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Binasco Matteo, Viaggiatori e missionari nel Seicento: Pacifique de Provins fra Levante, Acadia e Guyana, 1622-1648, prefazione di Luca Codignola, Città del silenzio, Novi Ligure, 2006

by Ferrara Giulia

Viaggiatori e missionari nel Seicento follows a simple plot, as it narrates the life and experiences of Pacifique de Provins (1588-1648), a 17th-century Franciscan missionary friar. At the same time, however, the complex historical events of that period are successfully reconstructed by the author of this book, Matteo Binasco. Thus several elements—political, cultural, economic, scientific—are put together under the life of Pacifique de Provins as their common denominator.

The protagonist lived in 17th-century France where he did not line up with the dominant *gallicanism*, i.e. the Crown-centred control over Church activities in France and its colonies. Probably, his non-alignment played a role in leading him to undertaking overseas missionary work. Yet it is also true that since the inception of Christianity – for necessity or for choice – missionaries have been always great voyagers, and Pacifique de Provins was, quite simply, no exception to this tradition.

In Binasco's book we are to discover the motivations, risks, hopes, illusions, devices of his missionary journey, through the very delicate historical period of counter-reformation, particularly with reference to the enduring reverberations of the ecumenical council of Trento (1545-1563).

Besides, the journey of Pacifique de Provins, who was the protagonist of many missions in the Middle East and of a daredevil journey in the French Antilles, allows the reader to understand, in a very punctual way, the basic themes stemming from the encounter between a 17th-century European man and the American natives, whilst in the background lurk the increasing European expansion in the “new world” and the evangelization of its inhabitants. Binasco's book has the merit of encouraging the reader to develop a finer curiosity about the relationship between Europeans and American natives during the 17th century, stepping outside received interpretive canons, especially as it comes narrated by an individual man, Pacifique de Provins, with his diaries and letters, collected under the title “Brève Relation du voyage de l'Amérique”. This text constitutes a very important document for American voyage history, which Binasco integrates and comments upon in a refreshingly vivid style. Thus the reader can hear Pacifique de Provins telling us what he sees, his personal experiences of the new world, altogether changing our perception of these events.

Reading *Viaggiatori e missionari nel Seicento* is like walking on unknown paths. And unknown were to Europeans the lands explored by Pacifique de Provins, now even more remote from us, our prejudices and our time. Binasco's book leads the reader far away from usual reality and dwells deeply into Pacifique de Provins', hence causing the reader to look at history with different eyes, Pacifique's own eyes. In this perspective, Binasco's book possesses undoubted literary value.

As concerns the scholarly value of Binasco's book, we can say that Pacifique de Provins personal history has one particular advantage: he was a catholic voyager on official business. This means that there is a copious wealth of documentation that Matteo Binasco could make use of. Thoroughly and intelligently combined, the ecclesiastic and other sources gathered by Binasco inform and illuminate Pacifique de Provins' first-person accounts. This is particularly relevant vis-à-vis one of the least known paths which Matteo Binasco runs across, i.e. Pacifique de Provins' life. Therefore it becomes possible to understand how he could be not solely a missionary, but also a visionary dreamer of “far away” lands and a dedicated promoter of Christian empire. Not to mention the very big obstacles that Pacifique de Provins had to overcome in the pursuit of his dream: the rigid ecclesiastic organization of the Catholic Church, frequent fights between different missionary orders, petty religious jealousy and, last but not least, the difficulty inherent into managing material and spiritual power amongst deeply religious populations in a time of religious conflict.

Binasco's book deserves recognition for putting in relationship all of these aspects, while preserving the fresh, first-person outlook contained in Pacifique de Provins' own production. Indeed, the latter benefits from Binasco's treatment of the former. For example, we understand better Pacifique de Provins' enthusiasm about the American natives only when we compare his documents with reports from other missionaries.

Readers of *Viaggiatori e missionari nel Seicento* will surely enjoy this book, especially if they are able to imagine themselves in America, for the first time, just like Pacifique de Provins.

1 Pacifique de Provins, *Le voyage de Perse et Brève relation du voyage des Iles de l'Amérique*. Editée avec des notes critiques par Godefroy de Paris. Collegio San Lorenzo da Brindisi dei Frati Minori Cappuccini, Assisi 1939.

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