
PRESENTING THE COLLECTION

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ITALY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA AND THE ETHIOPIAN ISLAMIC LITERARY TRADITION: L. ROBECCHI BRICCHETTI AND HIS COLLECTION OF MANUSCRIPTS*

Prolegomena

One should not underestimate the role played by travellers, explorers, adventurers, commercial agents and more and less official representatives of European powers in paving the way for the colonial expansion in Asia and Africa.

However, it is a well known fact that these forerunners of the military occupation were sometimes also scholars, sincerely interested in the culture of the local peoples, or at least conscious that it would have been impossible to control the “natives” without knowing their culture and languages. They thus promoted collections of manuscripts, artefacts, oral histories and traditions to gain a clear image of the peoples whose territories they were visiting.

Italians in the Horn of Africa are no exception to this cultural and historical phenomenon.

One of the most accomplished scholars in the field of Ethiopian and Somali Studies, Enrico Cerulli, while on duty in the Italian Legation in Addis Ababa in 1926—1931, travelled extensively in the Horn and thus acquired a firsthand knowledge of scarcely known countries and peoples, languages and cultures [1].

Here I should like to focus on Luigi Robecchi Bricchetti, a relatively unnoticed Italian traveller to the Horn of Africa, and to show how his stay in Harar contributed to the creation of one of the very few collections of Ethiopian Arabic Islamic manuscripts in Europe.

1. Luigi Robecchi Bricchetti: Some Biographic Data

Luigi Robecchi Bricchetti [2] was born in Pavia on the 21st of May 1855 [3] as an illegitimate son of the nobleman Ercole Robecchi and Teresa Bricchetti, a poor tailor woman. His father never recognized him [4] but kept helping him economically throughout his life. In his native town in Northern Italy he also died on the 31st of May 1926.

He graduated as a mechanic engineer at the Polytechnic Institute in Zürich and then moved to Karlsruhe where he completed his studies [5].

Robecchi Bricchetti's first long trip was to the Libyan Desert in Egypt in 1885—1886. He reached the oasis of Sīwa, which hosted the famous temple of Jupiter Ammon. He visited the ancient ruins whose structure and decoration he described in a series of beautiful sketches. During his stay in Sīwa, Robecchi Bricchetti secretly managed to enter the wide necropolis beside the temple and to collect thirty skulls which are still nowadays kept in the Anthropological Museum of Florence and in the Civic Anthropological Museum of Pavia [6].

In 1888—1889 he carried out his expedition to Harar with which I deal at some length in the following lines.

In 1890 supported by the “Italian Geographical Society” [7] he travelled to the Benaadir region (an Italian protectorate since 1889). He landed in Hobyo where he was hosted for a month by the local sultan, Yūsuf ‘Alī. From Hobyo he headed northwards to explore, for the first time ever, the valley of the Nogal river which he described from a geographical, anthropological, geological and environmental point of view.

In 1891 he was once again in Hobyo as a guest of Yūsuf ‘Alī. From there, he went south to the Webi Sha-beelle which he started exploring [8]. Robecchi Bricchetti tried to penetrate the Somali hinterland: his idea was to reach Harar from Somalia. He did not succeed, due to the Ethiopian pressure on the border areas. He thus decided to completely change direction and moved northwards to Berbera and the “Aromatica regio” (the land of the perfumes: the ancient Punt, where myrrh and frankincense are produced). He explored the Somali

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