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Mercury and the Argonauts in Japan: Myths and Martyrs in Jesuit Neo-Latin

Abstract: In the early modern period, a number of Latin texts were produced that combined references to Japan, Catholicism and Greco-Roman antiquity, including pagan mythology. This article examines two such works: An oration published in Spain in 1628, in which Jason and the Argonauts are likened to Xavier and his followers in Japan, and a Polish dramatic presentation datable to 1701 in which Mercury, Xerxes and the priest of Dodona, among other characters, appear in a story centered on the miraculous discovery of a cross inside a tree near Nagasaki. These works are prime examples of the diversity of early modern European Latin literature, which could combine tales from the new and old worlds in highly imaginative and creative ways.

Keywords: Jesuits, Neo-Latin, Japan, Spain, Poland

1 Introduction: Japan and Neo-Latin Through the Ages

This chapter discusses two pieces of Neo-Latin literature in which Japan and pagan Greco-Roman elements appear side-by-side. Examination of these two works is part of a three-year project which is being supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (Kakanhi grant no. 22K00466), in which I explore the intersections between Japan and the Greco-Roman tradition in early modern European Latin literature.

Before I plunge into these two works, some background information concerning Japan and Neo-Latin may be in order. Neo-Latin literature concerning Japan or more generally East Asia is a topic that has been explored already in surveys by Ijsewijn, Golvers, von Martels and others.¹ A comprehensive treatment, however, that touches on all periods and genres is a *desideratum*. In the following preliminary survey, I divide the history of Japanese Neo-Latin into three periods.

Period 1, the ‘Christian Century’, covers the time roughly from Francis Xavier’s (1506–1552) arrival in Japan in 1549 (though knowledge about Japan in the West can

1 See Golvers (2015), von Martels (2014), Ijsewijn (1990) 319–321, and cf. Watanabe (2021).

arguably be pushed back a few centuries before this year, to the time of Marco Polo (1254–1324))² up to the final and definitive suppression of Catholicism and the severance of relationship with Portugal in the late 1630s. In this first period we can already distinguish between European- and Japanese-authored Latin texts, although the former naturally precedes the latter. For at this time not only did Europeans begin to write about the newly discovered archipelago, but notably the Jesuits sent to the East expended considerable resources on teaching Latin to the Japanese, as a grammar, dictionary, and other introductory school texts printed specifically for use in Japan from the late 1580s to early 1610s testify.³ There is also evidence from this time that a limited number of Japanese educated by the Jesuits acquired fair proficiency in Latin, to the point of being able to compose verse. Compared to contemporary European Latin material, to be sure, Japanese-authored Latin texts from this period are rare, but they do exist, the majority in manuscript form but a few also in print. If the archive of the short-lived Japanese Jesuit seminary were extant (by all indications it is not), then we would doubtlessly have more documents of this kind. The first text to be examined in this chapter is a European one from this period.

Period 2 covers the mid-17th century to mid-19th century, the time when Japan was mostly closed off to the West, except for an extremely narrow and strictly controlled route open to the Dutch East India company. But the memory of Period 1 lived on in Catholic Europe, and we have an abundance of high-quality literary texts dealing with Japan from this time from all across Europe, from the Southwest to the Northeast, from Portugal to Poland. This is the category from which the second text to be treated in this presentation comes, and this is also the kind of material that I am currently very much focused on, due to the wealth of underexplored primary sources available. At the same time, however, from this same period also come Latin texts with a distinctly different undertone, namely those from the Protestant northwest, such as the works of Bernhard Varen (1622–1650), Engelbert Kaempfer (1651–1716), and Carl Peter Thunberg (1743–1828).⁴ Non-Catholic European texts on Japan and East Asia around the time of the Enlightenment are key evidence within intellectual history of the emergence of the modern Western image of the Far East as an advanced, yet distinctly non-White, non-Christian and somehow inferior counterpart, a topic that has recently been explored by Keevak, Kowner and others.⁵ But fascinating as such

2 See e.g. Varen (1649) 9–10.

3 On these texts and Jesuit humanistic education for the early modern Japanese in general, see e.g. Watanabe (2020) 200–203.

4 See e.g. Watanabe (2020) 210–211.

5 See e.g. Keevak (2011) 28–29; Kowner (2014) 165–172.

texts are, I must postpone the examination of this particular kind of text to a different occasion.

In period 2, the kind of Latin fluency among the Japanese that once existed in period 1 seems to have gone basically extinct. There were a few attempts within the hermetically closed archipelago to translate Western, including Latin, texts into the learned literary Sino-Japanese, but both in scope and linguistic fluency they bear no comparison to the kind of facility that the Jesuit-educated Japanese achieved in period 1.⁶ There are also indications that self-identified Japanese Catholic emigre families that survived in Western-controlled regions such as the Philippines until the 18th century sent their children to local academies where they were taught Latin, but they remained to all indications completely severed from Japan and eventually merged with the local population, leaving virtually no traces observable today.⁷

Finally, from the mid-19th century, when Japan again opened up to the rest of the world, until today, a variety of other Latin texts in and on Japan have emerged. Among them are Horatian verses written by Japanese Latinists and even Latin haikus composed by Europeans.⁸ I have also personally seen and heard about Latin archival documents kept in various Catholic institutions within Japan including the Tokyo Catholic Archdiocese and Sophia University. But again, more detailed examination of this kind of material must await another occasion.

2 *Iaponiae Argovictoria* (1628)

Let us now begin to look at the first of the two pieces under discussion. This is the printed quarto pamphlet entitled *Iaponiae Argovictoria*, by the Jesuit rhetorician Juan Antonio Jarque (1600–1666), published in Zaragoza in 1628.⁹ It records an oration, which must have lasted for a good hour or so, delivered in the Jesuit college church in the same city on December 3 1627. It ostensibly describes an emblem, but is really an effusive laudation of Xavier as the spiritual conqueror of the East using all manners of rhetorical tools available at that time, pulling out all

⁶ See e.g. Harada (2001).

⁷ On the early modern Japanese diaspora in Southeast Asia, see Iwao (1966).

⁸ See Ijsewijn (1990) 319–321.

⁹ Jarque (1628). In what follows the citation to this text is by page number. I am grateful to the Kirishitan bunko Library of Sophia University, Tokyo for permission to inspect their copy of this rare pamphlet.

the stops from Latin to Spanish and pagan antiquity to baroque humanistic theology, as we shall see.

The oration starts with Herodotus' (c. 484–c. 425 BC) description of Pharaoh Amasis II (?–526 BC) (1, Hdt. 2.173) and is liberally sprinkled throughout with learned references ranging all the way from classical antiquity to contemporary humanism. Cicero (106–43 BC) (20, 24), Virgil (70–19 BC) (2, 24) and Horace (65–8 BC) (23) are mined for tags, as are the Church Fathers including Ambrose of Milan (c. 339–c. 397) (8, 21) and John Chrysostom (c. 347–407) (7, 11). The sources are regularly identified in the margin; the citations serve as visible signposts of the orator's extensive erudition. Contemporary humanists are also cited in the same way, including the Italian emblemist-poet Andrea Alciato (1492–1550) (18) and his French counterpart Claude Paradin (c. 1510–1573) (4). The learned Portuguese Jesuit author Francisco de Mendoça (1573–1626) (3, 18, 21) is mentioned repeatedly and appears to have had a major impact at least on this oration, although his work seems to have fallen off the radar of current Neo-Latin research.¹⁰

The pagan classics are not used only as ornaments, however, but also serve a more substantial, structural purpose. Jarque makes explicit claims that Catholic triumphs such as Xavier's expedition to the East were foretold by the Sibyl and the great *vates* Virgil. So, according to him, Virgil's *Eclogue* 4 is not only a prophecy of the birth of Christ, but the mention of the new Argo and its heroes in lines 34–35 actually refers to the adventures of Xavier and the Japanese martyrs who followed the saint's lead (3). In case anyone needs convincing, Jarque mentions the fact that Xavier's illustrious father bore the name *de Jasso* (3),¹¹ a crystal-clear proof that the Navarrese saint is the new Jason, *QED*. Other allegorical equivalents naturally follow. So Tiphys, Argo's helmsman, is said to be Xavier's motivational virtue (26), and the Dioscuri are a pair of Japanese Jesuits (namely John Soan de Goto, 1578–1597 and James Kisai, c. 1534–1597) among the so-called twenty-six martyrs who were executed in Nagasaki in 1597 and beatified in 1627 (24). This beatification was one of the major spurs behind the oration itself, which was delivered in the same year on the feast day of Xavier, who had been canonised a little earlier in 1622. Pallas Athena, furthermore, the patroness of the Argo, is of course but a distorted reflection of the Virgin Mary (25), while the mythical ship itself stands for Japan (5), the goal and stage for the heroic Jesuit world mission. Pagan mythology according to Jarque is on the one hand but a delirious dream of blind antiquity: *caeca delirabat antiquitas*, he says (2). It is a dream nonetheless that, if explicated correctly by a

¹⁰ For a biography of Mendoça, see Torres (2001). Especially noteworthy is Mendoça (1631) for its very baroque fusion of classical humanism and Catholic piety. Jarque (1628) 3 indicates that the author was aware of Mendoça's work being posthumously edited in Lyon.

¹¹ On Xavier's father and his family name, see e.g. Schurhammer (1955) 1, 3, 17–18.

properly trained person such as himself, points to glorious and real Catholic victories. In addition to being the new Jason, Xavier is another Alexander the Great (356–323 BC), Paul the Apostle (c. 5–c. 64/65), and Julius Caesar (100–44 BC) all rolled into one, and greater than all of them (10–11). At one point (11), he turns to the saint and says *venisti, vidisti, vicisti*. Both classical mythology and history provide the frame and pedestal in and on which Xavier and his Japanese followers stand.

The oration is prosimetric and interspersed with verses, both in classical metrical Latin and rhymed Spanish. Many of the Latin lines are direct quotes or pastiches/centos of authors like Catullus (c. 84–c. 54 BC) (4), Virgil, Seneca (c. 4 BC–65 AD) (3, 20), Juvenal (fl. 2nd century) (4) and even the aforementioned Alciato. Two extended Latin verse passages, however, are Jarque's original, in which he displays his own considerable compositional prowess. The first, which consists of 28 lines of elegiac couplets in which the author recounts the story of a miraculous harvest in a field sown by a deceased martyr (23), is remarkable also in that the source and inspiration is explicitly said to be an oral testimony delivered by Sebastião Vieira (1574–1634), the Portuguese Jesuit Procurator of Japan, who evidently stopped by in Zaragoza during his European sojourn in the 1620s.¹² Vieira was eventually to be martyred in Japan in 1634 after returning to the East. This set-piece within the oration is remarkable in that most literary Neo-Latin retellings of edifying tales from Japan are based on published European accounts and thus are further removed from their source in terms of narrative chain.¹³ The second original verse piece occurs at the end of the Latin section, and Jarque prefaces it by saying that he is raising Roman lyric to a more sacred level, *Romanam sanctius animans lyram* (25). The poem in 38 lines (26) is basically a recap of the Xavier-Argo allegory and is at the same time a rather laboured imitation of a Horatian ode in the scheme of the third asclepiad. The entire oration then ends with a 5-page, 160-line Spanish poem (27–31) in the so-called *ottava rima* stanza. It is a much longer retelling and summary of the entire oration, juxtaposing the myth of the Argonauts with the deeds of Xavier and the Japanese martyrs. The Spanish stanzas may have come as a very welcome respite to the Zaragoza dignitaries or *virī principes* (as the listeners are repeatedly addressed: 1, 9, 13, 15, 23) who had had to sit through this very long, mostly Latin oration after the mass commemorating the recently canonised saint.

¹² On Vieira, see e.g. Frison (2010) 20. Jarque (1628) 23 misidentifies him with Francis(cus) Vieira (on whom see e.g. Frison (2010) 25). I am grateful to Takayoshi Kisaki for confirming that Sebastião is most likely the Vieira meant by Jarque.

¹³ See e.g. Watanabe (2020) 209–210.

3 *Novus Mercurius* (1701)

Let us now move from Spain to Poland, from the seventeenth to the 18th century. I would like to look at a short drama, or perhaps more accurately a composite multimedia show, performed in the Jesuit academy of Sandomierz at the start of the 18th century. This is the *Novus Mercurius* by Andrzej Temberski (1662–1726), another Jesuit rhetorician, a work that is preserved in a manuscript currently housed in the Jagellonian University Library in Krakow.¹⁴

The show is centred on an event that reputedly took place in southern Japan near Nagasaki shortly before the Christmas of 1589. A local farmer and his son went to a forest in search of firewood, and after they felled a tree and split it open they discovered a cross lodged inside. The miraculous discovery was reported to the Catholic ruler of the realm, the famous Arima Harunobu or Don Protasio (1567–1612). The wood with the cross inside was subsequently declared a relic, put in a glass display case in a local church and became an object of pilgrimage as well as the source of miraculous cures. It is not entirely clear what happened to this object after the collapse of the Japanese mission, but there is evidence that at least a fragment thereof eventually made its way to Europe via Macao in the late 1680s. There is also a detailed drawing of the miraculous wood in ARSI, and the cross-in-the-tree story, interpreted as a divine presage of the subsequent wave of persecution in Japan, was widely disseminated in Europe up to the 19th century. Father Renzo De Luca, the current Jesuit Provincial of Japan, has called for renewed attention to this now forgotten story in a recent scholarly article, on which I have also relied for the above information.¹⁵

Examination of the content of Temberski's *Novus Mercurius* makes it clear that it is a rendition of this once famous story. This version is also quite remarkable in being suffused with ostensibly pagan classical elements. The piece begins (113r–115r) and ends (120v) with Mercury, the messenger god, who announces the discovery of his staff or *caduceus*, which is surprisingly identified with the Christian cross in the Japanese forest (115r, 118v). Mercury appears on stage to speak at the beginning (113r) and end (118v) of the dramatic section, as well as in the very conclusion of the piece (120v), and otherwise constantly hovers in the background

¹⁴ On the manuscript and its author see Miazek-Męczyńska (2021) 258–259. I am grateful to Monika Miazek-Męczyńska for providing me with digital images of the Krakow manuscript (Jagiellonian University Library codex no. 2348.113r–120v: the folio nos. of this codex were changed in early 2023, and here I follow the new numbering). The exact date of the play's production is unknown, but the manuscript states it was performed by the rhetoric class in Sandomierz in 1701 (113r). Citation of *Novus Mercurius* here and elsewhere in the chapter is by folio number.

¹⁵ De Luca (2016).

like some Euripidean god. Other classical references pile on thick throughout the piece. Those concerned with pagan tree-worship seem to be structurally significant. So the priest of Dodona (113v) and the famous tree-lover Persian King Xerxes the Great (c. 518–465 BC) (114v) both appear on stage to expatiate on their objects of admiration. The overall idea guiding this piece appears to be that pagan tree worship sets the stage for, but is to be completely superseded by, the discovery of the sacred cross in the Japanese forest (so especially 119r), though again Mercury the non-Christian god somehow never fades away.

Temberski's *Novus Mercurius* as well as other pieces preserved in the Krakow manuscript have been described as mediocre dramas in secondary literature,¹⁶ but this assessment may be in need of significant revision after proper philological examination of the texts. This piece, as well as adjacent works (112v, 122r–128r) that I have been able to discern from a digital copy, are no ordinary Jesuit plays, but combine several genres to make up what seem to be a unique kind of multimedia presentation. As for *Novus Mercurius* specifically, the dramatic section in iambic trimetre (113r–118v) is very short, just over 300 lines. The usual length for annual Jesuit spectacle dramas was about 10 times that, and some went on for much longer.¹⁷ The insertion of a 10-line Polish song or *cantus* into the play, in which the local ruler is told of the imminent discovery of the cross in a dream (115v),¹⁸ is in itself unremarkable, except that this is all supposedly taking place in Japan. The very short dramatic section is followed by what are probably visual aids in the form of large symbolic drawings and possibly 3D objects brought on stage and accompanied by prose declamations (118v–120r). In the manuscript, these sections are labelled *symbola*, *hieroglyphica* and *emblemata*, and the Latin prose declamations therein are called *elogia*. The presentations are all thematically related to the preceding dramatic section and expand on the idea of some precious and powerful, small and hidden element which transforms the entire world once it is brought out into the open. The epilogic material concludes with a 10-line elegiac poem entitled *affectus* (120r–120v), the last two lines of which are spoken by Mercury. Among other things, it praises the cross as a sure refuge from the rod or *virga*, presumably a very potent and real object of terror to the Jesuit schoolchildren who were made to act out this piece. From what I have been able to see in the adjacent portions of the manuscript, Temberski experimented with similar combinations of drama with other genres, such as declamation, on other occasions (see esp. 112v, 126r–127v). Temberski's pieces, including *Novus Mercurius*, are thus not the usual Jesuit or

¹⁶ See especially Miazek-Męczyńska (2021) 259.

¹⁷ For the typical lengths of Jesuit Latin plays see e.g. Watanabe (2022) 21.

¹⁸ I am most grateful to Monika Miazek-Męczyńska and Maria Maciejewska for transcribing and translating this song.

Neo-Latin drama, but seem to be innovative multi-genre shows combining several different visual, performative and literary media for maximum impact.

4 Conclusion: Jesuit Humanism and Orientalism

This chapter examined two early modern Catholic works in which pagan Greco-Roman elements feature prominently. For those who study the rich Christian literary tradition from its beginnings, this embrace of apparently pagan elements, ranging from classical metre to mythology, may be nothing new. Starting at least from the Church Father Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390), Homer (fl. 8th century BC?) has coexisted with Jesus Christ and Virgil with the saints, despite misgivings voiced from such figures as Augustine (354–430) and Jerome (c. 342–420).¹⁹ It is definitely a sign of and testimony to the diversity of European culture throughout the ages that the Greco-Roman heritage, together with its pagan aspects, has been received with open arms long since Christianisation began, and Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) himself is known to have countered criticism against the Jesuit embrace of the classics with the biblical example of Moses, who used the spoils of Egypt to honour the Jewish God.²⁰

I do find in my presentations and conversations with the public that, again and again, even among Europeans, and even among Catholics, this relaxed attitude toward pagan classics displayed by the early modern church is met with a sense of surprise. Those of us in the know, so to speak, who have seen Jupiter and Minerva depicted nonchalantly together with archangels and saints in Jesuit literature or in wall paintings in the palaces of cardinals, may take all of this as business as usual, nothing out of the ordinary. But to many, even those with some knowledge of European and Christian history, this seems abnormal. I believe that we must continue to be sensitive to and address this popular sense of wonder, even though this kind of juxtaposition is actually extremely common.

And what about Japan, or East Asia in general? First, we must recognize that East Asia, like the Americas, was the New World, *Orbis Novus*, for early modern Europeans. As the Neo-Latin lexicographer Johann Rammingner points out, tomatoes, potatoes, chocolate, the Aztecs, as well as Japan and Korea, are all at the very edge of Latinity, the liminal region that entered the European cognitive universe for the very first time in the early modern period.²¹ Latinity, with its firm

¹⁹ On pagan classics and the Church Fathers, see e.g. Markus (1974).

²⁰ See O'Malley (1993) 254–257.

²¹ Rammingner (2014) 35.

roots in the ancient Mediterranean, was stretched to the limit to accommodate this new world, and early modern European users of Latin were generally clear about its foreignness or barbarity in the classical sense. Thus Bartolomeu Pereira (1588–1650), the Portuguese Jesuit who authored the Virgilian hagiography *Paciecidos*, very appropriately calls Japanese terms which he had to use in his epic *voces egregie barbaras*.²² But, looked at in another way, these works are all wonderful proof of the extreme and very self-conscious universality of early modern Catholicism as exemplified by the Jesuits who in their humanistic endeavours brought Greco-Roman mythology, Christianity, and the Far East all within their wide (and wild) embrace.

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22 Pereira (1640) *Vates lectori suo S.P.D.* See also Watanabe (2020) 209–210.

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