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The *Codex Casanatense* 1889: open questions and new perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

by
ERNST VAN DEN BOOGAART

The simple, colorful images of the *Codex Casanatense* have an immediate appeal, even in reproduction. Since they were published by Luís de Matos in Portugal and Franco Maria Ricci in Italy, they have frequently been used in exhibitions and texts to evoke the Asian world in which the Portuguese operated. Reproduced on the cover of the third volume of Braudel's *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme*, the "Portuguese in Ormuz" forced by the heat to take a meal seated in a bathing pool became particularly famous. What the images had to tell seemed obvious: they showed the costumes and some of the customs of the Asian peoples with whom the Portuguese had established contact in the first half of the sixteenth century.

Georg Schurhammer S.J., who rediscovered the engaging collection during his research for the life of Franciscus Xaverius, believed that the images were based on eye-witness observation and thought they were very faithful. He perceived them as a kind of illustrative supplement to Duarte Barbosa's *Livro*, a view he supported with some telling examples. Matos largely shared this view, but his more extensive comparisons between the images in the codex and the descriptions by Portuguese travelers and chroniclers turned up all kinds of discrepancies. This encouraged a more complex conception of the documentary nature of the images and the narrative texts. Clearly, the images and texts evoke ways of life in sixteenth-century Asia, but the reality to which they refer remains evasive. After all, reality is a superabundance of information that humans master not merely by observation, but also by ordering the observations according to interpretative frameworks they share with others, but to which they add individual features. Sanjay Subrahmanyam brought this out in his comments on some of the religious scenes depicted in the *Codex Casanatense*. The articles in this dossier pursue the leads provided by Schurhammer, Matos and Subrahmanyam.

Schurhammer was convinced that the painter of the Asian images of the codex was Portuguese. A few commentators suggested that the style in which the paintings had been executed was Indian, without however arguing their case in detail. Jerry Losty confronts the issue head on. By careful and detailed comparisons between the *Codex Casanatense* and Indian manuscript illustrations he builds a strong case for attributing the codex to an Indian artist. The iconography the artist employed – the couples and customs formula – was, however, Western, most likely suggested by a Portuguese patron. This makes the codex into one of those hybrid works of art of which Portuguese-indigenous encounters in West Africa and Sri Lanka offer other examples.

In my contribution I analyze the use of the couples and customs formula in detail. I argue that in addition to the division into Christians, Jews, Muslims and pagans the images show a division of Portuguese Asia into three large culture areas – the Arabian-Persian orbit, the Indian subcontinent and South-East Asia. Moreover, they present Asia as a continent largely inhabited by civil people, in contrast to the more savage Africans south of the Sahara. In my view, the codex is not so much a costume book as the visualization of ethnographic classification. This is a Western reading of the images. It needs to be supplemented by a reading that gives due weight to the contributions of the Indian painter to meaning of the images.

The image with "Hispar, Visno and Brama" and the one with the two-headed cobra are of a different nature than the others. They are symbolic images, derived from Indian iconography. In the context of the codex they are at the same time classificatory images, indicating paganism. However, as Peter Mason points out, some Western viewers may have taken the image of the two-headed cobra not merely as a symbol, but also as the depiction of a real, observable animal. In the early-modern period many Westerners believed that two-headed snakes actually occurred as an animal species.

Ana Paula Avelar and Vasco Resende compare the images of the codex with interpretative frameworks and specific descriptions in texts by Portuguese travelers and chroniclers. Ana Paula Avelar points out that the Portuguese texts and the Luso-Indian codex share a geographic framework stretching from Eastern Africa to China, and a set of social topics. This does not mean that the texts and the codex deal with all the topics in precisely the same way. This is only sporadically the case. More commonly they vary, add to, transform or delete some of the shared topics. They participate in a common discourse on Asia. Focusing on the Turco-Iranian peoples,

Vasco Resende takes the same approach as Avelar. He was one of the first to suggest that some of the legends in the codex are inaccurate and that the present numbering may disagree with the original sequence of the plates. In my contribution I followed up this lead for a more extensive deconstruction and reassembling of the codex.

Only the not very likely discovery of a textual source mentioning the patron of the codex will establish his identity beyond doubt. In the meantime we will have to make do with educated guesses based on data from the codex and life histories. Rui Loureiro demonstrates how such an informed guess can be constructed and suggests Garcia da Orta as a possible patron. Cases for other people can undoubtedly be built and contribute to further profiling of the patron.

In a beautiful piece of historical detective work, Vítor Serrão reveals that the author of the pen drawing showing the disfigured baby, on the last page of the codex, may have been the painter Simão Rodrigues. The interest in the baby was inspired by the persistent millennial expectations recurring after the death of King Sebastian. That pen drawing documents that the codex circulated at the beginning of the seventeenth century among a group of Lisbon painters who were collecting depictions of Asians to be used for the Legend of Saint Francis Xavier in the sacristy of the Church of São Roque. The fortunes of codex and the Saint were linked long before Father Schurhammer's rediscovery.

Finally, I would like to thank the editors of AHAM for entrusting me with the organization of this dossier and in particular Tiago Miranda, for his unstinting support, and Rita Almeida Simões, for her meticulous editing of the texts. The authors I approached handed in substantial articles that greatly add to our appreciation of the codex. I am grateful to all of them. Finally, Nuno Vassallo e Silva (Gulbenkian Museum), Susan Stronge (Victoria and Albert Museum), Carla Alferes Pinto (CHAM) and André Murteira (CHAM) deserve to be thanked for advice given in an early stage of putting together the dossier. We all are very much obliged to the Biblioteca Casanatense for sponsoring this project.