

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Massimo Zaccaria.** *"Il Flagello degli schiavisti" Romolo Gessi in Sudan (1874-1881) con trentatre lettere e dispacci inediti.* Fernandel, 1999. 272 pp. EUR 16.53 (paper), ISBN 978-88-87433-08-1.

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When Lytton Strachey, the trend-setting English biographer, expressed the hope that the four biographical sketches composing *Eminent Victorians* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1918 and 1933) might "...prove to be of interest from the strictly biographical no less than from the historical point of view", he was evoking the tension any biographer will face while simultaneously developing and contextualizing a subject. Striking the right balance becomes a particularly difficult and delicate task if the aim of the study is to elucidate a myth/reality dichotomy within a context of which the reader may be unfamiliar. Massimo Zaccaria's study of the seven-year period (1874-1881) during which Romolo Gessi (1831-1881), soldier, explorer, and administrator, was employed by, or otherwise linked to, the Turkish-Egyptian government of the Sudan is a particularly felicitous example of how the right balance has been struck in this type of work. Moreover, Zaccaria has included a careful analysis of sources including ones heretofore unused by historians, including the set of thirty-three unpublished letters and dispatches by Gessi himself, that he has included as an annex (pp. 181-211). In addition, he has provided an exhaustive bibliography of his subject.

Although, in a sense, forgotten, at least in Italy by non-Africanists, because of the almost total rejection by Italians of their recent colonial history, Romolo Gessi is, nevertheless, one of the best-known nineteenth century Italian personages associated with the "opening" of Africa to European penetration. According to his *post mortem* reputation, he was a major precursor of Italian colonization even though he served, not the Italian state, but the Turkish-Egyptian regime in the Sudan (1820-1885), the major so-called secondary empire in Africa of the period, and this before the Italian state had taken pos-

session of any territory in Africa.

This study is a revision of Zaccaria's "Laurea" thesis, a two volume work titled *"Romolo Gessi "flagello degli schiavisti" - Romolo Gessi e il Sudan del suo tempo: storiografia et storia"* (1989-1990) (Romolo Gessi "Scourge of the Slavers"-Romolo Gessi and the Sudan of his Times: Historiography and History [1989-1990]) that he wrote while a student in the Oriental Languages and Literature Section of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literature of the University of Venice. The revised and published version, that earned for Zaccaria a doctorate at the University of Siena, reflects a period of study and writing at the University of Bergen in Norway under the supervision of Professor Anders Bjorkelo, a specialist in pre-Mahdist nineteenth century social period of study and research at the University of Khartoum in Sudan.

As an off-shoot of the research for this study that Zaccaria undertook, in part, in Rome in the archives of the Comboniani Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, he wrote and published, in 1996, a study of the Sudan collections to be found in this archive: *Il Fondo Sudan nella Biblioteca della Curia Generalizia dei Missionari Comboniani del Sacro Cuore di Gesù: Omaggio a Mons. Daniele Comboni in occasione della sua beatificazione, Roma 17 marzo 1996* (The Sudan Collection in the Library of the General Curia of the Comboniani Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus: In Honour of Mgr. Daniele Comboni on the Occasion of his Beatification, Rome 17 March 1996 [Rome: Missionari Comboniani, 1996]).[1]

Myths about Gessi, argues Zaccaria in the Introduction of his book, have undergone three phases. In the period of the 1880s, just after he died, Gessi was lion-

ized by patriotic Italian journalists and writers like Manfredo Camperio for his scientific work (*i.e.*, his exploration/circumnavigation of Lake Albert) and his humanitarian efforts in favour of the Black inhabitants of the Southern Sudan. He was viewed as a distinguished Italian collaborator of Colonel (later General) Charles Gordon, particularly in his efforts to suppress the slave trade and to expel the (Arab) slave traders from the Bahr al Ghazal. The repatriation, in 1883, of Gessi's remains from Suez, where he had died in the French Hospital, in 1881, through the efforts of the African Society of Italy, and their reinterment at Ravenna, his father's birthplace, was an event of national importance and a stimulus to the colonial party in Italian national politics. Gessi came to be viewed, along with other Italians who had laboured in the Sudan, as a precursor of the conquests of Eritrea and Somalia that were getting underway.

Later, in a second phase, fascist propagandists, who tended to view all Italians who had been and who were active in Africa as precursors of fascism, emphasized the same precursor-related aspects of Gessi's role to which was added a degree of heroism and victimization in regard to the shabby way he was alleged to have been treated by Gordon in the "What a pity you are not an Englishman" episode of 1876. The latter refers to Gessi's anger at not having been as well rewarded by the Khedive for his achievements as he thought he should have been and his consequent resignation from the Khedival Service.

In the 1980s, after a long period of neglect owing to the post-Second World War association in Italy of colonialism with fascism and defeat, Italian scholars began to take another look, particularly after more of Gessi's letters and unpublished manuscripts came to light. New re-evaluations, undertaken in a profoundly anti-colonial intellectual environment, revealed negative qualities. Among other things, it seems that Gessi quarreled chronically with his associates, in particular with Carlo Piaggia (1827-1882) with whom he collaborated in the expedition to the Upper White Nile that led to his own circumnavigation of Lake Albert, and with Pellegrino Matteucci (1850-1881), his collaborator in his second attempt to explore the upper Sobat region. It turns out also that, as an explorer, Gessi was not very successful, in that the scientific results of his efforts were meager. What remained more or less laudable were the humanitarian goals of Gessi's combat and actions in the Bahr al Ghazal against slavery and the slave traders. However, his targeting of the Arabs in the region, particularly his execution of Sulayman, the leader of a rebellion in 1878, are

criticized. In this debate, Zaccaria comes out as a moderate, not as harsh a critic as other Italian scholars have been, such as Giulia Squadroni, relative to European actions in Africa in the immediate pre-colonial period. For Zaccaria, Gessi was simply a man of his times.

Zaccaria accomplishes his task in 180 pages of dense insightful narration and analysis. A short Introduction is followed by thirteen topical chapters following each other in chronological order and a few pages of "Conclusions". The first three chapters situate the body of myth that has grown up about Gessi, fill in the political, economic, and social context of the Egyptian Sudan in terms of the succession of the rulers of Egypt from Mohammed Ali to Khedive Ismail, and introduce the reader to the first forty-three years of Gessi's life spent mostly in pre-1878 Romania. The following three chapters detail Gessi's first tour of duty, a nearly three-year period, from February 1874 to December 1876, during which he served on Colonel Gordon's staff in Equatoria Province in the Southern Sudan, along with a number of other Europeans and Americans of diverse backgrounds. Here Gessi performed various tasks, including the circumnavigation of Lake Albert, as part of a larger Egyptian effort to explore and to bring the sources of the Nile River into the Egyptian Sudanese empire. Gessi came particularly to the notice of Gordon when, in October 1875, he refloated and repaired the latter's boat that had run aground and at almost the same moment led a small raid on shore that prevented Shilluk warriors from overwhelming an Egyptian post. The final chapter in this group attempts to elucidate Gessi's resignation from the Khedival service, apparently angry, as mentioned above, at not having been properly rewarded by the Khedive for his exploits on Lake Albert. The succeeding two chapters detail Gessi's growing but self-generated reputation in Italy as an explorer and his two attempts, in 1877 and 1878, to organize expeditions to explore the Sobat River region of the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderland.

Chapters 9-12 deal with Gessi's decision to accept the offer made by Gordon, now the Governor-General of the Sudan, to rejoin the Khedival administration and to undertake a special mission, as commander in chief, in the Bahr al Ghazal in order to suppress a rebellion fomented by Sulayman, son of Zubayr Pasha Rahma Mansur, the *de facto* ruler of the area, who was then being detained in honorable captivity in Cairo. A Ja'alin trader, Zubayr had built up a trading empire through the zeriba system based on ivory and slaves. Separate chapters detail the military campaign and Gessi's efforts, after the capture and execution of Sulayman, to administer the Bahr al

Ghazal. The final chapter in this group describes Gessi's return to Khartoum to defend his actions to Mohammed Rauf Pasha, the Egyptian official who replaced Gordon as Governor General. The trip itself was a tragic ordeal, lasting from September 1880 to early January 1881, in which Gessi's steamer, the *Saphia*, not the most powerful boat in the Government fleet, got caught in the *sudd* leading to the death of three-fifths of the passengers and crew from starvation and disease.

The chapter ends with an account of Gessi's remaining two months in Khartoum during which he was bedridden, most of the time, but facing an inquest by the new Governor-General, said to be heavily implicated in the slave trade. The latter, indeed, considered the possibility of arresting Gessi for dereliction of duty in the Bahr al Ghazal and possibly also for murder, because of some executions he had ordered. Gessi was saved by the timely intervention of influential members of the European community in Khartoum led by Mgr. Daniele Comboni, the Apostolic Pro-vicar. The report that Gessi wrote before his final departure from Khartoum about his two-year period of authority in the Bahr al Ghazal, intended to refute Rauf Pasha's accusations, was eventually published. According to Zaccaria, this report is very much at the basis of the favourable light in which Gessi's role in the Bahr al Ghazal has been viewed.

Thanks to the intervention of Gessi's European friends, he was permitted to leave Khartoum in March 1881 to present his case in Cairo, but he died along the way, in Suez. On the day before his death, he received the visits of Khedive Tewfik (Ismail's successor) and Ferdinand de Lesseps. The Egyptian government would honour Gessi posthumously. A final chapter estimates the possible influence of Gessi's campaigns in and administration of the Bahr al Ghazal on the rise and success of Mahdism in the Sudan, and a short Conclusion reconsiders the myths and realities of Gessi's career in the Sudan.

The Bibliography consists of three sections: an "Epistolary Archive", listing the 269 letters, found in a number of archives and publications, from Gessi to a number of persons, that Zaccaria has used in writing this study. These include but go much beyond the scope of the collection compiled and published by Carlo Zaghi in 1947 (*Gordon, Gessi et la reconquista del Sudan [1874-1881]: Documenti inediti et sconosciuti degli archivi italiani e stranieri raccolti e illustrati con introduzione note et appendici*, Florence: Centro Studi Coloniali dell'Università di Firenze). A second section of the bibliography, labeled "Bibliografia gessiana: scritti di e su Romolo Gessi", in-

cludes a listing of over 200 published works of all kinds about Gessi or that devote some attention to him.[2] It lists all the relevant writings of Carlo Zaghi and Silvio Zavatti. The same listing includes over seventy works signed by Gessi himself ranging from letters and reports, that he probably did not intend to have published, to short articles that he wrote for the Italian Geographical Society and various Italian periodicals. Finally, the Bibliography closes with a very complete general listing ("Bibliografia di Riferimento") of general works on the Sudan including old favourites by Rudolph Slatin Pasha, H. C. Jackson, and Harold MacMichael, much of the output of Richard Hill and Peter Malcolm Holt, and the writings of Sudanese historians: Muhammad Sa'id al Qaddal, Ahmad Ibrahim Hassan, Umar Bashir Muhammad, 'Abd Allah Hamid Musa, and others.

As an additional aid to the reader, Zaccaria has provided short biographical sketches, in the form of footnotes, of forty-two of the personages appearing in his account. These range from the Polish photographer, Richard Buchta (1845-1894), actually the first photographer to photograph the Sudan, invited to the Sudan by Gessi, and the German Explorer, Wilhelm Junker (1840-1892), to 'Abd Allah Mohammed Khalifa (1846-1899), the Mahdi's successor. Unfortunately, and despite Zaccaria's efforts to make of this volume a serious research tool for other scholars, he has failed to provide a general index for the volume.

A first question a reader might ask after reading this very weighty volume is how to situate it. Is it African history - a question the answer for which is only superficially obvious for those who, inspired by such founders of the new African history as Roland Oliver and Terrence Ranger, might argue that it is not African history at all, but clearly the history of Europeans - of a European - in Africa, a different thing altogether. But the Europeans in question were employed by the government of what was initially an autonomous African province of the Ottoman Empire that was elaborating an empire of its own in the Sudan and, for a period, in East Africa, and would itself have to contend with European imperialism beginning with the imposition of European financial control in 1876, continuing with the British military intervention of 1882, and culminating in the formal declaration, in 1914, of Egypt as a British protectorate. Zaccaria skillfully teases out the ambiguous situation and feelings of these Europeans employed by a Muslim administration whose local officials they increasingly grew to despise and whose economic and social policies many of them came to view as inimical to the interests of the Sudanese.

Certainly the bibliography is Euro- and Gessi-centered; however, the final and general section, the “Bibliografia di Riferimento” (pp. 258-265) includes a sufficient number of works on African and Sudanese history so as to reassure the reader that what is in fact a myth-and-reality study of a European in Africa is firmly grounded in up-to-date and comprehensive Sudanese and African historiography. Zaccaria contends that an understanding of this European element in Sudanese history is indispensable for understanding Sudanese history in general.

A second question that might come to mind is that of how accurate this study is as a biography, given that Zaccaria has concentrated, analytically and exhaustively, on the final seven years of Gessi’s life, that is, the period of his active role in the Sudan. He has skimmed over the first forty-three years of Gessi’s life in a little more than five pages, basing himself more or less uncritically on the writings of Carlo Zaghi and Silvio Zavatti, the latter, in particular, having contributed to the fascist era exaltation of the subject. Thus Zaccaria leaves standing the idea that Gessi was an ardent Italian nationalist who, in 1858, had fought with Garibaldi as a loyal representative of his father’s place of birth, Ravenna. In fact, throughout the volume Zaccaria refers to Gessi as “il Ravennate” which roughly translated means “the man from Ravenna”.

Gessi was forty-two years old when he accepted Gordon’s offer of a position on his staff. He had spent about thirty-seven of these years in Ottoman Romania (fully independent only in 1878) in Bucharest, Sulina, Tulcea, and probably also Galati. Yet strangely enough, although Gessi is credited with knowing between six and twelve languages including English, French, and Turkish, Romanian is not among these languages (p. 38), a lacuna that does not seem believable. More believable is the reappearing opinion that Gessi’s capacity to write in Italian was not very good (p. 88) requiring him to enlist the aid of Italian editors and colleagues, like Pelligrino Matteucci, whenever he wished a piece of “serious” writing to make a good impression.

Also, the facts emerging from Gessi’s early years raise questions as to his nationality. His father, Marco Gessi, is purported to have been a political refugee from Ravenna, that is, from Romagna, one of the Papal Legations (States). His mother was French. Marco Gessi had studied in London, acquired British citizenship, and had obtained employment in the British embassy in Istanbul. Later, he had become the British vice consul in Bucharest. Taking advantage of their diplomatic status, the couple

had paid a visit to Ravenna on the return from which their son, Romolo, was born on a ship that was either headed “towards Istanbul” (alla volta di Istanbul) (p. 37) or, as per Carlo Zaghi, to Malta (p. 38). But, continues Zaccaria, who lists both destinations without comment, Romolo was baptized in Istanbul where his parents also took steps to make sure that his British citizenship was recognized (a significant detail considering Romolo Gessi’s later *demele* with Gordon over his supposedly being less rewarded by the Khedive than others because he was “not an Englishman”).

Contrary to the opinion of Zavatti as adopted by Zaccaria, the young Gessi was probably not raised in Istanbul. Rather, the family simply transited through Istanbul on their way back to Bucharest via the delta of the Danube River, a common way to get to Bucharest by sea in those days. It was in Bucharest, not in Istanbul, that Romolo spent his boyhood and where his father died in 1842. After attending military school(s) [3] in Austria (Wiener-Neustadt) and in Germany (Halle), Gessi would himself obtain employment in the British Consulate in Bucharest. Later, he served as an interpreter with the British forces in the Crimean War, attached to the staff of General Fox-Stragways, where he became acquainted with Charles Gordon, then a young captain in the Royal British engineer corps. After the war, Gessi returned to Romania, this time to Sulina, still under direct Ottoman rule, located at the mouth of the principal Danube delta channel, the *Bratul Sulina*, where he was employed by Lloyd’s Register as a salvage specialist.

In 1858, Gessi purportedly traveled to Italy where in short order he fought with Garibaldi, in 1858, in his Alpine Riflemen (Cacciatori delle Alpi), winning a silver medal for valor (p. 39), visiting Ravenna where two of his maternal aunts purportedly still lived (p. 39), allegedly taking Italian citizenship there, and then returning to “the Balkans”, where he married a violinist, Maria Purkart, with whom he would have six children. However, Garibaldi’s Alpine campaign against Austria only began in April 1859. If Gessi took Italian citizenship *stricto senso* in Ravenna, it could only have been after the 17 March 1861 proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy. Moreover, if indeed Gessi’s mother was French, the daughter of the first courier of the French Embassy in Istanbul (p. 37), why were her sisters, his maternal aunts, living in Ravenna? He probably did not join Garibaldi’s Red Shirts in their invasion of Sicily in May 1860. And oddly enough, for a purported Italian patriot who fought against the Austrians, when Gessi decided, in January, 1877, at the end of his first tour of duty in the Sudan,

to create a home for himself and his family in Italy, he chose to settle in Trieste, a town that would remain part of the Austro-Hungarian empire until 1918. “Il Raven-nate” never lived for any length of time in Ravenna.

After this Italian interlude, Gessi returned to Romania, probably to Sulina or to Galati, a major river port in southern Moldavia, and then downstream to Tulcea, in Dobrudja, still under direct Ottoman rule. Here, in 1870, on the death of a brother, he became the director of a sawmill that went bankrupt,[4] causing him much financial distress but both freeing and stimulating him to accept an offer of employment in the Southern Sudan made to him by Gordon, who had been appointed in 1873, by the Egyptian government, to succeed Sir Samuel Baker as Governor of Equatoria Province. The two men had no doubt had a chance to renew their acquaintance during the short period between 1871 and 1873 that Gordon had served in Galati as British Vice-consul and member of the International Danube Commission.

These details regarding Gessi’s pre-Sudanese life are important. Not only do they suggest that here too there are some myths needing to be exploded, they also seem to reveal a strong Romanian side to Gessi’s development that has so far been overlooked. One might legitimately claim, for instance, that the hot, humid, and unhealthy summers spent in the Danube Delta towns of Sulina and Tulcea fortified Gessi’s immune system, making him resistant to such diseases as malaria, so that he was able to survive the extreme unhealthiness (for Europeans) of the Upper Nile and the Bahr al Ghazal—much to the satisfaction of Gordon—saddened and shocked by the deaths of his nephew, William Anson, and others of his European colleagues: the two brothers, Auguste and Ernest Linant de Bellefonds, the botanist, Witt, and many others, after less than a year spent in the Sudan. One reason that Gordon kept calling upon Gessi to perform a variety of tasks was that he was resistant as well as resourceful. Gessi too would die from disease contracted in the Sudan, but only as the indirect result of his more than three-month ordeal in the *sudd* in the closing months of 1880.

In his effort to sketch a balanced picture of Gessi’s post-1874 career, Zaccaria regularly cites evidence that Gessi, in addition to being keen on self-promotion, was not always honest in his dealings with others. And in parallel with his official duties, Gessi repeatedly attempted to engage in business. A major source used by Zaccaria for this aspect of Gessi’s background was the collection of memoirs of Carl Christian Giegler (1884-1921), a German engineer who held various functions in

the Sudanese and Egyptian governments from 1875 to 1893 (*The Sudan Memoirs of Carl Christian Giegler Pasha 1873-1883*, ed. by R. L. Hill, London: Oxford University Press, 1984). Giegler had serious doubts as to Gessi’s honesty, accusing him, in particular, of exaggerating the economic possibilities of the Bahr al Ghazal and other areas in the Sudan, in efforts to obtain the backing of European businessmen for (doubtful) joint ventures with him. For Giegler, Gessi was a “truffatore” (a cheat or a swindler) (Zaccaria, p. 103).[5]

If one considers Gessi’s apparent developing reputation for trickiness, the clear ambiguities of his national background, the circumstances of his business failure in Romania; the oft-repeated episode of his resignation from the Khedival service at the end of 1876, angry because he was not properly rewarded, appears in a different light. Gessi felt that he had been less well rewarded by the Khedival government for his circumnavigation of Lake Albert than were other explorers, Chaille-Long, for instance, for his explorations of the Victoria Nile and visit with *Kabaka* Mutesa of Buganda. When he complained to Gordon about this discrepancy, Gordon replied, “What a pity you are not an Englishman”, meaning that, given the British influence on Khedive Ismail, Gessi would have gotten more had he been English.

The account of this episode makes little sense, given that Gessi held British citizenship, and Chaille-Long was an American, even if Gessi had been emphasizing his Italianness probably in order to make himself better known in Italian geographical and business circles—to be the big fish in a small pond. In those days, the fact of taking a second citizenship did not lead to the loss of one’s British citizenship. But also, as Zaccaria points out, the results of Gessi’s circumnavigation had not been very fruitful from the scientific point of view and had had to be repeated by Alexander Mason Bey, also an American, in 1877.

In fact, it seems that Gordon had become disillusioned with Gessi because of his attempts to engage in doubtful business activities on the side, in particular, speculating on the price of *dura* (the Sudanese stable crop, a form of sorghum) during the period in 1875 that he was Gordon’s representative (*vakil*) in Khartoum (p. 62). Again, according to Giegler, all Gessi could ever talk about is “possible business deals realizable in this country” (Zaccaria, p. 62). Probably at the end of 1876, Gordon was attempting to ease Gessi out of the Khedival service, for, as revealed by a recent biographer, Charles Chenevix-Trench *The Road to Khartoum: A Life of General Charles Gordon*, New York: Norton, 1978) (in Zac-

caria, p. 82), 'Gordon had formed the opinion that Gessi was "utterly devoid of principle"'. And it is known that Gordon initially refused to take Gessi back in 1877, when he first asked to reenter the Khedival service, this time citing Gessi's family responsibilities, as a convenient excuse, and the very high mortality rate of Europeans in the Sudan.

If later, as Governor General of the Sudan, Gordon took back Gessi—after the latter's two unsuccessful attempts to explore the upper Sobat River area—it was that he was desperate to find a few competent European collaborators whom he could trust, faced, as he was, with a general uprising in the Bahr el Ghazal and being increasingly pressured to end the slave trade. Gordon was also in a phase of total disillusionment in regard to his Turkish-Egyptian collaborators. Gordon knew that Gessi would be tough and that additionally he was developing a strong dislike, not only for slavery and slave trading, but also for the Arab traders themselves. He also knew that Gessi was having financial difficulties given his inability to obtain business sponsorship for a third attempt at Sobat River exploration. Gessi's return was arranged by Mgr. Daniele Comboni, the Pro-Apostolic Vicar, one of Gessi's close friends.

The campaign against Sulayman confirmed Gessi's talents as a tactician in bush warfare. It also revealed Gessi's open and unselfconscious use of force, particularly of executions, to make himself feared and obeyed.

Gessi's predilection for executing foes and his apparent trickiness came simultaneously into play when his forces finally captured Sulayman and his principal chiefs in the village of Gara in southern Darfur. During the night of 15 July 1879, Gessi, with only 290 men and an element of bluff, induced Sulayman, and some 700 to 1000 of his men, to surrender. What promises he may have made to Sulayman personally are not clear; however, he did not initially arrest either Sulayman or his men; he simply confined them to the village and required them to hand over their arms. Then, two days later, in the night of 17-18 July 1879, he ordered Sulayman and nine of his chiefs to be executed by firing squad, arguing that he had discovered that they were planning an escape. And Gessi cited proof—a number of saddled horses in the village and a small stock of munitions and arms. Also, Gessi feared that his small force might be outnumbered and overwhelmed, given that many of Sulayman's followers, particularly Rabah Fadallah and his men, were lingering in the area.

While Zaccaria acknowledges that many persons

then and later, for instance, Rudolph Slatin Pasha (in *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, London, 1922), castigated Gessi for his treachery in regard to Sulayman, he points out that the execution had Gordon's approval (p. 133). Given, however, that at an earlier stage of the struggle, the Khedive had offered Gessi an award of 3000 Pounds should he capture Sulayman alive (in El Zubayr Pasha, *Black Ivory and White*, trans. H. C. Jackson, Oxford, 1913, p. II), the fact that Gessi, who was always trying to raise money one way or another, would sacrifice the possibility of earning this reward, would indicate that he considered the elimination of Sulayman to be crucial to his own survival.

Zaccaria, who devotes Chapter 13 of his study to the possible importance to the Mahdist movement of Gessi's campaigns and administration in the Bahr el Ghazal, suggests that Gessi's trickery played a role in determining numbers of the Arab and African populations of the area to opt for the Mahdi who was planning his jihad in 1881, just as Gessi was leaving the Sudan. He lays to rest the older idea that Sulayman's followers provided the main support to the Mahdi from this region. In fact, explains Zaccaria, few of these remained in the area once Sulayman had been captured and executed. Rabah's contingent, in particular, preferred to drive west into Waday, Bagirmi, and Bornu, which they conquered. Rabah was defeated and killed by the French, near Lake Chad, in 1900.

Rather, argues Zaccaria, recruits to the Mahdist movement came from the ranks of the Baqqara and Danaqla Arabs who, disliking the Ja'alin, Sulayman's people, had initially allied themselves with Gessi and had been disillusioned by his failure to honour any of the commitments that he had made to their leaders. And, of course, once Sulayman had been eliminated, Gessi began a process of removing the whole Arab element from the Bahr al Ghazal, this to carry on the campaign, supported by Gordon, to eliminate slavery and the slave trade in the southern Sudan. In short, both men had come to equate "Arab" with "slave trader", and, as Zaccaria suggests, Gessi's actions prefigured Governor General Reginald Wingate's "Southern Policy" (p. 169). In his report to Rauf Pasha, Gessi admitted quite frankly that in order to build up a coalition with which to defeat Sulayman's forces, he had found it expedient to make promises to his Arab allies, that he referred to as "negriers", that he had no intention of keeping (pp. 165-166). The result was so much more grist for Mohammed-Ahmed's mill.

And ironically, although Gessi argued passionately

that he was driving out the Arabs in order to emancipate the “Negroes”, the latter tended to be circumspect in terms of their feelings about this effort. The Azande and the Dinka remained substantially neutral in the struggle with Sulayman. Others made alliances of convenience, and the Nuer remained hostile to all outsiders. Indeed, the hostility of this latter group worsened the conditions of Gessi’s final trip through the *sudd*.

Zaccaria stresses that the Africans, although the victims of the slave trade, were also part of it, and most of their societies had traditionally had slavery. In general, for the Africans as well as for the northern Sudanese Arabs, slavery was an imbedded part of the traditional socio-economic system. Attacking it not only led to economic decline but served as one more proof of the hostile intent of the Turkish-Egyptian authorities towards traditional Sudanese society made even harder to bear by the presence of so many Christian officials who were attacking an institution sanctioned by the Koran.

In concluding his book with a final look at the myth and reality dichotomy of Gessi’s role in the Sudan, Zaccaria concludes that it was Gessi’s administration of the Bahr el Ghazal that merits his being remembered in Sudanese history as one European who made a difference, not so much because of his defeat, capture, and execution of Sulayman, but more particularly because the total impact upon the Bahr-el-Ghazal of his policies and actions greatly increased the recruitment to and the success of the Mahdist movement (p. 178).

There is, according to Zaccaria, very little left of the mythical Gessi once the true facts of the man’s life are understood. He was not a heroic figure either as an explorer, a mercenary, a soldier, or an administrator even though he at time performed all these roles. Although he wrote about and vaunted the commercial possibilities of the areas he visited, he was not particularly successful either as an explorer or as a businessman. His humanitarianism evolved according to the circumstances. However, as Zaccaria points out, this period in the history of European relations with Egypt and the Sudan and other places in Africa called for polyvalent men -jacks of all trades. Gessi was one of these; so was Frank Miller Lupton Pasha who succeeded him as Governor of Bahr al Ghazal, so was Rudolph Slatin Pasha, both of whom came initially to the Sudan as commercial representatives. Gessi’s real preoccupation was that of providing for his wife and family and, for a while, a mistress. He was reactive rather than proactive. He came to Africa in the first place because of a chance encounter with an old

acquaintance in Romania, at a moment when he needed to find a new job. Because Gessi could seize occasions as they came, he knew when and how to elaborate his own legend.

The conclusion one reaches in regard to this volume is that Zaccaria, with his background in oriental languages, literature, and history has written an excellent study both of the man and of the context in which he acted. Never mind the occasional contradiction or vague and contradictory dating of certain events, Zaccaria has produced a synthesis that would be the envy of many a professor of history far senior to himself. Moreover, future historians of the Sudan will be grateful to Zaccaria for his thorough listing and analysis of the extant writing by and about Romolo Gessi, his inventory of Gessi’s letters (the “Archivio Epistolare”), and the publication of previously unpublished letters. Zaccaria’s demonstration (pp. 181-187) of the ways in which source materials that have been available for some time were selectively edited, adapted, and manipulated by their editors, particularly Manfredo Camperio, in the 1880s, and Felice Gessi, a son who strove during the Fascist period to glorify his father’s reputation, offer a practical lesson on the pitfalls of source materials.

Two questions, for a future biography, remain to be elucidated. One of these, as suggested above, is the degree to which Gessi was influenced by some thirty-seven years of residence in Romania. The other concerns Gessi’s nationality. To what extent was he the Italian patriot that historians, including Zaccaria, seem to perceive? Given Gessi’s British citizenship and the shaky foundations of his Italian background, this reviewer considers that Gessi’s Italian patriotism was more a question of opportunism than of conviction. The question is worth investigating; however, doing so might be painful for Massimo Zaccaria, for he, if not nationalistic *per se*, is clearly very conscious, if not proud, of the role played by Italians in the nineteenth century history of the Sudan.

#### Notes

[1]. Zaccaria continues to work closely with the Comboniani missionaries. Notably, his curriculum vitae, listed on the University of Pavia Webpage <<http://www.unipv.it>>, indicates his involvement in a research project, “Photography as a Source for African History: The Italian Presence in the Sudan during the XIX Century”. One outcome has been a study of the photographic archives of the Comboniani missionaries: “Imagini per la storia dell’Africa: L’archivio fotografico dei Missionari Comboniani (2000)

<<http://www.unipv.it/webarchaf/Comboniani/inizio.htm>>

[2]. The publishing company, Fernandel, of Ravenna, Italy, has made portions of this volume available on its Webpage, notably the "Bibliography on and about Romolo Gessi", available at <[\\$">\\$](http://www.fabula.it/fernandel/bibliogr.html)>. One can be fairly certain that the publication of this volume by a Ravenna-based press is not a coincidence.

[3]. One or two military academies? Although one can be certain that Gessi did have formal military training; the question is where he got it. Basing himself squarely on C. Zaghi (*Vita de Romolo Gessi*, Milan: ISPI, 1939) and Silvio Zavatti ("Giovinezza di Gessi", *Corriere Padano*, August 1939), Zaccaria (p. 38) writes that Gessi studied "in the military academy of Wiener-Neustadt and Halle in Germany". The clear sense is that he is speaking of one academy and one country, not two. Yet Halle is in what was then known as Prussian Saxony and Wiener-Neustadt, south of Vienna, in Austria.

[4]. The explanation given by Carlo Zaghi (*Vita de Romolo Gessi*, Milan: ISPI, 1939, in Zaccaria, p. 39), one that Zaccaria wisely takes with a grain of salt, is that Gessi was forced into bankruptcy by the Ottoman administration for having been too publicly critical of it. He cites Giegler (*The Sudan Memoirs of Carl Christian Giegler Pasha 1873-1883*, ed. by R. L. Hill, London: Ox-

ford University Press, 1984) to the effect that what Gessi was operating was not a sawmill but a "caf chantant" with a gambling den that the Ottoman authorities had closed. If Gessi, as Zaccaria asks rhetorically, had had problems with the Ottoman administration in Romanian Dobrudja, why would he go to work for the same authorities in the Egyptian Sudan and why would the Turkish-Egyptian authorities accept his candidacy? In the same vein, one could be forgiven for raising one's eyebrows (as the Italian explorer, P. V. Zuchinetti [1838-1890] did [in Zaccaria, p. 40]) at the fact that Gessi, who purportedly had fought with Garibaldi against Austria, would choose to settle in Austro-Hungarian Trieste when he decided to move his family to Italy.

[5]. Probably a better term, given Gessi's Romanian background, would have been "smecher", a Romanian term meaning about the same thing as "truffatore", but with the rough edges smoothed off, thus, a likeable even charming cheat - a person engaging in "smecheria". In the instances of trickery revealed by Zaccaria one recognizes the "smecher" just as one also recognizes the "bisnitar" (even though this term evolved later, during the communist period in Romania), that is, a person who will not miss a chance to engage in petty business deals (that may be but usually are not honest) behind the back and sometimes at the expense of one's employer or anyone else by whom one might be trusted.

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