Modern Italy, 2014
Vol. 19, No. 4, 405–419, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.939164

Conflicting obituaries: the Abyssinian 'outlaw' Debeb as treacherous bandit and romantic hero in late nineteenth-century Italian imagination

Stephen C. Bruner*

Independent Scholar

(*Received 30 April 2013; final version accepted 17 September 2013*)

In 1886 the Abyssinian chief Debeb became a public figure in Italy as a rapacious colonial bandit. However, over the next five years he acquired additional public personas, even contradictory ones: as a *condottiero* ally, a ladies' man, a traitor, a young Abyssinian aristocrat and pretender to an ancient throne, a chivalrous warrior, and a figure representing the frontier and an Africa mysterious and hidden to Europeans. Upon his 1891 death in combat, he was the subject of conflicting Italian press obituaries. For some commentators, Debeb exemplified treacherous and deceitful African character, an explanation for Italy's colonial disappointments and defeats. However, other commentators clothed him in a romanticised mystique and found in him martial and even chivalrous traits to admire and emulate. To this extent his persona blurred the line demarcating the African 'other'. Although he first appeared to Italians as a bandit, the notion of the bandit as a folk hero (the 'noble robber' or 'social bandit', Hobsbawm) does not fit his case. A more fruitful approach is to consider his multi-faceted public persona as reflecting the ongoing Italian debate over 'national character' (Patriarca). In the figure of Debeb, public debates over colonialism and 'national character' merged, with each contributing to the other.

Keywords: Debeb; bandit; national character; colonialism; Italy; Africa

Introduction

In October 1891 Agenzia Stefani, the semi-official Italian news agency, announced the death in combat of the Abyssinian chief Debeb. No introduction of Debeb to newsreaders was necessary. He was a well-known colonial figure, one of the three or four indigenous leaders on whom Italian commentators had spent the most ink. Within the next few days newspapers across Italy carried extended obituaries or shorter death notices. The Rome newspaper *La Riforma* (1891) devoted more than a full column on its folio-size front page to his obituary. It reviewed Debeb's life and condemned him as a 'rebel' and inveterate practitioner of treachery and betrayal in the African Horn. It concluded that his death was a good thing for Italy's colony. The paper's characterisation of Debeb implicitly explained Italy's colonial disappointments and defeats as the result of indigenous treachery, with Debeb as the exemplar. Yet at the same time another obituary – this one a full column in Milan's *Corriere della Sera* (1891b) – praised the 'adventurer' for his martial virtues as a leader who was 'courageous, intelligent, energetic and resolute', and had even performed chivalrous acts. Without condoning deceit or betrayal, the

*Email: scbruner@comcast.net

paper found in Debeb traits for Italians to admire and emulate. The conflicting obituaries provoke the question: Who was Debeb in Italian eyes?

Two different approaches to understanding the chief suggest themselves. First, he initially came to Italian public attention as a 'bandit'. Since the 1960s an abundant scholarly literature has developed around the notion of the 'noble robber' or 'social bandit' as a folk hero (see Hobsbawm 2000 [1969]; Slatta 2004; Seal 2011), and late nineteenth-century Italians read popular adventure stories featuring such heroes.[1] More recent scholarship, however, finds the notion of the noble robber-social bandit simplistic, and that is the case in regard to Debeb.[2] To Italians, Debeb's persona was kaleidoscopic and complex. Beginning as an audacious and cruel colonial bandit, he assumed additional, even contradictory public images: as a *condottiero* ally, a ladies' man, a traitor, a young aristocrat and pretender to the ancient Abyssinian throne, a chivalrous warrior, and a figure representing the frontier and an Africa mysterious and hidden to European eyes. Although related to the Abyssinian emperor, at different times he fought for Italy against Abyssinia, for Abyssinia against Italy, and against both Italy and Abyssinia simultaneously. He was first romanticised after he became a mercenary in Italian service, not earlier while he was a bandit. He was killed in combat against rival Abyssinian forces, not Italian. To the extent that he was portrayed as a heroic figure, the portrayals stemmed from Italian sources, not African. In any case he demonstrated no affinity for Africa's poor and hungry; to them he seems to have been a predator rather than a benefactor.[3]

The second and more fruitful approach is to consider Debeb's public persona in connection with the ongoing Italian debate over 'national character'. As Silvana Patriarca (2010, 71–107) has shown, in both the literature and public discussion of the 1880s Italians were drawn to a discourse about 'national character', taken as the traits or predispositions that informed their public outlook, and especially to the martial virtues such as bravery, endurance, self-confidence and resoluteness. Moralists preached these virtues, fearing that they were lacking among Italians and seeing their absence as the cause of Italy's domestic and international disappointments and defeats. They also wrestled with alleged differences between a soft 'Latin' and a hardy 'Anglo-Saxon' character. In the figure of Debeb, the concurrent public debates over colonialism and national character merged, with each contributing to the other. Italians constructed and re-constructed Debeb's character as they sought to make sense of their colonial experience. Some commentators took his reputation for treachery as evidence of indigenous character in general. Yet he was an alluring figure to Italian imagination, and at his death other commentators found traits to admire – traits considered worthy of Italians – especially the martial virtues. In effect they preached these traits and virtues to Italian readers, to this extent blurring the line demarcating the African 'other'.

This article traces the accretions to Debeb's persona, noting how they reflected both Italian character discourse and Italy's colonial experience. They are seen through five successive stages: Debeb as bandit, *condottiero* ally, defector, traitor, and aristocratic pretender. In the move from one stage to another, new images became salient in public discussion, but the old ones did not necessarily pass away. By the time of his death Debeb had a multi-faceted persona. The multiple facets allowed Italians to pick and choose their preferred way or ways of reading his character, resulting in the conflicting obituaries noted above.

Debeb the bandit

Italy's first military thrust into Africa took place in 1885 with the occupation of Massaua ('Massowah', 'Medsau'a'),[4] a port on the Red Sea. The occupation occurred with the quiet

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.939164 Published online by Cambridge University Press

approval of Britain (then in control of Egyptian administration) and without local indigenous resistance. Having occupied Massaua, Italy began to expand inland. However, the area was home to armed bands and tribes engaged in continuing warfare in pursuit of cattle, hostages and slaves. They warred with one another and with passing caravans, and also with the Abyssinians to the south and the dervishes to the west (Sudan), both of whom sought control.[5] Meanwhile at home colonial affairs became the subject of nationwide debate and an almost daily topic in the larger newspapers.[6]

Debeb came to Italian public attention in 1886 as a raider of caravans and villages. His home territory was in a frontier region south and west of the Italian-occupied area. In September the widely circulated Rome newspaper *La Tribuna* described a bloody clash between Debeb's band and Italian troops. The paper was a leading reporter of colonial news to the metropole.[7] It regarded itself as a voice on the political left but in opposition to the Depretis government, and during Debeb's time was increasingly anti-colonial.[8] Although *La Tribuna* was not the only large paper with an Africa correspondent, other papers regularly noted its Africa dispatches.

In recounting the clash, the Rome paper explained that Debeb was said to be related to the Abyssinian emperor Giovanni IV ('Johannes', 'Iohannes'), but out of favour with the emperor and excluded from power because viewed as a potential rival for the imperial throne. After the emperor imprisoned his father, Debeb abandoned the court and led a well-armed gang of raiders. His clash with the Italians did not represent hostilities between Abyssinia and Italy, since their relations at that time were not yet openly hostile and Debeb was an enemy of both. *La Tribuna* characterised Debeb's band as 'robbers' and 'bandits', and Debeb as their 'fierce chief' and 'Abyssinian outlaw' (1886a). Northern Italians had previously used such epithets to describe resistance to the new Italian state in its 1860s war in the south, portraying their adversaries as ordinary criminals, devoid of basic moral scruples and not worthy of protection by the rules of war (Davis 1988, 75). Other newspapers also offered accounts of Debeb's raids. An Africa correspondent for Milan's *Corriere della Sera* observed that '[t]he great concern at Massaua for now is always Debeb' (Echis 1886).

The first clash reportedly ended more or less in a draw, with almost equal casualties on both sides. Another clash, noted in the press two months later, turned out worse for the Italians. Attempting to come to the aid of a caravan under attack by Debeb, Italian-led indigenous troops were driven off. Commenting on the clash, *La Tribuna* (1886b) warned fretfully that 'every day Debeb's band is becoming more aggressive and bold, and with every passing day it shows supreme contempt for our forces'. The 'bandit' was acquiring the reputation among literate Italians of an audacious predator, a development that challenged both Italian martial character and military effectiveness. *La Tribuna* implied that greater Italian boldness and aggressiveness were required in response.

Debeb the *condottiero* ally

The Italian colonial command had little prospect of being able to capture the chief. Instead, it gave some thought to the alternative of buying him off by hiring him and his band as mercenaries in Italian service. It initially discarded the idea as being too offensive to neighbouring Abyssinia (Piccinini 1888, 111). However, in early 1887 the outbreak of colonial war dispelled the command's previous hesitancy. A large Abyssinian force surprised and destroyed a column of some 500 Italian troops at Dogali, 36 kilometres inland from Massaua. The Italians withdrew from their advanced posts, sought reinforcements from Italy, and declared a colonial state of war. In the meantime they had to face both Abyssinian forces and raiders like Debeb (Belcredi 1887a).

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.939164 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The ambush seemed to reflect a lack of military reconnaissance, intelligence, and knowledge of both people and territory. Hiring local fighters for exploratory missions was one way to respond, and it had the added benefit of co-opting some of the armed bands in the area. To the Italians, Debeb's deep animosity toward the emperor and his chiefs offered hope of an alliance.

By November 1887 the Italian press reported that the 'notorious outlaw' was seeking to join with Italy. He came to Massaua escorted by 15 of his men to 'submit' to the colonial commander. As finally agreed, he put his band of a few hundred men at the disposition of the command in exchange for a monthly stipend and a quantity of rifles and cartridges (Belcredi 1887b). Journalists noted approvingly that he had not sought money for himself but only to pay his band (Chiesi and Norsa 1888, 66–67). The implication was that Debeb was not motivated by the money but by the justifiable desire to strike back against the emperor. He also gave hostages to guarantee his loyalty. Debeb was not the first 'bandit' to be taken into Italian service, but Italians saw the alliance with him as a coup, a blow to Abyssinia at a time when Italy was still hurting from its loss at Dogali and needed some good news. Now published reports from the colony began to take a more appreciative view of Debeb's character. He moved up considerably in Italian regard from bandit to *condottiero* ally. New characterisations soon appeared in public print, which helped to justify the Italian hiring of a chief so recently an outlaw.

Within weeks *Corriere della Sera*'s Africa correspondent interviewed 'this Abyssinian [who] has suddenly become our ally'. To the interviewer's surprise, Debeb hardly seemed the martial type. He reported that the chief was short in stature, placid in disposition and unimpressive in dress, and with an 'infantile curiosity' in the interviewer's watch chain and buttons. The correspondent observed that certainly no one would guess that the man in front of him was a feared bandit (Mantegazza 1887). Debeb seemed readily controllable. These observations must have been comforting to those readers in the metropole who felt uneasy about the new ally's reputation for fierceness and cruelty.

An early 1888 artist's sketch (Figure 1), said to be the first prepared of the chief, was consistent with such a comforting view, and a correspondent assured newsreaders that it bore a 'great resemblance' to the chief (Filippini 1888, 54). Yet artists' renderings of the chief were rare, and photographs of him were non-existent since, unlike other indigenous chiefs, Debeb

Figure 1. Engraver's rendering of Debeb.
Source: *Illustrazione Militare Italiana* 1888, 54.

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.939164 Published online by Cambridge University Press

seems never to have agreed to be photographed (Palma 2005, 55, n. 54). Consequently journalists and authors, especially those on the scene, had considerable leeway to see in Debeb what they wanted to see and what their readers wanted to read.

Thus another correspondent (Belcredi 1887b) described the chief in a way that highlighted his supposed martial virtues and mystique:

> … a very handsome man, twenty-eight years old, and among so many of these well known bandits … he stands out as the most martial and resolute type … . [H]e has the eye of a hawk … the eye of a man continually at war, who never relaxes and seems to want to see inside of things and men.

How does one recognise the 'eye of a hawk'? The correspondent was focusing on Debeb's hoped-for raiding and reconnaissance value to Italy, for which the 'eye of a hawk' was an apt metaphor.

Besides newspaper and periodical coverage of Debeb, the colonial conflict provoked the writing of numerous books describing and explaining the conflict to readers and in that process discussing and characterising Debeb.[9] Among these, Giuseppe Piccinini's 1887 *Guerra d'Africa* probably did more than any other publication to clothe Debeb with a romanticised mystique. Piccinini aimed his work at a wide popular audience, seeking to take advantage of the increased nationwide demand for Africa copy following the defeat at Dogali.[10] He offered readers a compendium of such material from 1886 and 1887, initially in 50, soon expanded to 150 instalments,[11] which he then gathered together into three volumes containing reprinted newspaper dispatches, official reports, letters, personal opinion and fascinating stories, with an engraving of an African scene for each instalment, plus obituaries of Dogali's fallen Italian officers. His work contained several extended representations of Debeb and his deeds, and eventually was expanded by another volume describing colonial events in 1888 – evidence of the popularity of his series and readers' thirst for Africa news. Piccinini's tone was pro-colonial and protective of the army and its decisions, including the decision to hire Debeb.

In contrast to other commentators, Piccinini did not soften Debeb's notoriety as a cruel bandit. He built on it. He said that villagers were terror-stricken by the outlaw, and he described Debeb as such a bloody and rapacious raider as to be exceptional even by Abyssinian standards (Piccinini 1887, 69–70). Yet he went further, presenting Debeb as a mysterious, even somewhat ghostly figure. Here Piccinini was willing to use imagined scenes and dialogue. He devoted five pages to Debeb's arrival at Massaua to join with Italy, beginning with a page worthy of a cheap novel's introductory atmospherics. According to his account, Debeb took the initiative in seeking an alliance, and arrived suddenly, alone, without notice and without being discovered on the way, in front of an Italian guard post at Massaua to present his proposal to the colonial commander. A taste of Piccinini's prose (1887, 88, 90):

> The sun had set for more than an hour.
>
> Silence reigned at Massaua almost as profound as in our European cities after the midnight bell … .
>
> Suddenly, in one of the desert ways around Massaua, a strange, a singular personage appeared who emerged from who knows where.
>
> He wore the dress of an Abyssinian warrior … .

Not recognising the chief, the Italian corporal of the guard called for an indigenous soldier to interpret. As soon as the interpreter saw Debeb, he let out a yell and tried to get away. The corporal restrained him, and the interpreter asked, 'But don't you know who this is?'. The Italian corporal joked: 'Is he perhaps the devil?', to which the interpreter eventually replied,

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.939164 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'But it's Debeb, the rebel, Debeb, the chief of those who have declared war on the Negus [the Abyssinian emperor] … Debeb, the chief of those who attack and destroy the caravans' (Piccinini 1887, 90–91).

Beyond writing in such a novelistic way to sell his work, Piccinini gave a twofold message to readers. First, Debeb terrified the *indigeni* (though not the Italian corporal) and would do the same to Abyssinian troops. Second, he knew the hidden desert pathways around Massaua. Both were good reasons for Italy to employ him. Debeb's resolute nature, his animosity towards the emperor, plus his giving of hostages would assure his trustworthiness, though Piccinini (1887, 220) soon conceded that Debeb had no love for the Italians either.

According to the colonial command soon after, the chief was raiding deep into Abyssinian territory. It reportedly called Debeb 'the best of the best' among Italy's indigenous forces (Belcredi 1888). Piccinini (1888, 111) added that Debeb knew the trails around Abyssinia 'step by step'. A journalist complained, 'Before, Debeb was never named by the newspapers without the usual qualifier of great robber [*ladrone*]; now I have seen some papers that even call him the Garibaldi of Abyssinia …', an apparent reference to Debeb as the liberator of Abyssinia from the current emperor's alleged tyranny. The journalist also noted that Italian students professed to admire Debeb (Mantegazza 1888, 199–200). Debeb's persona was embellished by reports that he had been quite a ladies' man at the Abyssinian court before deserting to become a bandit (Fasolo 1887, 209; Piccinini 1887, 70).[12] A correspondent reported that he had overheard a European *signora* in the colony saying that she would not despise an attempt by Debeb at seduction (Belcredi 1888). By March 1888 a romanticised image of Debeb, 'the handsome Debeb, the daring adventurer', was in Italian circulation, overlaying his previous bandit image (Belcredi, 1888).

Debeb the defector

That month news came to Italy of the unexpected: Debeb had changed sides, obtaining forgiveness from the emperor (Belcredi 1888). In departing, he did not incite a sudden uprising or a surprise revolt. He disappeared quietly from an Italian camp with his band, rifles, cartridges and money. Before leaving, he made gifts to some of his recent acquaintances, showing (one journalist wrote) as good manners as any 'old country gentleman' who had been someone's house guest (Belcredi 1888).[13] Debeb's defection provoked public finger-pointing at the gullible who had been taken in by his image. Some anti-colonial journalists now blamed the colonial command for having foisted a false Debeb onto the public. It had described him effusively, they claimed, as if he were a fictional lord in some novel, and as a courageous chief, a tamer of horses, a great hunter, and a proud *condottiero* who was also 'chivalrous' in his 'deference' to white women. They even asserted that the fictional portrayals of Debeb had stirred young women in Italy to 'want to share the fate of that unfortunate pretender to Solomon's throne' (Chiesi and Norsa, 1888, 122). The theme paralleled that of a contemporary Giovanni Verga short story, in which a Sicilian peasant girl falls in love with a notorious bandit, sight unseen and based only on her imagination stirred by village talk. She leaves home and family to join him as he seeks to evade the authorities in the countryside (Verga 2001 [1880], 133–141). The Verga story surely made the journalists' claim seem familiar and thus more plausible.

The finger-pointing gave rise to public debate over the reasons for Debeb's defection. Piccinini (1888, 130) saw the defection as exemplifying Abyssinian moral laxity: '[That's] Abyssinian loyalty and fidelity!' Debeb had not lived up to his word as an honourable *condottiero* would have. Piccinini soon claimed that Debeb had long been open to revoking his Italian allegiance (1887, 218–223; 1888, 128–133).

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.939164 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A few commentators implicitly blamed the colonial command for the chief's defection. There were peace feelers out to try to settle the colonial war. *La Tribuna*'s correspondent, who had previously extolled Debeb's character, now defended himself by supposing that Debeb had feared the possibility of an eventual Italo-Abyssinian settlement in which the Italians might hand him over to the emperor in exchange for the emperor's concession of Italy's desired colonial boundaries (Belcredi 1888). The argument had plausibility since, shortly after the Dogali defeat, the colonial commander had ransomed Italians held captive by delivering rebel chiefs into Abyssinian hands, where they were cruelly executed. At the time the move had caused a clamour in Italy (Del Boca 2001 [1976], 262–263). The correspondent surmised that Debeb, rather than risking such a pact, had preferred to make his own peace with the emperor. The explanation made Debeb's defection a matter of prudent foresight rather than of some inherent untrustworthiness or character defect. It also implied that the cause of his defection lay with a colonial command that had ignominiously sold out indigenous allies. Yet the ransom had been common knowledge well before Debeb had allied with Italy.

Other journalists (Chiesi and Norsa 1888, 122–127) argued that Debeb had defected because he had become discontented with the army's cautious strategy in the wake of the Dogali defeat. They offered the point as an indirect rebuke to Italy's supposed lack of aggressiveness in the colonial war. In response to the defeat, Italy had first amassed troops and materiel in the colony, and then slowly moved forward to recover the posts abandoned immediately after the defeat. The army fortified as it advanced, expecting any day a further attack by the Abyssinians. Once it had recovered the abandoned posts, it rebuilt the fortifications and awaited the anticipated attack. The attack never came; peace feelers intervened, and then the emperor turned to deal with dervish threats in the west. The Italians began to send troops home. Implicitly criticising the Italian strategy, the correspondents characterised Debeb as 'a man of action', ready to take the war far into Abyssinia, and unhappy with Italy's apparent half-heartedness and sluggishness. They reported that Debeb, while once watching the construction of defensive works, had dryly observed that the Italian troops were 'excellent stone-workers'. On another occasion he had rejected a young Italian officer's request to join him on a raid, saying in effect that the officer was not yet sufficiently hardened and proven in African warfare.[14] The message to readers was that Debeb had wanted to fight, not build fortifications. These points indirectly suggested Italian indolence and passivity, amounting to a challenge to the army to be more aggressive – more like Debeb. His defection had not quenched all Italian admiration for him.

Debeb the traitor

In view of the defection, the press debated whether Debeb's hostages previously delivered to the Italians should now be shot in order to encourage the fidelity of other chiefs. *La Tribuna* (1888a) said that shooting the hostages would contradict Italy's claim to be a civilised society. A frequent *Corriere della Sera* columnist and senator (Corte 1888) called the idea of such reprisals 'insane',[15] and even Piccinini (1888, 131) counselled against it. The command did not shoot the hostages. Instead, in August 1888, hoping to surprise Debeb at the inland town of Saganeiti, it sent a body of indigenous troops commanded by five Italian officers and supplemented by mercenaries. However, the Italian force commander allowed his objective to become widely known, and the force took longer than anticipated to reach Saganeiti. When it arrived, Debeb was waiting. The five Italian officers were soon killed, and the indigenous troops panicked and drew back in a disorder that spread into a general rout.

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.939164 Published online by Cambridge University Press

After the battle accusations of *indigeni* betrayal arose and figured prominently in the official reports and press discussion.[16] The command reported that a band of Italian-paid mercenaries had joined the mission, but had informed Debeb of Italian movements and then had fought alongside him once the battle started. It was bad enough, before, that Debeb as *condottiero* had not kept his word. Now he had induced betrayal by others still in Italian pay. Treachery now appeared as his main character trait, and he became known as 'the traitor' (*Corriere della Sera* 1888b; *La Tribuna* 1888b), an epithet reflective of Italian fear of indigenous betrayal and a low point in public esteem for the chief.

Debeb the pretender

Nonetheless Debeb's character in Italian eyes remained kaleidoscopic. In February 1889 news reached Italy that he had fallen out with the emperor Giovanni and had defeated a substantial imperial force (*La Tribuna* 1889a). He now sought support to dethrone the emperor. *La Tribuna* (1889b) published a letter from Debeb in which he appealed for a new alliance and defended his prior conduct with Italy. Although Debeb sent the letter to the British Governor at Aden, he clearly wrote it for Italian consumption, and *La Tribuna* treated it that way. Debeb cast himself as an honourable and aristocratic claimant seeking to recover his rightful throne. He was the son of a king and an Abyssinian 'prince', whose rank, he claimed, had not been sufficiently 'respected' by the Italians previously. So he had left them, as required by his sense of honour. When he left, he had taken arms and ammunition because they had been given to him and were his, not things temporarily 'on loan' to him. As to his victory over the Italians at Saganeiti, he said that the battle had arisen because the Italians had come after him, not he after them. He said that he 'always oppose[d] iron with iron' – an honourable precept amounting to a claim of self-defence – and that he had never done any wrong to the Italians. He concluded his appeal by pledging loyalty to whoever would help him to recover his throne, whether Italy or Britain. He left his earlier reputation as a cruel bandit unmentioned.

The command responded cautiously to Debeb's plea, but the characterisation of him as a 'pretender' now became his salient image in public discussion, though the other facets of his persona were not forgotten. The Italians had long been nurturing a relationship with Menelik II as a rival to the emperor Giovanni; Menelik was king of Abyssinia's Scioa ('Showa', 'Shoa') region and also had credentials for an imperial claim (Del Boca 2001 [1976], 51–82). For a brief time in early 1889 it seemed that the colonial command might support two imperial claimants: Debeb and Menelik. A public debate began over the relative merits of supporting one over the other. *La Tribuna* headlined the issue: 'Between Menelik and Debeb', and its Africa correspondent referred to both as 'pretenders' (Corazzini 1889a). Debeb's pretender label was much less disturbing to Italian ears than 'bandit', 'defector' or 'traitor'. It also gave Italy more room to overlook his previous conduct and to decide pragmatically whether to support him rather than Menelik. Debeb protested his friendship for Italy (Corazzini 1889b) and appeared to be the more aggressive fighter, who might be better able to sustain his pretender's claim in battle against either Giovanni or Menelik.

However, in March 1889 Giovanni was killed in a battle with the dervishes, suddenly putting the two pretenders head-to-head. The command considered Menelik to be relatively more reliable and pliable than Debeb, but the Italian press also remembered a 'merciful' or chivalrous Debeb after his victory over the Italians at Saganeiti. The chief had forbidden his troops to mutilate or molest the bodies of the slain Italian officers; instead he had had them placed in wooden coffins and deposited in a local church for retrieval by the Italians (Corazzini 1889c).

In the competition for Italian recognition and support, the respective personas and perceived moral characters of the two main claimants to the throne took centre stage.

Menelik seemed to demonstrate his pliability when in May he reached agreement with Italy on a treaty of friendship and commerce. Italy recognised Menelik as the new emperor in exchange for Menelik's acceptance of certain general boundaries desired by the Italians and, according to the later disputed Italian claim, protectorate status for Abyssinia. Plans were made for a Menelik diplomatic delegation to travel to Italy to witness ratification of the new treaty by King Umberto I. Italy's decision to support Menelik seemed made. Yet Debeb, closer to the coast, countered by sending a smaller delegation of his ranking relatives to Italy in a last attempt to win Italian support. His delegation won the race, reaching Italy in mid-July, about a month before Menelik's did. The press was still debating the relative merits of Menelik and Debeb. *La Tribuna* (1889c) headlined the dilemma: 'Menelik or Debeb?' The paper described Debeb as 'unceasing' in pursuit of the throne, and as the one who would be the more dangerous opponent.

Italy's dilemma was suddenly resolved again by events in Africa, shortly before Menelik's delegation arrived. At the end of July the semi-official news agency Stefani informed the press that Debeb had been betrayed and captured by other rivals (not Menelik) (*La Tribuna* 1889d). Part of the report also suggested that Debeb had been playing a double game with Italy and those rivals at the time he was captured. This aspect brought the image of the treacherous Debeb to the fore again. Many Italians enjoyed the irony of Debeb's being betrayed and were now ready to support Menelik. Yet a *Corriere* journalist (Milesi 1889) quoted an unnamed official as cautioning that matters might still change. Debeb was 'very shrewd … very intelligent, full of courage, desirous of glory and honour'. The official warned the journalist that it was not yet assured that Menelik would become the new Negus, and that Italy should be prepared for further surprises. In discussing Debeb, the source characterised him and 'all Abyssinians' as 'liars' and 'breakers of their word'. The characterisation suggested that Menelik's word and character were no more to be trusted than Debeb's. Nevertheless, having a written treaty with Menelik made him seem more trustworthy, while Debeb's shifting public persona counted more heavily against him. The government sent Debeb's delegation back to the colony empty-handed shortly before Menelik's delegation arrived, and Umberto I ratified the treaty with Menelik. Francesco Crispi, then prime minister, turned the delegation's arrival into a state visit that lasted three months and seemed to demonstrate the cultured nature and trustworthiness of Menelik's elite.[17] The next year, 1890, Menelik consolidated his hold on Abyssinia, obtaining submission to his emperorship from his main remaining rivals.

Yet at least some Italians continued to regard Debeb as a dashing, alluring figure. In mid-1890 *La Tribuna*'s Africa correspondent noted that he had received numerous letters and cards from regular readers across Italy wanting to know about the imprisoned chief. In reply the correspondent outlined Debeb's imperial lineage, pictured him as chained up in a mountain fortress, and attempted to alleviate readers' anxieties that the handsome chief might have been blinded by his captors (Corazzini 1890a, 1890b).

The conflicting obituaries

In 1891 Menelik proved to be less pliable than most Italians had expected: he rejected protectorate status for Abyssinia, and Italy broke off negotiations over the matter. The press expressed chagrin and anger now with Menelik. Shortly later, Debeb managed a daring escape – the kind found in novels, one observer noted (Eritreo [pseud.] 1891, 119) – and for a short time it

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.939164 Published online by Cambridge University Press

seemed that he might recover his following. However, he was pursued and killed by Abyssinian forces, leading to the obituaries mentioned at the outset.

Commentators fell into two categories: those who were glad and those who were sad. Those who were glad now saw Debeb's life through the lens of Italian debate over colonial policy and *indigeni* character – who could be trusted? – a debate in which Debeb exemplified the inherently treacherous African character. Those who were sad saw his life through a romanticising lens in which Debeb represented an almost tragic, misunderstood figure possessing many admirable qualities respected by Italians.

Rome's *La Riforma* (1891) concluded that Debeb's death was fortunate for Italy. It characterised him as a 'rebel', a repeated 'promise-breaker' and a 'restless' type, though admittedly also 'audacious and resolute' in combat. It excused the colonial command's earlier decision to employ him as an ally, claiming that 'his pride, his ardour and his aristocratic ways' had initially swayed the command and that he had been treated like a 'prince'. Despite such favoured treatment, he had betrayed Italy at a crucial moment by defecting in early 1888 when Italian forces were anticipating imminent combat with the then Abyssinian emperor Giovanni. Betrayal was thus at the heart of Debeb's character, whether by nature or by culture. The paper said that his death brought to an end any 'illusions' that Debeb or any of the lesser rivals would ever have made faithful allies.

La Riforma was Francesco Crispi's newspaper. Crispi was not in power at the time of Debeb's death, but his previous ministries had endorsed the hiring of Debeb, later had pursued the treaty with Menelik and the visit of the Abyssinian diplomatic delegation to Italy, and favoured dealing exclusively with Menelik to achieve Italian aims in Africa (Antonelli 1891). When Menelik later rejected protectorate status under the new treaty, it was Crispi and his treaty negotiator, Pietro Antonelli, who bore the indignant Italian reaction.[18] In its obituary *La Riforma* was in effect defending Crispi, arguing that neither Debeb nor other provincial chiefs had ever represented a viable alternative to Menelik. Debeb exemplified the unstable and treacherous character of all those chiefs. Despite Menelik's rejection of protectorate status, he was still the best party to deal with to achieve Italian colonial objectives (Antonelli 1891, 64–65). Other papers aligned with Crispi's colonial policy made similar claims. Palermo's *Giornale di Sicilia* (1891) adopted *La Riforma*'s comments as its own, republishing without attribution the entire obituary the next day. More succinctly, *Il Popolo Romano* (1891) in a brief notice said that Debeb's death had 'liberated' the borderlands from 'a dangerous agitator and pretender' whose passing would be a 'great benefit for colonial security'. These papers exemplified those that expressed satisfaction with Debeb's passing from the scene.

The *Corriere della Sera* obituary (1891b) presented a much different Debeb, a romanticised portrayal as favourable to Debeb as it could possibly be without condoning his banditry, deceit and betrayals. It is difficult to attribute the portrayal to anti-colonial sentiments, since the *Corriere* was on the political right and its new managing editor in another context at about the same time expressed support for Italian colonial aspirations.[19] The paper began by noting that Debeb's 16-year-old brother, a student at an Italian school in Turin who had originally been received by the command as a 'hostage' to secure the chief's fidelity, had been given official notice of the death and allowed to depart for Africa. The obituary went on to note Debeb's career as successively an 'adventurer', a 'friend' and a 'traitor', who had led 'a life of audacity and adventure'. He had assumed martial command while still in his teens and had 'an adventurous spirit and a fiery soul'. Still a young man at his death, he had led a band, blandly described in the obituary as 'Abyssinian malcontents' rather than as 'rebels' or 'bandits', that had long eluded both Abyssinian and Italian forces.

According to the obituary, when Debeb became an Italian ally, he did not understand the command's 'hesitancy to enter into action' and displayed both resentment and impatience. His inability to comprehend ultimately led him to return to the emperor. The attempt to capture him at Saganeiti failed due to insufficient Italian caution, but even then Debeb sought to 'propitiate' the command by ordering his men to respect the bodies of the dead Italian officers. Captured by rivals, he escaped after two years and, when pursued, died on the field of battle 'with valour'. In these respects the obituary accepted and followed the outline of the chief's life contained in his 1889 letter seeking an alliance against Menelik. The obituary concluded by characterising Debeb as 'courageous, intelligent, of energetic and resolute style'. The overall tone was one of praise for martial character traits that Italians could admire and share (*Corriere della Sera* 1891b).[20] At various times Italians had lauded other chiefs, but none of those chiefs aroused the simultaneous condemnation, popular fascination and admiration that Debeb and his exploits evoked at his death.[21]

Conclusion

The Debeb narrative was a part of Italy's late nineteenth-century public debate over colonialism. Yet the entire narrative is permeated with the language of good and bad moral character, and contributed to and was influenced by contemporary Italian debate over national character. It evoked comparisons of Debeb's imagined moral character with that of Italians. In the figure of Debeb, the two topics of discussion – colonialism and national character – merged. Italians viewed most indigenous chiefs as unambiguously 'good' or 'bad', depending on their perceived loyalty to the Italians at any given moment. Debeb's persona diverged from this duality as it became multi-faceted. By the time of his death Italians could select from a range of characterisations in assessing his life. Their assessments in turn revealed their own ideals, aspirations and anxieties, feeding back into the debate over national character. Some commentators broadly essentialised and condemned Debeb's character as treacherous – a way of explaining colonial defeats and disappointments – while others found in him traits and virtues worthy of Italian emulation, to this extent blurring the demarcation of the African 'other'.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the editors and anonymous referees of the journal for their comments and suggestions.

Notes

1. Popular fiction presenting outlaw heroes (noble and not) was abundant in nineteenth-century Italy. See Castagnola and Orvieto 2012, 16–64. Late in the century Emilio Salgari was churning out adventure stories for adults and young readers whose protagonists included noble outlaws in distant settings. See Lucas (2012); for an example of the figure, see Salgari (2011 [1898]).
2. See Slatta (2004) for a summary of the criticisms. Hobsbawm (2000 [1969], 47–48) lists nine attributes of the 'noble robber', most of which Debeb's figure fails to satisfy.
3. See, e.g., *La Tribuna* (1886a).
4. In 1891 in his *Nell'Affrica* [*sic*] *italiana*, Ferdinando Martini noted at least seven different ways to spell 'Massaua' (1925 [1891], 24). The variety of spellings in part reflected attempts to transliterate the words and sounds of indigenous, non-Roman characters (usually Semitic) into those of Roman characters. Further, north-eastern Africa in 1891 was a multi-lingual area. Today the choice of Roman-character spellings of indigenous proper nouns may convey contested political and historiographic implications. In this article I use common Italian spellings of indigenous proper nouns as found in my

sources, since the article investigates Italian perceptions of Debeb and the primary sources are therefore necessarily Italian. The first time an Italian spelling for various indigenous proper nouns appears, I note a few of the alternative spellings in parentheses.

5. Bibliographical note: This article touches on several background events in Italy's early colonial history, including (1) Italy's initial occupation of Massaua in 1885, (2) its defeat at Dogali in early 1887, (3) its consequent military build-up in the colony, which reached its apex in early 1888, (4) its defeat at Saganeiti in the summer of 1888, (5) the death of the Abyssinian emperor Giovanni IV, Italy's treaty signed at Uccialli ('Wichale') with his apparent successor, Menelik II, and the Abyssinian diplomatic visit to Italy, all in 1889; and (6) the diplomatic breach between Italy and Abyssinia that emerged in 1891. For details of these events the most accessible and comprehensive secondary sources are Battaglia (1958); Del Boca (2001 [1976]); and Labanca (1993). Having a much larger scope than this article, such historians' works have paid relatively little attention to Debeb. Contemporary journalists and authors paid much more, as this article shows. As starting points in researching the role of the press in early Italian colonialism, see Rainero (1971, 80–201), Nani (2006, 37–96), Pescosolido (2007), Contorbia (2007, 1717–1719 [bibliography]), and Finaldi (2009, 79–95).
6. Finaldi (2009, 85–86); Rainero (1971, 165–166).
7. Farinelli et al. (1997, 185–186); La Malfa (1962, 100). *La Tribuna* had a correspondent in Africa for most of the time referred to in this article.
8. See La Malfa (1962, 102), for a description of *La Tribuna*'s political position up to Dogali.
9. See, e.g., Fasolo (1887), Piccinini (1887), Mantegazza (1888), Piccinini (1888), Chiesi and Norsa (1888), Mantegazza (1896); Bizzoni (1897).
10. Regarding the thirst for colonial news following Dogali, see Rainero (1971, 165–166). For additional background on Piccinini, see Finaldi (2009, 113–122).
11. See Piccinini (1887, 664 [notice to readers]) and Piccinini (1888, 1–2).
12. Fasolo (1887, 209), called Debeb a 'great seducer' at the imperial court.
13. The 'old country gentleman' language describing Debeb's behaviour was reprinted in Piccinini (1888, 133).
14. Chiesi and Norsa (1888, 122–127, 126 [quotes]). To the same effect, Mantegazza (1888, 227).
15. *La Tribuna* (1888a) opposed the urging of the newspaper, *L'Esercito Italiano*, that the hostages be shot; *Corriere della Sera* (1888a) also opposed the idea; and Corte (1888) said that 'we would be committing a crime, about which all Italians would have to be ashamed, if listening to insane advice we were to use reprisals against the hostages given by Debeb'.
16. For the battle's official telegram reports distributed to the press, see *Gazzetta Ufficiale* (1888a, 1888b, 1888c). For newspaper descriptions of the battle and press reactions, see *Corriere della Sera* (1888b, 1888c [quoting the reactions of *La Riforma*, *Fanfulla*, *Il Diritto*, *L'Osservatore Romano* and *La Tribuna*], 1888d); *L'Osservatore Romano* (1888a, 1888b, 1888c [noting the reactions of *Il Popolo Romano*, *Capitan Fracassa*, *Fanfulla*, *La Tribuna*, *Don Chisciotte*, *La Riforma*, *L'Opinione*, *L'Italie* and *Il Diritto*]; *La Tribuna* (1888b, 1888c, 1888d).
17. The press noted approvingly the Abyssinian ambassador's donation to an Italian orphanage for the children of the fallen at Dogali, and his attendance at the opera in Rome. *La Tribuna* (1889e, 1889f).
18. See, e.g., the charge of deception directed at Crispi by *Corriere della Sera* (1891a): 'The country no longer deceived will ask itself … whether it is permissible for a government [Crispi's] for months and months to deceive (the word is a bit harsh but true) public opinion …'.
19. Alfredo Comandini became the managing editor of *Corriere della Sera* at the beginning of September 1891 and expressed his colonial views in connection with the Livraghi scandal trials that began two months later. See Comandini (1891).
20. Turin's *Gazzetta Piemontese* (1891), though reminding readers of Debeb's early bandit career, went so far as to say that under other circumstances Debeb could have been a man 'of great service to his country and to humanity'.
21. Debeb to one side, Italians praised two contemporary chiefs for their loyalty: Adam and Batha Agos. A correspondent once described Adam as an Italian 'beniamino' – a 'Benjamin', an allusion to the biblical favourite son. However, in 1891 he fell under suspicion and his unit was disbanded. Belcredi (1891); *Corriere delle Puglie* (1891). Ferdinando Martini, a deputy and member of the royal commission to advise on colonial policy, praised Batha Agos as the exemplary loyal chief (1925 [1891], 169–172), but the chief revolted in 1895, setting the scene for the Italian defeat at Adua.

Notes on contributor

Stephen C. Bruner, after a career as an attorney, received his PhD in Modern European History from Loyola University Chicago in 2011. His research interests are late nineteenth-century Italian liberalism, journalism and colonialism, and he has written articles previously on Italian colonialism and emigration, and on Italian reliance on indigenous colonial troops. He is preparing a book with the working title of *The Carabinieri Lieutenant: An 1891 Colonial Scandal, the Italian Press, and the Waning of the Civilizing Mission*.

References

Antonelli, P. 1891. "Nell'Africa italiana." *Nuova Antologia* 118: 53–77.
Battaglia, R. 1958. *La prima guerra d'Africa*. Turin: Einaudi.
Belcredi, G. 1887a. "Gli avvenimenti di Massaua: I capricci di Debeb." *La Tribuna*, April 17.
Belcredi, G. 1887b. "Corriere di Massaua: L"arrivo di Debeb." *La Tribuna*, November 14.
Belcredi, G. 1888. "Corriere di Massaua: La defezione di Debeb." *La Tribuna*, March 15.
Belcredi, G. 1891. "Ancora i processi d'Africa: L'arresto di Adam Aga." *La Tribuna*, March 28.
Bizzoni, A. 1897. *L'Eritrea nel passato e nel presente: Ricerche, impressioni, delusioni di un giornalista*. Milan: Sonzogno.
Castagnola, R., and P. Orvieto. 2012. *Ottocento inquieto e misterioso: Romanzi popolari e altri scritti dimenticati della letteratura italiana*. Rome: Carocci.
Chiesi, G., and G. Norsa. 1888. *Otto mesi d'Africa: Con prefazione di Dario Papa*. Milan: Carlo Aliprandi.
Comandini, A. 1891. "Il processo di Massaua." *Corriere della Sera*, November 28–29.
Contorbia, F. 2007. *Giornalismo italiano 1860–1901*. Milan: A. Mondadori.
Corazzini, N. 1889a. "Fra Menelik e Debeb." *La Tribuna*, March 20.
Corazzini, N. 1889b. "Echi africani." *La Tribuna*, April 2.
Corazzini, N. 1889c. "La sconfitta del Negus." *La Tribuna*, April 7.
Corazzini, N. 1890a. "Corriere d'Africa: Gli ultimi fatti d'arme, Il figlio di Kantibay, Il generale Orero e le tasse, Il governatore Gandolfi, Debeb, Le vergini bianche, Falso allarme." *La Tribuna*, July 21.
Corazzini, N. 1890b. "Riassumiamo." *La Tribuna*, August 1.
Corriere della Sera. 1888a. "Che si ha da fare degli ostaggi?." March 5–6.
Corriere della Sera. 1888b. "Nuovo disgraziato combattimento in Africa: Eccidio di basci-buzuc e di ufficiali italiani, Il tradimento degli Assaortini." August 14–15.
Corriere della Sera. 1888c. "Commenti ed osservazioni della stampa romana." August 14–15.
Corriere della Sera. 1888d. "Il combattimento di Saganeiti." August 15–16.
Corriere della Sera. 1891a. "Gli incidenti d'Africa: Considerazioni e notizie, La politica africana sotto il precedente ministero, I trattati." March 28–29.
Corriere della Sera. 1891b. "La morte di Debeb." October 6–7.
Corriere delle Puglie. 1891. "Il famoso Adam Aga: Giudicato da un ufficiale italiano." March 25.
Corte, C. 1888. "L'Africa: Risposta al secondo articolo di Semplice." *Corriere della Sera*, March 13–14.
Davis, J. 1988. *Conflict and Control: Law and Order in Nineteenth-Century Italy*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International.
Del Boca, A. 2001, orig. pub. 1976. *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale: Dall'Unità alla marcia su Roma*. Milan: Oscar Mondadori.
Echis. 1886. "Il generale Genè a Zula: Presa di possesso di Zula, Marcia faticosa." *Corriere della Sera*, October 1–2.
Eritreo [pseud.]. 1891. "Cronaca Eritrea." *Illustrazione Militare Italiana*, April 1.
Farinelli, G., E. Paccagnini, G. Santambrogio, and A. Ida Villa. 1997. *Storia del giornalismo italiano: Dalle origini ai giorni nostri*. Turin: UTET Libreria.
Fasolo, F. 1887. *L'Abissinia e le colonie italiane sul Mar Rosso, con due carte, ecc*. Caserta: Tip. di Antonio Iaselli.
Filippini, F. 1888. "Nostre corrispondenze da Massaua." *Illustrazione Militare Italiana*, April 1.

Finaldi, G. 2009. *Italian National Identity in the Scramble for Africa: Italy's African Wars in the Era of Nation-Building, 1870–1900*. New York: Peter Lang.
Gazzetta Piemontese. 1891. "L'uccisione di Debeb." October 6–7. http://www.archiviolastampa.it (accessed April 28, 2013).
Gazzetta Ufficiale. 1888a. August 14, 4426 (telegram).
Gazzetta Ufficiale. 1888b. August 17, 4451 (two telegrams).
Gazzetta Ufficiale. 1888c. August 29, 4578–83 (telegram).
Giornale di Sicilia. 1891. "L'uccisione di Debeb." October 8–9.
Hobsbawm, E. 2000. *Bandits*, Rev. ed. (orig. pub. 1969). New York: New Press.
Illustrazione Militare Italiana. 1888. "Il Debeb." image, 55.
Labanca, N. 1993. *In marcia verso Adua*. Turin: Einaudi.
La Malfa, M. 1962. "Orientamenti politici della "Tribuna" (I)." *Nord e Sud* IX: 98–122.
Lucas, A. 2012. "Salgari, Emilio." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (online). Oxford: Oxford University Press. http://www.oxfordreference.com (accessed July 10, 2013).
Mantegazza, V. 1887. "Debeb." *Corriere della Sera*, December 4–5.
Mantegazza, V. 1888. *Da Massaua a Saati: Narrazione della spedizione italiana del 1888 in Abissinia*. Milan: Fratelli Treves, Reprint.
Mantegazza, V. 1896. *La guerra in Africa*. 3rd ed. Reprint. Florence: Tip. Fiorentino.
Martini, F. 1925, orig. pub. 1891. *Nell'Affrica italiana: Impressioni e ricordi*. 9th ed. Milan: Fratelli Treves.
Milesi, M. 1889. "La venuta dei parenti di Debeb in Italia." *Corriere della Sera*, July 31–August 1.
Nani, M. 2006. *Ai confine della nazione: Stampa e razzismo nell'Italia del fine Ottocento*. Rome: Carocci.
L'Osservatore Romano. 1888a. "Ultime Notizie: Un altro disastro in Africa." August 14.
L'Osservatore Romano. 1888b. "Il combattimento di Saganeiti." August 15.
L'Osservatore Romano. 1888c. "Il nuovo disastro in Africa e la stampa italiana." August 15.
Palma, S. 2005. "The Seen, the Unseen, the Invented: Misrepresentations of African 'Otherness' in the Making of a Colony. Eritrea, 1885–1896." *Cahiers d'ètudes africaines* 177 (1): 39–69.
Patriarca, S. 2010. *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Pescosolido, G. 2007. "Opinione pubblica e colonie: La stampa italiana e l'occupazione di Massaua." In *Alla ricerca delle colonie (1876–1896)*, edited by P. L. Ballini and P. Pecorari, 275–322. Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti.
Piccinini, G. 1887. *Guerra d'Africa*. 3 vols. Reprint. Rome: Perino.
Piccinini, G. 1888. *Guerra d'Africa, Parte IV, Campagna 1888*. Reprint. Rome: Perino.
Il Popolo Romano. 1891. "Uno scontro in Africa." October 6.
Rainero, R. 1971. *L'anticolonialismo italiano da Assab ad Adua (1869–1896)*. Milan: Edizione di Comunità.
La Riforma. 1891. "Le notizie d'Africa: Debeb." October 7.
Salgari, E. 2011, orig. pub. in Italian 1898. *The Black Corsair [Il corsaro nero]*. Translated by N. Lorenzutti. ROH Press.
Seal, G. 2011. *Outlaw Heroes in Myth and History*. London: Anthem.
Slatta, R. 2004. "Eric J. Hobsbawm's Social Bandit: A Critique and Revision." *A Contracorriente* 1 (2): 22–30.
La Tribuna. 1886a. "Informazioni: Conflitto in Africa." September 19.
La Tribuna. 1886b. "Da Massaua." November 3.
La Tribuna. 1888a. "Fucilare gli ostaggi?" March 5.
La Tribuna. 1888b. "Nuovi guai in Africa: Uno scontro fra Debeb e gli irregolari." August 14.
La Tribuna. 1888c. "Informazioni: Il fatto di Saganeiti in Africa." August 14.
La Tribuna. 1888d. "Il fatto di Saganeiti." August 15.
La Tribuna. 1889a. "Un nuovo voltafaccia di Debeb, A Keren." February 12.
La Tribuna. 1889b. "La pretensione di Debeb al trono Abissino." February 17.
La Tribuna. 1889c. "Menelik o Debeb?" July 13.

La Tribuna. 1889d. "Debeb prigioniero?." July 30.
La Tribuna. 1889e. "Makonnen e il senator Rossi." October 15.
La Tribuna. 1889f. "Cronaca di Roma: Gli scioani a teatro." October 24.
Verga, G. 2001, orig. pub. 1880. "L'amante di Gramigna." In *Cavalleria rusticana e altre novelle*. Milan: RCS Libri.

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.939164 Published online by Cambridge University Press