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Anthropology, "races", and colonialism. African populations in the work of Giuseppe Sergi and beyond

Giovanni Cerro

Fondazione Collegio San Carlo di Modena, Via San Carlo 5, 41121 Modena, Italy
e-mail: giovannicerro84@gmail.com

Summary - *This article aims to examine the complex and ambivalent conception of Africa and its peoples in the work of Italian anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi (1848-1936), placing it in the context of the birth of Italian colonialism and the scientific debates of the time. On the one hand, based on his new method of recognizing ethnic groups, Sergi developed an original vision that included the peoples of East and North Africa in the Mediterranean stock and affirmed a closeness and interconnection between Europe and Africa. On the other hand, his vision remained anchored in the "racial" hierarchies typical of positivism: Sergi considered the "black" peoples of sub-Saharan Africa to be physically, intellectually, and morally "inferior", placing them in a "barbaric" stage of human evolution. Despite this hierarchical view, Sergi was a fierce critic of Italian colonialism and imperialism, which he considered economically disadvantageous, politically short-sighted, and morally anachronistic. Inspired by socialist and pacifist ideals, he condemned colonial violence and promoted the emancipation of peoples through international cooperation. Giuseppe Sergi's work thus embodies the contradictions of the anthropological thinking of his time, characterized by a constant oscillation between progressive openness and deeply rooted prejudices.*

Keywords - *Giuseppe Sergi, Africa, Anthropology, Races, Colonialism, Imperialism.*

Images of Africa

"I will not fear to assert, as far as concerns these Shangalla, or Negroes, of Abyssinia, (and, I believe, most others of the same complexion, though of different nations), that the various accounts we have of them are very unfairly stated. To describe them justly, we should see them in their native purity of manners, among their native woods, living on the produce of their own daily labors, without other liquor than that of their own pools and springs, the drinking of which is followed by no intoxication or other pleasure than that of assuaging thirst. After having been torn from their own country and connections, reduced to the condition of brutes, to labor for a being they never before knew; after lying, stealing, and all the long list of European crimes, have been made, as it were, necessary to them, and the delusion occasioned by drinking spirits is found, however short, to be the only remedy that relieves them from reflecting on their present wretched situation, to which, for that reason, they most naturally attach themselves; then, after we have made them monsters, we describe them as such, forgetful that they are now not as their Maker created them, but such as, by teaching them our vices, we have transformed them into, for ends which, I fear, one day will not be found a sufficient excuse for the enormities they have occasioned" (Bruce 1790, vol. II, p. 556-557).

With these words, the Scottish nobleman James Bruce criticized the way in which Europeans had described the "Shangalla" people, whom he had encountered during his numerous travels in Abyssinia between the late 1760s and early 1770s—a term, that of Abyssinia, used to refer to the Ethiopian empire, an ancient political entity whose creation dated back to the early 12th century and whose territory came to include present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. The purpose of these journeys was to solve a centuries-old

mystery: to discover the sources of the Nile River (Bredin 2000). At the end of his expeditions, Bruce succeeded in locating the sources of the Blue Nile on the Ethiopian plateau, which, however, had already been discovered by a Portuguese Jesuit, Pedro Páez, in 1617. Bruce's expeditions resulted in a monumental work, the first edition of which was divided into five volumes, including an appendix that contained a catalog of animals and plants he had encountered in Abyssinia, Egypt, Nubia, and Arabia. The customs of the "Shangalla", Bruce argued, were not as "savage" as European observers portrayed them: it was true that they had many children, were devoted to polygamy, and went around mostly naked, but they could not be judged according to the standards of another culture and on the basis of preconceptions; moreover, they were an example of sexual moderation that even the most refined and educated Europeans were incapable of. These pages clearly revealed the myth of the "noble savage" according to the typical motifs of Enlightenment anthropological and philosophical reflection (Landucci 2014), with which Bruce was steeped. Immediately after these words, however, the author hastened to clarify to his readers that his observations were not intended to call for condemnation or even the abolition of the slave trade, but merely to correct "cruelties", "crimes", "abuses" and "neglect of manners"; his aim was to reform this practice, not to eradicate it (Bruce 1790, vol. II, p. 557).

The oscillation in the conception of Africans between progressive openness and visibly "racist" and paternalistic elements is not only typical of the Enlightenment but persists for a long time in anthropological studies. This ambiguity is also found in the work of Giuseppe Sergi (1841-1936), one of the most important and influential Italian anthropologists between the 19th and 20th centuries (Cerro 2017b, 2024). Born in Messina in 1841 into a lower middle-class family, Sergi was a professor first at the University of Bologna, then at the University of Rome, where he founded the *Società romana di antropologia* in 1893 and a rich museum of cranial and skeletal evidence. On several occasions, Sergi confronted the figure of the other. First of all, the other understood as "degenerate", that is, as someone who, despite being constitutionally weak, did not succumb in the "struggle for existence" but survived at the cost of physical and mental abnormalities (Sergi 1889). The categories of degenerates identified by Sergi were broad and included those who were generally excluded from bourgeois society at the time, the so-called "dangerous classes" of the fin de siècle: the insane, suicides, criminals, prostitutes, servants and "servile" people, vagrants, beggars, and "parasites". To combat the proliferation of degeneration, Sergi proposed specific eugenic measures, ranging from the education of young people for less serious cases to forced sterilization, forced labor, and deportation to deserted islands for irredeemable cases (Mantovani 2004, p. 54-65; Cassata 2006, p. 28-35; Volpone 2008, p. 178-192; Volpone 2011; Cassata 2011; Tedesco 2012, 2016). Secondly, the other as a woman, considered "inferior" to men from a morphological, physiological, and intellectual point of view: women, Sergi wrote, were shorter than men, had less developed cranial capacity, retained infantile features in the shape of their skulls and faces even in adulthood, were not very sensitive, contrary to common belief, and were not at all capable of flashes of genius (Sergi 1892c, 1893c,d,e). With these judgments, Sergi aligned himself with a paradigm that was largely dominant in the age of positivism (Babini 2011; Azara, Tedesco 2019; Montaldo 2019).

Finally, the other was embodied by those populations variously defined as "barbaric", "savage" and "primitive", terms that Sergi, like large sections of anthropology that emerged after Darwinian evolutionism, used interchangeably to designate the cultural backwardness and inability of a human community to progress towards a more advanced and refined stage of civilization (La Vergata 2018). In this article, we will focus on Sergi's analysis of African populations; an analysis that is primarily anthropological, but which cannot be separated from his views on colonialism, imperialism, and war. Sergi's studies on African peoples are intertwined

with the first phase of Italian colonial expansionism, supported by large sectors of the political class, industry, commerce, and the geographical, colonial, and scientific societies that arose during those years. Italy's expansion in Africa began with the purchase of Assab Bay in 1882, followed by the port city of Massawa, and culminated in this phase with the establishment in 1890 of the first Italian colony on the continent, Eritrea (Del Boca 1992; Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2008; Finaldi 2017; Ertola 2022; Deplano and Pes 2024; Labanca 2025).

In the late 19th century, Sergi could claim that, thanks to travel, missions, and exploration, Africa was no longer a "mystery": Europe had not only divided up its entire territory, but also knew, at least in its fundamental aspects, its flora and fauna and the human varieties that inhabited it (Sergi 1906a, p. 351). Sergi praised the "explorers" for their iron will to learn, their determination, and their ability to carry out their plans, overcoming the obstacles of nature. It is therefore not surprising that he considered the Scottish doctor and missionary David Livingstone a "hero of science and humanity", also because of his anti-slavery convictions; and that the journalist Henry Morton Stanley, born in Wales but who moved to the United States at the age of seventeen, was considered a "man of great courage and a talented traveler", gifted with a "grand" psyche (Sergi 1893a, p. 32-33). Stanley had been commissioned by the editor of the newspaper he worked for, the "New York Herald", to find Livingstone after no news of him had reached Europe for some time; and Stanley did indeed track him down on Lake Tanganyika in November 1871. Moreover, in 1879, Stanley's seminal work "Through the dark continent" (1878) was published in Italian by the Milanese publishing house Fratelli Treves in a translation authorized by the author.

Thanks in part to the accounts of these "explorers", Sergi saw Africa as clearly divided into two parts: North and East Africa on one side, and sub-Saharan Africa on the other. The peoples of North and East Africa had the same physical characteristics as many of the other inhabitants of the Mediterranean basin and, in the past, had in some cases achieved a high level of civilization, as was the case with the Egyptians. At the time Sergi was writing, however, these peoples were all in a state of underdevelopment and, moreover, lived in extremely poor regions that offered little hope for significant development soon. On the contrary, the "black" peoples of central and southern Africa were "inferior" to the Mediterranean peoples in every respect—physically, intellectually, and morally; however, this did not mean that they could be subjected to conquest, violence, and oppression by Europeans.

The cradle of Mediterranean civilization

Sergi's anthropological theories on Africa cannot be understood without at least mentioning the reform of ethnic group recognition based on skull shape that he developed in the early 1890s (Cerro 2015). In fact, African populations played a very important role in the conception of the morphological method. The foundations for the reform were laid when Sergi had the opportunity to analyze 29 skulls recovered by the Pavia-based engineer and geographer Luigi Robecchi-Bricchetti in the Somali city of Chelengo, where a battle had taken place at the end of January 1887 in which the troops of *Negus* Menelik II had defeated the "Galla" (a term used to refer to the Oromo) and conquered the city of Harar, thus incorporating the entire Shoa into the Ethiopian empire (Robecchi-Bricchetti 1896, p. 172-179). The results of this research were published in 1891 by Sergi under the title "Crani africani e crani americani" ("African skulls and American skulls") in the "Archivio per l'antropologia e la etnologia", the journal founded by Paolo Mantegazza in Florence twenty years earlier. Relations between Sergi and Mantegazza were still good at that time, but they would soon deteriorate irreparably: the last straw was Sergi's decision in 1893 to found an anthropological society to rival Mantegazza's, the *Società romana*

di antropologia. As a result, Florence would no longer be the sole center of influence for the still young discipline of anthropology but would have to contend with competition from Rome.

Returning to the 1891 article, Sergi analyzed the African skulls recovered by Robecchi-Bricchetti, dividing them into four groups based on what he defined as "type", or the set of morphological characteristics that are "measurable and even non-measurable, impressions of the eye, that is, which undoubtedly derive from more or less varied shapes of the constituent parts of the skull" (Sergi 1891, p. 215). In this first experiment, Sergi continued to use craniometric indices and to refer to tables and data, but he concluded that these indices could only be considered valid as classification criteria within very limited limits, i.e., for the extreme forms of the cranial series. The cephalic index was not in itself an "indication of racial difference", but only described individual variations, albeit sometimes important ones. Equally unproductive was the combination of the cephalic index and the facial index, used by the German anthropologist Julius Kollmann for the classification of human "races" (Sergi 1891, p. 242). Using the new method, which was still being perfected, Sergi reached a conclusion opposite to that of Robecchi-Bricchetti. According to the latter, the skulls he brought back to Italy belonged to Oromo horsemen who had died on the battlefield and been left unburied by the victors (Robecchi-Bricchetti 1896, p. 178). For Sergi, however, most of them were Ethiopians. In addition to African skulls, the article also examined skulls from Mexico, Argentina, Peru, and Tierra del Fuego. While the cephalic index was not always reliable, inspection of the cranial morphology made it possible to accurately distinguish between different human "varieties", a concept he borrowed from the naturalist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who had used it at the end of the 18th century in his third edition of his doctoral dissertation, entitled "De generis humani varietate nativa" (1795). A variety included not only skulls that were identical to each other, but also skulls that, despite having the same primary characteristics, presented individual variations, i.e., non-hereditary differences in the composition of the bones and soft tissue parts.

Sergi would go on to explain his cranial reform in greater detail, describing all the different stages of his process in 1892, in an extensive study on Melanesian skulls brought back to Italy from New Guinea by naturalist Lamberto Loria (Sergi 1892a). From then on, the morphological reform accompanied all Sergi's research, with a reduction in the number of varieties and a simplification of the nomenclature used, which sought to reproduce the geometric shape of the skull with Latin names (Sergi 1893b, 1900a). The reform introduced by Sergi, starting with African skulls, was particularly important for several reasons, which are worth highlighting. Firstly, it made it possible to establish that skin color was an unstable characteristic, because it depended on environmental factors and interbreeding between groups, and therefore could not be used as a reliable parameter for "racial" classification; the only human trait that remained constant over time was the shape of the skull, which had to be recognized by the observer's eye and could not be deduced from measurements. Secondly, the reform presupposed a rigid polygenism, i.e., the hypothesis of the parallel appearance of human groups, a hypothesis that was rejected by most Italian anthropologists, but which was somewhat widespread in the United States, thanks mainly to the anatomist Samuel George Morton, whom we will meet later. Thirdly, for Sergi, there was no modern people without interbreeding: a statement that implied the rejection of the idea, already formulated by the Count of Gobineau in his "Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines" ("An essay on the inequality of the human races", 1853-1855) and then taken up by the French eugenicist Georges Vacher de Lapouge in his volumes "Les sélections sociales" ("The social selections", 1896) and "L'Aryen. Son rôle social" ("The Aryan. His social role", 1899), according to which the mixing of "races" was a source of degradation and contamination of a supposed original purity. Miscegenation was not a danger to the integrity and identity of the "race" but was an ordinary and universal phenomenon:

"pure races" did not exist but were rather an invention of the proponents of Aryan superiority over European peoples. Finally, the reform was the basis of the theory of Mediterranean or Eurafrican descent, which was hailed after World War II by geologist and paleontologist Guido Bonarelli as "the greatest achievement of modern anthropology" (Bonarelli 1952, p. 43).

With this theory, Sergi reactivated both the contrast between Africa/Europe and Asia and the dichotomy between civilization and "barbarism", which had been a constituent element of Italian colonial discourse since the liberal age (Nani 2006, p. 37-95). The Mediterranean peoples were to be considered as originating in East Africa; from there, by successive migrations, they had spread throughout Europe, founding the great civilizations of the ancient world. The Mediterranean stock comprised three branches: the "red-brown" or African, who inhabited East Africa; the "brown" or strictly Mediterranean, who inhabited North Africa and had also settled in southern and central Europe and even in Asia Minor; the "white-blond" or Nordic, with fair skin and blond hair, who had colonized the Scandinavian peninsula and the regions bordering the Baltic Sea, and who were therefore not Aryan, as German philologists, linguists, and anthropologists who supported Indo-Germanism believed. It followed that the peoples of the Mediterranean basin, rather than being "white", were a mixture of different colors, with a prevalence of "brown". And Africa revealed itself to be an integral and fundamental part of the myth of Mediterraneanism developed by Sergi (De Donno 2010; Pizzato 2015; McGuire 2020, p. 58-71; Pesarini 2021). The Aryans were in fact brachycephalic, i.e., with short skulls, and dark complexions; they were also underdeveloped and uncouth people who had invaded the European continent in several waves from the mountainous regions of Central Asia, starting at the end of the Neolithic period, destroying the superior civilization of the Mediterranean populations, bringing about a change in the language spoken by the Eurafrican peoples, breaking down existing social orders, and introducing their own rites, such as the cremation of the dead instead of burial. The Aryans soon divided into three branches, the Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic, occupying central and northern Europe. The supposed superiority of Asian civilizations was nothing more than the result, as the French archaeologist and historian of religions Salomon Reinach also argued, of an "eastern mirage" (Reinach 1893a,b).

However, what unequivocally distinguished the Mediterranean peoples from Aryans were the shapes of their skulls, described by Sergi using his new method: ellipsoid, ovoid, and pentagonoid shapes prevailed among the Mediterranean peoples, while cuneiform, spheroid, and platycephalic shapes were more common among the Aryans. In addition to physical differences, the two groups also differed in terms of behavior and social and political organization: the Mediterranean peoples were individualistic and apathetic, distrustful of all forms of authority, prone to rebellion, but also capable of achieving excellent results in the arts and sciences because they were gifted with quick and brilliant intelligence; the Aryans, on the contrary, were entirely devoted to power, recognized only the group and not the individual, tended to build closed communities based on order, discipline, and work, and were methodical and systematic, but never ingenious or sharp. In short, the Mediterranean peoples displayed an undoubted intellectual and artistic superiority over the Aryans. These differences, both physical and psychological, were still visible in modern peoples: in the inhabitants of southern Italy, for example, their remote "African" origins were evident, while in those of the North, traces of Aryan intrusions were still apparent (Cerro 2022).

According to this view, Africa was neither a continent without history nor a "child" continent inhabited by "inferior races of humanity"; in reality, it was in Africa that the seeds of the great Mediterranean culture, which had reached its peak with ancient Rome but was now in decline, could be traced; a lost paradise, therefore, but one that could be restored (Sergi 1908, p. 589). As has been noted, Sergi's theory soon established itself as the "most explicit and influential formulation

of Italian Mediterraneanism ever to emerge in the pre-unification and post-unification era" (Fogu 2025, p. 114; see also p. 114-128): with these observations, the process of transforming Italians into an entirely Mediterranean people was complete. There was something more, however: Sergi's theory also intended to include Africans—or rather, part of the African populations, except for the "black" ones—in the great family of the Mediterranean stock.

"Neither an Africanist nor an expansionist"

Proving that the inhabitants of North and East Africa belonged to the Mediterranean stock was the main purpose of the important book entitled "Africa. Antropologia della stirpe camitica" ("Africa. Anthropology of the Hamitic stock"), which Sergi published in January 1897 (Fig. 1). As can be seen, the title refers to the Hamitic stock and not to the Mediterranean stock, a subject to which he had dedicated another book two years earlier, "Origine e diffusione della stirpe mediterranea" ("The origin and spread of the Mediterranean stock", 1895; this book was translated into English in 1901 with a misleading title, "The Mediterranean race", and enjoyed rapid international success). There were at least two reasons for choosing the Hamitic stock. First, Sergi referred to the centuries-old tradition that saw "black" African peoples as the descendants of Ham, Noah's son mentioned in Genesis (9:18-27) and against whom, according to a well-established opinion, Noah himself had cast a curse, condemning him to a destiny of slavery (Sanders 1969; Goldenberg 2003). The association between Hamites and Africans was already known during the Middle Ages and began to spread more widely from the early modern period onwards, when Hamites began to be associated with an imperfect and "inferior" nature. A change of pace occurred only in 19th century anthropology, when it was believed that Noah's curse was not directed against Ham, but against his son, Canaan: according to this theory, Ham was considered the progenitor of the Egyptians and the inhabitants of the Horn of Africa, who therefore had Semitic origins, while Canaan was the progenitor of the "black" Africans (Sorgoni 2003). In Sergi, "Hamitic stock" was used in a very different sense, to emphasize the common ancestry, the center of origin, and the area of diffusion of all Mediterranean peoples, and not only those of North and East Africa: Hamites was a different way of saying Mediterranean and Eurafrican peoples.

Secondly, in the title of his book, Sergi referred to "stock" rather than "race". The Sicilian anthropologist's use of these terms is ambiguous, to say the least. At times, he seems to distinguish between the meanings of the two concepts, using "stock" to mean a union of different "races" and establishing a relationship between them similar to that between genus and species. At other times, and more frequently, the two terms are used as synonyms, with a clear preference for the former over the latter. The latter is the case in the volume on "Africa". While "race" referred to characteristics that changed over time (above all, skin color), "stock" (*stirpe*) referred to persistent characteristics, because they were related to cranial morphology. Furthermore, the word "race", especially in its German variant *Rasse,* was perceived as a notion typical of Indo-Europeanists and was therefore to be rejected because of its ideological implications. This does not mean that Sergi did not use the term "race"; on the contrary, he often used it, and over time his use of it became increasingly intense. Nevertheless, in most circumstances, it was used generically to refer to a human group, without further specification, and was a sort of toll that Sergi was evidently willing to pay to the "spirit of the times", i.e., to a language shared by most anthropologists.

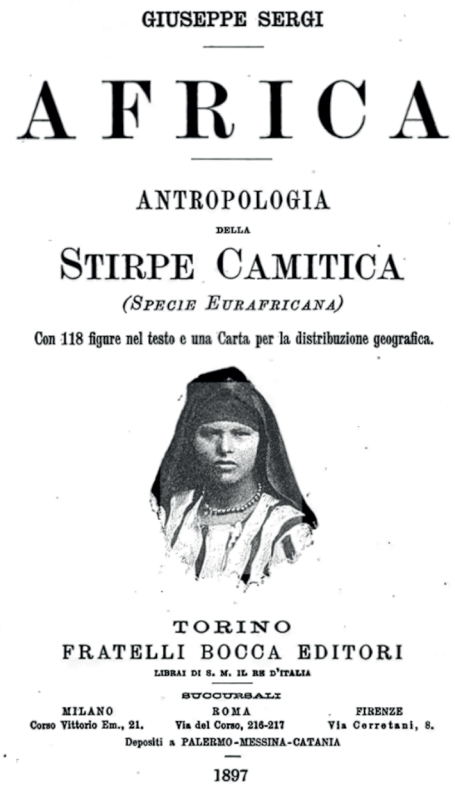
The historical and political context in which Sergi's writing on Africa appeared was also significant: on March 1, 1896, less than fifteen months before the publication of his study, Italian troops had been defeated at Adwa by the Ethiopian army of Menelik II. This military defeat caused a great stir in national public opinion, provoking a reaction from opposition parties, triggering

popular unrest, and marking a turning point in the Italian colonial project (Labanca 1993, p. 305-397; Del Boca 1997). The defeat had deeply affected Sergi himself. His judgment of the Italian government, the unpreparedness of the army, and above all of its commanders, had been very harsh on that occasion: Prime Minister Francesco Crispi, for whom he had no sympathy, also because of his domestic policy, which he branded as authoritarian and repressive, was called a "madman"; General Oreste Baratieri, commander of the Italian troops, was labeled an "ignorant and ambitious" man who had committed unforgivable errors on the battlefield (Sergi 1896, p. 162). A few years later, describing himself as "neither an Africanist nor an expansionist", Sergi went even further, claiming that Crispi was a "megalomaniac", a "bold but imprudent patriot, intelligent but short-sighted" (Sergi 1900b, p. 122). Sergi did not shy away from using anthropological and biological arguments, in true positivist style: Crispi bore the marks of a "savage heritage" and a "bandit tendency", which he had inherited from his Arbëresh ancestry—he was born into a family of Albanian origin that had settled in Palazzo Adriano, near Palermo.

To indulge his temperament, Crispi ended up leading Italy to "disaster" by pursuing the idea of building a "great nation"; and a "great nation" that respected itself had to, by definition, have colonies, and it had to have them in Africa, the latter being "no man's land and the land of the first occupier", so that it could hope to compete on equal terms with the other European powers (Sergi 1900b, p. 119). Nothing could be more distant from the truth. This attitude would have precipitated Italy even further down, just as happened to those fallen nobles who, to maintain a semblance of decorum in public, consumed what little remained of their former wealth and for this reason sank into even greater poverty. In the clash between nations, this disposition was commonly referred to as "patriotism", Sergi stated, but it was nothing more than "miserable pride" or, worse, the mere pursuit of narrow personal interests (Sergi 1900b, p. 125). To achieve his dream, Crispi had enlisted the collaboration of complacent men, including an "ignorant" and equally "megalomaniacal", and "frivolous and short-sighted" general, namely Baratieri (Sergi 1900b, p. 121). The colonial campaign had cost an exorbitant amount—two hundred million lire—and had bled dry an already prostrate people: contrary to popular belief, Italy was not a "young nation" at all, but an "old nation" that had grown thanks to the union of the pre-unification states, but was not yet sufficiently robust to move confidently in the international arena: for this reason, wanting to imitate British imperialism was "ridiculous" (Sergi 1900b, p. 129).

Sergi's accusations were more general and concerned the misguided foreign policy pursued by liberal governments, even before Crispi. Italian colonial policy had always been characterized by "ignorance" and "ineptitude", as demonstrated by the fact that it had been decided to occupy "the worst sites in terms of the possibility of useful and profitable possession" in the Red Sea, namely Assab and Massawa: the geography of those places was ignored, as were their relations with the interior regions of Africa and the profits they could bring to Italy (Sergi 1900b, p. 120). Eritrea, moreover, was a "colony that was not a colony", since it was "impossible to colonize a territory where there is only sand, bare mountains, or plateaus without aquifers" (Sergi 1990b, p. 121). Not satisfied, Sergi continued, the Italian government had embarked on a new colonial adventure, this time in China, with an attempt to lease San Mun Bay (an attempt that failed, however). For Sergi, it was completely unrealistic to expect future wealth from a Chinese port where it was very difficult for ships to enter, whose territory was of no significance and which was, moreover, sparsely populated and unproductive, perhaps even infested with diseases. Finally, the Chinese were not at all "primitive savages", as the Europeans portrayed them, but they were the heirs to thousands of years of history and civilization (Sergi 1906a, p. 306).

Returning to his 1897 essay on Africa, Sergi proposed dividing the Hamitic stock into two main branches: the northern branch, which occupied the Nile valley up to its sources, and


GIUSEPPE SERGI

AFRICA

ANTROPOLOGIA
DELLA
STIRPE CAMITICA
(SPECIE EURAFRICANA)

Con 118 figure nel testo e una Carta per la distribuzione geografica.

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***Fig. 1** - Cover of Giuseppe Sergi's book "Africa. Antropologia della stirpe camitica" (1897).*

the eastern branch, which included the peoples to the east and west of the Nile and those who occupied the so-called Horn of Africa up to the Indian Ocean (Figs. 1 and 2). And here we immediately encounter a first surprise: Sergi places the Egyptians in the eastern branch of the Hamitic stock. This is a relative surprise, because readers of "Origine e diffusione della stirpe mediterranea" (1895) already knew that the Egyptians originated from the eastern and southern regions of Africa: "I would venture to say", Sergi wrote at the time, "that from Somalia to the Nile delta, in prehistoric times, there must have been a single population, which was not black in race, but only brown" (Sergi 1895, p. 53-54). In the northern branch, Sergi included the Berbers of Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco; the Tuareg; the Tebu, a Saharan population particularly widespread in the Libyan region of Fezzan; the Fulani, prevalent in Central Africa; and finally, the inhabitants of the Canary Islands.

Regarding the Egyptians, ample space was devoted to the long-standing question of their origin, a lively debate that in the second half of the 19th century involved and opposed eminent anthropologists, linguists, and Egyptologists. In the discussion, Sergi took a clear position: against the supporters of the Asian origin of the Egyptians, in particular the English ethnologist James Cowles Prichard and the German Egyptologist Karl Richard Lepsius, he considered the African origin plausible, agreeing with authorities such as Jean-François Champollion, who was the first to decipher hieroglyphics, and his pupil, Ippolito Rosellini, founder of Egyptology in Italy. To confirm the validity of his belief, Sergi claimed that Samuel George Morton had also come to embrace a similar opinion to his, despite having started from an opposite position: while in 1844, in his work "Crania Aegyptiaca", Morton believed that the Egyptians were of Semitic origin, by 1850 he had changed his mind, stating that they were indigenous inhabitants of the Nile Valley, albeit with a completely different physical appearance from their neighbors (Nott and Gliddon 1854, p. 232, 317-319).

By combining research into the accounts of ancient authors (in particular Herodotus, Aeschylus, and Ammianus Marcellinus), analysis of representations found in monuments, and study of the mummies of the pharaohs of Deir el-Bahari, Sergi deduced the following physical characteristics of the Egyptians: light brown skin, black or dark brown hair, sometimes blond, but not a light blond and therefore not of the Nordic type, rather a blond tending towards reddish and a dark honey color; in most cases, the hair must have been straight. That said, Sergi did not deny that there must have been individuals, especially in Lower Egypt, with frizzy, woolly hair, slight prognathism, and a wide nasal aperture: these individuals must have been the result of interbreeding with "Negro" slaves or soldiers

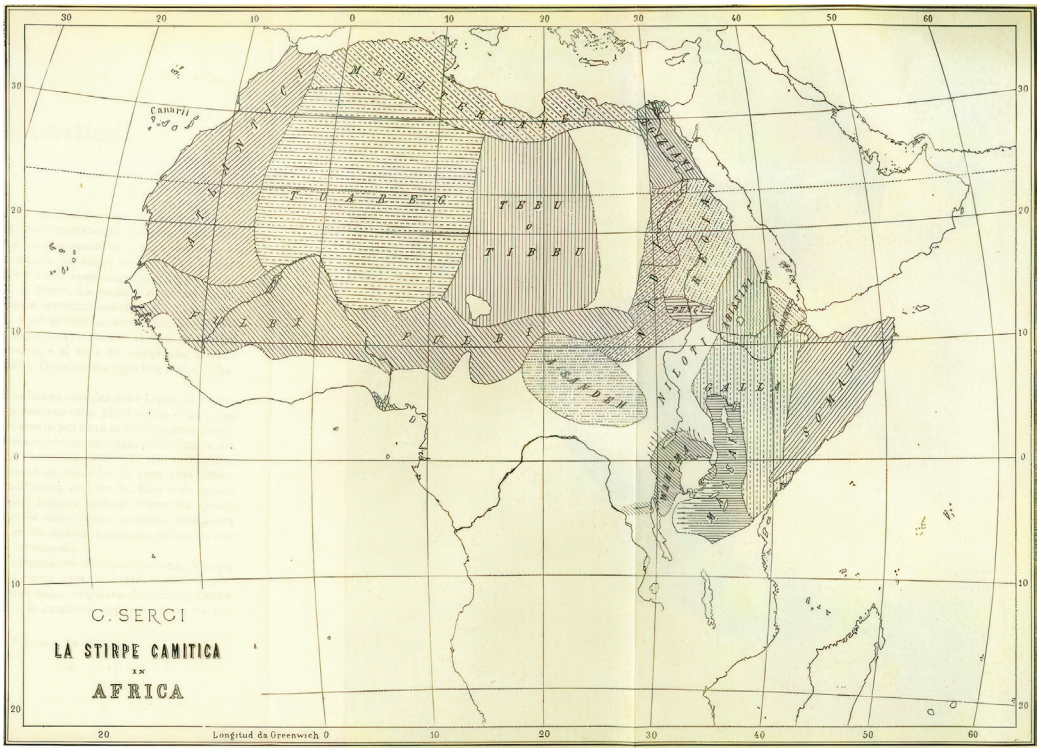

***Fig. 2** - Settlement and distribution of populations in North and East Africa (Sergi 1897, unpaginated).*

or were the legacy of Ethiopian domination. But they were still a minority compared to the rest of the population. The physical conformation of the Egyptians was much more similar to that of Europeans than to that of the "black" populations of sub-Saharan Africa: the beauty of their forms and the fineness of their features, found among both the pharaohs and the common people, had "nothing to envy" of the ancient Greeks and the primitive inhabitants of the Italian peninsula (Sergi 1897, p. 30). As Sergi had already pointed out in 1895, it was clear that the Egyptians belonged neither to the "white race" nor to the "black race", but to a "distinctly brown race", which was not the product of mixing between "whites" and "blacks", nor was it the result of the effect of the Egyptian sun, which had darkened the skin of the population (Sergi 1895, p. 52).

Sergi also devoted considerable effort to refuting a theory put forward by German pathologist Rudolf Virchow, according to which a change in skull shape had occurred in the Egyptian population: originally, the Egyptians were brachycephalic, but then, during the Fifth Dynasty, from around 2500 to 2400 BC, they became mesocephalic and dolichocephalic (Virchow 1888). The problem, Sergi observed, was that Virchow had not based this claim on direct analysis of ancient mummies, but had derived it from a single, rather late find, the wooden statue of Ka'aper (also known as Sheikh-el-Beled), a scribe who lived between the end of the Fourth Dynasty and the beginning of the Fifth. Despite the realism of Egyptian art, it was not possible to infer a definite proportion of human bodies from a statue, nor could general conclusions be drawn from a single artifact: although Virchow's hypothesis had been accepted by the British archaeologist Archibald Henry Sayce, the change in lineage he supposed was nothing more than "imaginary"

(Sergi 1897, p. 38). Based on 86 skulls from the Museum of Anthropology in Naples, then directed by Giustiniano Nicolucci, he found a prevalence of ellipsoid shapes (32 specimens), with six sub-varieties, sphenoid (24), ovoid (10), and pentagonoid (2).

Another African population, the pygmies, also belonged to the Mediterranean stock. Here Sergi indulged in dismantling the hypotheses formulated in the field of anthropology to explain their nature and origin (Janni 1978; Bahuchet 1993; Ramirez Rozzi 2022). Firstly, pygmyism was not a pathological phenomenon, both because it was too widespread (pygmies were found in mountainous and flat regions, in healthy and unhealthy areas) and because, except in cases of disease or mental disorders, pygmies were "strong, resistant, well-proportioned, and capable of all the same work as men of greater stature" (Sergi 1893f, p. 126). Of course, they may have had some "Negroid" and therefore "inferior" features, from the shape of their nose, which was often flattened, to their wide nostrils (Sergi 1893f, p. 130). However, prognathism was a rather rare phenomenon, and some of the pygmy skulls could be considered "even beautiful in form" (Sergi 1893f, p. 130). Secondly, pygmyism was not a recent phenomenon: on the contrary, the pygmies could be considered the first inhabitants of the Mediterranean basin, where they had arrived after migrating from central Africa. Once mixed with the Iberians, Ligurians, Pelasgians, and Libyans, i.e., the earliest peoples of the Mediterranean, they had gradually decreased in number but had not completely disappeared: traces of a short-statured population still survived in southern Italy and the islands. Finally, pygmies could not be considered either simple variations of the normally developed human type caused by the influence of special environmental conditions, as Virchow (1894) believed, or the precursors and ancestors of tall varieties, as Kollmann (1894) thought. Ultimately, for Sergi, pygmies were a variety unto themselves, with their own characteristics and cephalic and cranial forms different from those of the tall human type (Sergi 1894-1895).

Another anthropological issue that Sergi addressed in his 1897 volume on Africa concerned the presence of light-skinned ("blond") human groups in Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco and the megalithic monuments they were believed to have built (Sergi 1897, p. 284-303). On this subject too, Sergi examined the numerous hypotheses that had been put forward, especially by French anthropologists, to explain their presence (Topinard 1873): (a) remnants of the Vandal invasion; (b) mercenary soldiers who had reached Africa following the Roman army; (c) eastern elements who had arrived after the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt; (d) a community that had been present in North Africa since time immemorial; (e) a population of Celtic origin that had crossed the Iberian Peninsula and, once they had crossed the Strait of Gibraltar, had ended up imposing themselves on the local population, dominating and subjugating them; still others scholars believed (f) that their presence should remain unsolved due to a lack of historical documents. On the other hand, some German anthropologists, including Robert Hartmann, tended to downplay this presence, arguing that the blond individuals living in North African countries did not correspond at all to the authentic Germanic blond, but rather had a reddish-brown or at most ash-blond complexion, and moreover were very few in number (Hartmann 1876, p. 263-265). For Sergi, however, there was no doubt: once again, these were endogenous African elements. If the "blondes" had come from Europe and were stronger than the local populations, why did they end up adopting their customs and rituals and allow the local populations to continue speaking their own language without imposing their own? It could not even be argued, Sergi wrote, that such influence had not occurred because of the small number of "invaders" since, if they were truly responsible for the megalithic monuments built in Africa, why were there so few traces of dolmens in western France and Spain, the chosen locations of these populations? Furthermore, if they were of Celtic origin, why were they blond and dolichocephalic, and not dark-haired and brachycephalic

as described by the eminent French anthropologists Paul Broca and Abel Hovelacque? Finally, if the "blond" North Africans were indeed a Nordic "race", how had they managed to adapt and survive in an environment completely different from their own? Sergi proposed a climatic explanation: the "blond" African elements did not come from outside, but originated in the Atlas plateau because, as military doctor Ridolfo Livi had demonstrated, light skin and hair color were linked to increasing altitude (Livi 1896, p. 65): it was no coincidence that in Italy, blond populations were typical of the Alpine area and the northernmost part of the Apennine mountain range. The "blondes" of Africa were African in every respect and therefore Mediterranean.

Between beauty and backwardness: Abyssinia

Concerning the analysis of the eastern part of the continent, Sergi's thesis emerged clearly in his book on "Africa". His aim was to demonstrate that all the peoples inhabiting East Africa (a) could be clearly distinguished from the "black" populations of sub-Saharan Africa; (b) had numerous physical similarities with the Egyptians; (c) like the latter, were not of Asian or Semitic origin, but African. To support his arguments, Sergi presented the results of some of his craniological investigations, as we shall see shortly, but he also referred to numerous reports written by Italian authors of expeditions to East Africa, often financed by the *Società geografica italiana*, an association within which the first colonial expansion program of the newly unified state was developed (Carazzi 1972; Cerreti 1995; Monina 2002, p. 25-131; Natili 2008). As has been rightly noted, these expeditions were not only motivated by cognitive and scientific interests, but also by political and economic reasons, and were often functional to the expansionist aims of the liberal nation (Surdich 1982, 1986; Del Boca 2002, p. 3-39). It should be noted here that, since 1883, Sergi had been an ordinary member of the *Società geografica italiana*; then, for two years, between January 1892 and January 1894, he was even elected a member of the association's Executive Council. In 1891, he published a note on "Varietà umane della Melanesia" ("Human varieties of Melanesia") in the Society's Bulletin (Sergi 1891b). Although it was only a brief preview of the longer and more detailed article that would appear in Mantegazza's "Archivio", the line expressed in it was clear: the old method of skull recognition had to be abandoned in favor of the purely morphological method he had developed. Sergi was also among the participants at the first Italian Geographical Congress, promoted and organized in Genoa in September 1892 by the *Società geografica italiana*. At the meeting, Sergi presented a report on the primitive inhabitants of the Mediterranean, in which he stated categorically that no clear separation could be assumed between Egyptians, Libyans, Sicilians, Ligurians, Sardinians, and Iberians; rather, one should speak of their common origin (Sergi 1892b).

Much of Sergi's analysis was devoted to Abyssinia. Sergi was keen to demonstrate two closely related ideas: on the one hand, Abyssinia was incapable of "great commercial or industrial development"; on the other, its territory was of no interest to a European population that had conquered it (Sergi 1897, p. 121). These convictions stood in stark contrast to the vast literature extolling the virginity and fertility of African regions, which would be made fruitful by the work of Italian colonists (Ertola 2022, p. 52-62). On these issues, Sergi argued with the German naturalist Georg August Schweinfurth, who in 1870 had encountered groups of pygmies in Mali, whom he identified as the Akka and considered the remnants of a prehistoric humanity (Schweinfurth 1875, vol. II, p. 99-113; Puccini 1984a,b). In favor of Italian colonization of the African continent, Schweinfurth was the author of an article in which he showed the benefits that Italy could derive from the use of wild plants in Eritrea, from both a domestic and industrial perspective (Schweinfurth 1891). To those who claimed that Africa lacked everything, Schweinfurth responded with a long list

of medicinal and aromatic plants, plants from which resin, rubber, and gum could be extracted, plants suitable for textile processing and tool manufacturing, plants from which wood could be obtained for construction and cabinetmaking, edible plants and ornamental plants, concluding that Italian industry could derive "great profit" from each of these categories (Schweinfurth 1891, p. 6). A few years later, Schweinfurth praised the work done by the Italians in Eritrea, emphasizing their expertise in road construction, the organization and tactical ability of their colonial troops, their skill in perfecting agricultural methods, and the development of trade (Schweinfurth 1894). Despite opposition from European powers and significant resistance from the native populations, Italian colonization had produced, Schweinfurth wrote, "clear progress in all areas of administration and the constant development of the country" (Schweinfurth 1894, p. 32). Sergi was clearly not convinced by these arguments and remained skeptical about the usefulness of the colony for Italy.

Of course, it was undeniable that Abyssinia stood out for the beauty of its mountains and landscapes, as well as for its "wild and rugged" nature: it was, Sergi argued, "an African Switzerland" (Sergi 1897, p. 122). The comparison between Abyssinia and Switzerland recurs very frequently in the writings of Italian authors on Africa, at least since the 1840s: there is hardly a travel journal, exploration manual, or geographical treatise that does not mention this similarity (above all, Biasutti 1898, p. 39). Another case of western "invention", as noted by the Italian writer Giorgio Manganelli, author of a journey to Africa in 1970: "The 'beauty' of Africa was invented and elaborated by white people; in this way, its cultural annexation was preserved and protected" (Manganelli 2018, p. 32). However, Sergi pointed out, it was one thing to recognize the pleasantness of the places, but quite another to think that they could prove advantageous for the economic and industrial development of the mother country. Ethiopia, in fact, did not seem at all like a useful colony, given its extremely limited resources: water was scarce, vegetation was poor, it was difficult to introduce typically European plants to its soil, the fauna may have been suitable for hunting and even for the study of natural history, but it was certainly not sufficient to guarantee adequate sustenance for the population that had lived there for centuries, let alone communities that had settled there *from scratch* (mules and donkeys, for example, were small and not very resistant animals and therefore poorly suited to working in the fields or transporting goods). There were also numerous obstacles to building roads and the impossibility of installing railways, due to the special conformation of the territory. And without infrastructure, the exchange and circulation of products were difficult. This already depressing picture was made even more painful by the pernicious influence of the *Negus*, who over time had prevented any process of civilization of his people, and by the constant conflicts that divided the local leaders, the *Ras*: for these reasons, the Abyssinians had remained a "primitive people" (Sergi 1897, p. 126). The origins of their backwardness were therefore mainly geographical, historical, social, and political factors, rather than organic causes. Precisely because of its "still rudimentary" civilization, the resistance of Abyssinia could be overcome by the Italians and Europeans in general, if they acted with "prudence and forbearance" (Sergi 1906, p. 354).

As for the Semitic origins of the Abyssinians, these were to be rejected completely. Around the first millennium BC, the Sabaeans from the Arabian Peninsula did indeed arrive in Ethiopia, exerting a significant influence on the populations that had settled there: in particular, precisely because of the influence of the Sabaeans, the language of the Ethiopians underwent a gradual transformation, integrating Hamitic and Semitic elements. However, once this influence ceased, the Ethiopians returned to being "savages, as they had been before the Sabaean colonization" (Sergi 1897, p. 94). The language, customs, and religion had therefore changed due to foreign influences, but without altering the original physiognomy and anthropological background of these populations. If the Ethiopians sometimes called

themselves Arabs and Semites, it was either out of "simple vanity" or because they did not want to be confused "with the African Negro type, which they consider inferior" (Sergi 1897, p. 130). Even an authority such as the ethnologist Daniel Garrison Brinton—who, in a series of lectures given in 1890 at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, had affirmed the existence of a "Eurafrican race" thus anticipating Sergi's idea—had attributed excessive importance to linguistic aspects, neglecting physical characteristics, and thus ending up including the Abyssinians among the Semites, together with Arabs and Chaldeans. For Brinton, on the other hand, the Hamites included the Libyans, Egyptians, and almost all the peoples of East Africa, such as the "Galla", Somalis, and Danakil (Brinton 1890). Confirming his assessment, Sergi argued that if Italy had penetrated the whole of Abyssinia, it would have ended up imposing its own language within fifty years.

At the same time, Sergi did not consider Abyssinians to be "Negroid" at all and found no trace in them of the characteristic considered par excellence typical of "blacks", namely prognathism; on the contrary, they were rather resembling the populations of northeastern Africa, from Egypt to Somalia (Sergi 1897, p. 142). With this, Sergi distanced himself from a prejudice deeply rooted since ancient times, according to which the terms "Ethiopian" and "Ethiopian race" were used to designate individuals and human groups with dark skin, characterized by a radical otherness compared to peoples with white skin (Faloppa 2022). This concept had also penetrated the field of anthropology, so much so that as early as 1795 Blumenbach had distinguished five "races", including the Ethiopian or "Negro race"; the others were the Caucasian, Mongolian, American, and Malay "races" (Blumenbach 1795, p. XXIII-XXIV). Even the textbooks used in Italian schools between the late 19th and early 20th centuries had incorporated these ideas and defined the "Negro race" as "Ethiopian", dwelling on its most repulsive characteristics, such as "black, greasy skin" and the protrusion of the lower part of the face, like a "snout" (Gabrielli 2015, p. 89-146). Similarly, comics had been influenced by this idea: just think of the stories of Bilbolbul, the main character in the comic strips drawn by illustrator Attilio Mussino for the magazine "Il Corriere dei piccoli" starting in December 1908: Bilbolbul, an Ethiopian child with skin as dark as shoe polish, was described with epithets that appeared affectionately paternalistic, such as "rascal" and "brat" but he remained a "Negro" or at most a "moretto", meaning a black-skinned boy (Scarpa 2019). However, for Sergi, the association was "erroneous and vague": Ethiopian should not and could not be used as a term to indicate a "black race with inferior characteristics" (Sergi 1897, p. 18).

Sergi had had the opportunity to observe or study the physical traits of Ethiopians on three different occasions. (a) The first was the arrival, in August 1889, of a mission led by *Degiac* Maconnen, governor of Harrar and plenipotentiary of Menelik II, to the Italian government (Del Boca 1992, p. 343-346). The embassy arrived a few months after the conclusion of the controversial Treaty of Wuchale, which had been signed by Pietro Antonelli, representative of the King of Italy, and Menelik II on May 2, 1889, and which contained an article, the seventeenth, that soon became the subject of heated controversy: according to the Italians, this article established a protectorate over Ethiopia, while according to the Ethiopian interpretation, it merely promoted friendship and cooperation between the two countries. Maconnen's arrival in Italy provided an opportunity to sign an additional agreement to the treaty in Naples on October 1, 1889, which provided for a loan of four million lire to Ethiopia from the Bank of Italy in exchange for the payment of customs revenues from the territory of Harrar. Although he was unable to conduct direct anthropometric investigations at that time, Sergi managed to observe that, in most cases, these were individuals with balanced physical measurements, tall, slender, muscular, with "beautiful and elegant" proportions of the trunk and limbs (Sergi 1897, p. 143). The delegation members had reddish-brown skin, black hair, sometimes wavy, sometimes straight, sparse

beards, black or dark brown eyes, dolichocephalic or at most mesocephalic skulls, with regular curves and high foreheads; their faces were elongated, their noses straight, their lips of medium thickness, with an almost total absence of prognathism. Sergi did not deny, however, that among these individuals there were also some who were the result of interbreeding with "Negro" elements because they had darker than average skin, woolly hair, short, flat noses, and thick, fleshy lips, yet not "protruding and upturned" (Sergi 1897, p. 144), as was usually the case in sub-Saharan African populations. Furthermore, no characteristics of Semitic and Arab populations could be found in them. (b) Sergi's second opportunity arose in 1890 when, thanks to the mediation of Lombrosian criminologist Pasquale Penta, he was able to examine the physical traits of a group of twenty-seven "Abyssinians" detained in the penal colony on the island of Nisida, in the Gulf of Naples. Most of the prisoners were young, aged between 25 and 35; two were over 40 and only one was over 60. As part of the deportation operations ordered by the Italian government, individuals from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia had been transferred to national penitentiary institutions, including the islands of confinement. Many of them had been subjected to compulsory residence orders because they were accused of espionage and subversion of the colonial public order (Lenci 2004, p. 11-43). The phenomenon of deportation also went in the opposite direction, from Italy to its colonies, as happened when, in June 1898, the government headed by Antonio Starabba, Marquis of Rudinì, decided to forcibly transfer almost two hundred Italians to Assab, Eritrea. These individuals had been convicted of minor crimes but were also anarchists involved in the riots against the high cost of living in May of that year. The intention was to establish a penal colony by eliminating elements labeled as dangerous to society and political stability, an experiment that ended in February 1899 with the return to Italy of those who had survived the harsh living conditions in the colony, the punishments to which they were subjected, and the torrid climate (De Napoli 2024, p. 244-328). During the embassy to Italy in 1889, Maconnen visited the prisoners on Nisida and pleaded their case with the Italian authorities, asking for an improvement in their conditions of detention and the release of two priests. Following long and complicated negotiations, between 1892 and 1893, the Italian government finally granted clemency to those who had been subject to police measures and ordered their repatriation. According to the information and data that Sergi received from Penta, who worked at the prison, the hair color of the young African prisoners in Nisida ranged from light brown to dark brown (few had very dark brown hair); their hair was either straight (8 cases) or very frizzy (10); their height varied between 1.50 and 1.80 cm; thanks to the cephalic index, it was possible to identify an almost equal number of dolichocephals (12) and mesocephals (13); the facial index allowed us to identify a prevalence, albeit very slight, of individuals (12) with facial features halfway between a long, narrow face and a broad face; the nasal index characterized them as mesorrhine (14), i.e., with a medium nasal conformation, and leptorrhine, i.e., with a narrow and elongated nose (12). Among the skulls, there were numerous ellipsoids and ovoids. Sergi remarked that even among the group of prisoners from Nisida, there were hybrid ethnic forms with "Negroid" features, including thick hair and a platyrrhine nose, i.e., a wide and flattened nose. Sergi had already used these investigations and those carried out on the Ethiopian delegation led by Maconnen in his article on "Crani africani e crani americani" as confirmation to support the Ethiopian origin of the skulls reported by Robecchi-Bricchetti (Sergi 1891a, p. 245-250).

(c) The third occasion was the investigation of a series of 81 Abyssinian skulls, brought back to Italy by various expeditions, including those of Robecchi-Bricchetti and another engineer, Giuseppe Candeo, and preserved at the Museum of Anthropology in Rome. The prevailing skull shapes in the series were typical of Mediterranean peoples—ellipsoid (36), pentagonoid (21), and ovoid (19)—while Aryan-type skulls, such as platycephalic (2), trapezoidal

(2), and parallelepipedal (1), were less common. Regardless of shape, however, Sergi noted that there were never any "crude or inferior" forms; on the contrary, the figures were always "gentle and delicate" (Sergi 1897, p. 167; Fig. 3), often even elegant; due to the smoothness and gentleness of the forehead and the regularity of the curves, the male cranial forms even resembled female types. In general, Abyssinian skulls were similar to those of the ancient Egyptians, as described by the German physician and anthropologist Franz Pruner, who was given the title of "bey" by the viceroy of Egypt, ʿAbbās Ḥilmī I. From the point of view of the facial index, leptoprosopic types prevailed (52 cases), followed by mesoprosopic (24). As for the nasal index, leptorrhine noses (27) greatly outnumbered mesorrhine (26) and platyrrhine (24) noses.

Similar considerations were put forward by Sergi regarding the "Galla", four examples of which were available in the Roman Museum, brought back to Italy by the survivors of the African mission led by Eugenio Ruspoli. The son of the mayor of Rome, Emanuele, Eugenio was killed by an elephant during a hunting trip in December 1893. His body was recovered in the late 1920s by his nephew Carlo Marescotti Ruspoli and buried in Rome at the Basilica of Santa Maria in Aracoeli in a tomb that not only commemorates his "exploits" but is also surmounted—uniquely for a church—by a map of the Horn of Africa! All the "Galla" skulls belonged to the pentagonoid variety and were characterized, as usual, by their proportionate and elegant shapes. Equally noteworthy was the beauty of the bodies of the "Galla", an aspect that Sergi gleaned from three additional sources: (a) the accounts of Antonio Cecchi, who had joined the Italian expedition to Equatorial Africa led by Orazio Antinori and financed by the *Società geografica italiana* in March 1877. Cecchi would later become Italian consul in Aden and Zanzibar and would play a significant role in the first Italian settlement in Massawa, before being killed in November 1896 in Somalia, near the village of Lafolè, during an attack by Somali bands on an Italian camp. Unlike Sergi, however, Cecchi was convinced of the Asian origin of the Oromo (Cecchi 1885-1887, vol. II, p. 469-482); (b) the considerations of the Austrian geographer Philipp Paulitschke, who had long investigated the origins, movements, and intermingling of the populations of East Africa, arguing that the "Galla" belonged to the Hamitic group (Paulitschke 1888, 1893); (c) the photographs taken by the Sienese medical officer Leopoldo Traversi, who became Menelik II's personal physician, accompanying him on his military expeditions against the Oromo, and who took part in the failed negotiations with the Ethiopians on the disputed interpretation of Article 17 of the Treaty of Wuchale. Sergi included these photographs in his book on "Africa" (Sergi 1897, p. 143-144, 187-190, 197).

***Fig. 3** - An Abyssinian skull, presented as an example of the ellipsoidal cuneate form that Giuseppe Sergi considered one of the most harmonious cranial shapes (**Sergi 1897, p. 153**).*

As far as Somalis were concerned, Sergi had a single skull, preserved at the Museum of Anthropology in Rome and also brought back by the survivors of the Ruspoli expedition: once again, it was a pentagonoid variety. In this case too, Sergi rejected the theory that Somalis were Semitic: while it was possible to hypothesize that Somalis were descended from a mixture of "Galla" and Arabs, this mixture had not led to any "Semitization". If anything, the opposite phenomenon had occurred: the Arab elements

Fig. 4 - Somali fighter. This photograph, originally published by Philipp Paulitschke (1893, p. 340), was reproduced by Giuseppe Sergi in his book on "Africa" (Sergi 1897, p. 194).

had been absorbed by the "Galla": instead of "Semitization", it would be more correct to speak of "Hamitization". In addition, more than others, the Somalis had a high density of "Negro" elements within them; however, this presence had not altered the original anthropological type at all, which remained Hamitic, with "elevated" physical characteristics (Sergi 1897, p. 176). This was despite the traditions and genealogies of the Somalis themselves. In this regard, Sergi referred to a story reported by Vittorio Bottego in his book "Il Giuba esplorato" ("The explored Giuba", 1895), in which he recounted his expedition to the Juba basin, which began in 1892 on behalf of the *Società geografica italiana* (Bottego would have died in 1897 during another expedition to the interior of Somalia). When Bottego asked an eminent figure in the Somali city of Lugh why, while Arabs were white, Somalis, who claimed to be the descendants of the Arabs, were "black", the man replied naively: "Because if you were in Africa, your children would be born a little blacker than you, and so on down to your grandchildren, who, because of their color, would look like my brothers" (Bottego 1895, p. 374). For Sergi, the Somalis were the descendants of the inhabitants of the (legendary) land of Punt, which he placed on the coast of East Africa (Fig. 4).

Sergi made the same argument for the Danakil (now known as Afar), the inhabitants of the Afar Region of Ethiopia and of northern Djibouti. In this case, Sergi rejected the hypothesis of naturalist Giovanni Battista Licata, who had traveled to Assab in the mid-1880s and written a book dedicated to Mantegazza, entitled "Assab e i Danachili" ("Assab and the Danakil", 1885). For Licata, the Danakil were the result of a grafting of Arabs from Yemen and African "Negroes": from the Semites they had inherited their oval faces, small noses, and regular lips, and from the "Negroes" their slender physique and tall stature. For Sergi, on the other hand, they had none of the characteristics of either Arabs or "blacks": following the accounts of Traversi (1886), Dr. Santelli, physician in the French Navy (1893), and Cecchi (1885-1887, vol. I, p. 97-111), Sergi argued that the Danakil had a majestic bearing, did not have prognathism, had regular features, were elegant in form and extremely beautiful; in short, they did not give the "impression of Negroes" at all (Sergi 1897, p. 181).

Giuseppe Sergi's insights and studies on Abyssinians were confirmed by his son Sergio, also an anthropologist and his successor to the chair of anthropology at the University of Rome. In 1912, Sergio Sergi published the results of an extensive and highly scholarly investigation into a series of Abyssinian skulls, some from the Tigray region and others from the city of Kohaito, in southern Eritrea, brought back by Schweinfurth from his travels in Africa and donated by him to the *Berliner Anthropologische Gesellschaft*, founded by Virchow (S. Sergi 1912). Sergio Sergi had trained in Germany, at the University of Berlin, under the tutelage of anatomist Wilhelm Waldeyer-Hartz,

anthropologist Felix von Luschan, and neurologist Theodor Ziehen. According to Sergio Sergi, the average cranial capacity of Abyssinians was higher than that of Egyptians and corresponded to that of both ancient and modern populations of the Italian peninsula. All other skeletal characteristics and skull shapes of Abyssinians were almost identical to those of Egyptians and, in general, to those of all populations living in the Mediterranean since Neolithic times. While not denying the presence of the "Negro" element in Abyssinia, this was minimal and indicated only "the millennial attempt at infiltration and transformation that the Negro man carries out in the Eurafrican species"; an attempt that had been unsuccessful, however, since the Abyssinians, although unable to completely avoid contact with these peoples, managed to maintain their "biological individuality" (S. Sergi 1912, p. 116). The Abyssinians were an indigenous "race", and therefore Eurafrican and Mediterranean, and not the product of the union between "whites" and "Negroes". Sergio Sergi reached the same conclusions for the five "Galla" and Somali skulls, also belonging to the Virchow collection: despite the small number of specimens studied, it could be said that the Mediterranean type had remained unchanged over time.

Returning to Giuseppe Sergi, after examining the peoples of the Horn of Africa, he concluded that, as far as external characteristics were concerned, the Hamitic stock was generally characterized by brown skin, with many variations, from light brown to dark brown, depending on the latitude; straight or curly hair, black or brown; dark eyes and rather sparse beards. As far as internal characteristics were concerned, the skulls were predominantly pentagonoid, ovoid, ellipsoid, and wedge-shaped; the nose was mostly straight but could sometimes be slightly curved; the mouth was of medium size and, above all, the profile was without prognathism; stature was average and, in some cases, even tall. Intermediate characteristics included thin and sometimes slightly fleshy lips without protrusion; horizontally positioned, non-protruding eyes; and a thin and slender body, very rarely obese.

It has even been suggested that Sergi's considerations on the delicate and pleasant appearance of East Africans may have been echoed in a piece by the poet and director Pier Paolo Pasolini, "La grazia degli eritrei" ("The grace of the Eritreans") (Trento 2010, p. 179-210; 2012). The text was written in 1968, during a visit by Pasolini in preparation for the documentary film "Appunti per un'Orestiade Africana" ("Notes towards an African Orestes", 1970) but was only published after the author's death (Pasolini 1998a). In these few pages, Pasolini dwelled on the beauty of the Eritrean population: "Looking at a street in Asmara", he wrote, "you don't see a single ugly person. There is no fatness, deformity, or, practically, baldness: there are no badly formed bodies, short legs, crooked hips, or hunched shoulders. Everyone has a beautiful body, slim and lean, light and graceful, as if wrapped in humble brown silk. Their heads, with almost shaved frizzy hair, are like the heads of statues. Their Semitic or Arab features have the perfection of animals, and there is not a single eye that does not shine with a wonderful, depthless light, with a grace that is mysteriously without mystery" (Pasolini 1998a, p. 1870). A beauty that found a direct and consistent correspondence in the hospitable behavior of the Eritreans, in their friendliness, in their sweetness, in their "innocent servility", in their ability to detach themselves from worldly things, in a word, in their "grace" (Pasolini 1998a, p. 1871). Like the sublimity of the landscapes, the beauty of some African peoples is also a stereotype that has long informed colonial literature produced in Italy in the first half of the 20th century (Tomasello 2004; Casales 2023). Pasolini would soon change his mind, however, admitting in a text written during another trip to Africa for a film, "Il fiore delle mille e una notte" ("Arabian nights", 1974), that the true nature of the Eritreans was very different from what he had believed a few years earlier: "Their grace hides a sick and aberrant sensibility. Their loyalty is a murky attachment full of pretensions. Their submission seeks revenge that distorts reality" (Pasolini 1998b, p. 1922).

"Racial" inequalities and hierarchies

The time has come to return to a fundamental point. In order to define and elaborate a "race" such as the Mediterranean one, it was necessary to compare it with a group considered radically different from it, and Sergi easily identified this group in the "black" peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. This was a phenomenon that has been defined as "heteroreferential racialization" and which characterized much of the culture, not only scientific, of liberal Italy until the rise of fascism: the identity and color of one people were defined in opposition to the identity and color of another people, preferably "black" (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013, p. 21-65). In Sergi's case, it was the "brownness" of the Mediterranean peoples, and not their "whiteness", that was defined in relation to the "blackness" of Africans. But who were the "blacks", according to the Sicilian anthropologist? First of all, the trio of Kaffirs, Akka and "Bushmen", to whom most anthropologists at the end of the 19th century often referred to indicate the lowest level of the evolutionary scale; then the "Negritos" of Micronesia and Melanesia, the Australian aborigines, the Brazilian Botocudos, and the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego (the Fuegians, whose appearance and behavior had made a great impression on Darwin himself, as can be seen in the pages of the diary he kept on board the Beagle). All these groups were considered by Sergi to be "inferior" and "savage" because of physical, behavioral, dietary, and sexual differences that made them closer to "animals" than to civilized peoples (Sergi 1885, p. 249-295; 1888).

Therefore, according to Sergi, inequalities existed; indeed, they were an effect of the evolutionary process and, as such, were a fact of nature: "No one, not even the most convinced monogenist, can claim that there is equality between Papuans and Chinese, between Fuegians and Europeans, between Africans and Eskimos" (Sergi 1889, p. 2). These inequalities also implied a precise hierarchy among human groups: "The colored races are infinitely inferior to the white races; the Mongolian, Chinese, and Japanese races have a development that is close to that of the white Europeans, but they are also different from them in many respects" (Sergi 1889, p. 3). In the "inferior races", selfishness prevailed over altruism, as did all impulses that were harmful to civil coexistence; on the contrary, the "superior races" could achieve a high degree of civilization and morality. Only the latter could recognize the importance of "human rights" and fight for freedom and the elimination of all forms of servitude and vassalage. The more elevated the "races" were, the more differentiated they were internally, and the more capable they were of establishing complex social organisms (Sergi 1893a). However, interbreeding between the two groups was not only possible, but was the rule: ethnic mixing gave rise to hybrids, which were by no means sterile (Sorgoni 1998; Young 2000).

These inequalities were attributed to three different phenomena but often overlapped in the scientific culture of the time. First, atavism, or the reappearance of characteristics of animal species, which Darwin had discussed in the thirteenth chapter of "The variation of animals and plants under domestication" (1868). According to Sergi, this reappearance was due to adverse environmental conditions or triggered by innate characteristics. Secondly, degeneration, a concept with which the alienist Bénédict-Augustin Morel, in his "Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine" ("A treatise on the physical, intellectual, and moral degenerations", 1857), indicated the physical and psychological deviation from an original anthropological type considered normal. For Sergi, degeneration was a way of adapting to the environment that was "incomplete" and "inferior" to the average, and among "savages", the Fuegians were particularly prone to it. Thirdly, among the processes at the origin of the differences between "races" was arrested development, an expression referring to remaining stuck at stages of evolution that had been surpassed by the rest of humanity. This was an extensive application of the "law of recapitulation" formulated in the mid-19th century by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel, according to which ontogenesis

repeated phylogeny, i.e. each human being and each species went through a sequence of phases typical of adult ancestral forms in its development (Gould 2013, p. 117-121).

After all, the idea of the "inferiority" of African "blacks" was a theme that circulated widely in Italian anthropological circles (Burgio 1999; Forgacs 2015, p. 91-113; Aramini and Bovo 2018; Zagatti 2024, p. 23-107). Consider again Lombroso, who in a series of anthropological lectures "for ladies" held at the University of Padua in 1871, stated that "blacks" emitted a "particular odor that slave dogs are very good at distinguishing" and had numerous physical characteristics that brought them closer to monkeys: these included the excessive development of the semilunar membrane of the eye, the structure of the throat, the thinning of the calf muscles, and the shape of the spine, which was not curved but developed straight (Lombroso 1871, p. 25; cf. Sansone 2022, p. 12-64). Furthermore, their brains were lighter than those of white people, their skulls were long and narrow at the sides, with a poorly developed forehead, a sign that passions dominated intelligence and that moments of joy were frequently alternated with sudden and brief outbursts of anger; their forearms were longer than their arms, and the palms of their hands and soles of their feet were flattened; even their blood was different from that of "white" men, given the ease with which it coagulated. Just like monkeys, "Negroes" were highly intelligent until puberty; thereafter, their intellect stagnated and shrank, and their "poor brains" seemed uncomfortable in their "elongated and heavy skulls" (Lombroso 1871, p. 29). The Berbers, Arabs, Jews, and Abyssinians were nothing more than progressive stages of transformation of the African "Negro" into "white". Below the "blacks" were only the "Bushmen", considered the "platypus of humanity" (Lombroso 1871, p. 29): they combined the worst traits of the "black" and the "yellow" and, in addition, had their own characteristics, reminiscent of those of animals. According to Lombroso, the women of that population often exhibited steatopygia—a pronounced accumulation of fat on the buttocks and thighs (Fig. 5).

Fig. 8. Donna Boschimana.

***Fig. 5** - A depiction of a "Bushwoman" emphasizes her steatopygia, referencing the trope of the "Hottentot Venus" (**Lombroso 1871, p. 25**).*

This was exemplified by the case of Saartjie (or Sarah/Sara) Baartman, a Khoekhoe woman who was exploited as a circus attraction in "freak shows" across Great Britain and France between 1810 and 1815 and was disparagingly referred to as the "Hottentot Venus" (Crais and Scully 2011; Qureshi 2011).

Equally significant as Lombroso's position are the observations he made, together with the physician Mario Carrara, on twenty-five Dinka from Sudan, nineteen men and six women; this analysis first appeared in the "Archivio di antropologia criminale" founded and edited by Lombroso himself (Lombroso and Carrara 1896); then, with some modifications and additions, in the journal of the Roman Society of Anthropology, founded

Fig. 6 - A fifty-year-old man, member of the Dinka tribe (Lombroso and Carrara 1896-1897, p. 104).

by Sergi and predecessor of the journal you are now reading (Lombroso and Carrara 1896-1897). The study was prompted by the arrival in Italy of a "caravan" of Dinka, who stayed in Turin for the whole month of November 1895, performing in theatrical shows in which they reconstructed moments of life in an imaginary Sudanese village for the Italian public (Abbattista 2021, p. 275-290). In his book on "Africa", Sergi took up Lombroso and Carrara's investigation, quoting extensively and including three photographic portraits (Sergi 1897, p. 212-216). According to Lombroso and Carrara, the Dinka were "the blackest of blacks", with short, jet-black hair from childhood, sparse, short, straight beards, and very tall stature, even among women. Noteworthy were the size and length of their feet, as well as the anomaly that characterized their legs, with calves that were abnormally long compared to their thighs and the rest of their legs, which gave them the appearance of "wading birds" but was useful for living in the swampy plains (Lombroso and Carrara 1896-1897, p. 114; Fig. 6). There was also a marked left-handedness, poor cranial capacity, dull sensitivity, and the frequent presence of tattoos. Furthermore, their aesthetic sense was completely primitive, almost ape-like; they were extraordinarily apathetic, incapable of engaging in methodical and regular work, and were equally extraordinarily impulsive, with sudden and furious outbursts of anger. Most of these tendencies were also typical of criminals, with one significant difference, however: while in criminals these instincts were innate and therefore ineradicable, in "savages" they seemed to disappear "under the tortures of slavery", and therefore on contact with the "white man" (Lombroso and Carrara 1896-1897, p. 126).

As further confirmation of the "anti-black" prejudices circulating in Italian anthropology, we could also cite the studies of Mantegazza (Labanca 1992). For the Florentine anthropologist, the main criterion for classifying "races" was to be the degree of intelligence: on the basis of this parameter, there were "lower races", i.e. "black" and prognathic "races", which were "very difficult to perfect" and had occupied "the lowest place on the human scale" for centuries; "high races", such as the white "races", were those that were "indefinitely perfectible" from generation to generation; finally, there were the "medium races" (the "brown races"), which were "definitely perfectible" (Mantegazza 1876, p. 44). Another important factor in the construction of the ethnic hierarchy was the shape of the skull. The higher one climbed the ladder of nature, the less morphological complexity there was: while the head of a monkey resembled a tetrahedron, that of a human being corresponded at most to an ovoid or an ellipsoid. "Polyhedrism" in humans was typical only of pathological skulls, such as those of "idiots", in which there was a return to forms characteristic of lower animals, or those of "inferior races" (Australian, Mongolian, and "black"), as both Blumenbach and the French anatomist Louis-Pierre Gratiolet had demonstrated (Mantegazza 1896). High brain capacity that was not accompanied by a

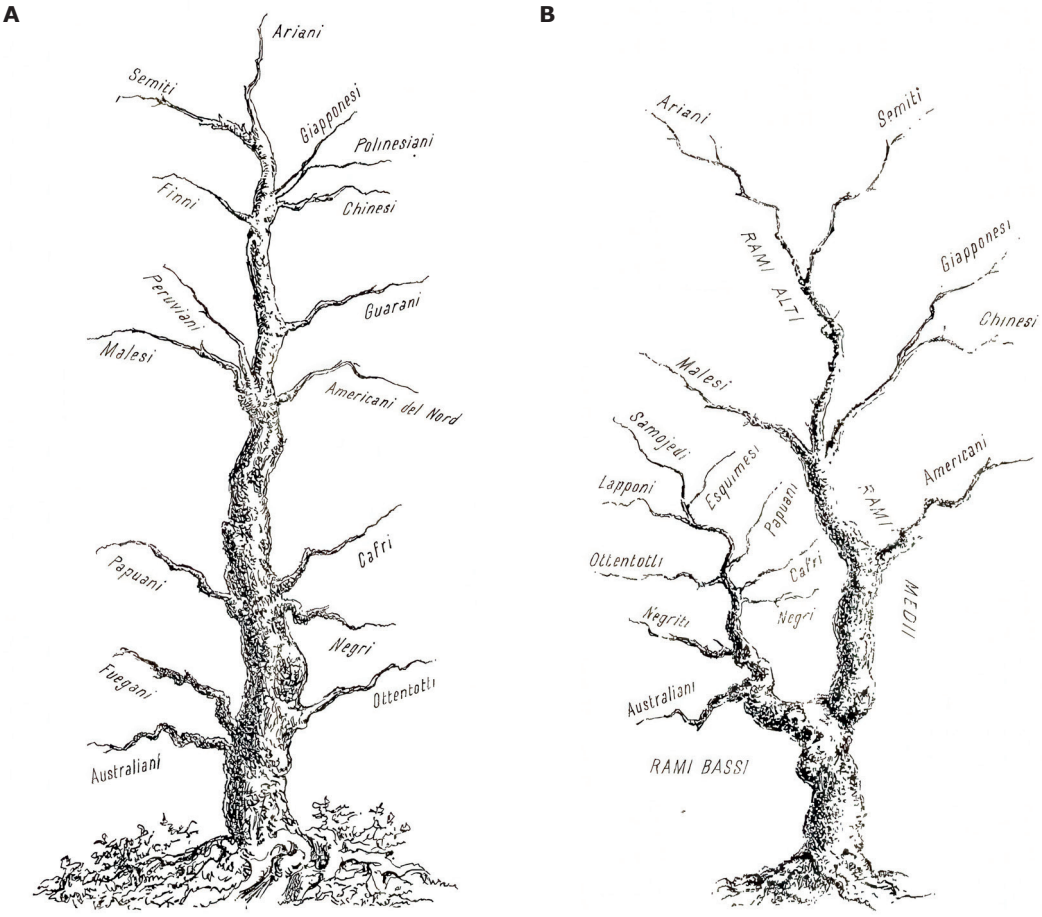

Fig. 7. ***A. A tree diagram representing an aesthetic hierarchy of human "races," placing Aryans at the top and "Negro" populations at the bottom (Mantegazza 1881, Table IV, unpaginated). B. Aesthetic parameters correlate directly with intellectual ones: on this arboreal model, Aryans and Semites occupy the upper branches, while "Negroes" from Australia and Africa, alongside Lapps and Eskimos, are relegated to the lower ones (Mantegazza 1881, Table V, unpaginated).***

beautiful shape was not a noteworthy quality in itself and was not sufficient to include a skull among the "higher races" (Mantegazza 1875, p. 81). For Mantegazza, morphological and aesthetic criteria were directly correlated with intellectual and moral standing: features considered "beautiful" were associated with superior intelligence and high morality, while those deemed "ugly" were linked to inferior intelligence, a lesser capacity for abstraction, and a backward state of civilization (Mantegazza 1881; Figs. 7 and 8).

Here, however, I would like to briefly focus on a lesser-known case, yet one that is quite influential: that of anthropologist and psychiatrist Enrico Morselli, whom Sergi knew well. Referring to the classification of the German anthropologist Gustav Fritsch and, above all, that of the German gynecologist Carl Heinrich Stratz, Morselli identified three ethnic groups based on their physical and psychological development: one could therefore speak of "protomorphic races", "archimorphic races" and finally

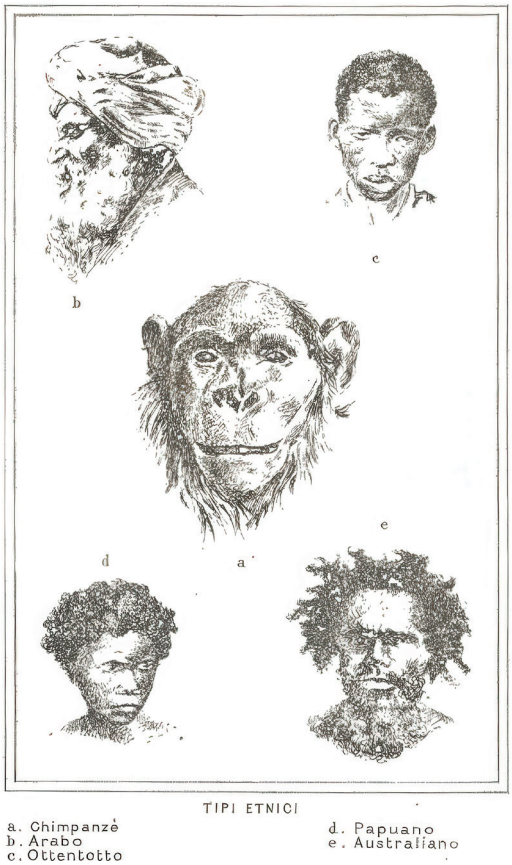

Fig. 8 - Comparative table in which Paolo Mantegazza seeks to demonstrate facial similarities between Arabs, "Hottentots", Papuans, Australians, and chimpanzees (Mantegazza 1881, Table VI, unpaginated).

"metamorphic races", the result of crossbreeding between the first two. It is worth noting here that Morselli, like Sergi, distinguished between "races" and "peoples": "races" were groups of individuals with homogeneous physical and psychological characteristics, while peoples were the result of a mixture of different ethnic elements; they were therefore the result of interbreeding between different "races". It would have been "unscientific" to speak of an "Abyssinian race" or an "Italian race"; while strictly speaking one should have spoken of the "Abyssinian people" and the "Italian people" (Morselli 1911b, p. 348). The "protomorphic races" were characterized by rudimentary morphology, short stature, small skulls, frizzy hair, simple brain folds, and dark skin: they included the "Bushmen", the Fuegians, the "Hottentots", the Eskimos, the Australian aborigines, and of course the pygmies, who would disappear under the influence of Europeans. These "races" were to be considered "the remnants of a humanity that had stopped or not progressed in its evolution" (Morselli 1911b, p. 320). The "archimorphic races"—which included the "Negro", the "yellow" and the "white"—were, on the other hand, more evolved from an organic point of view, with medium or tall stature, more delicate body proportions, greater curvature of the spine and greater muscular strength. The "archimorphic races" were able to create large and complex social communities, exploit the domestication of animals to their advantage, establish urban settlements by renouncing nomadism, and enjoy the fruits of agriculture.

It was true, Morselli claimed, that the "true great civilizations, of which humanity can be proud" descended from the "archimorphic races", but only from some of them. Even within the archimorphic groups, in fact, there were less evolved and therefore "inferior races" from a morphological, physiological, psychological, and sociological point of view. This was the case with the "Negro race", which had not managed to rise above "mediocre stages of civilization" (Morselli 1911b, p. 331). Of course, Morselli did not rule out that even among the "Negroes" virtues and behaviors worthy of appreciation could be found, as was the case with courage in the Akka, or that they could be authors of intellectual productions of some value, as in some love poems by "Negroes" from equatorial countries. Furthermore, they showed a remarkable ability to adapt to their environment: "Negroes" were able to withstand extremely high temperatures without dying of sunstroke, they were able to drink from putrid waters, live in malaria-infested environments, and survive long fasts. They also had the ability to imitate the customs of others,

but only the worst and most harmful aspects, such as tobacco and alcohol. Their customs, beliefs, knowledge, mentality, and moral sense were all signs of "a halt or delay in human evolution" (Morselli 1911b, p. 352). The "Negroes" of Africa had not made any noteworthy inventions, they had not brought any new ideas to humanity, they had not played any active or significant role in any religious or philosophical movement in history. The states that the "Negroes" had founded in Africa, such as Liberia, which became independent in 1847, were not stable, but formed and dissolved with surprising rapidity due to the constant wars between them. The African "Negroes" who were transported as slaves to the United States were unable, except in isolated cases, to achieve "all the acquisitions" of Europeans and were in any case "incapable of initiative and creation" (Morselli 1911b, p. 354). Everywhere they represented an "element of little from a biological, economic, intellectual, and moral point of view" (Morselli 1911a, p. 1325).

Given their biological diversity, the "races" were engaged in a continuous struggle for dominance, a struggle for hegemony, which Morselli defined as "ethnarchy": the "colored races" could not aspire to supremacy because the "white races" would end up assimilating the less suitable groups, until humanity consisted only of "superior" ethnic types. At that point, armed conflicts would give way to bloodless antagonisms of an exclusively cultural, intellectual, and moral nature. The humanity of the future would dominate nature and govern its own evolutionary process, directing it towards the creation of the *Metanthropos,* a man perfectly developed from a physical, psychological, and moral point of view (Fig. 9). This had nothing to do with the superman envisioned by Nietzsche: "the superior man imagined by the murky and narrow-minded German individualism is a monstrous exaggeration of the natural differences between men" (Morselli 1911a, p. 1338). *Metanthropos* would embody the idea of beauty of classical antiquity and develop a higher resistance to disease, greater sensitivity, sharper intelligence, and a more pronounced moral sense.

***Fig. 9** - For Enrico Morselli, the superior human type is embodied by classical statuary, exemplified here by a bust identified as Emperor Trajan (**Morselli 1911b, p. 1335**).*

While arguing for the inevitability of the struggle between "races" in the present, Morselli condemned the violence exercised by European colonizers around the world: "Alongside very rare philanthropic cases, we must unfortunately remember the ferocious hunts of the Tasmanians, the exploits of European travelers in Africa following the model of Stanley or German military leaders, the pirate invasions of North American settlers in the reservations of the Redskins... And this shameful list for so-called European civilization makes even more petty the attempts made here and there on a very small scale to "civilize" primitive populations, that is, to induce them, willingly or unwillingly, to accept our ideas, our beliefs (often even more erroneous than theirs), and to practice our customs, our way of life, of stable dwelling, of cultivation of the soil, of mutual individual respect" (Morselli 1911b, p. 355).

Against war and imperialism

As we have already seen, Sergi also believed that the existence of differentiation and hierarchy among human beings did not provide any ideological justification for colonial or imperialist policies. Sergi's anti-colonialism was based on two main arguments. First, economic considerations: the African campaigns were considered an enormous and useless waste of money and energy, which could be used much more profitably and concretely to eliminate or at least limit Italy's urgent problems, from illiteracy to the *questione meridionale*, from poverty to delinquency. Secondly, ideological and political reasons, which would be explored in greater depth during and after the First World War: Sergi's targets included not only the lack of political intelligence and ignorance of the African territory and its peoples, but also the ferocity and inhumanity of the European powers, with a discourse once again centered on the relationship between civilization and "barbarism", but carried out by reversing the traditional poles of that debate. With their wars of conquest and violent subjugation of indigenous populations, Europeans were "becoming barbaric", as will be seen more clearly below. Sergi's anti-colonial position can be explained in the light of his socialist sympathies, even though the socialist front was by no means united on the colonial question (Rainero 1971). Throughout his life, Sergi looked with interest at the ideals of socialism, understood as the struggle against the evils of society perpetrated by the "very few who dominate and enjoy" over the "very many who serve and suffer" (Sergi 1906, p. 343). There were two most important and missions that the socialist movement should have undertaken: on the one hand, to make human beings aware of their rights and duties, fighting for the education and moral elevation of the masses; on the other hand, to change the existing social order, starting with forms of property, the division of labor, the condemnation of war, and the revision of borders between states in favor of universal brotherhood. However, Sergi's convictions were accompanied by a rejection of collectivism, which he considered "pernicious" and contrary to the evolutionary process, because it implied an uncontrolled increase in desires and needs, and was therefore not feasible in modern societies, on pain of their destruction. Despite this, Sergi was convinced of the "indisputable usefulness" of socialism, since it could lead "peoples and nations, states and governments to the evolution of human society, to the reduction of suffering, to a minimum enjoyment of life for those who today have none" (Sergi 1906, p. 345).

Sergi's distrust of colonialism was shared by other anthropologists close to socialist ideals: Cesare Lombroso, for example, comes to mind. After the defeat at Adwa, the father of Italian criminal anthropology had fiercely disapproved of Crispi's colonial policy in a series of articles published in "Critica sociale", a socialist periodical founded in 1891 by Filippo Turati, and in "Avanti!", the newspaper of the Italian Socialist Party founded in December 1896. Lombroso pointed the finger, first and foremost, at the ignorance of the political class, which knew nothing about Abyssinia, nothing about its history, nothing about its climate, territory, or military forces (Lombroso 1896a, p. 163). Secondly, Lombroso criticized the waste of public funds: there was money in abundance when the government wanted to build "stupid fortresses," when it wanted to pay generous stipends to generals, when it intended to tackle "most misguided" military spending, while complaining that there was no money for "welfare of the people" (Lombroso 1896b, p. 245). To the fleeting glory of arms "of brutally wielding weapons" and "killing people," Lombroso contrasted with the authentic glory that could have derived for the country from the improvement of agricultural methods, which would have made the fields flourish, from the reduction of illiteracy, from the elimination of pellagra, malaria, and "cretinism," from the environmental remediation of entire regions, such as Sardinia, Sicily, and Puglia (Lombroso 1896b, p. 245). Lombroso then stigmatized the causes that had led not only to the start of colonial campaigns in Africa but also to their continuation, despite defeats and the awareness that this was not at

all the "promised land" that had been imagined: among these reasons were certainly the "imbecility" and ignorance of the rulers, but "megalomania", "misoneism", or fear of the new, the propensity to imitate other European nations, as well as the pursuit of economic interests by those who, through colonial expansionism, hoped to enrich themselves through transport, armaments, and construction (Lombroso 1896c, p. 1-2). Some of Lombroso's arguments were similar, if not identical, to those put forward by Sergi: it is curious to note that Lombroso also compared Italy to a fallen nobleman who, although reduced to poverty, was unable to give up his servants or his horses for reasons of social respectability (Lombroso 1896c, p. 1). In short, with colonialism, the gains were minimal, while the costs and damage were maximal. Lombroso's analysis was even more subtle, going so far as to hypothesize that colonialism was a product of industrial civilization. It was no longer a question, as it had been in the early modern age, of conquering territories and plundering and robbing the goods of subjugated peoples, but of finding new markets for industrial products: it was no longer the age of military imperialism, but of economic imperialism (Lombroso 1901). The phenomenon of Italian colonization had a peculiar character, which consisted in its being "proletarian": it was not the bourgeoisie , impoverished, made lazy and disillusioned by centuries of idleness, that threw itself into ventures in distant countries, but the "rough and mistreated Italian plebs": while the British were supported by political reflection, huge capital and vast experience, the Italians went to the colonies "without capital and with little culture" (Lombroso 1901, p. 283).

However, Lombroso considered the equation between colonial occupation and increased wealth for the mother country to be shortsighted, indeed simply "false", and this also applied to Libya, which Italy would occupy between 1911 and 1912 after a conflict with the Ottoman Empire, which controlled Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (Lombroso 1903, p. 245-253). Italy did not have a surplus of capital to invest and perhaps make profitable in the colonies; nor were these territories easy to annex, since they were inhabited by peoples who were extremely unstable and constantly in revolt against their rulers; from a geographical point of view, moreover, these areas were unproductive and unsuitable for European settlement (Libya, for example, was nothing but a succession of sand and swamps). If the central government, with its limited economic resources and poor administrators, was unable to improve the situation in the regions of southern Italy, why should it have succeeded in Africa? The Libyan venture would have been "harmful" because it would have disrupted Italian finances, increasing taxes and military spending, and would have rekindled imperialistic ideas of conquest, rather than pursuing greater freedom, genuine economic progress, and social improvements (Lombroso 1903, p. 250). Furthermore, the opposition of the indigenous peoples had to be considered: in the event of danger and attack from outside, the African peoples, instead of taking advantage of the situation to overthrow their often corrupt and despotic governments, fought assiduously and heroically to defend those governments. This was the case with the Abyssinians, who managed to triumph over the Italians despite living as slaves in a feudal society and fighting with rudimentary weapons.

Sergi also considered colonialism and imperialism to be among the main causes of the decline of European countries, particularly those he called the "Latin nations", namely Italy, France, and Spain. He devoted an entire book to this topic, "La decadenza delle nazioni latine" ("The decline of Latin nations", 1900), which was the subject of heated debate due to the theories it presented. In contrast to the decline of the Latin nations, Sergi noted the vitality and exuberance of the modern British, who could be considered the true heirs of the ancient Romans (on this subject, see also Sergi 1899). There were numerous similarities between these two peoples: both were skilled in the art of war and the construction of public works, both had been able to spread their customs in their colonies, and both had managed to combine selfishness and altruism, respect for the individual and attention to the common good in a balanced way. Another ambiguity in

Sergi's discourse lurks in his interpretation of British imperialism: sometimes the British were presented as those who had succeeded in taking up the baton of the best traditions of the ancient world, while at other times, as we shall see later, they were presented as bloodthirsty conquerors.

Already in "La decadenza delle nazioni latine" Sergi had defined war as a "terrible human disaster", comparing it to natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods (Sergi 1900b, p. 109). The horrors of conflict were the legacy of humanity's prehistoric and "savage" past, the memory of which was still present in the human mind, albeit submerged and rendered inert in most cases thanks to the positive influence of culture and progress: "the soldier is the brutalized man who does not respect man, he is the man freed from all human responsibility, deprived of all feelings of pity, who satiates himself with brutality and blood" (Sergi 1900b, p. 109). Since wars could only be justified as defense against enemy aggression, there was no reason to maintain professional armies: their abolition would have guaranteed economic benefits above all, thanks to the reduction in the huge military expenditures incurred each year by European nation states, and therefore also political and civil benefits. In essence, Sergi asked rhetorically after the defeat at Adwa, what was the point of organizing a regular army, such as the Italian one, if an untrained and poorly equipped "barbarian" was able to annihilate it in such a short time? At Adwa, "can a barbarian with an army without maneuvers, without a general staff, without drills in the parade ground, without clothes, with little provisions, defeat and destroy and render useless all that preparatory work of many years? What are all the standing and permanent armies worth if a horde of savages can ruin all the knowledge acquired in the offices of the general staff?" (Sergi 1900b, p. 105-106). Despite this, the Italian army included in its ranks "civilized and respectable men, men of high and modern ideas, who do honor to present society" (Sergi 1900b, p. 112): a statement that Sergi later confessed he wanted to delete, having become convinced that there was no difference between the ancient soldier and the modern one. Both were violent, devoted to killing, looting, and any other form of wickedness; both were absolute arbiters of the lives and property of others; both were fearsome and ferocious. If war was comparable to a "disaster", the soldier was its material executor: abolishing war meant gradually eliminating the instrument without which conflicts could not be waged (Sergi 1906b, p. 363-368). It was then up to education, especially scientific rather than humanistic education, to contain, repress, and render inactive the warlike instincts that still existed in civilized peoples, directing human beings toward the establishment of harmony between nations. Scientific culture, unlike religious fanaticism, could in fact contribute to elevating civilization and sentiments, to refining the spirit, stripping it of prejudices and errors.

There was no public occasion on which Sergi did not reiterate these anti-militarist convictions, which evidently derived, on the one hand, from the reflections of Herbert Spencer, who in his "Principles of Sociology" had described military-type societies as authoritarian, hierarchical, and coercive, dominated by the centralization of power in the hands of the state, contrasting them with industrial-type societies, which instead guaranteed individual freedom; on the other hand, from his proximity to the positions of democratic pacifism expressed by the journalist Teodoro Moneta, founder of the Society for Peace and International Justice, editor of the magazine "La vita internazionale", to which Sergi contributed several articles, and above all winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1907 (Girardi 2016, p. 184-187). Sergi also pointed out in his report to the First Universal Races Congress, held in London in July 1911, that differences in the morals and customs of different peoples never justified the use of force and war (Sergi 1911a). Even when faced with customs, traditions, and moral principles that might appear "repugnant" to Westerners, only example and persuasion should be used to influence them and aim to change them gradually. Violence could never be accepted, since no man had the right to subjugate another, to dominate him, or worse, to exterminate him. This also applied to the African

colonies, where Europeans, instead of introducing useful arts and crafts and virtuous ways of life, demonstrated all their ferocity: "thirsting for gain and gold, [they] ill-treat the natives, respecting neither their lives, their property, nor their families, and yet claim the respect and obedience of these same tribes" (Sergi 1911a, p. 72).

Sergi's call for peaceful relations between nations was once again based on a naturalistic assumption, clearly borrowed from Darwin and Spencer: sympathy between men, understood as the ability to empathize with the feelings of others and as sensitivity to social approval or disapproval. Sympathy was at the origin of the formation of human societies and averted the danger of useless and bloody struggles. Cooperative and altruistic behavior was always preferable to individualism, selfishness, and unbridled competition: their spread among the different strata of society had to be encouraged by the state, thus invested with a civilizing educational mission. Sergi's work therefore presents a curious reversal of perspective with respect to the anthropology of the time: the true "enemies" of civilization, the true "barbarians", are not to be found among "primitive" or "savage races", but in European countries themselves, where groups of degenerates were threatening the order and stability of bourgeois societies and where, at the same time, economic and political elites were using the ideology of technology and unstoppable progress to oppress the urban proletariat, wage war against each other, and destroy forms of culture that they did not understand because they were distant or contrary to their social conventions.

Still in 1911, while celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Unification of Italy, he suggested that nationalists promote peace and eradicate the real scourges of the country, rather than calling for, as they did, "a fierce war destructive of lives and property" against the Ottoman Empire for the conquest of Libya (Sergi 1911b, p. 298). This position echoed the convictions of the revolutionary and reformist left wing of the Italian Socialist Party, which was also very divided internally at the time (Degl'Innocenti 1976; Proglio 2016, p. 71-140). Sergi's words went unheeded.

Sergi's distrust of imperialism became even more pronounced during the Great War. At that time, like many Italian and foreign eugenicists, Sergi questioned what he perceived as an urgent and dramatic problem (La Vergata 2015; Cerro 2017a): was war a factor in the degeneration of the "race"? From a biological point of view, did it have positive or negative consequences for soldiers? And what were its effects on civilians? Sergi's answer was very clear: modern wars, and therefore also the First World War, were by their very nature degenerative, i.e. they operated a reverse selection. The improvement of weapons and the spread of military conscription had in fact made conflicts counter-selective because they killed the best part of the youth and left the task of reproduction to the surviving soldiers, who returned from the front physically and psychologically exhausted, or to those who had not been called up for military service because they were deemed unfit. In short, they were the worst, the degenerates, the only ones who could reproduce. The effects on the civilian population were also very serious: anxiety and nervous trauma, poverty, poor nutrition, and concern for the future put a strain on even those who did not fight at the front. The task of reviving the nation, both physically and psychologically, fell to the state, which was supposed to guarantee adequate nutrition for all social classes and aid those most in need to preserve the health and vigor of society for the future (Sergi 1916d, 1917).

However, we must not make the mistake of thinking that Sergi was in favor of "absolute neutrality", as was said at the time: once the war had begun, he believed it was irresponsible to wallow in inertia and immobility. On the contrary, it was necessary to work hard to achieve victory, striving to transform the conflict from a slaughter and massacre of men into a war in defense of democratic principles against Prussian militarism, a war in defense of small nations and their right to exist on an equal footing with large ones, a war so that peoples could freely express their nationality, freeing themselves from the oppression and domination of other states; finally, a war against all forms of autocracy and reaction. These ideas

were reminiscent of the positions taken by some fringes of the Socialist Party and even by revolutionary syndicalism, a political faction ideologically very distant from Sergi, who would always remain a democrat and a moderate. In 1917, aligning himself with the interventionists and irredentists, Sergi came to reinterpret the conflict as a continuation of the Italian wars of independence and the Risorgimento process: the purpose of the world war was to reunite "all Italians groaning under foreign rule into a single, large family within the natural borders established by nature between the Alps and the sea" (Sergi 1919a, p. 448). Not only that: Italy, together with other civilized nations such as France and England, had the task of defending the millennial civilization of which it was the creator and bearer, and had to aim to restore law and justice, and above all to establish universal peace, which was no longer to be disturbed "by the arrogance of nations still barbaric because they were imbued with a military and conquering spirit" (Sergi 1919a, p. 448). With the realization of these conditions, Mediterranean civilization could finally enter a new phase, the fourth, after the Minoan and Mycenaean, Greek, and Roman phases. This would be an unprecedented phase characterized by the abolition of militarism and the elevation of humanity through peace. Sergi's pacifism was therefore not without contradictions.

Sergi's voice joined the chorus of many anti-Germans (Niglia 2012). He denounced the Germans as the main responsible for the outbreak of hostilities: they had retained the gregarious, primitive, and "savage" attitudes of the ancient Germans described by Tacitus and the predisposition to violence that was characteristic of the Huns and the Vandals (Sergi 1914, p. 377-378); Wilhelm II was a modern "Genghis Khan" and Reich Chancellor Otto von Bismarck was described as a "semi-savage, despotic, violent politician, enemy of all civil liberties" (Sergi 1916b, p. 152). Germany had not put its technical and scientific knowledge at the service of the progress of humanity, but rather at the service of "barbarism" and violence (Sergi 1916a,c). The very attempt to create a supranational empire, modeled on that of Charlemagne or Charles V, was anachronistic and a sign of political backwardness: in the future, the focus should be on small nations, federated among themselves (Sergi 1916e). It was no surprise that ancient Rome had never managed to subdue the Germanic peoples, who had proved resistant to all forms of "civil influence" and had maintained an invincible aversion to the "Latin spirit": even if the Germans had become Romanized, a world war would not have broken out and bloodied Europe (Sergi 1919a, p. 447). Sergi contrasted Bismarck and Wilhelm II with the figure of American President Woodrow Wilson, whom he hailed as a "human champion" and a "star that shines brightly on human consciousness and promises the resurrection of a better life in the world" (Sergi 1918a, p. 5). Wilson's proposal to create a League of Nations seemed very reasonable to him, provided that this League was made up of a federation of free and independent peoples, each with the same rights and duties. After the war, it was necessary to build a new order that would undermine the foundations of the old society, so that it would no longer be possible to commit "crimes" as great as those of those who had consciously wanted and prepared for the conflict: "The true and legitimate victims of this terrible war are the peoples who await a solution that corresponds, on the whole, to the preparation for peace that has not yet been achieved" (Sergi 1918b, p. 215).

In the aftermath of the Great War, Sergi emphasized three aspects in particular: (a) the war that had just ended was a war between peoples, nations, and states, not a "war between races"; (b) he contested the unfairness of the peace treaties, which would create new opportunities for resentment and conflict, rekindling political and economic-financial imperialism and exacerbating the inequality between rich nations (especially France, Great Britain, and the United States) and poor nations; (c) he called for the colonies to be freed from exploitation by European countries, restoring a form of international justice and equality among the states of the world. Regarding the latter two aspects, in an article published

in 1919 entitled "I possedimenti coloniali e la giustizia internazionale" ("Colonial possessions and international justice") Sergi denounced the misdeeds of colonialism and its anachronistic and backward nature: the colonial histories of all nations were "painful and shameful"; none of them had brought any kind of civilization to the "primitive peoples", as they had promised to do, but only "barbarism and destruction, more or less violent" as well as the enslavement of the natives; all had been driven to conquest by greed for gain, and their behavior had been marked by a total lack of pity for the indigenous peoples (Sergi 1919b, p. 400). In the article, Sergi also argued against the League of Nations' decision to entrust the colonies that had been in German possession mainly to France, Great Britain. The term "mandate" was only a "hypocritical" way of masking, once again, domination and exploitation: "the Council of the League of Nations will not want to bother traveling to Africa to see and hear the natives' complaints or praise for the well-being and new civilization introduced. The natives will be the working animals of the mandate holders; civilization will be the compulsion to bear arms inside and outside" (Sergi 1919b, p. 395). Colonial countries should no longer be subject to the control of European states; a special administration should be set up for them, exercised "for humanitarian purposes" by delegates appointed by the League of Nations: "This would be the only means of bringing civilization to regions where it has not yet penetrated, and with true colonization and influence without violence and coercion towards the indigenous people, who currently receive no or only apparent and illusory civil education and intolerable slavery, as can be seen from the rebellions and repressions" (Sergi 1919b, p. 397). However, this was on condition that the Society underwent radical reform in its organization, structure, and intentions: it should not defend the interests of this or that nation, but should fight, as it did originally, for justice and peace, freedom and independence for all peoples.

Sergi distinguished between the "internationalization of the colonies" and imperialism, judging the former acceptable in a specific case and rejecting the latter in all its forms. Sergi only accepted colonization for developed nations that were affected by the problem of overpopulation and would therefore use overseas territories to transfer part of this surplus there: among these nations he included Germany and Italy, but also Japan. This model of settlement had to be regulated through a clear separation between the areas intended for settlers and those for local populations, to protect the latter from all forms of exploitation. Outside of this exceptional and strictly controlled circumstance, Sergi condemned imperialism, which he called a "terrible monster" (Sergi 1919b, p. 415). In the author's analysis, imperialism—both in its economic and political guise—represented the antithesis of a just international order because it suppressed the freedom and independence of peoples, perpetuating a system of oppression. The very concept of a "colonial empire" seemed anachronistic to him, since "slavery is always slavery, even if it is gilded and embellished" (Sergi 1919b, p. 408). African countries should be placed in a position to benefit from the profits derived from their labor and from the commercialization of the raw materials present on their territory: "no more antagonism to acquire colonies as the property of a state; no more martyrdom and murder of the indigenous inhabitants of colonial lands; but an equitable division among all nations of the products of the colonies and international cooperation to utilize the colonial territories" (Sergi 1919b, p. 400).

The only empire that Sergi viewed favorably was, of course, that created by ancient Rome, which had brought benefits, not harm, to humanity. For him, Rome's greatness lay in its mission of pacification and assimilation, thanks to which it had spread its language and culture and succeeded in unifying, for the first time in history, the various peoples of the peninsula and the entire Mediterranean basin. Sergi's exaltation of ancient Rome was not so much dictated by nationalistic intentions but rather derived from the Risorgimento culture in which he had been educated since his adolescence (Giardina and Vauchez 2008, p. 164-211). Sergi's postwar position on the colonies could therefore be

considered more mature and thoughtful than his attacks on Crispi's policy, even contemplating the possibility of emancipating the native populations. Only the internationalization of the colonies and the liberation of peoples from all forms of protectorate and all forms of political and imperialistic dependence would eliminate the possibility of future wars.

Africa is close, or perhaps not

In October 1938, the eighth Volta Conference dedicated to Africa was held in Rome, promoted by the moral and historical sciences class of the *Accademia d'Italia*, the cultural institution founded by fascism ten years earlier. The conference aimed to investigate some of the major problems of European colonization in Africa, with particular attention to geographical, anthropological, social, economic, and technical issues: from the most recent trends in African studies to the behavior of indigenous populations towards European civilization, from social policy towards natives to the possibilities of European settlement and acclimatization in the "black continent". The opening speech by the president of the *Accademia d'Italia*, Francesco Orestano, left little doubt as to the purpose of the conference: "Europe needs Africa. Europe has a right to Africa", a right that had been won through long colonization "at the cost of lives, blood, and property" and that could now be considered exclusive (Convegno Volta 1939, vol. I, p. 47). More than 100 speakers took part in the conference, including about 40 Italians and almost 70 foreigners, mostly from France, Germany, and Great Britain, but also from Belgium, Poland, and Portugal. Among them were prominent names such as anthropologist Eugène Pittard, ancient Roman historian Jérôme Carcopino, and Orientalist Louis Massignon. Among the Italians were the historian of religions Raffaele Pettazzoni, the explorer and zoologist Ardito Desio, the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Sergio Sergi, the governor of Libya Italo Balbo, the governor of the Italian Aegean islands Cesare Maria De Vecchi, and the viceroy of Ethiopia Amedeo di Savoia-Aosta. In fact, Italian colonial expansion had undergone a significant change with respect to Serg's polemics against the colonialism of liberal Italy: in May 1936, the fascist regime had proclaimed the birth of the empire after the war of conquest against Ethiopia (Bottoni 2008; Labanca 2015). Sergi was no longer alive by then: although he had passed away in October 1936, his name echoed once again in the conference sessions. Moreover, in the summer of that same year, on the occasion of the publication of the "Manifesto della razza" ("Manifesto of race"), his theory of Mediterranean ancestry had been at the center of vehement controversy among the various factions of fascist racism: how was it possible to accept the common origin and physical characteristics of Europeans and Africans if the "Manifesto" claimed that Italians were Aryans? (Cerro 2017c).

Among the guests at the conference was the geographer and anthropologist Renato Biasutti, professor at the University of Florence and assistant to Mantegazza in his youth. In Biasutti's absence, his report was read by Lidio Cipriani, professor of anthropology at the University of Florence and director of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in the same city, as well as signatory of the "Manifesto della razza" (Biasutti 1939). Sergi's theses were unacceptable to Biasutti: the inhabitants of North Africa had features that were very different from those of the populations living on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean basin, first and foremost their skin color, which was decidedly darker than that of Europeans. They could not, therefore, be included in the "Mediterranean race". The same could be said of the Ethiopians: the somatic and skeletal differences with Europeans were "too great", since the "Negroid imprint" remained "more or less marked" in Ethiopians (Biasutti 1939, p. 88). Ethiopians had a "significantly higher average mental level than pure Negroes", but this difference could not be quantified at the time, nor could it be hoped that they would approach or even equal the level achieved by European populations. It was more likely that they would remain in an intermediate position

between the two. The peoples of Mediterranean Africa, on the other hand, had historically been in direct contact with Europeans and therefore there was "no doubt" that they would have the opportunity in the future to participate in modern culture; however, obstacles could come both from Islam, which had led to closure and impoverishment, as well as favoring the assimilation of the "Negroid element", and from contact with properly African elements. For the "Negroes", on the other hand, there was no such possibility: despite their physical strength, or rather their "animal power", they were "psychically and mentally inferior" and could only occupy a "subordinate position" in contemporary societies (Biasutti 1939, p. 90). It followed that the mental level reached by "Negroes" was directly proportional to the amount of "European blood" they had absorbed (Biasutti 1939, p. 91).

The diplomat Luca Pietromarchi, director of the Spanish Office of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, held very different views. Pietromarchi did not take part in the conference either, but his report was distributed in print to the participants. Already the author, between 1936 and 1937, of a four-volume history of Abyssinia under the pseudonym Luca Dei Sabelli, Pietromarchi supported the validity of Sergi's thesis, according to which North and East Africans belonged to the same "race", the "Hamitic race". According to Pietromarchi, this human group shared not only physical characteristics but also cultural ones, including a tendency towards spirituality and very marked forms of mysticism, an inclination towards moral rigorism and uncompromising respect for the law. Until then, it had not been possible for the Aryan civilization—as that of the European peoples was considered—to influence the Hamites; the latter had instead shown a greater propensity to amalgamate with the strictly African elements, i.e., with "inferior races" (Pietromarchi 1939, p. 616). However, unlike Biasutti, Pietromarchi believed that the Hamites were not "hermetically closed to any form of collaboration", but constituted "the noblest race on the African continent"; a "race" that had been able, at least in the past, to make a "first substantial contribution to the civil progress of the world" (Pietromarchi 1939, p. 617, 619, 613). It was on them that Europeans should have relied on to conquer the "black and Negroid peoples": "Whoever has the Hamites has the rest of Africa" (Pietromarchi 1939, p. 619). The task of the colonial administrations was to bring about beneficial changes in the native populations: only if the "colonial subject" felt that he was being defended, supported, and protected by Europeans could "gratitude, sympathy, and trust" be generated in him (Pietromarchi 1939, p. 620). There were numerous means of persuading these "primitive natures": from sport to education, from the press to radio, and even charity. Although he was much more inclined than Biasutti to accept Sergi's ideas about Africa, even in Pietromarchi's case there remained a clear distinction between Africans and Italians.

Moreover, point eight of the "Manifesto della razza" stated that it was necessary to make a "clear distinction" between Europeans and Africans and that "theories that support the African origin of some European peoples and include Semitic and Hamitic populations in a common Mediterranean stock, establishing absolutely unacceptable ideological relationships and sympathies" should be rejected as dangerous. With this stance, the complexity of Sergi's conception of Africa was ignored or, worse, defused. The most original and innovative elements, on the other hand, were welcomed by Africanist scholars, including the English ethnologist Charles Selignam, author in 1930 of a volume with the unequivocal title "Races of Africa", in which he accepted the Hamitic stock thesis. Some of these aspects also found their way into postcolonial literature, which came to recognize the Sicilian anthropologist's merit in placing Africa at the origin of European civilization and in recognizing it as a fundamental stage in the development of humanity (Hansen and Jonsson 2015; Tarikhu Farrar 2020). Contrary to any attempt to separate Europe and Africa, Sergi's work affirmed the original proximity between the two continents and between the peoples who inhabited them and their profound interconnection: Africa was

closer than had previously been thought. This was a radical statement that inevitably aroused controversy and polemics at the time it was made and long afterwards.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the figure of Giuseppe Sergi serves as an emblematic case study of the complex relationship between anthropological knowledge, political power, and social dynamics in the age of imperialism (Pogliano 2005). His work clearly demonstrates how the human sciences were, at the time, a veritable intellectual battleground, whose outcomes were deeply intertwined with prevailing political imperatives and imperial ideologies.

On one hand, Sergi skillfully leveraged his prestige to dismantle one of the foundational narratives of European colonialism: the doctrine of a biological and hierarchical "racial" separation between Europe and Africa. His theory of a Mediterranean or Eurafrican stock, which identified Eastern Africa as the original cradle of these populations, was much more than an anthropological hypothesis; it was a political act of great import. By fundamentally reinserting the African continent into the framework of the history of civilization, it undermined the justifications for the colonial marginalization and subordination of Africa. In this sense, his anthropology became a sharp weapon for launching a radical and fierce critique of colonial ventures, which he condemned as expressions of "barbaric" and anachronistic violence.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that his vision remained partly constrained by the paternalistic and hierarchical paradigm typical of his era, a conceptual model that, in effect, ended up providing arguments and legitimacy, albeit indirectly and undoubtedly unintentionally, for another model of European hegemony. Sergi's insistence on the inferiority of sub-Saharan "black" populations and his substantial denial of their political agency, coupled with the idea that their emancipation could only be achieved under international guidance and control, reveals the cultural confines and inherent constraints of his "anti-racism". These were profound shortcomings, widely shared and, in the final analysis, characteristic of his time. It is no coincidence that his theory of the Mediterranean stock, born in part from the political and cultural intent of providing post-unification Italy with a national identity distinct from and alternative to the Aryan-Germanic one, became highly controversial. While it offered a solid "scientific" basis for nascent "anti-racism" and universalist visions, it was also vehemently attacked by the Fascist regime, which saw the connection with Africa as a dangerous assault on the myth of the purity and uniqueness of the "Italian race".

Therefore, the enduring value of Sergi's work finds its core relevance in his ability to illuminate the dual role of anthropology at the time: a discipline that, in its very nature, could simultaneously deconstruct "racist" dogmas and forge new, more subtle tools for human classification and hierarchization. For this reason, Sergi remains a pivotal figure for understanding the complexities and tensions in scientific thought at the turn of the 20th century. While remaining partly captive to the prejudices and categories of his day, Sergi also possessed the foresight to tear down some of its most entrenched doctrines. Giuseppe Sergi's most fruitful and relevant legacy, consequently, resides not so much in the answers he provided, but in the problematic and still-open questions that his work continues to raise about the multifaceted interplay between anthropology, political power, and prejudice.

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