

DESIDERI'S WORKS

2. Assessments of Desideri and his work

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The first scholar of Desideri's *Relazione*, Carlo Puini, recognised it as a "document of truly scientific importance [...] the most complete and detailed written to date" on the structure of the Tibetan religion. "For his time and absolute value Desideri unquestionably claims an eminent place in the history of geographical and religious knowledge of the Far East".

The Swede Sven Hedin, possibly the greatest explorer and geographer of Tibet and Central Asia, recognised Desideri's considerable merit not only for the huge undertaking of his journey which, after leaving India to cross the Punjab, Kashmir, Baltistan and Ladakh, made him the first European to cross the Trans-Himalayan plateau as far as Lhasa and beyond; but also for the description he left us, which is still practically unsurpassed by modern travellers: "Desideri's work is one of the best and most reliable ever written about Tibet", rich in detailed information, supplied in a lovely literary style, which singles out the Jesuit as "one of the most brilliant travellers ever to visit Tibet and, among the ancients, far and away the most important and intelligent of all".

Filippo De Filippi, one of the dominant figures in exploring this area, noted that the missionary's *Relazione*, deriving entirely from personal observation of the location and studies of Tibetan texts "has a supremely important scientific value, which has not been undermined by any other study appearing to date".

The most eminent western Tibetologist, Giuseppe Tucci, observed that "Desideri's arrival in Lhasa marks a memorable date in the history of Tibetan studies because he was the first to reveal Tibet to the West. I do not mean its ethnographic character or its geographical borders, but rather its profound and intimate spiritual reality". His work "even today, two centuries later, is in its profundity and clarity one of the most reliable descriptions of Tibetan religious beliefs". Elsewhere Tucci again admires Desideri "for the broad-mindedness and sympathy with which he approached the people in whose country he was staying, and their culture". For this reason he was able to study with Tibetan monks, "he became used to their way of reasoning and thus managed to see clearly where today many others only find darkness", and to compile "that *Relazione del Tibet* whose profundity and precision holds firm against the onslaught of the centuries and the perfecting of research". With the *Relazione* and his works in Tibetan he produced an "amazing encounter of the Roof of the World between St. Thomas and Tsongkha-pa".

Luciano Petech, an in-depth scholar of Tibetan history, defines Desideri as "one of the most lucid and profound minds Asia had ever seen arrive from Europe" and states that his life was epitomized by "the wonderful voyage he took with youthful enthusiasm but full spiritual maturity and an apostolic zeal that few missionaries have demonstrated". The Jesuit often passed on interesting historical information but "did not trouble himself with researching the country's past; he was a man of the present and future. But he scrupulously observed the terrible events that happened in his lifetime and decisively influenced the history of Tibet and the far-reaching consequences that are still felt today". With an admirable solitary effort he achieved extremely significant results: "he was the first Tibetologist in history, although his work was not circulated and stayed buried in the archives for centuries".

Fosco Maraini detected the enormous harm for Oriental studies caused by the two-century delay in awareness of Desideri's work: "had it been fully known since the 18th century today we would undoubtedly refer to its author today as a spiritual Marco Polo or a Christopher Columbus". Maraini also appreciates the missionary's literary style, and enjoys following him in "his adventures, especially in that homegrown Italian that is not without enjoyable flourishes".

Theatre historian Antonio Attisani appreciates the quality of the writing in a fundamental piece of work on forms of Tibetan theatre, and also emphasises the importance Desideri's contribution at all levels, both in knowledge ("a forerunner in Tibet of the century of Enlightened Europeans") and in dialogue: "Desideri masters a sumptuous writer's language developed according to coordinates which make it unique, always sprinkled with metaphor and long highly imaginative pages, able to paraphrase the texts he has studied with the greatest skill."

Many eminent scholars of various fields and tendencies have expressed strong appreciation to Desideri and his work in modern and recent time. We can here remember: Henri de Lubac, Stephen Batchelor, Donald S. Lopez, Rudolf Kaschewsky, Martin Brauen.

We conclude this anthology of quotations with Luigi Foscolo Benedetto, curator of a splendid critical edition of Marco Polo's *The Million*, who presents Desideri in these words: "one of the noblest [people] I have ever encountered in my shambolic academic wanderings. He is a missionary, in the fullest and highest sense, in times of industrious enthusiasm, in one of the most arduous areas of mysterious Asia: his uncommon sincere faith and moral and physical gifts have made him a precursor of modern mountaineers and explorers [...] He believes in the truth of what he is teaching and the intrinsic power of truth [...] Like all those who have given their own life a purpose, and really lived their dream, Desideri remains true to the heroic ideal which enflamed his youth. He acted before speaking and now speaks in order that others may take up his interrupted work and complete it."

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