# SEA-SHAPED IDENTITIES

## ITALIANS AND OTHERS IN LATE 19TH-CENTURY ITALIAN NAVY TRAVEL LITERATURE

## A CASE STUDY

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**ABSTRACT**

During the second half of the 19th century, shortly after the reunification of Italy, began a period of Italian presence on the international seas. During these voyages Italian naval officers had the chance to come into contact directly and for the first time with the most diverse populations. Their travel notes and diaries can be considered as travel narratives influenced by the new Italian navalism, which was focused on building a strong and powerful image of the Navy on the seas and of Italy as a civilised nation. The paper, focusing on a re-reading of the travel notes on the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, analyses how Italian Navy officers used to picture 'Others' as a means of building a positive self-image of a nation at the top scale of the civilisation.

**KEYWORDS**

national identity, representation of otherness, maritime anthropology, travel literature, Tierra del Fuego

In Italy it was only during the last third of the 19th century that a new collective perception of the sea emerged with force, which was able to change the system of social and cultural references within which the discourses of the nation were defined, starting from the educated classes and handed downwards in more or less conscious forms to the other levels of society (Monina 2008, 59).

In fact, although the peninsula could boast a privileged relationship with the sea due to its glorious past linked to the Maritime Republics, in the centuries after their hegemony Italy locked herself up, despite the extension of her coastline, in a protective and distrustful attitude that caused a maritime vacuum. This 'state of profound ignorance and alienation' (Frascani 2008, 93) led to focus attention on the defence of the mainland, as evidenced by the numerous coastal fortifications still visible nowadays.

The fear of Barbaresque pirates, combined with an old conception of the sea as symbolic place of the pitfalls of body and soul, and the poor maritime attitude began to dissipate only in the course of the period of Romanticism, to eventually change thanks to the incipient industrial and economic modernisation that was progressively bringing man to take advantage of a nature hitherto scarcely controllable.

This process slowly left room for the possibility of a positive use of the water element, primarily in the upper and middle classes in the form of beach tourism and appreciation of its therapeutic virtues, or for nautical sports activities. Over time the structure of the cities changed, and the strong defensive walls were replaced by places for socialisation and entertainment (Malatesta 2001). The Italian coasts, once long coastal swamps infested by malaria, began to be reclaimed as a result of the passage of railways (Frascani 2008, 101–110). The change was mainly managed by the new-born State, which since the days of its Prime Minister Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour, proposed to show Europe a maritime Italy able to fully exploit the characteristics and potential of its relationship with the sea.

The Italian Royal Navy gradually began to strengthen its fleet and armaments: a movement that gained progressive importance in the process of nation building, intertwining with Italian colonialist ambitions. In those years the phenomenon of navalism began, although with initial ups and downs; a phenomenon defined by Giancarlo Monina as the 'cultural and political movement that elaborated and propagated the myth of the *Grande Italia Marittima* [the Great Maritime Italy], as a key of interpretation, and as a model of representation, of the international role of Italy operating as a means of power policy' (Monina 2008, VIII).




Chonos of Eden Harbour (West Patagonia) in their ships. Journey of the Navy Vessel «VettorPisani», 1882. Gift by Captain G. Palumbo 1885. Enrico H. Giglioli Collection

What was being created in Italy was a particular *sea mystic:* a strongly emotional mytho-symbolic corpus of ideas that would at first silently support the strengthening of the Navy, and then speed the country with swelling sails towards its *maritime destiny*.

In this process of renewed socialisation of marine areas, the discovery of the ocean also played a role in the construction of the Italian identity. Considering that from 1866 to 1890 the Italian Navy effected 11 circumnavigations of the globe and 21 oceanic campaigns, it is interesting to learn that the role played by these journeys, besides being commercial and expansionist, was mainly representative: these circumnavigations bore a new Italian-ness.

In the first place, the 'showing of the flag' was the declaration of the existence of the Italian nation through the passage of the vessels in the strategic harbours of the world. Acting on behalf of the State, the ship embodied the essence of Italy, becoming a symbol and instrument of power. The vessel could treat friendship or alliances with other countries, support the action of the representatives of the national government in various foreign countries, protect fellow citizens 'cementing the union in the name and for the good of the common Homeland and for the benefit of the individuals', acting with strength, 'virtually or in action' (Leva 1992, 6). This political function was dual: internal and external, as the flag was to be seen and respected by other nations and populations, as well as being recognised by the *new* Italians. A task which was not always easy, given the still limited resources invested in oceanic campaigns, the dispersal of immigrants, and their strong tendency to identify themselves according to regional origins. It is no coincidence that the declared aim of the long maritime campaigns was not only to train the crews to the hard life of the sea – to forge their body and mind – but also to mature individuals through the prolonged and forced cohabitation: a rite of passage that led from regionalism to nationalism.

Moreover, during these voyages, Italian naval officers had the chance to come into contact directly, and for the first time, with the most diverse populations: from the Japanese to the Chinese, from the aborigines of Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia to the inhabitants of Papua-New Guinea. In a socio-anthropological maritime perspective that conceives ocean spaces 'as stages of social exchanges and reciprocal influence among different people that live both on the waters and on the lands' (Cocco 2013, 8), these encounters appear to be interesting social spaces where the structure of a discourse on Italian identity could be created (Dimpflmeier 2015). Their descriptions, as well as those of the populations encountered, are easily accessible in the numerous travel accounts of the Italian Navy.[1] The travel notes, influenced by the new Italian navalism, which was focused on building a strong and powerful image of the Navy on the seas and of Italy as a civilised nation, can be considered as privileged sources in the search for the transfigurations of Italian identity and the conflicts that characterised them.

[1] In particular, I analysed the travel accounts available in the *Rivista Marittima*, the official journal of the Italian Royal Navy, or published as independent volumes (see Dimpflmeier 2013).

In this short essay I would like to focus on the dynamics that occurred in a specific stretch of the sea: the Magellan Strait. The passage of the Italian ships along the channels of Tierra del Fuego is particularly interesting because the travel reports – complementing a tradition that already existed, between narrative, memory, new discoveries and (re)-construction of stereotypes – created an Italian tradition, outlining images of Fuegians and Italians in a dialectical process of identity definition.

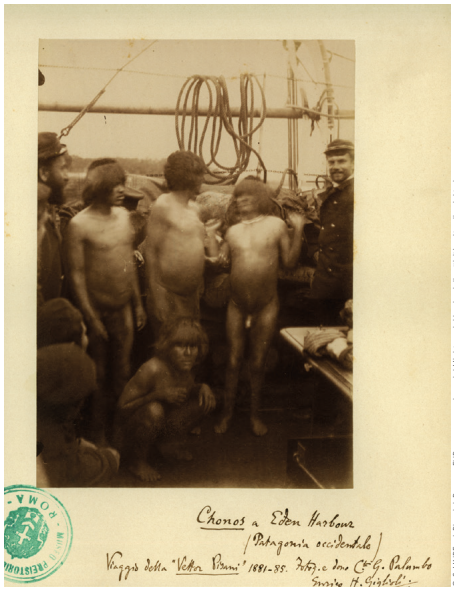
## THE MAGELLAN STRAIT'S SEA SPACE AS IDENTITY *NOMOS*

Prior to the opening of the Panama Canal, which was inaugurated in 1920 – even though its initial design dated back to 1879 – the Magellan Strait at the extreme south of Latin America was the only connection between the two great oceans that bathed the coasts of the American continent. After 1830 when four Fuegians – three men and a woman, dirty and naked – were taken by Captain Robert Fitz-Roy from those cold climates and dragged to the presence of King William IV and Queen Adelaide, the whole area was brought suddenly to the attention of the Western world. The officer of the British Navy had devised a thorough *operation of recovery*, which consisted of cleaning and dressing the Fuegians, teaching them good manners, the use of modern technology, the gospels and ensuring that they would disseminate their knowledge once back among their own kind, in a sort of experiment of civilisation (Puccini 2006, 2007). And indeed it seemed that the inhabitants of those desolate regions were *improved* until they were taken back by the Beagle to Tierra del Fuego in 1832, and immediately returned to their previous ways of life, condemning themselves to the lowest considerations of subsequent observers.

In fact, since the first crossings of the Strait, a tradition of seafaring literature was created that stimulated general expectations regarding the savagery of the natives. Charles Darwin defined Tierra del Fuego as 'the extreme edge of South America [where] man lives in a state of civilisation inferior to that of any other part of the world' (Darwin 1989, 214).

In 1875, Enrico H. Giglioli wrote about the first circumnavigation of the Italian vessel Magenta. Published seven years after the end of the journey, a time lapse during which Giglioli had the opportunity to read up on all the populations he met while travelling, *Viaggio intorno al Globo della R. Pirocorvetta Magenta negli anni 1865-66-67-68* is a script in balance between the '*narration* of the journey and the aspiration to render *exotic* experiences scientific' (Puccini 2006, 145). Here is how Giglioli describes his first encounter with the Fuegians:

> There were two families, that is two men, two women and two children, one of whom was still suckling, all gathered in a dinghy along with a dog; at first, seeing the launch approaching, they tried to escape to the ground to hide in the bushes, but reassured by the friendly gestures of our sailors they allowed themselves to be approached. They were perfectly naked, except for a man who had the fore part of the skin of a penguin hanging in front, and one






Chonos in Eden Harbour (West Patagonia). Journey of the Navy Vessel «VettorPisani» (1881-1885). Photo and gift by Captain G. Palumbo. Enrico H. Giglioli Collection

> of the women, the one nursing the child, who was partly covered by a piece of sealskin that also served to suspend the infant (...). They were all horribly dirty, their skins greased with rancid fat, their hair unkempt and long, apart from the summit where it was shortened; the colour of their skin seemed to be a dark brown, their features were brutal: low foreheads, very prominent cheek-bones, and eyebrow ridges, big long noses, protruding jaws, wide mouths, full lips and small eyes; the breasts of women were long and pendulous. An excessive thinness and a painful expression of cold and hunger moved to compassion even the sailors (Giglioli 1875, 947).

The Italian explorers' first descriptions depicted Fuegians as naked, dirty and misshapen – smeared with rancid fat, with unkempt hair and brutal features. At the same time these representations are intertwined with the pity felt by the Italians, who depicted themselves as generous, thoughtful and kind:

> (...) approaching the dinghy, revived after the first movement of fear they [the Fuegians] start to cry out altogether: Tabaca! Galletta! namely tobacco and biscuit, the two great desires of those poor people (...); they also asked for the berets of the sailors, making signs that it was cold. Mirabelli [a Navy officer] collected the little tobacco that he and his people had, stripped off a waistcoat of wool that was given to a naked woman and received in return two arrows (ibid.).

Giglioli, according to the dictates of the Instructions for travellers of the time, describes the physiology and taxonomic classification of the Fuegians, then moves on to portray their few clothes, hairstyles and tools – the external manifestations which could speak for the inner degree of development of their minds. The naturalist commented that they were 'perhaps the lowest in respect to the psychical side of all American natives. Indeed, from what I know it is doubtful if they do not compete with Australians and Negritos to occupy the last steps of the human scale' (ibid., 948). He sees them as brutes because of their marriage practices, odd superstitions, sale of their own children and cannibalism: Fuegians appear on the ladder of civilisation much closer to animals than men.

Repeatedly in Giglioli the moral judgment mixes with scientific assertions, while his statements, which are based mainly on sources 'gleaned here and there', create a new record that has a referential value and the power to influence the glance of future readers and observers. In this construction of Otherness 'the apparent objective detachment of the notation hides a vicious circle in which the unconsciously ethnocentric gaze of those who have been in the places and misrepresented the people, serves, in reality, only to confirm prejudices and build stereotypes' (Puccini 2006, 153). The Fuegians, in conclusion, appear as beings fated to remain wretched in those desolate and tremendously inhospitable lands, and as such, worthy 'of the generous deed of the illustrious

commander of the Beagle, who maintained [them] with paternal solicitude' (Giglioli 1875, 951).

On this double axis – animal/man and nature/civilisation – the following representations of the inhabitants of the Tierra del Fuego are played and, by contrast, that of the Italians. When ten years after the journey of the ship Magenta, in 1879, the vessel Cristoforo Colombo, en route home, crossed the channels of Patagonia again, 'it is needless to say with what enthusiasm all on board mounted on the command bridge, on the quarterdeck and bulwarks to see these natives, who with the full force of their short and wide wooden paddles, seeing us proceeding slowly, head to come aside us' (Giorello 1879, 119). In his journal, Lieutenant Giovanni Giorello describes at least three different encounters. He writes: 'It seems that, as now the passage of steamboats in this neighbourhood is more frequent, small colonies of natives have settled in different parts of the channels, who, having lost part of their habitual distrust for strangers, speculate, as one may say, on the desire one might have to see them and the compassion they inspire' (ibid.). In the eyes of Giorello, trade does not occur between Europeans and natives; on the contrary, a relationship reminiscent of the practice used for the domestication of wild animals was established: attracted by food or objects, the Fuegians may in fact be closely observed.

When the time comes to describe the natives, Giorello follows Giglioli's accounts. The lieutenant wants to be backed up by an expert, and Giglioli has become the authority to testify the veracity of his observations. At the same time, however, it is possible that the lieutenant was influenced to such an extent by the previous reading of the volume on the Magenta's journey, that he created specific expectations that make it difficult to distinguish his own observations from those of the naturalist. Speaking of Fuegians' filth and malnutrition, he will say, for example, that 'they were not so dirty and disgusting as I imagined them; but from the distance they give off the stench that we commonly call "bestino" [of a wild animal]. Often hunger and always little substantial nourishment can be read on those faces, some of which do not fail at times to show a gleam of intelligence' (ibid.).

Thinness, physical deformation and nudity are recurrent terms, whereas the approximation to animals is often made to characterise these people as subhuman. The difficulties of communication are many:

> (...) of course one cannot understand much with the big uproar of shouts that everyone gives us in chorus during the ten minutes they were alongside us. Notwithstanding the repeated invitations to come on deck we could not make them come aboard. Biscuits, tobacco, rum bottles and old clothes were distributed among them; after that, casting off the ropes that held them near us, we started moving, leaving them all standing to make gestures of farewell; whilst in an amazing scene they filled the air with a deafening cry perfectly similar to what you hear from a bevy of seabirds when fleeing on water (ibid., 120).



Fuegian canoe (West Patagonia). Journey of the H.M. Ship «Alert» - Cap. Sir G. Nares. Gift by H. W. Bates, May 1882. Enrico H. Giglioli Collection

In fact, characterising their voices as frightened birds shows that Giorello was comfortable with seeing them as lower life forms. Giovanni Petella, reporting about another meeting, tells us that they

> (...) seemed at first enticed by our friendly gestures and clothes, (...) but when a mariner was about to tow the canoe, (...) the three were invaded by such fear, (...) that without saying a word, inflating their cheeks and blowing their lips, they began to row at full speed toward the land, [where] the young Fuegian [a girl], with one leap, disappeared into the thick bush, scuttling like certain monkeys (Petella 1889, 74–75).

Like animals belonging to *ante litteram* safaris, Fuegians become 'beasts' that need to be cautiously observed. 'Gaglietta-tabacco-pantalon' (i.e. 'biscuits-tobacco-pants') are the words they often repeat, taught to them by European travellers. A few expressions that reveal the representation of the indigenous made by Westerners since the very first encounter, when they interpreted their needs – for food and clothing – projecting themselves in their difficult environment.

As Giorello writes, Italians satisfy them 'with what they were asking for and in abundance, so much so that, a few minutes after their arrival (...) they were all (more or less) fully clothed. We turned the three naked Fuegians into Navy officers in ceremonial uniform' (Giorello 1879, 126). The natives, then, show 'their gratitude, intoning a lilting song that has a lot of Malay and Polynesian rhythm'. The atmosphere warms up and 'later, to the sound of an orchestra improvised by sailors with hurdy-gurdy, guitar, and flute the three poor Fuegians, at first motionless and almost stunned, begin gradually to come alive' (ibid.). The evening then goes merrily, until after dark their canoe is moved away, and 'reluctantly our new friends leave and make their way to return to their nomadic and miserable existence' (ibid.). For a moment the distance that separates the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego and the Italians seems to shorten, but only when they cover themselves with European clothes and are thankful for the gifts received. Once their bestiality is hidden and they recognise their status as *receivers*, a first opening appears which allows them to become *friends*, that is, when the *savage* tunes in to the frequency understandable by the Italians then, and only then, he/she becomes human. But it is only a moment, a night in the cold Patagonian channels, because the morning after the two tanned lieutenants have already returned to their 'miserable existence'.

The repulsion against dirt is also clearly expressed in this diary. A dirtiness and stench that the mariners from the vessel Cristoforo Colombo eliminated in this way:

> (...) since the morning a canoe with six indigenous approached alongside the boat, coming from the lands of the south. Made confident by gifts, with which all sailors were lavish, they mingled with them on the prow. When everyone gave part of his unused clothing or other things which were out of use (...), someone had

> the idea of putting one of the families in contact with hot water and soap. The first to undergo such an operation was a young man of 25 who initially let them do it, and then found the degreasing pleasant, and did not want to stop. Later came one of the women (rather young), who demurely refused to take off the woollen underpants that she had just received, and was so gladly wearing, and she let them wash only that part of her body above the belt, but as if she was undergoing a painful operation. The third and last was the old woman, who submitted her whole body to soaping and was not happy until she believed to be properly washed (ibid., 127–128).

What could avert a *savage* from his state of bestiality more than putting him in contact with hot water and soap? The words employed are interesting: they seem to describe an epic encounter between dirt and cleanliness, wildness and civilisation. At first, the natives do not understand, but then, Giorello seems to suggest, that enlightened by the use and benefits of this wonderful invention brought to them by progress – the soap – they get a taste for it, as if the impetus that they put into washing themselves was testifying an equal appreciation for civilisation. A suggestion that reveals, rather than their supposed tastes, only the European prejudices.

The latent conviction in Giorello's travel notes of the irremediable distance between civilisation and barbarism is made explicit in 1889 in *La natura e la vita nell'America del Sud. Impressioni di viaggio* by Dr Giovanni Petella, in which the official, referring to a sentence of Charles Darwin, does not fail to point out how these encounters 'persuaded him that the gulf between civilised and savage man is far deeper than the simple difference that exists between the wild animal and the domestic' (Petella 1889, 79).

In Petella's account, the poor acceptance of the exposure of the naked body is more strictly associated with the very strong impact that the climate and the nature of Tierra del Fuego made on Italian mariners. In particular, it is the impressive severity of the climate that makes the native nudity seem particularly harsh and highlights their fragility. Lieutenant Petella gives the best description of this dichotomy between their lack of clothing and the extreme cold. One evening, already soundly asleep 'buried under a triple insulating layer of wool', he was called on deck 'where a wind that cut the face like a razor was blowing':

> (...) the whole crew and some official of goodwill woke up: barking of dogs, whimpers and monosyllabic human cries were coming from some pirogues: (...) a couple of fragile canoes, pushed by the current and paddled, had (...) approached a few spans from the side, [so that] one could see men, women and children in the cold squalor of their nakedness. (...) That scene of supreme commiseration has remained so vivid in my memory that it still seems to me to hear the monkey-like cries desperately pleading for rescue, the wail of babies and baying of dogs, all pressed one

> against the other: altogether a scene of saddening effect, yet so alive in the splendour of such a frozen landscape; unforgettable because of its time and place, and for the unexpected impact of people and things (ibid., 76–77).

A heartbreaking picture that clearly explains the extremely strong effect that the climate and nature of Tierra del Fuego had on Italian mariners, and thus on their account of Fuegians. 'A wind that cuts the face like a razor', 'in the cold bleakness of their nakedness', 'a scene of saddening effect, yet so alive in the splendour of such a cold nature', 'a state of perfect nudity, that makes me freeze, locked in my overcoat, more than the view of the surrounding snow' (ibid., 78) are phrases that well represent the sad misery of the *savages*, but also, on the contrary, the implied sense of superiority of the Europeans, who have acquired the ability to cover themselves, to fight and control nature. A sense of superiority that never abandons the Italians:

> I can never describe the comical effect of these three human beings, descendants of the same father Adam, after the sailors had dressed them all up in old clothes; those sisters of ours, dressed as half officers, could not offer a more curious and grotesque sight. The man could not put on the trousers, because his foot was fixed at a right angle; our laughter broke out uncontrollably, but a general feeling of commiseration prevailed (ibid., 79).

Common exchanges of goods or simple gifts of clothing to the Fuegians were not only made in the general conviction that they were cold, but also that they had to be emancipated somehow from their condition. But the distance that separated the civilized from the native could only be superficially overcome by the use of clothing – it was just an attempt at assimilation: hence the laughter, the hilarity provoked by the Fuegians, *our brothers*, maybe, but ultimately ridiculous, dressed in clothes that make them resemble us the most, in a show described as 'poor and grotesque'. This is a common reaction in these travel notes, where every time a population – which has been generally accused of rigidly sticking to its old, primal customs – eventually accepts European etiquette is scorned for its appearance, which only underlines the emptiness of the offer for a potential closure of the gap between the primitive and civilised.

At the civilised extreme of these dichotomies, naval officers and mariners appear to be more courageous, braver, full of good will and vigorous. Moved by pity, ready to help and sympathise, they carry a mission of civilisation to the miserable Fuegians. They are the first to hold out their hands to those kind of men, crowded together amongst babies' wails and yelping dogs, imploring desperately for help.

## *ITALIANI BRAVA GENTE:* THE DISTANCE OF COMPASSION

The Italian maritime tradition regarding the encounters with the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego therefore allows to observe some of the dynamics of identity construction following the reunification of Italy.

The representation of the Fuegians from Giglioli onwards seems to be characterised, apart from being impervious to direct observation, by the failure to recognise the humanity of the native, so close to bestiality and nature to be hard to assimilate, just as the mission of Fitz-Roy had previously shown.

The Fuegians were described as poor, hungry, skinny, shivering, naked, miserable, ugly, grotesque, filthy, disgusting, stinking, bestial and aphasic in a discourse that exalts their Otherness. Seen as a whole, these representations are built on very precise dichotomous opposites, from which emerges the image of an advanced, civil, modern (and colonial) Italian-ness. Nature/culture, noise/speech, savage/civilised, child/adult, naked/dressed, dirty/clean, need/gift are the commoner antinomies. Italians are at the top step of civilisation and have the features that are bound to it: they know how to control and exploit nature, protect themselves from it, cover themselves up, keep hygienically clean and healthy, and express themselves in a developed and complete language. Based on this acquired distance, they may appear generous, compassionate, kind and considerate with the *miserable* Fuegians, who have no possibility of improvement.

The social space existing between the channels of Tierra del Fuego therefore allows post-unification Italy to experiment and build a new language of identity. The images, already present in the preceding tradition, in the 20-year period prior to the development of colonialism in Africa, were re-adapted in the process of nation-building, through a precise game of contrasting representations, in which compassion, besides being one of the many strategies used to manage and understand Otherness, is no more than a way to fill and disguise – keeping it unalterable – the unbridgeable gap between savage and civilised.

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