered beyond recognition. In particular, the N, NE, E and SE part of the city would convey the image of a typical fortified city of knights, a medieval western European bastion in the East.

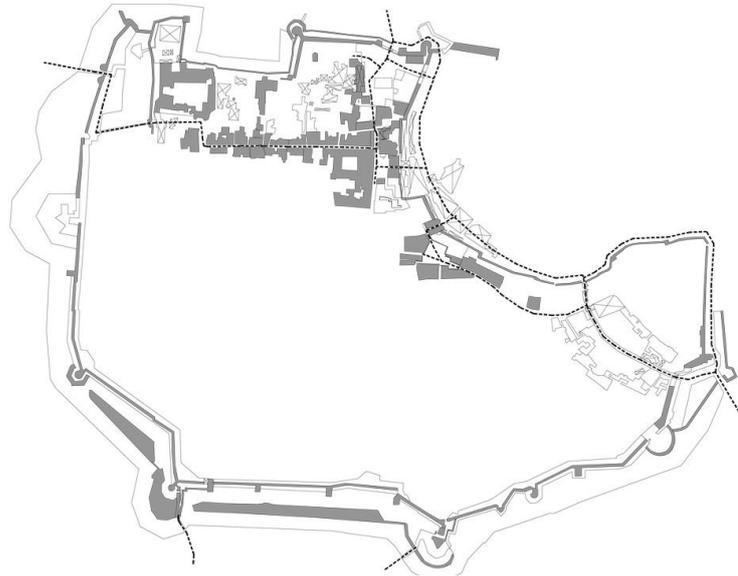


Figure 1. Urban interventions in the walled city by the Italian administrations (1912-1943).

The Italian administration's urban refurbishment program included restoration projects of specific built typologies<sup>3</sup> (almost exclusively from the period of the Order of St John) and the regulation of the existing urban form through new squares and open spaces. Built heritage that did not fit the desired imagery was demolished and replaced with new administration buildings that were dressed in a neo-medieval architectural style<sup>4</sup>. The neo-medieval style was devised by Italian architects working for the Italian administration and strongly reflected the general morphology, scale, and materiality of the restored heritage buildings.



Figure 2. The building of the Compagnia Commerciale Italiana per l'Egeo, built in neo-medieval style (1929-1930, architects: P. Lombardi and R. Petracco).

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Building and urban interventions in the city can be seen as a means of mass communication, as a specific message is being communicated to a mass audience through a carefully constructed image(ry).

### **Historical narrative and monuments**

Restored heritage monuments, new buildings in neo-medieval style and new open spaces staged in a set of (restored and reconstructed) medieval walls, gates and towers, revealed a new historical narrative which pointed out the medieval character of the walled city as the only 'authentic' and 'true'. The resultant heritage space is similar to a theme park that spoke of the everyday routine of the Knights, and emphasized the noble and benevolent qualities of the medieval Order of St John: Knights fought for Christian faith (as reflected by the restored bastions, the city walls, the moat and other military positions), they did charity work in the service of God (witnessed by the hospital of the Order), they had honour and served justice (as seen in the Courthouse of the Order), they had a hierarchical system of organisation (as reflected by the Grand Master's palace), they were Christians (witnessed by the Castle Cathedral, the Virgin of the Burgh and numerous chapels), and they resided in groups according to nationality (as seen in the 'hostels of the tongues'). The constructed heritage space referred to pre-defined and directed readings, which limited misinterpretations and implied specific cultural presumptions which helped in the acceptance of the imposed social conventions of the political present of the time.

### **Naturalisation<sup>5</sup> of history: tourist guides, cinema newsreels, daily press.**

Colonial media of the time gave a lot of publicity in the urban transformation project of the city, underlining every time the Italian administration's duty to bring forward the 'true' historical character of the place. Such media would include tourist guides, cinema newsreels, and articles in the daily press. Texts and audiovisual means produced by the Italian administration aimed in popularising the interpretative code through which the newly 'constructed' heritage monuments would acquire meaning. As decoders, these means constitute hegemonic interventions<sup>6</sup> that set up a common reference framework in which the new Past is understood. Tourist guides comprise a privileged field of popularisation and dissemination of a new narrative on the local history<sup>7</sup>. Heritage monuments and tourist guides complement each other, as the latter is the medium that explains to the reader what to look for in a monument when standing in front of it and how to perceive what he sees, while anchoring signifieds to determined narrative contents. Tourist guides published by the Italian administration supported and reproduced the approved reading of the local history, and propagated the importance of the heritage monuments that were brought forward by the colonial administration.

Short documentaries on history and built heritage and newsreels on the refurbishment project produced by the Luce film institute<sup>8</sup>, gave the 'unsuspected' audience aspects of the city, full of semiotic meaning, focusing on the same heritage monuments as tourist guides, and reproducing the same narrative content. To the audience of metropolitan Italy, they helped establish direct relationships between medieval past and colonial Present, and helped to solidify the idea that it was the right of the Italian administration (as cultural successors of the medieval Order) to continue to impose social identities and political hierarchies to the local population.

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Similarly, the newspaper of the Italian administration, *Messaggero di Rodi*, aimed in shaping public opinion, and in our case promoted wide acceptance for the restoration of the medieval character of the walled city. It regularly included articles that described in detail restoration and urban projects, always highlighting their contribution to the restoration of what was promoted as the true character of the city. Newspaper articles also propagated the ‘self-evident’ of the medieval character of the walled city and the ‘obligation’ of the Italian administration to restore it and to bring it forward.

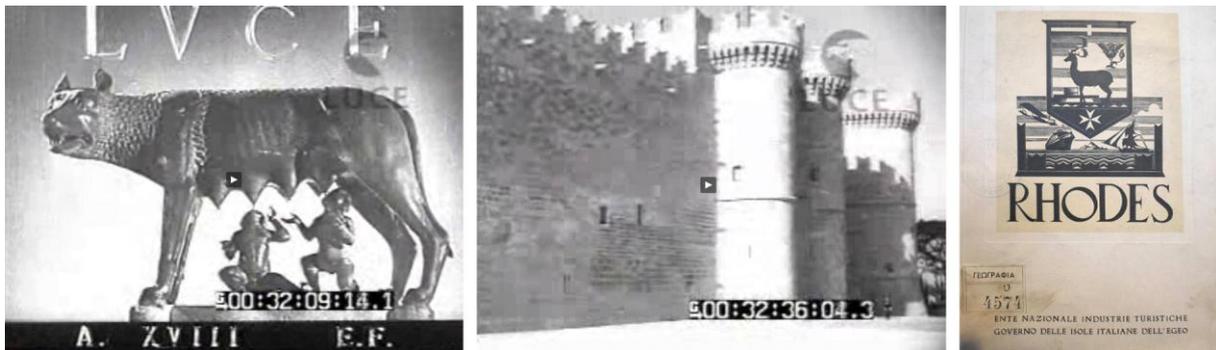


Figure 3. (left, middle) *Giornale No 51 (25/06/1940): Nel sole di Rodi*. Newsreels like this propagated the significance of the restored monuments. (right) Cover of the tourist guide published in 1933 by the State Tourist Department of metropolitan Italy (ENIT) and the local Italian colonial administration.

### THE WORK OF THE PROVISIONAL GREEK GOVERNMENT(S) (1947-1950).

During the period between the Paris Peace Conference (1946) and Paris Peace Treaties (1947), the Greek government sent a team of experts to the islands to gather information that could be useful for their annexation into the Greek state<sup>9</sup>. One of the commissioned reports was dealing with the question of how to re-signify the heritage space of Rhodes in a way to fit the dominant discourse on Greek national history, which was based on the unity and continuity of the nation throughout the ages. In his text, ‘*the question of form*’, architect and academic Dimitris Pikionis brought forward the importance of *image* and *form* of the built heritage stock in promoting Greek national identity and proposed a series of measures most of which would become (local) laws by the interim provisional governments (1947-1950)<sup>10</sup>. Recognising the architectural value of the Italian interventions, he restricted the focus on heritage typologies and urban spaces that had escaped the attention of the previous Italian administration.

#### ‘The question of (heritage) form’ (1947)<sup>11</sup>.

Issues raised in the text deal with, (a) the restoration of the ‘original’ plan and shape, (b) the use of coating on external facades to undermine the significance of unwanted built heritage, (c) the use of new building materials, (d) the importance of the vernacular architecture in contemporary culture, (e) the symbolic value of architecture and its role in achieving social consensus, and (f) the symbolic

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value of urban green. For the walled city of Rhodes in particular, D. Pikionis proposed a series of practical measures, such as (a) the promotion of the byzantine origins of heritage Muslim mosques, (b) the expropriation and state management of the ottoman heritage buildings, (c) the rationalisation of urban form, by creating new straight axes visually connecting the new important heritage monuments, (d) the establishment of archaeological sites in the open spaces that were created after the aerial bombardment of the city in 1944, (e) the study of ancient topography through archaeological excavations and the re-establishment of ancient streets, (f) the promotion of a local vernacular that would reflect the imagery of the vernacular of the rest of the Aegean islands, (g) the invention of a new architectural language, that would incorporate elements of the newly discovered local vernacular.

### New heritage monuments

The narrative content of the heritage monuments brought forward by the Italian administration was redefined within Greek national narrative frames. New monuments supported a version of local history that emphasised the Greek nation as the dominant subject of the local history. New heritage monuments were identified by the Greek provisional administrations<sup>12</sup> and would include archaeological sites, byzantine churches and chapels, restored structures of the Order of St John and heritage examples from the Muslim quarters of the city. As the Ottoman period was re-approached, it was discovered that significant monuments in the Muslim quarters originated from older byzantine structures. Byzantine history and heritage had already been assimilated into the official Greek historiography, a century earlier<sup>13</sup>, as the link between Antiquity and the Present.



*Figure 4. The orthodox church of Ag. Paraskevi, which had been converted into a mosque during the Ottoman period, restored to its original use.*

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Discovered byzantine structures emphasised the presence of medieval Christian Hellenism in the built heritage mix and would also provide a strong counterbalance against the restored buildings of the order of St John. Along with future archaeological excavations, they would provide evidence for Greek claims on the heritage space. In the new historical narrative, medieval buildings of the Order of St John were attributed to Greek local artisans and master builders who had worked according to the standards and practices of ancient and byzantine traditions. In addition, parts of the walled city (such as streets) were identified to originate from the ancient city. Typical architectural elements of heritage buildings were incorporated into the national architectural vocabulary. External staircases, for instance, were seen as a variation of the Aegean-architecture common theme.

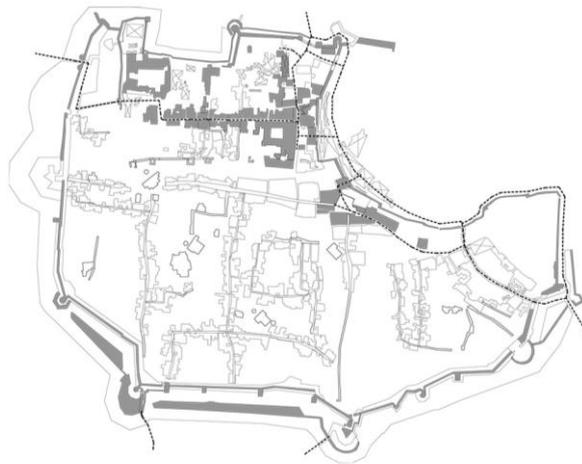


Figure 5. The new heritage space of the walled city.

### Propagation of the new local history

During the period of incorporation into the Greek state, the local provisional governments and the Greek governments published texts that re-negotiated local history and diffused new historical narratives. Such publications include treatises on local history and culture, written by local experts and mainland academics<sup>14</sup>, tourist guides and popular fiction<sup>15</sup>, all of which helped to consolidate new historical narratives as the only true and possible version of history.



Figure 6. Covers from publications on the history and heritage of Rhodes.

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In an age of extreme shortages and hardships, such publications were probably the only means available to reach wider audiences (although there are a few cinema productions and newsreels that gave a glimpse of the new territories to the Greek mainland audience). Popularised treatises on local history and culture would become the main medium to propagate new narrative and interpretative schemata on the origins of the heritage space. Facts and myths from local history were re-evaluated according to their national compatibility, and were used to signify the periods of the new history of Rhodes. Milestones and monuments that antagonised the national view of history were undermined. In the depiction of the local historical timeline, the emphasis shifted from the medieval to the ancient (and more widely accepted as “Greek”) times, while the nationalised byzantine past was confirmed in the Muslim built heritage.

Research on issues that highlight the Greek character of local history and culture would become a field of activity of specialised state institutes, such as the Archaeological and Historical Foundation of the Aegean (1947) and the Folk Archive of the Dodecanese (1949). The former aimed in the purification of local History from foreign- driven falsifications<sup>16</sup>, while the latter aimed in the promotion and popularisation of every form of folk culture<sup>17</sup>.

### The discovery and popularisation of Vernacular forms of dwelling

Particularly interesting are those publications that deal with the discovery of folk culture and vernacular architecture. The study of folklore would contribute to the diffusion of the concept of common nationhood across the local cultural conscience, while the recently discovered vernacular architecture would be seen as a variation of the Greek traditional island architecture theme. Greek mainland scholars had already articulated an idealised, achronic, pre-industrial, Christian past and a classless, Christian, rural, imaginary community in the core of the nation since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For them, as with the new experts of the local folklore, this imagined community permeated the historical continuum undisturbed by any respective present<sup>18</sup> and referred to a vague, but national, past. Publications on the vernacular architecture of Rhodes and the rest of the islands, pointed out archetypal typologies that referred to Greek national forms, thus providing tangible evidence for the concept of cultural continuity with the ancient past.

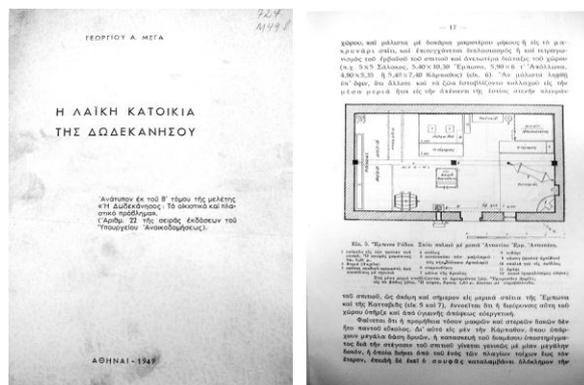


Figure 7. Example of publication on the local vernacular architecture: G. A. Megas, Vernacular housing in the Dodecanese (in Greek) (Athens: Ministry of Reconstruction, 1949).

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The quest for vernacular architecture was confined strictly to rural, family-housing typologies belonging to the Greek Christian population. Typologies that referred to urban dwelling, industrial production, non-Christian faith, or different national groups, were excluded. The typical example of the local vernacular was identified with flat-roof, single-room, rural houses which resembled the Cycladic heritage paradigm.

### Conclusions

The example of Rhodes reveals how the construction and management of heritage space can be employed in order to legitimise the hegemony of a certain power in the present, and the importance of media in diffusing and naturalizing new narratives and interpretations. The Italian and Greek administrations, although different in ideological principles and social aims, employed the same means in order to appropriate the heritage space of Rhodes through different readings, and to render their political hegemony historically legitimate. Urban interventions included restoration of specific built typologies, regulation of the urban form and construction of new buildings in architectural styles that embed elements of the constructed past. The resultant heritage space would provide tangibility to dominant narratives of local history. Both administrations defined the narrative content, as well as the ideal form and image of the heritage paradigms, and both produced texts and films in order to propagate and diffuse their versions of local history and culture.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Elenco dei monumenti delle Sporadi: Le tredici Sporadi', a publication of the Italian ministry of Education in 1913, includes a list of ancient and medieval buildings of the city of Rhodes. Its entries constitute important evidence on what constituted historically and culturally significant for the Italian administration. The list can be found also in G. Gerola, "Monumenti medioevali delle tredici Sporadi (appunti di viaggio)", *Annuario della Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene*, vol.I (1914).

<sup>2</sup> Converted to the city's first archaeological museum during the first years of the Italian provisional rule.

<sup>3</sup> Preservation methods ranged from scientific to empirical. Reconstruction 'in stile' was considered as an acceptable practice, as it not only helped to bring out the monument's historicity, but highlighted the administration's ability to recreate monuments anew by using new and contemporary techniques [R. Santoro, "I restauri degli edifici medievali di Rodi" in *La presenza italiana nel Dodecaneso tra il 1912 e il 1948*, ed M. Livadiotti and G. Rocco (Catania: Edizioni del Prisma, 1996), 247]. New techniques in an old theme supported the right to appropriate medieval heritage and the claim on cultural relation to the medieval Order.

<sup>4</sup> The neo-medieval architectural style is deemed positively even today, as it did not lead to mere fake reproduction of past forms, but led to architectural products of their own right [B. Kolonas, *Ιταλική αρχιτεκτονική στα Δωδεκάνησα 1912-1943* (Italian architecture in the Dodecanese 1912-1943, in Greek) (Athens: Oikos, 2002), 34-35]. New administration buildings in the walled city dressed in this style would fill-in urban gaps resulting from the demolition of structures of unwanted narrative content, or the rationalisation of urban form.

<sup>5</sup> 'Naturalisation' refers to the acceptance of particular mental and interpretative patterns as the only true contingent of social reality. A *naturalised* social objectivity conceals the contingent character of social reality. Production and consolidation of meaning are key mechanisms in the stabilization of power relationships and their acceptance by various subjects (Concept taken from E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), chapter 2).

<sup>6</sup> Hegemonic interventions are articulations that restore the clarity of meaning and help a discourse to dominate over competing others [E. Laclau, "Power and representation" in *Politics, Theory and Contemporary Culture*, ed. M. Poster (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 282].

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<sup>7</sup> Such publications include: A. Maiuri, *Rodi. Guida dei monumenti e del museo archeologico di Rodi* (Rhodes: Italian Military Administration, 1918); Ente Nazionale Industrie Turistiche, *Rodi, la leggendaria isole delle rosse*, (Roma: Ente Nazionale Industrie Turistiche, 1925); Ente Nazionale Industrie Turistiche, *Rhodes, l'île des Roses*, (Rodi: Governo delle isole italiane dell'Egeo, 1933).

<sup>8</sup> The Luce film institute was founded in mainland Italy in 1924 and in 1926 was put under the control of the fascist government becoming a means of propaganda. Short movies and newsreels of the Institute were screened by law before any commercial movie.

<sup>9</sup> The gathered information was published in K. Doxiadis, ed., *Δωδεκάνησος- τετράτομος μελέτη του υπουργείου Ανοικοδομήσεως και συνεργατών του* (Dodecanese- a four volume study by the ministry of Reconstruction and its associates) (Athens: Ministry of Reconstruction, 1947).

<sup>10</sup> Decrees covered issues which relate to the organisation of competent authorities, the identification of heritage structures and the establishment of a heritage list, the regulation of building activity in heritage areas, the regulation of the archaeological process etc.

<sup>11</sup> D. Pikionis, *Το πρόβλημα της Μορφής* (The question of form, in Greek), in *Το οικιστικό και πλαστικό πρόβλημα*, ed. K. Doxiadis (Athens: Ministry of Reconstruction, 1950), 93-122.

<sup>12</sup> The first heritage list would be compiled by the Greek military administration in 1947. Its amended version came out a year later in 1948 by the General Administration of the Dodecanese.

<sup>13</sup> The Byzantine period had already been incorporated into the official Greek narrative on national descent [See K. Paparrigopoulos, *Ιστορία του ελληνικού έθνους από των αρχαιοτάτων χρόνων μέχρι των νεωτέρων* (*History of the Greek nation, from Antiquity to modern era*, in Greek) (Athens: N. Passaris publishers, 1865-1874)].

<sup>14</sup> Such publications include: A. G. Vrontis, *Ιστορία της Ρόδου* (History of Rhodes, in Greek) (Rhodes: State Press of Dodecanese, 1948); G. A. Megas, *Η λαϊκή κατοικία της Δωδεκανήσου* (Vernacular housing in Dodecanese, in Greek) (Athens: Ministry of Reconstruction, 1949); Ch. Karouzos, *Ρόδος (Ιστορία- Μνημεία-Τέχνη)* (Rhodes: History-Monuments-Arts, in Greek) (Athens: I. Papachrisanthou publishers, 1948).

<sup>15</sup> Such as: A. Tarsouli, *Δωδεκάνησα* (Dodecanese, in Greek) (Athens: 'Alpha' I. M. Skazikis publishers, 1947).

<sup>16</sup> Resolution no. 16522, Gazette of the Military Administration of the Dodecanese, Issue 31, 12/06/1947.

<sup>17</sup> Resolution no. 17563/1563, Gazette of the General Administration of the Dodecanese, Issue 34, 15/11/1949.

<sup>18</sup> For Greek Folklore scholars, identification of rural culture with peoples' culture would bring the idealization agricultural society's value system. For them, rural culture embodies and safeguards all national values (A. Kyriakidou- Nestoros, *Η Θεωρία της Ελληνικής Λαογραφίας* (Theory of the Greek Folklore, in Greek) (Athens: The Modern Greek Studies Association for Culture and General Education, 1978), 184-185.