

NOTES & REVIEWS

A TRIBUTE TO LUIGI MONGA'S SCHOLARSHIP

The Journal of Aurelio Scetti: A Florentine Galley Slave at Lepanto (1565-1577). Translated and edited by Luigi Monga. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, volume 266. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004.

It is the middle of the sixteenth century; Christian states are prospering from free trade even as they face, quite literally, a sea of troubles. On the waters of the Adriatic, the Aegean, and the Mediterranean, piracy is on the rise. In 1561 Cosimo I de' Medici finds it necessary to establish the Holy Military Order of the Knights of St. Stephen. Its mission is to patrol the Mediterranean, to liberate Christians who have been enslaved in North African cities, and to spread Christianity throughout the world. As the decade wanes, however, the Muslim threat increases, so much so that the Knights of St. Stephen join the *Santa Lega*, or Holy League, a military alliance formed by Pius V that brings together the major Christian powers. The Venetians join in as well, but reluctantly, after they lose Famagusta, their last outpost in Cyprus, to the Turks in 1570. The following year, the Turks are crushed by the Holy League in the Battle of Lepanto.

This is the world that Shakespeare evoked so poetically in *Othello*. It is also the world of Aurelio Scetti, a Florentine galley slave who recorded his impressions of it in a vivid journal that, thanks to Luigi Monga, we now have in English. In Scetti's journal, as in Shakespeare's play, the trouble in the big world is reflected in the little world. Like Othello, Scetti murdered his wife for what he claimed was "her bad behavior" (4), but the resemblance, alas, ends there. There is no delicate "put out the light, and then put out the light," here. Instead, on the night of 20 August, 1565, Scetti woke up his sleeping wife, Caterina, with two blows to the head with a candlestick; then, as she sat dazed on the edge of her bed, he cut her neck with a razor, gave her a blow to the mouth, and kept hitting and cutting until she died. Nor is there any ennobling suicide here with a Spanish sword tempered in an icy brook. Scetti, in an attempt to escape the law, leapt from the walls of Arezzo, broke his right thigh in the fall, and was promptly arrested. He was tried and sentenced to death, but Cosimo, who was struggling to supply the Knights of St. Stephen with slaves, commuted Scetti's sentence to service on the galleys and even promised Scetti's father, privately, that his son would eventually be released. It was with this hope that Scetti lived out his days as a galley slave.

Recounting how he narrowly escaped beheading – he had actually been carried to the chopping block – Scetti says that "instead of being frightened" he prayed: "My Lord, all this was caused by my fault. I ask you to free me from this chain!" Such pious outpourings are sprinkled throughout the journal, which, as Monga says, Scetti wrote in order to purify his soul through confession, "a fundamental element in Christian spirituality" (7). Scetti also wrote it, however, to show his loyalty to Cosimo and, later, to his successor, Francesco Maria. And Scetti wanted his freedom badly. Once, after he petitioned for a pardon and was denied, he fell quite ill. "This hardship," he says, "caused a terrible sickness that brought Aurelio close to rendering his spirit to God and his body to the earth" (106). He nearly always writes about himself in the third person, which *Annali d'italianistica* 22 (2004).

gives the journal the appearance of objectivity.

Divided into twenty short chapters, this journal forms a record of ten of the most important voyages of the Knights of St. Stephen. The first one took the small fleet of four galleys into the Mediterranean in the service of Philip II of Spain. The goal was to seek out and oppose Barbary corsairs. According to the agreement between Cosimo and Philip II, the Spanish king would cover half the cost of maintaining the fleet in exchange for 80 percent of whatever it might confiscate. Here, as elsewhere in this journal, the political and personal animosities between maritime leaders come to life. Jacopo VI Appiani, the Tuscan admiral, refused to serve under his enemy, Gianandrea Doria, in whose charge was the Spanish fleet; and as a result had to be replaced by his brother Alfonso. On this voyage, Scetti records that three enemy galleys were captured but that he saw four others sail swiftly away and escape: "[...] they had been greased the previous night" (68). The importance of greasing the hulls regularly is among the many particulars of sixteenth-century galleys that one learns about in this journal; Monga's introduction, densely detailed but eminently readable, adds a great deal more about their sizes, their structure, and how they were manned.

If there is a climactic moment here, it is the battle of Lepanto, in which the Tuscan fleet again fought side-by-side with the Spaniards, led then by Don John of Austria. Among the dead, says Scetti, were 5,000 Christians and 40,000 Turks. "The galleys," he says, "could barely sail through the site of the naval battle [...] because of the countless corpses floating on the sea. It was extraordinary to see that one could recognize the Christians from the Turks, for the former were looking upward, while the latter were facing down, toward the sea" (122). Such exaggeration is typical, of course, of early travel accounts, but it also helps one to hear the beating of Scetti's heart on these pages. Also contributing to this end are the drawings, done very likely by Scetti himself, which introduce each chapter with a relevant scene; and following each drawing is a brief, dramatic abstract in verse, which Monga reproduces in the original and translates at the foot of the page. Here is a sample from a chapter on Lepanto: "Il mare scorre all'una e l'altra parte: / Austria, Colonna, D'Oria e i veniziani, / ciascun dimostra ogni suo ingegno e arte / per conquistar quant'ha in potere i cani" (118).

After Cosimo's death in 1574, it was to his son Francesco I that Scetti had to appeal for his freedom. In 1577, then, Scetti dedicated his journal to Cosimo's son. The man who had brutally murdered his wife twelve years before, however, seems never to have regained his freedom; and the wound to his leg – an enduring reminder of his crime – seems never to have healed properly: his femur probably broke at the neck and was never quite right again, as even his self-portrait, included here, suggests. What redeems his sad life of course is the journal itself.

This translation is based on Monga's own edition of the manuscript, *Galee toscane e corsari barbareschi: il diario di Aurelio Scetti, galeotto fiorentino (1565-1577)*, which appeared in 1999. For this English translation, he has written an elegant, highly informative introduction that makes use of contemporary records, including a transcript of Scetti's trial. It is a model of scholarship, the kind of contribution that will last forever.

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(The same order has been kept in which Luigi Monga entered his publications on his *curriculum vitae*.)

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