

The First Meeting between Japan and the West

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(An article from Francis Britto's *All about Francis Xavier*)



1. Xavier and Anjiro

Every Sunday evening throughout 1992 millions of Japanese watched the NHK serial drama, "Nobunaga, King of Zipangu", featuring the life of the warlord Oda Nobunaga, 1534-1582. Also appearing in the program was the Portuguese missionary Luis Frois, who met Nobunaga often and knew him well. Not only did Frois have a prominent role in the story, but he also acted as narrator, linking one scene with the next and ending each week's episode with the Portuguese words, "Até breve, obrigado," or "Thank you, until next time." In September 1992 a newly composed opera was performed in Tokyo for the first time featuring the Jesuit-sponsored expedition of four Japanese boys who traveled to Europe in the 1580s, met Philip II in Madrid, and Popes Gregory XIII and Sixtus V in Rome. Thus there can be no doubt about the current interest in the early Japanese-Western relations, especially as the 450th anniversary of the Europeans' first arrival occurs in 1993.

It is not always appreciated that one of the purposes of Christopher Columbus's voyages of discovery was to find the fabled island of Zipangu, the name by which Marco Polo had referred to Japan. Polo never came to Japan, but he heard about the country during his extended stay in China. In his hearsay account of Japan, he emphasized the country's great wealth of gold, an inaccurate statement that aroused interest, not to say cupidity, in the West and fired Europeans' desire to find the fabled island. But it was not until 1543 that three Portuguese were shipwrecked on the small island of Tanegashima to the south of Kyushu and in this fortuitous way the century of Japanese-European relations began.

Within a few years more Portuguese merchants arrived in Japan, and if they did not find Polo's gold, there was a ready supply of silver available. The Chinese coveted Japanese silver, while the Japanese wanted Chinese silk. Owing to the depredations of the *wakō* pirates, there were no official commercial relations between Japan and China, and so using their capacious carracks, the largest ships afloat at the time, the Portuguese plied a profitable trade between Nagasaki and their base of operations at Macao. But by its very nature this venture was not destined to be permanent, although it lasted for the better part of a century, for as soon as the Chinese were allowed to export their silk directly to Japan, the Portuguese middlemen would no longer be needed.



2. Oda Nobunaga

In addition to the Portuguese, who dominated European trade in Japan during the sixteenth century, in the course of time Spanish, English, and Dutch merchants also arrived to conduct business. Ironically, although the English stayed for only ten years, 1613-1623, and traded with a notable lack of success, they at least left a variety of piecemeal information about everyday life of the Japanese. On the whole the Iberian traders did not tend to settle for extended periods in Japan and so have left few records. There are exceptions. Bernardino de Avila Girón and

the shipwrecked diplomat Rodrigo de Vivero y Velasco compiled detailed accounts of their stay in Japan.

1. LUIS FROIS

For in-depth information on Japan, we must turn to the letters, reports, and writings of the permanently based missionaries, especially those of the Jesuits, who stayed longer and were more numerous than the mendicant orders. Francis Xavier reached Japan in 1549 and in the following years reinforcements arrived to preach the Gospel. Considering that the total number of missionaries probably never exceeded a hundred at any one time, the results they achieved are remarkable. Among the missionaries Luis Frois was the chronicler par excellence. Combining an elegant literary style with inexhaustible energy to inform Europe about events in Japan, he sent back dozens of lengthy reports and letters. Although many of these concerned the progress and problems of the mission, Frois also described current affairs and political events.

One may wonder why Frois and others spent so many hours industriously writing these reports. It must be remembered that the Society of Jesus had been founded as recently as 1540 and was still in the early stage of development. Lacking the long tradition of the older religious orders, the Society strove to foster a sense of unity among its men scattered throughout the world. One way to do this was to encourage letter-writing among its members. An instruction dated 1553 advised Jesuit missionaries to describe their mission field by writing about "the weather, the degrees of longitude, the dress, the food, the housing, number and customs of the inhabitants; just as other accounts are written to satisfy curiosity, so let our men also write in the same way." Another factor was also present—by fostering interest about Japan among Europeans, the Jesuits hoped to attract much-needed funds and reinforcements for the mission.

Frois was in an excellent position to write about Japan. For many years he acted as the Jesuit superior's secretary and thus had access to reports written by missionaries stationed in different parts of the country. In addition, as the NHK program accurately depicts, Frois came to know the great Nobunaga well; on occasion he chatted with the warlord for hours in Japanese and was given a personal tour around his castles. The missionary has left a fascinating first-hand portrait of the ruler that is of particular historical value. Contrary to the nature of contemporaneous Japanese sources, which tended to be brief and terse, Frois's letters are full of rich detail that help us to see Nobunaga and other lords as human beings and not just as remote and inaccessible autocrats.

Frois has left excellent accounts of the various castles he visited. He begins his



3. A Japanese castle

description of Gifu Castle on a rather wistful note: "At this point I wish I were a skilled architect or had the gift of describing places well, because I sincerely assure you that of all the places and houses I have seen in Portugal, India and Japan, there has been nothing to compare with this as regards luxury, wealth and cleanliness." Despite this modest disclaimer, Frois goes on to provide an excellent account of the fortress. He also writes about Azuchi Castle,

another of Nobunaga's strongholds and situated on the east bank of lake Biwa; his account has a certain poignancy as the magnificent structure existed for only three or four years before being destroyed in 1582 following the ruler's violent death in Kyoto. "On top of the hill in the middle of the city Nobunaga built his palace and

castle, which as regards architecture, strength, wealth and grandeur may well be compared with the greatest buildings of Europe." Frois was quite familiar with the place as he had often visited Azuchi and on one occasion was given a personal tour of the castle by Nobunaga himself.

When the four boys set out to Europe in 1582, they took with them a screen, probably painted by Kano Eitoku, featuring the castle and city. It was presented to Gregory XIII on 31 March 1585, and we can only deplore that since then no trace of the artistic and historical treasure has been found.

We may well wonder how and why Europeans such as Frois gained such close contact with Nobunaga and other nobles. It has to be borne in mind that if Europe was interested in Japan, so Japan also was interested in Europe. The Japanese were familiar with China and Korea, of course, and they knew that distant India was the birthplace of the Buddha. But their geographical knowledge did not extend any further West, and it is understandable that even the mightiest of the land should be curious about the men from the unknown and mysterious West. In addition, some of the missionaries were educated men who had obtained fluency in Japanese, and so had no difficulty in answering the dozens of questions that Nobunaga and others asked them about the West—its position, social customs, government, history, architecture, dress, food, etc.

There was perhaps an additional reason. The Europeans all lived in Japan when the country enjoyed no central authority and was split up into scores of hostile fiefs governed by the *daimyō*, or barons. It was an age of treachery, a violent period of *gekokujō* ['supplanting one's superior'], when subjects rebelled and overthrew their lords at the first opportunity. It was a time when it was not prudent or safe for rulers to completely trust subordinates lest they too turn traitor. But as the Westerners were powerless, rulers could feel at ease in their company and chat with them familiarly as they offered no political or military threat.



4. A samurai

Japan's isolated geographical position and thousands of trained *samurai* precluded the possibility of European military intervention (unlike other regions of Asia and South America). In the case of Japan, the Europeans arrived not as haughty conquerors but as neutral visitors; for perhaps the first time Europeans and Asians met on equal terms. It was now the Westerners' turn to be regarded as barbarians and in fact they were soon dubbed *Nambanjin*, or Southern Barbarians. The term

comes from the Chinese and it would be a mistake to read too much into it in the Japanese context. The Chinese regarded as a barbarian anyone who did not have the good fortune to have been born in the Middle Kingdom, and so the Japanese, taking over the same term, called the Europeans coming to Japan from Macao in the south the Southern Barbarians. Perhaps on account of this equal, or less than equal, relationship between Westerners and the Japanese, a number of the visitors took such a deep interest in local culture and left such detailed accounts.

2. THE VOCABULARIO

As there were so few missionaries to preach the Gospel throughout the country, a European press was imported so that the written word could help to spread the Christian cause. This Jesuit press brought out a total of thirty-one titles, many of them religious in nature. These included biographies of the saints, a liturgical handbook (the only work printed in two colors), and the translated writings of Thomas à Kempis and Luis de Granada.

Perhaps the most enduring products of the press are works dealing with the Japanese language. Reinforcements to the mission were arriving from Europe and they needed dictionaries and grammars to learn the language. In 1603-1604 the press published *Vocabulario da Lingoa de Iapam*, a Japanese-Portuguese dictionary of 32,798 entries, neatly listed in alphabetical order. Only four copies of the book are now extant. Compiled by a committee of Portuguese and Japanese Jesuits, the dictionary was intended for beginners and as a result was concerned more with spoken rather than written Japanese. Both the Chinese and Japanese have traditionally shown more interest in literary rather than spoken language, and so this dictionary is a valuable source of information on how people actually spoke nearly four centuries ago. The compilation of the work is astonishingly objective and scientific, and it compares well with contemporaneous dictionaries produced in Europe. Words are classed according to categories, such as poetic, literary, vulgar, women's or children's terms, and a distinction is made between the more elegant speech of Kyoto and that of Kyushu.

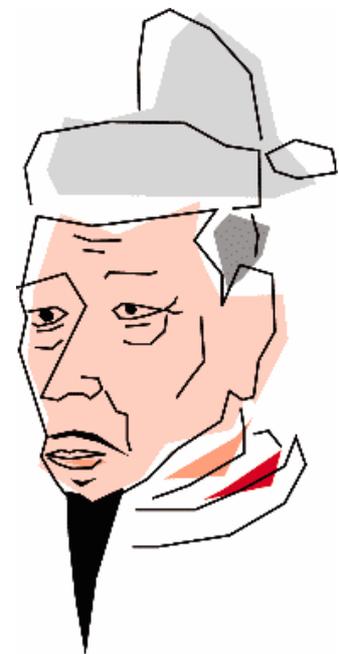
Buddhist and Shinto terms are also noted and some fifty examples appear under the letter *A* alone and more than a hundred under *B*; in general, such terms are defined objectively without adverse comment. For example, "*Aretebisu*. Name of a *Kami* who was in the kingdom of Kinokuni; is worshipped in a shrine called Nishinomiya near the sea." "*Chōse no higan*. The vow, exceeding all other vows, made by Amida to save men." Quotations from well-known classics, such as *Heike Monogatari* and *Taiheiki*, are provided, as well as 362 proverbs, to show how a particular word should be used. One quoted proverb runs: "*Ame ni nurete tsuyu osorishikarazu*. Proverb. A man who suffers great evils does not fear small ones,

just as a person drenched with rain does not fear the dew." An entry that shows that human nature does not greatly change through the centuries: "*Katakuchi*. A sort of container without handles used for vinegar and other things. *Katakuchi iu hito*. A man who talks only about his own affairs and does not listen to what other people say. *Katakuchi mondō*. Dispute in which only one person speaks without allowing others to speak or argue." And as the *Vocabulario* is primarily concerned with spoken Japanese, it includes various words that are not to be found elsewhere in Japanese writings. But for this product of the Jesuit press, the existence of such terms would not be known today.

In addition, the use of Roman letters in the *Vocabulario* throws light on contemporaneous pronunciation. To cite just one example, it is to be noted that the dictionary renders the verb "to conquer" as *katsu* and the noun "thirst" as *kat*, although in modern Japanese both would be given equally as *katsu*. This is only one of many such examples showing that a distinction in pronunciation was made in those days. Such differences are not arbitrary but follow a rule; in the case of a *kun* (or Japanese) pronunciation, the word is written *katsu*, but in the case of an *on* (or Chinese) pronunciation, the word appears as *kat*—a distinction that would not have been apparent had the text been written in Chinese characters.

3. JOAO RODRIGUES

If Luis Frois was the renowned chronicler of the Jesuit mission, then Joao Rodrigues was the linguist and fervent apologist of Japanese culture. Rodrigues came to Japan as a boy in 1577, and probably because of his youth learned to speak Japanese with such fluency that he was nicknamed The Interpreter. As Frois came to know Nobunaga well, so Rodrigues in his turn knew Hideyoshi, Nobunaga's successor, and in fact was invited to visit him twice only two weeks before the ruler's death in 1598. Rodrigues spent thirty-three years in Japan before being expelled to Macao in 1610, and during his long stay grew to understand and appreciate many aspects of the indigenous culture. Owing to his command of the language, he was deputed to compile a grammar of spoken Japanese for newly arrived missionaries, and the Jesuit press published his *Arte da Lingoa de Iapam* in 1604-1608 at Nagasaki.



5. Hideyoshi

It has to be admitted that the *Arte* as a language textbook compares poorly with the *Vocabulario*. Rodrigues was a busy man and not intellectually equipped to think out the best way to approach compiling such a book. As a result he based his work

on a standard Latin grammar, although reflexive Latin and non-reflexive Japanese are structurally different and the study of each requires a different approach. A concrete example will illustrate the problem. On f. 3v, Rodrigues lists the present tense of the verb "to be"—"I am, *degozaru*; thou art, *degozaru*; he is, *degozaru*; we are, *degozaru*; you are, *degozaru*; they are, *degozaru*." Using the structure of Latin as his model, he freely employs grammatical terms such as pluperfect, future perfect, and present conditional subjunctive, although these concepts have little or no relevance in a Japanese context.

But if the *Arte*, with its endless rules and exceptions, leaves much to be desired as a textbook of Japanese for beginners, it remains a storehouse of information to modern linguists who wish to study early seventeenth-century speech. In addition, not content with explaining grammar, Rodrigues also includes a mass of information about letter-writing, courtesies, currency, weights and measures, titles of nobility and monks, lists of emperors and eras, and for comparative purposes a table of Biblical chronology. One of the most interesting sections is his mini-treatise on Japanese poetry in which he shows his extensive knowledge of the language and literature as he explains the different types of verse, rules of composition, and seasonal words. He also quotes more than twenty poems as examples, including the verse beginning *Kimi ga yo* (the words of the present-day national anthem) and Mansei's moving lament, *Yo no naka wo nani tatoyen*.

When living in exile in Macao in his old age, Rodrigues was once more commissioned to write a book, this time the history of the Japanese mission. The only part of the actual history still extant is brief and derivative, adding little, if anything, to our knowledge. But to place his history into proper context, Rodrigues hit on the plan to compose several introductory books to describe Japanese life, religion, and culture. The texts of two of these books are extant and offer a fascinating glimpse of Japan as seen by a well-informed European. In his somewhat wandering and meandering style, the author deals with art, painting, architecture, Kyoto, dress, food, geography, astronomy, and the tea ceremony.

4. THE TEA CEREMONY

Rodrigues devotes no less than four chapters to the tea ceremony and he was obviously well familiar with the pastime. The missionaries encouraged the practice of tea because it involved no superstitious belief or rite, and it allowed Christians to take part in a cultural activity without compromising their religious faith. A number of Christian nobles, all known to Rodrigues, were renowned for their expertise in the tea ceremony, and this doubtless gave the author an opportunity of experiencing the rite at first hand. Some of Sen Rikyu's leading disciples were Christian, and Rodrigues in fact attended an audience at Hideyoshi's court in which Sen Rikyu

was also present only a matter of a few weeks before the tea master's enforced suicide in 1591.

The chapters on tea provide much information. Rodrigues writes about the production, picking, and preparation of tea leaves, as well as the elaborate procession carrying the season's finest tea to the shogun's palace. He mentions with approval the rustic garden and teahouse, and the way tea gatherings were conducted in those days. When he comes to define the purpose of the ritual, he shows that he was familiar not only with the pastime itself but also with its aims and ethos. He explains,



6. Tea ceremony

This gathering for tea and conversation is not intended for lengthy talk among themselves, but rather to contemplate within their souls with all peace and modesty the things they see there and thus through their own efforts to understand the mysteries locked therein. ... So they do not make use of spacious rooms and richly decorated apartments for this gathering.... Instead the desired effect is gained by a tiny cottage, thatched with straw and reeds... fashioned with timber as rough as it came from the forest.... Hence they have come to detest any kind of contrivance and elegance, any pretence, hypocrisy and outward embellishment.... The more precious the utensils are in themselves and the less they show it, the more suitable they are.

Modern tea masters have expressed genuine admiration for the depth of Rodrigues's insight and understanding.

5. JESUIT SCHOOLS

But this cultural appreciation was a two-way affair. The Jesuits opened two schools for the sons of the gentry, and taught there not only traditional Japanese topics but also Western theatre, singing, music, and painting. The four boys who went to Europe studied at one of the schools and were obviously skilled in Western music. When they visited Evora Cathedral, two of them played on the large organ, to the astonishment and applause of the archbishop and onlookers. On their return the quartet performed on harp, clavichord, violin, and lute in the presence of Hideyoshi in 1591. Also on record is another performance of Western music played in the present of Hideyori, the son of Hideyoshi, in Osaka Castle in 1606.

One school was fortunate enough to have the services of Giovanni Niccolo, an Italian Jesuit who taught Western painting, and in this way began the short-lived experiment of Japanese artists painting in the Western style. A number of examples of this type of art still exist. Some are devotional pictures used to decorate churches



7. Evora Cathedral

or as a visual aid in teaching catechism. As the student painters had never left Japan, their work was confined to copying paintings and book illustrations imported from Europe. A fine example is Our Lady of the Rosary, preserved in Kyoto University, depicting Our Lady and Child, and four saints. Around three sides of the colorful painting are featured the fifteen mysteries of the rosary. The composition is admittedly overcrowded and

a few features are depicted somewhat naively. But the work shows charm and talent, and it must be remembered that it was executed probably by a member of the first generation of Japanese painting in the Western style.

Probably after they had graduated from school the painters turned to secular subjects and executed screens depicting pastoral scenes in the West, mounted warriors, and bird's-eye views of Western cities. This last subject was based on the illustrations in Georg Braun's *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, 1572, for the four boys were presented with a copy of this work during their stay in Padua in July 1585 and brought it back to Japan. One particular screen features a bird's-eye view of Rome, clearly detailing the Tiber, Colosseum, Castel Sant' Angelo, the nearby obelisk, and other notable landmarks, all neatly depicted by a Japanese painter who had never left his island country. Other screens are decorated with maps of the world, based on Western maps and atlases (the boys also brought back from Europe Ortelius's famous work, *Theatrum Orbis*). They display a happy combination of contemporaneous Western and Japanese geographical knowledge. The West contributed accurate depictions of Europe, South America, Africa, and India, while the local contribution accounted for the accurate delineation of East Asia.

6. CONCLUSION

There was thus, during this first meeting between the West and Japan, a fruitful exchange of cultural knowledge. But this interchange was not to last and ended

before it had time to put down roots and mature. The Tokugawa *shōgun* had no divine right to rule the country, and in the first half of the seventeenth century they were constantly on the alert lest a coalition of disaffected *daimyō* might challenge their hegemony. They regarded Christianity in particular and Westerners in general as a possible catalyst in the formation of such a hostile threat. So Christianity was proscribed and eventually Western merchants, apart from a handful of Dutch living in semi-captivity in Nagasaki, were ordered to leave the country and not return. When the city of Macao sent an unarmed delegation to Japan in 1640 to plead for resumption of trade, the authorities beheaded sixty-one officials and crew members at Nagasaki, sending thirteen sailors back to the Portuguese settlement with the grim news. To complete the isolation of the country, the shogunate not only expelled Europeans but also forbade Japanese to leave the country. The seclusion of Japan *vis-à-vis* the West was now complete and it was to last for two centuries.

It is a tempting but fruitless exercise to speculate on the probable outcome if Japanese-Western cultural relations had not been abruptly interrupted and had been allowed to continue unchecked. But while we may deplore their premature and unnatural termination, we can rejoice that such a meeting of minds did take place in Japan four centuries ago and that it can now continue in our own day without let or hindrance.

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