

EAST AND WEST

Founded by Giuseppe Tucci

A QUARTERLY PUBLISHED BY THE
ISTITUTO ITALIANO PER L'AFRICA E L'ORIENTE

Book Reviews

EXPLORATIONS AND MISSIONOLOGY

Oscar Nalesini

Enzo Gualtiero Bargiacchi, *Ippolito Desideri's*
Relazione between Local History and
International Events, [monographic issue
of] *Storia locale. Quaderni pistoiesi di*
cultura moderna e contemporanea, 2, 2003,
pp. 4-103, Gli Ori, Pistoia.

I s I A O

Vol. 55 - Nos. 1-4 (December 2005)

The maps are very well designed. Only a genuine expert is able to find some flaws. In the large fold-out map (fig. 1), which covers the large area from the Panjshir valley in Afghanistan to Baltistan in northeastern Pakistan, the Nuristani settlement of Pashki, the southernmost and also main village in the Prasun (Parun) valley – since several years also the capital of the newly created Afghan province ‘Nuristan’ – is not shown. The map ‘Gates of Peristan’ on fig. 17 is excellent. The unfortunately undated photos are well printed, with some exceptions, and some of them should have been presented much larger. The expensive (and heavy) coated paper makes the study somewhat weighty, and its binding impedes an easy wide opening of the large-format book.

All in all, it’s a great publication, though somewhat ‘conglomeratic’, on the ethnohistory, social structure, economy and the pre-Islamic past of four small ethnic groups living in southern Chitral. This thorough study deserves the scholarly attention much needed for more research on cultures in danger of disappearing, easy victims of aggressive modernisation.

Max Klimburg



EXPLORATIONS AND MISSIOLOGY

Kenneth Nebenzahl, *Mapping the Silk Road and Beyond. 2000 Years of Exploring the East*, Phaidon Press, London 2004, 178 pp.

The book is subdivided into a first part referring to an Ancient and Medieval European concept of Asia from the maps of Abraham Ortelius to that of Cristoforo Buondelmonte, a second part on the impulse to explore the East from the map of the world of Fra Mauro at the time of Francis Drake’s naval expeditions, a third on the East Indian Empires (Portuguese, Dutch, British, French, Spanish) and a fourth on resisting European encroachment (Japan, Korea, China). The concluding section consists of reproductions of

maps to the North to Cathay and the Pacific. The book is a splendid edition owing to the colour reproductions of all the maps and the extremely accurate notes. The book is a must for the main libraries specializing in cartography and the relations among the various parts of Eurasia.

Lionello Lanciotti

Enzo Gualtiero Bargiacchi, *Ippolito Desideri’s Relazione between Local History and International Events*, [monographic issue of] *Storia locale. Quaderni pistoiesi di cultura moderna e contemporanea*, 2, 2003, pp. 4-103, Gli Ori, Pistoia.

It gives me great pleasure to greet the publication of this book (in fact, it is a monographic issue of the Pistoia review *Storia locale*) dedicated by Enzo Gualtiero Bargiacchi to the events that developed around the *Relazione* written by the missionary – also from Pistoia – Ippolito Desideri, after seven years living in Tibet.

Reading it one is reminded of the many novels imitating Manzoni and Potocki that appeared in our bookshops in recent times, which center around a lost manuscript or a burnt library. And it can be read precisely like a novel, so pleasant is the way the book is written. But with one important difference: the *Relazione* manuscripts really did exist, and fortunately still do. Indeed, they consist of one of the most important texts ever written on a country, Tibet, which, although discussed extensively (and often inappropriately), is still relatively unknown to the Italian public.

The *Relazione* was written by the Jesuit Ippolito Desideri after his return to Italy in 1727. Six years earlier he had been moved from Lhasa owing to a dispute with his Capuchin ‘brothers’ over which Order should direct the mission in Tibet, which was imagined to be a promising land for winning souls and the lands attached to them. Desideri narrates the story of his own stay in the Land of Snow, accompanying it with many penetrating observations on daily life, the institutions and above all religion.

Something that is important per se, and for a number of reasons: historically, because it was the first time that modern Europe received first hand information on that land; and currently, because the text contains a huge quantity of information that still arouses the Tibetologists' interest. But Desideri was not just one of the first Europeans to get to know Tibet personally. He succeeded in mastering all the linguistic and cultural tools necessary to understand and analyse the philosophy on which the Tibetan variant of Mahāyāna Buddhism was based. These tools were acquired so thoroughly by Desideri that he was able to write several books in Tibetan for the purpose of refuting the doctrinal bases of Buddhism, and to encourage the Tibetans to convert to Catholicism. Although these works did not have the desired proselytic effect, the knowledge required to write them rightly make Desideri the first European tibetologist.

Bargiacchi displays a profound interest in the subject and – I daresay – a sincere attachment to the figure of his fellow countryman. These sentiments emerge clearly from his lively and often passionate prose. After summarizing the events that led the young man from Pistoia to Asia and that, in 1721, obliged him to leave Lhasa, the author enters the heart of the problem of writing the *Relazione*, which was completed in 1728, and of how it, together with the other writings, ended up being buried in the archives and forgotten. So much so that – for a long period of time – all that was known about the information gathered by Desideri was that contained in a letter he wrote to Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, which was later published in the collection *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* (Paris 1722).

Only in 1875 did another Pistoia scholar, Gherardo Nerucci, succeed in identifying a copy of the manuscript in the collection of a local erudite nobleman, Filippo Rossi Cassigoli, and to pass the information on to Carlo Puini and Angelo De Gubernatis. The sensation caused in the academic world by the finding of this precious text was great and led also to manoeuvres to gain possession of the book, which also involved intriguing by the Hakluyt Society of London, as well as to attempts to gain

money by printing it. All these conflicts had the ultimate and sole effect of delaying publication of the work.

After the death of Rossi Cassigoli in 1890, the documentary collection on the history of Pistoia that he had set up was purchased by the National Library of Florence. Desideri's manuscript thus became more easily accessible and in the end Puini succeeded in having it published by the Italian Geographic Society in 1904. Unfortunately Puini, rather than edit the manuscript, used it to elaborate his own personal view of Tibet, as a number of contemporary Italian and foreign reviewers noted at the time. The story is again enlivened on the eve of the Great War, when the Dutchman Wessels discovers several of Desideri's manuscripts in the Historical Archives of the Company of Jesus, including two new autograph versions of the *Relazione*. This is important as it was Wessels' collaboration that enabled Filippo De Filippi to produce a new edition of the *Relazione* in which the new finds were taken into account. This time the publication was in English (London 1932), which ensured it had a wider international diffusion.

Although greatly improved with respect to Puini's edition, and more accessible to foreign researchers, it was still an incomplete publication. In order to obtain a more rigorous approach to studies on Desideri's we must proceed even further in time. Since 1928, the Himalayas and the Land of Snow have been the subject of pioneering field research carried out by Giuseppe Tucci. After admiring and praising the quality of Desideri's writings in studies on the materials collected during his expeditions, Tucci oversaw the masterful critical edition of Desideri's entire work which was prepared in 1954-1956 by Luciano Petech for the series 'Nuovo Ramusio' printed by the State Printers. Again thanks to Tucci's initiative this was followed by the publication (with Italian translation) by IsMEO of Desideri's Tibetan works edited by Giuseppe Toscano, which appeared between 1981 and 1989.

In Bargiacchi's book the events linked to the search for the manuscript containing Desideri's report and its publication performed also the function of the thread linking most of

European Tibetology between the 19th and 20th centuries. If on this point I dare make a friendly criticism of the author it is only to point out that he sometimes lets his enthusiasm run away with him, ending up in the trap of digressions on many characters that he gradually mentions but who are sometimes only indirectly or in no way involved in studies on Desideri (for example, the pages devoted to the Anglo-Russian 'Great Game' or mountaineering undertakings). These digressions are interesting in themselves and often prove precious for explaining the historical and intellectual context in which these figures act, but they detract from the prose as they lead sudden interruptions which are needed to bring the discourse back to the principal topic and can often give the impression to the less well informed reader that Tibetological studies center almost entirely on the work of the Jesuit missionary.

The events I have summarized and others that cannot be dealt with here for lack of space, were reconstructed by Bargiacchi in a long and praiseworthy work involving traveling and archival research, which the reader can easily appreciate by consulting the Appendices. This, in addition to the originality of the research, the easy to understand language and the other qualities mentioned above, go to make up a book, the reading of which I can warmly recommend even to those who are not specifically concerned with Tibet. And this is also an invitation to the author to continue in this praiseworthy work of further study of the history of the Desideri's studies as well as of the links between Desideri's thinking and the scientific and philosophic research theme of his times.

All that is left for me to do is to adopt a consideration expressed on various occasions by Bargiacchi. In an increasingly culturally flattened world in which even intellectuals are often not capable of reading foreign languages, the nevertheless excellent publication of Desideri's work in Italian runs the risk of being appreciated only by a tiny number of researchers and ultimately to be largely overlooked. The time has come to again honour the work of the great Pistoia missionary by making a revision of previous publications of

his writings and a new critical edition of them with an English translation.

Oscar Nalesini



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