

Okapi, Italy and the Heart of Darkness. The political history behind early specimens of *Okapia johnstoni* in Italy

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ABSTRACT

Italian natural history collections are not only valuable from a scientific perspective, but represent an often overlooked historical heritage. In this note two early collected okapis, the giraffid species described in 1901, that reached the Zoological Museum of Parma University in 1907 are briefly discussed in the context of other specimens brought to Italy in the same years. This offers a unique occasion to review the political relations existing between the Free State of Congo and the Reign of Italy at the beginning of the century when the okapi was discovered.

Key words: colonialism, Parma University, Eduardo Baccari, Emilio Piola, Congo Democratic Republic

RIASSUNTO

Okapi, l'Italia e Cuore di Tenebra. La storia politica dietro i primi esemplari di *Okapia johnstoni* in Italia.

Le collezioni di storia naturale dei musei italiani non sono solo preziose da una prospettiva scientifica, ma rappresentano un patrimonio storico spesso sottovalutato. In questa nota incentrata su due esemplari di okapi – la specie di giraffide descritta solo nel 1901 – donati al Museo zoologico dell'Università di Parma nel 1907 sono discussi nel quadro della storia delle acquisizioni scientifiche sulla specie e con riferimento a diversi altri esemplari che raggiungono i musei italiani in quegli anni. Ciò offre l'occasione unica di inquadrare questi esemplari all'interno dei rapporti politici esistenti all'epoca tra lo Stato Libero del Congo ed il Regno d'Italia.

Parole chiave: colonialismo, Eduardo Baccari, Emilio Pioli, Repubblica Democratica del Congo, Università di Parma.

INTRODUCTION

Among the important exotic mammalogical collections stored in Italian natural history museums (GIPPOLITI *et al.*, 2014), there are some early specimens of okapi, *Okapia johnstoni* (SCLATER, 1901). This giraffid species is endemic to the Congo Democratic Republic, and more precisely limited to the forests of the north-east part of the country (HART, 2013) with much range extending north-east of the Congo River and a smaller range south-west of the same river (STANTON *et al.*, 2014). The species was described only in 1901 on the basis of a few skin pieces believed to belong to a new zebra species, *Equus johnstoni* Sclater to honor Sir Harry Johnston, the British High Commissioner of Uganda, that collected the first scientific evidences of its existence.

The reason why there are some early specimens of Okapi in Italy lies in the particular relations existing in the early 20th Century between the Congo Free State (a private property of the King of Belgium) and the Kingdom of Italy (PICCOLINO, 2007a; 2007b). Specifically, at the beginning of 1903 a formal agreement was reached between the Independent State of Congo and the Kingdom of Italy to furnish military personnel to the African state. In exchange, there was the possi-

bility to encourage the migration of Italian colonists in the fertile Kivu region in the east of the country. To such an end, an exploratory-diplomatic mission to Congo, led by Eduardo Baccari (Benevento, 17 agosto 1871 – Rome, 11 giugno 1952) a medical-captain of the Italian Navy and an expert of colonial affairs, was decided in May 1903 (PICCOLINO, 2007a; 2007b). Interestingly, in the same days, a skeleton and a skin of okapi reached Rome, where after being mounted by the staff of the Zoological Museum of Rome University, they were exhibited at the Quirinal garden to be showed to the King of England Eduard VII and the Emperor of Germany William II (MARANGONI & GIPPOLITI, 2011). Baccari, that in the Congo hinterlands had the occasion to watch personally atrocities and mistreatments, produced a report where he express the opinion that the Kivu project should be rejected by Italian Government, as it eventually was, but even to ask the withdrawal from Congo of Italian officers (PICCOLINO, 2007b). The Baccari's report blocked the Italian migration to Congo, the 'Heart of Darkeness' (CONRAD, 1902), but for some years many Italian soldiers served in Congo and, often, donated important natural history collections or specimens to Italian museums (cf. SALVADORI 1909; 1912).

Specifically, two early okapi specimens reaching the Parma



Fig. 1. The two okapis of the Zoological Museum of Parma University (Gippoliti, 2018)



Fig. 2. Skull and some skeletal elements belonging to the Piola's collection

Zoological Museum seem to have never been reported in the international scientific literature.

Between November and December 1907 the Ethnographical and Zoological collections made by Captain Emilio Piola in the Congo Independent State were donated to the Natural History Museum of Parma University (Rossi, 1986). The small zoological collection is noteworthy for the presence of two mounted okapis; a male and a female.

In Italy the Zoological Museum of the Rome University received a skin and a skeleton as a gift of the King of Italy – surely a gift of the King of Belgium following the agreement between the two reigns - in 1903 (CARRUCCIO, 1903), thus rendering Rome the third museum to receive Okapi specimens after London and Tervuren (MARANGONI & GIPPOLITI, 2011). The Natural History Museum of Genoa received the skin and skeleton of a female in 1905. She was captured by local people in December 1904 in the Engueta Forest, between the left bank of the Uellé River and the source of the Likati River (MENCHINELLI, 1970). Skin and skeleton were acquired by Lieutenant Antonio Millo Ribotti, that was also the author of the first ever photo of a live okapi, a calf (LANCASTER, 1910).

Camerano discussed the okapi complete and incomplete skins received in Turin a few years later (CAMERANO, 1911). Camerano does not furnish any detail about the source of these specimens, yet it is highly probable they were a donation by the Principe Vittorio Emanuele Duca di Savoia-Aosta, Count of Turin. The Count made an important hunting expedition in Africa in the period 1908-1910, and its collection, actually preserved in the Museo di Storia Naturale of Florence University, also include a mounted okapi skin (FINOTELLO & AGNELLI, 2015). In his paper, Camerano evidenced the scientific controversy surrounding the significance of the presence of ossicones as potential sexual character (LYDDEKER, 1908; LANCASTER, 1910). Regrettably, Camerano too seemed unaware of the presence of the okapi pair in Parma, as was LANCASTER (1910), and no scientific paper has never appeared – to our knowledge - discussing these important specimens.

Regrettably, not much information are available about the permanence of Emilio Piola in Congo. According to ROSSI (1986), the ethnological collection (Azande, Mombutu, Akka pygmies) sent to Parma by Piola originated from the Oubangi Region, and more specifically upwards of the confluence of

the Uellé and MBomou rivers that create the Oubangi River, approximately from 23° to 27° East and from 2° to 5° North. Here lies the northern border of Okapi's range (LÖNNBERG, 1905) where the species has been scarcely studied (NGBOLUA, *et al.* 2014). Some ethnographical pieces originated also more southerly from the forest zone of the Aruwimi district.

Today we know that Lydekker was right when he claimed that ossicones are a sexual character in *Okapia*. Therefore, we can now consider the Piola's okapis as the first correctly sexed pair ever to have reached a natural history museum. As the conservation status of the species is precarious (KÜMPEL *et al.*, 2015), hopefully okapi specimens could be a way to increase Italian awareness and contribution to the *in situ* conservation of this spectacular species and of the whole unique biodiversity of the Congo Democratic Republic (GIPPOLITI, 2005), that has also been recently bred (June 2022) for the first time in Italy at the Parco Zoo Falconara near Ancona.

Therefore, a huge political history was hidden behind the Italian okapi specimens, a history that should be part of our storytelling to make public aware of our wonderful planet and the need to maintain its biological integrity.

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