

Biography

Ippolito Desideri was born in Pistoia on 20th December 1684, and entered the Society of Jesus in Rome in 1700 before his sixteenth birthday. He trained at the prestigious Collegio Romano where his extraordinary logical and philosophical gifts and passion for saving the souls of others led him to be singled out by his superior, the provost general Michelangelo Tamburini, for the challenging mission to the then-distant, mysterious and almost inaccessible land of Tibet. The Society had made other, fruitless attempts to reach this country during the previous century.

The fascination for the “Indies” was undoubtedly inspired by the experiences of Francesco Saverio, Alessandro Valignano, Roberto De Nobili and the adventures recounted by Daniello Bartoli but young Ippolito also had significant examples among his fellow townsmen, including Jesuit Giuliano Baldinotti (Pistoia 1591-Macao 1631), a good mathematician and the first missionary to go to Vietnam, and Franciscan missionary Arcangelo Carradori, who was in Upper Egypt (1630-1638) and wrote a dictionary Italian-Nubian, the first one for a sub-Saharan African language.

Desideri left Rome on 9th September 1712, before completing his regular course of studies. After an eventful voyage on sea and land, he reached Lhasa on 18th March 1716. The journey took him from Goa, the “Rome of the Orient” and centre for the diffusion of Christianity in southern and eastern Asia, to Delhi, Lahore, Srinagar in Kashmir (with the arduous passage across the Pir Panjal mountains) and then across the harsh mountain ridges furrowed by the waters of the Indo river and its tributaries to Ladakh; and lastly to the Tibetan capital after the long and exhausting crossing of the lonely frozen wastes of the Trans-Himalayan plateau. The account of his journey is rich in detailed historical, geographical, anthropological, sociological and naturalistic observations, expressed in a clear and poetic literary style throughout.

In Lhasa the missionary was welcomed and supported in his studies, and was amazed by this open attitude and the fact that his ideas were greeted with enthusiasm even though the Tibetans did not accept the one way to salvation and remained convinced that “each person may be saved according to his law” (*MITN* V, 193).

The Jesuit remained in Tibet for five years, greatly mastered the local language, deeply studied, understood and discussed the Tibetan Buddhism. He was able to write, directly in Tibetan

five books, which show the profound comprehension of the Buddhism’s core concepts.

Unfortunately on 28th April 1721 he was forced to leave Lhasa due to a Vatican-issued

injunction, since the Propaganda Fide Congregation had entrusted the Tibetan mission to the rival Capuchin order. Leaving Tibet against his will on 14th December 1721 (he had remained until then in the border region of Kuti).

Desideri stayed in India for several years until on 21st January 1727 he sailed from Pondicherry for Europe to arrive in Port-Louis, Brittany, on 22nd June 1727. After crossing France he sailed from Marseille to Genoa and after a short stop in Pistoia, his birthplace, and Florence, he returned on 23rd January 1728 “prosperously to Rome fifteen years and four months after leaving there to go to the East India missions” (*MITN*, VII, 107).

However it was not to be such a prosperous return for him, as his Order was in disgrace and any hopes he had of returning to Tibet were definitively dashed, while he was also prevented from publishing the account (already prepared for printing) and in any way discussing matters pertaining to his mission.

He died in blissful solitude in the Casa Professa of his Society in Rome, on 13th April 1733.

His great account in Italian include a complete and reliable description of almost every aspect of the Tibetan life and especially of the religion. This *Relazione* and the Tibetan works remained hidden in the archives for centuries and had to wait a lot to be published and to be appreciated for his worth, not obsolete even today.

To study Desideri’s life and work is useful for scientific reasons and for the contribution to improving the interreligious dialogue.

For a more detailed biography see E.G. BARGIACCHI, *A Bridge Across Two Cultures. Ippolito Desideri S.J. (1684 - 1733). A Brief Biography*, Istituto Geografico Militare , Firenze, 2008.

Drawn up by E. G. Bargiacchi in 2008