

Imperato PJ (1998) *Quest for the Jade Sea: Colonial Competition around an East African Lake*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press

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In the late African afternoons, when the sun is setting and the wind descending from Mount Kulal in Kenya subsides, the surface of Lake Rudolf – also known as Lake Turkana – turns a shade of green so strikingly similar to jade that it is attributed to particular algae slowly rising to the surface (Imperato, 1998: 3). This evocative image provides the inspiration for the book’s title, which Bartle Bull describes as a “vivid account” of the rivalries, emerging in the nineteenth century, among European powers competing for control of the lake’s shores.

Pascal James Imperato offers a historical analysis of what he terms *eurocolonialism*, marked by “treachery” (Imperato, 1998: 5), which shaped the policies of France, Italy, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Great Britain. Only the latter, however, succeeded in playing a decisive role, confronting the Ethiopia of Menelik II (*Negus Neghesti* from 1889 to 1913), who pursued both diplomatic foreign policies and expansionist action in the region. Imperato thus provides a vivid portrayal of East Africa under colonial scrutiny and of the many explorers who contributed to increasingly precise mapping.

The methodological approach is classical. Over fifteen years, Imperato consulted an impressive body of explorers’ publications and analyzed numerous primary sources such as letters, diaries, diplomatic dispatches, and confidential reports. This enabled him to address broader political issues, as Lake Rudolf lies on the border between Kenya and Ethiopia and receives its inflow from the Omo River. The lake was named “Rudolf” in 1888 by Count Teleki, in honor of the Austrian Crown Prince.

The book is divided into fifteen chapters, and the fluid narrative draws readers into the scene. Imperato skillfully describes the arrival of European explorers at Lake Rudolf from the mid-nineteenth century, when maps were still incomplete and the so-called

armchair geographers dominated scholarly debates. The “old explorers” – Burton, Speke (who discovered Lake Victoria in 1858), Krapf, Rebmann, New, Wakefield, Stanley, and Livingstone – gradually gave way to new figures such as Verney Lovett Cameron and Henry Morton Stanley. Imperato organizes the arrival of Europeans by sponsoring nation, outlining their strategies, political-diplomatic approaches, and anecdotes drawn from explorers’ own accounts.

Austria-Hungary’s entry, marked by Zanzibar’s independence in 1862 and Teleki’s arrival at Lake Samburu in 1886, is examined first. The American presence is narrated through Smith’s exploration and his attempts to persuade Menelik II to allow an expedition into the Ethiopian highlands, despite the latter’s fear that foreign ambitions would jeopardize the Lake Rudolf region. British engagement in the area is portrayed as significant, highlighting the geopolitical rivalry between Kitchener and Marchand in attempting to intercept Ethiopia, where Menelik II pursued a policy of self-preservation, confrontation, and later accommodation. Diplomatic efforts by Lord Salisbury and Rodd (Imperato, 1998: 197–207) regarding the Anglo-French boundary negotiations and the British delineation of the Sudan–Ethiopia frontier after the fall of the Mahdist state (Imperato, 1998: 231–240) are analyzed in detail.

Italy’s involvement proves epoch-making, particularly in relation to Ethiopia, and is effectively presented in Chapter 8, “Italians at the Source” (Imperato, 1998: 143–155). Imperato traces historical milestones such as the occupation of Massawa, Bottego’s expeditions, the Battle of Metemma in 1889 (resulting in Yohannes IV’s death), the clash at Adwa between Menelik II and King Umberto I of Italy, and the Crispi–Rudini political transition. The Russian section focuses on the unifying role of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the phenomenon of “black-upon-black colonialism” of a non-racist character, and the 1895 encounter – engineered by Leontiev – between an Ethiopian delegation and Tsar Nicholas II, which positioned Russia as mediator in Ethiopia’s diplomatic affairs.

The volume closes with a detailed five-page chronology and meticulous notes.

Positioned within the broader historical-geographical research tradition, the monograph provides both a geographical account of

exploration in the Lake Rudolf region and a substantial historical reading of the political figures who governed the surrounding states.

Several authors have addressed similar themes. Alan Moorehead, for example, produced two volumes – *The White Nile* and *The Blue Nile* – though his approach has often been criticized as “insensitive,” paying insufficient attention to local populations. Ian Parker’s *Jua Kali’s Voyage on the Jade Sea*, reviewed by Imperato himself, presents a straightforward “sailing history” of Lake Rudolf. Compared to these works, Imperato demonstrates greater descriptive sensitivity, though still at an early stage: he narrates the arrival of the *outsiders* but devotes limited space to those who experienced colonization directly, except for brief digressions on local customs reported by explorers (e.g., Maasai circumcision, elephant hunting).

Reading this book, one perceives a largely Eurocentric perspective. Imperato highlights the achievements of European explorers – whose accounts he studied for fifteen years – and portrays local actors as hindrances to the process, without engaging deeply with their needs, trampled rights, or silenced voices. Moreover, postcolonial theories receive little attention: the effects of colonization are rarely analyzed, aside from passing references to the 1970 agreements between the United Kingdom and Kenya or post-Mahdist Sudanese–Ethiopian boundaries. Nor does Imperato explore in depth the socio-political relationships between colonizers and colonized. For instance, in discussing Menelik, he does not examine his interactions with the *ras* (provincial governors) or with Emperor Yohannes IV, which might have shed light on the resentment attributed to Menelik. Instead, Menelik appears primarily as a figure of doubt, counterposed to European colonial ambitions.

Imperato’s work thus constitutes an invaluable resource for analyzing European diplomatic strategies in the contest over Lake Rudolf and the different political-diplomatic approaches adopted toward Ethiopia’s *Negus Neghesti* Menelik II. Each chapter provides historical data, references to European political figures (arranged by nation), and accounts of geographical discoveries. The text is enriched by thematic windows on sociocultural practices observed by explorers, as well as by a substantial monochromatic iconographic and cartographic apparatus. The bibliography is broad and carefully curated.

This book will undoubtedly benefit students of international relations, researchers, professors, and enthusiasts interested in deepening their understanding of the historical, geographical, political-institutional, sociocultural, and anthropological dimensions of the Upper Nile, Ethiopia, Kenya, and the communities surrounding Lake Rudolf.

References

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