

## The Italian Military Forces in Crete – From Naval Blockade to Autonomy (1896-1909)

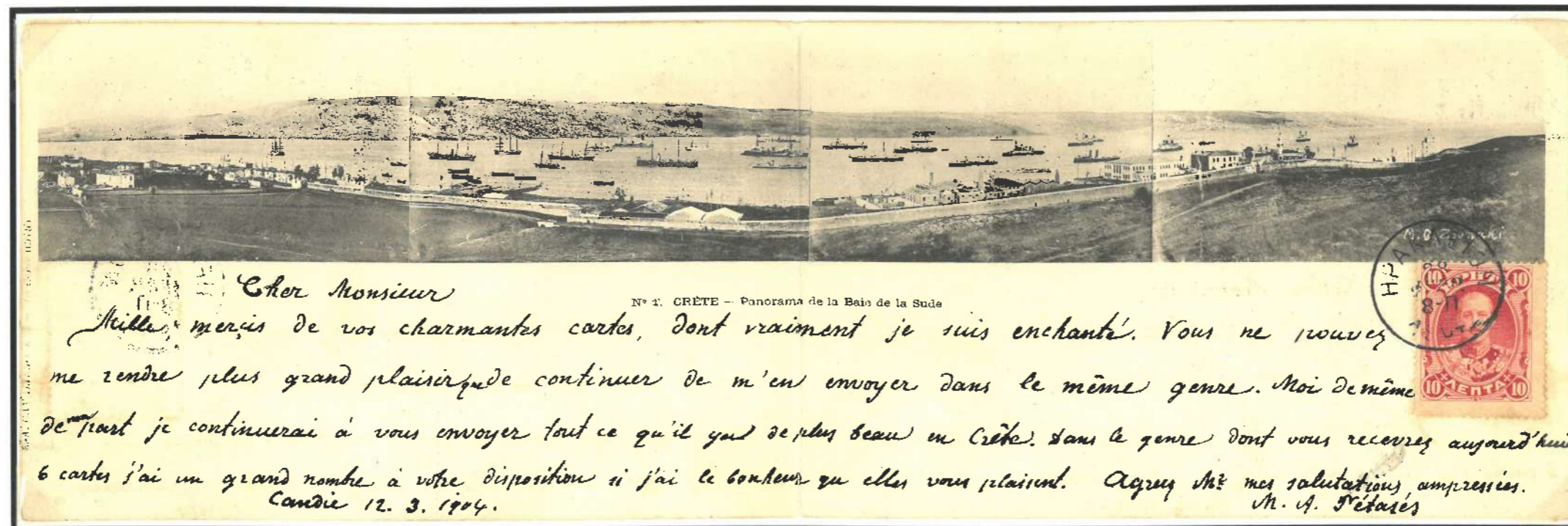
At the end of the 19th century, Crete was under Ottoman rule. Following successive uprisings by its inhabitants, who sought liberation and union with Greece, tensions escalated between the Christian and Muslim populations. This unrest culminated, in early 1897, in a new revolution that rapidly intensified, leading to violent incidents and civilian casualties. The Great Powers of Europe soon decided to intervene by dispatching military forces to the island, aiming to prevent further clashes between Christians and Muslims and to contain the violence. Among these powers was Italy. The Italian Navy was among the first to arrive, as early as 1896, with dozens of warships and troops. During the naval blockade of Crete (February 1897–December 1898), a total of 87 warships took part, of which 30 were Italian, making the Italian naval presence the strongest among the Great Powers — England, Russia, France, Austria-Hungary, and Germany. Italy's involvement was therefore both prominent and decisive. Admiral Napoleone Canevaro, commander of the Italian fleet, was appointed head of the Admirals' Committee that oversaw Cretan affairs. After the naval blockade of the island on 21 March 1897, Italy assumed control of the Chania sector. As a result of this strong and leading Italian military presence during the blockade and in the years that followed, up to 1900, an Italian Post Office was established in Chania (within the Italian-administered sector). This post office began operations on 16 January 1900, further demonstrating the depth of Italy's role on the island. The dynamic and effective presence of the Italian forces eventually led, following the establishment of Cretan autonomy in December 1898, to the creation of a Cretan Gendarmerie trained and organized under the Italian Carabinieri. Italian troops remained on the island for many years, contributing to the maintenance of public order, as well as to the organization and development of Crete, until their final withdrawal in July 1909.

This exhibit seeks to trace, through postal items, the presence and activities of the Italian military forces in Crete during the period 1896–1909. The exhibit is divided into three parts (chronological periods), with emphasis on the importance and rarity of the material:

- **The period 1896–1898 (Pages 1–5):** Refers to the naval blockade of Crete and the presence of the Italian naval and land forces on the island.
- **The period 1897–1906 (Pages 6–7):** Refers to the corps of the Carabinieri in Crete.
- **The period 1907–1909 (Page 8):** Refers to the remaining Italian military force in Crete until their final withdrawal in October 1909.



Letter sent from the Italian warship *Sardegna* (R. Nave Sardegna, October 17, 1896) to Piacenza (October 23, 1896). The postal rate of 20 centesimi is canceled with the ship's date stamp, from the period when it was stationed in Cretan waters during its first visit (September 22, 1896 – May 22, 1897), a few months before the declaration of the naval blockade of the island.



Double postal card dispatched from Heraklion, Crete (28 February 1904). The card illustrates the Gulf of Souda crowded with the warships of the Great Powers, evoking the international naval presence during the Cretan Blockade.

The Italian battleship *Sicilia* played a prominent role among the fleets of the Great Powers stationed in Crete in early 1897. Beyond its symbolic presence, the ship also carried strategic weight, as its commander, Admiral **Napoleone Canevaro**, was appointed head of the Council of Admirals. Under his leadership, the council brought together senior naval officers from other Powers: **French Rear Admiral Edouard Pottier**, **Russian Rear Admiral Pavlev Petrovich Anreyev**, **British Rear Admiral Robert Harris**, **Austro-Hungarian Commander Gustav Ritter von Bros (succeeded on 21<sup>st</sup> February 1897 by Rear Admiral Johann Elder von Hinke)**, and **German Commander Udo Kellner**. Canevaro's position at the head of this multinational body highlighted both Italy's influence and the importance of the "*Sicilia*" within the international naval presence in Crete

Following the arrival of the Great Powers in Crete, hostilities between Greeks and Ottomans temporarily subsided. However, they soon resumed with greater intensity after the arrival of the Greek army on the island, under the command of **Colonel Timoleon Vassos**. The Council of Admirals convened aboard the battleship *Sicilia* to determine the necessary measures in light of the new circumstances.

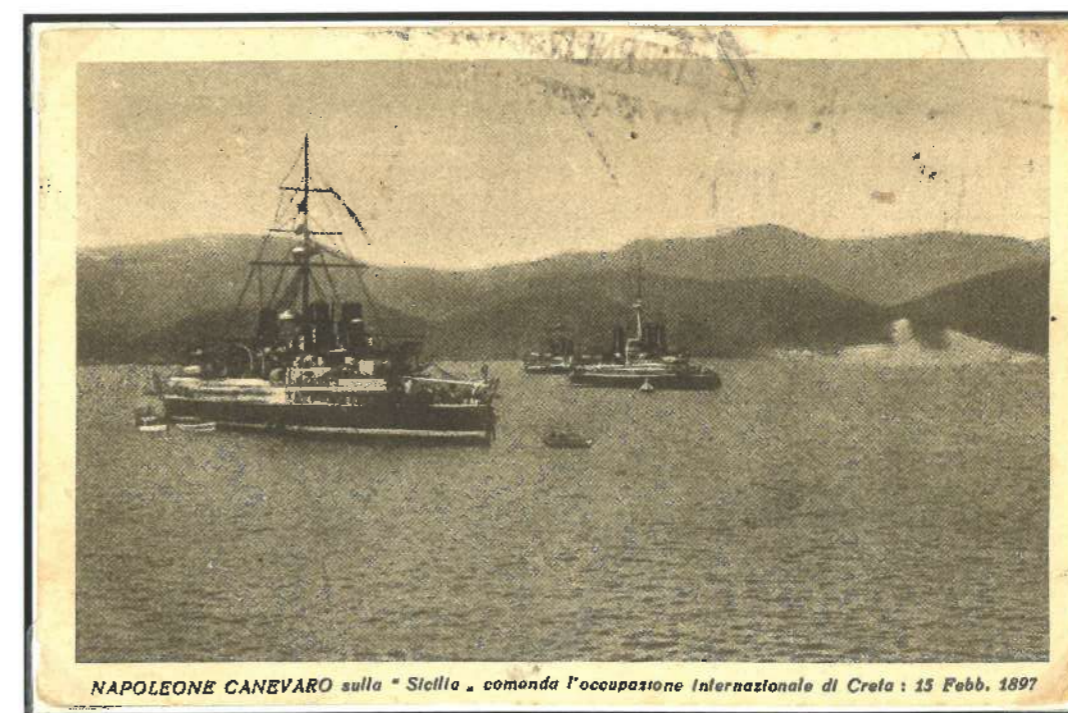
On March 21, 1897, the Council of Admirals, under the leadership of the Italian **Vice Admiral Canevaro**, declared a naval blockade of the island of Crete. The blockade applied to Greek warships as well as to any maritime vessels transporting supplies or military equipment for the Greek army stationed in Crete or intended for the Cretan revolutionaries.



Cover sent from Italian battleship *Sicilia* (R.N. Sicilia, 17.7.1897) to Napoli (21.7.1897). The stamps (2X10 centesimi) were canceled with the ship's datestamp, which at that time was stationed in Crete. On the back of cover, the inscription R.N.SICILIA is clearly visible.



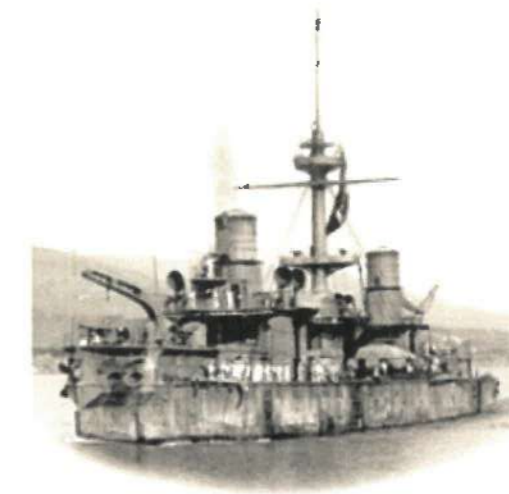
The head of the Council of Admirals and Commander of "*Sicilia*" Felice Napoleone Canevaro



Postcard depicting the battleship *Sicilia* in the Gulf of Souda during the naval blockade of Crete.

The naval blockade of Crete, imposed by the fleets of the Great Powers, officially ended on December 5, 1898. Throughout the entire period, from March 21, 1897, until December 5, 1898, warships from all the Great European Powers were present in Cretan waters. It is worth noting that out of a total of 87 vessels, 30 were Italian. Among them were the powerful battleships *Sicilia*—which was placed in command—*Andrea Doria*, *Re Umberto*, and *Francesco Morosini*, under the command of Captain **Carlo Amoreti**, who soon handed over command of the battleship to his deputy, **Luigi Favareli**.

The Italian battleship *R. Nave Francesco Morosini* was present in Cretan waters from the early months of the island's crisis, playing a leading role. It visited Crete twice: the first time from October 19, 1896, to April 19, 1897, and the second time from June 30, 1898, to January 27, 1899, when Crete had already gained its autonomy.



It

R.N. F.Morosini in Suda Bay during the naval blockade



Postcard dispatched by a sailor serving on the Italian Battleship “**Francesco Morosini**” during her presence in Crete, in the course of enforcing the naval blockade of the island. The card, artistically illustrated with motifs reflecting the Cretan Question and the city of Chania, is franked with a 10 centesimi adhesive and cancelled by the ship's datestamp (R.Nave F.Morosini 10.9.1898), addressed to Coggiola, Provincia di Biella, Italy.

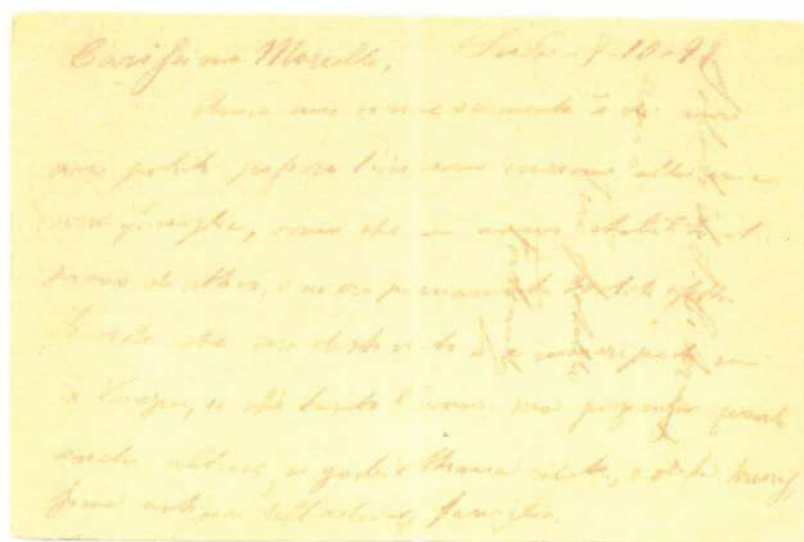


Cover sent by a sailor of the warship “**R.Nave Francesco Morosini**” during her stationing in Crete, in support of the naval blockade of the island. The cover is cancelled with the ship's datestamp (“**R.Nave F.Morosini 22.10.1898**”) and bears the 20 centesimi postal rate. Its final destination was **Besana in Brianza, Lombardy**.

During the naval blockade of Crete, a large number of ships of the Italian Navy passed by the island, representing the dominant naval force among the Great Powers. The warship *Archimede* was dispatched to Crete at the end of **September 1898 (22.9.1898)**, when the Great Powers had already decided on the autonomy of Crete under the suzerainty of the Sublime Porte (the Sultan), and it remained there until 28.3.1899. The blockade of the island was completed about 40 days later, on 5 December 1898, one month after the final withdrawal of Ottoman troops from the island and the closure of the Ottoman post office (3 November 1898).

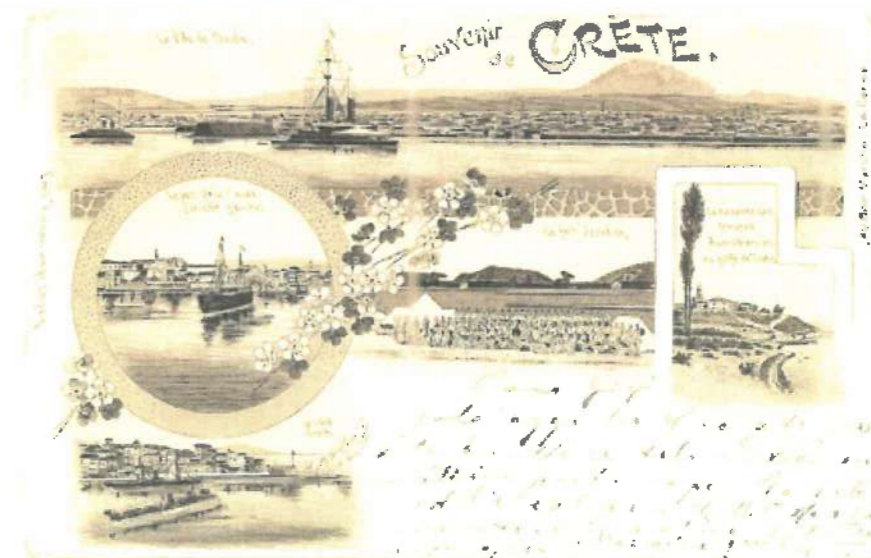


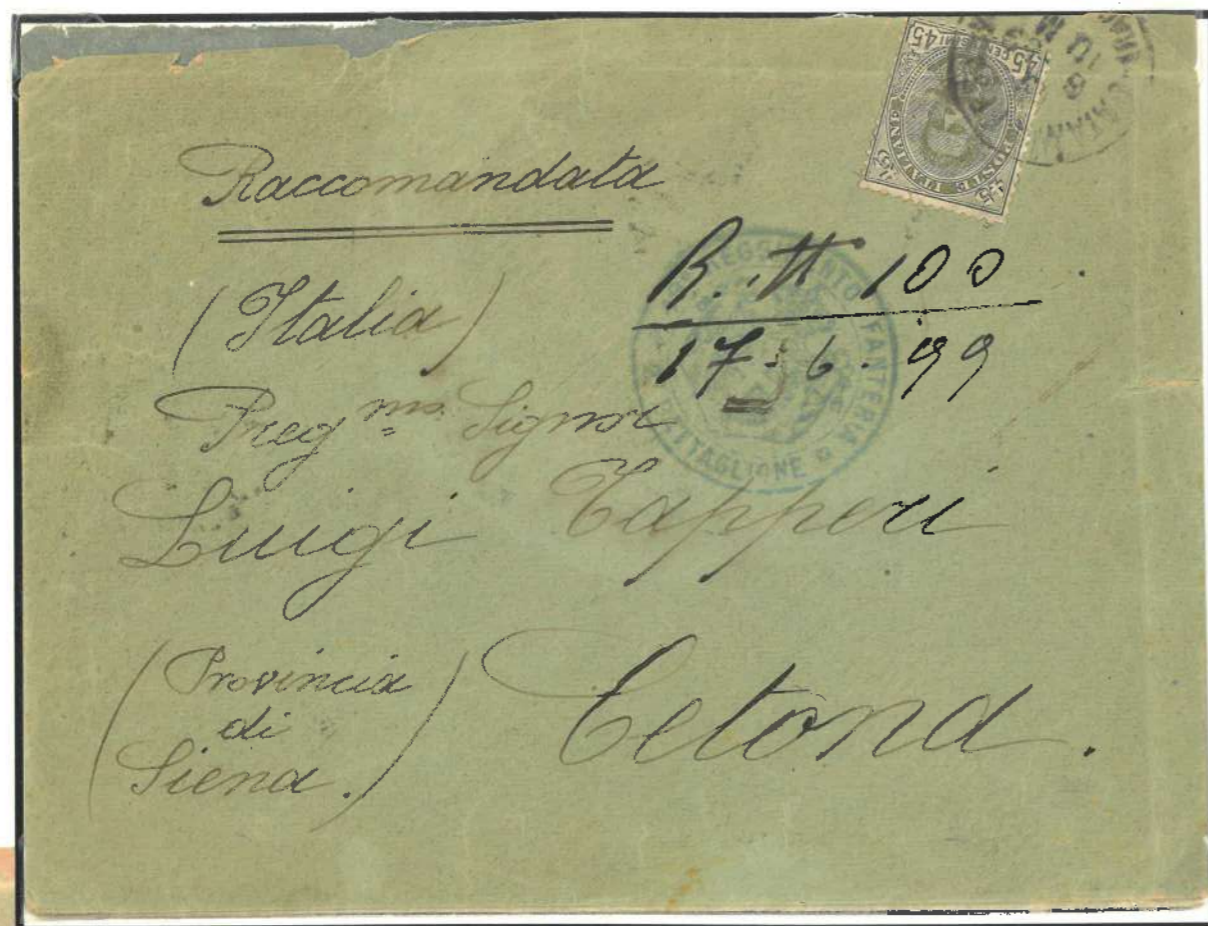
R. Aviso Archimede



Postal card of the Ottoman post, mailed from the warship *Archimede* on 8.10.1898, at the time it was in the waters of Crete during the naval blockade of the island, with destination Venice. The card is stamped with the ship's date mark **R. Aviso Archimede 8.10.1898**. On the back side, the handwritten note **Suda 7-10-98** is clearly visible.

Postal card featuring images of the presence of the Great Powers in Crete (1897-98), sent from the warship *Archimede* on 18 February 1899. The 10 centesimi stamp was canceled with the ship's date mark **R. Aviso Archimede 18.2.1899** and sent to Modena.





Registered cover from Crete, June 17, 1899. Sent by an Italian soldier serving in the “49° Reggimento Fanteria / 2° Battaglione,” bearing the unit cachet on both front and reverse. On the front is a manuscript registration notation “R.N.100-17.6.99” and franked with a 45 centesimi stamp (cancelled upon arrival at Catania on June 19, 1899). The letter was received at Cetona on June 21, 1899, with a transit marking at Chiusi (June 20, 1899). Registered military correspondence from Crete was not marked with labels or postal handstamps at dispatch, but only with a manuscript registration number and date. The cancellation of the franking was not performed in Crete but at Catania, the Italian post office in Sicily, through which all military correspondence from Crete was routed to Italy.

This is the only recorded example of registered military correspondence from Crete, prior to the opening of the Italian Post Office in Chania (January 16, 1900).



Cover sent on July 30, 1898, from the Italian warship *Etruria* (R. Nave Etruria 30.7.1898) addressed to Spezia (Spezia Arsenale, Genova 4.9.1898). The cover was franked with a 20 centesimi stamp, which was canceled with the ship's date stamp “R. Nave Etruria 30 Lug 1898.” At that time, the *Etruria* was operating in Cretan waters, supporting the naval blockade of the island.

This is the only known letter from the warship *Etruria* during the period of the Cretan naval blockade.

During the period of the Naval Blockade of Crete (1897–1898), the Italian Carabinieri formed part of the International presence on the island and played a central role not only in maintaining security and public order, but above all in organizing the newly established Cretan Gendarmerie. Thanks to the leadership of their senior officers **Federico Craveri (1897–1900)**, **BalduinoCaprini (1900–1903)**, and **Eugenio Monaco (1903–1906)**, the approximately 100 Carabinieri who served in Crete succeeded in transforming a particularly dangerous region—plagued by religious and ethnic rivalries—into a place of safety, legality, and order. They also provided exemplary training to the Cretan Gendarmerie, which assumed full responsibility after their final withdrawal in 1906.



Federico Craveri

Registered cover sent via Ottoman post office in **Chania (11 April 1897)** to **Rome Italy (16 April 1897)**, franked by 1 piastre stamp (20 paras for external postal fee and 20 paras for registration). Very clear Ottoman Postal markings, the rare registration seal “U.P.U. TURQUIE R No 446” as well as the bilingual postmark of Chania. The sender of the envelope is **Federico Craveri**, an officer of the Royal Carabinieri forces who distinguished himself in Crete for his service and, in June 1898, assumed command of the Royal Carabinieri Corps on the island.

Letter, signed by **Federico Craveri**, preserved within the cover, concerning the replacement of a senior officer of the Italian army stationed in Crete. The document makes reference to the bombardment of the Malaxa heights and records accounts of mistreatment of civilians and destruction of property in the wider Chania area.

La Lanza 23 Maggio 1897

Signor mio Colonnello

Il giorno 24 sono il capitano di  
 randa, Scurpotta, mio comandante, mi co-

rolontà dell'ammiraglio stesso, - Il comandante Scurpotta  
 mi disse che io sarei il mio capo di stato maggiore  
 re, ma intanto voleva subire - Fu invece  
 volle un progetto di difesa della città, dell'artigianato  
 consigli sull'opportunità e meno di impiegare  
 un fortino - Padovani questa non è la mia  
 partita, ma siamo in ballo e conviene  
 adattarsi - In merito poi al fortino era  
 forzato gli ordini che non ero competente,  
 non volendo consigliare una bestialità.  
 L'abbandonamento poi del capitano Puffigiani  
 è inopportuno sotto la patria dei luoghi  
 che costui ha e del reale valore come ufficiale  
 che è stato maggiore.  
 L'una ufficiale la situazione: io faccio come ho  
 frequentata dai miei ispettori voluti al signor  
 generale -

Devoto aff. serv.  
 Craveri



With the departure of the Italian Carabinieri from Crete in 1906, the Italian military presence on the island was henceforth represented only by a small infantry force. The administration of the Cretan State, as well as the Cretan people—although they held strong feelings of gratitude, sympathy, and respect toward the troops of the Great Powers—felt that they were capable of maintaining security and public order on their own, relying solely on their own forces. The Italian army remained in Crete until the autumn of 1909, when it finally withdrew, along with the remaining troops of the other Great Powers.



The building that housed the Italian troops in Chania during the period 1897-1909



Postcard depicting an Italian army unit at the Izzedin Fortress in Souda, in October 1906



Cover sent from Chania on 9 July 1909, to Firenze (14 July 1909). The standard postal rate of 15 centesimi is canceled with the military postmark "DISTACto TRUPPE ITALIANE IN CRETA". This particular postmark appeared on correspondence shortly before the withdrawal of the Italian troops from Crete



Envelope sent from Chania, postmarked "DISTACto TRUPPE ITALIANE IN CRETA" (May 22, 1909), to Augusta (Syracuse) (May 27, 1909).

*Ab. deaportato di Briggione  
Galassini Lucando 34 = Briggione  
Fanteria 7<sup>a</sup> Compagnia  
Distaccamento Isola  
Augusto Braggione  
Trasmissione Isola Naha*