



Asian Ceremonies and Christian Chivalry in Pigafetta's 'The First Voyage Around the World'

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1 INTRODUCTION

Famished, sickly, desperate. Such must have been the appearance of the first Europeans to ever enter Asia from the East, having crossed the largest stretch of water on the planet—the Pacific.¹ With gums swollen by scurvy, and with eyes momentarily forgetful of spices, scanning the coastline of scattered islands for food, these ghostly figures seemed more

¹ Their mission was to find for Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and king of Spain, a westerly route to the Asian markets, which would allow Castilian ships to procure spices without questioning the Portuguese monopoly on the easterly route as effectively established by the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494). For a discussion of the entire Magellan-Elcano expedition, see Parry (1981, 282–294), Morrison (1978, 549–659); and the shorter

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the unhappy prisoners than the masters of the ships that carried them.² Their captain, Ferdinand Magellan (1480–1521), had found the strait for which Columbus and a host of other explorers had groped along the American coasts for almost thirty years. Brave and ruthless, Magellan was not lingering on the price that the enterprise had cost up to that point—a mutiny by Spanish pilots who hated their Portuguese leader, the loss of two ships, and the death of many men during the crossing of a bay that turned out to be an uncharted ocean. Yet the latter, harrowing experience was crystallized by Magellan’s greatest admirer, Antonio Pigafetta (c. 1492–1531):

We were three months and twenty days without getting any kind of fresh food. We ate biscuit, which was no longer biscuit, but powder of biscuits swarming with worms, for they had eaten the good (it stank strongly of the urine of rats). We drank yellow water that had been putrid for many days. [...] Rats were sold for one-half ducat a piece, if only one could get them. But above all the other misfortunes the following was the worst. The gums of both the lower and upper teeth of some of our men swelled, so that they could not eat under any circumstances and therefore died. [...] Had not God and His blessed mother given us such good weather we would all have died of hunger in that exceedingly vast sea. In truth I believe no such voyage will ever be made again.³

summaries in Kamen (2003, 197–200) and Canova (2019). See also Oliveira (2002) and the key document detailing the contract between Magellan and the Spanish court, “Agreement entered into by the King of Spain and Fernando de Magallanes and Ruy Faleiro for the voyage to the Spice Islands,” in Benitez Licuanan & Llavador Mira (1990, 3–6). This document partly explains both the northerly route chosen by Magellan after passing the strait and the time that he spent in the Philippines even if they evidently were not the “spice islands.” Other collections of documents are considered in Torodash (1971). On the Treaty of Tordesillas, see Ribot García et al. (1995), Varela Marcos and Vernet Ginés (1994), and Leon Guerrero (2004).

² The first two islands sighted by the fleet were Rota and Guam, of the Marianas. Magellan looked at Rota from a distance and then ordered to approach Guam.

³ Pigafetta (1995, 26–27). This is the edition of the text that I will follow here; it is the most accurate translation into English, and it reproduces in color the maps from the original manuscripts. For a treatment of the text’s history, see the “Bio-Bibliographical Note,” in Pigafetta (1995, xxxviii–lvi). For a good edition of the original text (from the Italian manuscript preserved at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan), see *Il primo viaggio intorno al mondo*, edited by Camillo Manfroni and recently reprinted by Ghibli (2014). A more recent edition in Italian is in Canova (2000).

The first encounter of this starving crew with a group of Asians was not promising. Before Magellan could make a landing at Guam, several small boats sailed toward the Spanish ships, and a multitude of men and women boarded and skillfully stole everything that they could lay their hands on, including one boat that was fastened to the side of one of the caravels. This prompted Magellan to order a punitive landing, and during the skirmish that followed, his men were able to recover their boat but not to grasp much food before falling back to the ships and sailing away. This incident, which caused the Spanish to name these islands *Islas de los Ladrones* (Islands of the Thieves), meant that more men would die from malnourishment and scurvy before a decent amount of food could later be obtained in the course of more friendly encounters, in the Philippines. But the enterprise would cost many more lives, including Magellan's, and in the end, Pigafetta would be one of the only 18 men who made it back to Seville in 1522, out of the 237 who had sailed from the Guadalquivir in August 1519.⁴

This essay is neither a chronological reconstruction of the entire expedition nor a comprehensive analysis of all the themes in Pigafetta's account, *The First Voyage Around the World*. Rather, I would like to offer some reflections on the impact of curiosity on this text. The meaning of curiosity is twofold. First, Pigafetta pens colorful descriptions of Asian landscapes, flora, fauna, sounds, and rituals.⁵ Here, I shall focus on customs and rituals, because images of Asian ceremonies in *The First Voyage* exemplify well Pigafetta's genuine and tranquil inquisitiveness. My argument is that the author, in general, avoids judgments and leaves his readers free to wonder, rationalize, and/or evaluate the perplexing rituals that he witnessed, took part in, or heard of.⁶ Secondly, Pigafetta is *himself* a curiosity: a knight from Vicenza aboard Spanish

⁴ Another handful of survivors eventually reached Europe years later. Parry (1981, 123).

⁵ I will not explore the theme of language here, but Pigafetta adds four vocabularies to his pamphlet: for Guarani, Patagonian, Bisayan, Malay. The last two are longer, and as noticed by Cachey in his Introduction they are impressively accurate. Pigafetta (1995, xxix). On this issue, Cachey gives some useful references in endnotes 119, 221, and 344 on pages 148, 161, and 174 respectively. For a more detailed discussion, see Bausani (1960) and Soravia (1994).

⁶ Other scholars have already commented on Antonio Pigafetta's curiosity and on his unwillingness to judge the societies and customs that he encountered. See for instance Caraci Luzzana (1992, 290–292), Da Pozzo (2005) and Canova (2001, 10). See also Parry (1981, 285–286). The attempt by Pablo Castro Hernández to question this

ships sent on a mission to find spices. His is an odd presence. He is much more out of place than the other Italians in the crew, who are Genoese pilots.⁷ He is also a unique character when compared to the Florentine merchants who in those decades were reaching India from the West, on Portuguese ships.⁸ Contrary to them, Pigafetta holds a chivalric value system and has the composure of a nobleman. As we shall see, this identity is linked to his primary audience and explains why the lyrical climax of the book has nothing to do with precious spices or Eastern markets, but instead deals with Magellan's heroic death. Both the first definition of curiosity—resulting in open-ended images of Asian ceremonies—and the second one—causing the transformation of Asian landscapes into a stage for chivalric acts—constitute a theme through which we can reconsider several pages of *The First Voyage* and recover the intellectual and emotional reactions that they sparked among sixteenth-century readers.

These “two curiosities” of Antonio Pigafetta are mirrored in the introduction of his book. He begins by explaining how, in 1519, he had joined Magellan's fleet, armed by Charles V at Seville, thanks to the recommendation of a fellow Vicentine, Francesco Chiericati, who at that time was the papal ambassador in Spain. Pigafetta needed the intervention of such a well-connected friend because he was neither a sailor nor a merchant investing money in the enterprise. He was eager to take part in the voyage toward the Indies simply because, as he stated in the first paragraph, after reading and hearing about “the great and marvelous things of the Ocean Sea,” he wished to see them for himself. And he illustrated his two main objectives quite clearly: “so that I might be able thereby to satisfy myself somewhat, and so that I might be able to gain some renown with posterity.”⁹ In other words, from the very beginning of his

consensus is not compelling. Castro Hernández (2018). Castro Hernández skillfully reconstructs the Renaissance aesthetic attitudes that are echoed in a few passages of *The First Voyage*, but this seems a *non sequitur* with regard to the specific issue of Pigafetta's general attitude toward Asian nations. In the vast majority of his descriptions of rituals, traditions, courtly etiquettes, and even sexual practices the Vicentine employs a matter-of-fact prose without aesthetic comments and hence devoid of even indirect moral evaluations.

⁷ One of the Genoese on board has left a dry account of the voyage, published in the aforementioned edition of Pigafetta (2014, 187–202).

⁸ On these Italian merchants and their cultural attitudes and values, see my articles: Salonia (2019) and Salonia (2021). A collection of relevant primary sources is in Spallanzani (1997).

⁹ Pigafetta (1995, 4).

book, Pigafetta on the one hand resembles a curious tourist and on the other hand is self-conscious about the opportunity he has to acquire fame among his primary audience, which as we shall see were fellow knights and courtesans. In the first half of this chapter, I will present examples of the Vicentine writer's curiosity, in particular toward different Asian rites and ceremonies, from courtly to sexual. In the second half of the chapter, I will move on to analyze the chivalric tone of the book, which is linked to Pigafetta's curious background.

2 OPEN-ENDED IMAGES: THE CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ASIAN CEREMONIES

After fleeing from the rapacious inhabitants of Guam, the hungry travelers reached the Philippines and began to wander around the archipelago. The first interesting description of a baffling Asian ceremony follows the arrival in front of the island of Limasawa and the classic exchange of gifts between Magellan and the local king.¹⁰ On this occasion, Magellan stayed onboard, while Pigafetta managed to be sent with another crewmember onshore, where the king hosted them at a banquet. The Vicentine knight writes:

When I reached shore, the king raised his hands toward the sky and then turned toward the two of us. We did the same toward him as did all the others. The king took me by the hand; one of his more notable men took my companion [...] The king's men stood about us in a circle with swords, daggers, spears, and bucklers. The king had a plate of pork brought in and a large jar filled with wine. At every mouthful, we drank a cup of wine. The wine that was left in the cup at any time, although that happened but rarely, was put into a jar by itself. The king's cup was always kept covered and none else drank from it but he and I. Before the king took the cup to drink, he raised his clasped hands toward the sky, and then toward me; and when he was about to drink, he extended the fist of his left hand toward me (at first I thought that he was about to punch me) and then drank. I did the same toward the king. They all make those signs one toward another when they drink. We ate with such ceremonies and with other signs of friendship. I ate meat of Good Friday, for I could not do otherwise.¹¹

¹⁰ Pigafetta (1995, 35–36).

¹¹ Pigafetta (1995, 37).

This vivid and amusing scene is the first European description of Filipino courtly life, which Pigafetta chose to frame within the concept of friendship. He does not comment on the simplicity of the ceremonies that he witnessed but rather gives the impression that he had a good time, surely satisfying some of his curiosity, which was anyway far from quenched as we learn from the fact that soon after the lunch he was busy writing down “the names of many things in their language.”¹² The only thing that Pigafetta feels compelled to justify is about himself, explaining why he broke the divine law of abstinence on Good Friday.

Pigafetta shows a similar attitude later in his account, when he covers the events taking place at the city-port of Cebu. Obviously, there are several interesting themes that are present here as well as in other parts of the text—such as clothing and fauna, flora and cooking, diplomacy and the Christian faith—but they are beyond the scope of my chapter, so I shall continue to focus on Pigafetta’s depiction of ceremonies witnessed by the European explorers. In the midst of the long section on the stay at Cebu, the Vicentine nobleman pens three long paragraphs, each of them dedicated to the peculiarity of one local ceremony or custom: pig slaughtering; sexual intercourse; and funerary rites. The reader learns that the ceremonial killing of a hog is performed by two elderly women, who honor the sun by dancing while holding flags, blowing bamboo trumpets, and sprinkling wine upon the heart of the hog. Then one of the women thrusts a lance through the heart of the hog.¹³ “The other one dipping the end of her trumpet in the blood of the hog, goes around marking with blood with her finger first the foreheads of their husbands, and then the others [...]”¹⁴ Pigafetta was evidently not among those in a hurry to find spices, as he readily employed his time to explore Asian human geographies and cultures, making sure that he would be invited to whatever daily activity could “satisfy” his curiosity. *The First Voyage* is thus very far from ship logs and dry letters of sailors, witnessing the nobleman’s eagerness to absorb the surreal and unexpected treasures of the East, inviting his readers to savor them patiently. Pigafetta was aware that his travel writing was engaging in the creation of knowledge about Asian societies, and he resisted the temptation to disparage the consecration of

¹² Pigafetta (1995).

¹³ Pigafetta (1995, 56–57).

¹⁴ Pigafetta (1995, 57).

the swine. The text does not justify it either, but instead the author leaves the account open to different interpretations and evaluations. He limits himself to close the paragraph with a statement that stresses the significance of such actions within a novel cosmology that invites the reader at the very least to pause: “Thus no one but old women consecrate the flesh of the hog, and they do not eat it unless it is killed in this way.”¹⁵ The following, quite famous paragraph, is dedicated to the use of bolts on the penis for sexual intercourse.¹⁶ Pigafetta does not condemn this custom; he carelessly confesses that he was so curious about it that when going around the town he often asked “many, both young and old, to see their penis,” and he only tentatively and very briefly claims that the custom has something to do with the “weak nature” of the Filipinos.¹⁷ Later in the book, Pigafetta drops even such kind of vague hypothesis about “weakness.”¹⁸ When he describes the custom (among Javanese men) to use little bells around their penis to attract the attention of their lovers and then to keep them on while having sexual intercourse, he simply states that “women take great pleasure,” without judging the practice.¹⁹

Finally, the third paragraph in this section deserves more space, as it has thus far attracted little attention from scholars. It details funerary practices in Cebu in unembellished but empathetic prose:

The deceased is placed in the middle of the house in a coffin. Ropes are placed about the box in the manner of a palisade, to which many branches of trees are attached. In the middle of each branch hangs a cotton cloth like a curtained canopy. The most principal women sit under those hangings, and are all covered with white cotton cloth, each one sits by a girl who fans her with a palm-leaf fan. The other women sit about the room sadly. Then there is one woman who cuts off the hair of the deceased very slowly with a knife. Another who was the principal wife of the deceased, lies down

¹⁵ Pigafetta (1995).

¹⁶ Pigafetta (1995, 57–58). This paragraph is absent in most French manuscripts. Pigafetta (1995), endnote 204 on p. 158.

¹⁷ Pigafetta (1995, 58).

¹⁸ Here Pigafetta is clearly engaging with an already existing literary tradition concerning Asian genital infibulation and decoration, which included the important fifteenth-century account of Niccolò de’ Conti. See Canova (2001, 8–10).

¹⁹ Pigafetta (1995, 116).

upon him, and places her mouth, her hands, and her feet upon those of the deceased. When the former is cutting off the hair, the latter weeps.²⁰

The First Voyage here offers a clear example of its author's ability to describe what is alien with a simplicity that never devolves into detachment. The passage confirms that Pigafetta is an inquisitive observer, and that often his nuanced words paint with fine strokes while at once leaving the broad contours and the overall evaluation of the scene still open. When he has to point out something that could easily be misjudged, for instance that "they keep the body in the house for five or six days during those ceremonies," he immediately hastens to add an exculpatory parenthesis: "I believe that the body is anointed with camphor."²¹ That is to say, Pigafetta's images of unheard-of Asian customs and rites are the fruit of the author's genuine curiosity, of his desire to see "marvelous things" for himself, but they are also nuanced and open-ended, leaving the audience free to make up their mind about the origins, rationale, and overall appropriateness of perplexing acts.

Pigafetta does not change his matter-of-fact yet lively prose even when, later in the course of the voyage, he learns about the much more morally questionable funerary rituals taking place in Java:

We were told also that when one of the chief men of Java dies, his body is burned. His principle wife adorns herself with garlands of flowers and has herself carried on a chair through the entire village by three or four men. Smiling and consoling her relatives who are weeping, she says: "Do not weep, for I am going to sup with my dear husband this evening, and to sleep with him this night." Then she is carried to the fire, where her husband is being burned. Turning toward her relatives, and again consoling them, she throws herself into the fire, where her husband is being burned.²²

²⁰ Pigafetta (1995, 58–59).

²¹ Pigafetta (1995, 59).

²² Pigafetta (1995, 116).

This rite of self-immolation, which was practiced in India, Java, and Bali for centuries, could have been very easily targeted for moral indignation.²³ Yet in his short description, Pigafetta refrains from using any adjective or adverb suggesting disapproval or stressing horror at the fate of Javanese women. In fact, he ends the passage abruptly with one last line that, if short of a justification, surely might have echoed in the mind of a sixteenth-century reader as a glimmer of rationale: “Did she [the wife] not do that, she would not be considered an honorable woman or a true wife to her dead husband.”²⁴

When the Vicentine knight encounters wealthier and more sophisticated courts than those of the Philippines and the Moluccas, he merely opts for slightly adjusting his vocabulary, perhaps just enough to leave the readers enchanted, while still allowing (and almost inviting) them to draw their own conclusions about the news of such distant customs. For example, this is Pigafetta’s account of the courtly culture that he witnessed in the wealthy state of Brunei:

We entered the courtyard of the palace mounted on the elephants. We went up a ladder accompanied by the governor and other chiefs, and entered a large hall full of many nobles, where we sat down upon a carpet with the presents in the jars near us. At the end of that hall there is another hall higher but somewhat smaller. [...] There were three hundred footsoldiers with naked rapiers at their thighs to guard the king. At the end of the small hall was a large window from which a brocade curtain was drawn aside so that we could see within it the king seated at a table with one of his young sons chewing betel. No one but women were behind him.²⁵

Pigafetta, who is evidently much more intrigued by court etiquette than by spice markets, continues his careful description of the scene:

Then a chief told us that we could not speak to the king, and that if we wished anything, we were to tell it to him, so that he could communicate it to one of higher rank. The latter would communicate it to a brother of the governor who was stationed in the smaller hall, and this man would

²³ On the long history of widow sacrifice across South and Southeast Asia, see Creese (2001).

²⁴ Pigafetta (1995, 116).

²⁵ Pigafetta (1995, 72–73).

communicate it by means of a speaking-tube through a hole in the wall to one who was inside with the king.²⁶

To the Vicentine knight as well as to his readers, this custom was at once perplexing and intelligible, as the men at arms, the layers of aristocratic ranks, and some form of outward respect in addressing a ruler were all signs of civility, in continuity with (not opposition to) late medieval and Renaissance European notions of kingship and political sophistication. Not by chance, the following sentence in the text is dedicated to Bornean actions showing homage, which though perhaps amusing are immediately justified by Pigafetta with a shorter and otherwise redundant clause:

The chief taught us the manner of making three obeisances to the king with our hands clasped above the head, raising first one foot and then the other and then kissing the hand toward him, and we did so. This is the method of royal obeisance.²⁷

The account continues with an indirect conversation between Pigafetta and the king, where the Europeans interestingly do not qualify the universal claims of the Habsburg emperor, but rather place Spain and Brunei on the same level. Obviously, what matters here is not whether Pigafetta reported the words that were truly spoken during the encounter, but rather that the image of Asia absorbed by his audience stressed a shared, transcultural notion of kingship:

We told the king that we came from the king of Spain, and that the latter desired to make peace with him and asked only for permission to trade. The king had us told that since the king of Spain desired to be his friend, he was very willing to be his, and said that we could take water and wood, and trade at our pleasure. Then we gave him the presents, on receiving each of which he nodded slightly.²⁸

The paragraph concludes by impressing on the reader's mind the image of a prosperous polity:

²⁶ Pigafetta (1995, 73).

²⁷ Pigafetta (1995).

²⁸ Pigafetta (1995).

To each one of us was given some brocaded and gold cloth and silk [...]. They presented us with refreshments of cloves and cinnamon, after which the curtains were drawn to and the windows closed. The men in the palace were all attired in cloth of gold and silk which covered their privies, and they carried daggers with gold haft adorned with pearls and precious gems, and they had many rings on their hands.²⁹

This story is the first accurate description of a Malay court by a European traveler.³⁰ Pigafetta deliberately closes it in an abrupt manner, lightheartedly mirroring the way in which his own meeting at a distance with the ruler had come to a sudden close. Here as in many other passages, *The First Voyage* shows all the limits of historiographical frameworks that reduce every European encounter to an act of insensitive “othering.” Pigafetta does not offer a comparison with European spaces and courts, and he does not insert an overall judgment about the reasonableness of Bornean customs. Strikingly, only a couple of paragraphs later—as a sort of brief and dry afterthought—readers are told that the king of Brunei is Muslim.³¹

Pigafetta’s readiness to recognize ceremonies and symbolisms that confirm the civilized character of the societies he encountered resembles the attitude of the Islamic traveler Abd Al-Razzaq, as recently described by Joan-Pau Rubiés.³² I find Rubiés’s suggestion that a late medieval concept of civilization was shared transculturally across Eurasia especially insightful and useful to move beyond rigid dichotomies. With regard to Pigafetta, the tendency to downplay religious differences when portraying Islamic courts and Muslim kings is confirmed later in the book, when Pigafetta describes a strange scene that took place in Tidore, one of the Moluccas. At this point in the voyage, three out of five ships had already been lost, Magellan had died, and many Spaniards had been killed at the famous ambush during a meal in Cebu. I shall return to these episodes in the second half of the chapter. Suffice it to say here, that because of

²⁹ Pigafetta (1995).

³⁰ For a very interesting discussion of Brunei at the turn of the sixteenth century, see Nicholl (1980). Nicholl argues that the official chronology of Brunei’s sultans is wrong and that Pigafetta witnessed a civil war between Muslims and Buddhists caused by the very recent introduction of Islam. He considers the key witness of Pigafetta on pp. 37–39.

³¹ Pigafetta (1995, 74).

³² Rubiés (2009, especially 55–93).

their precarious situation and due to the memory of the recent betrayal suffered at Cebu, some of the men in the expedition feared for their lives and suspected another conspiracy, so they communicated to the king of Tidore their intention to leave immediately, even without loading all the available cloves. At this point, the king, who had busied himself to gather more spices for his guests and who had held a sincere intention to establish an alliance with Spain, protested by desperately recurring to his holy book and swearing that there was no conspiracy against the Europeans and no danger. This is how Pigafetta draws the scene:

Then he [the king] had his Koran brought, and first kissing it and placing it four or five times about his head, and saying certain words to himself as he did so (which they call *zambahean*), he declared in the presence of all, that he swore by Allah and the Koran which he had in his hand, that he would always be a faithful friend of the king of Spain. He spoke all those words nearly in tears.³³

Incredibly, according to Pigafetta, the Spaniards were so moved by such oath that they decided to remain at Tidore for longer and even rewarded the Muslim king with the imperial insignia.³⁴ This is yet another example of how Pigafetta's prose remains, in the words of Giovanni da Pozzo, *impassibilmente stupita*, "unperturbedly surprised."³⁵ In this case, the only comment that he inserts after the description of this story is that later on the Spanish discovered how the king of Ternate had indeed been advised to kill them in order to please the Portuguese, but he had refused. Hence, Pigafetta's only comment sounds like a vindication of his and his companions' nonchalant and positive reaction to the king's oath over the Koran, if not as an oblique suggestion of the validity, in Asia, of oaths sworn over non-Christian sacred texts.³⁶ Obviously, I am not suggesting that Pigafetta espoused religious indifferentism. On the contrary, his account is dotted with expressions of faith and with episodes concerning the spreading of the Gospel. Yet we should not forget that Christianity could also stimulate a flexible universalism, potentially

³³ Pigafetta (1995, 95).

³⁴ Pigafetta (1995, 95).

³⁵ Da Pozzo (2005, 442).

³⁶ The French manuscripts omit the word Koran and state that the king swore on his crown. Pigafetta (2014, 138), note 7.

favoring the recognition of transcultural civility. This explains how Ming China could be at once more religiously tolerant and more ethnocentric than Christian Europe and the Islamic world.³⁷

Let us now return to Pigafetta's insatiable interest in the various courtly traditions and languages of political civility across Asia. Of course, he could not miss the opportunity to dedicate several pages of the book to China, even though he did not visit that country. Both Pigafetta and his Asian interlocutors perceived the Chinese emperor as the highest political authority in Asia, sitting at the top of a complex hierarchy of interlocking suzerainties. In this sense, rather than an alien political landscape, Asia appeared to Pigafetta (and his readers) intelligible and admirably well-ordered. As well put by Zoltán Biedermann, "In the sixteenth century, there was a critical mass of polities across the globe operating on grounds of analogous, or even homologous, strategies of power building, acting and soon interacting imperially, without conquering in the modern sense of the word—and understanding that they could measure forces and negotiate precisely on such grounds."³⁸ In Pigafetta, we find exactly a perceived continuity and a shared concept of political stability rather than insensitive dichotomies of "self" and "other." With his usual, serene curiosity, and having asked many questions to a well-informed "Moor," Pigafetta thus portrays the most powerful court of Asia:

He [the Chinese king] has seventy crowned kings subject to himself, and some of the latter have ten or fifteen kings subject to them. His port is called Guantau. Among the multitude of other cities, there are two principal ones called Namchin and Comlaha [Beijing] where the above king lives. He keeps four of his principal men near his palace, one toward the west, one toward the east, one toward the south, and one toward the north. Each one of those four men gives audience only to those who come from his own quarter.³⁹

Artfully extending his actual, physical voyage into a country that he has not visited, Pigafetta leads his audience into the halls of the Forbidden City and stresses the themes of space and rituals. Space is articulated both through the vastness of the imperial palace and through the list of

³⁷ Rubiés (2009, 108).

³⁸ Biedermann (2018, 35).

³⁹ Pigafetta (1995, 118).

suzerains who pay homage to the Chinese emperor—to the point that the list of lesser kings becomes itself a special tour of Asia.⁴⁰ Rituals harmoniously bring together and render visible on a daily basis such breathtakingly vast power. Yet the reader would look in vain for an overall assessment of Chinese civilization, for a judgment toward its pagan ceremonies and customs, or for comparisons with European powers. The audience is, therefore, invited to react to the text, and even to actively co-author it by drawing a conclusion about the author’s open-ended portrayal of moving landscapes, dense with surprising yet never unintelligible human action. Pigafetta once more colors his account with details about specific ceremonies. So, after impassibly mentioning how those who disobey the Chinese king are executed by flaying, with their skin dried, salted, and publicly exposed,⁴¹ the Vicentine moves to report a more amusing detail of court culture:

That king never allows himself to be seen by anyone. When he wishes to see his people, he rides about the palace on a skillfully made peacock, a most elegant contrivance, accompanied by six of his most principal women clad like himself; after which he enters a serpent called *nagha*, which is as rich a thing as can be seen, and which is kept in the greatest court of the palace. The king and the women enter it so that he may not be recognized among his women.⁴²

This positive description of “a most elegant” stratagem is followed by another glance at the majesty of the imperial palace, with its seventy thousand guards, and halls adorned with copper, silver, gold, and precious gems. The enormous palace as portrayed by Pigafetta—“it takes a day to go through it”⁴³—is a space inviting the reader to imagine China’s stability, justice, and prosperity, characteristics that are in turn projected throughout Asian human geographies by the symbol of Chinese suzerainty, which must be displayed by all tributary kings in their capitals: the dragon.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Pigafetta (1995, 118).

⁴¹ For a scholarly discussion of slow torture and capital punishment in imperial China, see Brook et al. (2008).

⁴² Pigafetta (1995, 119).

⁴³ Pigafetta (1995, 119).

⁴⁴ Pigafetta (1995, 118).

3 FAMILIAR ANTIPODES: CHIVALRIC THEMES IN A WORLD OF ISLANDS

In her beautiful book *Chivalry and Exploration, 1298–1630*, Jennifer R. Goodman explains that “many themes, motifs and preoccupations link the literature of late medieval chivalry with factual narratives of exploration.”⁴⁵ Unfortunately, *The First Voyage Around the World* is absent from the pages of Goodman’s work, yet I believe that Antonio Pigafetta’s identity as a knight had an important impact on some key sections of his narrative. As I suggested in the introduction of this chapter, Pigafetta’s identity was *itself* a curiosity of which he was self-conscious: there was no other Italian nobleman onboard. Crucially, after the voyage, Pigafetta first gave a draft of his memoirs to emperor Charles V, and then sat down to reorder his notes into a book, which he eventually opted to dedicate to Philippe Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, the Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes.⁴⁶ As a result, some key passages in the text re-familiarize the antipodes, by articulating an intrusion of Christian chivalric themes into Asian landscapes.⁴⁷ The Vicentine gentleman writes not from the perspective of a merchant, or a pilot keeping a logbook, or an imperial officer, but rather from the perspective of an intellectual knight.⁴⁸ His “Asia” is then not only concerned with the marvelous that “satisfies” his curiosity, as I have shown above, but also with chivalric discourses and parallels to Mediterranean geographies familiar to his primary audience—something that secures his second objective as stated in the introduction: “to gain some renown with posterity.” The traces of this chivalric theme that I will briefly present here are: the portrayal of the first solemn Holy Mass in the Philippines; the lyrically central place of Magellan’s death; and the shorter hints at knightly leadership (or lack thereof). The splendid maps in the original manuscript, which I will not treat here, are arguably

⁴⁵ Goodman (1998, 45).

⁴⁶ For a discussion of Pigafetta’s search for patronage, the attempt to obtain it from the Pope, and his eventual decision to opt for the Grand Master of Rhodes, see Pigafetta (1995, xlii–xlvii).

⁴⁷ For an introduction to European chivalry and its connection to courtly culture, see Scaglione (1991). On the genre of chivalric poetry in Italy, see the contributions collected in Di Natale and Carrassi (2007).

⁴⁸ It is not altogether clear whether Pigafetta was already a Knight of Rhodes before embarking on the journey around the globe, but he had been received within the order by the time he penned the final version of his account.

a fourth chivalric aspect of the text, as they depict a world of islands clearly connected to the Mediterranean tradition of *isolari*, with which the Knights of Rhodes were surely familiar.⁴⁹

The question of whether the first Mass celebrated in the Philippines as described by Pigafetta took place at Limasawa or in some other island has been much debated.⁵⁰ Here I shall merely focus on Pigafetta's portrayal of this Easter Sunday liturgy because it represents a clear example of chivalric themes. According to *The First Voyage*, on the morning of Sunday, March 31, 1521, Magellan sent a message to the king of Limasawa, letting him know that he and his men were about to disembark but would not do so to exchange other gifts or to partake in meals with him, but rather to celebrate the Mass and pray. Then, Magellan ordered the priest to prepare a place for the liturgy, and, as recalled by Pigafetta:

When the hour for mass arrived, we landed with about fifty men, without our body armor, but carrying our other arms, and dressed in our best clothes. Before we reached the shore with our boats, six pieces were discharged as a sign of peace. We landed; the two kings⁵¹ embraced the captain-general [Magellan], and placed him between them. We went in marching order to the place consecrated, which was not far from the shore. Before the commencement of mass, the captain sprinkled the entire bodies of the two kings with musk water. At the time of the offertory, the kings went forward to kiss the cross as we did, but they did not make any offering. When the body of Our Lord was elevated, they remained on their knees and worshipped Him with clasped hands. The ships fired all their artillery at once when the body of Christ was elevated, the signal having been given from the shore with muskets.⁵²

This scene, still quite captivating for modern readers, and surely enchanting and touching for a sixteenth-century Catholic audience, is followed by three sentences that deliberately insert a courtly theme between two religious acts:

⁴⁹ For a discussion of these maps of Asian archipelagos, which were intended by Pigafetta as an essential component of his account, I recommend Pigafetta (1995, xxx–xxxvii).

⁵⁰ Schreurs (1981).

⁵¹ Local Filipino kings whom Magellan and Pigafetta had already met and befriended in the previous days.

⁵² Pigafetta (1995, 39).

After the conclusion of the mass, some of our men took communion. The captain-general arranged a fencing tournament, at which the kings were greatly pleased. Then he had a cross carried in and the nails and a crown, to which immediate reverence was made.⁵³

The celebration of the Eucharist plays a fundamental role in the narrative. To a reader uninitiated to chivalric poems, this remains simply a beautiful episode of religious piety and a model act of thanksgiving by faithful Catholic men led by a good captain. However, to Pigafetta's primary audience, fellow knights and courtesans who were very well acquainted with chivalric literature, this description of a Holy Mass revealed multi-layered meanings. First, Magellan leads armed men to the shore, forming effectively a group of knights; then, the captain stands between the local kings and they proceed together toward the altar, thus indicating spiritual brotherhood; finally, Magellan acts almost *in persona Christi* when he blesses his new pagan friends with musk water.

As explained by David E. Clark, in medieval literature Mass attendance is central to knighthood. In his study of the *Morte Darthur*, Clark also argues that Christian worship is linked to temporal benefits.⁵⁴ This is a striking observation when one notes that Pigafetta decided to insert, right after his description of Easter Mass, a long paragraph where Magellan asks his new allies to let him erect a cross at the top of their island. Pigafetta has Magellan explain to the local kings that this cross would symbolize their friendship with the Spanish emperor and guarantee that in the future other Spanish ships "would do nothing to displease them or harm their property." Moreover, if they erected the cross and adored it "neither thunder, lightning, nor storms would harm them in the least."⁵⁵ It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the liturgical celebration—from the marching of armed yet peaceful men toward the altar to the elevation of the Eucharist—and the promise of future temporal benefits are chivalric themes artfully and vividly inserted into the narrative by Pigafetta. Needless to say, *The First Voyage* does not have the sophisticated symbolism and the diversified spiritual hierarchy of knights that one finds in the *Morte*

⁵³ Pigafetta (1995, 39).

⁵⁴ Clark (2015).

⁵⁵ Pigafetta (1995, 40).

Darthur.⁵⁶ Yet the sudden echo of knightly themes on the Asian stage is one more reason to consider Pigafetta's account a fascinating and in some way unique piece of travel literature. This is why we can say that Pigafetta was himself *a* curiosity: the only Italian knight imbued with epics and images of Christian chivalry among his fellow crewmembers, and surely the only one to write a book that would influence images of the East formed in the minds of countless Europeans readers.

The death of Ferdinand Magellan is the second episode in Pigafetta's narrative that introduces chivalric values into Asian landscapes, moving from piety and liturgy to heroic actions, sacrifice, and fame. After days spent solidifying an alliance with the chief of Cebu, Magellan became involved in a local dispute about tributes between his ally and the chief of Mactan, a nearby island. A detailed reconstruction of Magellan's stay at Cebu, his political and military objectives, and the facts surrounding the battle at Mactan is beyond the scope of my contribution.⁵⁷ Instead, I propose to read this passage in isolation, as if we did not know that it is part of a piece of travel literature. Suffice it to say that the Portuguese captain eventually decided to move with three long boats and about sixty armed men against Mactan, in the early hours of April 27, 1521.⁵⁸ Pigafetta, who being a knight was part of the posse and probably fought next to Magellan for most of the battle, thus invites his readers to visualize the dramatic events at the bay of Mactan:

When morning came forty-nine of us leaped into the water up to our thighs, and walked through water for more than two crossbow flights before we could reach the shore. The boats could not approach nearer because of certain rocks in the water. The other eleven men remained behind to guard the boats. When they saw us, they charged down upon us with exceeding loud cries, two divisions on our flanks and the other on our front. When the captain [Magellan] saw that, he formed us into two divisions, and thus did we begin to fight. The musketeers and crossbowmen shot from a distance for about half-hour, but uselessly.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ On religious life and knighthood see also Riddy (1987, 113–137).

⁵⁷ A good contextualization of Magellan's objectives and actions is in Field (2006).

⁵⁸ A useful map of the battle can be found in Morrison (1978, 643).

⁵⁹ Pigafetta (1995, 60).

Rather than calling off the attack, Magellan ordered some of his men to go burn the houses near the shore, but the diversion did not work, as according to Pigafetta two Spaniards were killed on the spot and the natives reacted by attacking the rest with even more fury. The text then continues in a crescendo of tragic tension:

So many of them charged down upon us that they shot the captain through the right leg with a poisoned arrow. On that account, he ordered us to retreat slowly, but the men took to flight, except six or eight of us who remained with the captain. The natives shot only at our legs, for the latter were bare; and so many were the spears and stones that they hurled at us, that we could offer no resistance. The mortars in the boats could not aid us as they were too far away. So we continued to retreat for more than the distance of a good crossbow shot from the shore, still fighting in water up to our knees. The natives continued to pursue us, and picking up the same spear four or six times, hurled it at us again and again. Recognizing the captain, so many turned upon him that they knocked his helmet off his head twice, but he always stood firmly like a good knight. Together with some others, we fought thus for more than one hour, refusing to retreat farther. An Indian hurled a bamboo spear into the captain's face, but the latter immediately killed him with his lance, which he left in the Indian's body. Then, trying to lay hand on sword, he could draw it out but halfway, because he had been wounded in the arm with a bamboo spear. When the natives saw that, they all hurled themselves upon him. One of them wounded him on the left leg with a large *terciado*, which resembles a scimitar, only being larger. That caused the captain to fall face downward, when immediately they rushed upon him with iron and bamboo spears and with their cutlasses, until they killed our mirror, our light, our comfort, and our true guide. When they wounded him, he turned back many times to see whether we were all in the boats.⁶⁰

The key question that one should ask is whether this text has anything to do with travel literature. Or is this brief, yet dense and emotional story encapsulating various themes that are typical of the chivalric genre? Outnumbered and wounded yet undimmed, Magellan is portrayed as the embodiment of chivalric values: "he always stood firmly like a good knight." Pigafetta reconstructs the scene as the ultimate sacrifice of a knight whose virtues went evidently beyond maritime skills and bravery

⁶⁰ Pigafetta (1995, 61).

at sea.⁶¹ To grasp how Pigafetta deliberately inserts chivalric notions of heroic death and even hints at Christian teachings on laying down one's life for his friends, it is key that we realize how the last part of the story must be completely made up by the author. The Vicentine knight surely fought side by side with Magellan, but near the end of the battle, and by his own oblique admission, he too abandoned his "mirror," as we suddenly find him watching Magellan's last stand from "the boats." Considering that the long boats were so far that their mortars could not help, when Magellan fell Pigafetta must have been at least half a mile away from the scene. All he could have distinguished from that distance were tens of Mactan warriors surrounding something in the water. In fact, it is even possible that Magellan was not killed where he fell but that he was captured, carried on shore, and later ritually murdered, since human sacrifice of enemy warriors was a common practice in the Philippines before the Spanish conquest.⁶² Hence, the inclusion of this detailed and moving section, truly a chivalric poem in miniature, is a self-conscious and deliberate decision by Pigafetta, who would have felt embarrassed to write that he had fled and found himself so far from Magellan that he had no exact knowledge of the great captain's final moments. This lyrical apex of the book is also a clear indication of how, underneath cosmopolitan attitudes and shared notions of civility, culture and locally rooted meanings still matter.

This insertion of Christian chivalry into Asian spaces does not always take the form of long sections like those describing the Easter Mass or Magellan's death. There are other instances in *The First Voyage* where Pigafetta briefly alludes to Magellan's Christ-like behavior. For example, when the fleet flees from the first encounter with the thieving natives of Guam, the exhausted crew eventually take refuge on an apparently uninhabited island, and Pigafetta informs the reader of Magellan's love for his men, as well as the effects of the captain's *caritas* on them:

⁶¹ The fact that Magellan was not a member of the high nobility is not a problem for Pigafetta's narrative. As explained in a very enjoyable essay by Alberto Castaldini, the Indo-European tripartite system (priests, warriors, farmers) was "rigid at birth but alterable by an existential choice-search-vocation, which could be perfected by a conquest. The courage of the 'quest' transforms into knights." My translation from the Italian text. Castaldini (2014, 39).

⁶² Field (2006, 329–333).

He [Magellan] had two tents set up on the shore for the sick and had a sow killed for them. [...] We stayed there eight days, and during that time our captain went ashore daily to visit the sick, and every morning gave them coconut water from his own hand, which comforted them greatly.⁶³

This act of love is an instance of *imitatio Christi*.⁶⁴ It is itself a chivalric act, and it could arguably be linked to Magellan's frequent Mass attendance besides the communal liturgies, something mentioned several times by Pigafetta and that would have been noticed by readers who were saturated with chivalric literature.⁶⁵

In other passages, the issue of honorable behavior (or lack thereof) is merely hinted at. Pigafetta portrays the king of Tidore as a good ruler and an honorable man. First, as I explained above, the author informs the readers of how the king rejected the advice to betray the Spanish after having promised friendship, and sincerely swearing (on the Koran). Then, Pigafetta credits the same king with going above and beyond his duties toward the Spanish, by giving gifts to a local governor to make sure that he would do his best to procure more spices.⁶⁶ On the other hand, a member of the expedition, Joao Carvalho, is shown to lack chivalry. After the death of Magellan, the king of Cebu had second thoughts about his alliance with the Spanish, and he treacherously murdered many of them during a banquet—to which Pigafetta did not take part as he was on the ship to recover from a wound. According to the Vicentine knight, when the survivor of this ambush begged for help from the beach, Carvalho abandoned him to his fate because he harbored the desire to replace him as the commander of the ships.⁶⁷ Later, in the space of two paragraphs, Pigafetta accuses Carvalho of freeing an important prisoner after receiving bribes in gold and of “usurping for himself” three local women who had been taken onboard to be brought to Spain.⁶⁸ Finally, Pigafetta does not

⁶³ Pigafetta (1995, 31, 34).

⁶⁴ For a nuanced discussion of the complex meanings of *imitatio Christi* in late medieval chivalric literature, see Shou (2018).

⁶⁵ For instance, when talking about the stay at Cebu, Pigafetta informs the reader: “The captain-general went ashore daily during those days to hear mass, and told the king many things regarding the faith.” Pigafetta (1995, 53).

⁶⁶ Pigafetta (1995, 96).

⁶⁷ Pigafetta (1995, 64).

⁶⁸ Pigafetta (1995, 75–76).

name those who in the midst of the terrible return voyage across the Indian Ocean demand to change route and surrender to the Portuguese in Mozambique, but he does comment positively about another group on board, who, “more desirous of their honor than of their own life, determined to go to Spain living or dead.”⁶⁹

4 CONCLUSION

Pigafetta did not write the account of his voyage through stiff dichotomies. His descriptions of ceremonies across Asian landscapes stress continuity at the antipodes. They discretely encourage the European reader to spot a shared notion of civility behind the layer of apparently perplexing traditions. Pigafetta’s curiosity leads him to observe, disembark, take notes, ask questions, but almost never to compare or to propose clear-cut interpretations. While comparisons with European customs and rites would have unavoidably led the audience to focus on difference, Pigafetta’s abrupt endings and transitions, as well as his lack of explicit evaluations, leave the audience free to complete the author’s thoughts and to guess the rationale of what is described, thereby absorbing the similarities of human societies sharing a basic notion of civilization. Pigafetta’s calm, empathetic curiosity toward ritual and institutional forms of civility—in grief and pleasure, in kingly awe and friendship, in governance and faith—opens a window on the variety of responses among pre-modern European travelers visiting Asia. Memories and reconstructions of their experiences were much more multiform, complex, and nuanced than a dismissive “othering.” In the passage detailing the unfortunate first encounter at Guam, when local people stole what they could from the hungry travelers and Magellan reacted with a punitive landing causing a small pitch battle, Pigafetta adds three sentences that (gratuitously) turn the table and force the reader to identify for a moment with the thieving natives:

When we wounded any of those people with our cross-shafts, which passed completely through their loins from one side to the other, they, looking at it, pulled on the shaft now on this and now on that side, and then drew it out, with great astonishment, and so died. Others who were wounded in the breast did the same, which moved us to great compassion. [...] We

⁶⁹ Pigafetta (1995, 122).

saw some women in their boats who were crying out and tearing their hair, for love, I believe, of those whom we had killed.⁷⁰

This is more than empathy. It is indeed compassion, with a pinch of regret.

The findings of the first half of this chapter are all the more relevant because my contribution focused on a Vicentine knight, not a merchant. In some of my recent work, I have discussed how cosmopolitan reactions to Asian encounters were especially marked among late medieval Italian merchants like the Florentine Giovanni da Empoli, while his nemesis Alfonso de Albuquerque represented the more militaristic attitudes of Iberian aristocratic leaders. Yet this study of Pigafetta has shown that even among European knights there were different sensibilities toward the East, its societies, and the production of knowledge about them.

In the second half of this chapter, I have proposed a hypothesis about the intrusion of chivalric themes even into the fabric of Pigafetta's writing about Asia, focusing in particular on two episodes. The Holy Mass of Easter 1521 is given an unusual space in the narrative, partly because of its link to Christian chivalric images. Then, the death of Magellan, fighting while outnumbered, sacrificing himself to save the lives of his men, represents the lyrical climax of the entire book, which draws its meaning and pathos from the heroic high culture of Western Europe. These moving sections, as well as shorter passages such as the one where Magellan taking care of the sick seems to exemplify the *imitatio Christi*, facilitate the presence of Christian and knightly values in Asian spaces—spaces that are themselves rendered more familiar by the inclusion of an *isolario* in the original manuscript.

Therefore, in Pigafetta, cosmopolitan empathy and locally rooted values coexist. On the one hand, he is genuinely curious about Asian ceremonies and courtly rites. Hence, the images of the East emerging from *The First Voyage Around the World* confound the simplistic stereotype of an “othering” and contemptuous West and instead confirm the presence of a Eurasian, shared notion of civility. Yet, on the other hand, it is necessary to recognize that cosmopolitan attitudes never dissolve local identities and ties. Underneath late medieval and early modern global networks and encounters, permanence and culture played a role. Pigafetta is a Catholic knight, a Renaissance courtesan from Veneto, who

⁷⁰ Pigafetta (1995, 29).

consciously engages with the Western literary tradition of the heroic epic. His peculiar identity, culture, and audience anticipate, shape, and prolong the stage of encounter. So much so that a reader familiar with Marcello Fogolino's *Adorazione dei Magi* (c. 1515), which Pigafetta must have seen in the church of St. Bartholomew in Vicenza, is tempted to wonder if that extraordinary painting—dense of knightly, strange figures surrounded by a fablelike landscape—might have been in Pigafetta's mind when he described Asian courts and Christian worship at the antipodes (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Marcello Fogolino, *Adorazione dei Magi* (c. 1515)—Musei Civici di Vicenza, Palazzo Chiericati

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