

Japan, India, or China? The Uncertain Steps of Sabatino de Ursis's Mission to Asia

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Abstract. *This contribution presents an analysis of the texts and contexts (plus transcriptions) of two documents relating to the vocation, evaluation, and appointment of Sabatino de Ursis to the overseas missions. These documents reflect the flexible process behind the selection of de Ursis to travel east. At the same time, they illustrate a definite policy and practice on the part of several members of the Jesuit leadership in Italy to appoint a specific type of missionary to the region, characterised above all by intellectual capabilities, personal maturity, and spiritual strength. It will be shown, finally, how the system that resulted in sending Italians such as de Ursis to his eventual destination, China, shaped the mission in a number of ways, most notably, in giving form to the so-called policy of accommodatio.*

Riassunto. *Questo contributo presenta un'analisi dei testi e dei contesti (più le trascrizioni) di due documenti relativi alla vocazione, valutazione e nomina di Sabatino de Ursis alle missioni d'oltremare. Questi documenti riflettono il processo flessibile dietro la selezione di de Ursis per viaggiare in Oriente. Allo stesso tempo, illustrano una politica e una pratica ben definite, da parte di diversi membri della gerarchia gesuita in Italia, per nominare uno specifico tipo di missionario da inviare in Asia, caratterizzato soprattutto da determinate capacità intellettuali, maturità personale e forza spirituale. Viene illustrato, infine, come il sistema che ha portato all'invio di italiani come de Ursis verso la sua destinazione finale, la Cina, abbia plasmato la missione in molti modi, in particolare, nel dare forma alla cosiddetta politica di accommodatio.*

On 28 January 1601, a letter was sent from Salerno about one of the many candidates in Italy for the Jesuit overseas missions: «Sabatino de Orsi reminds Your Reverence how he greatly wishes to go to Japan and how in days past he wrote to the Father [Superior] General about this». Four months later, on 17 May 1601, we learn in a second unsigned letter, this time addressed to the Superior General, that de Ursis had indeed been selected to go, and was preparing to leave the following day. One of the objectives of this letter was to remind the General (who had ultimate responsibility over missionary appointments) about Sabatino de Ursis (1575-1620): «that his desire was always to go to Japan»¹. Inherent in this

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¹ The documents from which these quotations are drawn are reproduced in full in the chapter's Appendix. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. Note that for transcriptions, scribal abbreviations have been silently expanded (for example, V.P. has been transcribed as Vostra Paternità); some original accents and punctuation markings (and their accompanying lower and upper case letters) have been modernized or removed to assist legibility; original spelling of words that deviate from their modern forms have been retained in the transcribed version. My thanks to Mauro

request was also an attempt to ensure that he would not be sent to India's Malabar Coast with Alberto Laerzio (1557-1630), who was recruiting in Europe to bolster numbers for that mission. As is well known, de Ursis's final destination, instead, was neither Japan nor India, but China. He left Europe on 25 March 1602².

Both of the documents quoted above are preserved among the *Litterae indipetae*. These letters produced from all over the Society of Jesus – and especially numerous in the Italian provinces – were petitions addressed to the Superior General asking to be considered for missions outside their own provinces, especially the 'Indies' of the East. In the case of the Italian *Litterae indipetae*, during de Ursis's lifetime, we find interspersed among these first-person documents, texts that are not by but about candidates for the missions. The documents quoted above fall into this category. The texts take a number of different forms, such as reports sent from the provinces about potential candidates, simple lists naming prospective appointees, and single letters about individuals (as in the case of these documents). In the period under consideration here, there are twenty-five separate reports in three folders concerning roughly 130 individual candidates from 1589 until 1603³.

Together, they reflect a concerted effort on the part of the Jesuit leadership in Rome and a number of provincial collaborators in Italy and Asia to direct and select the appointment of high quality and suitable Jesuits from the Italian provinces to the region. The letters about de Ursis illustrate very effectively some of the key features of this process, as well as its significance for who managed to be selected, who stayed home, and how these decisions ultimately shaped the overseas mission fields⁴.

Brunello and Davor Antonucci for their insights into these documents during the preparation of this chapter.

² Many themes and protagonists in this study have received substantial attention in recent scholarship (together with extensive bibliographical treatments), and have informed what follows, including, especially: *Jesuit Historiography Online (JHO)* <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/jesuit-historiography-online>; I.G. Županov, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Jesuits*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019; R.P.C. Hsia, ed., *A Companion to the Early Modern Catholic Global Missions*, Leiden, Brill, 2018. Biographical information about the Jesuits mentioned in this essay is from the following sources (as well as individual works cited in the notes throughout the chapter): *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, available at: <https://www.treccani.it/biografico/>; *Diccionario histórico de la Compañía de Jesús*, ed. C.E. O'Neill and J.M. Dominguez, 4 vols., Rome and Madrid, Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu - Universidad Pontificia Comillas, 2001; Maria Iris Gramazio, *Gesuiti italiani missionari in Oriente nel XVI secolo*, «Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu», 66, n. 132, 1997, pp. 275-300.

³ ARCHIVUM ROMANUM SOCIETATIS IESU (ARSI), *Fondo Gesuitico (F.G.) 732-759* (containing the 'Indipetae' from the Old Society); Italian reports from the period under consideration here are at 732, 733 and in *Ital.* 173 ('Missiones et servitium...'): this last folder contains reports only (there are no petitions), about candidates from Rome, Veneto, and Milan.

⁴ The study draws on and further develops some materials and analysis already published by the present author: *Becoming 'Indians': The Jesuit Missionary Path from Italy to Asia*, «Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme», 43.1, 2020, pp. 9-50; *Vocation to the East: Italian Candidates for the Jesuit China Mission at the Turn of the Seventeenth Century*, in *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Joseph Connors*, edited by M. Israëls and L. Waldman, 2 vols, Florence, Villa I Tatti, the Harvard

The search for missionaries

In the early-modern period, the Jesuit presence in Asia came within the ambit of the Society of Jesus's Portuguese Assistancy, one of the administrative units through which the Society was governed and organised; aside from Portugal itself, it included lands in the overseas Portuguese sphere of Brazil and Mozambique, as well as Asia, but not the Spanish Philippines. Even though theoretically the Jesuits transcended regional distinctions, the number of Portuguese in Asia followed usual personnel patterns by constituting the largest number of appointments there⁵.

In 1573, just over three decades after the first Jesuit mission to Asia led by Francis Xavier (1506-1551), a shift took place in both the administration and approach towards the missions in the region. In the same year as his election to the generalate, Everard Mercurian (1514-1580; elected 1573) appointed the Italian Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606) to the role of Visitor to the East Indies. He travelled to India in 1574 and never returned to Europe. Acting as the Superior General's personal representative in the East and directly answerable to him, Valignano was charged with the oversight and reform of all Jesuit operations in the region, including recruitment practices and missionizing methods. The intention behind this appointment to some extent was to re-centre oversight of the Asian missions in Rome, rather than Portugal. Through Valignano's trusted communications sent to Rome, the aim was that the Superior General of the worldwide Society would use the information to guide, decide, and direct what happened in the overseas missions.

Under Valignano's stewardship of the enterprise, and with the support of General Mercurian and his successor, Claudio Acquaviva (1543-1615; elected 1581) – who in turn were aided by some key figures at the provincial level – the number of Jesuits from the Italian provinces surpassed the Spaniards to become the second largest group sent to Asia, after the Portuguese⁶. Several factors contributed to this: one was the expanding geographical dimensions of the Society's presence in the region, and another was the almost total absence of local men allowed to join the Society, which meant that the missions depended on reinforcements from Europe. European and Iberian geopolitical factors, as well as internal organisational ones, meant that the large number of Jesuits in the Italian provinces became a ready source of men. At the same time, under his leadership, Valignano sought to improve

University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, 2013, vol. 2, pp. 313-327; *Imagining the 'Indies': Italian Jesuit Petitions for the Overseas Missions at the Turn of the Seventeenth Century*, in *L'Europa divisa e i Nuovi Mondi. Per Adriano Prosperi*, edited by M. Donattini, G. Marcocci, S. Pastore, 3 vols., Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, 2011, vol. 2, pp. 179-189. Some parts of the study are contextualised further in a forthcoming monograph by the present author about biographical writings from the Italian provinces in the first century of the Society of Jesus.

⁵ The most comprehensive study remains, D. Alden, *The Making of an Enterprise: The Society of Jesus in Portugal, its Empire and Beyond, 1540-1750*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996.

⁶ D. Alden, *The Making of an Enterprise*, cit., p. 268.

the quality of candidates being sent overseas and he looked to his homeland of Italy to provide them.

Before leaving for the Indies, Valignano sent to Mercurian a series of detailed reports. Among his recommendations was to reset the Asian enterprise to its universal character by drawing personnel from a mix of regions, in order «that there is to be commingling of nations, and not in a small number». One of the regions that he believed still to be under-represented was his own Italy, where he argued that more recruits should be found, as long as they were of the best kind, like the few excellent candidates whom Mercurian recently had sent to join him. These Italians, Valignano argued, could provide the help that India needed, while at the same acting as valuable «cornerstones» (*pietre angolari*) between the fractious Portuguese and Spaniards⁷.

The notable uptick in administrative documentation concerning the sending of Jesuits from Italy to Asia corresponds to Valignano's advice. While the extent of textual traces is impressive, what it points to more than numbers is quality. The Italian candidates for the overseas missions about whom by far the largest documentation exists at ARSI, became a byword for quality and the preferred choice for augmenting the much larger but stretched Portuguese cohort in Asia. This is the theme that drives the next part of the analysis.

Why Italians?

In leaving Portugal, in the spring of 1574, Valignano was conscious of departing also from Portugal's style of government. In January, he reported to Mercurian the rather shocking observation – written in code – that, what he saw as the Roman method, «to govern with love», for the Portuguese, «is against the spirit of Father Ignatius»⁸. The following month, as preparations for departure progressed in Lisbon, Valignano returned to the subject in his letter to the General, this time in light of Mercurian's directive concerning: «the sweet method that Your Paternity desires», an approach, he wrote, «that Your Paternity taught me»⁹.

This was the method that Valignano sought to implement in Asia. Without it, he argued in a later report from Japan, a local clergy and self-sustaining religious life in Asia was unlikely to develop, and «Christianity will remain suspended on a thread and without any foundation, interior roots, or the ability to survive by

⁷ Alessandro Valignano in Lisbon to Everard Mercurian in Rome, 8 February 1574, in *Monumenta Missionum Societatis Iesu, Vol. XXI, Missiones Orientales: Documenta Indica IX, 1573-1575*, edited by J. Wicki, Rome, Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu (Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu 94), 1966, pp. 155-156 (henceforth, this volume (9) is abbreviated to, *Documenta Indica*): «che vi sia commistione di nationi et non in picciol numero».

⁸ Alessandro Valignano in Lisbon to Everard Mercurian in Rome, 12 January 1574, in *Documenta Indica*, cit., p. 86: «il g.l.f. [governare] con f.g.g. [amore] è contro il b.m.o. [spirito] del P. Ignatio.»

⁹ Alessandro Valignano in Lisbon to Everard Mercurian in Rome, 6 February 1574, in J. Wicki, ed., *Documenta Indica*, cit., p. 133: «il suave modo che Vostra Paternità desidera»; «che Vostra Paternità m'ha insegnato».

itself». Japan – where Xavier had first introduced Christianity in 1549 with such high hopes – was to be the location for the clearest articulation of Valignano's program. On his arrival in 1579, he lamented the disparaging treatment of Japanese converts and brothers at the hands of European missionaries, especially the Jesuit mission leader Francisco Cabral (1528-1609). Over the following years, through his numerous writings of practical guidance for Japan's government, administration, and mission methods, as well as in his letters, Valignano argued that, «If [the Japanese] are treated properly [...] we may confidently hope they will become workers in no whit inferior to European subjects»¹⁰. This was where de Ursis wished to go.

By the time of de Ursis's requests to go to Japan, Valignano was serving as Superior of Japan and China (from 1595) and Acquaviva was the Superior General (from 1581): both men had been at the novitiate together, at S. Andrea in Rome. Valignano had arrived on 29 May 1566, at the age of twenty-seven. Acquaviva arrived just over a year later, on 22 July 1567, at the age of twenty-four. In between these two arrivals was another entrant, from Rome, the twenty-five-year-old Fabio de Fabii (1542-1615), on 17 February 1567. De Fabii provides an important backdrop to the appointment of Italians to the Jesuit Asian missions and, as we will see, he played a significant role in the appointment of de Ursis. After a number of leadership roles in Rome (including as novice master), de Fabii was appointed provincial (1584-1589) and later rector of the Collegio Romano (1602-1604); he was Neapolitan provincial (1600-1602) and had the role of Visitor to most of the Italian provinces and a few outside Italy as well. He was Assistant for Italy (1604-1608) and was General Acquaviva's admonitor (an appointment for providing honest advice to the General, including criticisms). Because of de Fabii's roles, he was both influential and probably knew more Jesuits in Italy than almost anyone of his contemporaries. He was the author of numerous reports and short-lists for the missions. Several petitioners nominate him and, of those who subsequently left for Asia, they wrote letters to him and sent him greetings by name through their epistolary networks¹¹.

All three – de Fabii, Valignano, and Acquaviva – knew each other from S. Andrea and worked together throughout their lives, either in person or from a distance through letters. They were also interconnected cogs in the wheels of the Jesuit Asian missions: the first, as we shall see, through his part in assessing and recommending mission candidates; the second, as we have seen, as Visitor and Provincial in Asia; and the third as Superior General in Rome. Their common

¹⁰ For relevant quotations and discussions of Valignano's writings from Japan, see M.A.J. Üçerler, *Alessandro Valignano: Man, Missionary, Writer*, «Renaissance Studies», 17.3, 2003, pp. 337-366 and J.F. Schütte, *Valignano's Mission Principles for Japan*; trans J.J. Coyne, 2 vols., St Louis, Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1980, especially, vol. 1, pp. 260-267 and vol. 2, p. 60.

¹¹ The cited entry records for the Roman novitiate of S. Andrea are at: ARSI, *Rom.* 170 ('Novitii in Dom. Prof. admissi 1556-1569'), ff. 84v (Valignano), 89r (de Fabii), 92v (Acquaviva).

approach is reflected in a letter that Acquaviva addressed to the Society's provincials in 1583. Mirroring Valignano's earlier advice to General Mercurian, Acquaviva requested of all provinces: «to have a mix of the members of the various provinces and languages, so that in this way, every part of this body [the whole Society] will come to be tied and united through this mix and fortified and embellished together with this uniform variety»¹². With respect to the 'Indies', he heeded Valignano's earlier call for top candidates from Italy. In a letter to the College Rector in 1599 regarding applicants from Naples, General Acquaviva asked for reliable information about which candidates would be best suited for selection (no doubt, to accompany the *Indipetae* in providing more detailed data than the petitions did):

Your Reverence will have seen the desire of many for the Indies and I would like that some consideration be given to this matter and that you propose several of those who, in this holy inspiration, you will judge to be most fervent and suitable, such that, in needing to call some to this effect, we can do so with more awareness and certainty¹³.

In 1599, when this letter was written, de Fabii was about to become provincial of Naples, beginning in 1600. He performed precisely the task requested by Acquaviva, quoted above, in concert with the advice of their former novice fellow, Valignano.

Selecting Sabatino de Ursis

One of the candidates about whom de Fabii wrote, and who received the relatively unusual attention of a single, dedicated letter written solely about him, was de Ursis, who was twenty-six years old at the time. This is the first document presented in this study (Appendix, Doc. 1). The 1601 letter tells us that de Ursis had already written to the Superior General shortly before:

with this [letter] he reminds Your Reverence of the whole matter, hoping greatly to be helped by Your Reverence in this *negotio*; and still that you wish to help him now with Our Father General so that he is sent with these Procurators of Goa and of Japan.

¹² ARSI, *Ital.* 168, f. 41v (30 April 1583), quoted in Alessandro Guerra, *La Compagnia di Acquaviva: riflessioni su memoria e identità gesuitica*, in «Anatomia di un corpo religioso: L'identità dei Gesuiti in età moderna», ed. Franco Motta, numero speciale, «Annali di storia dell'esegesi», 19.2, 2002, pp. 385-399 (p. 391), and Russell, *Becoming 'Indians'*, p. 15: «far mistura de' soggetti di varie province e lingue, perché così ogni parte di questo corpo venga stretta et unita con questa mistione e fortificata et abbellita insieme con questa uniforme varietà».

¹³ Claudio Acquaviva in Rome to the College Rector (Girolamo Barisone) in Naples, 27 February 1599, ARSI, *Neap.* 6, f. 24v, quoted in Russell, *Becoming 'Indians'*, p. 34: «Vostra Reverendissima havrà visto il desiderio [di] molti delle Indie, vorrei che facesse sopra ciò un poco di consideratione et ce ne proponesse parecchi di quelli che in questa santa inspiratione giudicherà più ferventi et più atti acciò bisognando chiamarne alcuni a questo effetto se possiamo farlo con più cognitione et sicurtà».

The procurators were the Italian, Laerzio, and the Portuguese Francisco Vieira (1555-1619), named here as Procurator for the Japan mission and later appointed Visitor to the Japan and China missions.

The next section of the letter echoes the *Litterae indipetae* for its urgent tone, and almost as if it were written by de Ursis himself: «For the love of God, and of Our Most Holy Lady, do not fail to help, and to console him in this, since he is unable to do anything in his current state, on account of his desire to go». The author of the letter attempts to turn his pleading into a certainty, based on trust in his interlocutor: «and knowing certainly that you will not fail to console him, he prays you still, that you will pray for him, and for this *negotio*».

Who wrote the letter and who was its recipient? This is not clear, but we learn that de Ursis was in Salerno at the time: one possibility is that it was written by a superior there and addressed to de Fabii in Naples, who annotated it with his brief appraisal, signed it, and sent it on to Rome. The only section clearly written by de Fabii is the postscript (it is not possible to conclude whether the two sections of the document are in the same hand; even if they were, the document could have been a copy of the original, including a petition written by de Ursis, of which this request may have been a paraphrased summary). In this second part of the document, the tone changes quite markedly from the body of the letter, and returns to the style of the many provincial reports about prospective candidates that are interspersed among the *Indipetae*. De Fabii writes: «In his ability to apply himself, he is very sound. He has recently finished the novitiate and made his vows. He has poor health. Now, for a short time he has been keeping a school of grammar, in Salerno; he has spirit and mature manners». More relevant, perhaps, than these few words, and as we will discover, de Fabii knew de Ursis very well; he met him when de Ursis first entered the Society in Rome, at S. Andrea, and where de Fabii had been novice master.

This is not the last we hear of de Fabii in relation to de Ursis, neither is it the final word about de Ursis before his departure for India in 1602. Keeping our focus for now on the two documents presented here, on 17 May 1601, a second letter again raised the matter of his vocation and appointment to the overseas missions, this time addressed to «Your Paternity», that is, the Superior General, the only person in the Society to receive this title (Appendix, Doc. 2). The unsigned letter from an unspecified place stated: «Brother Sabatino de Ursis, who, on the 18 May 1601, leaves for the Indies with Father Laerzio, reminds Your Paternity that his desire was always to go to Japan». He goes on to explain: «and with the same [desire] he departed; however, he [de Ursis] prays Your Paternity that in his time he remembers to console him, since with this mission he has consoled him greatly; and in this while he continues to pray for Your Paternity».

The language of the two letters – apart from the first document's postscript by de Fabii – is very similar, with the repeated use of the word «consolation». Whether the same person wrote them or even paraphrased summaries of de Ursis's own petitions is unclear (there are differences in the handwriting); what is clear is

that the author of the second document was well aware of the requests made in the first. This second document is a reminder of the original request for Japan. It acknowledges that de Ursis is partly consoled by having been selected to go to India; he seems no longer to be in his spiritual crisis described in the first document; however, he is not wholly consoled either, because it remains unclear whether his true vocation to Japan will be satisfied. This is the purpose of the second letter: to seek complete consolation in this vocation.

While neither of these documents apparently was written by de Ursis – they are not signed by him (the *Indiptae* tend to be signed by their authors), and were not written in the first person in the style of the *Indipetae* – they clearly convey and represent his missionary vocation. Apart from the postscript signed by de Fabii in Doc. 1, which was written in the style of an evaluation of de Ursis, the documents seem to have been devised on his behalf.

The letters differ in two main respects, apart from their slight variation in content. As already noted, the first has the postscript from de Fabii, which may well have carried the necessary weight for the appointment to be made. The second letter, unlike the earlier one, has a secretarial notation on the folio's *verso*, which was presumably recorded upon receipt for filing in Rome. It identifies the document as a *ricordo*, or memorial «about brother de Ursis», who is noted as having «departed for the Indies».

These documents are by no means unique, although they are the exception rather than the rule. For example, from the start of the China mission in 1582 to the end of Acquaviva's generalate in 1615, fifteen Jesuits from the Italian provinces travelled to China.¹⁴ Of these, extant reports concern only three: Niccolò Longobardo (1565-1655), with two reports, de Ursis (two), and Alfonso Vagnone (1568-1640), with three.¹⁵ More broadly, in the period of Acquaviva's long generalate (1581-1615), a mere total of twenty-three petitions and roughly half that number of reports and lists are extant, out of ninety-two Jesuits who sailed east in those years. Details remain very brief about many of these, presumably functioning as short-lists of those considered suitable. Many future missionaries were named in these brief lists, such as Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656; sent to India), Francesco Eugenio (c.1573-?; went to Japan and Macau), and Giacomo Antonio Giannone

¹⁴ J. DEHERGNE, *Répertoire des jésuites de Chine de 1552 à 1800*, Rome, Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1973, listed all Jesuit missionaries sent to China up to the nineteenth century, including their national provenance.

¹⁵ Apart from the documents about de Ursis, provided in the Appendix to this article, similar documents concerning Italian Jesuits sent to China in this period are at, ARSI, *F.G.* 733, ff. 1, 25/1v (Longobardo), 24/2 (Vagnone); ARSI, *F.G.* 732, ff. 12v, 389r (Vagnone). Where *recto* and *verso* are not indicated, these are absent from the archival foliation system and are numbered sequentially instead. Several of these documents – many of which contain reports about Jesuits who were sent to Asia – are later manuscript copies of original documents that became incorporated into the ARCHIVIO DI STATO, Rome, as part of the *Fondo Gesuitico*.

(1577-1633; destinations included Macau, Cochinchina (Vietnam), and Japan, where he met a violent death)¹⁶.

Among the *Litterae indipetae*, there are records about four Italians who travelled in the same 1602 fleet as de Ursis. From a mix of provinces, the Italians travelled in the same ship as the Japan procurator, Vieira, whereas de Ursis was on a different ship¹⁷. Antonio Zumbo is described in the 1600 report from Palermo: «after having completed and defended his studies in philosophy, he undertook four years of school [teaching] and presently is studying the first year of theology». Giovanni Vincenzo Cafiero received an appraisal from de Fabii (as Naples Provincial) in the form of brief notes written on the candidate's 1601 petition. De Fabii indicated that Cafiero had made good progress in his studies in the humanities, and that he «shows spirit». Giulio Cesare Curione's report, sent from Milan in 1594, describes him as being in possession «of good intelligence and spirit, and strength». The future Japan martyr, Girolamo de Angelis (1569-1623), was described in Sicily Provincial Bartolomeo Ricci's report of 1592 as having been free of dependent relatives and as having a «rich married sister»; the report further observes, «this year, he has commenced his studies in logic, which he manages very well». The future Superior of the China mission, Longobardo, appeared in the same report. He travelled much earlier than the others did, in 1596¹⁸.

In the next section, we will take a closer look at the contexts for these documents to shed a wider light through them onto some aspects of the missionary enterprise and its approach and organisation. It does so by following the geographical destinations relevant to the texts reproduced here about de Ursis – India, Japan and (although not mentioned, his actual destination) China. This will lead us in the conclusion, to circle back to what the documents can reveal about the organisation of the missions, some of the main protagonists in their organisation, as well as something of the type of missionary they envisaged when they chose a man of the likes of de Ursis.

¹⁶ ARSI, *F.G.* 733, f. 140/2 (Report from Naples, naming, among others, Roberto de Nobili, 1601; signed by Provincial Fabio de Fabii). A similar short-list report is at, ARSI, *F.G.* 733, ff. 260r-261v (including Antonio Giannone, Francesco Eugenio, and Francesco Buzomi (or Buzomo)). Not all of those short-listed were successful: Giulio Orsino (at f. 260r) did not sail.

¹⁷ The lists of Jesuits who sailed are in, J. Wicki, *Liste der Jesuiten-Indienfahrer 1541-1758*, «Aufsätze zur Portugiesischen Kulturgeschichte», 7, 1967, pp. 252-450 (at pp. 269-285).

¹⁸ Reports on Antonio Zumbo, ARSI, *F.G.* 733, f. 105r: «dopo finito, et difeso il corso di filosofia, ha fatto 4 anni di scola, et al presente studia il primo anno di teologia»; on Vincenzo Cafiero (signed by de Fabii), ARSI, *F.G.* 733, f. 119r: «mostra spirito»; on Giulio Cesare Curione, ARSI, *F.G.* 732, f. 12v: «di buoni ingegno e spirito, et forze»; on Geronimo d'Angelis (where Longobardo is also named), ARSI, *F.G.* 733, f. 25/1v (copy): «una sorella maritata et ricca»; «quest'anno ha incominciato la logica et ci riesce molto bene.»

Japan, India, China...

Let us begin with the requested destination of Japan. It was here that the greatest danger lay for missionaries to Asia, with the proscription of Christianity from 1587, followed by intermittent persecution, including executions of Christians, among whom were Jesuits. With the mass expulsions of 1614, most Jesuits working in Japan went into exile in Macau; the final forced departure of all Christians in 1640 led to ever-fiercer persecution until Christianity's eradication as an openly practised religion. The dramatic events in Japan were widely reported and read in Europe, especially among Jesuits. They were inspiring to the authors of the *Litterae indipetae*. Many wanted to imitate Christ's suffering and death, the early Christian martyrs, and (from their own times) the Japan martyrs by giving their lives in hopes to secure new conversions as well as their own salvation¹⁹.

Vespasiano Bonamici, who was selected along with de Ursis to depart for Goa, in 1602, wrote of his conviction that he must go to the missions and die there too («*Io devo morire*»):

I have been in the Society for eleven years, and with ease, eating well and dressing well, and comfortable everywhere, and I will finish my life in a bed: is that possible? That my life ends in a bed while Christ died on the cross?²⁰

Japan was one of the most sought-after destinations of the petitioners. In his 7 January letter to Mercurian, quoted above, Valignano wrote of candidate Vincenzo Lenoci: «he does not want to go if not to Japan»²¹. Giulio Orsino's 1600 petition from the Collegio Romano is typical: his vocation was «to go among infidel peoples, especially to Japan, or else to China»²².

De Ursis never managed to be sent to Japan. When he did eventually leave Europe in 1602, he travelled on the same boat as four other Italians, five Portuguese and two French. Other Italian Jesuits from his 1602 fleet did manage to be sent to Japan. Giovanni Vincenzo Antoglietta (1577-1618) was on the same boat as de Ursis and was in Japan from 1605, but was expelled to Macau with two confreres after a shipwreck; in 1617, he tried to return to Japan with no success and

¹⁹ The present author offers a more developed treatment of the theme of Jesuit martyrdom in, C. RUSSELL, *Early Modern Martyrdom and the Society of Jesus in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, in *Narratives and Representations of Suffering, Failure, and Martyrdom: Early Modern Catholicism Confronting the Adversities of History*, edited by L. Cohen, Lisbon, Centro de Estudos de História Religiosa, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2020, pp. 67-99.

²⁰ ARSI, *F.G.* 733, f. 77v (Vespasiano Bonamici, S. Andrea, 23 September 1598); quoted in C. RUSSELL, *Early Modern Martyrdom*, cit., p. 93: «undeci anni sono stato nella compagnia, et sempre in aggi, mangiato bene, vestito bene, et commodo per tutti i luoghi, et finirò la vita mia in un letto; è possibile? io finire la vita in un letto, et Christo in croce?»

²¹ «non vuole andare se non al Giappone», *Documenta Indica*, cit., p. 62.

²² ARSI, *F.G.* 733, f. 93r (Petition of Giulio Orsino, Collegio Romano, 23 May 1600): «d'andare tra gente infedeli et specialmente al Giappone, o vero alla China». His requests for the Indies are analysed in G.C. Roscioni, *Il desiderio delle Indie. Storie, sogni e fughe di giovani gesuiti italiani*, Turin, Einaudi, 2001, Ch. 1.

he died in Macau. Francesco Boldrino (c.1575-1632) travelled in the same ship as the Japan Procurator, Vieira, and was in Japan from 1609-1612, when he returned to Macau, but he left again for Japan in 1615 and died in 1632. Giovanni Battista Zola was another Italian on a different boat from that of de Ursis – that of India Procurator, Laerzio – and like de Ursis, he went from Goa to Macau and from there to Japan in 1606. Zola was back in Macau after the expulsions of 1614, but returned to Japan in 1615, where he remained for a further ten years until his capture in 1625 and execution the following year²³.

While the dangerous conditions of the Japan mission at the turn of the seventeenth century in many ways contrasted with the unrealistic expectations of the petitioners back in Europe, Jesuits were still sailing there when de Ursis applied to go and thus could reasonably expect to have been sent. Indeed, the numbers of Jesuits in Japan grew between 1587 and 1607 from 94 to 140. In 1607, Japan was numerically second only to Goa, which had 184 Jesuits. Another mission that saw a boom in Jesuit appointments during these years was South India around Cochin. Between 1601 and 1607, the mission rose to the third-largest Jesuit undertaking in Asia, after Goa and Japan, from thirty-five to sixty in those years²⁴. Italians were sent there in particularly high numbers and it was where de Ursis was concerned he would be destined to go.

As already noted, Procurator Laerzio was in Europe principally to recruit for this mission. An experienced missionary in Asia, he left Europe for Goa in 1579; almost twenty years later, in 1598, he was sent back to Rome as mission Procurator. On his return to India, in 1602, he became Vice-Provincial of Goa and then Provincial of Malabar (1605-1611). In 1620, he was appointed Visitor to Japan and China. He was once more Procurator for India in Rome and departed for the East for the final time in 1624; the following year, he again became Provincial of Malabar, 1625-1629, and died in Cochin in 1630. When he set sail with the same 1602 fleet as de Ursis, he was travelling with a large cohort of fifty-nine Jesuits, and a record number of thirty-one Italians. This was extremely unusual: by comparison, in 1601, nine Jesuits sailed in one boat, and they were all Portuguese.

The Portuguese India fleet of 1602 travelled in four ships, with its two procurators. This was the forty-fourth eastward journey that had been made by over four-hundred members of the Society since the first expedition sixty-one years previously, in 1541²⁵. With high hopes that many of the new recruits would join Laerzio in Malabar (soon to become the location for the famous experiment in cultural adaptation led by the Brahmin-dressed Italian, de Nobili), he later

²³ A. Tamburello, *Per un repertorio dei Gesuiti italiani in Giappone (secoli XVI-XVII)*, in *Italia-Giappone 450 anni*, 2 vols., edited by A. Tamburello, Roma-Napoli, Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente e Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", 2003, vol. 1, pp. 35-38. My thanks to Carlo Pelliccia for this reference.

²⁴ D. Alden, *The Making of an Enterprise*, cit., p. 46.

²⁵ Details of the 1602 fleet are in, J. Wicki, *Liste der Jesuiten-Indienfahrer 1541-1758*, cit., pp. 283-285.

complained that less than a dozen of the Jesuits accompanying him, far fewer than he had expected, actually went with him to work at Cochin²⁶.

De Ursis was among those who did not go to Cochin. He went to Macau instead, arriving there in 1603, apparently still expecting to proceed to Japan. This was where missionaries prepared for entry to Japan. The length of time that de Ursis spent in Macau points to the likelihood that this was indeed where he was destined, since otherwise he may have gone to China earlier, where language training tended to take place on the mainland, as opposed to that for Japan, conducted in Macau²⁷. Another consideration on this point is to compare the case of de Ursis with that of his fellow China missionary, Alfonso Vagnone: he left Europe the year after de Ursis, in 1603, and was already in mainland China in 1605, while de Ursis arrived a year later, in 1606.

De Ursis, instead, was the only Italian sent to China out of the entire thirty-one strong cohort that travelled from Lisbon in 1602. Why was he diverted from the Japan mission to China? His poor health may be one explanation. Another is that his talent for mathematics and architectural knowledge attracted the attention of Valignano, who was in Macau and who identified these traits as more suitable for the China mission. Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) explained how it happened. On 15 August 1606, he penned one of the *solì* – letters reserved for the eyes of the Superior General only. In it, and in his capacity as China Superior (since 1597), Ricci set out the affairs of the mission. It was the first time that he performed this task, which was usually the responsibility of Valignano, whom he described as the father of the mission, until his death earlier that year, in Macau, on 20 January, an event that he described as having left them feeling like orphans. As to the China mission, Ricci explained that prior to Valignano's death, «The Father Visitor entrusted us here inside China with sixteen [members] of the Society: twelve priests, all Europeans, and four Chinese brothers born in Macau among Christians». He continued: «Apart from these, he entrusted the nomination of two others in Macau to be sent here [to mainland China] when we ask for them; and we have already asked for them if they give them to us and if they can enter». These two were Francisco Lopes (1574-?), although he never entered, and de Ursis²⁸.

²⁶ For this point, see D. Alden, *The Making of an Enterprise*, cit. pp. 236-237.

²⁷ L.M. Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579-1724*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 250-252. More broadly, this volume provides an important study of the Jesuit China mission.

²⁸ Matteo Ricci to Claudio Acquaviva, Beijing, 15 August 1606, in *Matteo Ricci: Lettere (1580-1609)*, edited by F. D'Arelli, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2001, pp. 423-424: «Il p. visitatore ci lasciò qua dentro della Cina sedici della Compagnia; dodici sacerdoti, tutti europei, e quattro fratelli cinesi, ma nati in Macau fra cristiani. Oltre di questi lasciò nominati doi altri in Macao per mandarsi qua dentro, quando noi li chiedessimo; e già li habbiamo chiesti se ce li daranno e potranno intrare».

Unbroken Ties: Letters from China to Rome

In 1606, the same year when Ricci wrote his letter, de Ursis travelled to Nanjing, then to Beijing, where he arrived the following year, in 1607. His work with Ricci as an astronomer, translator, and writer on hydraulics in Chinese, introducing European pharmaceutical knowledge to China and working on the early stages of the reform of the Chinese calendar – which he continued after Ricci's death – is well known and discussed elsewhere²⁹. His exile to Macau in 1616-1617, together with Vagnone, from their respective missionary bases in Nanjing and Beijing, is also well known. This was where de Ursis died only three years later, in 1620, while Vagnone returned to China in 1624. De Ursis was De Ursis was forty-five years old on his death, which took place only two years after taking his final vows, at forty-three.

Why so late? According to Ricci, Italian Jesuits tended to be held back in favour of their Portuguese confreres. In his 1606 letter, Ricci described to Acquaviva about Longobardo that «three years ago, he made his vows of [spiritual] coadjutor by order of the Father Visitor [Valignano], but always it has seemed to me that he deserved more and that he should be conferred with the profession of the fourth vow». This grade would have been conferred, he writes, «if this enterprise were not in lands subject to the Portuguese – where it seems to me they do not easily create superiors who are foreign». By comparison, Ricci did not hesitate to comment that: «And here, I have another companion, Diego [de] Pantoja [(1571-1618)...] who has not given much edification [...] It appears to me that I would feel embarrassed at being professed thus, with these other two coadjutors» – that is, the Italians Longobardo and Vagnone³⁰. Ricci recommends Longobardo as his successor; he effectively does the same in a 1605 letter addressed to de Fabii (who had been appointed Assistant for Italy the year before), describing Longobardo – who did indeed succeed Ricci as mission Superior – as a «great worker in these parts, very devoted to Your Reverence and a prolific writer»³¹. Once more, then, de Fabii appears in these texts from the missions, this time as correspondent of Ricci, as well as lauded by Longobardo, Ricci's successor as China Superior.

²⁹ See, for example, Francesco Frisullo and Paolo Vincenti, *L'apostolato scientifico dei gesuiti nella Cina dei Ming. Il missionario salentino Sabatino de Ursis*, Castiglione, Giorgiani Editore, 2020.

³⁰ Matteo Ricci to Claudio Acquaviva, Beijing, 15 August 1606, in *Matteo Ricci: Lettere*, cit., pp. 426-427: «tre anni sono fece i voti di coadiutore per ordine del p. visitatore, ma sempre mi parse meritava egli assai più, e che deveria darseli la professione de' quattro voti»; «se non fusse questa impresa in terre soggette a Portoghesi, dove mi pare non se deveriano fare facilmente superiori forastieri»; «E qui ho un altro compagno, Diego Pantoja [...] che non ci ha data tanta edificazione [...] parmi sentirei vergogna esser questo professo, e, questi altri doi coadiutori».

³¹ Matteo Ricci to Fabio de Fabii, Beijing, 9 May 1605, in *Matteo Ricci: Lettere*, cit., p. 381: «p. Nicolò Longobardi, grande operaio in queste parti, molto divoto di Vostra Reverendissima e copioso nello scrivere».

De Fabii is also a protagonist in the de Ursis correspondence. In a letter from Macau addressed to Portugal Assistant, João Álvares (1548-1623), dated 23 August 1608, de Ursis asks that greetings be conveyed to various friends, adding:

and I ask Your Reverence to do the same to Father Fabio de Fabii, my novice master, asking him to commend me to the Lord, because I hope that, just as he helped me many times in Rome, being in the midst of so many servants of the Lord at S. Andrea [at the Quirinale, Rome], now I will be helped even more in my greater needs and danger. I will not write now [to de Fabii...], but on another occasion, I will do so³².

This letter is important for giving visibility to the role of de Fabii as a cherished mentor from the earliest days of de Ursis's membership in the Society, and revealing a bond between the two that extended to the faraway mission fields of China. This document also confirms that de Ursis was at the novitiate in Rome, before moving to that of Naples (possibly for his health, which was described as poor). He clearly maintained his contacts with de Fabii there, too, where the latter became Neapolitan Provincial (1600-1602): as we have seen, it was de Fabii who wrote the appraisal of de Ursis, which probably decided his fate as missionary to the East. As for his arrival in mainland China, another fellow-former novice – Valignano – made the decision that de Ursis should go there and not to Japan. These were decisions that carried weight, and bore within them shared histories, friendships, and a great deal of trust. They influenced who was sent where and, perhaps more crucially, the kind of missionizing that was to be done – in the words of Valignano – in the Roman way, with «amore», which came to be known as the method of accommodation.

Acquaviva, Valignano, and de Fabii were not the only protagonists in the missionary path taken by de Ursis, however. Another important figure that appears in his correspondence is the Portugal Assistant in Rome, Álvares. De Ursis opened his letter by recalling: «the charity and love that Your Reverence always showed me – while in Rome and in the time when I departed for India – obliged me to write many times»³³. Like de Fabii, Álvares was a figure of reference for de Ursis when he was in Rome, and maybe another reason why he was chosen: these men knew him well.

The Assistant is also visible here as another meeting point between those who determined how the missions operated and were governed: that is, between the

³² ARSI, *Jap. Sin.* 14 II ('Iapon. Epist. 1600-1610'), f. 316v (Sabatino de Ursis to João Álvares, Macau, 23 August 1608): «l'istesso domando a Vostra Reverendissima voglia fare con il Padre Fabio de Fabii, mio Maestro de Novitii, pregandolo mi voglia raccomandare al Signore, perché spero che se per suo mezzo fui molte volte agiutato in Roma stando nel mezzo di tanti servi del Signore a S. Andrea; molto più sarò adesso, che la necessità, e il pericolo gliè maggiore; non scrivo adesso [...] con altra occasione lo farò».

³³ ARSI, *Jap. Sin.* 14 II, f. 316r (Sabatino de Ursis to João Álvares, Macau, 23 August 1608): «La carità, e amore che Vostra Reverendissima sempre mi mostrò standose in Roma, e nel tempo che parti[i] per la India mi obligavano a scrivere più e più volte».

Superior General, the Portuguese crown (which provided funding and oversight of the missions by papal delegation), and the Jesuit leadership back in Portugal. As the Rome-based conduit of information from Portugal, he was the mediating figure between the spokes and centre; he assisted in working out the delicate balance between nations, destinations, and individual appointments. This included establishing how many appointees would be priests and coadjutors (or lay brothers); how many would be already fully integrated into the Society and ready for leadership roles, and how many were yet to complete their formation abroad, as in the case of de Ursis.

De Ursis would have been aware of the Assistant's pivotal role in the missions and he conveyed a sense of responsibility and perhaps gratitude and debt in sending his letter. He wrote: «knowing how much Your Reverence desires news from these parts [...] – and since until now I have found myself (we might say) on the move, not being in one definite place, [and therefore] I have not done it – now [...] I set about writing these two lines to give the latest news to Your Reverence»³⁴. Here, we have an illustration of how the Jesuit account of China – its mission methods, key events, people, and issues that constituted this crucial aspect of Sino-European contact – travelled along lines of patronage, friendship, debt, gratitude, obedience, and religious fraternity. These ties were previously established in Europe and remained unbroken between the Society's hub in Rome and the China mission through the letters that travelled between them.

Conclusion

The two letters produced about de Ursis's vocation to the 'Indies' have enabled an exploration of the many factors that went into appointments, as well as the policies that shaped who sailed and what kind of missionary methods they were likely to employ. They highlighted the special attention paid to Italian candidates in this period for bolstering both numbers and quality. They also reveal the importance of province leadership in the selection process, and the documentary evidence that pertains to this from the Italian provinces during the period when de Ursis was seeking to be selected for the 'Indies'. This was a complex, multi-lateral system for negotiating departures, involving many players, and numerous interconnected considerations.

Specific details emerged about de Ursis as well. His selection for the 'Indies' was only one hurdle among many that he had to jump: the next one was the destination. This remained uncertain and changeable to the last: he wished to go to Japan; he and his provincial superiors appeared concerned that he would end up in Malabar with Laerzio; he went to China. Four figures seemed intimately involved

³⁴ ARSI, *Jap. Sin.* 14 II (Sabatino de Ursis to João Álvares, 23 August 1608), f. 316r: «sapendo quanto Vostra Reverendissima desidera nove di queste parti [...] come infino adesso mi sono ritrovato (possiamo dire) di camino, non stando in loco determinato, non l'ho fatto, adesso [...] determinai scrivere queste due righe per dar la nova a Vostra Reverendissima».

in this process: de Fabii at the novitiate and provincial level, who proposed that he be released from his home province; Acquaviva as the Superior General, who gave the licence for him to leave, and Valignano who appointed him to the China mission; finally, the Portugal Assistant administered the final lists for the mission fields of Asia. This was a carefully managed and negotiated process that attracted the attention of the highest levels of the Society, as well as the active involvement of the individual himself. Even if he did not secure his desired destination, as in the case of de Ursis, without this vocation, the path of the would-be missionary did not proceed.

APPENDIX

Doc. 1: Letter with postscript by Fabio de Fabii to unnamed recipient about Sabatino de Ursis, ARSI, F.G. 733, f. 116r (Salerno, 28 January 1601)

Sabbatino de Orsi ricorda a Vostra Reverendissima come lui desidera grandemente andare nel Giappone, et come li giorni passati scrisse al Padre Generale di questo. Però con questo ricorda a Vostra Reverendissima il tutto, sperando grandemente essere agiutato da Vostra Reverendissima in questo negotio; et ancora che lo voglia agiutare adesso con il Nostro Padre Generale accioché sia spedito con questi Procuratori di Goa, et de Giappone. Vostra Reverendissima per amor de Dio, et della Madonna Santissima non manchi agiutarlo, et consolarlo in questo; poiché non può fare niente restando in questo modo, per il desiderio dell'andata; e sapendo di certo che non mancherà di consolarlo, la prega ancora, che vogliano pregare il Signore per esso, et per questo negotio. In Salerno. 28 di Gennaio 1601.

Nella habilità dell'impegno si mostra assai mediocre / ha finito poco fa il novitiato et fatto i voti. Ha poca sanità. Hora tiene una scola di grammatica di poco numero in Salerno, mostra spirito et maturità di costumi / Fabio Fabii.

Doc. 2: Unsigned letter to Superior General Claudio Acquaviva about Sabatino de Ursis, ARSI, F.G. 733, f. 129rv (place and author not specified, 17 May 1601)

Il fratello Sabbatino de Ursis, il quale alli 18 di Maggio 1601 parte per l'Indie con il Padre Laertio, ricorda a Vostra Paternità che il suo desiderio fu sempre di andare nel Giappone, et con l'istesso si è partito; però prega Vostra Paternità che nel suo tempo si ricordi di consolarlo, poiché con questa missione tanto l'ha consolato; et in questo mentre resta pregando in ogni tempo per Vostra Paternità

[129v] Ricordo del fratello Sabatino de Ursis partito per l'Indie 17 di maggio 1601

