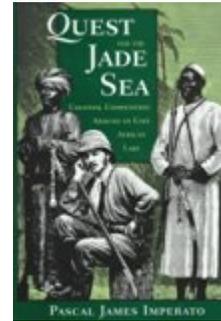


Pascal James Imperato. *Quest for the Jade Sea: Colonial Competition around an East African Lake*. Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1998. Xvi + 332 pp. \$32.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-2791-4.

Reviewed by George L. Simpson (Department of History, High Point University)  
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## Pascal Imperato's *Quest for the Jade Sea*

Following his famous trek through Maasailand in 1883-1884, Joseph Thomson issued a challenge for some enterprising European adventurer to journey to the lands that lay between Lake Baringo and Lake Turkana in what is today northern Kenya. The Scottish explorer declared, "Clearly there is a region of great interest and importance here, the exploration of which will be a rich reward to the adventuresome traveler; and I can only say I shall envy the man who is first in the place." [1] The experiences of those who answered Thomson's call as well as those of others who came to the Lake Turkana basin for their own reasons during the ensuing two decades form the subject matter of Pascal Imperato's most recent work, *Quest for the Jade Sea*.

Those familiar with Monty Brown's *Where Giants Trod* (1989) will find much of Imperato's book familiar going. Like Brown, Imperato's focus is on the Europeans and the couple of Americans who first ventured to the great Rift Valley lake. Imperato has little to say about the Africans these individuals encountered on their journeys. Moreover, his treatment of these adventurers is generally sympathetic. Indeed, Imperato writes that, "All of the travelers to Lake Rudolf were bold, resourceful, and unorthodox men well endowed with originality and eccentricity" (p. 6). He declares that he intends to judge their deeds "within the framework of their times, not according to latter-day cultural and social norms" (p. 5). Some readers, particularly those with an Afrocentric or postmodernist perspective, will thus be tempted to go no farther. The loss will be their own, for there is much

to recommend this painstakingly researched and splendidly written monograph. While Brown's book is without doubt more richly and colorfully illustrated, Imperato's much more inexpensive work contains over three dozen black-and-white photographs as well as half-a-dozen maps to accomplish the same task quite well. In addition, Imperato has done much to put his account of the European exploration of the Lake Turkana basin into a broader historical context.

Professor Imperato begins his rich narrative by revisiting the story of the European search for the source of the Nile River by such individuals as Richard Burton, John Speke, and James Grant. He discusses the impact that the first written accounts of the interior of East Africa by Protestant missionaries such as Johann Krapf, Johann Rebmann, and Charles New had on "armchair geographers" (a favorite phrase of the author) back in Europe. What emerges is a tale of personal vanity, petty intrigue, and outright treachery, familiar to the Africanist, but artfully told for those less acquainted with the history of nineteenth-century African exploration. Furthermore, Imperato rightly assigns great importance to the Africans who served as guides or interpreters on the famous European expeditions, and laments the fact that they left no written accounts of their activities. Equally noteworthy was the information that the travelers learned from the Africans they encountered as well as traders like Sadi bin Ahedi about a great inland lake to the northwest of Victoria. A host of Europeans journeyed to Lake Turkana inspired by geographical curiosity and the chance to

achieve personal glory and motivated as well by nationalist sentiments.

Curiously enough, since Austria-Hungary played a minor role in the imperial conquest of Africa, the first of these individuals was a Transylvanian count named Samuel Teleki. Imperato's treatment of Teleki deserves praise as he has used the diaries of both Teleki and his Austrian assistant, Ludwig von Hohnel, and hence gives details that go beyond Hohnel's published account of the European discovery of Lake Turkana. Also notable is the author's use of Hungarian sources in his retelling of Teleki's trek, although the reader may note a patriotic bias from the count's compatriots. While Imperato certainly is more sympathetic to the Hungarian adventurer than this reviewer, he does not try to hide Teleki's racist attitudes towards blacks nor the latter's scatological preoccupation with the sexual and hygienic conduct of Maasai murrans (pp. 59-63). More significant, however, is the author's conjecture that Crown Prince Rudolf may have had vague ambitions to claim the region surrounding the lake as an Austro-Hungarian possession and use it as "a geographic bargaining chip in the game of big-power European politics" (pp. 51-2). While such a notion may have entered Rudolf's mind, without direct evidence from sources close to the Crown Prince, this must remain speculation and, of course, Rudolf's suicide in early 1899 renders the point moot.

Imperato's handling of the several expeditions that followed Teleki are also well researched and offer fresh insights. Such is the case with the author's treatment of the Americans William Astor Chanler and Donaldson Smith (who made two journeys to Lake Turkana and about which Imperato earlier published a short monograph) and Englishmen including the ivory hunter, Arthur Neumann, and the aristocrat, Henry Cavendish. Herbert Austin's two expeditions to the lake are retold mainly with the that officer's published accounts, but also with some use of the British Foreign Office (FO) archives. Lord Delamere's journey south from Ethiopia through northern Kenya also receives attention, although here Imperato has had to rely on secondary accounts by Elspeth Huxley and Errol Trzebinski. With respect to Bottego and Ruspoli, the author has made excellent use of primary and secondary sources in Italian. Finally, the Imperato's treatment of the Russians Bulatovich and Leontiev is perhaps the most interesting part of the book. Here, he has employed English translations of Russian works available on the Internet along with written sources. Again, however, the reader should be cautious of Imperato's assertion that "the Russians saw

it [the southern Ethiopian province of Ecuatoria next to Lake Turkana] as a future colony or protectorate, and the French saw it as a foothold for themselves in Ethiopia" (p. 191). The author's source for this contention is the British diplomat James Rennell Rodd, who was naturally suspicious of any activity by rival powers in the region.

The imperial perspective that Imperato's provides his readers, however, is one that recommends his monograph. In a chapter entitled, "Showdown on the Upper Nile," the author presents a clear and concise account of the race between the French and British officers, Jean-Baptiste Marchand and Horatio Herbert Kitchener, to lay claim to the southern Sudan as well as the diplomatic crisis that followed between Paris and London. Imperato's treatment of the Ethiopian emperor, Menelik II's adroit diplomacy concerning his southern frontier and unique brand of indigenous imperialism likewise helps the reader understand the context in which the exploration of that region occurred. The picture Imperato paints of the Ethiopian conquest of the region is not very attractive, and he compares it unfavorably to that of the Europeans (pp. 176-77). It is compelling nonetheless. Moreover, even as Imperato describes the orgy of murder and butchery that Ethiopian soldiers inflicted on the peoples of southern Ethiopia, he also gives another face to their atrocities. Thus, the author notes the reaction of the Ethiopian leader, Ras Giorgis, who "practically wept from compassion and rode silently covering his face" (p. 186) after seeing the carnage inflicted by his men.

With such a thoroughly researched book one hesitates to criticize Imperato's use of sources, yet there are a few cases where the author should have made more use of the FO or other British government archival records. Such is particularly the case in Imperato's contention that a decision to halt Smith's second expedition was made "at the highest echelon" and "largely determined by [Lord] Salisbury's decision" (p. 212) and that James Sadler "had strict orders from the Foreign Office to prevent all expeditions from going to Lake Rudolf" (n. 24, p. 302). In the first instance, the author relies on a letter from Smith (n. 12, p. 302) and in the latter he gives no source whatsoever. Also, Imperato's allegations of the murder of a Rendille "chief" and "hunters" at the hands of Dr. Eustace Atkinson and two other whites in 1902 (pp. 140-41) relies on the not-always-dependable Trzebinski. The reviewer would note that the couple of Rendille elders that he was able to interview in 1992 knew nothing of the incident, and that the Colonial Office and Kenya National Archive records are likewise silent about it. A citation using FO documentation might put this issue to rest.

A couple of other criticisms are in order before completing this review of an interesting and generally praiseworthy book. In his treatment of African names, the author generally uses the colonial nomenclature as in calling Lakes Turkana and Chew Bahir, Rudolf and Stephanie respectively. African peoples are designated as follows: Suk for Pokot, Galla for Oromo, Reshiat for Dasanech, and Wakuafi for Samburu(?). In this case, closer attention to scholarly works cited in the notes such as those of Uri Almagor and David Turton, or a reading of Neal Sobania's dissertation on the history of the eastern Lake Turkana basin would help. Of more importance, the Africanist as opposed to the imperial historian might well expect to see just a bit more background on the African inhabitants of the region. Undoubtedly, this would serve Imperato's purposes better as the reader would gain a

better understanding of the interactions of local peoples with the European and American explorers. Yet, in conclusion, it is worth reiterating that Imperato's study of the exploration of the Lake Turkana region is essentially sound in its scholarship, balanced in its interpretations, and lucid in its presentation.

Notes:

[1]. Joseph Thomson, *Through Masai Land: A Journey of Exploration among the Snowclad Volcanic Mountains and Strange Tribes of Eastern Equatorial Africa*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1885, pp. 532-33.

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