

Bader, Vera Simone: *Moderne in Afrika. Asmara – Die Konstruktion einer italienischen Kolonialstadt 1889–1941*. Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag 2016. ISBN: 978-3-7861-2759-8; 287 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Nicola Camilleri, University of Pavia/Remarque Institute, New York University

In July 2017, global media turned their attention towards Asmara, the capital city of the State of Eritrea. UNESCO added the city to its list of World Heritage sites for being „A Modernist African City“.<sup>1</sup> Several articles celebrated the beautiful features of what had been the capital of *Colonia Eritrea*, the first and longest lasting colony of the Kingdom of Italy. Old coffee houses, wide streets and modernist architecture were mentioned as traces of this past. „Asmara is perhaps the most startling of Italy’s former colonial capitals“, Italian colonial architecture expert Mia Fuller, has written.<sup>2</sup> Recently too, media have focused on Asmara to wonder about its touristic development, when, as a consequence of the historic peace agreement with neighboring Ethiopia in September 2018, the first flight from Addis Ababa landed in Asmara’s airport.

This new awareness about Asmara accompanies a new academic interest in its colonial past and postcolonial present.<sup>3</sup> Vera Simone Bader’s German-language book under review here is the elaboration of her doctoral dissertation at Humboldt University in Berlin, completed in October 2012. Settled in the fields of the history of architecture and urban planning, the book aims to retrace the urban development of Asmara during the entire period of Italian rule, from 1889 until 1941 (p. 10). For a German reader, Italian colonialism is mostly associated with the fascist invasion of Ethiopia; little is known about the earlier Italian colonial period, known as *colonialismo liberale*. One of the book’s contributions, therefore, is to shed light on this little known period. The fact that it covers the entire time frame of Italian rule in Eritrea, from the liberal to the fascist period, also addresses the essential historiographic question about continuities between liberal colonial domination and fascist rule in the Horn of Africa, a key aspect of any study of Italian colonialism.

The book features two alternating chapters each on the history of Asmara and its urban transformation, and on specific architectural expressions of different moments, set in a wide, nuanced and historically well contextualized discourse about architecture, the representation of power, colonial rule etc. The first chapter offers a history of colonial Asmara from its conquest by Italian troops in 1889 until the mid 1930s, for the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935–36 is taken as the divide that introduces the next period of the investigation. The chapter fittingly starts with a sketch of Asmara before colonization and then focuses on three phases. The first was characterized by the military presence, which also marked the architecture, used to show the power of the colonizers during the conquest: architecture at the time worked as a bulwark (p. 31). After this, with Governor Martini (1897–1907), a turn to a less military-oriented colonial policy materialized in an intense program of urban construction. Public buildings and essential infrastructure still in use today date back to this period. Urban transformation and architecture during this time had the specific goals of creating the environment for a society under colonial rule and staging new political relations. In the third phase, started by Governor Salvago Raggi (1907–1915), the engagement of a professional city planner brought the transformation already underway one step further. Salvago Raggi issued a set of decrees to regulate the details of urban life in Asmara. A central aim of this effort was to emphasize the instrumental function of city planning in creating a segregated colonial society: colonizers and colonized might, for example, live in different areas in order to physically respect racial difference, on which colonial rule itself was based. Despite the creation of segregated quarters for different sectors of colonial society, life in the city was permeable, boundaries daily challenged and interactions inevitable, as the book does not fail to mention. This

<sup>1</sup> Cf.: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1550> (20.11.2018).

<sup>2</sup> Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad. Architecture, Cities, and Italian Imperialism*, London / New York 2007, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> See the recent publication: Peter Volgger / Stefan Graf (eds.), *Architecture in Asmara. Colonial Origin and Postcolonial Experiences*, Berlin 2017.

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historical overview is enriched in the second chapter by a focus on selected buildings and actors in the urban transformation outlined above.

From the third chapter on, the author looks at the period between the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935–36 and the end of Italian rule in 1941. As a consequence of the war, *Africa Orientale Italiana* (AOI) or Italian East Africa, a colony covering almost all of the Horn of Africa, was created, which included the small colony of Eritrea. The empire in East Africa had to become the projection of a new, fascist, powerful Italy, which was finally supposed to gain the international prestige long denied it. The ideology of the fascist „civilizing“ mission paired with a cult of modernity led to the transformation of Asmara into a fascist colonial city. This was at the same time a further stage of an aggressive and highly racist policy towards the local population, which left indelible wounds in Eritrean society. With the arrival of a remarkable number of Italian settlers, the population in the city quickly grew. New infrastructure, streets and bridges above all, had to apply the fascist program of modernity. The need to display and perform power through architecture became so pressing that Bader sees a turning point in the city’s history here. By all accounts, the role of Asmara in fascist Italy’s wide imperial program evidently changed in comparison to the previous period. In the map of the empire, Addis Ababa, capital city of the old Ethiopian empire, was supposed to become the Italian imperial capital, with Asmara serving as gateway to AOI. Yet Addis Ababa was nothing more than an artificial capital, while Asmara remained the real capital of the Italian empire during these years, as Gian Luca Podestà has convincingly argued.<sup>4</sup>

The fourth chapter finally examines discourses and practices of fascist architecture during the imperial period. Differently than in the Italian colony of Libya, the new architecture in Asmara employed local traditions and architectural elements only to a small degree. The Italians conceived Asmara as a free space in which to build according to their imaginations. What materialized was a city built in a pluralistic style in which, however, the scarcity of financial resources always

played a crucial role. After 1935, modernism in architecture became the language of rupture with any stylistic forms of the past, but it also had to be simple and accessible to everyone. For this reason, Bader writes of a simplified modernism („*vereinfachte Moderne*“) for Asmara (p. 186), a compromise between ideological utopia and its applicability. No sophisticated solutions or references to the classical past were allowed. Material expressions of modernist architecture can still be admired in Asmara, including some constructions that symbolize important myths of fascist modernity – e.g. the airplane or the ship – or movie theaters, in which fascist propaganda spread messages of modernity.

Based on a rich trove of published and unpublished sources and enhanced by magnificent pictures, the book represents an important addition to the field of (Italian) colonial studies, as well as urban history. For our understanding of Italian colonial rule in Eritrea it argues convincingly that a strict segregationist policy did not begin during the late fascist period but had its roots in the earlier liberal period, and continued for the entirety of the colonial regime. The urban planning policy pursued by Salvago Raggi is good evidence of this. However, the continuity in segregationist policy does not impact the chronology of the book, which, as mentioned above, sees the war against Ethiopia as a major caesura and the proper start of a radical imperial policy, also visible in architecture and city planning; colonial rule had a turning point more in the war than in the rise to power of Mussolini in 1922. In asserting this, the author embraces a well established interpretation in the historiography of colonial Eritrea. Works of oral history have shown that, in the memory of many Eritreans, fascism came with the war and since that moment they perceived colonial rule as particularly discriminatory. That in this juncture architecture became an expression of the radically imperial nature of Italian colonialism appears a logical consequence. While generally speaking, the chronology of the book follows a tradition in the study of Italian Er-

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<sup>4</sup>Gian Luca Podestà, „Asmara. The Real Capital of the Italian Empire in East Africa“, in: Peter Volgger / Stefan Graf (eds.), *Architecture in Asmara*, p. 71–79.

itrea. However, new studies have also paid attention to other nodal points, such as the long under-researched effects of WWI in the colony.<sup>5</sup> This allows us to think about a more nuanced and gradual chronology for the history of the colony, from which, perhaps, the book may have benefited. For example, one of the constructions most related to Italian rule in Eritrea, the so called *Cattedrale* (in fact, the *Chiesa della Beata Vergine del Rosario*), was built in 1923 on the main street of Asmara and is barely mentioned. In the interior of the church a commemorative plaque still records the names of the donors, among them Benito Mussolini. These observations, however, suggest new avenues for future research, which will inevitably find in this book a touchstone.

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<sup>5</sup>Shiferaw Bekele / Uoldelul Chelati Dirar / Alessandro Volterra / Massimo Zaccaria (eds.), *The First World War from Tripoli to Addis Ababa (1911–1924)*, Addis Ababa, Centre français des études éthiopiennes, Addis Ababa 2018, in: <https://books.openedition.org/cfee/1024> (28.11.2018).