

**Enzo Gualtiero Bargiacchi**

# **A Bridge Across Two Cultures**

Ippolito Desideri S.J. (1684-1733)  
A Brief Biography

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the Jesuit missionary.**

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## Foreword

This brief biography of Ippolito Desideri is drawn from a previous biography, *Ippolito Desideri S.J. alla scoperta del Tibet e del buddhismo*, published in Italian in 2006, and from another, more detailed biography which is in the process of completion; as well as extensive archival and library documentation published in 2007 by the Jesuit Historical Institute. It is also the result of over ten years of research in many settings.

Readers can therefore refer to the above texts for source material and to some fundamental texts indicated below. Only some of the archival data from unpublished or little-known sources have been indicated here.

Quotations from Desideri are taken from the version edited by Luciano Petech, abbreviated here as *MITN* (in seven volumes, the last three dedicated to Desideri). All quotations from Desideri are followed (in brackets) by the specification *MITN*, the number V, VI or VII of the corresponding volume, and the page number; in the case of the *Relazione* there are no further specifications, except the addition, in the case of volume VI, of DR.2 or DR.3, where the number is added to indicate whether it is the second or third Book (Books I and IV are unmistakably identified as they are contained respectively in volumes V and VII). Quotations from letters, on the other hand, are accompanied by a note with the details and identifying abbreviation received in the *MITN* (DL. followed by the number).

English translations are taken from the editions of Filippo De Filippi, for the *Relazione* [DE FILIPPI (ed.) 1932], and Henri Hosten, for the letters [HOSTEN 1938]. References to the account given by Desideri's travelling companion are simply FREYRE, to indicate that they derive from the original Latin edition contained in the *MITN*; sometimes followed by the specifications "in *MITN*" or "in DE FILIPPI (ed.) 1932" or "in SWEET 2006", to show the origin of a specific quotation in the two English versions.

References to the works in the Tibetan language edited by Giuseppe Toscano, have the abbreviation *Op. tib.*, followed by the number of the volume.

The abbreviations for the texts cited are:

BARGIACCHI 2003: E. G. BARGIACCHI, *La 'Relazione' di Ippolito Desideri fra storia locale e vicende internazionali*, "storialocale", (a. I), n. 2, December 2003, pp. 4-103.

BARGIACCHI 2005a: Tiziana CHIAPPELLI, *Dialogo con Enzo Gualtiero Bargiacchi su p. Ippolito Desideri s.j.*, "Religioni e Società", a. XX, n. 52, May-August 2005 ("L'invisibile e lo spazio"), pp. 99-104 (Dialoghi/documenti: "Percorsi italiani al buddhismo").

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- conoscenza geografica*, “L’Universo”, a. LXXXV, n. 6, November-December 2005, pp. 788-807.
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- DE FILIPPI (ed.) 1932: F. DE FILIPPI (ed.), *An Account of Tibet. The Travels of Ippolito Desideri of Pistoia, S.J., 1712-1727*. Edited by F.D.F. With an Introduction by C. Wessels, S.J., George Routledge & Sons, Ltd. (“Broadway Travellers”, edited by Sir E. Denison Ross and Eileen Power), London, 1932, pp. XVIII + 475 [2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1937].
- HOSTEN 1938: H. HOSTEN (ed.), *Letters and other Papers of Fr. Ippolito Desideri, S.J., a Missionary in Tibet (1713-21)*. Edited and translated by the Rev. H. Hosten, S.J., “Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal. Letters”, vol. IV, 1938, Article n. 24, pp. 567-767 [repr. in volume 1998].
- MITN (1952-1956): L. PETECH (ed.), *I missionari italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal* (vol. II de “Il nuovo Ramusio”. Collection of journeys, texts and documents concerning relations between Europe and the East, edited by IsMEO, scientific director Giuseppe Tucci), La Libreria dello Stato, Rome, 1952-1956, seven volumes (Parts I-VII): Parts I-IV, *I Cappuccini marchigiani*, La Libreria dello Stato, 1952-1953; Parts V-VI-VII, *Ippolito Desideri S.I.*, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato. Libreria dello Stato, 1954-1955-1956.
- Op. tib.* (1981-1989): G. TOSCANO (ed.), *Opere tibetane di Ippolito Desideri S.J.*, IsMEO, 1981-1989 (4 voll.): Vol. I, *Il “T’o-rañs”* (The Dawn), 1981; Vol. II, *Lo “Sñiñ-po”* (The Essence of Christian doctrine), 1982; vol. III, *Il “Byuñ k’uñs”* (The Origin of living beings and all things), 1984; Vol. IV, *Il “Ñes legs”* (Supreme goodness and ultimate purpose), 1989. A two-part fifth volume, *Skye ba sna ma* (The Transmigration of souls) is still in typescript form.
- SWEET 2006: M. J. SWEET, *Desperately Seeking Capuchins: Manoel Freyre’s ‘Report on the Tibets and their Routes (Tibetorum ac eorum Relatio Viarum)’ and the Desideri Mission to Tibet*, “The Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies” (“JIATS”, digital journal: [www.thdl.org?id=T2722](http://www.thdl.org?id=T2722)), n. 2, August 2006, pp. 1-33.



## 1. Early years

Pistoia nestles at the foot of the Apennine mountains, a spur of which extends between the Ombrone and Brana rivers to the centre of the city, a favourable location halfway between Florence and Lucca: then town was a bone of contention in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, when it fell under Florentine rule. It was in this city, at about 7pm on Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> December 1684, that doctor Iacopo Desideri and Maria Maddalena, daughter of Ippolito Cappellini, welcomed the birth of their fourth child, Ippolito, after Francesco, Anna Maria and Giuseppe, who had arrived at yearly intervals since 1681. They would be joined by another son, Giovan Battista, in 1686. The couple had married in 1678, as soon as Iacopo had obtained his degree in medicine from the University of Pisa.

Ippolito was born at Number 6 in today's via Pietro Bozzi, formerly owned by the Cellesi, where Iacopo Desideri's family had recently moved, leaving the home in nearby via Sant' Andrea given to them by his paternal uncle, Francesco, parish priest of Casalguidi. Ippolito was baptised the next day, receiving the names Tommaso (the apostle on whose saint's day he was born), Gaspare and Romolo as well as that of his maternal grandfather.

The Desideri family were originally from Gora, about three kilometres northwest of the city, where they owned a mill and had long made a comfortable living as millers. Some of them consequently earned the title of Pistoiese "citizens" and moved inside the city walls. The family was included among the nobility of Pistoia and had its own coat-of-arms, a privilege earned by obtaining positions in public magistrateship.

Ippolito was little more than two years old when his mother died on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1687 at just twenty-eight years of age after giving birth to her fifth child in 1686. His father Iacopo was soon married again, to Costanza, the daughter of Gerolamo Dragoni of Prato, and the children were launched on the route to a religious life – all except the third, Giuseppe, who would follow in his father's footsteps, obtaining a degree in medicine from Pisa.

The early loss of a mother and later the family is a hard test of character but those are able to overcome this thanks to plenty of loving care can become strong, decisive, independent, responsible and authoritative. This was to be the case of Ippolito, though we know little of his early years in Pistoia.<sup>1</sup>

An important factor in Ippolito's education was the fact that he lived in a city that – despite its marginal position in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany during the decline of the Medici dynasty – still enjoyed the benefits of the powerful

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1 Regarding the years in Pistoia and the Desideri family, see: N. RAUTY, *Notizie inedite su Ippolito Desideri e sulla sua famiglia tratte dagli archivi pistoiesi*, "Bullettino Storico Pistoiese", a. LXXXVI (Terza serie, XIX), 1984, pp. 3-31; see also BARGIACCHI 2003 and BARGIACCHI 2006b.

influence of the Rospigliosi family holders of civil and religious power with Camillo and Giulio (1600-1669) respectively; the latter was first an influential cardinal in Rome and later, in 1667, became Pope Clement IX. This is the reason for the grandeur of the church of Sant' Ignazio, built from 1647 and admired for its Bernini altar (although the valuable Flemish-style organ made in 1664 by Belgian Jesuit Willem Hermans also deserves particular attention). The church of S. Ignazio (now better known as Spirito Santo), was annexed to the Jesuit college, founded in 1635 in the presbytery of the parish church of Sant' Andrea before moving to its own premises for which construction began in 1641.

The foundations for young Ippolito's future were laid in this well-established College, with impressive results that would take him far, both in distance and achievement.

Confirmation of his success in his studies lies in the fact that in spring 1700 Ippolito set off for Rome, accompanied by the rector of the Collegium Pistoriense, Gio. Battista Nembrini<sup>2</sup>, and on 27<sup>th</sup> April entered the Society of Jesus in Sant' Andrea in Quirinale, beginning his novitiate and donning the habit on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1700. Here he met Ildebrando Grassi (1683-1731) from Bologna, who had joined the Society a year earlier and would be his travelling companion in India as well as the recipient of his famous letter.

At the end of his novitiate, Ippolito made his profession of faith, pronouncing the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1702 in San Vitale. He then moved to the prestigious Collegio Romano at the church of Sant' Ignazio, where he once again found Ildebrando Grassi and made friends with the Siense Francesco Piccolomini (1682-1740).

With the first, philosophical phase of his education complete, Desideri followed the traditional course and worked as a "Maestro" from 1706-1710, teaching "Humanities" (literature) in the outlying Colleges of Orvieto and Arezzo and later at the Collegio Romano itself. In autumn 1710 he began a theology course and immediately came into his own, so much so that in the second year he was supervising exercises in logic: extraordinary proof of his ability in this subject is to be found in his work.

After his second year of studies, and before completing the third, Desideri suddenly left to become a missionary.

Desideri's missionary vocation was inspired by the spiritual exercises prescribed by the founder of the Society of Jesus, St Ignatius of Loyola, the fascinating accounts

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2 The name of the rector of the College in Pistoia is to be found in the "Catalogus Brevis Provinciae Romanae Anni 1700", A.R.S.I., Rom. 96), on p. 52 (Collegium Pistoriense): «P. Jo. Bap'ta Nembrinus Rector à die 20 Novembris 1697».



of Daniello Bartoli, the illustrious examples of Francesco Saverio, Roberto De Nobili, Alessandro Valignano and Matteo Ricci, and probably also by the irresistible “longing for the Indies”. Gian Carlo Roscioni perceptively describes this as a combination of the heroic spirit of adventure and the eagerness for inner knowledge to save oneself and the rest of the world; this desire leads to a disregard for hardship and danger, to the point of martyrdom, to achieve that longed for (often only in dreams) existential breakthrough, and set off towards unknown lands confirmed in the accounts as places «in which there is much to learn»<sup>3</sup>.

Desideri's request met with the needs of his Society which, after various attempts to open missions in Tibet starting with the one founded by Portuguese Antonio de Andrade (1580-1634),<sup>4</sup> had lost all rights to that area, entrusted by the “de Propaganda Fide” Congregation to the Capuchin monks in 1703. Since Tibet could be of strategic importance for guaranteeing an overland connection between China and India, when the Jesuits of Goa heard that the Capuchins had left Tibet after a first fruitless attempt (1707-1711), they judged that the moment was ripe to penetrate the country themselves. Having learned their lesson from the various prior failures, they requested adequate reinforcements.

This was a great opportunity for young Ippolito, who seemed to be the right person in the right place at the right time, with all the required physical and intellectual characteristics as well as unparalleled enthusiasm, maturity and determination. All this explains the immediate acceptance of his application<sup>5</sup> by the Jesuit Superior General, Michelangelo Tamburini,<sup>6</sup> and the speed with which it was processed. Desideri was ordained a subdeacon (21<sup>st</sup> August), a deacon (25<sup>th</sup> August) and a priest (28<sup>th</sup> August) and celebrated his first Mass on 31<sup>st</sup> August. He then prepared without delay for his departure, which took place immediately after his audience with Pope Clement XI (Giovanni Francesco Albani, 1649-1721; Pope from 1700), to which he was brought with his confrere Ildebrando Grassi, by Orazio Olivieri (1654-1740), Secretary General of the Society of Jesus.

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3 G.C. ROSCIONI, *Il desiderio delle Indie*. Storia, sogni e fughe di giovani gesuiti italiani, Einaudi, Torino, 2001; the quotation is from p. 141.

4 In 1624, from Indian Garhwal he reached the kingdom of Guge (western Tibet), the first European to cross the Himalayan mountains.

5 The application, published in *Op. tib.* II, 1982 (pp. 271-273), is dated 14.8.1712 and the acceptance is dated the following day.

6 Michelangelo Tamburini (Montese, Modena, 4.12.1647-Rome 28.2.1730), son of Carlo, captain of Montese, was the theologian of Rinaldo d'Este, Cardinal and later Duke of Modena; rector of the Jesuit College of Modena (1692-1695) and later Mantua (1696); Superior of the Province of Veneto (1697-99); Secretary and later commissary of General Tirso Gonzales; after the death of the latter, he was elected the 14<sup>th</sup> Provost General of the Society of Jesus in 1796. For Tamburini, see Fabrizio MARTELLI, *Michelangelo Tamburini XIV Generale dei Gesuiti*, Golinelli Editore, Formigine (Modena), 1994.



*European journey*

Località	Data
ANDATA	
Roma	27/09/1712
Firenze	
Pistoia	06-11/10/1712
Livorno	22/10/1712
Portovenere	22-30/10/1712
Genova	31/10-23/11/1712
Barcellona	
Alicante	
Malaga	
Cadice	
Sesimbra	
Lisbona	16/03-07/04/1713

Località	Data
RITORNO	
Port Louis	11-16/08/1727
Vannes	16-22/08/1727
Rennes	23-28/08/1727
La Flèche	31/08-04/09/1727
Le Mans	04-08/09/1727
Parigi	12-26/09/1727
Chalone sur Saône	28/09/1727
Lyon	30/09-04/10/1727
Avignone	06-09/10/1727
Marsiglia	10-15/10/1727
Genova	22-26/10/1727
Sestri Levante	26-31/10/1727
Levanto	31/10-02/11/1727
Viareggio	03/11/1727
Pistoia	04/11-11/12/1727
Firenze	11/12/1727-18/01/1728
Roma	23/01/1728



*Ocean voyage*

## 2. The great journey (from Rome to Lhasa)

Località	Data
ANDATA	
Lisbona	08/04/1713
Equatore - attravers.	08/05/1713
Isola di Trindade	
Doppiaggio di Capo di Bona Speranza	fine giugno/1713
Mozambico	25/07-17/08/1713
Equatore - attravers.	inizio settembre/1713
Goa	20/09/1713

Località	Data
RITORNO	
Pondicherry	23/01/1727
Isola Mauritius	fine febbraio/1727
Isola Réunion	inizio marzo/1727
Capo di Bona Speranza	09-10/04/1727
Isola di Sant'Elena	30/04/1727
Isola di Ascensione	07-09/05/1727
Equatore (attravers.)	20/05/1727
Martinica	11-22/06/1727
Port Louis	11/08/1727

## 2.1. Across the Mediterranean and the oceans.

On 27<sup>th</sup> September 1712, «at the age of 27 years and 9 months, in the company of Fr. Ildebrando Grassi also en route to the East Indian Missions» (*MITN* VII, 173), Desideri left Rome. He stopped off in Florence, where he was received by Grand Duke Cosimo III dei Medici, and in Pistoia from 6<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> October before continuing to Leghorn where, on 22<sup>nd</sup> October, he boarded a small sailing ship for Genoa, arriving there only on the 31<sup>st</sup> (the «unfavourable winds» forced the ship to stop in Portovenere until the 30<sup>th</sup> of October).

Desideri and Grassi along with another confrere, Florentine Francesco Maria Del Rosso (rector of the College in Goa), left the Ligurian port supported by the legal representative of the Society of Jesus, Pier Francesco Iambini, «on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November on the ship of Captain [Gio. Lorenzo] Viviani called Madonna delle Vigne» (*MITN* V, 124), and thus began their very difficult and dangerous sea journey across the western Mediterranean: «with continual storms, a horribly rough sea and consistently unfavourable and feeble winds» (*MITN* V, 124). After several storms and «very unfavourable winds», escaping attack by Turkish pirates, and being forced to go ashore a number of times in Spain (Barcelona, Alicante, Malaga and Cadiz) and Portugal (Cezimbra), the missionaries finally reached Lisbon in mid-March 1713 where they were welcomed by Father Francisco Duarte de Fonseca (1668-1738), attorney for the Indies.

As Europe's westernmost port, Lisbon was the preferred gateway to the Far East, after the seafaring route had been opened beyond the Cape of Good Hope, and the king of Portugal, Grand Master of the Order of Christ, owned all undertakings connected with Asia, including missionary business, according to the so-called *Padroado* (Patronage) which formalised the combination of civil and religious power. Desideri, Grassi, Del Rosso and another five Jesuits also on their way to the Indies (including Giovanni Battista Sanna, who would act as their superior during the journey) went to «bow to the majesty of the king and queen of Portugal» (*MITN* V, 125), before boarding on the 8<sup>th</sup> April 1713 and sailing the next day, Palm Sunday, from the port of Lisbon.

For over five months the journey unfolded across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, showing us how in the 18<sup>th</sup> century men had to struggle with the forces of nature. Indeed a journey made difficult by storms and dead calm seas brought our missionaries' vessel close to the South American coast, passing the Brazilian island of Trinidad before returning to the western coast of Africa, circumnavigating it, rounding the Cape of Good Hope at the end of June and returning up the east to reach Mozambique on 25<sup>th</sup> July. Here Desideri was at last able to stand on dry land again after three and a half months, and witness the

distressful slave trade: «here for the first time I witnessed to my regret trafficking in the lives and freedom of men» (*MITN* V, 130).

The group of Jesuit fathers grew by two and the ten of them boarded ship at Mozambique on the 16th August 1713, leaving the port the next day. After crossing the equator northwards in early September they at last reached Goa, the “Rome of the Orient”, on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1713 and were received by Vasco Fernandes Cesar de Menezes, the Portuguese Viceroy of the Indies (1712-17).

The journey was very hard and Desideri himself tells us: «Of the ten Fathers who arrived in Goa, eight from Europe and two from Mozambique, all except Father Ildebrando Grassi and myself fell gravely ill, some were in extremis and two died» (*MITN* V, p. 138). Our friend had however been able to gain perfect command of the Portuguese language and demonstrate his gifts as a shrewd and discerning observer with very significant naturalistic notes and observations.<sup>7</sup>

## **2.2. In India.**

Desideri took, and brilliantly passed, the examination for his solemn vow on 28<sup>th</sup> October, after which he began his third and final Probation. Just twelve days after the spiritual exercises he was called to the Provincial Father Antonio de Azevedo on 13<sup>th</sup> November and advised of his imminent departure for the Tibet mission.

Desideri’s Indian journey began on 16<sup>th</sup> November 1713 from Goa. Along with Father Melchior dos Reys, appointed rector of the Jesuit College in Agra, he boarded the flagship of a Portuguese war fleet at Panjim [today Panaji], captained by Lopo José de Almeida and on its way to Surat to fight the Arabs of Muscat. The young missionary was now so fluent in Portuguese that he was often called to give talks to the sailors, which were greatly enjoyed, and he also acted as their confessor. After a two-day stopover in Chaul, he arrived in Bassein on 7<sup>th</sup> December.

Desideri stayed a few days in Bassein, where the Jesuits had an important college (whose Superior was also in charge of military assignments concerning fortifications and artillery), before abandoning the sea to continue his journey on 20<sup>th</sup> December, stopping the next day in Damão. The missionary was ill when he reached this Portuguese garrison (which remained such, like Goa and Diu, until 1961) but soon recovered and was able to set off again on New Year’s Day 1714, to reach Surat on 4<sup>th</sup> January. This was an important city in the state of Gujarat located at the mouth of the river Tapti, at the southern opening of the gulf of Khambhat (Arabian Sea).

In Surat Father Ippolito met the Visitor to the Moghul Empire, José da Silva,<sup>8</sup>

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7 Specifically discussed in BARGIACCHI 2005b, and in BARGIACCHI 2006b.

8 Da Silva also acted as ambassador for the Portuguese authorities in Goa to the Moghul emperor in Delhi.



and due to wars and uprisings troubling the area, was obliged to remain for almost three months as the guest of the Capuchins. This same city had been a bone of contention between the Jesuits and the Capuchins until the latter Order succeeded in 1703 – thanks to Father Francesco Maria da Tours who was sent expressly to Rome – in obtaining the rights to Surat and were granted the Tibet mission.

Desideri took advantage of his stay to study the Persian language, once the *lingua franca* of most of the Orient, and also managed to understand what was happening in India, providing an accurate historical overview in his account. When the situation resolved itself, he set off again on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1714 with Fathers José da Silva and Melchior dos Reys, reaching the capital of Gujarat, Ahmadabad, on 4<sup>th</sup> April. Here the priests were the guests of a Dutch trading company. Three days later on 7<sup>th</sup> April, the opportunity presented itself to join a large caravan of about two thousand people, mainly soldiers on foot or horseback. The journey continued uneventfully almost until the end of April, marching in the early morning before sunrise «in good order, like an army, with trumpet drums, standards officers, baggage-carts, camels, etc.» (*MITN* V, 11)<sup>9</sup>, until they camped in the evening in some spacious area with a water supply and ever-watchful guards.

The journey along the imperial caravan route of Rajasthan, rendered harder by excessive heat and a searing wind as well as other trials, unfolded relatively quietly across Udajpur and Ajmir. The trouble began for the missionary after the caravan divided into three parts for the different destinations: at Sanganer, Desideri was forced to remain behind as a prisoner for two days because he was recognised as a European and believed to be a rich merchant, and therefore a large sum of money was demanded for his release. Fortunately, thanks to the intervention of his travelling companions, the order came from Amber to release him and although he had now lost his companions, Desideri managed to cross Jaipur and Amber and reach Delhi – the sumptuous capital of the declining Moghul empire – on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1714.

Throughout his time in India, Desideri was less tormented by the hardships of the journey than by the uncertainty hanging over his dispatch to Tibet, for which he had requested a specific patent that, as we shall see, his General was unable to provide. In Delhi, though, Portuguese Manoel Freyre,<sup>10</sup> who looked after the Christians in the city, was assigned as his travelling companion and superior. Desideri, who wanted an assistant, accepted this decision with evident if well-concealed disappointment. But the “superior” was Portuguese, five years older and as we shall see, had precise instructions for the mission with knowledge of the more delicate aspects unknown to the young Italian.

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9 Letter to Fr. Francesco Piccolomini (Agra 21.8.1714); in *MITN* V, DL.4, pp. 10-19; quoted from *HOSTEN* 1938, n. 5, pp. 599-619: 603.

10 M. Freyre (born at Ancião, Portugal, in 1679) entered the Society of Jesus at Goa on 7<sup>th</sup> October 1694; in 1710 he is recorded as being engaged in the Agra mission.

In mid-May, with the heat at its peak and the monsoon season imminent, it was necessary to stop. Desideri was thus sent to the Jesuit College in Agra, «a short six days' walk away», arriving there at the end of May. Without granting himself a rest he worked on improving his knowledge of the Persian language, concentrating on the interesting theological texts written in that language by Gerolamo Saverio,<sup>11</sup> until on 15<sup>th</sup> August, exactly two years after his Roman assignment, he obtained the longed-for «Patent [...] allowing [him] to go to the Mission of Tibet, and to continue the remainder of the journey, conforming with [his] wish, and [his] requests continually repeated» (*MITN* V, 17).<sup>12</sup>

After walking back from Agra to Delhi between August 22<sup>nd</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>, he met his travelling companion and superior Freyre, who had been his host when he first arrived in the imperial capital. All that remained was to wait for the rains to stop and make the final preparations – especially for Freyre, who was busy passing on orders to Father Manoel Durão who was to replace him in looking after the three hundred or so Christians in his care.

### 2.3. The great Himalayan crossing

**2.3.1. From Delhi to Leh.** The two Jesuits set off on their journey on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1714. When they reached Lahore, in the Punjab, on 9<sup>th</sup> October, they stayed ten days before moving on again northwards across the river Ravi, a tributary of the Chenab and later the Chenab itself, a tributary of the Indus. The most effortless, even and familiar part of their journey ended in the small city of Gujrat, whence they took the mountain road on 28<sup>th</sup> October. They had reached the first spurs of the Himalayas, the Pir Panjal range (with a pass at an altitude of almost 3500m). The route was difficult due to the unending series of ridges and countless swirling torrents to cross: an almost impossible venture for inexperienced travellers without adequate equipment and clothing. Beyond those mountains lay the fertile, hospitable valley of Srinagar, the capital city of Kashmir situated at an altitude of 1893m «in a wide and most pleasant plain surrounded on all side by high mountains [...] A big river [Jhelum] flows through the middle of the city, and nearby are large and beautiful lakes [Dal to the north-east and Anchar to the north-west], whereon with much pleasure and amusement one can sail in small boats» (*MITN* V, 160).<sup>13</sup>

This ideal location was exactly what the two dishevelled travellers needed to recover from the hardships they had suffered, especially the Pistoiese missionary

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11 Jeronimo Javier Ezpeleta Y Goñi (Beire, Navarre, Spain, 27.6.1549 – Goa, India, 27.6.1617), missionary and theologian, nephew of Francesco Saverio (son of his sister Ana de Jasso).

12 Letter quoted in note 9; from HOSTEN 1938, p. 615.

13 Quoted from DE FILIPPI (ed.) 1932, p.72.



who was gravely ill and twice came near to death, in November and the following February. A long stay was imposed by the need to see out the winter and wait for the mountain routes ahead to be at least partly free of the snow and ice blocking them. Desideri used his remaining energy to complete his studies of the Persian language.

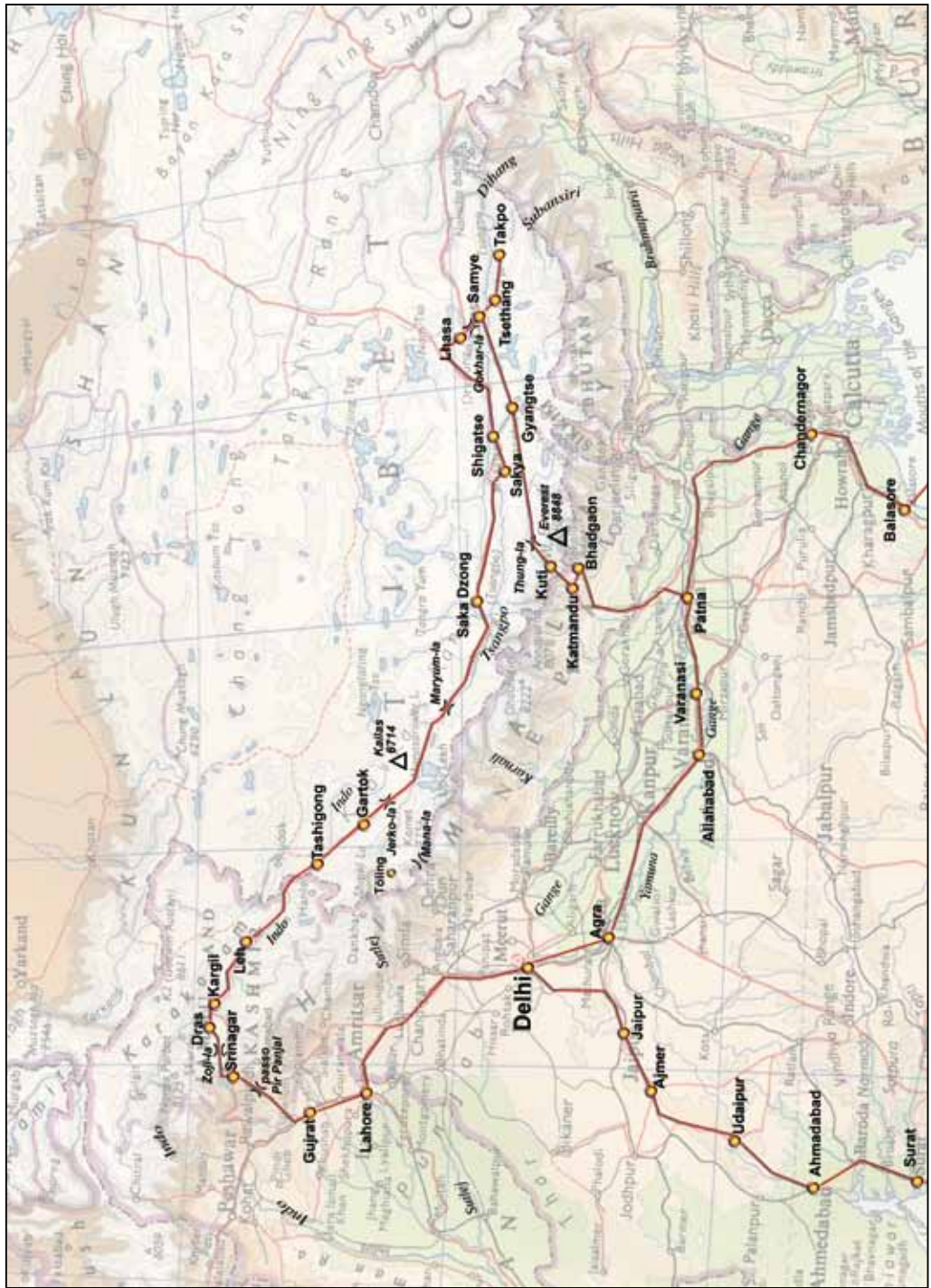
«As the snow had begun to melt and the people of Kashmir had again begun to move around, opening up the passes, on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1715» (*MITN* V, 163) the two missionaries and their guide, interpreter and bearers took up their journey again, remaining in Kashmir for a further twelve days in mountainous but populated and cultivated areas. This is the foot of the upward route to Zoji-la, a pass situated at about 3500m, among the sea of mountains where the Karakorum range, that follows the Hindu-kush, penetrates between the Himalayas to the south and the Kun-lun to the north in a kind of harsh corridor leading to the huge, arid, desolate and windy expanses of upper central Asia and the Tibetan plateau. They began climbing that mountain, «heavy with deep snow and hard ice everywhere», on the morning of 30<sup>th</sup> May, which was the feast of the ascension in that year, 1715. Having passed Zoji-la, a true orographical, climatic and cultural frontier, the missionaries continued down to Matayan, the first village of Baltistan, also under Moghul empire rule, and shortly afterwards entered Ladakh, at the time an independent kingdom, and then Dras in early June. After staying two days they set off on an impenetrable pathway which led them on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1715 to Leh, capital of Ladakh, the “land of mountain passes”. The route, across endless series of ridges crisscrossed by the Indus river and its tributaries, on dangerous, barely marked if existing paths, forcing them to make actual ascents and cross ramshackle, rickety bridges, is described by Desideri in the *Relazione* and in the letters, as usual with outstanding expression and communicative skills enabling the reader to relive those experience as he is transported by the accurately detailed and poetically evocative prose.

**2.3.2. From Leh to Gartok.** The missionaries stayed fifty-two days in Leh, a small town (whose population Freyre estimated at two thousand),<sup>14</sup> where they were welcomed by the king Nyima Namgyal, who reigned from 1700 until his abdication in about 1725. They found themselves immersed in a Tibetan environment, not only due to the typical architecture, language and the physical characteristics of the people, but also to the culture and religion. Desideri was immediately intrigued by the surprising amount of freedom enjoyed by all faiths, and by the high consideration for religion practised there, in which he recognised similarities to Christianity. For this reason he decided to stay in this hospitable

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14 Leh is situated at an altitude of 3500m at the mouth of a small fertile valley along the river Indus, which is about 10km south-west.

*The circuit of the Himalayas*



<b>Località</b>	<b>ANDATA</b>	<b>Data</b>
Delhi		24/09/1714
Lahore		09/10-19/10/1714
Gujrat		
Passo Pir Panjal (3 475 m)		
Srinagar		13/11/1714-17/05/1715
Zoji-la (3 529 m) e sosta a Matayan		30/05/1715
Baltistan		
Dras		
Leh		25/06-17/08/1715
Tashigong		07/09-09/10/1715
Gartok (Gar)		11-16 (circa)/10/1715
Jerko-la (4 941 m)		09/11/1715
Monte Kailas (6 714 m)		
Lago Manasarovar		
Maryum-la (5 151 m)		
Saka Dzong (Saga)		04-28/01/1716
Sakya		15-29/02/1716
Shigatse (Xigaze)		marzo 1716
Lhasa - in missione		18/03/1716-28/04/1721

<b>Località</b>	<b>Data</b>
Ganden	
Gokhar-la	
Samye	
TseThang	
Takpo (Dvags po)	
regione del Kongpo	

<b>Località</b>	<b>RITORNO</b>	<b>Data</b>
Lhasa		28/04/1721
Gyantse (Gyangze)		
Thung-la (5 481 m)		30/05-14/12/1721
Kuti (Nyalam)		27/12/1721-14/01/1722
Kathmandu		14-20/01/1722
Bhadgaon (Bhaktapur)		
Raubas (regno di Bettiah)		06/02-23/03/1722
Patna		31/03/1722
Benares (Varanasi)		04/04/1722
Allahabad		
Kora		
Jahanabad		
Agra		20/04-01/10/1722
Delhi - in missione		1722-1725



*Photo by Dainelli (De Filippi expedition 1913-1914). Courtesy of Photographic Archive of the Italian Geographical Society, of a jula bridge in Ladakh similar to the one described by Desideri when he arrived at a «wide and rapid torrent impossible to cross either by wading or swimming. Travellers are therefore obliged to use a bridge made of twisted willows. From one mountain to the other two thick ropes of willow are stretched nearly four feet apart, to which are attached hanging loops of smaller ropes of willow about one foot and a half distant from one another. One must stretch out one's arms and hold fast to the thicker ropes while putting one foot after the other into the hanging loops to reach the opposite side. With every step the bridge sways from right to left, and from left to right, therefore only one person at a time can cross. Besides this, one is so high above the river, and the bridge is so open on all sides, that the rush of water beneath dazzles the eyes and makes one dizzy» [MITN V, pp. 166-167 (DE FILIPPI ed. 1932, pp. 75-76)].*



place where, apparently, no European had ever been before.<sup>15</sup>

This same absence served to ignite in his superior the suspicion that all the

*The city of Leh «is situated in a large plain surrounded by mountains, and dotted with villages. The city at the foot of the hill gradually extends upwards until you reach the Residence of the Grand Lamà and the Royal Palace, both large, fine buildings. Above, nearly on the summit of the hill, is a fortress» [Desideri, MITN V, p.166 (DE FILIPPI ed. 1932, pp.78-79)].*

*E.G. Bargiacchi's photo (August 1983) shows the conditions of the buildings in which the Pistoiese missionary was received.*

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15 Desideri and Freyre are effectively the first Europeans to have completed the journey from Srinagar to Leh and describe it, while there had been the presence in Leh of Portuguese Jesuits João de Oliveira and Francisco de Azevedo (1578-1660) in the previous century, described in the account written by the latter, lost to memory, having been removed from the Society of Jesus historical archive only in 1924.

discomforts and suffering of their terrible journey had been in vain, since they had found «not a trace of the Capuchin Fathers»<sup>16</sup>; when the Portuguese priest later learned from the accounts of a Kashmiri merchant returning from a journey across eastern lands that there existed a third, larger Tibet, where he had seen Europeans with strange clothes distributing medicines, he cast his doubts aside and decided that this was the direction they should follow. Our friend Desideri protested fruitlessly that the land of Ladakh was ideal for founding a mission, not only thanks to the welcome they had enjoyed but also because there was a greater need for their help considering that no missionary had been here, and none was likely to arrive, but also to avoid conflict with the resentful rival Order.

This disagreement between the two Jesuits with its specific reference to the Capuchins clearly shows that Freyre scrupulously followed the orders he had received – orders that Desideri knew nothing about. Indeed he was unable to understand why his superior, who wanted to return to India as soon as possible, would not allow him to remain in Ladakh. Michael Sweet correctly assumes that:

Freyre [...] had been tapped by da Silva to gather intelligence on the activities of their Capuchin rivals. The unsupported speculations of earlier writers that Desideri and Freyre were in fact spies appear to be half-correct; Desideri remained entirely unaware of Freyre's covert mission, as far as we can judge from his available writings.<sup>17</sup>

«On 17<sup>th</sup> August 1715 with a few guides» and horses they had purchased, the two missionaries set off again «for the lands of that second Tibet, until the evening of 7<sup>th</sup> September» (*MITN* V, 171), when they reached Tashigang, the first outpost of that «third and largest Tibet», after crossing unhealthy plains «partly occupied by stagnant and putrid waters, and partly [...] by pools of sulphurous water» (*MITN* V, 172). The missionaries were warmly welcomed to this frontier location, protected by sturdy fortifications,<sup>18</sup> where about a hundred people lived (according to Freyre's usual somewhat reductive estimate), by the local civil and religious authorities who took steps to find the best way for them to reach their destination. An opportunity presented itself with the return to Lhasa of a Mongolian princess along with a military garrison located in nearby Gartok, which had been in her employ for two years, following the death of her husband.

The support of the princess, who was attentive and affectionate towards the missionaries, was decisive in the completion of an otherwise impossible journey.

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16 FREYRE, in *MITN* VII, pp. 197-198 [in SWEET 2006, p. 17; in DE FILIPPI (ed.) 1932, p. 354]; quoted from DE FILIPPI (ed.) 1932, p. 354.

17 SWEET 2006, p. 6. The English authors who, with prejudiced anti-Jesuit animosity, classified our missionaries as spies are Graham Sandberg, Thomas H. Holdich, Perceval Landon.

18 Those fortifications were destroyed in 1841 by the fierce Sikh invasion of Zorawar Singh.

Indeed, she not only provided the protection and assistance of her caravan but promised her commitment to helping «to make the long and difficult journey as pleasant as possible; adding that she esteemed it a great honour to be able to assist two Lamás from a distant land» (*MITN* V, 174).<sup>19</sup>

On 9<sup>th</sup> October 1715 the two Jesuits began their journey across the desolate steppes where the Indus<sup>20</sup> divides into a thousand little streams and where visitors might expect to meet only a rare nomad; in two days they reached Gartok, a large camp at an altitude of about 4500m, which then housed a large number of soldiers whose function was to control the incursions of enemy Zungari Mongolians in that part of the frontier.

**2.3.3. From Gartok to Lhasa.** At the end of the month of October the full caravan set off: men and women of the court on horseback, like the military escort, then the horses and especially the yak with their burdens, as well as many men on foot accompanied by other troops on horseback, reserve horses and other livestock. The missionaries were served by three people «three Christian servants and an infidel interpreter» (*MITN* V, 178).

The group followed the valley of the Indus and its tributaries upwards to reach a high pass on 9<sup>th</sup> November, Jerko-la (4941m), separating the Indus basin from that of its tributary, Sutlej, and leading into a strikingly beautiful and spiritually evocative area.

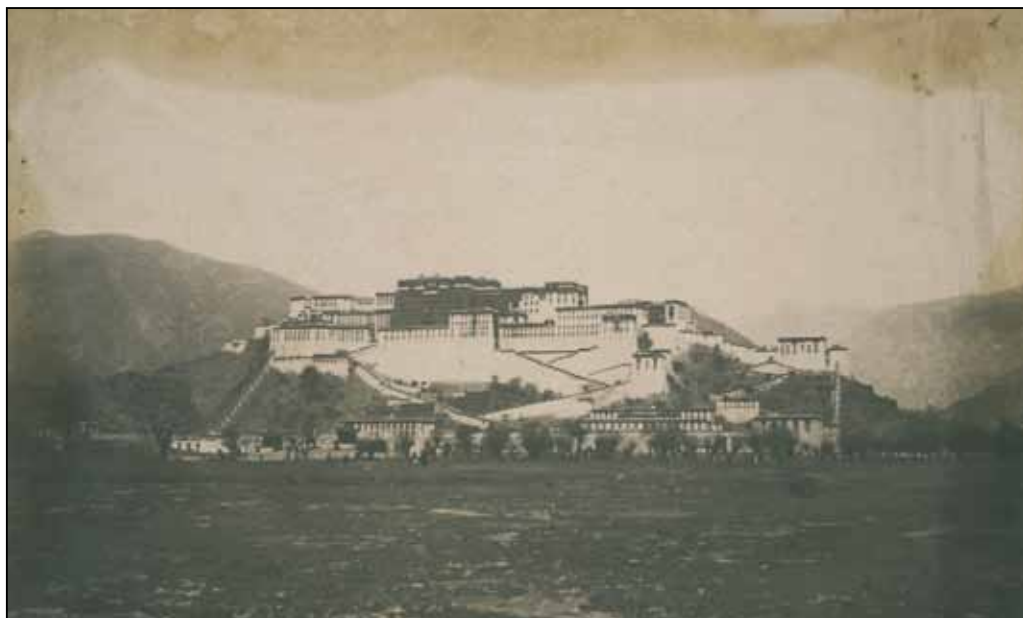
The locals approach this place [...] with great respect and veneration, [...] Here, off the route, is an infinitely high mountain, also very broad in circumference, its summit covered by clouds and perpetual snow and ice, and the rest very rough, untamed and harsh due to the bitter cold there. [...] The Tibetans go to some trouble to pass right around this mountain [over fifty kilometres], which takes some days, and by doing so believe they will obtain very great (so to speak) indulgences (*MITN* V, 174-175).

The mountain in question is Kailas (in Tibetan, Kang Rinpoche, which means “precious snowy mountain”): although not particularly high (6,714 m), it

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19 Quoted from DE FILIPPI (ed.) 1932, p. 83.

20 Here the Indus is called Gartang or Gar Tsangpo.



*«Potalà is a huge rock of considerable circumference and somewhat high. [...] a wide, well-conceived and easy staircase leads up to the summit of the rock where stands a sumptuous palace five storeys high. The centre of the facade of this palace corresponding to the principal apartments is most perfect and well-proportioned, the two wings do not quite correspond; still, it is a fine building. [...] This Palace occupies the whole top of the rock of Potalà, but in old days it was smaller, as can be seen by the drawing made by the Rev. Albert D'Orville and the Rev. Johann Grüber of our Society, and by that of Father Athanasius Kircher, fig. viii, chap. iv of his book, La Cina Illustrata, describing the journey of the above-mentioned fathers from China to Mogol. The Palace was modernized, enlarged, adorned and enriched by the late Grand Lamà» [Desideri, MITN VI, DR.2, pp.27-28 (DE FILIPPI ed. 1932, pp. 137-138). This photo by Ovche Norzunov was the first photo of Lhasa ever published. It appeared in the article by Joseph Deniker, La première photographie de Lhasa, "La Géographie", Tome IV, 2<sup>me</sup> semestre 1901, n. 10, 15.10.1901, pp. 242-247: 245 (fig. 38). Courtesy of Photographic Archive of the Italian Geographical Society.*

is majestic in appearance with a triangular pyramid shape of rocks and ice, like a crystal dome (or, for Buddhists, like a huge natural stupa) and is a holy mountain





Photo E.G. Bargiacchi, August 1987.

and destination for pilgrimages for Indian and Tibetan religions. The nearby lake Manasarovar is also venerated in the same way, as Desideri notes, when he accurately describes these places which combine religious<sup>21</sup> and geographical importance. Indeed, this area<sup>22</sup> comprises an extraordinary hydrographic system forming the source of the largest rivers of the Indian subcontinent.<sup>23</sup>

The Swede Sven Hedin (1865-1952), a great explorer and scholar of Tibet and central Asia, dedicates entire chapters of his monumental work *Southern Tibet* to Desideri's discoveries, quoting extensively from the *Relazione*. Specifically, Hedin states that Desideri was not only the first European traveller to visit and describe Manasarovar and to discover Mt. Kailas, but he was also the first explorer to correctly raise the question of the sources of the Indus and Ganges rivers. Lastly, he also states that if we:

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21 As well as the ritual circumambulations of Mt Kailas and lake Manasarovar, Desideri also notes the worshipful devotion to the cave where the hermit Milarepa lived, Tibet's most famous and best-loved ascetic.

22 Today this is a district of Purang, in the Ngari prefecture in western Tibet.

23 To the north the Indus which subsequently curves around Nanga Parbat (8126 m) and crosses Pakistan to empty itself into the Arabian Sea south of Karachi; to the west, the Sutlej, which after a long course flows into the Indus; to the south the Karnali, a tributary of the Ghaghara which, in turn, flows into the Gange just north of the city of Patna; to the east the Tsangpo, which crosses all of Tibet horizontally as far as the extreme east and then manages to turn south, under the names of Dihang and then Brahmaputra, to meet the sea in Bengal, forming a single delta with the Ganges.

Add to this the general merit of his narrative, the absence of fantastical speculation, the quiet matter-of-fact way in which he gives his observations and nobody will call it an exaggeration if I regard Ippolito Desideri as one of the most brilliant travellers who ever visited Tibet, and among the old ones, by far the most prominent and the most intelligent of all<sup>24</sup>.

Having crossed the Maryum-la pass (5,551 m), a watershed between the Sutlej and Tsangpo basins, the route mainly follows the course of the latter river in a desolate, solitary and stony landscape, so brooding and majestic that its memory could still terrorise anyone unprepared for a test of this kind. It was no longer a question of climbing steep mountain paths, but of staying in the saddle from daybreak until well into the night; this was certainly no relief, not to mention the fact that it was impossible to undress and wash. The resulting parasites and the extreme cold made it impossible even to sleep. Indeed:

The bed was a skin laid on the ground and the pillow a saddle [...] with the sky for a roof [...] Nor should it seem strange that we chose to cross this desert in winter; indeed if we did not cross it at this time, there would be no snow to melt over the fire as drinking water; moreover the summer consists of three months of continual rain which makes this land impassable in other ways (*MITN* V, 179, 177 e 180).

The words Fr. Ippolito uses to describe the characteristics of this epic journey enable us to experience all its hardships, with marvellous detailed descriptions of a typical day. Sven Hedin rightly notes the classic nature of this description of travels in Tibet, and authoritatively claims that no modern traveller has surpassed him.

As well as the «disasters suffered», Desideri does not fail to emphasise the «relief received» from the «loving and paternal assistance of God [in the form of the] affectionate and maternal care» shown by the princess who, as we learn from Freyre's account, was named Caçal. Despite the difficulties of the crossing, the Italian Jesuit managed to continue his studies of the Tibetan language with the interpreter, until he gained sufficient command of it to converse amiably with the «tartar»<sup>25</sup> princess, in conversations of great mutual interest that provided relief from the trials of the journey. The support of this benefactress (who, after a brief stay at Court, retired to a convent in Shigatse) was certainly encouraged by the intellectual and human gifts of her guest. The famous astrophysicist Giorgio

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24 S. HEDIN, *Southern Tibet. Discovery in former times compared with my own researches in 1906-1908*, Lithographic Institute of the General Staff of the Swedish Army, Stockholm, 1916-1922 (9 vols. of text and 3 atlases): Vol. I, *Lake Manasarovar and the source of the great Indian rivers. From the remotest antiquity to the end of the eighteenth century*, 1917, pp. 278-279.

On the Kailas and Manasarovar area see BARGIACCHI 2006b, pp. 34-37.

25 At that time, in Europe, the Mongolians were called Tartars.

Abetti (1882-1982) rightly says that «Fr. Desideri's uncommon intelligence and the liking he aroused in those near him explain why he was able to learn the Tibetan language so rapidly».<sup>26</sup>

Bearing in mind the suffering caused by the journey and the long, agonising stay in infertile, completely unpopulated areas, we can easily understand the relief the two missionaries felt on finding life at Saka dzong on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1716, when they encountered the first permanent dwellings and human beings settled in this area.

After a 24-day stay, due to the princess's illness, they set off again on 28<sup>th</sup> January across increasingly populated areas to reach Sakya<sup>27</sup> in mid-February, the capital of a large ecclesiastic principality strongly independent from the central power of Lhasa and governed by a lama, a hereditary role passed on from father to son. The two missionaries stayed here from 15<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> February 1716 and permanently parted company with the princess; they set off on their journey once again, reaching Shigatse,<sup>28</sup> capital of the ancient Tsang kingdom, in just a short time.

After Lhasá [Shigatse] is the most considerable city in Tibet. A powerful and very rich Lamá [the Panchen Lama] lives there, who takes rank immediately after the Grand Lamá and when the Grand Lamá of Tibet happens to be a young boy, the Lamá of [Shigatse] is his master and tutor (*MITN* VI, DR.2, 21).<sup>29</sup>

In Shigatse, which is close to the large, imposing monastery complex of Tashilhumpo (founded in 1447 and home of the Panchen Lama), the two Jesuits stopped for about six days and after another twelve days' travelling, reached the long sought-after destination. Desideri tells us:

three years, five months and twenty-two days after my departure from Rome; two years and four months after leaving Goa; a year and almost six months after leaving Delly; and ten whole months after leaving Cascimir; on 18<sup>th</sup> March 1716, the eve of the

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26 G. ABETTI, *I viaggi di Padre Ippolito Desideri da Pistoia*, "La Nazione", 26.4.1932, p. 3.

27 Sakya [Sag'ya, "grey land", altitude 4280 m.], «one of the most mysterious places in Tibet», according to Giuseppe Tucci, who spent a month there in 1939, and recalls the experience as follows: «I was proud to admire a holy city of which Desideri provided the clearest and most accurate description in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and where after him and before me, perhaps only one or two Europeans have been» [G. Tucci, *L'Italia e gli studi tibetani*, "Civiltà" (Bi-monthly journal of the Esposizione Universale di Roma, Bompiani, Milano), a. I, n. 2, 21 June 1940, pp. 75-84:75.

28 Shigatse [Xigaze], located at an altitude of 2900m, is a city near the point where the Tsangpo joins the Nyang Chu river coming from the south-east, across the vast and fertile 85km valley beginning at the city of Gyantse. Shigatse is 280km southwest of Lhasa.

29 Quoted from DE FILIPPI (ed.) 1932, p. 132.

glorious patriarch St Joseph's day, by divine will we arrived in the city of Lhasà, capital of the third and greatest Tibet, ending such a long journey in the place I had established and prearranged as the beginning of our mission in this kingdom (*MITN* V, 183).

Sven Hedin states that Desideri

had accomplished a journey which ought to make his name for ever famous. It was not till quite 188 years later that the next European expedition – under Captain Rawling and Major Ryder – passed through the valley of the upper Brahmaputra. Father Desideri was the first European who travelled along the whole of the Trans-Himalaya along its southern flank. For nearly two hundred years nothing was known of this journey except what Desideri imparted to Father Ildebrand Grassi in a letter written in Lhasa on April 10, 1716, which was afterwards printed in the *Lettres Edifiantes*.<sup>30</sup>

The same assessment is supported, from a different point of view, by Tucci:

Desideri's arrival in Lhasa marks a memorable date in the history of Tibetan studies, because he was the first to show Tibet to the West, not in terms of its ethnographical features or geographical boundaries, but rather in its profound and intimate spiritual reality.<sup>31</sup>

### **3. Desideri's stay in Tibet (1716-1721)**

#### **3.1. The early months in Lhasa**

Desideri and Freyre arrived in Lhasa, where the Jesuits Grueber and d'Orville

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30 S. HEDIN, *Trans-Himalaya. Discoveries and Adventures in Tibet*, MacMillan and Co., London 1909-1913 (3 vols.): III, p. 125.

31 G. TUCCI, *L'Italia e l'esplorazione del Tibet*, "Asiatica", a. IV, n. 6, November-December 1938, pp. 435-446: 441.

had passed on their return from Peking about fifty years before, and in which city, nine years previously, the Capuchins had tried to open a mission, abandoned over four years before. However despite these ephemeral presences the city was practically unknown to Europeans and would remain so for centuries, until the 1904 expedition led by Francis E. Younghusband, which violently penetrated the city with pure colonial-style military action. A prestigious character in the history of exploration, the British colonel Henry Yule (1820-1889), sums up the events summarizing knowledge of what was known as the “forbidden city” in this way:

A fatality has attended the accounts of Lhasa that *should* have been. Grueber and Dorville, who were there in 1661, give no account of the city. Father Desideri who travelled thither by Ladakh in 1715-16, a route not known to have been travelled by any second European in modern times, gives no detail of his journey beyond Ladakh, and says nothing of Lhasa. The journal of Samuel Vanderput, a Dutchman who in the time of the Emperor Yungching reached Lhasa from India, acquired the language and the friendship of the Lamas, and accompanied a deputation of them to Peking, was never published, and appears to have perished. Nothing tangible is to be got out of notices of Giorgi in the *Alphabetum Tibetanum*. Thomas Manning, an Englishman who reached Lhasa from Calcutta in 1811, was arrested and sent back by the Chinese, and died without publishing any particulars of his journey. For nearly thirty years the spirit of geographical exploration has been at a sadly low ebb in India; may it revive before foreign nations snatch the honour from us of solving such problems as the true course of the great river of Tibet, and the latitude of Lhasa, the last uncertain to the extent of *more than a whole degree*.<sup>32</sup>

On arriving in Lhasa, Freyre considered his task to be complete, having accompanied Desideri and entrusted him with the mission, and after less than a month's rest he left the land he so disliked on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1716, and after 42 days arrived in Kathmandu, in Nepal. Here he remained for five months as the guest of the Capuchins, who were preparing a new expedition into Tibet led by

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32 H. YULE, *Cathay and the Way Thither* being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China, The Hakluyt Society, London, 1866 (2 vols.), vol. I, pp. 148-149 note 2 [2nd ed. in 4 vols., revised throughout in the light of recent discoveries by Henri Cordier, Hakluyt Society, London, 1913-1916 (4 vols.), vol. II (“Odorico da Pordenone”), 1913, p. 249 nota 4]. It should be mentioned that in this edition too [reprinted in Peking (1932) and New Delhi (Munshiram Manoharlal Publ., 1998)], which was claimed to be updated, we find repetitions of the same outdated information even after partial publication of Desideri's *Relazione* and after the Younghusband military expedition (both in 1904).

Domenico da Fano.<sup>33</sup>

Desideri was left alone «since in all that immense expanse of three Tibets there was not one other missionary or even another European» (*MITN V*, 183), and visited the city with great attention, as we can clearly tell from his beautiful, accurate and “photographic” description, bringing to life places that may no longer exist following the destruction wrought by the Chinese. This description is akin to a guide to the Lhasa of three centuries ago, and can still be useful today for the parts that still survive. The solitary missionary did not lose heart and when he was called to the palace by order of the king Lajang Khan [Lha bzang Khan]. Politely interrogated by the generalissimo, commander of the kingdom’s military, he explained with the greatest sincerity and confidence his missionary intention as propagator of the only «true and legitimate way, outside of which there is no other, to reach heaven and achieve eternal happiness» (*MITN V*, 184), and his intent to remain in Tibet until he died, save for impediments from a higher source of power. These words made a good impression and aroused much curiosity, so much so that he was received by the Prime Minister (who would become his friend) on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1716 and three days later, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, he had an audience with the king whom he judged to be «a man who demonstrated that he had studied science, who spoke with emphasis and persuasion, with frank commitment to the truth which he upheld with intrepid determination» (*MITN V*, 187), and who granted him protection, support and freedom of action.

The conditions appeared to be truly favourable considering how positively his religion seemed to be judged, although it was not held to be the only way to salvation; the Tibetans objected that «each may be saved according to his law» (*MITN V*, 193), but they seem open to accepting any modifications to their system that proved to be superior, and convincingly good and effective. When asked to illustrate his religion and its differences with theirs, the “lama from the West” did not yet feel sufficiently confident of his command of the spoken language to undertake such a task, and he therefore proposed the preparation of a written text. However, to convince others one not only needs familiarity with the spoken language in order to express oneself clearly, but also familiarity with the religious system in order to compare the differences with the true law of which the young missionary felt to be the bearer. He therefore devoted all

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33 His long stay with the Capuchins and detailed description of their movements in the more usually concise report of the Portuguese Jesuit are definitive confirmation that the main purpose of his missionary journey was to gather information. From Kathmandu, Freyre moved on to Patna, where he stayed, ill, for three months before finally reaching Agra, where on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1717 he signed his report written in Latin. Around 1719 he left the Society of Jesus, and the only further trace we have is an unsuccessful application for re-admission, written from Goa in 1724.



*«At certain hours in the morning or afternoon the young students in the monastery-universities are engaged in study or in private conferences [...]; at other hours they are obliged to attend the public conferences or disputations which are held nearly every day in a kind of enclosed square with trees. [...] Others are appointed to maintain certain propositions attacked with great ardour by some of the students who crowd round the defendants and loudly and emphatically quote arguments in the form of enthymemes, partly derived from metaphysical reasons, partly from authoritative standard books: To these arguments the defendant, as is the custom with us, replies by denying, or assenting or contradicting the arguments, or denying the hypothesis and explaining the doctrine, as is done in our schools» [Desideri, MITN VI, DR.3, p.155 (DE FILIPPI ed. 1932, p. 218)]. «There is a peculiar gesture always made during disputations by the proposer of the argument, which amuses the audience and captivates the attention, while it excites the defendant to a good reply. As soon as the disputant has expounded his argument he rapidly straightens the five fingers of his right hand and with them strikes the palm of his left close to the defendant's face, saying: Rorrò chì, words which have no meaning, but said with emphasis are good as to say "Now reply if you can!" This gesture is always used when arguing in company, or in a public disputation» [Desideri, MITN VI, DR.2, p. 95 (DE FILIPPI ed. 1932, pp. 185-186)]. Photo E.G. Bargiacchi, Sera Monastery, August 1987.*

his energies with admirable fervour from the day after his first meeting with the



*A depiction of the bhavacakra (Wheel of Existence) which, as Desideri rightly says, is a symbolic introduction to the basic concepts of karma (dependent origination), that is the opposite of fate and predestination: «The Tibetans to denote one of the principal points of their religion [use] a symbol, or figure, or hieroglyph which [...] resembles the frontispiece in a small book by Father Pietro Pinamonti of our Society called L'inferno aperto, the head of a hideous monster with a wide-open mouth. Inside the mouth are six divisions representing the six conditions of mankind, that is three as rewards for virtue, three as punishments for vice [...] the six worlds or the six states of man. [...] Thus the horrible head and terrible mouth signify the deeds of men and the six division the*

*six states in which they reap the fruits of their deeds» [Desideri, MITN VI, DR.3, pp.307-308 (DE FILIPPI ed. 1932, pp.305-306)]. Photo by Cesare Antilli (De Filippi Expedition 1913-1914). Courtesy of Archivio Storico Osservatorio Astrofisico di Arcetri – INAF.*

king, until the last day of his stay in that kingdom «studying from morning till night» (MITN V, 188), putting off eating until night-time and sustaining himself during the day with tea prepared in the Tibetan style (with yak butter) – certainly nutritious but unappealing to western tastes.

Today it is hard to even imagine how difficult Desideri's task was. Tibetan is a «peculiar language [which] has no connection or affinity with any other» (MITN VI, DR.2, p. 91);<sup>34</sup> it belongs, in fact, to the Tibetan-Burmese language group but the alphabet adopted in the 7<sup>th</sup> century derives from the Indian late Gupta era. Moreover, the historical spelling system means that the modern spoken language differs greatly in pronunciation from the written words. Desideri was definitely the first westerner to come to grips with the language, of whose existence Europe was barely even aware, and he was therefore forced to make up a dictionary and personally put together a grammar of the language in order to conquer the rules for the construction of discourse. Moreover, as Giuseppe Tucci says, he had to analyse «with scholastic clear-sightedness and subtlety, the complicated obscurities of Lamaist dogmatics, [later reproduced] in that *Relazione del Tibet* whose profundity and precision holds firm against the onslaught of the

34 Quoted from DE FILIPPI (ed.) 1932, p.184.



centuries and the perfecting of research»<sup>35</sup>.

Between June and August 1716, while he studied the Tibetan language and conceptions, Desideri wrote two books in Italian, and on 8<sup>th</sup> September he began translating the first into Tibetan.

### 3.2. Penetrating the central concepts of Buddhism

The Jesuit's precious and fruitful solitude was interrupted by the arrival of three Capuchins in Lhasa on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1716: Domenico da Fano (1674-1728), Francesco Orazio della Penna (from Pennabilli)<sup>36</sup> and Giovanni Francesco da Fossombrone (1677-1724). Fr. Ippolito, who had already been informed of their arrival by a letter from Domenico da Fano, received in late July 1716, presented them at Court, helped them learn the language, and translated the message they carried from the Pontiff of Rome. Their relationship became very conflictual, though polite and friendly in appearance: the Jesuit, from the heights of his education, certainly did not fear any competition, while the Capuchins never accepted the presence of an extremely competent rival, as different from them as the strategies and methods of their two religious orders. The Capuchins, with considerable duplicity and bad faith therefore employed all possible means to expel their rival colleague.

After dutifully welcoming the new arrivals, the Pistoiese Jesuit returned to his studies and to writing, in Tibetan, his book entitled "With the dawn rises the sun which dispels the remaining shadows", which he presented to the king on Epiphany 1717 (*Op. tib.* I). This event took place in the large royal audience

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35 G. TUCCI, *Alessandro Csoma de Kőrös*, "Acta Philosophica" (Universitas Francisco-Josephina, Kolozsvár), I, 1942, pp. 3-20: 3 (Italian text, pp. 3-11), 12 (Hungarian text, pp. 12-20) [republished in Italian in G. TUCCI, *Opera Minora*, G. Bardi Editore (Università di Roma. Studi orientali, Vol. VI), Rome, 1971 (2 vols.), Vol. II, pp. 419-427: 419].

36 Francesco Orazio della Penna di Billi (ie. from Pennabilli), formerly Luzio Michel Angelo Nicola Olivieri (Pennabilli, province of Pesaro and Urbino, 1680 – Patan, Nepal, 20.7.1745), son of Orazio and Francesca, took the cloth at Cingoli (Macerata) on 8.11.1700 and made his vows on 8.11.1701. With the third Capuchin expedition he reached Chandernagore on 1.9.1713, and immediately set off for Patna, leaving there on 27.12.1714 for Kathmandu, where, from early 1715 he acted as the father superior. He reached Lhasa on 1st October 1716 with prefect Domenico da Fano, and when the latter left in 1722, became superior there as well as prefect of the mission from 1725 (he was appointed prefect on 13.8.1719, but only took up the post on 15.9.1725). He remained in Lhasa for almost 16 years, leaving on 25.8.1732 for Kathmandu and after two years there, moving to Patna in late 1734. He sailed for Chandernagore in December 1735, and in late 1736 reached Rome, where he remained at length and, having been confirmed as prefect and obtained the considerable means required, he prepared a new expedition. With this ninth expedition he arrived in Chandernagore on 25.9.1739, in Bhadgaon [Bhaktapur] in Nepal in January 1740, and in Lhasa on 6.1.1741, leaving this city definitively with all the other Capuchins on 20.4.1745, and arriving in Nepal on 4.6.1745.

room, attended by court dignitaries and the great lamas, in the presence of the three Capuchins and is described as a great ceremony in the *Relazione* and in the letters of the author of the work presented; it is summarised here with brilliant expression by Fosco Maraini (1912-2004).

We are in Lhasa, capital of Tibet; it is the 6<sup>th</sup> January 1717 [...] In the throne room an Italian steps forward; he is young, good-looking, humble (in his own way, with a hint of pride and boldness in his bearing), with a highly intelligent expression that misses nothing [...] This was the Pistoiese nobleman Ippolito Desideri, an uncommonly energetic and vigorous man of outstanding courage and generosity [...]<sup>37</sup>

The king enjoyed the book and after receiving the opinion of the most competent lamas he called Desideri to the palace and told him the general opinion was that the axioms and principles contained in it were «well-presented and do not fail to satisfy reason. He was however greatly opposed to their dogmas and opinions. He judged it opportune and necessary, surrounded by the opposing teachings in such an important subject, not to settle on any fixed decision until he had weighed both sides of the argument in the scales of solid, strong reason. For this reason he had decided to call a debate with [the Christian] on one side and the Lamà and scholars of his country and universities on the other» (*MITN V*, 195-196). Well aware of the high level of this debate, he suggested that Desideri pursue his study of the language and philosophy even further in order to grasp their dialectic and fully penetrate their fundamental concepts. Basically, the king proposed a religious dispute during which the various concepts would be freely contrasted without preconceptions, to emphasise the value and persuasive efficacy of the ideas; it would be a debate reminiscent of that one that took place in Lhasa at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, when Indian Buddhism prevailed over the Chinese version.

As a consequence the king guaranteed Desideri all the necessary support and thus the Jesuit and the Capuchin Orazio della Penna began, on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1717, to study in the monastery of Ramoche, and spent the following summer in the great monastic university of Sera (about 4km north of Lhasa).

Fr. Ippolito's studies concerned the canons of Tibetan Buddhism, an enormous number of texts (almost 5,000) collected in two anthologies, the *Kanjur* ("Translation of Buddha's word", the collection of direct teachings, in 108 volumes) and the *Tanjur* ("Translation of the treatises", the Indian commentaries on the teachings, in 224 volumes). An excellent introduction and guide to this vast philosophical area was available in the work of Tsong Khapa (1357-1419), founder of the Gelugpa school, principally in the *Lam rim chen mo*

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<sup>37</sup> F. MARAINI, *Quel gesuita che scriveva in tibetano*, "La Nazione", 16.12.1984, p. 3.

(“Great treatise on the stages of path” or “gradual way to enlightenment”), which may be compared to the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas (1221c.-1274) as a summary and organic description of previous religious writings.

Desideri carefully observed and beautifully described the logic of Tibetan Buddhism, the theory and argumentative practice, and formation of pupils, with daily focused and enthusiastic application to devouring the canonical books, comparing the main passages and annotating them as well as frequently discussing these topics with the Tibetan monks. Many of his general and specific discussions are exemplary, such as the illustration of the Wheel of Existence [*bhavacakra*] (MITN VI, DR. 3, pp.307-308) or the faultless linguistic analysis of the famous mantra *om maṇi padme hūm* (MITN VI, DR.3, pp. 289-291), which, as Rudolf Kaschewsky states, «may mark the memorable beginning of Tibetology in the West».<sup>38</sup>

The description of the missionary’s journey of inner discovery is as fascinating – or even more so – than the account of his journey over mountains and valleys. Having reached the uplands of reflection, he confidently tackled the peak, the Buddhist concept of emptiness, known by the Sanskrit term *śūnyatā* which, for Desideri, studying the Tibetan texts, was «tongbà-gni» [*stong pa nyid*]. This concept derives principally from the subtle philosophical thinking of Nāgārjuna (2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.), which for westerners was one of the «most obscure and convoluted [regarding] Emptiness, not in the material and philosophical sense but in the lofty, mystical sense whose aim is to ultimately rule out the existence of any Being which exists of itself and is independent and uncreated», with the disturbing conclusion for a western cleric that «thus the door to knowledge of God is entirely closed» (MITN V, 199). Not only was he the first to rise to these levels but, as Tucci observes with wonder: «Who has put it better than Desideri, who said that Buddhism, in spite of its idols, is a Godless religion?»<sup>39</sup>. Our Jesuit in fact discovered that Tibetans believe the world and everything existing in it to be merely the contingent and changing state of a continual, infinite and eternal process for which «they do not take into consideration any primary, universal, uncreated, independent cause on which everything else depends, in fact they categorically deny this and reject both destiny and the existence of any being of itself, uncreated, as lord and creator of the universe» (MITN VI, DR.3, 167).

The magnificent prose and unsurpassed clarity of expression are the result of an arduous upwards climb to that aforementioned peak: an ascent with many failed attempts before the final success. For here our young Jesuit had no guides,

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38 R. KASCHESKY, *The Image of Tibet in the West before the Nineteenth Century*, in T. DODIN, H. RÄTHER (ed.), *Imagining Tibet. Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*, Wisdom Publications, Boston (USA), 2001, pp. 3-20: 10.

39 G. TUCCI, *L’Italia e gli studi tibetani* (see note 27), p. 78.

since his Tibetan teachers (whom he initially considered reticent in providing esoteric teachings) were not in fact able to offer explanations regarding the heights of thinking reserved only for the greatest experts. So he returned, alone, to «reading and re-reading, scrutinising and probing» and arrived «not only at an understanding but a full possession and skilled comprehension of all that subtle, sophisticated and convoluted material», which was so important and indispensable for his purpose (*MITN* V, 199-200). The process by which Desideri reached the heart of Buddhist reflection is described enthusiastically and engagingly and the resulting explanation of Buddhist “emptiness” is astonishing:

all things are empty of existence in themselves. The reason [...] is that nothing owes its own existence to an intrinsic nature and exist essentially on its own. The reason for this being so [...] is that nothing is totally independent inasmuch as there is nothing that is [...] unconnected unlinked, and without reciprocal correlation [...] but] everything considered in the light of its essential nature has some correlation with some term or object, then nothing possesses its own essence absolutely of itself, but rather from the term or object which it is correlated (*MITN* VI, DR.3, p. 204).<sup>40</sup>

Desideri was fascinated by that theoretical construction concerning the contingency of the phenomenal world which he found perfectly acceptable from a Christian viewpoint, just as he was convinced by the Tibetans’ inclination for «virtuous works» and such evident devotion that it represented «a reproach to Christians who did not yet do as much for the True God they worshipped» (*MITN* VI, DR.2, 102); so he could not fail to admire a religion organised according to «the rules of well-ordered reason, [...] to be admired [because] not only does it urge the avoidance of vice, [...] instilling the need for triumph over all passions, but moreover it arouses love and respect for virtue and even more surprisingly, guides Man to a humanly sublime and heroic perfection» (*MITN* VI, DR.3, 292).

We could note the glaring contradiction between these extraordinary acknowledgements and the ever-connected statements qualifying the Tibetan system as «erroneous and harmful» or «infernal doctrine and diabolical religion» (*MITN* VI, DR.3, 204); this is not only due to the understandable need for caution, but to the disturbing fact that at the centre of this system lies a concept which implies the denial of «any Being of itself and uncreated and any primary cause for all things» (*MITN* VI, DR.3, 194). So all the efforts of this explorer of new concepts aimed to demonstrate that by their very coherence they would have required a “primary cause”, a divine creator. Despite his strenuous hard work, he sensed that the construction he had undertaken stood firm against his dialectic

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40 Michael Sweet, who is completing a new, long-awaited, critical edition of Desideri’s *Relazione* in English, has kindly provided the translation of this excerpt.

challenges, to the extent that he humbly asked for help from the more advanced European study centres to find adequate answers:

I have no other desire than [...] to run from one holy European cloister to another, inviting all the most fervent theologians [...] to the Mission in Tibet and [...] I would like [...] to urge them to abandon the clamour of European circles and philosophical Cathedra and run all together to the Tibet Mission to pass the days and whole nights refuting atheism [...], and countering the convoluted errors [...]<sup>41</sup>

Desideri however goes so far as to state that, notwithstanding the apparent paradox, the Tibetans could not be considered atheists since although in theory they «ruled out any divine being [...] in practice [...] they accept and recognise it» (*MITN* VI, 208). This was because he found the perfection idealised and represented by Tibetan divinities consonant with the Christian vision, although on closer examination they revealed themselves to be indicative only of higher existential levels to be reached on the spiritual journey.<sup>42</sup>

### 3.3. Desideri and the decisive events of Tibetan history

In the monastery of Sera, on 28<sup>th</sup> November, Desideri began to draft a new book in Tibetan, *The origin of things* ['*Byun k'unis*]. Concentrating on the empyrean of philosophical concepts, he was completely unaware of the imminent serious and violent earthly events that would prove decisive in Tibet's history.

Towards the end of 1717 Tsewang Arabtan, ruler of the Zungari Mongolians, led a small army on a surprise attack of his rival monarch (of the Qoshot Mongolians) Lajang Khan, overcoming energetic resistance and killing him on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1717 after conquering Lhasa and pillaging the city for three days. A reaction from the Chinese, who considered that land to be under their protection, was not slow in coming and almost three years later they routed the scarce Zungari troops and occupied Lhasa on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1720, where they installed the young man in their company as the 7<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, with no temporal powers (which were temporarily entrusted to a secular monarchy).

The historical information provided by the scrupulous Jesuit is, as usual, reliable and accurate. Invaluable, too, is the detailed account of those crucial events, described with the lively, compelling style of an accurate and highly

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41 Letter to the Cardinals of Propaganda, from Lhasa 21.12.1719, Arch. Prop. Fide, Scr. Congr. Part., vol. 84, Congr. 29.11.1732, ff. 79-84: 83v.-84r. The letter was only partially published in *MITN* V, DL.16 (pp. 69-80), and unpublished in English; the passage shown here was published only in BARGIACCHI 2003 (pp. 96-97, note 370) and in BARGIACCHI 2006 (p. 111).

42 On these subjects see: BARGIACCHI 2005a, BARGIACCHI 2006a, BARGIACCHI 2005b (pp. 54-56, 60-64).

skilled observer. With this account, as Luciano Petech, says, Desideri provides a «really first class source», which succeeds in «giving us a lively, pulsating sense of these tragic events [...], the consequences of which are still resonant today»<sup>43</sup>. Desideri's clear-minded predictions are, unfortunately, right: «with this victory, after such long drawn-out and lamentable catastrophes [...], rule of this third and main part of Tibet passed in October 1720 from the Tartars to the Emperor of China, by whom it is presently governed and under whose immense power it is believed it will remain» (*MITN VI*, DR.2, 75).

The memory of the sixth Dalai Lama, a very unusual man who was both strange and tragic as well as extremely controversial, was still very much alive during Desideri's stay, who describes him to us vividly. Rigzin Tsanyang Gyatso (1683-1706) was chosen in 1688 and maintained in secret by the regent,<sup>44</sup> in agreement with the second Panchen Lama (Lobsang Yeshe, 1663-1737), until October 1697 when he was officially installed. The young man showed no interest, however, in his studies and devoted more time to the national sport of archery. Moreover, despite the reproaches and pressure he was subjected to, he rejected ecclesiastical life and in 1702 renounced monastic vows to return to being a layman, enjoying a carefree, hedonistic and licentious life. Desideri tells the story of this «very dissolute young man» (*MITN VI*, DR.2, 39), the only secular Dalai Lama, remembered above all for his love poems.

Desideri and Orazio della Penna, who were guests in the monastery of Sera, suffered no harm, unlike the Capuchins who had remained in the city of Lhasa: Domenico da Fano and Angelico da Brescia, who had recently arrived, and with him, in late July, Bonaventura da Lapedona, who returned to Nepal three months later, while Father Giovanni da Fossombrone was in the hospice of Takpo-khier [Dvags-po-Gyer], by prior arrangement (since this was the only place where it was possible to find a few grapes for Communion wine).

The Jesuit sought refuge in the hospice after the Zungarian invasion, retiring there with Angelico da Brescia in late December 1717, after an eight-day walk across Ganden, Gokhar-la, Samye and Tsethang. It was certainly not a favourable situation for Desideri: not only had he lost the friendship and protection of the king and court dignitaries, but because of that very friendship he was now in danger from the new rulers. The planned theological debate would not take place,

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43 L. PETECH, "Introduzione", *MITN V*, pp. XIII-XXXIII:XXVII.

44 Sangye Gyatso governed for many years (1679-1703) even after the death, which was concealed from him, of the fifth Dalai Lama [Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (1617-1682), known as "Great Fifth", the real founder of Tibetan theocracy], and had many successes like the annexing of the kingdom of Guge and all of modern western Tibet.

but Desideri continued to study and write his books in Tibetan<sup>45</sup> and learned much more about both religious and secular life in towns outside the capital. As Desideri moved around he profited from the opportunities that presented themselves for human and religious dialogue. On one very important occasion he met the lama of Nyingmapa monastery (followers of the old school), in Lungar.<sup>46</sup> But his curiosity also led him to carefully observe ordinary life, enabling him to provide us with accurate descriptions of every aspect of the Tibetan world and significant observations regarding anthropology, linguistics, culture, religion, economic, history and politics as well as habits and customs, clothing, social and family relationships, games and pastimes.

He remained in the remote refuge until April 1721, except for a few months for brief visits to Lhasa<sup>47</sup>, also travelling widely in south-eastern Tibet, in both the Tsangpo basin and that of its important tributary, the Subansiri (Shipasha-chu in Tibetan), visiting various regions like Kongpo, Nang and Loro and passing close to today's border with India where, on the southern slopes of the Himalayas, aboriginal populations lived whom the Tibetans called Lopa (today this area falls into the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, north of Assam). Here Desideri was able to discover the final destination of Tibet's great river, the Tsangpo, which makes a large loop at the extreme east of the Himalayan mountain range passing round the impressive Namcha Barwa mountain (7755 m) and then «wanders between east and south, passing through the Lhobà region and on downwards to Rongmati [Rangamati], a Mogol province on the other side of the Ganges, to finally die and merge with the Ganges itself» (*MITN* VI, DR.2, 15). The fact that this Tibetan river was none other than the Brahmaputra (in its upper course known as Dihang) was only discovered in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: it was not known

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45 On 21<sup>st</sup> June 1718 he completed the *'Byun k'unis* (The Origin of Things), begun in Lhasa on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1717. On 24<sup>th</sup> June 1718 he began the draft of a book in Tibetan, *mGo skar gyi bla ma ... skye ba sna ma ...* (On the theory of emptiness and past lives), on which he would work throughout 1719 (a draft of this work had already been written, in Tibetan, in 1716). *'Byun k'unis* is published in the *Op. tib.*, III, while the other, substantial volume is still awaiting publication.

46 This place is unidentified.

47 He definitely stayed in the capital between 9<sup>th</sup> September 1719 and 10<sup>th</sup> February 1720, as it is recorded in the copy of a few paragraphs of a letter in Portuguese sent by Desideri to the rector of Agra, Melchior dos Reys. This unpublished document is kept in the ARSI (Goa 73, f. 253, «Copia d'alcuni paragrafi d'una lettera scritta al P.R. d'Agra a' 12 Gennaio 1721») and was interpreted and translated from the Portuguese into English by Michael Sweet with the help of Ray Harris, Kathryn Sánchez and Ivy Corfis (I can use this information thanks to Mr Sweet's kind permission). Desideri's presence in Lhasa at that time is confirmed by the address on three letters sent on 21.12.1719 to General Tamburini (DL.14) and the Cardinals of Propaganda (DL. 15 and DL 16) published in *MITN* respectively on pp. 61-62, 63-68, 69-80.

whether the Tibetan river flowed into the Brahmaputra or the Irrawaddy, despite the many attempts to find out. This river which flows along some of the deepest gorges on the planet still raises questions today, and has taken the life of many canoeists attempting to answer them.

The real source of Desideri's problems was not the Tibetans or the troublesome events disturbing the country, but his own co-religionists, the Capuchins, and the Vatican authorities. Of the Capuchins, only Orazio della Penna had devoted time to studying the language and, as the Jesuit tells us, the activities of the Capuchin mission mainly consisted of «practising medicine, through which many children baptised by them when on the verge of death were able to reach heaven» (*MITN* V, 218). Their hostile attitude towards a culture they were unable to understand, their scorn and contempt for books they considered to be works of the devil, fit for destruction, stood in contrast with the attitude of Desideri who, according to Petech: «is a missionary yet also knows how to be a perfect gentleman of Court. He sees, observes, weighs up; condemns without raging; rejects without scorn. His broad-minded, objective attitude is simply admirable». His resolute confidence in his ideas never prevented him from abandoning «a position of extreme courtesy [...] which greatly contrasted with the petulant, plebeian quarrelsomeness» shown by some of his envious colleagues in the other Order<sup>48</sup>. On 12<sup>th</sup> December 1718 the complaints of the Capuchins caused a further injunction against the Jesuits, to leave Tibet, to be issued by Propaganda Fide; the Jesuits had no choice now but to recall their missionary. The letters did not arrive and our Jesuit tried in all ways to avoid or at least delay his repatriation.

Desideri wrote many impassioned letters in defence of his right to remain in Tibet and continue the work he had begun and these reveal much about his state of mind: troubled and tormented yet firm and confident of the validity of the ethical and religious principles inspiring his mission and research. Ultimately all his efforts were in vain, since on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1721 the Capuchins themselves took the trouble to deliver a letter to him at the Takpo hospice, from the General of the Society of Jesus. This letter, dated 16<sup>th</sup> January 1719, contained the order to make ready to leave as soon possible. Tamburini, who was very well aware of Desideri's attachment to his mission, was so beset by the injunctions of Propaganda Fide that he urged his young emissary to obey promptly, insisting that obedience would be more pleasing to God than the conversion of all the kingdoms of Tibet. Although shocked and disheartened, Desideri had no alternative, so two days later he wrote from Trong-gne (an unidentified place at the Takpo hospice) to the Propaganda Cardinals to assure them that although he had «nothing to live on, nor the wherewithal to make the journey [...] in order to obey orders as promptly as possible [he would leave] the kingdoms of Tibet as soon as possible» (*MITN* V,

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48 L. PETECH, "Introduzione", *MITN* V, pp. XIII-XXXIII: XXVI and XVII respectively.



80-81).

Although he declared his prompt obedience the Jesuit stalled, always doing his best to defend both his own cause and that of the study of Tibetan texts. At that time he was helping Giuseppe Felice da Morro (who had replaced Giovanni Francesco da Fossombrone in 1718) with the Tibetan language and dictated a translation of the *Lam-rim* to him.

In mid-April 1721 Desideri and Giuseppe Felice da Morro (d'Alba) returned to Lhasa, where Domenico da Fano, in the presence of the other two Capuchins, showed the Jesuit the documents stating the outcome of his cause with hostile and triumphant pride.

### 3.4. Still in Tibet, but on the way home

On 28<sup>th</sup> April 1721 Desideri left Lhasa for good, still in the company of Giuseppe Felice da Morro (1681-1721); the next day they met the new Capuchin Gioacchino da S. Anatolia (1684-1764), who would reach the mission on 1<sup>st</sup> May.

The return journey, which they made on horseback as far as the Tibetan border, necessarily led them to the considerable altitude of 5,480m at the Thung-la pass after Gyantse, between Tingri and Kuti. Here, Desideri provides further astonishing proof of the clarity of his reasoning with a perfect description of the “mountain sickness” deriving from the rarefied air or, as he says, «the thinness and fineness of the air» (oxygen had yet to be discovered) and noting that conditions were worse inside the refuge «where the air is further thinned by the fire we make there for relief from the cold, and to cook on» (*MITN* VII, 4). Consider that only towards the end of that century the great Lavoisier recognised the function of oxygen in the processes of breathing and combustion. So as French historian Pierre-Jacques Charliat tells us, «Fr. Desideri can be considered one of the pioneers of mountaineering, as one of the first to describe and analyse its dangers»<sup>49</sup>.

Having overcome the discomfort linked to the altitude, on 30<sup>th</sup> May 1721 the two missionaries arrived in Kuti (Nyalam in Tibetan), the last Tibetan town before Nepal. Desideri's adventures in Tibet were not yet over, since here in Kuti the last, most difficult and tormented act played out: the Jesuit stayed behind and let the Capuchin (to whom he had dictated the translation of the *Lam-rim*) go on alone.

His stay was motivated by the dangers associated with the sudden change from the cold of Tibet to the heat of India. These sudden changes are really infernal and our Jesuit suffered especially from these conditions; however a stay

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49 P.-J. CHARLIAT, *Les temps des grands voiliers*, vol. III of *Histoire universelle des explorations*, publiée sous la direction de L.-H. Parias (4 vols.), Nouvelle Librairie de France Sant'Andrea, Paris, 1957, p. 121.

of six and a half months was unjustifiable despite his skill in reasoning. The truth is, he needed to be alone and reflect. The long stay in Kuti was a crucial point in Desideri's life, as an agonising inner drama played out. He did not wish to leave that country which moved him to say: «I see myself breaking down and already near death, yet see that before my last breath I can make one step more towards Tibet» (*MITN* V, 5)<sup>50</sup>; now, instead of a step towards it he had to respect orders, with death in his heart, and take a step in the opposite direction. The border was located in the Jesuit's own mind; not only did he feel defeated and humiliated, he was tormented by a heart-rending situation: he must obey the orders he received and give up the mission that he felt to be his own, which seemed to him like giving up the very reason for his existence.

In that last Tibetan town, the Jesuit still had important Tibetan books and could add a few chapters to his «book confuting the error of metempsychosis» (*MITN* VII, 6), but he poured most of his efforts into stating his case once again in letters, appeals and petitions. It has been claimed that the letters add nothing of real significance to the *Relazione*. That may be true of the information gathered, revised and poured into that prestigious work, but not of the emotions of the author, resonant with turmoil expressed in prose that is sometimes elegant and composed and at other rhetorical and pedantic.

We see him oscillate between the now-fading light of divine grace (the acceptance *in extremis* of his repeated petitions to all the authorities, including the supreme Pontiff, to whom he wrote two letters) and the terrible darkness of an almost hoped-for death. He wrote to his superior assuring him that he had obeyed the orders sent to him, and explaining that he was not yet outside Tibet but at its last border, emphasising the reasons for his prolonged stay – externalising his inner distress. The Jesuit missionary took more time with the excuse that he could not fail to «get to know [...] and enjoy [...] the company» of Capuchin Fr. Felice da Montecchio,<sup>51</sup> whom he knew to be returning from a single brief visit to Lhasa and who arrived in Kuti on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1721. Divine grace, in the form of the acceptance of his petitions, did not arrive, but fortunately life goes on and Desideri took the step that would lead him forever away from the country which had so fascinated him and its libraries, by leaving Kuti, «the last border of Tibet and the first of Nepalese jurisdiction» (*MITN* VII, 6), on 14<sup>th</sup> December in

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50 Letter to the General (Goa 15.11.1713); in *MITN* V, DL.2, pp. 5-6: 5; in HOSTEN 1938, n. 2, pp. 584-587. Quoted from HOSTEN 1938, p. 585.

51 Father Felice da Montecchio (today Treia, province of Macerata), formerly Antonio Maria Bianchi, entered the Order in 1687. In 1706 he was in Chandernagore and in 1708 in Patna. He was head of the mission after the death of Giuseppe da Ascoli (20.12.1710) until the arrival of Domenico da Fano (August 1715). Having left for Europe in 1724, he stopped in London for many months between 1724 and 1725, and returned to Rome in 1726.

the company of the aforementioned Capuchin.

## **4. The return journey**

### **4.1. From Nepal to Patna, Agra and Delhi**

The first few days of the Jesuit's journey, accompanied by the Capuchin, led him again through «untamed places and terrifying precipices [...] On such a journey one cannot go on horseback, and in many places it is hard to even pass on foot» (*MITN VII*, 6-7). Some relief was provided by the discovery, after so much of arid desert, «the greenery and pleasantness of trees». However, after an endless series of «very high, excessively steep mountains in quick succession» (*MITN VII*, 7), the two missionaries arrived in Kathmandu, where the Capuchins had a hospice, on the evening of 27<sup>th</sup> December 1721.

Desideri's account is a valuable source of important information about the three kingdoms into which Nepal was still divided and whose capitals – Kathmandu, Patan and Bhagdaon – were situated in the same valley, a few kilometres from one another. On 14<sup>th</sup> January 1722 the Pistoiese missionary left Kathmandu for Bhadgaon, where he remained only six days but was however honourably welcomed in two audiences with the ruler, who equipped him with introductions for the king of Bettiah and bestowed him with armed escorts necessary for crossing the desolate mountains on the way towards the bordering Indian kingdom beyond which Patna lay.

Desideri left the valley of Kathmandu on 20<sup>th</sup> January accompanied by the Capuchin Bonaventura da Lapedona (1680-1735), crossing insalubrious areas on a journey rendered more eventful and adventurous by many drawbacks such as difficult rivers to cross, rapacious and exacting tax collectors and attacks from bandits or wild animals. Having crossed several large rivers, last of all the Gandak, the left tributary of the Ganges, and the Ganges itself, Desideri reached Patna, where he was again the guest of the Capuchins. He stayed there a month and a half to recover from the exhausting journey and to rest so as to acclimatise to the heavy air of the Indian plain. Here he experienced more crucial historical events with the dissolution of the Moghul empire and penetration of European colonialism, painted with the bright colours of the «Dutch East India Company» and the «English East India Company», with their affluent colonies and trafficking of opium and other products, and above all with the pompous authority and «majestic order» of fleets that escort and protect trade. Desideri has left us an accurate description of opium production techniques and of the enormous profits that colonial companies earned from their trading, without failing to examine the way it was used, the effects of addiction and cheating by blending it with other concoctions to increase production and profits.

On 15<sup>th</sup> February 1722, during his stay in Patna, Desideri received a letter from his General, sent on 28<sup>th</sup> January of the previous year, containing the order to remain in Delhi or another base that was dependent on Goa. In his answer, after reassuring his superior that he had left Tibet, Desideri declared himself ready to obey but still insisted in his request to be recalled to Rome to state his case.<sup>52</sup> The letter reveals him to be a resolute, combative, confident missionary, still trusting and determined; unaware of the difficulties in which his Order now found itself over the “rites question” and the pitched invasion in Tibet, he was fully convinced of his motivations, so much so that before leaving Patna he formally appealed against the decision of Propaganda Fide, legally summoning the Capuchins, in a letter addressed to the Pope where he states: «I appeal to the immediate and supreme Tribunal of Our Most Holy Lord, the Lord Clement XI, Sovereign Pontiff, or his successor».<sup>53</sup> Clement XI had died on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1721 and his successor was Innocent XIII (Michelangiolo Conti, 1655-1724). «Rendered courageous by the evidence of many truths»,<sup>54</sup> Desideri here committed an act of insubordination that would create even more problems for his General and his Order.

Having obtained the protection of the escort reserved for imperial messengers, who were allowed to travel freely, on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1722 Desideri left Patna, which was under the care of the Capuchins, to arrive on the evening of the 31<sup>st</sup> in Benares [Varanasi], and then continue westwards. After four days he reached Allahabad, where the Ganges receives the waters of the Yamuna on the right. Heading northwest he concluded his circumambulation of the Himalayas, to return at last on 20<sup>th</sup> April 1722 to Agra, where «after a gap of seven years and seven months he finally [had] the consolation» of returning to a house owned by his Society.

In a comfortable place among his confreres he was finally able to stop and relax after so much discomfort, effort, suffering and frustration. This rest was surely well-deserved, but letting go of the energy and tension that had sustained him was dangerous, since it gave free rein to suffering hitherto contained and caused by «the change in climate and the passage from extremely cold to

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52 «[...] I cannot, must not, will not fail to further petition [...] the P.V.M.R. to deign to send me immediately and promptly an express order and absolutely undeniable command to present myself in Rome at the first opportunity, where I am conscience-bound to speak to the P.V.M.R., and the supreme Pontiff, concerning the cause of the Tibet Mission» [Letter to the General (Patna, 24.2.1722), Arch. Prop. Fide, Scr. Congr. Part., vol. 84, Congr. 29.11.1732, f. 96; unpublished but catalogued by Petech, in *MITN* V, as DL.23].

53 Translation of the Latin text of the legal summons of the Capuchins, from Patna 19.3.1722, published in HOSTEN 1938 (in Latin and English, pp. 759-760), and in *MITN* V (in Latin, DL.25, p. 93); quoted from HOSTEN 1938, p. 760.

54 Unpublished passage from the letter to the General, quoted in note 52.

extremely hot countries» (*MITN* VII, 31-32).

Thus his relief lasted a very few days only, since immediately after the solemn profession of his fourth vow (obedience to the supreme Pontiff for the missions), which took place on 1<sup>st</sup> May, he fell gravely ill, coming close to death, until as a last resort he decided to have a change of air and moved on 1<sup>st</sup> October to Delhi, where he recovered his health and soon became involved in the care of the mission in that city following the illness of the Jesuit father who cared for the Christians living there.

Desideri deepened his knowledge of Urdu, perfected the Persian language which was useful for religious terms, and quickly devoted himself to evangelical activities, opening a school for youngsters and succeeding in inaugurating a new church on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1723. He was undoubtedly committed, but the ecclesiastical routine is clearly evident in his account, to the extent that the priest in Delhi hardly seems to be the same person as the missionary in Tibet. Fortunately, the order arrived from the Provincial to return to Goa; although obligatory, his departure was welcome and he set off without delay.

While obedience set him promptly on his way, the same did not apply when it came to the destination. The missionary did not head for Goa, which he justified by the riots of the Moghul empire along that route; however the fact remains that he simply did not want to return to Goa. The reasons for his chosen direction are not clearly expressed but a deciding role was surely played by the awareness that it would not be easy to leave Goa for Europe, which he intended to do in order to state his case and return to Tibet. Thus the missionary did not follow the direct route that had led him there over ten years before, but took the road on which he had arrived when he left Tibet, going backwards along it to return to Patna in autumn of 1725.

It must be pointed out that in Patna and Delhi in 1725 Desideri claims to

have been «on very familiar terms with Mr Samuel Van de Putte, a Dutchman»<sup>55</sup>.

Here another extraordinary character enters the tale, whose adventurous and mysterious life makes him the secular foil of the Italian missionary: a curious encounter between two great travellers, tireless researchers, honest with themselves and others and both gifted with great intelligence, linguistic skill and charm. Yet their differences are a chasm, considering that the Pistoiese Jesuit was completely consecrated to divine will while the Dutchman was not only a layman but on the subject of religion «he aroused the suspicion of having none whatsoever, despite being an honest man»,<sup>56</sup> as we are told by Capuchin Father Cassiano da Macerata whose *Giornale* (journal) of his journey would mention van de Putte's trips to and from Lhasa, as remembered by his confreres. The encounter between Desideri and van de Putte is also mentioned in a letter from Gioacchino da S. Anatolia describing how «a Dutch heretic who had copied from Fr. Ippolito Dessiderij in Patna about 20 pages of accounts of Tibet, its laws and customs, and decided to come here to see if it was all true».<sup>57</sup>

Desideri usually gives a detailed description of the people he met but in this case it was more fitting for him to avoid any mention of the Dutch heretic or even atheist.

## 4.2. From Patna to Pondicherry

In Patna in late November 1725 Desideri boarded ship with the Capuchin Paolo Maria da Matelica (1680-1751), with a large Dutch fleet commanded by

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55 From a brief manuscript note published by Silvia Castello Panti: S. CASTELLO PANTI, *Nuovi documenti su Ippolito Desideri*, in Francesco SURDICH (ed.), *Miscellanea di storia delle esplorazioni*, Fratelli Bozzi (Studi di storia delle esplorazioni, 1), Genova, 1975, pp. 153-178: 167. Samuel van de Putte (Vlissingen, Holland, February 1690-Batavia, Java, 27.9.1745), son of ship's captain Carel (1630-1695), graduated in law in Leiden (1714). He was in Italy from 1718 to 1721 and graduated in medicine in Padua. In 1721 he left Holland on a long overland journey across Persia, India (which he covered repeatedly in all directions) and then Tibet and China. A great scholar and shrewd observer, he was held in great esteem by the Tibetan lamas, gathered much information and traced out maps but on his death-bed in Batavia, he ordered all his valuable papers to be burnt: not only was this done but fate intervened relentlessly on the papers that had luckily escaped destruction when, during the Second World War, the Middelburg archive where they were kept was destroyed. All that remains of his work was published by Pieter Johannes Veth (1814-1895) in a fifteen-page article in 1877 [P.J. VETH, *De Nederlandsche Reiziger Samuel van de Putte*, "Tijdschrift van hecht Aardrijkskundig Genootschap", vol. II, 1877, pp. 5-19.], and the scanty accounts of the missionaries who met him.

56 *Giornale del P. Cassiano da Macerata*, in MITN IV, pp. 3-142: 110.

Cassiano da Macerata (1708-1791), born Giovanni Beligatti, was in Lhasa from 6.1.1741 to 30.8.1742. He was Fr. Antonio Agostino Giorgi's main assistant on the *Alphabetum Tibetanum* (1762). His *Giornale* is of considerable ethnographic importance.

57 Letter from Lhasa, 2.8.1731, in MITN I, CL.52, pp. 146-153: 151.

Captain Christiaan Pielat (1692-1740); this fleet, an extraordinary armed escort for the merchandise, was intended to demonstrate the strength of the East India Company to local brigands and tax collectors. The voyage down the Ganges, the progress of which is described along with the European trading stations (Dutch, Portuguese, French and English), continued until 20<sup>th</sup> December 1725, with their arrival at Chandernagore, 35km north of Calcutta [Kolkata], now absorbed into the large conurbation of this huge city. Here, on the right bank of the Hugli (a branch of the delta) long held by the French, both the Capuchins and the Jesuits had a base.

Desideri was welcomed by his French confreres and the city authorities and found a passage on commander Antoine d'Albert's (1686-1751) ship, which was on a special mission for the East India Company. He left Chandernagore with the commander on the evening of 25<sup>th</sup> December in a little flat-bottomed boat suitable for river sailing, and two days later reached the ship, "Sirena", where another Capuchin was already waiting for him – Antonio Maria da Jesi (1786-1738). A long voyage in the Ganges delta (on the Hugli) and in the gulf of Bengal led them on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1726 to Pondicherry, where they went ashore the following day.

Desideri was offered a great welcome and support from his confreres who had settled in this city since 1689; the city was occupied by the French in 1672 and remained in their possession until 1954. Here he met Fr. Jean-Venance Bouchet (1655-1732), who had founded the Jesuit mission in Karnatak in 1702 (on the initiative of Louis XIV the mission was given independence from that of the Portuguese in Madura), his successor Fr. Étienne Le Gac (1671-1738), and Fr. Dominique Turpin (1672-1740).

In Pondicherry Desideri was very surprised to discover that the letter sent by him from Lhasa on 10<sup>th</sup> April 1716 to Fr. Ildebrando Grassi had been published in French in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* edited by Du Halde<sup>58</sup>. Along with surprise he felt disappointment that the letter, which was written when he first entered Tibet, contained errors of judgment (later corrected) as well as minor inaccuracies regarding dates.

Fr. Ippolito was certainly welcome in that mission which lacked manpower and needed a missionary of his experience and linguistic skill. He was implored

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58 *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères par quelques Missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jésus*, chez Nicolas Le Clerc, Paris, 1707-1776 (Recueils I-XXXIV): XV recueil, 1722, pp. 183-208. This letter, the original of which has been lost, was retranslated into Italian in volume XV (1829) of the *Scelta di Lettere edificanti scritte dalle missioni straniere...*, Ranieri Fanfani, Milano, 1825-1829 (18 volumes), pp. 40-50; in English translation in C.R. Markham, *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*, Trübner and Co., London, 1876 [2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1879; repr. New Delhi 1971 e 1989], pp. CLXI+354: 302-308 [2<sup>nd</sup> ed. pp. CLXV+362: 302-308]. Since the original is lost, in *MITN V* (pp. 32-40) it is reproduced as DL.7 in the French version of the first edition of the *Lettres*. In HOSTEN 1938, the letter is with n. 8 on pp. 638-646 (only in English).

to stay and supported in his intention not to return to Goa but instead go back to Rome to champion his cause. The interventions of the influential Fr Bouchet met with success and Desideri remained throughout 1726 in the Karnatak mission, adding Tamil – spoken in southern India – to his collection of languages.

Towards the end of 1726, almost certainly due to the influence of his French confreres, Desideri finally obtained his long-awaited opportunity to return home. He was entrusted by the Jesuit Josef Pinheiro, bishop of Meliapur (now a suburb of Madras [Chennai]) with the task of taking to Rome the case of the martyrdom and canonisation of John de Brito (João de Brito, 1647-1693). He went to Meliapur (or S. Thomé, the city of St Thomas), in mid-December 1726, on a pilgrimage to the places that commemorate the holy apostle; in that very city, on 20<sup>th</sup> of the month, he formally received the documentation for the canonisation and on 23<sup>rd</sup> returned to Pondicherry in order to prepare to leave as soon as possible.

### **4.3. The return to Rome**

**4.3.1. The Ocean voyage.** Having obtained from «Monsieur Le Noire [Pierre-Christophe Lenoir, born 1683], the general governor of this area for the French East India Company, [...] a passage for Europe on a ship belonging to the Company, called the Danaè» (*MITN* VII, 82), Desideri boarded on the evening of 21<sup>st</sup> January 1727. The ship weighed anchor that evening but the condition of the winds made it impossible to leave the coastline until the evening of 23<sup>rd</sup> January. After crossing the equator the ship found «the sea to have quite a swell and the waves to be rough», due to a hurricane that had hit the Mascarene islands, towards which the ship was sailing. When the hurricane passed the voyage continued smoothly among the Mascarene islands, past Rodrigues, dropping anchor in Mauritius (in late February) and Réunion (early March).

In his *Relazione*, the missionary gives a detailed description of the hurricane and of the islands – their colonial fortunes, their population, and their effective and prospective economic activities. His ecological notes are exemplary regarding the slaughter of tortoises and turtles, and he notes that the latter were identical to the former except for their «flat, wide hands [...] which render them fit to swim in the sea» (*MITN* VII, 89).<sup>59</sup>

The voyage continued southwards and between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> April 1727 they rounded the Cape of Good Hope; once again, but this time in reverse, the missionary suffered the trauma (already experienced when passing from the cold of Tibet to the heat of India) of passing into «the winter cold which at that time was felt along the Cape of Good Hope [where he fell ill] with very acute colic pains and urinary retention». Between Tuesday and Wednesday of Easter week, now reduced to

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59 On these topics see: BARGIACCHI 2005b (p. 802) e BARGIACCHI 2006b (pp. 88-92).



an extremely poor condition and feeling «every hour closer to death» (*MITN* VII, 86), and deprived of any spiritual sustenance (as the only cleric on board), Desideri found a way to support his hopes of salvation in entrusting himself to the intercession of the venerable Fr. de Brito, to whom he was linked as custodian of the documents for the beatification process. At midday on Wednesday he was freed from pain and out of physical danger, although exhausted. But it was Easter time and the sailors wished to be delivered of their sins through confession; the priest and ship's chaplain once again sacrificed his own needs and set aside his own suffering in favour of the salvation of others, and for this reason he suffered a terrible relapse. Faith in divine goodwill and the intercession of the Jesuit martyr de Brito once again brought Desideri back to health and saved him sufficiently to be able to continue the journey, although not fully recovered.

The relapse of the missionary's illness, caused by his weak physical condition, and the effort the confessions had required, deserves more general reflection in order to be fully understood. Confession is a purification ritual, linked to the Catholic sacrament of penitence which is necessary in order to overcome the inner damage which impedes participation in the Communion and more generally, the harmony of the person with the rest of the world. The ritual can only take full effect with the total emotional involvement of the person confessing and the confessor: the former must be determined to carry out a serious and conscientious examination of his conscience, to remove from it the oppressive weight of the deviations he has committed from behaviour normally accepted as right; while the confessor must be able to supervise this process and be strong and firm enough to take upon himself the weight of the sin and suffering caused by that inner damage without being overwhelmed by it. This purification ritual is also found – although under different forms – in a variety of other ancient and modern cultures, but has unfortunately lost its sacred-therapeutic character to become instead reduced to mere empty religious formality or to paid therapeutic practice which is as costly as it is ineffective. Having become familiar with the strict correctness and truthfulness characterising every deed performed by Fr Ippolito, we can understand (although his own discretion forbids him from mentioning it) the effort required to carry on his own weak and suffering shoulders the burden of the sailors' sins. These were as much caused by the particular and difficult nature of their profession as by their participation in the unprincipled adventures of colonial trading: while the investors risked only their money (perhaps insuring themselves with the diversification of businesses) with the hope of rich and respectable profit, the sailors placed their own unique and non-insurable lives at risk, as an available capital to make that infernal task productive even through criminal acts.

Having passed the island of St Helena on 30<sup>th</sup> April (owned by the English),

the ship dropped anchor on 7<sup>th</sup> May at Ascension Island, uninhabited at this time except for the occasional presence of castaways or those condemned to death. Having restocked with the necessary supplies the ship left the island at about midday on 9<sup>th</sup> May and on about the 20<sup>th</sup> of that month crossed the Equator, after suffering some damage in an accident. This event made it necessary to take the precautionary measure of changing plan and giving up the idea of travelling straight to France, heading instead for the Antilles where the ship could be repaired. Having fortunately overcome a dangerous rocky seabed, the ship dropped anchor on 11<sup>th</sup> June 1727 in the port of St. Pierre on the French island of Martinique. Desideri arrived here «little more than a walking corpse, pale, emaciated, exhausted and utterly without strength, due both to the discomforts of the voyage and the mortal illness and relapse» (*MITN* VII, 92), but was able to return to perfect health in the twelve days he stayed there, comforted by the loving care of his confreres, led by Eustache Lebrun (1680-1732).

They set sail again in the afternoon of 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1727, and passed the Newfoundland Bank to continue smoothly as far as Port-Louis in lower Brittany where they arrived in the evening of 11<sup>th</sup> August 1727 and thus ended the long ocean voyage.

**4.3.2. Across France and Italy.** Desideri had now returned to European soil and although he was not in full health, he was at least relieved from the serious illness that had tormented him. After resting for four days he set off again. The journey from Port-Louis to Paris lasted from the 16<sup>th</sup> August until the evening of 12<sup>th</sup> September 1727, stopping in Vannes (16<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> August), where he met Fr. Hermes Melchior, Rennes (23<sup>rd</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> August), La Flèche (Sarthe; 31<sup>st</sup> August-4<sup>th</sup> September), Le Mans (4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> September). In each place he was the guest of Jesuit colleges and was much gratified by the excellent welcome he received; in Le Mans he was given the material «for the canonisation of the Blessed Gio. Francesco de Regis [1597-1640] ... to be taken to Rome and handed to the Holy Congregation of Rites» (*MITN* VII, 94-95).

In Paris, as a guest in the professed house of the Society of Jesus, he received among other attentions the care of Frs. Frémont (representative of the East India missions) and Anne-Joseph de la Neuville (1672-1750), with whom he had «the consolation and enjoyment of seeing the principal sights of this large city [...] and the royal splendour and delights of Versailles» (*MITN* VII, 95), where he remained for three days meeting the French royal family and important court noblemen.

Returning to Paris after his visit to Versailles, Desideri was honoured to receive the welcome and honour of two important diplomats: nuncio monsignor Bartolomeo Massei (1663-1745), and Giulio Franchini Taviani of Pistoia,

«minister and agent of the R. H. in Tuscany».

On 23<sup>rd</sup> September Desideri went to Fontainebleau, and the next day had the «longed-for good fortune to bow to His Most Christian Majesty» Louis XV and to talk with the most eminent Court figures: Jesuit Father Claude Bertrand Tachereau de Linières (1658-1746), the king's confessor, Cardinal Henri-Pons de Thiard de Bissy (1657-1737), and Cardinal André-Hercule de Fleury (1653-1743).

The simple missionary, tired and strained by the ordeals of his adventure and, we might expect, frustrated and defeated, had all the necessary qualities to converse at the highest levels – not so much because he brought exotic information never heard before, but because of his eloquence and ability to understand and connect his knowledge in an organic overview.

But the journey was not yet over and so he left Fontainebleau on the morning of 26<sup>th</sup> September 1727 by stagecoach and arrived in Chalon-sur-Saône at midday on 28<sup>th</sup>, leaving there after lunch by the same stagecoach on the river Saone and subsequently staying four days in Lyon (30<sup>th</sup> September-4<sup>th</sup> October), on the Rhone, and reaching Avignon on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1727. In Avignon Desideri met Fr. Jean Croiset, rector of the Jesuit novitiate, and received «very special honours from his Excellency Monsig. [Raniero] Delci [of the Marchesi di Monticiano (1670-1761)] His Holiness's Vice Legate» (*MITN* VII, 97).

On 9<sup>th</sup> October Desideri left Avignon and arrived the following evening in Marseille, leaving that city on the 15<sup>th</sup> October on board a felucca (Mediterranean sailing vessel) travelling with a similar vessel carrying Jacques de Campredon, France's envoy to the Republic of Genoa. The journey from Marseille to Genoa would provide a further seafaring thrill with an attack by two pirate ships, fortunately thwarted with skill and determination combining caution with courage.

The vessel at last reached Genoa on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1727 and Desideri set off again with this same ship to Leghorn, four days later, although unfavourable winds halted it at Sestri Levante where it moored on the evening of the same day. On 30<sup>th</sup> October the felucca set sail again but was forced to shelter at Levanto. After a long voyage Desideri felt himself close to home and hurried there, unable to wait, as he himself tells us:

As the southwest wind continued to blow and the sea showed no intention of calming its fury, I decided to set off on land, leaving Levanto at midday on 2<sup>nd</sup> November. I crossed the mountains and passed Sarzana the following day, arriving that evening in Viareggio and, on the 4<sup>th</sup> November, happily reaching Pistoia (*MITN* VII, 103).

The welcome stay in his home town was unfortunately extended by an attack of tertian fever (starting on 17<sup>th</sup> November) and until the 11<sup>th</sup> December he was unable to move to Florence, where he then remained until 18<sup>th</sup> January 1728. In both these cities he received «very particular honours and special favour [from] their Serene Highnesses and Illustrious Prelates, and wonderful personages and all the nobility and clerics both of [his] Society, and other Institutions and persons from all orders, states and conditions» (*MITN* VII, 104).

Desideri's visit to Pistoia is recorded in the diary Giovan Cosimo Rossi Melocchi kept for «mere amusement»: things [in Pistoia] *noted and observed in detail*, from January 1724 – 30<sup>th</sup> April 1728 («things that happened in Pistoia [...] described as really and faithfully [...] observed and described objectively [...]»)<sup>60</sup> Rossi Melocchi, a former schoolfellow of Fr. Ippolito, gives a very interesting account of how he visited the missionary at the Jesuit college late one night with a certain Domenico Manni. He tells us that Desideri was staying in the Jesuit college and that he had a thick black beard, was greatly in demand among the leading personages in the city and had a book, «where his whole journey is described», at that time in the possession of his brother Giuseppe. The description, although ungrammatical, vividly reveals the astonishment of someone hearing news of exotic, far-off lands where «there are elephants and tigers and very cold countries», and where «the eldest brother takes a wife and the others make use of her like her husband»; the diarist also shows us a missionary who still has energy and confidence: «once arrived in Rome he hopes to kneel at the feet of His Holiness».

During his stay in his hometown, Desideri continued to work on the *Relazione* and certainly edited the «Short and concise account of the journey to the East Indies» which ends thus:

On the evening of the 4<sup>th</sup> of this month of November, thanks be to God, I arrived here in Pistoia happy and in good health, 15 years and 25 days after my last visit before leaving for the Indies (*MITN* VII, 471).

When he returned to Pistoia the missionary found that his father, who had been widowed again in 1706, had died on 14th April 1713 while he was sailing

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60 The manuscript, in two volumes, is kept in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Firenze, Fondo Rossi-Cassigoli, mss. 192-193. The “Ritorno dal Tibet del P. Ipolito Desideri Giesuita pistoiese” is in vol. II, carte 196v. and 197 r. and v. The same passage is reproduced in a manuscript copy made by Alberto Chiappelli in the home of Giulio de’ Rossi in the late 19th century (*Diario delle cose pistoiesi*, vol. I in the Biblioteca Comunale “Forteguerra”, Pistoia, Carte Chiappelli 186, pp. 420-421). Giovan Cosimo Rossi Melocchi (Pistoia 15.1.1684-Pistoia 1.8.1734) married Francesca Cellesi and had four children; a lengthy description of him and his memoirs in Maddalena de’ Rossi, *Diario di Giov. Cosimo dei Rossi Melocchi*, “Bullettino Storico Pistoiese”, a. I, 1899, pp. 25-34.

on the Atlantic. His eldest brother, Francesco (1681-1742), was parish priest of S. Maria a Colonica, near Prato, while his doctor brother, Giuseppe, lived in the family home with his wife Fortunata Alessandra Caterini and their three children Maria Francesca Angela, Giovanni Silvio<sup>61</sup> and Maria Maddalena Anna, born respectively in 1710, 1712 and 1718.

It is difficult to find mention of his visit to Florence, but the many manuscripts in the city's Biblioteca Riccardiana include the concise *Diari* of Giovan Battista Fagioli (1660-1742), a Florentine humorous poet and satirical playwright, from whom we learn that on Monday 12<sup>th</sup> January 1728, Fagioli went to lunch «with Mr Niccolò Ginori at the home of Viviani where [he found ] Jesuit Frs. Desiderj and Rosignoli, the former has returned from Tibet [...] and is going to Rome »<sup>62</sup>.

Having left Tuscany, Desideri's journey ended on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1728 when he arrived «safe and sound in Rome 15 years and 4 months after leaving for the East India mission». The loving and paternal welcome he received from the General of the Society of Jesus, Michelangelo Tamburini, filled him with a tenderness that «sweetened all the hardships, efforts, difficulties and dangers [...] in the fifteen years of uncomfortable journeys and rough missions encountered and suffered» (*MITN* VII, 105).

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61 Giovanni Silvio Desideri (1712-1787), would later become canon of the Cathedral in Pistoia and receive the valuable copy of the *Relazione* written by his uncle Ippolito. This copy passed through the hands of Antonio Matani (Pistoia 27.7.1730-Pistoia 21.6.1779) who made extensive notes from it, then used by Enrico Bindi (1812-1876) for a "Catalogue of Pistoiese Biographies" which remained in manuscript form (ms. 155, Biblioteca Leoniana of the Seminario Vescovile, Pistoia). Pistoiese historian Mario Bruschi has recovered the information provided by Bindi.

62 Ms. 3457 (registered in the past as 3511). Fagioli lists those present at the lunch as including the various components of the Viviani, Strozzi and Compagni families. Worth noting: the date shown on the diary is 12<sup>th</sup> January 1727 since the Florentine style was still in existence – the year was not considered to be from the birth of Jesus but from his incarnation (conception) and therefore was backdated by nine months with the New Year beginning on 25<sup>th</sup> March (24<sup>th</sup> March 1727 was followed by 25<sup>th</sup> March 1728).

Pier Francesco Rosignoli S.J. (Novara 1690 - Macerata 1775) taught philosophy in the Jesuit College in Florence.

## **5. The final years (1728-1733)**

### **5.1. The difficult situation of the Jesuits and the lawsuit with the Capuchins**

**5.1.1. The controversy over rites and the Jesuits' difficulties.** General Tamburini, now infirm, gave his missionary a loving welcome, but he was busy managing a very difficult situation. During his generalship the rites question had concluded most unfavourably for the Society of Jesus. The question of Chinese or Malabar rites originated from the Jesuits' acceptance of the culture of the place in which they found themselves working. As the 29<sup>th</sup> General, Dutchman Peter Hans Kolvenbach (born in 1928) says «enculturation is both method and substance of evangelisation. It means meeting other men at their roots and deepest principles, and there favour an encounter with the Gospel»<sup>63</sup>. Thus in China the participation of Christians in rites honouring ancestors and Confucius was tolerated; Chinese terms were used to denote God, and the priests dressed like local men of letters; this was bitterly condemned by other religious orders more closely linked to an orthodox external appearance and also envious of the success obtained by Jesuits through missionaries with great cultural gifts and scientific education, who received a very honourable welcome at court (Matteo Ricci is still honoured in both Italy and China).

In 1645 Propaganda Fide had already condemned Chinese rites; the Jesuits opposed this but the censure was reiterated: in 1704 and 1710 by Pope Clement XI, who in 1715 imposed the vow of observance. General Tamburini tried to defend his Society's reasoning but, increasingly accused of negligence and inability to ensure that orders were obeyed, if not actual disobedience, he was struck down by terrible injunctions contained in a Propaganda Fide decree of 1723. New Pope Benedict XIII (Pierfrancesco Orsini, 1650-1730), elected on 29th May 1724, with his distinctive style of softening asperity, revoked the

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63 P.H. KOLVENBACH, *Fedeli a Dio e all'uomo*, Ed. Paoline, Torino 1990, p. 76.

threatened serious consequences, but Propaganda Fide insisted on the sentence, and this situation heralded the negative final judgment sanctioned by Pope Benedict XIV in 1742, the expulsion of the Jesuits from various countries and the suppression of the order by Pope Clement XIV in 1773.

In this context Desideri, who had already been accused by the Capuchins with whom he had been in contact of «inappropriate mistakes» even against Christian principles, understood at once that he had no chance of winning his cause and would not have been able to appeal to the Pontiff. Indeed, he had to defend himself against a serious allegation regarding his points of view which, as stated by Gioacchino da S. Anatalia in a letter of 20<sup>th</sup> July 1731, «caused more problems for the Holy Church than China's». <sup>64</sup> In a subsequent letter (2<sup>nd</sup> August 1731), also addressed to his confrere Paolo Maria da Matelica, the Capuchin reiterates these accusations: «We know of the misery of the poor Chinese and Malabar Christians, etc; God does not want similar misfortunes to befall poor Tibet. The Capuchins [...] for this reason do not wish to be with the Jesuits». <sup>65</sup>

Desideri's situation was certainly unfortunate and for the moment he had no choice but to take refuge in writing the account of his journey. There is little documentation of this period, but we know that the missionary was preparing to leave Rome and was prevented from doing so; his own appeal against the Capuchins for the Tibet mission had been turned against him.

**5.1.2. Desideri's defence.** The Capuchins remaining in Lhasa, who were without resources and adequate reinforcements, maintained that their difficulties were dependent on this unresolved controversy and on the plotting of the Jesuits, and thus asked repeatedly for a resolution of the lawsuit. Father Felice da Montecchio took responsibility for this, writing a long series of memoirs (twelve, with three “summaries” of attached documents) which, in the printed version for use by the Cardinals of Propaganda Fide are dated 1729, but seem to have been edited in 1728 (the date shown on the *Difese* by Desideri, after his adversary's first memoirs). The Capuchin was profoundly affected by his missionary experience, as shown by the letters from London written by an unidentified cleric who interviewed him on behalf of Propaganda Fide on his return to Europe:

The above Fr. is so melancholic as well as hypochondriac and irritable [...]. Instead of giving me the information I'd like, he leads me around the mountains and precipices

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64 Letter from Lhasa, 20.7.1731, in *MITN* I, CL.50, pp. 139-141: 139.

65 Letter from Lhasa, 2.8.1731, in *MITN* I, CL.52, pp. 146-153: 152.

of Tartar country telling me about the great dangers he has overcome!<sup>66</sup>

Having been informed about Desideri's return and his intention to leave, Felice da Montecchio put forward a request that «Father Ippolito before leaving Rome should express on paper his accusations, proof and reasons»<sup>67</sup>. On this subject the General of the Society of Jesus writes in a letter with humble obedience announcing to the «Congregazione de Propaganda Fide that he has ordered Father Ippolito Desiderij to remain in Rome until after Easter»<sup>68</sup>.

Desideri was therefore obliged to defend his reasons and those of his General in three memoirs called "Difese", causing his adversary to complain that «by giving the name of "Difesa" to his threefold answer, the Jesuit Change his adversary from accusation to accuser, thus reversing, for unknown reasons, judiciary order»<sup>69</sup>. The roles were effectively reversed with the Jesuit forced to defend himself against the Capuchin, who in turn was being pressured by his confreres in Tibet, who considered him responsible for their misfortunes.

Felice da Montecchio, who was aware that «doctrine, eloquence, spirit, all co-exist harmoniously in Father Ippolito» (defined as «a quibbler»), fearing the Jesuit's «erudite reflection»,<sup>70</sup> dedicated all his energies to the controversy, with great acrimony and excessive sarcasm. Desideri's *Difese*, as Petech has noted, «are rather technical writings which reveal unexpected forensic eloquence and legal rationality»;<sup>71</sup> but their aim is in fact only defensive. The Society of Jesus was then simply trying to justify itself and demonstrate its good faith, which was not easy considering the relentless contradictions attributed to General Tamburini regarding whom incontrovertible proof was presented that he had known about the Tibet mission being entrusted to the Capuchins by "Propaganda Fide" – proof that contradicted his embarrassed statements to the contrary.

Felice da Montecchio was also informed that «Fr Ippolito had prepared a three volume work and was about to print it», declaring himself honoured to receive «the pleasure of enjoying the erudite efforts» of the Pistoiese Jesuit, but he appealed to ancient decrees «in which for reasonable and very correct reasons it

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66 Unpublished letter by an unidentified cleric on the Tibet question, from London, 10.11.1724 (Arch. Prop. Fide, C.P. 84, Congr. Part. 29.11.1732, ff. 56-59:57r. Similar information in two other unpublished letters by the same cleric, also from London, dated 8.9.1724 (ff. 54-55) and 9.3.1725 (ff. 60-62).

67 *Memoria* II, respectively points 15 (f. 5r) and 17 (f. 5v).

68 Unpublished letter from the Casa Professa, 18.3.1728, Arch. Prop. Fide, C.P., vol. 84, Congr. Part. 29.11.1732, f. 275.

69 Foreword to the *Memoria* V, f. 1r.

70 *Memoria* IV, respectively points 23 (f. 10v) and 43 (f. 22v).

71 L. PETECH, *Il quadro storico dei viaggi di Ippolito Desideri S.I.*, "Bullettino Storico Pistoiese", a. LXXXIX (Third series, XXII), 1987, pp. 53-68: 65.



is forbidden to missionaries, even Fathers of the Society, to print any book owing to the Holy Missions without the express permission of the Holy Congregation», also mentioning the consequent penalties, even excommunication<sup>72</sup>.

Desideri was already unable to bear the annoyance of these disputes, as he states at the end of his third Defence, when, having become aware of the other writings of the now unbridled Capuchin he asked to be exempted from answering him, not only because he thought he had been as clear as possible but also because he thought it unfitting that «two Missionaries, coming back from the ends of the Earth, should, here in Rome waste time accusing each other, defending themselves, attacking each other and evading blows»<sup>73</sup>. The General's Curia of the Society of Jesus wished to put an end to the matter as soon as possible, giving up all claims and, as is stated in an internal document, suggested a small «but trenchant response and with this draw to a close forever the controversy over Tibet, which it were better if it had never begun, and Fr. Ippolito was forbidden further dealings with the Eminences and Ministers of the S.C. on this subject»<sup>74</sup>.

On 28<sup>th</sup> February 1730 General Tamburini died; it was Lent and the funeral rites took place without the commemorative speech, which would be given on the following 5<sup>th</sup> June at the Provincial Congregation by Father Francesco Volumnio Piccolomini, rector of the Germanic College in Rome. Father Piccolomini illustrated the General's difficult navigation through the various storms battering the Society and remembered the efforts poured into missionary work in the most various countries including «Mogol, with missionaries from the Province of Rome who have with apostolic zeal crossed the Caucasian mountains to disseminate the Gospel in the vast kingdoms of Tibet [...]»<sup>75</sup>. On 30<sup>th</sup> November 1730 Frantisek Retz (1673-1750) of Bohemia was elected 15<sup>th</sup> General. Meanwhile in July of that year Florentine Lorenzo Corsini (1652-1740) had risen to the Pontificate with the name Clement XII.

Capuchin father Felice da Montecchio died in Rome on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1732, just before the “Special Congregation on the questions of the Mission in the kingdoms of Tibet”, on Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> November 1732, expressed a concise decision confirming the exclusive consignment of the mission to the Capuchins. The decree was signed by Pistoiese Niccolò Forteguerrì<sup>76</sup>, secretary of Propaganda

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72 *Memoria XI*, point 5, f. 2v.

73 *Difesa III*, point 25, f. 10r.

74 S. CASTELLO PANTI, *Nuovi documenti su Ippolito Desideri* (quot. note 55), p. 171.

75 Published in F. MARTELLI, *Michelangelo Tamburini* (see note 6), pp. 119-134:133.

76 Niccolò Forteguerrì (Pistoia 6.11.1674-Pistoia 17.2.1735), satirical poet, author of the poem in octaves *Ricciardetto* (published posthumously in 1738 and placed in the Index the following year) which refers in burlesque terms to the courtly tradition of Pulci and Ariosto. His *Memoirs of the Missions* were only published in 1982.

Fide from 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1730 until September 1734, a position formerly fulfilled by his fellow-citizen and supporter Carlo Agostino Fabroni<sup>77</sup>.

## 5.2. The “Relazione”

On arriving in Rome, Desideri had already almost completed a first draft of the account of his journey. He immediately began to write a second version in three books, which was completed on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1728, as shown by the date added at the end by the author himself. At this point the missionary undertook an extensive revision of the work, dividing the former Volume II into two volumes, so that the *Relazione* now consisted of four volumes instead of three, as announced in the foreword “To the Reader” in the final draft. This revision work was suddenly interrupted after the first three chapters of the new Volume III. The first two volumes were reproduced in a fair copy in the final draft, which was thus the fourth.

There are four remaining drafts contained in four manuscripts: two manuscripts show the same first draft (“C”, partial autograph, and “F”, not autographed but complete with appendices); the manuscript named “B” contains two drafts (B<sub>1</sub> and B<sub>2</sub>, respectively before and after the corrections), while manuscript “A” contains the final version of the first two volumes and the final (third) volume of the intermediate draft B<sub>1</sub> (which would have become the fourth if the corrections had been complete). The names of the manuscripts were given by Dutch Jesuit geographer Cornelis Wessels (1880-1964) and then by De Filippi and Petech.

The first draft is untitled but the author refers to it as “Ragguaglio” (Briefing) while the others are entitled *Relazione de’ viaggi all’Indie e al Thibet* [Account of journeys to the Indies and Tibet] (B<sub>1</sub>) and *Notizie istoriche del Thibet e Memorie de’ viaggi e Missione ivi fatta* [Historical notes on Tibet and Memoirs of the Journeys and Missions made there] (A and, with a slight variation, B<sub>2</sub>)<sup>78</sup>.

It is not possible to establish when Desideri broke off his work on the *Relazione*, but presumably it was concluded in 1728 or 1729, when he dedicated himself to the “Difese della Compagnia di Giesù contro le Scritture del R.P. Felice da Montecchio Cappuccino”, and discovered that he was forbidden to publish anything regarding his mission.

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77 Carlo Agostino Fabroni (Pistoia 28.8.1651-Rome 19.9.1727), son of Nicola and Lucilla Sozzifanti and related to the Panciatici and Rospigliosi families, studied at the Roman College of the Society of Jesus; he took a degree in theology and canonical law in Pisa, but was a longstanding friend and ally of the Jesuits. In 1695 he was named secretary of Propaganda Fide and was made Cardinal in 1706.

78 For a complete description of the structure of Desideri’s account, see: BARGIACCHI 2003 (pp. 77-79 and 98-99) and BARGIACCHI 2007 (pp. 1-4).

The failure to publish this work caused inestimable damage to many aspects of Oriental studies, and especially for the knowledge of Buddhism and of Tibet. The *Relazione*, written in an elegant and effective literary style which is both rigorous and evocative, may be considered as the starting point of modern travel literature, the result of fascinated participation and free from fantastic or unsubstantiated information, and is both a meticulous geographical compendium able to systematically discuss all the aspects of a nation including the critical examination of the scanty relevant bibliography. It was defined by Tucci «an admirable description», «ahead of its time» which «even today, two centuries later, is for its depth and clarity one of the most reliable presentations of the beliefs» of that country;<sup>79</sup> while for Filippo De Filippi (1869-1938), it is endowed with «scientific value of the first importance, untainted by any research that has so far appeared»<sup>80</sup>.

### 5.3. The final stage

We know very little of the last part of Ippolito Desideri's life. We have none of his letters after 1722, and we do not know whether after he was forbidden to leave Rome, as recorded above, he made other journeys. Indeed he is recorded as remaining in the Roman Casa Professa. In his second *Difesa* he retraced his journeys in a highly effective flashback:

How could one ever imagine how many journeys, how many and how horrible the suffering, and how many dangers it would cost me to reach that third Tibet? I will say nothing of the storms encountered in the Mediterranean or the Ocean, and the discomforts of a long sea journey to Goa. From Goa to Surat: from Surat, due to unbearable heat, having to cross the whole of Mogol from south to north. Having to cross streams, ice, the Caucasus mountains, terrible cold. For several months, in changing climates, falling seriously ill during the journey, without doctors, or medicines, or any comfort. Blinded by the dazzling expanse of snow. Two months' travelling on foot, between unimaginably terrible precipices. From 9<sup>th</sup> October until the 4<sup>th</sup> January, crossing a harsh desert full of snow, ice, difficult mountains to climb, and unbearable cold. For ten months on the journey from Cascimir to Lhasà, suffering continual hunger and thirst, sleeping on the ground in the open air, among snow, and ice and other discomforts that would horrify readers. In short, suffering the practically inexpressible tortures of Hell<sup>81</sup>.

With bitterness he concluded that he must be considered mad if all this had not been carried out for noble and religious ends, «but rather with the sole purpose

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79 Quotations from writings of 1933, 1943 and 1938.

80 DE FILIPPI (ed.) 1932, "Preface", p. 37.

81 *Difesa* II, point 38, ff. 15v.-16r.

of irritating the Propaganda jurisdiction», as stated by Felice da Montecchio<sup>82</sup>.

The Pistoiese Jesuit, who had passed from the warm welcome and honours received during his return journey to the rude awakening of the problematic situation in Rome, dedicated himself body and soul to drafting the account and drew from it a short instruction book for missionaries in Tibet, which has been conserved in two manuscript versions. Because it was impossible for him to publish anything, he must have lost interest in that last revision he was working on, but was aware of the importance of his account and perhaps for this reason, took care to give a copy to his bother in Pistoia, the doctor Giuseppe.

He had no choice but to isolate himself, make himself invisible, disappear in a certain sense. Endowed with great vigour and virility and energy strongly devoted to Christian care for his neighbours, he had already completed his physical tasks and now, relieved of this burden, he could and must devote his remaining energy to the completion of his spiritual path. Desideri, who possessed outstanding aesthetic and rational gifts in perfect harmony, had pushed himself to the further limits of theoretical reflection and dialogue with others through that «impassioned quest for truth», that Bertrand Roy perceived as the typical feature of the spirituality of dialogue<sup>83</sup>; now he had to master – we might say, embody – those cognitive accomplishments that, for such a markedly sensitive man, are not only theoretical (referring to the surface of things) but rooted in deeper layers.

The total defeat and frustration of all his hopes provided an opportunity to test himself and confront the deepest meaning of life. Through long hours of study and reflection, the existential implications of the Buddhist concepts seem to have become consolidated with the Christian meaning of sacrificing oneself to be born into a new life: «by dying to oneself, one is reborn to eternal life», stated lama Denys Tendrup<sup>84</sup>, reminding us of Jesus's invitation to his disciples to deny their own wishes, take up their own cross and follow him. (Mt 16, 24-25; Mk 8, 34-35; Lk 9, 23-24; Jn 12, 25-26). The unique and holy task of the human life is the discovery and fulfillment of the fundamental truth: the conscious accomplishment of the highest evolutionary process, the passage from the ego to the cosmos as the locus of identity. That truth, sought by Desideri with heroic self-sacrifice throughout his missionary

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82 *ibidem*, f. 16r. (Desideri takes up the statements of Felice da Montecchio in his first *Memoria*, point 37, f. 12r).

83 B. ROY, *Il dialogo come cammino di conversione e di crescita*, "Missione Oggi", n. 6, June-July 2002, pp. 44-46: 46.

84 Lama Denys TENDRUP, *Il processo ciclico di vita e di morte*, "Paramita" a. XVII, n. 68, October-December 1998, pp. 11-16:12 (a speech given on 15.1.1997 at a seminary in the faculty of psychophysiology at the "La Sapienza" University in Rome; trans. from French by Maria Angela Falà).

activity, matures within the heart of the spiritual man able to follow his destiny and ensure that the extinguishing of life can be fully experienced as the death of the self and rebirth into the infinite: overcoming finitude, knowledge is no longer of something external but identification with the real nature of the self and the world. And death itself becomes the moment of truth: the mirror of the entire life and the unveiling of its true meaning.

Scholars of Desideri have presented various hypotheses on the real cause of his death, defined as «pain in the chest»<sup>85</sup>, but one cannot go beyond inference. What is certain is that his physical strength had been undermined by the difficult mission he had undertaken, the various illness and above all, the changes in climate to which he was particularly susceptible. However, careful research into the historical archive of the Society of Jesus has led us to the discovery of an unpublished diary by an anonymous confrere living in the same Roman Casa Professa, a few scanty recordings witnessing the missionary in good health at least until 10<sup>th</sup> February 1733. On that day the diarist wrote: «The morning spent with Fr. Desideri walking to Mont'Alto»<sup>86</sup>.

We learn from the same diarist that on Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> April 1733, «in the morning Fr. Desideri received the viaticum» and on Monday 13<sup>th</sup> April «at a quarter past 1 in the afternoon Fr. Desideri died». His death therefore took place in the Casa Professa and not at the Roman College, as claimed on a paper attached to manuscript F of Desideri's account, conserved in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence<sup>87</sup>. The date of 13<sup>th</sup> is confirmed by the "List of deceased" of the Province of Rome and by the "Sacristan's diary" of the Chiesa del Gesù, where we learn that he was buried on 14<sup>th</sup> April in the Fathers' burial place.

The information regarding his death is thus definitively verified but there is one more consideration to make. It is of little importance to know whether the «pain in the chest» was angina, tuberculosis or something else; it is more significant though that he died four and a half months after Propaganda Fide's decision against his appeal. Desideri's strong mettle was however certainly worn down «by the exertions of intense missionary activity and weakened by the hard

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85 An extensive discussion of Desideri's death is to be found in A. LUCA, *Nel Tibet ignoto. Lo straordinario viaggio di Ippolito Desideri S.J. (1684-1733)*, EMI, Bologna, 1987, pp. 352: 296-298.

86 A.R.S.I., Fondo Gesuitico, Titulus XII, Romana Domus Professa, F.G. 1128, "Diario di un individuo" (August 1730- June 1733). Desideri is remembered on the following dates: Wednesday 7.5.1732, Friday 9.5.1732, Monday 17.1.1732, Tuesday 10.2.1733, Thursday 9.4.1733 and Monday 13.4.1733.

87 This piece of paper shows the dates on which he took the habit (9.5.1700), left for the mission (27.9.1712), returned from the mission (4.11.1727) and on 14th April 1733: «He died in Rome in the College in the octave of Easter of chest pain, aged 48 years, 3 months and 25 days».

climate of Tibet and India»<sup>88</sup>, but the Pistoiese missionary did not die of a broken heart over a decision he expected. That decision simply freed him from all earthly commitments and the necessity of resisting the illnesses working in his worn-out body. Summoning the same trusting courage with which he had faced every test in his life, he, accomplishing a life marked with sanctity (truth), abandoned himself to divine providence, living with awareness that last luminous moment when the various components of the human mind are dissolved and reabsorbed into the cosmic dimension of which they are an expression.

## 6. The story continues

An ordinary story would end with the death of the central character, and even more so, a biography: at the most there is an epilogue where the merits and praises of the deceased are exalted. But this is not an ordinary story, so a new chapter would be needed. As writer José Saramago says in his *Travels in Portugal* «the journey never ends. Only the travellers end. And they too may live on in memory». More than a chapter, we would need an entire book to follow the events and “fortunes” of Desideri’s work, its slow but inexorable rise to the surface, because it still has much to teach us today; so we will leave this for other publications.<sup>89</sup>

Let us conclude with Luigi Foscolo Benedetto (1886-1966), who considered Desideri a «missionary, in the most complete and highest sense [... who], overcoming the easy western and priestly contempt, felt the charm of Tibet’s religious and philosophical world» and admirably described it<sup>90</sup>. This author saw Desideri and his legacy in this way:

He was attracted by the unknown countries and souls; he asked ancient books about the secret of life; for him to conquer was to know, and to know was to love [...]. Like all those who have given a purpose to their life, who have really lived their dream, Desideri remains faithful to the heroic idea that inflamed his youth. He acted before speaking. And now he speaks so that others may take up and complete his interrupted

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88 L. PETECH, *Il quadro storico dei viaggi di Ippolito Desideri S.I.*, quot. note 71, p. 66.

89 BARGIACCHI 2003 e BARGIACCHI 2007.

90 L. F. BENEDETTO, *Di uno scritto poco noto del P. Ippolito Desideri da Pistoia*, Firenze, 1928 («This booklet was circulated in only 25 copies on the happy occasion of the wedding of Miss Fulvia Casella and Mr Gualtiero Pastorini. Fiorenzuola d’Arda, 6<sup>th</sup> October 1928»), p. 29: respectively pp. 5 and 12.



*I.G.M. Library*  
work<sup>91</sup>.

fotolito I.G.M. Firenze

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91 *ibidem*, respectively pp. 14 and 19; *Printed in May 2008*



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