

*Wage Differentials in Italy and Egypt. The Incentive to Migrate before World War I**

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Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that foreign intervention and capital played a decisive role for development in Egypt during the three decades before World War I. The role played by foreign labour as a factor of production is not well studied or even appreciated. The standard image of the foreign community in Egypt at that time is one of hard-nosed British administrators and engineers, rapacious European capitalists and a rabble of adventurers, speculators and profiteers, swooping down on the country like locusts under the protection of the Powers and the Capitulations with the sole purpose of exploiting the riches of the country to their own advantage and the disadvantage of the indigenous population. All these types certainly existed and were very visible.¹ The silent majority may, nonetheless, have been small people earning their living through honest work as workers and clerks, domestic servants, self-employed artisans and craftsmen, small retail traders or professionals. They came mostly as ordinary emigrants from Southern Europe, Greece and Italy in particular, the Levant and Sudan. Many came as refugees from the Russian and Ottoman empires, Jews, Greeks, and Armenians in particular.

Obviously, foreign labour did not have an impact on the Egyptian economy comparable to that of present-day foreign workers in Europe or Arab OPEC-countries. In 1907 the foreign population of Egypt was only 2.5 percent of total population although its share in the labour force probably was higher. Con-

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¹ For an earlier period, some were vividly described in Landes, 1958.

centration in urban areas and certain occupations added to the impact, however. In 1907 one-third of the population in Alexandria were foreigners, in Cairo the share was about one-fifth and Port Said topped the list with almost one-half. Contemporary authors² estimated that about 20 percent of the workers in the building industry in Cairo and Alexandria were foreigners, mainly Greeks and Italians, and mainly working in skilled occupations. Wage developments in the building industry from 1903 to 1913 speak to the importance of the inflow of foreign labour in this industry. While from 1903 to 1913 wages for unskilled building workers in the Delta, excluding the big cities, increased by 32 percent, those of skilled, indigenous workers increased by 23 percent against 16 percent only for foreign skilled workers. In Alexandria for the same period unskilled building worker wages increased by 17 percent against only 1 percent for indigenous, skilled workers and a fall by 2 percent for foreign skilled workers.³ Cost-of-living may at the same time have increased by some 35 percent. The depressed state of the building industry in Cairo and Alexandria in 1908 and 1913 as compared with the blooming countryside (the Delta) is part of the explanation. But it would also seem that the inflow of foreign labour played an important role in depressing wages for foreign, skilled labour and keeping down wages for indigenous, skilled building workers, and more so in the main port of debarcation, Alexandria, with its concentration of foreigners than in the countryside. Indeed, it was these peculiar wage developments that triggered the present investigation.⁴

The main target of emigration from Southern Europe at this time was, of course, America and Europe, but a minor flow found its way to North Africa and the Middle East. There must have been incentives to migrate across the Mediterranean at that time. That this was, indeed, the case can be shown for Italian building and agricultural workers moving to Egypt.

The Italian colony in Egypt increased from 18,800 in 1882 to 24,500 in 1897, 34,926 in 1907 and 40,198 in 1917.⁵ The annual rate of increase was thus about 1.8 percent from 1882 to 1897, 3.6 percent from 1897 to 1907 and 1.4 percent from 1907 to 1917. Detailed Egyptian data are not available but from Italian records it appears that substantial gross emigration from Italy to Egypt took place during the years 1881-85 and accelerated after 1897 to reach a peak in

² Vallet, 1911, pp. 155-16.

³ *Annuaire statistique*, 1914, pp. 376-78; Hansen, 1979, p. 81.

⁴ Foreign labour may have had other than economic impacts. I should not be surprised if it could be shown that this was the inroad of socialist and unionist ideas in the Egyptian labour market. In 1911 there were "no more than eleven unions, some of them with exclusively foreign membership." Baer, 1980, p. 14.

⁵ Population census data.

1904-05.⁶ Emigration originated mainly in Venezia, Lombardy, and Sicily.⁷ There are no records of returning emigrants. Italian estimates of Italians resident in Egypt indicate a strong increase from 1891 to 1901 with a certain fall from 1901 to 1911, possibly with a peak between the last two years, implying a substantial return of emigrants to Italy during the years before 1911. The overwhelming majority of Italians lived in Alexandria, Cairo, and Port Said (in this order). There is general agreement that many were skilled artisans and craftsmen.⁸ From about 1905 there seems to have been a flow of temporary, seasonal migrants from Italy to the Egyptian building industry. These were farmers and farm-workers from Appulia and Calabria, arriving in Alexandria in November and returning to Italy in March;⁹ considering the timing of their movements, they cannot have been picked up by the Egyptian population census of 1907 and their numbers are unknown. These emigrants can only have been employed as labourers and may have exerted a depressive influence on wages for unskilled labourers in the building industry in Alexandria.

I. Building Workers

Information about wages in the building industries in Italy and Egypt may help us understand the changes of the net inflow of migrants to Egypt which in turn helps us understand the development of wages in the Egyptian building industry from 1903 to 1913. For workers in the Italian building industry we have information from Milano, Roma, Firenze and Genoa about wages in 1860, 1870, 1880 and 1890. Daily wages (apparently annual averages) are reported to have been as shown in columns 1 to 4 in Table 1.

For the sake of comparison we need to estimate wages in 1903. Hourly wages in Italy, national average, increased from LI 0.25 in 1890 to LI 0.27 in 1903, that is by 8 percent.¹⁰ Assuming this rate of increase to apply to daily wages of building workers, average, excluding Rome, we obtain the estimates for 1903 shown in Column 5 of Table 1. There appears to have been a certain increase in the relative wage differential between masons (*muratore*) and labourers (*manovale*) in Florence from 1860 to 1870, after which year it is almost constant around 1.6. We assume that the differential is the same in 1903 as it was in 1890.

⁶ Appendix: Table 1.

⁷ Early Italian emigration to Egypt seems to have included substantial numbers of Sephardic Jews with Italian nationality (Landau, 1969, Ch. II), moving after the establishment of the Mixed Courts.

⁸ Cromer, 1908, p. 248.

⁹ Vallet, 1911, p. 117.

¹⁰ *L'economia italiana*, 1961, p. 568, Table 8.

TABLE I

BUILDING WORKERS, ITALY
DAILY WAGES
(LI)

	1860	1870	1880	1890	1903 (esti- mated)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>muratore:</i>					
Milan	1.60	2.00	2.00	3.50	
Rome ^a	2.30	2.22	2.65	n.a.	
Florence ^b	2.10	2.80	2.80	2.80	
Genoa	2.35	3.19	3.51	3.72	3.76
Genoa	2.50	3.50	3.50	3.80	
Average, incl. Rome	2.11	2.34	2.74	n.a.	
Average, excl. Rome	2.04	2.38	2.77	3.35	3.62
<i>manovale:</i>					
Milan	1.14	1.20	1.20	1.80	
Rome ^c	1.68	1.70	1.95	n.a.	
Florence	1.54	1.80	1.80	2.00	
Genoa	1.66	2.17	2.42	2.54	2.52
Genoa	1.60	2.00	2.30	2.50	
Average, incl. Rome	1.50	1.70	1.83	n.a.	
Average, excl. Rome	1.44	1.70	1.79	2.11	2.28
<i>Ratio, muratore/ manovale</i>					
Milan	1.40	1.67	1.67	1.94	
Rome	1.37	1.31	1.36	n.a.	
Florence	1.36	1.56	1.56	1.40	
Genoa	1.49	1.60	1.49	1.49	
Average, incl. Rome	1.41	1.54	1.50	n.a.	
Average, excl. Rome	1.42	1.61	1.55	1.59	

^a maestro muratore; ^b primo muratore; ^c garzone muratore.

Sources: *Archivio economico dell'unificazione italiana*, I, XI, Fasc. 1; I, VIII, Fasc. 4; I, X, 3; I, XII, Fasc. 3; Rome.

however, but the matter is tricky. The employers would often be British, French or Belgians whose attitudes and relations to Italians and Greeks might be much the same as to other Mediterranean workers. For a divide-and-govern explanation of discrimination (Reich, 1981, ch. 5) any divisive characteristic could be exploited by the employers. Be that as it may, if the differential in Alexandria between foreign and indigenous skilled workers applied to unskilled workers, there would have been a positive differential of some 15-20 percent for labourers between Alexandria and Italy. But clearly the incentive for labourers to move must have been much smaller than for skilled workers and probably too small to create migration worth talking about. It may be indicative that whereas we hear much about Italian craftsmen in Egypt, Italian labourers are never mentioned (apart from the seasonal workers referred to above). But that may, of course, just be History's usual neglect of the small people.

From 1903 to 1913 we are able to follow the development of the differentials between Alexandria and Italy in both nominal and real terms. For masons we have:

TABLE 3

NOMINAL AND REAL DIFFERENTIALS
BETWEEN ALEXANDRIA AND ITALY, MASONS

	1903	1908	1913
<i>Alexandria, maçonnerie, briques, étrangers</i>			
PT/day ^a	22.5	23.0	20.0
LI/day ^b	5.83	5.96	5.18
Costs-of-living, index ^c	100	133	135
Constant 1903-PT/day	22.5	17.3	14.8
Constant 1903-LI/day	5.83	4.48	3.84
<i>Italy, primo muratore:</i>			
LI/day ^d	3.62	4.12	4.97
Costs-of-living, index ^e	100	107	111
Constant 1903-LI/day	3.62	3.85	4.48
Ratio: Alexandria/Italy			
nominal wages	1.61	1.45	1.04
real wages	1.61	1.16	0.86

^a *Annuaire Statistique*, 1914, p. 376.

^b Conversion at par; see Table 2.

^c Hansen, October 1979, pp. 57 ff.

^d Applying relative increase in *retribuzione media giornaliera*, see *l'Economia italiana*, 1961, p. 570.

^e *Ibid.*, p. 570.

While the nominal differential between Alexandria and Italy for masons was down from 61 to 45 percent in 1908 and to only 4 percent in 1913, in real terms the differential was cut to almost one quarter already in 1908, and in 1913 the situation was reversed with a negative differential. Whatever the cost-of-living differential in 1903 may have been, there cannot have been much incentive for skilled buildings workers to move from Italy to Egypt in 1913. The Cromer-bubble was over.

For labourers in the building industry the picture was much the same, albeit less pronounced. A certain fall in the nominal inter-country differential was accompanied by a strong fall in the real differential. Since the differential was at best slightly positive in 1903, there cannot possibly have been any wage incentive for building laborers to move from Italy to Egypt in this century.

II. Agricultural Workers

For the temporary migration from Southern Italy the comparison should be made with wages in Alexandria for earth-work (*terrassement*). We have information about daily wages for agricultural workers in Sicily in 24 different locations in 1906-1907 and 1913.¹³ Since cost-of-living both in Alexandria and Italy changed little from 1908 to 1913, comparisons of nominal wages suffice. Table 4 then shows daily wages for earth-work in Alexandria and for

TABLE 5

WAGE DIFFERENTIALS BETWEEN
ALEXANDRIA AND SICILY

	1903	1908	1913
Alexandria, <i>terrassement</i> , PT/day ^a	6.0	6.5	7.0
Alexandria, <i>terrassement</i> , LI/day ^b	1.56	1.69	1.82
Sicily, agricultural laborers, LI/day ^c	1903	1906-07	1913
Modica	n.a.	1.35	1.00
Caltagisone	n.a.	1.46	2.00
Terranova	n.a.	1.47	1.50
Siracusa	n.a.	1.60	1.10
Girgenti	n.a.	1.64	2.00
Trapani	n.a.	2.80	1.80
Alcamo	n.a.	2.30	1.50

^a *Annuaire Statistique*, 1914, p. 376.

^b Conversion at par.

^c Arcari, "Le variazioni dei salari agricoli..." *Annali di statistica*, 1936, p. 223.

¹³ Arcari, 1936.

agricultural workers in locations in Sicily with wages lower than those in Alexandria in 1908 and/or 1913.

Of 24 locations in Sicily, five had lower daily wages in 1906-1907 than earth-workers in Alexandria, 1908. This figure was the same in 1913. In four of the latter cases there was a marked decline from 1906-1907 to 1913. Differentials were not small. In 1906-1907 the largest differential was 28 percent, in 1913, 82 percent. Whether these differentials were large enough to make labourers migrate temporarily is difficult to judge. It should not be overlooked that wages were higher in 18 other locations in Sicily, albeit not always increasing. The temporary migration after 1905 may have been induced by seasonal employment opportunities rather than wage differentials.

III. Seasonalities and Cycles

It should be emphasized, however, that our information for Egypt is limited to the month of September of the years 1903, 1908, and 1913. September is a seasonal peak in Egypt in both agriculture and the building industry. Wages during the seasonal slack would be lower and the incentive for temporary emigration of agricultural labourers from Italy correspondingly smaller. Annual averages of wages in Egypt would also be lower with smaller incentive for building workers to move permanently. Moreover, building activity in Alexandria differed much between the three years. In 1903 building activity was brisk but the building boom did not peak until 1907. In September 1908 the boom had definitely collapsed¹⁴ and it was apparently the foreign building workers who suffered most from the recession.¹⁵ During the years of boom and wild speculation, 1905-1907, however, differentials between Italy and Egypt may have been more in favour of Egypt than in both 1903 and 1908. There is some indication that in 1907 wages for labourers may have been as much as 50 percent, and for masons 30-40 percent higher than in 1905,¹⁶ only to fall back to the previous level again in 1908-1909. During 1906-1907 differentials between Egypt and Italy for labourers may have been quite substantial. Italy, however, also partook in the international business cycles at that time although the 1907 crisis probably hit Egypt much harder than Italy. Comparison between unemployment levels in Florence and Alexandria are not possible.

IV. Conclusions

A strong wage incentive for skilled building workers in Italy to move to Egypt thus disappeared between 1903 and 1913. Whether it existed earlier than

¹⁴ Hansen, 1979, pp. 32-3, with excerpts from *The Egyptian Gazette*.

¹⁵ Vallet, 1911, p. 116.

¹⁶ Legrand, 1909, p. 29.

1903 we do not know but this seems likely. With the strong fall in real wages for such workers in Alexandria, Egypt must also have become less attractive compared with other destinations of Italian emigration. We should thus expect a decline in Italian emigration to Egypt these years.

Emigration from Italy to Egypt would be influenced by many factors amongst which wage differentials and employment conditions would only be two, albeit probably important ones. If we assume that the push-and-pull forces determining emigration generally show up in the movements of the totals for Italian emigration, the difference in developments of total emigration and emigration to Egypt should indicate the presence of Egypt-specific determinants. Data for 1880-87 and 1900-13 are shown in Appendix: Tables 3 and 4.

A burst of Italian emigration to Egypt in 1882-83 could naturally be ascribed to the British occupation in 1882 and the establishment of British law and order after the Arabi revolt. A parallel burst into Algeria and Tunisia may be similarly ascribed to the French occupation of the latter country in 1881. Total Italian emigration to North and South America displays a rather steady and strong upward trend from 1880 to 1887 while emigration to European countries show the same pattern as emigration to Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia with an increase from 1880 to 1883 followed by a substantial fall to 1885 and then a slow recovery. Schumpeter (1939, Vol. I, p. 396) declared: "The fifth Juglar [in Europe] covers the period from the middle of 1879 to the end of 1888. Its prosperity lasted to the middle of 1881; recession, from the middle of 1881 to the end of 1883; depression covered 1884 and the greater part of 1885 and was followed by three years of recovery." If in the pattern of total emigration to Europe we see a reflection of Schumpeter's fifth Juglar, it may perhaps be justified to see the pattern of Italian emigration to Egypt as the combined result of the British occupation and the fifth Juglar.

Matters were more complex during the period 1900-13. Schumpeter (1939, I, pp. 424 ff) had great difficulties with his Kondratieff-Juglar-Kitchin model. Even within Europe there were substantial differences between trends and cycles in Great Britain and Germany, for example. After a decade of stagnation in the nineties, Italian emigration to the Americas picked up around 1900 with almost quadrupling until 1906, followed by a sharp set-back in 1907-08 and recovery from 1909 to 1913. Emigration to Europe (mainly Germany, France, Switzerland and Austria-Hungary) declined steadily from 1901 to 1904, increased 1905-07, fell then somewhat to 1909 and then increased steadily until 1913. During the first four years of the new century emigration to Egypt remained at a level about double that of the nineties. In 1904-05 there was a sharp increase whence there was a steady downward trend until 1914. Emigration to Algeria and Tunisia remained at a high level 1901-07, fell then abruptly to about half at which level it remained to 1913. Needless to say, there was a burst of emigration to Tripoli and Morocco after the occupations by Italy in 1911 and France in 1912. Italian emigration to Egypt thus followed a pattern different from that of emigration to Europe, the Americas, and other

North African lands. We notice in particular that the recovery of emigration to the Americas and Europe after 1908-09 has no counterpart in emigration to Egypt.

The common feature of this period seems to have been the financial crisis of 1907 with the preceding hectic activities. Egypt took part in this development, both boom and crisis probably being more pronounced than elsewhere. Financial developments in Egypt were accompanied by a strong increase in residential building activity from the turn of the century until 1907 when the building boom collapsed, never to recover again before World War I. Consumer price developments in Egypt followed a pattern different from that of Europe and the United States. I have discussed this problem elsewhere (Hansen, 1979, 1981). Briefly, Egypt experienced a relatively strong increase in residential rents and food prices, the latter related to the shift from being a net grain exporter to a net grain importer and special problems with the supply of animal products (cattle and chicken pests) all of it related to the increasing cotton prices, income and consumer demand and substitution in agricultural production away from food products. The residential building boom and its collapse with the special development of the food prices account in part for the strong decline in relative real wages in the building trades in Egypt from 1903 to 1913. But the immigration of Italian and other building workers must have contributed to decline in relative wages and thus to the later decline in immigration.¹⁷ After 1907 Egypt was no longer "another America" for Southern European labour.¹⁸

Needless to say, the building worker wage differentials here discussed may tell us little about relative opportunities in other walks of life, trading, finance, etc., although it was Italian banks that collapsed first in the financial crisis of 1907; Italians may also have been relatively hard hit in other businesses. It would, finally, be of great interest if differentials between Greece and Egypt could be studied in the same way because Greeks constituted the largest element in the European colony (see Appendix) and may have supplied substantial numbers of skilled building workers to Egypt.

¹⁷ A letter to the editor of *The Egyptian Gazette*, January 25, 1910, tactfully commented: "The rats leave the sinking ship."

¹⁸ In the United States, another target of Italian emigration, daily wages in unionized building trades (largely skilled workers), converted at par, were PT 68 in 1903. Daily earnings for full time employees in the American construction industry (presumably including unskilled labour) were PT 43 in 1903. Thus American building worker wages appear to have been some two to three times those for foreign skilled building workers in Alexandria. The claim that Egypt at that time was "another America" appears somewhat exaggerated insofar as building workers are concerned. The differential is, however, remarkably small considering that the countries are USA and Egypt. *Historical Statistics of the United States*, I, Series D, 745 and 774, 775.

Appendix: TABLE 1

EGYPT: FOREIGN AND EUROPEAN POPULATION
(000)

	1840	1870	1875	1882	1897 000	1907	1917 000
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Total population				6,806.4	9,717.2	11,287.4	12,718.3
Total foreign population ^d	38.1					286.3	206.0
Total European population	6.0	67.9	80.0	89.7	111.3	147.2	—
of which:							
— Greeks	2.0 ^a	30.0	35.0	37.3	38.2	63.0	56.7
— Italians	2.0	14.5	14.0	18.7	24.5	34.9	40.2
— British	1.1	3.8	6.0	6.1	19.6 ^b	20.7 ^b	24.4
— French	0.7	10.0	17.5	15.7	14.2 ^c	14.6 ^c	21.3

Sources: Cols. 1, 2 - consular reports, quoted from D. Panzac, 1980, p. 18.

Col. 3 - consular reports, quoted from Brinton, 1968, p. 18.

Cols. 4, 5, 6, 7 - population censuses, Col. 4, Panzac, *op. cit.*, Col. 5, 6, 7, *Annuaire Statistique*.

^a Not including 3,000 Greeks with Ottoman nationality.

^b All British subjects; including 6,500 Maltese and others; including army of occupation, about 6,000 men.

^c Including Algerians and Tunisians.

^d The difference between "foreign" and "European" population consists mainly of Ottoman subjects (Turks, Syrians, Armenian, Jews, Palestinians) and Sudanese.

ITALIAN EMIGRATION TO EGYPT

	Italians resident in Egypt, Italian Estimates	Cumulated annual gross emigration from Italy to Egypt	Italians resident in Egypt, Egyptian data	Cumulated annual gross emigration from Italy to Egypt
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1870		—	14,500	
1871	10,679		—	
1875	—		14,000	4,266
1881	16,302		—	
1882	—	10,504	18,665	19,720 ^a
1891	29,000		—	15,454
1897	—	11,432	24,500	
1901	38,000		—	22,626
1907	—	25,311	34,900	
1911	34,926		—	16,570
1917	—	15,691	40,198	
1924	45,106		—	

Sources: Col. (1) - *Annuario statistico italiano*.

Cols. (2) and (4) - *Annuario statistico della emigrazione italiana dal 1876 al 1925*, p. 90.

Col. (3) - See Appendix I.

^a 1876-96.

Appendix: TABLE 3

ITALIAN EMIGRATION 1880-87

	Algeria	Tunisia	Egypt	Total America	Total Europe	General Total
1880	1390	260	758	33080	84224	119901
81	1552	265	837	40821	92107	135832
82	3325	2235	2213	59695	93930	161562
83	2882	1867	1374	63388	98665	169101
84	1636	637	850	55467	87538	147017
85	3423	818	1194	72490	78232	157193
86	2243	1557	740	82166	80406	167829
87	1375	633	867	129463	82474	215665

Source: *Annuario statistico della emigrazione italiana.*

Appendix: TABLE 4

ITALIAN EMIGRATION 1900-13

	Algeria and Tunisia	Egypt	Total America	Total Europe	General Total
1900	3831	1373	165627	186047	352782
1901	7346	1757	278176	244298	533245
02	8743	1916	282586	236066	531509
03	7665	1787	280413	215943	507976
04	9645	4496	249574	203942	471191
05	7051	4509	444724	266982	726331
06	7963	2516	509348	264883	787977
07	9372	2467	414303	276420	704675
08	4728	2007	237405	240953	486674
09	4217	2126	397666	219623	625637
10	4086	1730	400852	242381	651475
11	3880	1910	260372	263966	583844
12	4373	1826	399713	294371	711446
13	3717	1403	356325	307627	872598

Source: *Annuario statistico della emigrazione italiana.*

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