

## Cristoforo Castelli's narration: between the word and image

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### Abstract:

*The Seventeenth century's seven albums with thousand illuminated papers and handwritten reports have been forgotten, until the priest Gioacchino di Marzo founded them in 1878 in the Libreria Comunale of Palermo, referred to as the formerly House of Theatins, and saved them. The albums, which narrate the history of Georgia in the seventeenth century and the twenty-five-year story of Sicilian Missionaries in Georgia, are regarded as precious and priceless treasure for the Georgian nation.*

*Georgian public learnt about the albums only at the beginning of twentieth century when Georgian catholic Mikhail Tamarati found the albums in Palermo, photographed half of the photos and sent them to Georgia (1910), where they are actually kept at the National Centre of Manuscripts. The albums revealed not only the faces of Georgian kings which were unknown before, but also the type of costumes of that time and a lot of information in different fields such as art, history, geography, ethnography, etc.*

*Soon after the discovery of the albums by Georgians, Georgia became part of Soviet Union, which denuded the right to Georgian scientist of the time to go to West Europe and study the albums. Consequently, they based their research on the photos but not the original albums and the researches at the time did not offered accurate information about the albums. Several Georgian and Italian scholars studied the albums from 1970 to 1990 and published only a part of albums, however, the studies were not without inaccuracies.*

*The main difficulty of the Castelli's albums is his narration style, which is full of gaps, as in his text as in his drawing works. My present speech is focused on the analysis of Castelli's Albums narration style between the words and the images, which are complementary to each other and which gives the key to his works.*

**Keywords:** Manuscript, Georgia, Theatin.

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### *On the road to Georgia*

Cristoforo (Teramo) Castelli's (1600-1660) works includes the *Fondo Castelli* (seven albums with a thousand illuminated papers and handwritten reports, actually preserved in *Libreria comunale* of Palermo) and the letters and the report, *Missione per molti paesi d'infedeli*, preserved in theatine

house of Sant'Andrea Della Valle in Rome. All this material narrates the history of Georgia in the seventeenth century and the twenty-five-year story of Sicilian missionaries in Georgia, that are considered as valuable and priceless treasure for Georgians.

Cristoforo Castelli, theatine missionary, spent twenty-two years from 1632 to 1654 in Georgia, residing mainly in Mingrelia (West Georgia). Born in Genoa in 1600, after his father's death he moved to Palermo, with his widowed mother to her uncle (mother's brother) Gregory Castelli, "ex Frate", Lord of Galiano. Castelli spent his youth years in Palermo, where he studied at the Jesuit Collegio Massimo. In the church of San Giuseppe dei Teatini, located close to the College, Cristoforo got familiar with Padre Don Pietro Giardina, who later became his teacher. Thanks to him Cristoforo was recommended to Don Pietro Avitabile, who was returning to Palermo from Georgia, and with the letter to Pope Urban VIII from the King of Georgia and Nikiphore Irbakhi. The Georgians requested to send a painter and a medical to them:

*[...] un soggetto Medico Pittore, insegnante, e ornato di tali virtù che non ne havendo al loro paese ne sapendo dove trovare un soggetto di queste fatte lo desideravano grandemente.<sup>1</sup>*

During the meeting between Urban VIII and thirty-two years old Cristoforo Castelli, Cristoforo was charged to go to Georgia and describe clearly the Georgian reality, sending annual writing reports proved by images:

*E perché nella nostra partenza per l'Oriente ci fu ordinate dal M[olto] R[everendo] P[adre] G[enerale] e dalla Cong[regazione] e de P[ropaganda] Fide e da Papa Urbano che dovessimo scrivere e nottare diligentementi ogni cosa.<sup>2</sup>*

In 1631 Castelli started his way to Georgia, an ancient Christian country, which was destroyed and separated by two Muslim Empires (the Ottoman Empire to the West and Persia to the East). In addition, Georgian territory was split in small principalities, which were in continuous war between each other. Envisaging the mentioned situation Castelli gets two tasks: the first meet Georgians' request regarding doctor and painter, and the second task directly from Congregation of Propaganda Fide, that meant to renew religious strategy: evangelization through the images. Castelli arrived to final destination one year later, where his stay lasted twenty-two years. During his mission he often moved from region to region, after the Georgian Kings and Princes called him in their principalities. Thanks to his talent as an artist and medical he was respected and requested person in the Land of the Georgians. In 1652 he became Vice-Perfect of the Mission in Mingrelia, which enrolled him to write not only annual reports, but manage all correspondence connected to missionaries. Thanks to his talent in writing and drawing, he left rich materials as in textual as in images.

In 1654, by decision of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, Castelli left Georgia for Italy taking only cards, drawings and writings with him: *Le faticche di venticinque anni*. The road back to the homeland was long and tiring and he arrived during the summer of 1655 in Rome. As evidenced by the reports and letters of the missionary, he sacrificed much to get back to Italy with Albums – effort of twenty-five years. The albums were destined to Propaganda Fide, but for some unknown reason, he decided to leave Rome for Palermo with the albums. Yet strange, messages, pictures of the report, very useful information for everyone that Castelli owned, had to be a valuable material for the Propaganda Fide.

On his way back to Napoli and Palermo, one of the albums, which he considered the most valuable, was lost at sea. Back in Palermo, despite his age of sixty years, he resumes his works in order to testimony his mission in Georgia, by drowning and writing his memories. Later, Propaganda Fide never acquired his completed works and the report, together with the drawings, precious materials of

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<sup>1</sup> Patrizia Licini, "Cristoforo Castelli e la sua missione in Georgia", *Regnum Dei. Collectanea theatina*, 41, 3, 1985, VI-226 p., p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

that time, was forgotten in the Theatines' House in Palermo. Only thanks to the attention paid by the librarian Gioacchino Di Marzo, the albums were kept in a safe place in 1878.

Not before the beginning of the twentieth century, when Georgian catholic priest Mikhail Tamarati found the albums in Palermo and photographed half of the photos in the seven albums then sent them to Georgia (1904), did the Georgian public learn about the albums. The photos are kept at the National Centre of Manuscripts. Soon after the discovery of the albums by Georgians, the country became part of the Soviet Union, which denuded the right from Georgian scientist of the time to go to Western Europe. Therefore, their study and research of the albums were based only on the photos but not on the original albums. Consequently, the scholars at the time did not offer accurate information about the albums. Several Georgian and Italian scholars studied the albums from 1970 to 1990 and published only a part of seven albums, however, the studies were not without inaccuracies.

### *The list of materials and their narration*

The materials left by Cristoforo Castelli known nowadays are scattered in different archives and libraries in Italy (Rome, Florence, Napoli, Palermo). It is constituted in letters, handwritten reports and drawing papers. The albums and textual materials are the narration style in both texts and drawing works, which separately are full of gaps, and only fulfil each other when esteemed together.

#### **1. The epistolary materials.**

The letters, dated 1632-1654, written during his mission in Georgia, are considered as a most reliable material, as narrating the contemporary events of that time. The letters chronologically describe his journey from the beginning of his trip to Georgia (1631), including the difficulties he had to bear with accompanying other missionaries on behalf of love to God:

*[...] camminando cossì più d'un mese continuo dormendo sù la terra sotto il padiglione del Cielo con poco biscotto, et abondanza solo d'acqua, e qualche poco di latte che si comprava per la strada, [...] la notte poco si riposava, convenendo stare molto vigilanti, e fare la guardia per esser in mano de nemici: il giorno eravamo dal sole si ben percossi, che come alle Serpi ci fece mutare la pelle nel volto, e nelle mani, benche nella sommità de monti dell'Armenia patimmo ancora gran freddi, posandovi le nevi tutto l'anno, e questi monti, non niente meno travagliosi sono nel salire che nel scendere con essere circondati da dirupi, e fiumi, ne sapria dire quali siano maggiori li pericoli passati in mare, ò quelli veduti in terra e di tutti siamo passati liberi per la gratia di Dio benedetto, per amor del quale spero passare maggiori.<sup>3</sup>*

After his arrival in Georgia he provides numerous and precise information. The content and manner of the letters changed according to the recipient. Some of his letters were addressed his Religious Superior in Rome he had to officially report to according to his mission responsibility and duty. The news are mostly related to the Georgian history, where missionary overviewed the Georgian lands, kings, religions situation in the country, wars between the principalities. All these events are narrated during all difficulties of mission.

Informal and familiar type of letters were addressed to other mission members (Don Clemente Galano, Don Francesco Maggio), with whom Castelli spent several years having the same memories for places, descriptions and names experienced together in Georgia.

The rest of letters are addressed to relatives, especially to his uncle "Illustrissimo Signor Zio", who was for him a source of inspiration, great moral and material support. Castelli in his letters, using a literary style, texts enriched with details and confidence, expressed the deep commitment, affection and gratitude towards this person:

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<sup>3</sup> Cristoforo Castelli, *Ricerca sull'architettura georgiana : carteggio inedito*, ed. Patrizia A. Licini, Milano, [s.n.], 1980 (Istituto di materie umanistiche, facoltà di architettura, Politecnico di Milano, 21), p. 3.

*Hor quì s'è, Signor Zio, e Padre, hà da mostrare la sua magnificenza, quì s'è se le rappresenta occasione di comprar stati terreni non già, ma amplissima Città nella bella Patria del Paradiso. Qui si che potrà quasi assicurare la sua salute, poichè quest'anime ricomprate per cossì dire col sangue, e fatica di Vostra Signoria Illustrissima che tale si stima hoggi il denaro, compariranno nel tribunale di Dio, avocando in favor suo, che l'habbi liberate da tanti mali, ne si creda Vostra Signoria Illustrissima che ricerchiamo limosine per sovvenire alla nostra grande povertà, che di questo ci preggiamo, questi sono li nostri honori e grandezze, stimando più l'essere poveri, e dispreggiati con Christo, [...] supplico Vostra Signoria Illustrissima per quanto ama Iddio, [...] à mostrare in questa opera la sua liberalità.<sup>4</sup>*

Letters full of affection, compassion and gratitude are devoted to his mother, "Signora Madre Carissima". Castelli underlined her spiritual strength, who had not preserved his only son from dedicating to God and dedicated to God and on this way Castelli felt himself perfectly happy and fulfilled:

*Perdonatemi se non Le scrivo spesso et à longo per che li travagli della Missione sono assai e la lontananza non è poca. All'altra vita si rivedremo e consoleremo abbastanza. Si relegri che un solo figlio che haveva L'hà sacrificato al Signore. [...] Il misero sono ancora carcerato, e vivo morendo per l'absenza dall'amato, ne per me si trova instrumento di Morte, ma solo di partire. [...] In tanto moro perchè non moro.<sup>5</sup>*

The letters that Christopher Castelli sent from the distant lands of Georgia and Mingrelia are the testimonies of the missionary years work and resemble the facts and events that occurred during these period. The contents of the messages are divided in some fundamental topics depending on readers' choice and interest, so called Points of Interest. Of course, these points are connected to each other and allow delivering, if compared, other information and deductions. The first theme can be read from different points of view: the first is updated information that is in connection with his biography provided by him. Every word of the author is soaked with sincerity and profound religious sentiment of and his effort to bring always the Christian message to new territories.

The letters also testimony the personality of Castelli and the state of his soul transition: from young thirty-two years old to the fifty-four years old person. Looking through his letters we can follow his twenty-five years past in Georgia, and catch a glimpse of both the change of the state of the soul of Castles via the change of narrative manner.

To summarize Christopher Castelli's whole correspondence, we can conclude that all his letters have a diary type form, where he records the daily events especially, showing his feelings, the plot of their own existence, that occurs in a dialogue with himself and stimulates moral passion more and more. It outlines a world of daily life, often dangerous and ungrateful, humble and devout, in contact with the powerful, yet demure, almost as adventurous and heroic actions of the missionary is not the protagonist and the author, but considered as a mere executor driven by the hand of God.

## **2. The report**

The *Missioni per molti paesi d'infedeli*, written between in 1658-1660, is based on Castelli's memory, narrating style represents the past, in which the narrator summarizes his life during 25 years on the Orient lands. Castelli begins writing it far away from Georgia hoping to see it published. He reviews his half-life spent in Georgia considering the country as his 'bride'.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

The narration of the *Missione per molti paesi d'infedeli* is built around the autobiographical voice. The text of report is divided in chapters with subtitle, and the succession narrative does not follow the chronology of events, but are complied with episodes similar to each other rather than a temporal arrangement.

Nevertheless the freshness of the story, which revealed so rich in details, almost as a sketch present, is also real, with phrases often dry and concise, comparable to his drawing talent, in which Christopher Castelli was a master.

Castelli commences his narration with the description of a fire set in the missionaries' residence in Guria, then he tells about such all accidents happened in different residences of other regions:

*Fra molti travagli che incontrano i Nostri Missionarj per il Mondo particolarmenti nei paesi de nemici del nome Catholico nell'oriente uno che molto gl'affligge si è che alle volte essendosi fatighati con sudori, Pericoli di morte per acquistarsi i Cuori di quei Prencipi barbari, e persuadergli darci qualche Chiesa, e residenza per nostro albergo ne loro Regni, e Dominij servendoli noi come loro Schiavi in tutti loro Comandamenti avanzandoci noi per questo mezzo per acquistar Terreno, e per stabilire bene residenza in aggiunto di quelle anime prive di Maestri Catholici nel più bello del Riposo ecco viene all'improvviso e di nascosto un Turco, et uno eretico, et aspettando l'opportunità d'una notte oscura che soffi vento pone alle novelle habitationi fuoco, e si parte lasciando che ogni Cosa diventi preda delle fiamme; questo fatto accadde nella residenza di Gurielle.<sup>6</sup>*

The beginning of this narration and the way of describing the circumstances shows that he has a rather good idea of Georgian reality and the familiarity he feels toward this 'foreign country'. Castelli's narration of the *Missione per molti Paesi d'Infedeli* ends with a return story to his homeland, Italy, and with the description of all the difficulties he encountered when saving the material he had with him. His caution for his material is not random, but due to the 25 years spent on this lands.

To summarize Castelli's textual narration, it can be considered as the continuation of the epistolary materials that show him at his young age, who starts off for unknown lands and then comes back older to his homeland. Castelli esteems his activity from this scope and accomplishes by returning home.

To conclude on both texts, in result it is some kind of "journey" Castelli had to Georgia and then back home, collected and analyzed information where his time perception seems medieval, and not especially important. The texts are the very material, according to which we can find out Castelli's situation. As for his attitude to Georgia it remains the same through twenty-five-year narration follow up, *Orient as the Land of Barbarians*.

### 3. Seven Albums

The seven Album, about a thousand papers containing designed and handwritten text are preserved in the Libreria Comunale of Palermo. The albums mainly consist not only of drawings and sketches, but also texts, reports and remarks. As for the chronology of the material provided on individual pages, later assembled as an albums by Castelli, it includes as well as surviving trip from Georgia to Italy, and later to Palermo, based on memory paintings and texts. Material is basically arranged thematically, but not strictly split.

Castelli in his material describes the Georgian society in all its manifestations, so we get reliable information on daily life, crafts, architecture, on businesses, art, customs and traditions. His portraits take over both faces of the nobles of that time, thus giving a cross-section of society. Images and descriptions revealed not only the faces of Georgian kings, that were unknown before, but also the type of costumes of that period, as well as sufficient volume of information in different fields such as art, history, geography, ethnography, etc.

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<sup>6</sup> Patrizia Licini, "Cristoforo Castelli e la sua missione in Georgia", *op. cit.* p. 39.

The albums contain clear view of the missionary life, description of missionary residences, buildings characteristic representations of different farming activities, domestic portraits of male and female faces, figures, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic, calligraphic exercises invention of alphabets and different representations: all stipulated on drawings, letters and reports. All the mentioned news is placed without any order, but as notes Bellio: *“Questo disordine vi è buono, esso mostra che il frate notava tutto quello che gli pareva degno di memoria man mano che gli presentava agli occhi o al pensiero.”*

The presentation of “Identity” of Georgia in the textual and visual narrative, as above mentioned, fulfils each other, but separately they present Georgia in a completely different way. If text narration deals only with the Castelli “figure”, his emotions and thoughts, meanwhile the visual narration represents in details the world that surrounds the missionary, where it is possible to glimpse the “image” of Georgia.

In some drawings, Castelli repeats the scene narrated in the texts, easy to recognize, not because of remarks, as he usually does in paintings, but from the clear picture by textual narration. Thanks to his talent of narrator as “word” as of “image”, we can summarize the twenty-five-year story of Cristoforo Castelli.