

Andrea Savio, *Tra spezie e spie: Filippo Pigafetta nel Mediterraneo del Cinquecento*, 2020.

Savio's study of an intriguing career in informal diplomacy opens with Giovanni Botero's description of 'ambassadors, spies, merchants and soldiers', whose travels between states allowed them to gather information of considerable use in government. Born in Vicenza in 1533, Filippo Pigafetta was a descendant of the famous circumnavigator Antonio Pigafetta, but was excluded from the Venetian patriciate on grounds of his illegitimacy. Between 1576 and 1587, as 'explorer, informer and spy', Filippo Pigafetta visited Suez, London, Madrid, Lisbon, Rome, Jerusalem and Venice. This decade, the apex of his activity, provides Savio's focus. His short book is divided into two sections, one dealing with the development of Pigafetta's network, the other with his travels.

Savio sets out to understand Pigafetta in the context of wider networks of young noblemen from the Venetian Terraferma. Pigafetta's career was situated against the background of conflict with the Ottoman Empire, especially after the Battle of Lepanto: firm in his Catholic beliefs, he saw the Ottomans as adherents of a 'false religion'. Following service as a soldier, he took a significant interest in military matters, studying extensively and becoming an important author and translator of treatises on the arts of war.

In 1576, when his home city of Vicenza became a place of refuge from a plague-stricken Venice, Pigafetta benefited from contacts with exiles such as the apostolic nuncio Giovanni Battista Castagna (later Pope Urban VII). Vicenza already had notable academies: the Accademia Olimpica (founded 1555). and the Accademia dei Costanti (1556). Pigafetta had wide literary interests, and was part of a network of scholars, collecting books and

exchanging correspondence. Alongside these connections, he also had interests in the silk trade.

When it came to spying, then, Pigafetta was well-placed to leverage his contacts to obtain information. His background offered a range of cover stories: he could plausibly become a 'curious traveller' or engineer or pilgrim. Besides conflict with the Ottomans, Venice was also dealing with tensions over the pepper trade, from which the city was increasingly excluded with the development of new sea routes to Asia.

This was the background against which, in 1576, Pigafetta arrived in Alessandria. In his travels through Egypt he saw the preliminary works undertaken by the Ottomans for a Suez canal and was able to report on the strength of the Ottoman military and its defences, the hostility towards them from the local population, and the regulations imposed on access to firearms. While his observations on the military and judicial structures were thoughtful, the same cannot be said for his negative stereotyping of the Egyptian Arabs.

Later, Pigafetta spent time in the Low Countries and England, engaged with the threat of Protestant revolt; his companion on the London mission, Antonio Maria Ragona, wrote a description of England's ports and fortresses, probably with Pigafetta's input, but its lack of detail suggests the pair were unable to observe many at first hand. After a relatively short stay, they made their way south through France and Spain. In Madrid in 1583 Pigafetta assisted a newly-appointed Venetian ambassador, Vincenzo Gradenigo, and wrote an account of the court and government of Philip II, largely following the conventions of the ambassadorial relation. In 1585 he was back in Italy, spending time in both Venice and Vicenza before accompanying another Venetian diplomatic mission, this time to Rome.

There he was entrusted by Pope Sixtus V with the task of reporting on Syria and Persia, where he travelled in 1587 in the guise of a pilgrim. On his return, he entered the service of Ferdinando de' Medici.

The great strength of Savio's study is undoubtedly the detailed research, spanning twenty-one libraries and archives and turning up some notable material on Pigafetta not previously considered in depth by scholars. There is, however, relatively little contextualisation of Pigafetta's career against the norms of diplomatic service in this period. The book would have been strengthened by greater consideration of how this case contributes to our wider understanding of informal diplomatic agents and what can tell us about the broader practice of diplomacy. Whether Pigafetta was a typical or outlying figure remains to be established. That said, scholars engaged in research on sixteenth-century embassies will find much useful material for further analysis in Savio's study.

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