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# Images of India through the Eyes of Filippo Sassetti, a Florentine Humanist Merchant in the 16th Century

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## ABSTRACT

Two lines of influence characterise Portugal in the 16th century, one related to overseas travel and the other connected to the implanting of a humanist culture. It is with these two lines in mind that the present work is organized, its aim being the presentation of the way the Orient – particularly Goa and Cochim – assumes a determinate shape in the correspondence of Filippo Sassetti (Florence 1540 - Goa 1588), traveller-merchant-humanist and Florentine Renaissance man. In the thirty-two letters written in India over a five-year period (1583-1588) to family, friends and the Grand Duke of Tuscany, in which Sassetti relates his new and ‘strange’ reality, we can discern a course that, beginning with an initial state of disillusionment, leads him to interpret the differences he encounters between East and West in light of his knowledge of classical antiquity.

*É tendo em conta duas componentes que caracterizam o século XVI, as viagens ultramarinas e a cultura humanista, que se organiza o presente trabalho cujo âmagô será o de acompanhar a estada no Oriente, precisamente em Goa e Cochim, de Filippo Sassetti, mercador-viajante-humanista nascido em Florença em 1540 e falecido em Goa em 1588. Nas 32 cartas enviadas da Índia ao longo de cinco anos (1583-1588) a familiares, amigos e ao grão-duque de Toscânia, Sassetti relata a nova e ‘estranha’ realidade através dum percurso que, após a desilusão inicial, o conduz a interpretar as diferenças encontradas entre o Oriente e o Ocidente à luz dos seus conhecimentos da antiguidade clássica.*

José Sebastião da Silva Dias, the Portuguese historian, has stressed that there were two lines of influence that characterised Portugal in the 16th century, one related to overseas travel and the other connected to the implanting of a humanist culture<sup>1</sup>. These two aspects framed Portuguese culture and the consciousness of its shapers, and in this sense, “the geographical discoveries assume a privileged dimension precisely because, in a certain sense, they represent a continuity with the past, while, in another, representing an eclipsing of the values of antiquity”<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, the Renaissance presents itself as “a complex transitivity composed of both continuity and discontinuity with the past,”<sup>3</sup>

thus expressing “the first cultural and social break produced in the passage from the Middle Ages to the Modern Age”<sup>4</sup>.

The voyages of this period reach beyond the old world, open up unlimited horizons and echo within the humanist mentality, strengthening the conviction in man’s capacity to exceed the older values, so often held to be absolute.

It is with these two lines in mind that the present work is organized, its aim being to present the way in which the Orient – particularly Eastern India, Goa and Cochin – assumes a determinate shape in the correspondence, from the last quarter of the 16th century, of Filippo Sassetti, traveller-merchant-humanist and Italian Renaissance man. The objective of these pages is to accompany Filippo Sassetti during his travels through the Orient, a journey through time and space, in search of an alterity engraved in the geographic and anthropological landscape of unknown worlds<sup>5</sup>.

The impact that the success of the events on the Iberian peninsula had on Italy was remarkable, as is demonstrated by the number of texts produced in the last decade of the 15th century<sup>6</sup>. These texts, directed towards the general public, had “the merit of arousing sensitivity and great curiosity towards the West Indies, an absolute novelty, and towards the East Indies, which, in a mythical form, were already part of European culture”<sup>7</sup>.

Nevertheless, it was with the voyage of Vasco da Gama in 1498 that the maritime encounter between East and West resulted in a new relationship of power between man and the sea and a genuine confrontation with another reality, about which there had already been gathered a series of notions from a range of journeys, both real and fantastic, dating from the Middle Ages. It is enough to mention the vast diffusion of the Prester John legend, about the sovereign of a fabulous Nestorian kingdom, which during the Middle Ages was thought to be located in Central Asia and after the 14th century was located in Ethiopia. Long before the Portuguese discovery of a maritime route to India, merchants and missionaries produced descriptions of those far away lands where the much-desired spices were to be found.

We cannot forget to mention the success, on the verge of the 13th century, of the narrative of Marco Polo, the Venetian merchant whose fascinating travel book would be read by Portuguese navigators. Years later, in the first decades of the 14th century, the *Itinerarium* of the monk Odorico da Pordenone captured the attention of all those interested in far off places; besides spreading the desire to share the Christian faith, da Pordenone, a Franciscan missionary, revealed himself to be a curious and attentive observer. In addition to these works we must also mention the travel book by John Mandeville (c. 1356), which also had an impact on the imagination of this period. We must also bear in mind the report of the long journey made by the Venetian merchant Niccolò de’ Conti in the Orient between 1415 and 1439 and dictated to Poggio Bracciolini. All of these texts “performed the function of recording and organizing the medieval imagination”<sup>8</sup>.

But if it is true that the desire to learn about the Orient traverses the European imagination, it is also true that the success of the expedition made it possible for travel to the Orient to become more or less constant; and a series of texts spread throughout Europe, providing increasingly detailed information about new places, habits, fruits, plants and people. It is not possible for us to discuss at length the so-called 'literature of discovery' composed of a heterogeneous set of documents, though we must briefly outline the range of these testimonials to be able to sketch the cultural horizon of the traveller – in our case, Filippo Sassetti. Any traveller, on writing about what he has seen, witnesses and selects what is worthy of representation and description, basing this on his interests, temperament, education and even on his capacities for observation and expression<sup>9</sup>. His experiences determine his writing, and thus on choosing to analyse the letters of Filippo Sassetti we must bear in mind the course of events and involvements that framed his existence.

Firstly, we must stress that at the end of the 15th century we can find a significant Italian community in Lisbon. Its members were well established in Portuguese society and participated actively in the most lucrative business dealings, such as the sugar industry and the slave trade, under the protection of the Portuguese monarch. In Lisbon, these Italian merchants witnessed the preparations for the voyage of Vasco da Gama, thus experiencing what would come to be a great change in the commercial routes of the period. It is from this point on that the Italians residing in Lisbon, particularly the Florentines, would become the spokesmen for the novelties of the new world, serving not just their commercial interests but also seeking to provide information about the characteristics of these new places.

It is no surprise, then, that the return voyage of Vasco da Gama was awaited with considerable impatience. Immediately following the return of Vasco da Gama's fleet in 1499, the Florentine merchant Girolamo Sernigi sent two letters from Lisbon on 10 July and 28 August 1499 with information about the novelties of the Orient. Despite not having participated directly in the expedition but having witnessed the return of the armada, Sernigi managed in his letters to render, to a certain extent, "an accurate image (but not for that true), suggestive and useful, of the recently discovered Oriental world"<sup>10</sup>.

But it is not just in relation to the voyage of Vasco da Gama that we encounter this type of report. In 1500, one of the crew members of the expedition led by Pedro Álvares Cabral wrote a report of the trip known as the *Relação do Piloto Anónimo*; and in 1502 the second voyage of Vasco da Gama was recorded by the scribe of one of the ships, Tomé Lopes, in his *Navegação às Índias Orientais*.

In addition to Sernigi's two letters and the two reports mentioned above, a significant corpus of travel texts, produced by Italian and Portuguese travellers and merchants regarding the New World and India, was collected in Fracanzio de Montalboddo's *Paesi Nuovamente Retrovati et novo Mondo da Alberico Vesputio Florentino Intitulato*, printed in Vicenza in 1507. The main intention behind this work was to describe the experiences of the travellers. The success of this volume was surprising: it was reprinted five times, three times in Milan and twice in Venice, in the first two decades of the 16th cen-

ture. Various sources of information thus circulated, in manuscript and printed form, in Italian political and mercantile circles, creating both great expectations and great concerns.

The Italian interest in and attention to Portuguese discoveries are also revealed in the choice of texts that constitute another 16th-century volume, *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, by Giovan Battista Ramusio<sup>11</sup>. Published in Venice in 1550<sup>12</sup>, this volume includes Portuguese texts previously unpublished, such as *O Livro das Cousas da Índia*<sup>13</sup>, by Duarte Barbosa. Having embarked for India in 1500 in the armada of P. Álvares Cabral, Barbosa worked as a scribe in Cananor and wrote his text between 1511 and 1516. Barbosa's work and the *Suma Oriental*, written by Tomé Pires in Malaca between 1511 and 1515, can be considered the first works on the geography of India, and they were also "the first two discursive elements that offer Portuguese culture a systematic description of the Orient"<sup>14</sup>.

Some years later, news from these lands began to flood in, sent by Piero Strozzi, Giovanni da Empoli, Raffaello Galli, Francesco Corbinelli, Andrea Corsali – Florentine traveller-merchant-humanists, the humanist and mercantile culture that shaped them having privileged travel and discovery.

Published by Giovan Battista Ramusio, the two letters from Andrea Corsali<sup>15</sup> – the first written in Cochin in January of 1516 to Giuliano de' Medici, the second also written in Cochin to Lorenzo de' Medici and completed in January of 1518 – reveal to us an atypical merchant, much as we will see, years later and exploring the same spaces, in the figure of his fellow Italian, Filippo Sassetti. Without wanting to hazard a risky comparison between these two Florentine merchants, I shall limit myself to underlining a few elements which we shall again find, in some form, in Filippo Sassetti almost seven decades later. They have in common two particular factors: proximity to the Medici family and extensive erudition in the areas of geography, astronomy and cosmography. In both cases there is relatively little information available on their commercial success. In the writings of Andrea Corsali there is a clear concern to compare his own thoughts with those of the ancients, a fact which led him to coordinate "the old names that Ptolemy gave with the modern ones we have today"<sup>16</sup>. Andrea Corsali travelled with an astrolabe to correct with his own experience any possible errors handed down from antiquity. He demonstrated a typically humanist attitude, with a fresh view of old books, the framework of the old for the knowledge of the present. Yet, as Formisano notes<sup>17</sup>, we should not forget that even in the 15th century Corsali's education was still intrinsically linked to a pragmatic and mercantile type of humanism, as well as to the mercantile epistolary tradition.

In Milan in 1510, the *Itinerarium* by the Bolognese Ludovico Varthema was published. Having set sail in Venice for Alexandria, Varthema navigated throughout the Indian Ocean before returning to Europe. The twelve editions of the work in the first half of the 16th century confirm the strong curiosity these travels awakened. India was frankly the centre of attention, as it was, naturally, in Portugal as well, as attested to by the work

of the printer of German origin known as Valentim Fernandes. Fernandes was responsible for the printing of Marco Polo's *Travels* and for the travels of Niccoló de' Conti in 1502<sup>18</sup>, two years after the return of Vasco da Gama.

Despite the succinctness of this account of the texts written on the Orient, the survey suffices to demonstrate Aristotle's maxim – "All men desire by nature to know."<sup>19</sup>

Reality and fantasy had walked hand in hand; to the spices which had already been tasted, were added fantastic legends about the existence of strange precious stones, fine fabrics and other wonders coming from a world of fable. The time had come, however, when it was possible to verify and, above all, to experiment:

Never would our old ancestors, or those who went before them, have believed that a time could come when our West would be known in the Orient and in India the way it is now. Because the writers who spoke of those parts wrote so many fables about them that it seemed impossible to all for the West to navigate in India's lands and waters. [...] And since experience is the mother of all things, from her we learn the radical truth<sup>20</sup>.

The analysis and criticism of man, his desire to see in order to believe, to alter and, in the end, to overcome, characterise the attitude of humanism that opened paths to new ways of acting and thinking, based on the vigorous realism of Aristotle, especially Aristotle the naturalist<sup>21</sup>. Our brief overview of some of the fundamental aspects of the Renaissance reveals its basis to consist of two main principles: man as an essential subject and object and a new interpretation of the Greco-Latin heritage. A classicism was revisited, never opposed to religious doctrine, attentive to reality and its interpreter. Take the development of nautical cartography, shipbuilding, astronomy, botany, pharmacopoeia, the explanation of natural phenomena – in other words, all of the areas directly connected with human experience. These scholars, navigators, merchants and students of science were stimulated by the new spaces as well as by knowledge of the ancients.

It can be argued that Filippo Sassetti embodies what the Portuguese historian Luís Filipe Barreto considers to be a particular trait of the Renaissance:

the complexity of an unstable relationship between the old and the new, the game of the survival and metamorphoses of the currents and fragments gathered up in a syncretic discursive logic made of dominating and dominated levels and affiliations<sup>22</sup>.

It is in fact within that logic of confrontation between the old and the new 'seen and experienced' that we shall approach the letters Sassetti sent to Florence during his five-year stay in Goa and Cochin.

Though descended from a family with a strong mercantile tradition, Filippo Sassetti, born in Florence in 1540, was from very early on an avid follower of humanist culture. The work by Giovan Battista Ramusio circulated within the family, and Filippo's father, Giovambattista Sassetti, had dedicated to his sons, Filippo and Francesco, a transcription of *Discorso sopra il crescere del Nilo*, by G.B. Ramusio to Hieronimo Fracastoro<sup>23</sup>. Economic difficulties led Filippo's father to sell the family estate in 1545 to the wealthy Capponi family, owners of a successful trading house with subsidiary offices in Lisbon,

among other places. To earn a living, Filippo Sassetti entered the mercantile world as a clerk, though his interests inclined steadily towards philology and the classical languages, as well as geography, astronomy and botany.

In 1568 Sassetti enrolled in the University of Pisa and under the guidance of the illustrious Pier Vettori began to study classical philology, Greek and Latin. At the university, he established deep and lasting friendships with Francesco Buonamici, Giovambattista Strozzi, Francesco Valori and Francesco Bonciani, who, years later, would become the recipient of Sassetti's letters from Lisbon and India. In Florence, in 1573, Sassetti wrote "Lezione sulle imprese" and two years later entered the *Accademia degli Alterati*<sup>24</sup> under the name of *Assetato*. With an in-depth knowledge of Aristotle, he wrote a review of a work by Alessandro Piccolomini on the *Poetics*, a work he also began to translate and to which he added a commentary. He participated in the literary controversy of the time by writing "Difesa di Dante" and "Discorso contro l'Ariosto". In 1577 he left the University of Pisa and returned to merchant activities, writing "Discorso sul Commercio fra Toscani e Levantini"<sup>25</sup>.

In 1578 Sassetti left for the Iberian Peninsula and, after a brief stay in Madrid, in October of that year, settled in Lisbon to devote himself to mercantile activity. The choice of the Portuguese capital must not have been a coincidence, given that 1576 saw the beginning of a campaign – with the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Francesco I, as principal stockholder – whose main objective was exporting pepper and other goods from Portugal to Tuscany<sup>26</sup>.

We should also mention that from 1570 onwards the King of Portugal, D. Sebastião, was no longer capable of bearing the sole financial burden of arming ships bound for India each year and sustaining the costs of maintaining the Portuguese fortifications. Therefore, in addition to imposing a tax on pepper and other goods, he decided to liberalise the spice trade by drawing up the *Regimento do Trato da Pimenta*<sup>27</sup>. Though the provisions of the *Regimento* applied exclusively to Portuguese merchants, it was not difficult to get around them by offering the king a good deal, particularly if this included advance payments in currency<sup>28</sup>.

Filippo Sassetti worked in Lisbon from October of 1578 to April of 1582, acquiring considerable experience and a satisfactory work contract allowing him to leave for India with certainty as to his future<sup>29</sup>. His stay in Lisbon was not altogether positive and can be summed up in the revealing words written by Sassetti himself to his friend Francesco Bonciani in a letter sent from Lisbon on 19 February 1579:

the king (D. Sebastião) died; the army lost; a new state, new conditions; changes in all areas of business; the disappearance of all projects; [...] to all this is added loneliness and the absence of conversation [...]. If I had not had Plautus and the stories of these oriental travels and discoveries [...] and the use of my astrolabe night and day, I would already have died<sup>30</sup>.

This frame of mind explains his desire to leave for India. In the years he spent in Lisbon, Filippo Sassetti improved his knowledge of geography, astronomy and botany<sup>31</sup>.

Sassetti's first attempt to reach India, in April 1582, did not go as expected and, six months into the voyage, having reached the dead calm coasts of Brazil, a return to Lisbon was inevitable. He repeated the attempt a year later, and, leaving Lisbon on 8 April 1583, he reached Cochin on the eighth of November of that year. From his arrival in Cochin to the year of his death in Goa in 1588, Filippo Sassetti wrote thirty-two letters, which he sent regularly to friends, family members and other illustrious figures of Florence<sup>32</sup>. These letters, all published, have been the object of various studies, focussing on both their literary and scientific merit<sup>33</sup>. The content of these letters covers a broad range of areas and disciplines, making an exhaustive treatment of these difficult.

It should be mentioned that the thirty-two letters from India reveal some characteristics of what can be classified as personal correspondence and some that fit the description of travel correspondence, yet they also contain elements that distinguish them from both of these categories.

But let us be more precise: the fact that correspondence from India to Italy passed through Portugal, carried by the armada that left the port of Cochin for Lisbon once a year between December and January, and that the correspondence arriving from the kingdom only arrived once a year as well, influenced the discursive structure of these letters – particularly in the dissonance that can be detected between the rapidity of events and the perception of a new reality on one hand and, on the other, the transmission of these impressions to those waiting in Europe.

It should also be borne in mind that these letters were written in Cochin and Goa during the period of Sassetti's commercial activity: "My location is in part in Goa, in part in Cochin and in part on the sea, for it is necessary to travel back and forth, visiting the places where the pepper is kept"<sup>34</sup>.

Sassetti's addressees also shape the choice of topics to be dealt with, all of them sharing a deep interest in cultural matters, especially in the fields of astronomy, geography, medicine and botany.

As happened with other men of his time, Filippo Sassetti was seized by an yearning for departure and did not fail to explain these feelings to his instructor, Pier Vettori, whom he told of an episode he had witnessed in Lisbon: a good family man, a dedicated father and husband, who, finding himself by chance down by the docks one morning when the ships were preparing to set sail for India, like Orlando overcome by his fury<sup>35</sup>, counted the ducats he had in his bag, sent word to his family for them not to expect him for dinner and climbed aboard one of the ships putting out to sea<sup>36</sup>.

Seduction is, undoubtedly, the most appropriate term for this calling and that which best translates this collective excitement, the dizziness that led thousands of people to risk their lives on their way to the Orient; and Filippo Sassetti had had contact in the Portuguese capital with the exotic trading goods arriving in large scale – spices, all types of precious stones, cotton fabrics so fine "they must be seen to be believed"; silk veils, mother-of-pearl and other "fancies of the sea"; indigo, porcelain<sup>37</sup>.

Besides all these, the capital of Portugal had also allowed Sassetti to witness the arrival of the most unusual assortment of peoples – Japanese, Chinese and Moors, amongst them<sup>38</sup>. The countless novelties he encountered awakened in him a natural curiosity, especially since he had read “a few short books on the novelties from India, Verzino (Brazil) and China; and while I read I build castles in the air from which better to see, touch and write”<sup>39</sup>. More incisive still was the confession made to Baccio Valori in a letter from 22 January 1586, written in Cochin. Sassetti’s words express his deepest desire: “From the first moment of my departure, I had the fantasy of rediscovering the *cinnamomo*, so as to identify all of the subtle qualities the ancients attributed to it”<sup>40</sup>. Along with the letter, he had sent to Baccio Valori a treatise on *cinnamomo* [cinnamon]. His main intentions were to confirm what he had read, verify his own ideas on the subject and, in general, do what had been impossible for him to do up to that point – namely, “to ally to commerce and pilgrimage in far off lands the acuity of science”<sup>41</sup>.

With regard to the descriptions of new lands and new peoples, of their habits and customs, it is possible to single out a path which, during Sassetti’s five-year stay in the Orient, moving between Goa and Cochin, culminates in his acceptance of profound differences between East and West. This was path which, beginning with an initial period of seduction, moves on to intermediate phases of disillusionment, understanding through comparison and, at last, acceptance; a path during which the element of surprise at facing the new world never left him.

Sassetti’s voyage to India lasted for seven long months, from 8 April to 8 November of 1583, and as he notes, “another fifteen days and we would have been in bad shape”<sup>42</sup>. The coast of Cochin had been sighted but they could not get ashore for lack of wind. Eight days aboard waiting to disembark allowed Sassetti to register his first impressions, not very positive, of the indigenous population, as he watched the natives come and go in little rowboats similar to cooking shells, bringing betel leaves, “horn-shaped figs”<sup>43</sup> and *lanhas*<sup>44</sup>.

Filippo Sassetti was thus faced with a multifaceted reality difficult for him to understand, despite all of his humanist learning. At first, he used simple descriptive formulas. He lost no time in bringing his family and friends up to date, taking advantage of the return voyage to Portugal: between December of 1583 and February of 1584 he sent seven letters to Florence with news about India. He sent two letters to his sister Maria and one each to Francesco Valori, Baccio Valori, Pietro Spina, Francesco de’ Medici and Ferdinando de’ Medici.

From his first letter, the pleasure Sassetti took in communicating what he saw with the casualness of one not burdened by obligation is apparent. It is evident in the relaxed tone of one who, despite witnessing strange situations and events, does not yet feel the duty of relating original sights, new discoveries, the first contact with this world the Portuguese unveiled by sea, in search of Christians and spices, using Christianity as a “powerful device of cultural translation”<sup>45</sup>. As Luciana Stegagno Picchio notes, there is a marked difference between the “insider’s view of the Portuguese who acted as protag-

onists in the overseas adventures and the outsider's view of the Italians who witnessed and related the events"<sup>46</sup>.

In some situations, we encounter short descriptions of habits, customs and superstitions already crystallised, to a certain extent, in the narratives of the 16th century. Sassetti claims that it would be superfluous to tell them again<sup>47</sup>, given the existence of details amply documented in the narrative of André Thevet, which he himself had read in Lisbon<sup>48</sup>. Despite containing some information on new places, however, a certain disillusionment, mixed with an inevitable sense of wonder, runs through the letters dating from December 1583 and January 1584. The wonder of seeing on land a whole display of new things, including plants, animals and men, and the disillusionment at witnessing the miserable condition of the village where they had landed, where the people, including the king, walked around naked, "clothed by the greatest tailor in the world, Our Lord"<sup>49</sup>, the houses like pigsties, with low ceilings<sup>50</sup> and roofs made of palm leaves. Sassetti relates the habits and customs of different social groups: among the gentiles, the Brahmans had good customs inscribed in their laws but their observance of these did not always reflect this; they did not kill and married only once, yet the women whose husbands had died would take their own lives, allowing themselves to be burned alive in the fires of the *sati*. Our Florentine merchant claims that all of them are hagglers and swindlers, and are "lazy as fleas"; they shout at each other, cheat and fight. They follow the doctrine of Pythagoras, eating no living or sentient being, out of a belief in metempsychosis<sup>51</sup>.

Sassetti also claims that there are other natural gentiles who eat everything and whose women can satisfy their appetites when and where they choose. The royal militia, he writes, was amazing, composed of terrible men, naked and black, with dishevelled hair and strange movements, with weapons, swords, shields, spears, bows and arrows and arquebuses. In sum, he witnessed a multitude of customs, encompassing both religious practices, impossible to grasp due to the existence of diverse sects, and scientific ones, these too numerous and confusing.

Sassetti revealed himself to be an attentive observer, capable of pursuing and understanding difference, gifted with a power of quickly and concisely grasping diversity and establishing connections. He compares the attitude of the gentiles to that of the ancients, as the gentiles wrote "on wild palm leaves that are flat and hard", an ancient habit recorded in the third and sixth cantos of Virgil's *Aeneid*, where the responses of Apollo's oracle were written on leaves called *olle*, perhaps a corruption of the ancient *folia*<sup>52</sup>.

After two months of residence in Cochin, Sassetti had already realized that the differences with the West were so striking that he could not cease to "wonder at the wonderful"<sup>53</sup>. Profound differences, inevitable for those who have travelled so far, experienced, however, in the "tasting of the sweetness of mutation", with an awareness that "if one had the time and availability to study each thing carefully, it would be an infinite delight, and possible to find relics of the customs of the ancients spread throughout the Orient"<sup>54</sup>.

Sassetti plunged deeply into Indian reality in search of a cultural confrontation, attempting to interpret the signs surrounding him in a tireless effort to decode them in light of his knowledge of classical antiquity. The ancients were always present to him, in his continuous references to Aristotle, Avicenna, Galen, Lucretius, Pliny, Herodotus, Thales, Pythagoras, Empedocles and Ptolemy; and constant too was the comparison between what he knew and what, at last, he saw and experienced.

In a group of eight letters written between January and February of 1585<sup>55</sup>, a year after his arrival, Sassetti's business dealings remain in the background, while the focus lies on his perception of a culture – Indian culture – which appears to be entirely disconnected from the Western world. However, the length of his stay in this culture and his careful sifting through of its phenomena enabled him to identify the ancient links between the two civilizations. Pier Vettori, with whom he could converse on religion, philosophy and classical languages, was clearly the right person for such a dialogue. To his former instructor, Sassetti narrates his forced commercial pilgrimages between the “unfortunate” Cochin and Goa, “as large as Pisa”, during which he discovered the Malabar coast connecting the two cities. Ashore at a Portuguese fortification called Bazzallir, Sassetti noticed the presence of a fantastic temple with two chapels. At the doorway of one of the chapels stood two statues, one on the left and one on the right. The statue on the right had seven arms: four arms on the right side that split off at the elbow into four branches and three arms on the right that branched out in the same manner. Sassetti seeks to render the description of these statues in minute detail. Thus, as he tells us, each hand held something: a cobra, an axe, staff; in one of the left hands, a hammer. The statue on the left had six arms that branched off three ways from the elbow. Filippo Sassetti realized that such a large number of symbols must contain profound meanings and wrote, “I seem to remember the Greeks also represented Apollo with additional arms [...]”<sup>56</sup>.

Sassetti's descriptions of the people of the Orient had gained in detail. For the Brahmans, “already mentioned by Pliny”, he attempts to discover a Western equivalent, and, analysing the origin of the name (*bra*, Deus; *mene*, specular), establishes an analogy with Western theologians.

The reflections on a new language, which until then had not been described by travelers, represent one of the central objectives of Sassetti, who describes it as “an agreeable, attractive sounding language”, composed of fifty-three elements. A language, therefore, more expressive than the European ones, which possess less than half this number. A language, however, difficult to articulate, due, according to Sassetti, to the temperature of the tongue and to the dryness of the mouth, which the locals maintain by constantly chewing *betel* mixed with areca (*avellana indica*) and a type of chalk. Yet this population suffered from the same ill as the rest of the world – namely, that the language of science was completely different, and required six years to learn.

Sassetti elaborated on the subject a year later, in a letter to Bernardo Davanzati<sup>57</sup>, written in Cochin on 22 January 1586, where he claimed that the language of science was Sanskrit, an ancient language, “well articulated”, which they learn as we (meaning Euro-

peans) learn Greek and Latin, adding that the current language had much in common with the ancient one. But our merchant presents other arguments as well, noting that there are words Italian and Sanskrit have in common, among them the numbers 6, 7, 8, 9, and the words *Dio* and *serpe*. Despite not going beyond the lexical dimension, this acute observation reveals the relationship between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin, exposing once again the confrontation recorded by Pliny and Herodotus between the Brahmins and their doctors, as the philosophers call them.

During his years spent in India, Sassetti did not confine himself to the circle of Europeans who lived and worked there, largely in Goa, because he felt he should have arrived in India at a younger age to be able to return with some real knowledge: “I should have come here at eighteen to take some knowledge of these beautiful things back with me”<sup>58</sup>. Thus the numerous queries he addressed to gentiles provoked surprise, as they were not used to being questioned in this manner.

The eleven letters sent after two years spent in India<sup>59</sup>, written between December 1585 and February 1586, continue to be full of information that completes and in some cases deepens observations sent earlier. There is, for instance, a noticeable advance in his comparison and experimentation with the knowledge of the ancients. To Pietro Spina, a Maltese knight used to the sea, Sassetti sent a letter wholly devoted to the movements of the tides and the winds and to detailed geographical descriptions. Ptolemy, whose *Geography* Sassetti knew well<sup>60</sup>, is examined, as his claims substantiate two famous Dutch geographers and cartographers, friends and (supposedly) correspondents of Sassetti, Gerhard Kremer (known as Mercator) and Abraham Ortelius. The former, writes Sassetti, wishes to “save” Ptolemy’s authority; the latter, starting from Ptolemaic precepts, follows the modern relationships that emerge on the Indian Ocean, the Comorin Cape and in Malacca<sup>61</sup>.

Sassetti was not prepared for the seasonal cycle he encountered in the Orient, since “the old poets did not know of this, they left no writings on the matter; I could not have guessed”<sup>62</sup> – and this, despite Pliny having noted, in relation to Taprobane, that no navigation was done from the solstice to the October equinox “as it was winter on that sea”<sup>63</sup>. But our merchant witnessed only three seasons: winter, the season of the land-born winds, and summer. The transition from summer to winter occurred rapidly, with winds, lightning, thunder and rain, as if the world desired its end. So unpredictable and violent was the arrival of winter that, even though it was the custom for Portuguese and Indian servants to sleep in the street or squares during summer, a twenty-year-old Portuguese boy was awakened at four in the morning by a violent storm, stood up and tried to get inside, but as soon as he reached the door fell over dead<sup>64</sup>. Such a testimony reinforces other sources of information, and Sassetti frequently has recourse to such a strategy, as when he writes that winter is followed by a season of night and morning winds so cold that the Indians would wear long shirts made of silk or other fabrics filled with cotton, which they would keep on until noon, when the warmer sea breezes would start to blow. According to Sassetti, the sun and the heat would make the summer very disagreeable, particularly in Goa<sup>65</sup>.

The botanical information Sassetti provides is unceasing, due to the large number of medicinal herbs he discovered and considered wonderful, some of which he tried. In fact, in addition to having requested the collaboration of a gentile doctor for help in this area, he had bought a garden in Goa, where he intended to plant hundreds of these plants<sup>66</sup>. According to Sassetti, Portuguese and *mestiço* apothecaries showed no interest in furthering their knowledge of botanical remedies, and the gentile doctors, “whose science is completely empirical”<sup>67</sup>, knew a great deal but were extremely guarded with what they knew, providing no information to outsiders. It is important to mention, however, that this knowledge was so important to Sassetti that, whenever possible, he would send seeds to the Grand Duke and to his friends. On 6 January 1587 he sent to Baccio Valori his “discourse on *cinnamomo*” along with some samples of the plant. In this text, he proposes to discover whether the cinnamon that grows on the island of Ceylon is the same as the *cinnamomo* mentioned by the ancients, including Pliny, Herodotus, Dioscorides, Gallienus and Ptolemy. This is an erudite text in which Sassetti demonstrates familiarity with “modern” authors as well the ancients, including Garcia da Horta<sup>68</sup> and Cristovão da Costa<sup>69</sup>, from whom he received the attitude, “More than knowing, it is a question of seeing, of reading the world with your senses: with taste, smell, sight and hearing”<sup>70</sup>.

The last two letters from January 1588 were sent to Baccio Valori and Lorenzo Giacomini, and bear news of the far-off China, where Sassetti probably would have travelled had death not surprised him in Goa on 3 September 1588. As we have shown, Filippo Sassetti was a merchant/traveller constantly concerned with unearthing ‘memories of antiquity’ to use in decoding the present. A traveller immersed in the humanist culture, for whom the past functions as a key to perceiving the present: his stay in India.

Finally, we should recall that Filippo Sassetti was the author of a vast correspondence that includes 126 letters written in various countries and which remained incomprehensibly forgotten until the first half of the 18th century when, in volume II of “Florentine Prose”, thirty-four of his letters appeared. The complete *corpus* of Sassetti’s letters was only published in 1970 by V. Bramanti in a work entitled *Lettere da vari paesi*. Prior to this, starting in the first half of the 19th century, only selections of the letters of this merchant/traveller had been published, and only in Italian. Filippo Sassetti: this 16th-century cultivator of humanism, this ‘European’ who lived in and experienced other places and other worlds, the Asian worlds.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> J. da Silva Dias, *Portugal e a cultura europeia (séculos XVI a XVIII)*, Porto 2006.
- <sup>2</sup> C. Radulet, *Tipologia e significado da documentação italiana sobre os Descobrimientos Portugueses*, in Id., *Os Descobrimientos Portugueses e a Itália*, Lisbon 1991, p. 39.
- <sup>3</sup> L. Barreto, *O Tratado da Esfera de D. João de Castro*, in “Cultura História e Filosofia”, 1984, 3, pp. 267.
- <sup>4</sup> A. von Martin, *Sociologia del Renacimiento*, México 1966, p. 15.
- <sup>5</sup> L. Formisano, *Aspetti della cultura di Andrea Corsali*, in “Miscellanea storica della Valdelsa”, 1993, 98, 3, p. 217.

- <sup>6</sup> We can mention, for example, *La lettera dell'isole che a trovato il re di Spagna*, ed. G. Dati, in Rome in 1493.
- <sup>7</sup> Radulet, *Tipologia* cit., p. 41.
- <sup>8</sup> L. Stegagno Picchio, *A Literatura de viagens e o diálogo italo-português*, in "Mare Liberum", 1991, 2, p. 92.
- <sup>9</sup> L. Olschki, *Storia letteraria delle scoperte geografiche*, Florence 1937, p. 5.
- <sup>10</sup> C. Radulet, *Identificação e Diferenciação na primeira visão do Oriente nos textos de Álvaro Velho, Girolamo Sernigi, Guido di Tommaso Detti e Piloto Anónimo*, in C. Radulet, *Tipologia* cit., p 81.
- <sup>11</sup> A humanist in the deepest sense of the word, Giovan Battista Ramusio was in contact with foreign and Italian Renaissance minds; he was thus able to bring together the best texts on travel and geography. On the structure of Ramusio's work, see, among others, L. Stegagno Picchio, *Portugal e Portugueses no Livro das "Navigazioni" de G.B. Ramusio*, Lisbon 1984.
- <sup>12</sup> G. Ramusio, *Delle Navigazioni et Viaggi nel qual si contiene La Descrittione dell'Africa, et del paese del Prete Ianni, com uarii uiaggi, dal mar Rosso a Calicut, et insin all'isole Molucche, dove nascono le Spetierie, Et la Navigazioni attorno il mondo*, Venice 1550.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, fls.310v.-348v. (Italian translation by Ramusio, *Libro di Odoardo Barbessa Portoghese*)
- <sup>14</sup> L. Barreto, *Descobrimentos e Renascimento*, Lisbon 1983, p. 143.
- <sup>15</sup> Ramusio, *Delle Navigazioni* cit., fls.192v.-203v. On the figure of Andrea Corsali I recommend the studies by Renato Lefevre, Ilaria Luzzana Caraci and Luciano Formisano.
- <sup>16</sup> I. Caraci (ed.), *Scopritori e viaggiatori del Cinquecento e del Seicento*, Milan - Naples 1991, vol. 40, t. 1, p. 450.
- <sup>17</sup> Formisano, *Aspetti della cultura di Andrea Corsali* cit., p. 218.
- <sup>18</sup> The Portuguese edition, *Ho Livro de Nicolao Veneto escripto por Pogio florentim Bracciolini*, was translated from the Latin by the editor, V. Fernandes.
- <sup>19</sup> Aristóteles, *Metafisica*, A, 1.
- <sup>20</sup> D. Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo de situ orbis*, livro IV, cap. I.
- <sup>21</sup> Barreto, *Descobrimentos* cit., pp. 33-34.
- <sup>22</sup> Id., *O Tratado da Esfera de D. João de Castro*, cit., p. 228.
- <sup>23</sup> Ramusio, *Delle Navigazioni* cit., fls. 281-284.
- <sup>24</sup> The *Accademia degli Alterati* was founded in Florence in 1568; Giovanbattista Strozzi was one of its founders.
- <sup>25</sup> "Archivio Storico Italiano", Appendix IX, 1853.
- <sup>26</sup> G. Canestrini, *Intorno alle relazioni commerciali de' Fiorentini co' Portoghesi avanti e dopo la scoperta del Capo di Buona Speranza*, "Archivio Storico Italiano", Appendix tomo III, 1846, p. 107.
- <sup>27</sup> BNL (Biblioteca Nacional Lisboa), *Regimento do trato da pimenta*, Fundo Geral, n. 801.
- <sup>28</sup> E. Albéri, *Relazioni degli Ambasciatori Veneti al Senato*, vol. V, 1861, p. 166.
- <sup>29</sup> Filippo Sassetti was hired by Giovan Battista Rovellasco, a Milanese residing in Lisbon, for whom Sassetti was to purchase pepper in Cochín.
- <sup>30</sup> "El re mori; perdessi l'esercito; mutossi nuovo stato, nuove condizioni; alterazione d'ogni negozio; svanimento d'ogni disegno; [...] e a tutte queste s'aggiunge poi la solitudine e nessuna conversazione [...] che se non fusse stato Plauto e un poco di storiaccia di queste navicazioni e discoprimenti orientali, [...] mettendo in uso il mio astrolabio e di giorno e di notte, io me n'ero a quest'ora venuto in lettera da voi", *Lettere edite e inedite di Filippo Sassetti* by Ettore Marcucci, Florence 1855, p. 130
- <sup>31</sup> It should be noted that an interest in botany was highly developed in Florence in that period. The Grand Dukes of Tuscany themselves possessed considerable knowledge of the field. Cosimo I introduced various kinds of fruit trees and inaugurated the *Giardino dei Semplici* in Pisa, a botanical garden

- for the cultivation of medicinal plants; Francesco I supported the cultivation of rice and mulberry trees; Pier Vettori, Filippo Sassetti's instructor, wrote a treatise on the cultivation of olive trees in 1569, and it is this treatise that Sassetti had in mind when, in Lisbon, he observed that the olive trees were so badly treated that they only produced olives once every four years. Cf. Letter from Lisbon to Francesco Bonciani, 19 February 1579. *Lettere edite e inedite di Filippo Sassetti*, cit., p. 132.
- <sup>32</sup> For this work I have used the following edition: F. Sassetti, *Lettere dall'India (1583-1588)*, ed. A. Dei, Rome - Salerno 1995.
- <sup>33</sup> Among these can be counted the following important works: G. Costantini, *Filippo Sassetti geografo*, Trieste 1897; M. Rossi, *Un letterato e mercante del secolo XVI. Filippo Sassetti*, Città di Castello 1899; S. Ferrara, *Un mercante del secolo XVI. Storico difensore della 'Commedia' di Dante e Poeta. Filippo Sassetti.*, Novara 1906; M. Vallauri, *Medicina indiana e indologia nelle lettere del Sassetti*, "Atti dell'Accademia delle Scienze di Torino", 1950-1951, s. II, 85, pp. III-29; G. Caraci, *Introduzione al Sassetti epistografo. Indagini sulla cultura geografica del tardo Cinquecento*, Rome 1960; M. Milanese, *Filippo Sassetti*, Florence 1973; *Una giornata di studio su Filippo Sassetti nel quarto centenario della morte*, "Atti e memorie dell'Accademia toscana di Scienze e Lettere La Colombaria", Florence 1989; C. Sensi, *Ritocchi per Sassetti*, "Filologia e Critica", 1989, 14, pp. 233-253.
- <sup>34</sup> "La stanza mia è parte in Goa e parte qui in Coccino e parte in mare, chè bisogna andare di su e di giù, visitando questi luoghi dove la *pimenta* si raguna", letter sent by Filippo Sassetti to a Florentine friend, Michele Saladini, and written in Cochin, in December of 1585, *Lettere dall'India*, cit., p. 131.
- <sup>35</sup> Sassetti's reference in relating this episode is to *Orlando Furioso*, by Ludovico Ariosto.
- <sup>36</sup> Letter to Pier Vettori, written in Cochin on 27 January 1585, *Lettere dall'India* cit., p. 76.
- <sup>37</sup> Letter sent from Lisbon on 10 October 1578 to his friend Baccio Valori in Florence, *Lettere edite e inedite di Filippo Sassetti* cit., pp. 124-125.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126-127.
- <sup>39</sup> "qualche libretto sulle novità d'India, del Verzino e della China; e mentre che io le leggo, fo mille castellucci d'andare là a vedere e toccare e scrivere", letter from Lisbon to Florentine Francesco Bonciani. No date, but it appears to have been written towards the end of 1579. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- <sup>40</sup> "Io sono stato, dalla prima volta in qua che io m'imbarcai, in fantasia di ripescare il cinnamomo in maniera che le note attribuitegli dagli antichi, quanto sia per le proprie qualità, vi si riconoscano tutte", *Lettere dall'India* cit., p. 163.
- <sup>41</sup> *Orazione di Luigi Alamanni*, on the event of the death of Filippo Sassetti, *Lettere di Filippo Sassetti sopra i suoi viaggi nelle Indie Orientali dal 1578 al 1588*, ed. P. Viani, Reggio, 1844, pp. 1-16.
- <sup>42</sup> Letter to Francesco Valori from Cochin, December 1583, *Lettere dall'India* cit., p. 32.
- <sup>43</sup> This is Sassetti's description of the banana.
- <sup>44</sup> Unripe coconuts.
- <sup>45</sup> D. Curto, *Quadro da Presença Portuguesa no Oriente (Séculos XVI e XVII)*, in R. Perez (ed.), *Os Portugueses e o Oriente*, Lisbon 2006, p. 16.
- <sup>46</sup> Stegagno Picchio, *A literatura de viagens* cit., p. 89.
- <sup>47</sup> Letter to Pier Vettori from Cochin, 27 January 1585, *Lettere dall'India* cit., p. 86.
- <sup>48</sup> Probably a reference to André Thevet's *La cosmographie universelle*, Paris 1575.
- <sup>49</sup> "(...) tengono il maggior sarto del mondo che fa loro i panni: questi è Messer Domenedio (...)", letter to Francesco Valori, December 1583, *Lettere dall'India* cit., p. 35.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>51</sup> Letter to Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici, Cochin, January 1584, *Lettere dall'India* cit., p. 59.
- <sup>52</sup> Letter to Francesco de' Medici, Cochin 22 January 1584, *Lettere dall'India* cit., p. 52.

- <sup>53</sup> Letter to Baccio Valori, Cochin, 20 January 1584, *Lettere dall'India* cit., p. 43
- <sup>54</sup> “ (...) se si avesse comodità e tempo di poter vedere ogni cosa particolarmente, sarebbe un gusto infinito, e si ritroverebbero le reliquie sparse per tutto questo oriente d'ogni costume antico”, letter to Baccio Valori Cochin 27 January 1585, *Lettere dall'India* cit., p. 75.
- <sup>55</sup> A letter sent to Baccio Valori, Pier Vettori, Francesco Valori, Ferdinando de' Medici, to his sister Maria, and two letters sent to the Grand Duke Francesco de' Medici.
- <sup>56</sup> Letter to Pier Vettori, Cochin, 27 January 1585, *Lettere dall'India* cit., p.84.
- <sup>57</sup> A member of the *Accademia degli Alterati* named *Silente*. This learned merchant had translated Tacitus.
- <sup>58</sup> “Bisognerebbe essere venuto qua di diciotto anni per tornarsene con qualche cognizione di queste bellissime cose”, letter to Bernardo Davanzati Cochin 22 January 1586, *Lettere dall'India*, cit., p.180
- <sup>59</sup> Letters sent to his sister, Maria, and to Michele Saladini, Giovambattista Strozzi, Pietro Spina, Francesco Valori, Baccio Valori, Bernardo Davanzati, Lorenzo Canigiani, Alessandro Rinuccini, Francesco de' Medici, Ferdinando de' Medici.
- <sup>60</sup> In a letter sent from Lisbon to his friend Baccio Valori in March 1583, Sassetti mentions having found in Madrid a text by Ptolemy with commentary and annotations by Michele Villanova, *Lettere edite ed inedite di Filippo Sassetti* cit., p. 240
- <sup>61</sup> Letter to Pietro Spina, Cochin, 20 January 1585, *Lettere dall'India*, cit., p. 147. On this subject see M. Milanese, “Filippo Sassetti e la geografia del Cinquecento”, in *Una giornata di studio su Filippo Sassetti, nel quarto centenario della morte*, Florence 1989.
- <sup>62</sup> “Non seppero i poeti antichi questa cosa, però non la lasciarono scritta, né si poteva indovinarla”, letter to Giovanbattista Strozzi, Cochin, 1 January 1586, *Lettere dall'India* cit., p. 132.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- <sup>65</sup> Sassetti uses an adjective taken from Lucretius to denote the discomfort of the dust in Goa.
- <sup>66</sup> Letter to Baccio Valori, Cochin, 22 January 1586, *Lettere dall'India* cit., p. 160.
- <sup>67</sup> Letter to Francesco de' Medici, Cochin, 11 February 1585, *Lettere dall'India* cit., p. 111.
- <sup>68</sup> The work of the Portuguese doctor, *Colóquio das simples e drogas e coisas medicinais da India*, Goa 1563, had been translated in Venice in 1576.
- <sup>69</sup> *Tractado de las drogas, medicinas y plantas de las Indias orientales*, Burgos 1578.
- <sup>70</sup> A.A. Marques de Almeida, *A formação do discurso científico no Portugal das Descobertas entre fins do século XV e meados de Quinientos*, “Mare Liberum”, 1997, 13, p. 31.

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