Espinoza, Filippo Marco (University of Trento), *Sponge fishing and trading in the Dodecanese under Italian rule, 1912-40*.

This paper is part of a larger study dealing with the economic and social impact of the Italian rule over the Dodecanese (1912-1947).  It aims at stressing the peculiarities of a special kind of maritime industry. From the second half of the nineteenth century, sponge fishing was the main source of economic activity in some of the semi-desert Italian Aegean islands (Kalymnos, Symi, and Halki). The islanders controlled all aspects of the trade through a wide set of exchanges and relations that involved the entire Mediterranean space. Sponges were fished in Anatolia or in Northern Africa, processed and packed by women on the islands, then sold in Western Europe (mainly in London and Frankfurt) by representatives of the Greek Diaspora. For this reason, in the Dodecanese prospects of employment in sponge diving, sponge processing, sea transportation and merchandising abounded.   On the other hand, working conditions could not be considered as decent: for divers fatal and seriously disabling injuries were a daily risk.

After the end of World War I, the Italian colonizers tried to develop this sector and introduced new safety at work and social security regulations, intended to ensure better living conditions for fishermen and their families. At the same time, since the twenties, the production and trade of sponges met increasing difficulties. The death of the Ottoman Empire, and the subsequent emergence of several states along the coasts of the eastern Mediterranean, had caused growing difficulties in obtaining fishing permits; while the appearance of synthetic materials, the discovery of new exploitable areas in the Caribbean region and the appreciation of the lira made uncompetitive Dodecanesian sponges on the international market. Finally, in 1935 it was not possible to sell the sponges in London, because of the economic sanctions imposed by the League of Nations after Italy’s aggression in Ethiopia. These difficult conditions stimulated major merchants to move in the Greek islands, or elsewhere. The resulting lack of labor pushed to emigration skilled workers. Between 1912 and 1941 the population of Kalymnos dropped from about 25,000 to 7,000 inhabitants.

Based on documents from the Archive of the Italian Ministry of foreign Affairs (Rome) and the General State Archives of Dodecanese (Rhodes), this paper will deal with the evolution and the crisis of the sponge fishing in the Archipelago during the Italian rule.