Migrations | North–South movements | A little-known story: Italian workers in Tunisia

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, thousands of Italians preferred immigrating to North Africa rather than going all the way to America.

Many Italians immigrated to Tunisia in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The first migratory wave comprised many professionals and traders, often Jews from Livorno in Tuscany. Mass migration of poor peasants and workers from Sicily began in the second half of the 19th century, alongside the to-and-fro movement of seasonal workers such as miners from Sardinia. In 1881, the number of Italians in Tunisia was just over 11,000 (72 per cent from Sicily); they formed more than half of the European population in Tunisia, a proportion significantly higher than that of the French community, which counted only 708 individuals. In 1921, a French census registered almost 85,000 Italians in Tunisia, a figure many historians believe to lie below the actual total of around 90,000–100,000.



Working Number: IT1 109

Name: Register listing 'all of the subjects of the Grand Duke of Tuscany [Italy] residing in Tunisia'

Holding Museum: State Archives of Livorno

Date: 1850

Materials: -

Curator Justification: Tuscan subjects residing in Tunisia were officially recorded by the Consulate. The register included age, place of birth, place of residence, conjugal status and profession. Such registration was necessary in order for the Tuscan immigrants to remain under the jurisdiction and protection of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.



Working Number: IT1 125

Name: A map of Tunisia (1:1,600,000) showing Italian agricultural settlements, mines, coral- and sponge-fishing areas and boat lines

Holding Museum: Italian Geographical Society (SGI)

Date: 1906

Materials: -

Curator Justification: This map was published as an annex to a book dedicated to the Italian community in Tunisia. Significantly, it includes not only Tunisia but also the islands from which most of the Italian workers came: Sicily predominantly, but also Sardinia and the small islands of Pantelleria and Lampedusa, closer to Tunisia than to Sicily.



Working Number: IT1 123

Name: Italian stonecutters in Tunisia

Holding Museum: Italian Geographical Society (SGI)

Date: First years of the 20th century

Materials: -

Curator Justification: During the first half of the 19th century many Italian immigrants to Tunisia came from a middle-class background, but in the second

half of the century, immigrants were predominantly poor people from Sicily. Many of them found employment in public work projects carried out during the French Protectorate (1881–1956).



Working Number: TN 064

Name: Little Sicily

Holding Museum: Institut Supérieur d'Histoire Contemporaine de la Tunisie

Date: Early 20th century

Materials: Paper

Curator Justification: This neighbourhood developed near the port of Tunis in the late 19th century, along with the settlement of a booming Italian immigrant population, predominantly from Sicily.



Working Number: IT1 014

Name: The European neighbourhood of Tunis and the Northern Suburbs

Holding Museum: Italian Geographical Society (SGI)

Date: 1875

Materials: -

Curator Justification: A very early photo of the city of Tunis, taken during an expedition of the Società Geografica Italiana in Tunisia.



Working Number: IT1 122

Name: Italian and Tunisian miners at work

Holding Museum: Italian Geographical Society (SGI)

Date: First years of the 20th century

Materials: -

Curator Justification: By 1906, there were 5,850 Italian miners working in Tunisia. Many of them came from Sardinia and worked in the phosphates mines. At the time, Tunisia was Europe's main supplier of phosphates, used for the production of fertilisers and detergents.



Working Number: IT1 140

Name: An olive oil factory run by an Italian migrant in Monastir (Tunisia)

Holding Museum: Italian Geographical Society (SGI)

Date: First years of the 20th century

Materials: -

Curator Justification: Tunisia, like Italy and other Mediterranean countries, has been a land of olive oil production since time immemorial. Italian immigrants who engaged in its production had thus to compete with local producers. The consumption of olive oil was not confined to the Italian immigrant community, but was shared by other immigrants and by the Tunisians.



Working Number: IT1 121

Name: An Italian Pasta Factory in Tunisia

Holding Museum: Italian Geographical Society (SGI)

Date: First years of the 20th century

Materials: -

Curator Justification: Migrants brought with them their food culture and their technical skills. On the Southern Mediterranean shores, Italians immigrants created several food industries, at times – as in this case –aimed mostly at meeting the needs of their own community.



Working Number: IT1 100

Name: Au Palais Arabe. A furniture shop of the Italians Eugenio and Alfredo Coen in Tunis

Holding Museum: Italian Geographical Society (SGI)

Date: Photograph: first years of the 20th century; building: late 19th–early 20th century

Materials: -

Curator Justification: Eugenio and Alfredo Coen, two Jewish brothers from Livorno in Italy, immigrated to Tunisia in the 1880s and started a furniture factory that in 1906 employed about 100 carpenters, cabinet-makers and other workers, most of them Italian. Their furniture shop in Tunis was the foremost in town.



Working Number: IT1 005

Name: The stand of the Italian Community in Tunisia at the International Exhibition held in Turin in 1911

Holding Museum: State Archives of Livorno

Date: 1911

Materials: -

Curator Justification: At the centre of the photo, the sign reading E. & A. Coen (Tunis, Susa, Sfax) refers to Eugenio and Alfredo Coen, Jewish brothers from Livorno in Italy, who were the owners of a furniture factory in Tunis and its foremost furniture shop “Au Palais Arabe”.



Working Number: IT1 101

Name: Grand Bazar Arabe. A late-19th-century bazaar built in Tunis by the construction company of G. Di Vittorio, an Italian immigrant in Tunisia

Holding Museum: Italian Geographical Society (SGI)

Date: Photograph: first years of the 20th century; building: late 19th century

Materials: -

Curator Justification: Three shop signs are visible on this building: at the centre “Grand Bazar Kassar Said”, on the left “Grand Bazar Arab” and on the right “I.

Piperno". The name of the shop owner – Piperno - is an unmistakably Italian Jewish name.



Working Number: IT1 099

Name: Villa Maria, in Tunis, the mansion of Luigi Rey, the son of a migrant from Piedmont (Italy)

Holding Museum: Italian Geographical Society (SGI)

Date: Photograph: first years of the 20th century; building: late 19th century

Materials: -

Curator Justification: This imposing villa testifies to the economic success achieved by second-generation immigrant Luigi Rey. With his brothers he ran a construction company that built important public buildings such as the slaughterhouse near Tunis. He was awarded honours by both the Italian king (Cavaliere dell'Ordine della Corona d'Italia) and the Bey of Tunis (Nichan Iftikhar).



Working Number: IT1 111

Name: A Tunisian decoration (on the right) and an Italian decoration (on the left) awarded to a member of the Moreno family

Holding Museum: State Archives of Livorno

Date: 1870–74 (the Tunisian decoration); 1884–1906 (the Italian decoration)

Materials: -

Curator Justification: The most successful and influential Italian immigrants in Tunisia were awarded honours by both the Italian king (Cavaliere dell'Ordine della Corona d'Italia) and the Bey of Tunis (Nichan Iftikhar). Some were Jews from Livorno, such as the Moreno brothers, who had immigrated to Tunis in the early 19th century, and Giacomo Castelnuovo, who became the Bey of Tunis's personal physician.



Working Number: IT1 110

Name: Circular letter by the Italian Director General of Police to all the Italian Prefects, regarding 'Italian migration to Tunis and Bona (Algeria)'

Holding Museum: State Archives of Catania

Date: Rome, 6 December 1878

Materials: -

Curator Justification: The Italian government had learnt that there were large numbers of unemployed Italians in Tunis and Bona (Algeria), who were so poor that many ended up begging in the streets. The Director General of Police instructed prefects to inform citizens of this situation and to "assiduously prevent clandestine migration and repress its promoters".
