

## **GESSI: A man at the service of Gordon Pasha.**

Italian involvement in Sudan dates back to the 800's, with various characters having influenced events in the country. Between explorers, adventurers and others who have left their mark, most notable in Sudanese history was Romolo Gessi, on whom several books have been written, including "Gordon, Gessi and Sudan's re-conquest".

Gessi's life was a tumultuous adventure from beginning to end. Born on the ship taking his exiled parents from Ravenna to Constantinople on the 30<sup>th</sup> April 1831, he died in Suez exactly fifty years later on the 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1881. His mortal remains were later repatriated to Ravenna, his family's town of origin.

The following short history of his life and adventures will shed some light on the military expedition led by Romolo Gessi in Sudan.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> July, 1878, Gessi sailed out from Khartoum on board the steamer "The Bordeen". The orders issued by General Gordon were clear: the former vice-lieutenant and trusted friend was to lead one of the most powerful expeditions of the time, numbering approximately 10,000 men, with orders to re-conquer the Bahr Al-Ghazal and its neighbouring provinces, which had fallen into the hands of Suleiman's zealous rebels. Once there, they were to abolish the slave trade, clear the country of slave traders, and introduce a proper administration.

The campaign, it was assumed, would be gory and horrific, but circumstances appeared propitious and the likelihood of a successful outcome seemed high.

Gessi's group included Paul Virginio Zucchinetti, who accompanied him in the capacity of physician. Zucchinetti was a quarrelsome former Major in the Italian army, an unsuccessful deputy, as well as a self-proclaimed veterinarian and medical doctor with the Catholic Missions of Central Africa, and was strongly predisposed to exploring the regions of the Upper Nile.

The fact is that no sooner was the punitive expedition announced than the number of defections from Gessi's ranks began to swell, quickly becoming mass desertions. Of the 10,000 men originally under his command, towards the end only 40 remained with Gessi - the others having defected and joined the rebels' ranks, together with their arms and baggage. Of these remaining 40, many were drifters and jailbirds - faithless, disorderly, sickly, eager to pillage and loot, and related to the rebel groups that they were supposed to fight.

"Sudan is a gigantic broken-down body, corroded to the very marrow," wrote Gessi at a particularly dispirited moment, "and Gordon's work to raise it up again from this state is nothing but a superficial, puerile attempt that benefits nobody. Gordon is oblivious to what goes on in his administration. To prohibit slavery, for the Arabs, is an unreasonable, dishonest act - a sacrilege that goes against the Koran's rules. The abolitionist campaign invented by the English in order to interfere in the Egyptian government's affairs is only a pretext."

In the middle of "**kharif**" - the rainy season - Romolo Gessi launched a massive forced enlistment campaign, as a result of which he again found himself with 300 regular soldiers and 700 irregular, formless rabble armed with poor guns. There was no sign of Gordon's

promised reinforcements, nor was there a trace of Emin Pasha's two divisions. The local commanders agreed to supply troops, but then reneged proffering various improbable excuses so as not to honour their agreements. Even doctor Zucchini, accused repeatedly of brutality for having flogged several soldiers already weakened from frightful diseases, left for Uganda with an English missionary group.

After shooting a number of officers for inciting soldiers to desert, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of November, Gessi pressed forward into open country, covering swampy paths with grasses over three meters in height, through violently raging hurricanes, navigating the river Ayel on flimsy cane rafts. More than a soldier was overcome with exhaustion, tumbling overboard into the mud, preferring death's liberation rather than to continue on that painful march.

While sailing the river El-Tangi on cane rafts, Gessi learned that Suleiman's relatives, instead of persuading the rebels to put down their arms, had joined the revolt and proceeded to plague the country by extorting taxes. In Wau, at least, 700 armed men joined Gessi's group, mostly Niam Niam tribesmen and a number of bearers. The column resumed the journey through a dense jungle, marching for 7 hours a day. Gessi managed to occupy the road junction post Dem Idris, of remarkable strategic importance, thus preventing the rebels from receiving reinforcements and supplies from Kordofan and Bahr Al-Ghazal.

The morning of the 27<sup>th</sup> December, Suleiman, seething with rage, moved to re-conquer the lost outpost, attacking with no less than 11,000 men. The rebels' flags now fluttered from the 50 metre high barricades, the fortification, and the trenches that Gessi had built. Suleiman was so sure of victory that each of his soldiers wore around his waist a rope with which to tie up the prisoners. A first onslaught, then a second, a third and a fourth – a bomb ripped into two of Gessi's tents, killing his horse. But the defenders fired away, digging chasms into the rebels' ranks, who after three hours of fierce fighting withdrew untidily leaving behind 1,087 dead, thousands of wounded, ammunition, guns and 9 flags.

The winners' triumph was unrestrained; they stripped the corpses, ripping open the bellies of the wounded, stuffing sliced off limbs into mouths, crushing skulls – an orgy of mutilation and torture, culminating with the Niam-Niam's macabre feast of cooked hands and feet of the killed enemies, gulping down the delicious morsels with gusto. Gessi, lost in total 27 men, but was unable to appease the soldiers' barbarian brutality and the tribesmen's cannibalistic rage.

In the meantime, and as a result of his defeat, Suleiman abandoned his remaining 5,000 men, but returned on the 1<sup>st</sup> January with renewed determination. Dem Idris's fort was bombed amidst asphyxiating canon and machinegun fire. The village was besieged. The number of the wounded grew exponentially, but Gessi, without surgeon or medicines, resorted to treating their injuries with what was available: a shaving blade, a penknife and a large blunt needle. He was running out of food, sugar, salt, tobacco and coffee. Ammunition was scarce – the muskets had only 6 remaining charges with 200 for each Remington. So Gessi ordered his men to collect the bullet shells from the ground and extract those embedded in logs and trees, melting them down to make new bullets. Shooting was only allowed when the target was sure. Crushed stones were also used in place of ammunition. But the field was swarming with spies as many officers were in Suleiman's pay.

Nevertheless, Romolo Gessi was not discouraged by doubts; Romolo Gessi knew no hesitation. He rested only a few hours a night, firearm in lap, between one burst of gunfire and another, while the enemy onslaught continued amidst the exploding bombs, under disastrous climatic conditions, impassive, watchful and supervising. "The great warrior does not know fear," murmured the tribesmen. Sometimes they called him father, at other times lion. Perhaps, and heaven only knows, he was motivated by the unexpressed desire to outdo the famous feat of Gordon the Chinese, who had attacked the T'ai-p'ing rebels armed only with a stick. On the 11<sup>th</sup> March, finally the scarce ammunitions arrived from Laddò, and Gessi decided to break the exhausting stalemate. He knew that Suleiman could hardly rely on 3,000 men, mostly Arabs of the Mandala tribe, and that confusion between his adversaries was at its highest pitch.

The next morning, after occupying the enemy positions, now deserted and reduced to ashes behind a dense wall of smoke, Gessi discovered a heap of burned mule and horse corpses. A dozen soldiers in all survived the battle, and immediately set about beheading the natives, hurriedly depositing the severed heads in baskets to present to the victorious Gessi as a sign of awe and admiration.

After eleven hours locked in combat, the night was illuminated by the flickering fire of the torches. The rebels had fled in all directions, amidst a chaos of cheers, sparks and shots, slaughtering the wounded so as to take no prisoners. Filled with anger, half-naked, accompanied by a few remaining faithful, Suleiman vanished northward, abandoning the survivors to a hideous fate.

For the record, Gessi had not received mail for over seven months. He was cut off from the outside world, lost in a dank swamp country, his army decimated by death and scarcity. He could not know that Gordon, overwhelmed by a deficit of 3 million dinars, was facing huge organisational problems. In Darfur, an undisciplined and predatory soldier ruled. The new European governor, Rosset, was poisoned no sooner had he reached Al-Fasher, and in his place governed a usurper, a civil employee traitor, accomplice of the sultan and would-be slaver, Harùn. Meanwhile, the Bahr Al-Ghazal seethed with discontent. In Kordofan, the governor sent by the general was assassinated by Sobahi, a former lieutenant of Zubeir, who in turn hoisted the rebel banner, spreading disorder and dissatisfaction in his wake.

"That poor chap Gessi thinks that I will send him troops," wrote Gordon to his sister Augusta, "but I do not have a single man to send him". He was absolutely unable to supply any assistance to his lieutenant, now engaged in a solitary fight without the help of the Egyptian government, who on the brink of failure, gave Sudan back to the slavers, thus disowning the intransigent general. Gordon had to send his steamer up the White Nile in an attempt to reactivate communications with the Bahr Al-Ghazal.

He then telegraphed the untrusting khedive humbly asking permission to leave for Sciacca and upon the advice of General Stone, the Chief of Staff of the Egyptian Army, engaged in his service two Italian cartographers: Giacomo Bartolomeo Messedaglia and Francisco Emiliani Danziger. The first was a Venetian who had spent several years in the Bekaa Valley and in Celesiria, taking part in various construction jobs, including the road between Maalaka and Baalbek. The second, a native of Udine, had participated in the terracing works of the Suez Canal and accompanied Mitchell the geologist on his adventure trip to Abyssinia. On the 15<sup>th</sup> March, Gordon, who had been awarded the Miralai (General) honour of the Osmanieh third class and a prize of 2000 pounds, increasingly fearful for

Gessi's fate, started a forced march towards the theatre of operations, travelling fast by camel through torrid days and icy nights. He reached Sciacca on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April, freed thousands of slaves who were encamped in the surrounding area, and shot without mercy several of Suleiman's imprudent emissaries. Then he left for Kalaka, an important ivory trading centre. The desolate route through those sparsely populated areas was littered with skulls, bones, and the decomposing corpses of slaves, dead of starvation, hardship or torture.

To Gordon the Sudan appeared a country cursed by God, gangrened by hostility and warfare. The central government was against him, his struggle and effort all in vain. Corruption was widespread, and the extent of the evil immense. The slave-hunters had invaded every inch of this enormous territory, reducing the vegetation to ashes, destroying even the boats and the small clusters of banana trees. A verdant country was now nothing more than a miserable wilderness; they had massacred thousand of adult males, captured the children and women, and plundered the ivory, the livestock and even the poultry.

All of a sudden, Gordon felt a piercing longing for unexciting England. An atrocious feeling of impotence haunted him. At times he succumbed to his own panic, but nonetheless, mechanically continued to seize caravans of slaves, whip employees, and fire civil servants. Then at last on the 26<sup>th</sup> April in a sudden frenzy of activity, he organised the delivery of ammunition to Gessi. Escorted by 2,000 men, these munitions had been expedited to Meshra el-Rek nearly two months earlier.

This was just in time, because in Dem Idris, a smallpox epidemic had inflicted heavy casualties. In a single week, 160 of sheik Calliongo's men had died. Apart from the irregular troops, Gessi now had under his orders 6 complete divisions, made up mostly of former slaves who had enlisted themselves in the service voluntarily. On the other hand, it appears that Suleiman had fewer than 3000 men, either forcibly recruited or slaves.

A week later, Gessi's column entered the slavers' territory, and the enemy troops fled. According to the records, the two defeated commanders – Hamit Bey and Etman Tayalla – immediately disappeared. Suleiman, on the other hand, had been glimpsed from afar, immobile on his horse in front of the fortifications' gates, before escaping with some guards. An hour of fierce galloping was not enough to seize him, as he was clearly mounted on a much faster steed, recounted several of his pursuers.

When Gessi returned to the field, out of breath, the troops had already plundered huts and warehouses, making away with ivory bracelets for a value of 4,000 pounds, 30,000 thalers of trading goods, mostly Fazoglu gold bars, arms, canons, and even of suksuk soap flakes. Gessi only barely tore from their grip Suleiman's personal papers – including his father, Ziber Rahmat's letters, which proved the old merchant's connivance in the revolt. It appeared that the rebellious slave, escorted by his lieutenant Rabah, had headed for Darfur to join Harùn the "false sultan" and to foment a general uprising there. Determined to end it once and for all, Gessi did not hesitate to leave with 600 hand picked soldiers, each of whom carried only 120 single bullets and flour for 4 days.

The march was fast, proceeding blindly in the lashing rain like a pack of dogs in the mud, battered by uninterrupted and unprecedented hurricane weather conditions. During the night they encamped under a magnificent *digitata Adansonia* - a gigantic Baobab - in an ashen, burned out village, amongst the discarded hip bones, slaughtered corpses, smashed skulls and crippled limbs, which served as meals to the vultures. A providential

encounter with some women of Suleiman's entourage, who had remained behind with a cargo of smoked antelope meat, allowed them to partially appease their hunger.

The women kissed Gessi's feet imploring for mercy, then hurriedly recounted that the slaver Suleiman was heading to Demaraia village, a day and half away. Gessi had 400 men, while Rabah, leading the rearguard - which planned to join the column of another rebel, Idris el-Sultan - had approximately 300 soldiers.

At two in the morning, Gessi ambushed Rabah and defeated his adversaries without resistance, although Rabah, like Suleiman before him, succeeded in vanishing by galloping away under cover of darkness. Then Gessi proceeded to attack Idris's troops. Idris had been trapped by the violent storm, and had chosen to set up camp under a large tamarind tree, together with his court and harem. No sooner were the metallic roars of fusillade firing heard, louder than the claps of thunder, than he realised that his men had fallen in an ambush. He escaped with his life, abandoning arms and ammunitions, tents and harnesses, bulls, horses, donkeys and saddlebags, flags and drums, slaves and provisions.

Now they had an abundance of provisions, but they still continued literally to proceed in the dark. Information on the whereabouts of the elusive Suleiman was scanty and often conflicting, gleaned here and there from informers' relations or hearsay voiced by the local aborigines. He was a day from here, or perhaps there; close by – or perhaps ten miles away... At times, Gessi was indeed convinced of being on the tracks of the slaver, but then he would encounter a dispersed column of rebels, themselves desperately seeking Suleiman. It was clear that the fugitive had sheltered in Baku's *zeriba*, which lay just beyond a destroyed forest completely deprived of streams or water wells.

At last, when Gessi re-entered Suleiman's former territory, a message from general Gordon arrived informing him that Messedaglia had reached Darfur, where the new governor had appointed him and his deputy Emiliani, and that they were expecting the arrival of another European Officer, the Austrian Rudolph Slatin. Egypt's Khedive had issued the order to entrust the assignment to a native sultan, but Gordon appeared increasingly resistant to telegraphic diktat from Cairo. Partially reassured, on May the 29<sup>th</sup> Gessi began hunting the elusive slaver with 550 men, a pathetic rocket and 12 shots.

A local spy who knew the acacia, tamarind, and baobab-studded surrounding area like the palm of his hand, served as his guide. Gessi left for Dara, the capital of Darfur, but was again left in the lurch by the guide and risked dying of thirst when he and his men became lost in the arid and desolate landscape. At Dara with Messedaglia, he worked out his plan to attack Suleiman, and started closely following the rebel with 275 men, clearing the way to Gebel Marrah. A forced march of three days and three nights followed, under a pelting deluge on flooded lands. They learned that the enemy had a force of nearly 2,000 men in three different columns – two of which were led by Abdulgassim and Rabah, both of whom would readily abandon their slaver boss to his fate. Suleiman was accompanied by his relatives, some chiefs, and an approximately 800 soldiers who were almost dead of hunger and hardship. He camped in Gara to wait for the weather to improve before resuming his escape. He did not suspect anything, which meant that Gessi needed to use the surprise factor to his advantage.

The night of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> July, Gessi set up camp a couple of hours' away from Suleiman's *zeriba*. He ordered that no fires be lit, so as not to alert the enemy camp. He

also decided not to attack at night, and deprive the slaver of any chance of escaping under cover of darkness. Gessi then resumed the march and took up positions a couple of hundred meters away from Suleiman's encampment. There were no lookouts or guards. Gessi concealed his men in the thick bushes surrounding the *zeriba* and sent a messenger into the camp with a note for Suleiman, saying: "I accord you five minutes of time in order to surrender, after which we will attack from all sides. You are surrounded".

Endless moments of apprehension followed, filling them with doubt and anxiety. Was it a gamble, were they bluffing? Success and failure were fifty-fifty. Perched in a tree, Gessi glimpsed his messenger, Sheik, Ismaen, cautiously approaching Suleiman's tent, unaccosted. He saw him exchange a few quick words with a slave, who hastily entered the tent. Shortly after, in the encampment, pandemonium broke out.

The indistinct men's voices joined the women's shrill wails and children's screams. Amidst the deafening din, Gessi ordered his men to further add to the confusion by sounding the bugles and striking the drums. Many soldiers took advantage of the confusion to escape into the bush.

Ten minutes went by and Suleiman came out under the rain, followed by a swarm of civil employees and relatives (brothers, cousins, uncles, grandsons). Slender and arrogant, the slaver wore an incongruous red coat and a belt with a topaz-studded buckle. He presented himself before Gessi and imperturbable, declared himself prisoner. The escaping wild animal humiliates itself, submitting, therefore surrendering its dishonor in exchange for its life.

Gessi, incredulous, ordered the seizure of all arms, surrounded the *zeriba* which he had encircled with pickets, captured the slaver's troops and seized the slaves.

When he realized that Gessi only had under his orders a handful of barefoot and emaciated men, Suleiman let out a cry. The scene was surrealistic. Turning to Mussa Wad-El-Hag, a former civil employee of the Egyptian government, sobbing and in tears, Suleiman accused him: "You told me that there were 3,000 men, and instead they are 300!" After which he remained silent, furious and disheartened, convinced of having been tricked and sorry to have stupidly surrendered when he could have attempted a surprise attack.

While the invincible Suleiman ruminated and recriminated, Gessi requisitioned the camp and discovered five saddled horses ready for a getaway and a considerable cache of arms and ammunitions. He had to remain calm and attentive. Without further ado, he had Suleiman line up against the wall, alongside his relatives and chiefs. The firing squad loaded the few still working Remingtons. The rebels, to their honor and merit, were shot down without a word, except for Mussa Wad-El Hag, who burst out crying like a child. Suleiman – whose skull was shattered by a bullet, fainted, and fell lifeless like a deflated rag against the rampart.

At this point, Romolo Gessi replaced his sword. The revolt was now under control. The last of Suleiman's partisans, who had dispersed in the bushes and high grasses, fell one by one under fire, together with the fugitives and deserters. Within a few weeks, the other rebel chiefs' strength was sapped. Idris-El-Sultan was sentenced, and Abdulgassim, was hanged, accused among others, to have personally conducted human sacrifices.

Only Rabah succeeded in escaping. After wandering the equatorial regions all the way up to the shores of Lake Chad, and after many bloody fights, he went on to build a powerful empire in Baghirmi and Bornù, until he too was eliminated – 21 years after Suleiman – by the joint French missions of Gentil, Faureau-Lamy and Joalland-Meynier.

As for the *false sultan Harùn*, after escaping Slatin's grip (Messedaglia and Emiliani later died of consumption in 1882), he attempted an audacious incursion on Dara, but was repulsed and, after an extraordinary pursuit on horseback, found sanctuary in Gebel Marrah's mysterious labyrinthine cliffs. Abandoned by his people, reduced to beggary, he was eventually shot dead in March 1880, and his head was sent to Khartoum.

Gessi died some months before Comboni, "who, like Gessi and Gordon, was at the center of a fundamental historical process, their lives interlaced, bringing irreversible changes to Sudan's history": the stage was set for the Mahdi's fundamentalist nationalist uprising.