

Unsheathing the Katana. The Long Fortune of the First Two Japanese Embassies in Italy: Rediscovery and Rereading between Continuity and Discontinuity (1873–1905)

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Abstract: At the end of the nineteenth century, Italy welcomed an official embassy sent by the government in Tokyo to make Japan more integrated into the new world scene it was entering. The cultural and political elites of the peninsula had the chance to discover, or rather rediscover, the charm of a world that had been lost over the centuries. This essay aims to reflect on the means and meanings of this late nineteenth-century encounter. Indeed, from this moment onwards, Japan increasingly became part of Italian mental horizons, in particular through the rereading and reuse of two precedents dating back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that saw the two countries dialogue and “discover” each other for the first time.

Keywords: Italy, Japan, Iwakura, Boncompagni, mikado

1. Introduction

When historians examine the relations between Italy and Japan in contemporary era, they inevitably focus on the political and ideological ties that bound the regimes of the two countries from the 1920s, culminating in the alliance during the Second World War.

The intention of strengthening this friendship led the two partners to organize frequent mutual visits between the countries. However, due to the highly ideological nature of the axis between Rome and Tokyo, the attention of the visiting delegations was focused on short-term objectives. Cultural interest almost never prevailed over political and propagandistic ends, with both interlocutors attentive to the needs of the present.

During this period, many prominent political figures travelled in both directions (Vagnini 2015). In 1928, for example, the minister plenipotentiary of

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Japan, Count Uchida, came to Milan at the end of his diplomatic mission in Paris.² In 1930, Imperial Prince Takamatsu travelled to Italy, accompanied by his wife.³ Finally, a few years later, in 1936, F. Ushizaka, procurator on behalf of the mayor of Tokyo Masao Yoshiyama, stayed in Milan with “l’incarico di studiare ed ispezionare l’andamento generale del lavoro nell’amministrazione municipale della vostra città”.⁴

The Italian press and society paid great attention to these occasions of encounter between the two countries. However, due to the duration of the visit and its cultural implications, the honeymoon of Prince Nobuhito Takamatsu and his wife Kikuko was the event that aroused the greatest interest. The *Corriere della Sera* described the sumptuous receptions and ceremonies during the imperial couple’s stay in Turin, Milan, Florence and Rome. It also reported on the curiosity of the public as they witnessed the unusual procession of Japanese princes passing through the Italian streets (*Corriere della Sera* 1930a, 1930b).

While it was undoubtedly an unusual event, it was certainly not unique or isolated. There are in fact several more or less recent precedents of ceremonial journeys made to the peninsula by delegations and delegates from Japan.

The first Japanese journey to Italy, the one closest in time to the imperial couple’s honeymoon, was made in 1873 by the minister plenipotentiary, Iwakura Tomomi. Before that, between 1585 and 1615, two other delegations had left the archipelago under the impetus of Catholic evangelization in the Far East. These embassies were one of the first tangible moments of cultural interaction between the European and Japanese worlds and were welcomed in Italy in an atmosphere of celebration and euphoria.

The journey of the young imperial couple can be seen as a piece in a complex puzzle. It was in fact the most recent trip that a delegation from Japan had made to Italy. There is, of course, no continuity—either in time or, above all, in meaning and purpose—between the various Japanese delegations that had crossed the Italian stage since the sixteenth century. However, the journeys of the various embassies over the course of more than three centuries can be used to tie up the threads of a fluctuating relationship between the peninsula and the archipelago.

Despite receiving great attention, the young imperial couple’s trip (in addition to the political and ideological closeness between Rome and Tokyo) was not enough to set in motion a process during the 1930s to rediscover and re-read a more or less distant past. In fact, neither the press nor the largest cultural forum giving a voice to Italian intellectuals, the *Nuova Antologia. Rivista di lettere scienze e arti*, took the trouble to examine the long relationship between the two partners.

² Archivio di Stato di Milano (from now on ASMi), Prefettura di Milano, Gabinetto, Carteggio fino al 1937 - Serie I, 742.

³ ASMi, Prefettura di Milano, Gabinetto, Carteggio fino al 1937 - Serie I, 742.

⁴ ASMi, Prefettura di Milano, Gabinetto, Carteggio fino al 1937 - Serie I, 742: “the task of studying and inspecting the general municipal administration work carried out in your city”.

All attention was instead polarized around the interests of the present. Indeed, if the more openly Catholic scientific journals—such as the *Gregorianum*—dealt with the theme of the *longue durée* of contacts between Italy and the Far East, they did so from a point of view totally in line with the regime's propaganda. For example, in his considerations on the evangelizing action of the Society of Jesus in China and Japan, the Jesuit Pasquale d'Elia placed the stress almost exclusively on the fact that the mission was an Italian initiative. In his articles on Matteo Ricci and Alessandro Valignano, the two Jesuits were the main focus of attention, while the consequences of their action provided but a blurred background to the narrative (D'Elia 1935, 121–30; 1940, 482–526).

In order to explain the reasons for such a specific interest in the historiography of the 1930s, it may be useful to refer to the theory of historicism, a conception of history which has its roots in the complex thought of Giovan Battista Vico (1688–1744). At the time of the above-mentioned Japanese visits to Italy, the greatest exponent of historicism in Italy was Benedetto Croce (1866–1952). In 1938, Croce published one of his most seminal books, *La storia come pensiero e come azione* (*History as Thought and Action*). In this book, the philosopher famously maintains that the only history that can exist is contemporary history, because all history is nothing but the manifestation of the interests of the present in which the historian lives: “perché, per remoti e remotissimi che sembrano cronologicamente i fatti che vi entrano, essa è, in realtà, storia sempre riferita al bisogno e alla situazione presente, nella quale quei fatti propagano le loro vibrazioni” (Croce 2002, 13).⁵ While Croce was by no means involved in the Fascist regime, this conception of history could resonate strongly with the cultural atmosphere of the time and be intertwined with representations of Italian history aimed at satisfying the political needs and objectives of the present. In this sense, the reference to Croce can provide a methodological starting point for an essay that, in the 2020s, aims to reread the events of the early modern age through the documentary lens offered by the first sources to reconsider them, between the 1870s and the first decade of the following century.

Indeed, it is as a result of sudden changes in Italian and Japanese society between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the voyages of 1585 and 1615 regained the limelight. The reasons that led an entire generation of journalists, intellectuals and politicians to deal with the events of that distant past once again have to be sought in the needs of their present. These interests have to be taken into consideration in order to understand the inevitable relationship of continuity and discontinuity in the double chronological jump examined in these pages.

However, before we get there, let us go over the Japanese delegations' journeys to Italy between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries and what they represented in the two different eras, namely, the one when they took place and the one when they were rediscovered and reused.

⁵ “because, however remote the facts may seem chronologically, in reality, history is always referred to the present needs and situation in which those facts propagate their vibrations”.

2. The two embassies of the modern age

Questi Principi Indiani hanno q.ta [questa] mattina nella sala Regia havuto il Concistoro publico levati al popolo da tutta la Corte, dalle guardie del Papa, et nel modo che si fa à gli altri Amb.ri [Ambasciatori] di Re [...] essendo essi trè, et il quarto rimasto all'alloggiamento infermo, cioè due nipoti del Re di Fiunga, uno chiamato Yto Don Mancio et l'altro Chiyva Don Miguel nipote del Re d'Arima et del Re d'Omura. Gli altri dui sono principal.mi [principalissimi] ss.ri [signori] nel Giapon di quel regno di Figta, uno di nome Nocauro Don Iulian, et l'altro Fara Don Martin. Ha orato per loro un P.re [Padre] Iesuita Portugheze, et essi sono comparsi in habiti Indiani, cioè con drappi d'oro a guisa di pacienze sopra vesti tessute di seta di varii colori a figura di diversi uccelli, con scimitarre al fianco stravaganti, et in testa cappelli di feltro mischio con piume bianche all'uso nostro.⁶

This is what the secretary of Pope Gregory XIII reported in March 1585 about his first meeting with the delegation of princes from Japan.

In this first image, the young Japanese delegates are placed at the edge of the scene. At the centre, the undisputed protagonists and narrators of the events were the Jesuits who accompanied them. Thus, a first interpretative problem is to understand the real dimension of these two modern-age journeys: on one hand their original meaning, and on the other the interests of the Italian society that welcomed them.

The two diplomatic initiatives that came to Europe from the archipelago should be seen in the political and cultural climate of the early modern era, when the birth of an increasingly connected world conditioned the actions of those European actors who claimed to be universal: the Philippine monarchy and the Counter-Reformation church (Broggio 2003, 249–89; 2004; 2013, 441–78; Visceglia 2013; Flynn, Giráldez, and Sobredo 2001; Clossey 2008; Tremml-Werner 2015, 192–99).

Two subjects with such a marked institutional asymmetry cannot be directly compared. A general parallel between these two actors, however, seems inevitable: indeed it is right to underline that both found their “Eldorado” in the Far East. They saw sixteenth-century Japanese society as the perfect context in which to assert their hegemonic models. The first, the Jesuits, opted for a spir-

⁶ Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Urb. Lat. 1053, Rome, 23 March 1585, ff. 138–39: “These Indian princes held their public consistory this morning in the royal hall in front of the people and the whole court in the manner of the king’s ambassadors. There were three of them, while the fourth remained in his quarters because he was ill: one is a nephew of the king of Fiunga, and is called Yto Don Mancio, the other is called Chiyva Don Miguel and is a nephew of the king of Arima and the king of Omura. The other two are noble lords of the kingdom of Figta in Japan, one named Nocauro Don Iulian, and the other Fara Don Martin. A Portuguese Jesuit spoke for them; they appeared in Indian dress, that is to say: in robes of multi-coloured silk with various birds painted on them and with gilt inserts. They wore extravagant scimitars on their hips, and hats on their heads with white feathers as we are accustomed to wear.”

itual conquest using the cross rather than the sword; the second, the Spanish, wanted to make Japan a bridgehead for their oceanic and imperialist ambitions. The archipelago was supposed to serve both as a port of call for their galleons on the long Pacific route crossings, and—above all—as an outpost for a (mainly dreamed-of) conquest of China (Boxer 1969; Sola 2012).

The hybridization of the hegemonic strategies of the two European players, with the Jesuits increasingly interested in the construction of a parastatal network and the Spaniards ready to exploit the contrasts existing between the Society and the other religious orders active in the East, led to an increasingly evident rivalry, which at the end of the 1580s resulted in ill-concealed hostility that ended up damaging both contenders (Broggio, Cantù, Fabre, and Romano 2007; Millán and Visceglia 2008, 26–31; Sola 2012, 23–39; Friedrich 2017; Corradi 2019; Tripepi 2021).

At the third vertex of this triangle were the political institutions of the Japanese archipelago. After an initial phase of fleeting opportunities for contact left to the initiative of Portuguese captains, the Jesuits were the first Europeans to settle permanently in Japan. From 1549, with the arrival of Francis Xavier, the Jesuit mission laid the foundations for the next half century of success (Boxer 1951; Elisonas 1991, 2008; Boscaro 2008; Correia 2018).

From the very first contacts, the Japanese institutions paid particular attention to the newcomers: in a period of great social unrest and a void of power since the end of the previous century, large sections of Japanese society looked to them with interest and sympathy. The weakest social classes were fascinated by the concepts of equality and personal freedom that traditional local religions did not contemplate. Moreover, in a period of violent wars and deprivation, the Christian concept of life beyond death was a reassurance in the face of conditions of misery and uncertainty. On the other hand, the so-called *daimyos*, the powerful territorial lords who gained possession of the voids left by the crumbling central power, considered the Jesuit fathers an opportunity to enrich themselves and their territories. It was in this climate that, from the 1550s until at least the second half of the 1580s, the Jesuits prospered and the religion spread throughout local society (Elisonas 2008; Bang 2015; Hesselink 2016; Wirbser 2017; Correia 2018; Tripepi 2021).

In the first 30 years of unexpected expansion for the Jesuit mission, the need for order and regulation had been overlooked. It was only in 1579, with the arrival of the visitor-general of the Indies, Alessandro Valignano, that the foundations on which the Jesuit missionary edifice rested were strengthened and stabilized (Moran 1993; Ross 1999; Luca 2005, 22–24; Tamburello, Üçerler, and Di Russo 2008).

Among the many operations carried out by the Jesuit from Abruzzo was the establishment of special seminaries, schools and colleges to create an indigenous clergy capable of actively integrating the work of the European missionaries. He also visited the great *daimyos* who were friends of Catholicism and it was from these meetings that the idea of a *Cerimoniale* for the brothers working in Japan was born. This operation was necessary so that they would be aware of

what behaviour and external manifestations Japanese society could expect from members of the religious hierarchy.

What Valignano did was formalize an evolution that had already started some time before. The text was therefore the ideological manifesto of the Society's actions in Japan and the first theorization of Jesuit syncretism. From now on, the fathers were advised to conform their external practices to the local Japanese religions: clothing, attitudes, even the architecture of the sacred places. In the Japanese minds, everything had to evoke the idea of respect paid to their religious authorities (Sanfilippo 1997; Catto 2011).

With the formulation of the theory of *adaptatio*, the Society completed on the doctrinal and theoretical level the evolutionary process that had already been underway for a decade on the political level. After these changes, in 1586, Valignano wrote to General Claudio Acquaviva in a state of despondency owing to criticism from inside and outside the order. The visitor's words, full of regret, show the difficulty of presenting the particular conditions present in Japan to the European world:

[...] poiché le cose che avvengono così lontano [...] sono tanto caratterizzate da circostanze così ignote e insolite, come quelle del Giappone, non si lasciano comprendere in fretta e bene come conviene, essendo questo punto così importante, di certo mi perdo d'animo non sapendo come posso ben chiarirlo e farlo ben capire (Boscaro 2008, 215).⁷

Valignano's answer to the sceptics and detractors of the Jesuit actions in the archipelago was a masterpiece of cunning. By sending a delegation of young Japanese princes to Europe, he would confront the old continent with the reification of a very precise narrative of Japan: the Japan presented by the delegation and the one recounted by the fathers in their letters should totally coincide. In this way, the European world see the successes and difficulties of the Jesuit evangelization in Japan for itself and realize that, far from being blameworthy, the policy of adaptation to the circumstances had been useful for the spread and establishment of the Catholic faith there.

It is known that crowds met the Japanese princes on their European journey in what Angelantonio Spagnoletti defined as "a phenomenon of collective hysteria that crossed the Iberian and Italian courts" (Spagnoletti 2018, 225–26). Everyone was involved, and the Society's propaganda move was—at least in the short term—extremely successful: from Madrid to Rome, passing through Florence, Venice, Mantua, Ferrara, Milan and Genoa, everyone participated actively and with genuine interest in the passage of this unusual procession.

The return of the embassy coincided with the beginning of a new political phase for the archipelago, however, cementing what had already begun at the

⁷ "[...] since things that happen so far away [...] are so characterized by unknown and unusual circumstances—like in Japan—they cannot be understood quickly or as well as they should be, and since this point is so important, of course I feel frustrated not knowing how I can clarify it and make it well understood."

end of the previous decade. Indeed, the 1580s saw the autonomist impulses coming from the endless galaxy of small and large local potentates be forcefully and steadily counteracted by the central political authorities (Hesselink 2016, 88–91, 97–102, 141–46; Correia 2018).

First Oda Nobunaga and then Toyotomi Hideyoshi succeeded in creating the basis for the definitive recentralization of political power. Despite starting under the best auspices for the Society, this new phase soon turned against the fathers. Supporting the independent positions of the southern *daimyos*, they were involved in the open clash that followed and were defeated and deprived of the position of advantage and privilege that had been their strength and fortune for almost half a century.

The Spaniards, on the other hand, took advantage of the new situation: uncompromising with the enemies of the new master of the Japanese political scene, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, they were seen as the perfect partner to make the country's economy flourish. The result was a profound split in the Catholic front, so much so that at the end of his reign, Philip II undertook an investigation campaign against the Society in order to discredit the fathers and limit their power and influence (Millán and Visceglia 2008, 26–31).

The immediate result was a great increase in the presence of the Franciscan order in the archipelago, which was closely linked to the Philippine monarchy. The Jesuits had to accept the change, despite the attempts of Valignano who, in 1585, had managed to obtain a bull from Pope Sixtus V granting them the exclusive right to evangelize Japan: a bull that was swiftly disregarded and cast aside by the development of events.⁸

The idea of a second embassy came from a Franciscan, Luis Sotelo. The aim of the trip was to create a diocese in northern Japan to flank that of Nagasaki, which had been a Jesuit monopoly for decades: Sotelo hoped to become bishop of this hypothetical new diocese. In order to satisfy his career goals, the Andalusian Franciscan reached an agreement with the *daimyo* of Oshu, in the north of the archipelago, exploiting his ambitions to become the official intermediary in the trade between Spain and Japan.

A pompous diplomatic mission to Madrid was organized in order to negotiate new routes that would also allow the Japanese to reach Europe on a yearly basis (León-Portilla 1981; Gil 1991, 384–425; Alvar 1995; Fernández Gómez 1999; Lee 2008; López-Vera 2013; Colomar Albajar and Lázaro de la Escosura 2013). The request was somewhat provocative: to accept it would have meant that the Spanish king, Philip III, who had succeeded his father, would have voluntarily relinquished his position of global commercial supremacy and hegemony. So, it

⁸ The archival documentation on this subject is both rich and explicit: Hideyoshi was aware of the hostilities within the Catholic front and decided to exploit them to his advantage. The growth of the Franciscan presence led to an increasing decline in the Society's importance. Even the bulls of Sixtus V were quickly disregarded and cancelled by his successors. *Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu*, Jap. Sin. 12 II, ff. 191v–192r, Gams (1957, 132) and Sorge (1991, 29).

was inevitable that the king was reluctant to grant an audience to the delegates, all the more so after *daimyo* Date Masamune's decision to send the embassy on board the first ocean-going ship built and piloted entirely by Japanese seafarers.

The arrival of the vessel in Mexico was seen as—almost—an explicit declaration of war: not only did the embassy require the Spanish to voluntarily renounce their hegemony, but even showed them that this hegemony could be broken at any moment, with the direct entry of the Japanese into the transoceanic routes.⁹

The initial dismay was followed by rigid closure dictated by fear, the main victim being Sotelo's careerist ambitions.¹⁰

Developed and pursued in a context that was strongly hostile to the embassy's intended objectives, the Franciscan friar's legation project foundered once and for all when he returned to the East: arrested and imprisoned in the Philippines, Sotelo managed to escape and paid a Chinese captain to take him back to Japan. However, the favourable political climate of appeasement, dialogue and confrontation with the Europeans re-established after Hideyoshi's death, under the leadership of Tokugawa Ieyasu, soon changed with the rise to power of his son Hidetada, responsible for the first anti-Christian edicts and progressive closure to the European world. When Sotelo reached the Japanese coast, he was denounced as a Christian priest by the Chinese captain who had accompanied him. Locked up again in prison, he was found guilty and burnt alive in Nagasaki in 1624.

3. Recovering and rereading the past

The burning of the Sevillian friar was the extreme representation of Japan's definitive closure to the Christian religion. A few years later, in 1639, all Europeans would be expelled from the country and only the Dutch would maintain an entrepôt—subject to strict and severe controls—on the artificial island of Dejima (Iannello 2012).

For the next 250 years, Japan and Italy remained totally estranged worlds that almost lost all memory of these first contacts.

It was only in 1854, with the arrival of American gunboats commanded by Commodore Perry in Kanagawa Bay, that the archipelago was forced to reopen to the West and resume the contacts it had broken off more than two centuries earlier. From this moment on, and even more so with the fall of the shogunate and the beginning of the Meiji era in 1868, Japan took rapid and continuous steps to integrate itself into the existing network of international relations. In particular, in 1871 it became necessary to send a delegation with the task of re-

⁹ Archivo General de Indias, Gobierno, Audiencia de Filipinas, 1, n. 150, ff. 1–3.

¹⁰ Philip III's reaction was so harsh that not only did he initially deny the delegates an audience, but he also put a spanner in the works once they had left Madrid for Rome. There, in order not to risk Pope Paul V being persuaded to grant the two delegates what he had promptly denied them, he made sure that his ambassador in the city kept a constant watch on and informed him of every subsequent development. Archivio Apostolico Vaticano, Fondo Borghese, Serie IV, n. 65, lettere diverse, 1615 f. 56.

negotiating the terms of the “unequal treaties” stipulated by the archipelago with its western partners. Furthermore, the embassy was to collect useful and important information to facilitate Japan’s entry into the restricted group of industrialized powers of the time.

The journey of the Iwakura delegation lasted several years and took the Japanese ambassadors to both the USA and the main European states. The stop in Italy, which lasted almost a month from 8 May to 2 June 1873, was one of the most prestigious on the journey (Nish 1998; Kunitake 2009). It was an opportunity to sew back together the threads of a relationship that had been interrupted at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

The arrival in Italy of the first delegation truly expressing Japanese wishes and interests also brought the two modern-age embassies back into the limelight.

The focus on the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century missions was primarily based on documentary investigation, with the aim of reconstructing the material legacies produced by the two encounters. The task of bringing to light the events of that faded past was taken on by late nineteenth-century scholarship, in particular the Venetian Guglielmo Berchet (1877).

Berchet’s work, published in 1877, is not only the first account of the two Japanese journeys almost three centuries apart, it also fits perfectly into the climate of his time: it was the inevitable consequence of the events that were taking place in that period. In fact, not only did Iwakura stop off in Italy in 1873, but only a couple of years later, in 1875, namely about a decade after the beginning of bilateral relations between the two countries, Rome and Tokyo began negotiations to create a permanent Japanese consulate on Italian territory, which was opened in 1876.¹¹

The establishment of official diplomatic relations between the two countries generated extraordinary attention to all matters relating to Japan. Moreover, the fresh memory of the Iwakura mission provided a very close precedent to refer to in the study of the two modern-age missions.

The structure of Berchet’s work betrays a purely erudite and descriptive interest: the sources recovered are not questioned, but simply presented to the reader as glimpses of a past reposed in the present to arouse the curiosity of those who had only been aware of the existence of Japan for a few years. The same aim is also reflected in the meticulous attention paid to the more material aspects of these first encounters: the diplomas of Roman citizenship issued to the Japanese princes during their visits to the papal court, as well as the descriptions of the stuccoes and brocades in the rooms where they stayed, and the gifts brought from so far away to pay homage to the political authorities of the peninsula.

¹¹ The city originally chosen to host the consulate was Milan, as the Tokyo government considered it to be the most important economic centre in Italy. The initial aim, again on the Japanese side, was to boost trade relations between the two countries. The *Corriere della Sera*, established in 1876, gave a detailed description of the events of those years in its issue of 19 March 1882.

Berchet's work interpreted the climate of his time and was instrumental to the interests that saw Italy and Japan drawing ever closer together in those years: it was the result of the needs and ambitions of a political and cultural class that regarded the Land of the Rising Sun as a new "Eldorado" to reach out to, just as it had been for the Society of Jesus 300 years earlier.

In fact, at the same time as diplomatic agreements were being signed between the two countries, a pressing—and successful—advertising campaign was launched in all the main newspapers of the kingdom in order to convince Italian companies to invest in Japan, especially in the silk sector.¹² The interest of the Italian ruling class was to present the new relations established with the Asian country within a framework of continuity with the past. Through the constant reference to the precedents of the modern age, Japan could be defined as a "historical" partner of the peninsula. It is no coincidence that numerous newspaper articles were dedicated to the two modern-age embassies, both in the local and national press, when the Iwakura delegation was in Italy.¹³

The press benefited from the favourable climate that formed the backdrop to the resumption of official contacts between the two countries. Breaking the fourth wall, the two sixteenth- and seventeenth-century embassies went from being the subject of a narrative that had seen them as protagonists, to playing a passive role: a sort of *mirabilia* to be shown to the new guests arriving from the archipelago almost three centuries later.

Questa mattina [gli ambasciatori giapponesi] si recarono a vedere l'Archivio generale dei Frari, e il portico del Seminario, dove si conservano memorie giapponesi, da essi esaminate col massimo interesse. Come abbiamo altra volta accennato, riportando i documenti dell'Archivio dei Frari, venne nell'anno 1585 da Roma a Venezia un'ambasciata preseduta dal signor Ito Mantio, e fu la prima venuta in Europa; poi nell'anno 1615 una seconda ambasciata, preseduta dal signor Nasekura. I documenti di queste ambascerie furono in parte pubblicati, e siamo informati che l'attuale ambasciata ne commise la raccolta completa (*Gazzetta di Venezia* 1873).¹⁴

¹² For convenience, I have decided to refer to the issue of Turin-based newspaper *La Stampa* of 14 February 1877. The presence of three different advertisements within the same issue allows us to understand the pervasiveness, in the medium to long term, of an advertising campaign aimed at creating favourable conditions for the development of trade relations between Italy and Japan.

¹³ In those weeks, the trip of the Iwakura delegation was one of the hot topics in the Italian press. Not only was there news about the various stages of the Japanese delegation's journey to Italy, but also in-depth columns were published on the customs and traditions of the archipelago, along with several articles recalling the centuries-old tradition of Italo-Japanese relations. These traced the roots of a renewed relationship of friendship and collaboration back to the two voyages that took place in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. *Gazzetta di Venezia* 12 May 1873, 30 May 1873, 31 May 1873, 3 June 1873; *La Nazione* 10 May 1873, 13 May 1873, 15 May 1873, 20 May 1873, 26 May 1873, 31 May 1873, 5 June 1873.

¹⁴ "This morning [the Japanese ambassadors] went to see the Frari general archive and the portico of the seminary, where Japanese memories are preserved, which they examined with

In rapid succession, in under 20 years, Italy welcomed the first official delegation from Japan (1873); authorized the establishment of a permanent consulate (by 1875); launched a widespread publicity campaign in all print media to encourage economic and trade relations with Japan; and started to build armaments for resale to Japan. From a propagandistic point of view, the two modern-age embassies undoubtedly played a central role in supporting the interests that linked Rome and Tokyo.

This unusual alliance held up well and indeed was further strengthened (and with it the interest in the two modern-age embassies) by the complicated evolution of the international framework as from the start of the new century Japan began to engage in a series of brazen and victorious military campaigns in Asia. The victims were mainly China and Korea, but it was clear to all that Russia was the real obstacle to Japanese interests. We can see the reaction of Italian public opinion as the tension between the two powers grew: conveyed by both the press and literature, with the publication of a new work dedicated to the two modern-age embassies, the peninsula looked upon the war exploits pitting the archipelago against its antagonists in the Far East with ill-concealed sympathy.¹⁵

It was in this climate that in 1904 Francesco Boncompagni Ludovisi, a future senator of the Italian kingdom, published a second volume dedicated to the two delegations' journeys in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Boncompagni Ludovisi 1904). This work filled some documentary gaps in Berchet's essay, in particular describing the Roman sojourn of the two embassies in greater detail. Nevertheless, just like the text of the Venetian scholar, Ludovisi's work also veered towards uncritically chronicling the facts.

Although very similar in methodological approach to Berchet's previous work, owing to the calibre of its author and, above all, the debate it generated, Ludovisi's text marked a turning point in the reinterpretation of the two Japanese delegations' journeys during the modern age. At the same time, it also al-

the greatest interest. As we have already mentioned, the documents in the Frari archive reveal that in 1585 an embassy led by Mr Ito Mantio came from Rome to Venice, and this was the first to reach Europe; then in 1615 a second embassy was led by Mr Nasekura. The documents of these embassies were partly published, and we are informed that the present embassy commissioned a complete collection of them".

¹⁵ The first news about the Japanese war effort in the Far East dates back to the summer of 1894. On 1 August 1894, the *Corriere della Sera* published an article referring explicitly to the conflict between China and Japan for the control of the Korean peninsula. The war, which lasted only a few months, saw the archipelago triumph over the Chinese Empire, creating the conditions for the subsequent war with Russia, which was worried about excessive Japanese interference on the continent. In this sense, the article in the *Corriere della Sera* of 15–16 March 1895 (*Corriere della Sera* 1895) is of great interest: "Le simpatie degli Europei sono tutte per i Giapponesi, perché si dimostrano valorosi, coraggiosi, intraprendenti; e tutti augurano la vittoria finale al Giappone e la rovina dei Cinesi" ("The sympathies of the Europeans are all for the Japanese, because they are proving to be brave, courageous and enterprising; everyone [in Europe] hopes for a Japanese victory and a Chinese defeat"). See also Berryman, Neilson, and Nish (1994), Paine (2003), Zachmann (2009) and Fröhlich (2014).

lows us to take a deeper look at the motivations and interests that were at the basis of that particular turn-of-the-century rereading.

The first factor to consider is the origins of the author of the text. Francesco Boncompagni Ludovisi, born in the 1880s, was the young descendant of a noble Umbrian family whose origins date back as far as the sixteenth century (Re 1930). Going back in time, it is possible to note an interesting coincidence which, combined with the political contingencies of the young Francesco's time, may help to understand why he was interested in the two embassies that had arrived from Japan three centuries earlier. It is a coincidence that lies in his family origins, at least on the Boncompagni side, which can be traced back to Ugo Boncompagni, better known by the name of Gregory XIII.

It was precisely Pope Boncompagni who, in 1585, a few weeks before his death, had welcomed the first delegation from Japan to Rome with a solemn public consistory. This not only provides an instrumental explanation for the young Francesco's choice of subject for his work, that is, to pay homage to his illustrious ancestor, but it also helps to understand the methodological structure used throughout the text, with its attention to the cardinals' documentation and the notices composed by the papal secretaries. He had access to these documents, unlike Berchet 20 years earlier.

Moreover, the young Francesco was particularly attentive to the national and international political situation, both by personal inclination and family background. In the space of a few years, he embarked on a political career, becoming first a deputy and then a senator of the Italian kingdom (Margiotta Broglio 1969).

The specific interest in Japan shown by Boncompagni Ludovisi in his work can therefore—once again—be attributed to the “vibrations” produced by past events in the present. In this regard, the date of publication of the text is not at all accidental: 1904, during the most heated phases of the conflict between Russia and Japan in the East. It was precisely in those months that Italy risked becoming involved in the conflict.

The ill-concealed sympathy with which the Italian political tribune looked towards the Japanese triumphs in the East encouraged two of the most important Italian industrialists of the time, Giovanni Bombrini and Ferdinando Maria Perrone, to engage in building armaments to be resold to the Asian partner (*Corriere della Sera* 1904).¹⁶ Both Bombrini and Perrone were closely involved

¹⁶ The first news of the involvement of Italian industrialists in the construction of armaments for resale to non-European partners dates to an article published in the *Corriere della Sera* on 3 January 1902. On that occasion, the interests of Italian industrialists were linked to a conflict that had developed on the South American continent, between Argentina and Venezuela. Senator Bombrini expressly denied Italian involvement in the construction of armaments to be resold to the Buenos Aires government (*Corriere della Sera* 1902). However, on 10 January 1903 the *Corriere della Sera* again reported the launch of two battleships destined for Argentina from the shipyard of Sestri Ponente. Moreover, the article of 8 January 1904 goes on to report “strange” movements in the Spezia shipyards: it seems that munitions had been brought by an Italian navy ship to the two Ansaldo ships purchased by Japan (*Corriere della Sera* 1904). This umpteenth Italian involvement to the advantage of Japan confirms the entanglement between Italian industry and the Land of the Rising Sun.

in running the engineering and shipbuilding giant Ansaldo. The biggest problem, however, was that the projects for these armaments were executed by the Italian Ministry of the Navy; this put the Italian political authorities in a delicate position with respect to Russia, risking creating the conditions for Italy's involvement in the war. The disrespect towards the tsar was reported in the pages of the socialist newspaper *Avanti!*, which had close ties to St Petersburg. These considerations were also quoted in their entirety in other newspapers, such as the *Corriere della Sera*:

L'Avanti! protesta perché a Genova si è compiuto un contratto di vendita fra l'Argentina e il Giappone di navi costruite da una casa italiana, l'Ansaldo. Esso dice: "Le navi argentine avrebbero dovuto essere condotte in un porto argentino, oppure in qualsiasi porto estero e là si sarebbe dovuto concludere il contratto e cambiare la bandiera alle navi, ammainando i colori argentini e alzando il sole vermiglio del Mikado. Il far ciò all'ombra della bandiera italiana fu una sconvenienza verso la Russia. Non bisogna anzitutto dimenticare che queste due navi non sono creazioni della ditta costruttrice, ma che furono eseguite sui piani del nostro Ministero della marina. Tutte le tenerezze, tutti i riguardi per la Russia non esistevano che quando si trattava di giudicare i fischi dei socialisti, ma ora invece ogni riguardo per la Russia non esiste più. Ci sono di mezzo gli interessi degli industriali navali Bombrini e Perrone e quindi vada al diavolo la Russia e lo Zar e viva il Mikado!" (*Corriere della Sera* 1904).¹⁷

It was therefore fundamental for the political and cultural elite of the time to justify this choice, which had almost led to a diplomatic crisis with Russia, owing to the *longue durée* of relations with Japan. The concealed objective was precisely to trace back to the two modern-age embassies, on which Boncompagni Ludovisi's work intended to cast new light and greater notoriety, the reasons for an alliance that on the threshold of the new century was no longer only economic and cultural but evolving towards a political and military alignment.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, how should we consider Italian society's late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century reinterpretation of the journeys of the two embassies

¹⁷ "Avanti! protested because a sales contract between Argentina and Japan of ships built by the Italian company Ansaldo had been concluded in Genoa. It says: 'The Argentine ships should have been taken to an Argentine port, or to any other foreign port, and the contract should have been concluded there and the flag of the ships should have been changed, lowering the Argentine colours and raising the vermilion sun of the mikado. To do this in the shadow of the Italian flag was improper towards Russia. First of all, it must not be forgotten that these two ships were not created by the construction company but built according to the plans of our Ministry of the Navy. All the endearment, all the consideration for Russia only existed when it was time to judge the socialists' whistles, but now consideration for Russia no longer exists. What is important here are the interests of the shipbuilders Bombrini and Perrone, and so to hell Russia and the tsar and long live the mikado!'"

that had arrived from Japan three centuries earlier? What were the aims of this political and intellectual process of reinterpretation? And finally, what consequences did it have on the intricate relationship between continuity and discontinuity at the basis of processes to reread the past?

Faced with a society that was ever more intimately connected to Japan, there was a clear need for the Italian elites of the time to explain the reason behind this connection to themselves and to the world. This need and purpose clearly emerge when consulting the digital archives of two of the main newspapers of that period: *La Stampa* and *Corriere della Sera*.

If we analyse the presence of the word “Japan” in the two newspapers year by year, we can see the exponential growth of the space occupied by this topic in Italian society: from a few dozen times in the early 1870s, to several thousand in the early 1900s. The increase remained almost constant, with two peaks: the first was around 1873–1878, while the second was reached in the first five years of the new century. The explanation is easy: in the first case it was due to the official resumption of relations between the two countries, the arrival of the Iwakura delegation and the creation of a permanent consulate in Milan. In the second case, the effects of the Russo-Japanese conflict that was raging in the Far East played a decisive role.

The newspapers of the time were a litmus test of the political and cultural interests of Italian society. The fact that Berchet’s and Boncompagni Ludovisi’s works saw the light precisely at the peak of Italian society’s attention to the Japanese world encourages us to consider these rereadings of the modern-age embassies’ travels as instrumental to a collective and national interest. Tracing the motivations for the increasingly pronounced partnership back to those early days was a strategy aimed at legitimizing the political, economic and cultural interests of the time. To use Croce’s words, it was in essence the manifestation of how history becomes an instrument to refer to a present need.

On the other hand, this continuity, which found its greatest expression in the appearance of scholarly works dedicated to the long-standing relationship between Italy and Japan, needs to be compared to the appearance—at the very end of the conflict between the mikado and the tsar—of a scientific and intellectual debate in discontinuity with the narrative that had been offered until then.

In this sense, volume 35 of the prestigious journal *Archivio Storico Italiano*, published in 1905, contained a review of Boncompagni Ludovisi’s work that deserves careful consideration. This was the first time that the focus on the two journeys made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was taken out of the limited sphere of erudite and travel accounts, to instead concentrate on their real value:

Dopo le opere del Gualtieri e del Berchet sulla prima ambasceria, e dell’Amati sulla seconda, e dopo quest’ultimo lavoro, dove si vedono raccolte, sopra entrambe, le notizie che fino ad oggi rimasero inedite, resta poco o punto a dire circa la venuta in Italia de’ Giapponesi, e la dimora che vi fecero, le accoglienze che vi ebbero, e ogni altra particolarità di simil genere; ma resta molto a sapersi

rispetto alla sostanza de' fatti. Intendo dire, che il leggitore europeo, il quale, da tutto quel che fu scritto, volesse, per esempio, farsi un'idea giusta del valore reale della prima ambasceria, non ne verrebbe a capo (Puini 1905, 468).¹⁸

The following pages describe the historical and political process that led to the organization and sending of the first delegation. From the arrival in the archipelago of the first Portuguese, who were soon joined by the first Jesuits, to the situation of political fluidity and instability in Japan at that time, and the convergence of interests between the *daimyos* and the Catholic avant-garde in the Far East: painted with rapid but precise brushstrokes, all this context was used for the first time to explain why the delegation was sent and to understand its objectives and results. It was also pointed out that “I PP. Gesuiti, che pensarono tale Ambasceria, ne esposero chiaramente il fine, e il modo che avevasi a tenere, modesto anzi che no, nel riceverla tra noi” (Puini 1905, 471).¹⁹ What is more, the reasons for the erroneous conviction that “Que' giovani giapponesi [...] furono aspettati ed accolti come se venissero a portare a' Principi d'Europa, specie al Pontefice, gli atti di devozione di tutto il Giappone, in nome del sovrano, o de' sovrani, che ivi allora regnavano” (Puini 1905, 471) were to be sought in European needs for greatness and splendour.²⁰

Offspring of its time and of the needs of a political and cultural class that had become closer and closer to Japan since the 1870s, the attention paid in the first decade of the new century to the modern-age embassies created the intellectual conditions to break the continuity with the past and initiate a totally new phase. While starting from great nineteenth-century erudition, the new direction taken in the rereading of that distant past was one of progressive distancing from previous studies, creating the premises and the bases for a fruitful—and not yet fully concluded—phase of critical debate on the theme of the first Euro-Japanese contacts during the modern age.

Archives

Archivio Apostolico Vaticano (AAV), Fondo Borghese, Serie IV, n.65, lettere diverse, 1615 f. 56.

Archivio di Stato di Milano (ASMi), Prefettura di Milano, Gabinetto, Carteggio fino al 1937 - Serie I, 742.

Archivo General de Indias, Gobierno (AGI), Audiencia de Filipinas, 1, n. 150, ff. 1-3.

¹⁸ “After the works of Gualtieri and Berchet on the first embassy, and that of Amati on the second, and after this last work, where we see collected hitherto unpublished information on both of them, there is little or nothing left to say about the coming of the Japanese to Italy and the stay they made here, the welcome they received, and every other detail of a similar kind; but there is much left to know about the substance of the facts. I mean that for instance, the European reader who should wish, from all that has been written, to form an accurate idea of the real value of the first embassy, would not be able to understand it.”

¹⁹ “The Jesuit fathers who planned this embassy clearly explained its purpose and the modest way in which it was to be received among us.”

²⁰ “Those young Japanese [...] were waited for and welcomed as if they had come to bring to the princes of Europe, especially to the pontiff, the acts of devotion of all Japan, in the name of the sovereign, or the sovereigns, who reigned there at that time.”

Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI), Jap. Sin. 12 II, ff. 191v-192.
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