

The Adventurous Landing in Japan of Abbe Giovanni Battista Sidotti in 1708*

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FOREWORD

Sometime in the early thirties I systematically perused the *Historia de los PP. Dominicos en las Islas Filipinas y en sus Misiones del Japón, China, Tung-kin y Formosa*, written by Frs. Juan Ferrando and Joaquín Fonseca, and among what left the deepest impression in my mind stands out the account on Abbé Giovanni Sidotti, a priest from Palermo, Sicily, who was said to have landed in Japan in 1708, and about whom very little was reported regarding what happened to him thereafter.

In 1947 I met a knowledgeable missionary from Japan who passed by Manila, and I asked him if perchance he knew anything about Abbé Sidotti. Happily he replied he did, explaining that according to Japanese documents the said Abbé was arrested as soon as he landed, and was sent to Yedo (Tokyo) borne in a sedan chair, and later was stricken with paralysis due to the rigors of the long journey, and eventually died in prison.

* Fr. Pablo Fernández, O.P., Curator of the Dominican Archives in the Philippines, has written the Foreword to set Tollini's article in its right historical perspective (Note of the Editor). — Prof. Tollini is an Italian researcher, who lives in Via Turati, 21/28037 Domodossola (NO)/Italy.

The fragmentary narrative by the aforementioned historians about Abbé Sidotti follows:

"With the Legate Tournon, sent by the Holy See to visit the Christian community and missions of China, there came an extraordinary man, who arrived jointly with him in the Philippines with the main purpose of proceeding from these shores to the empire of Japan and of preaching in its domains the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. He was by name Abbé Sidotti, a very edifying and holy priest, a worthy offshoot of the learned class of the clergy of Rome.

"He stayed in Manila for two years¹, engrossing himself in the study of the Japanese language, and was regarded in a high opinion of holiness. He also collected generous alms for the foundation of a seminary intended to provide the Japanese missions with sufficient personnel, and thereafter left auspiciously for Nagasaki aboard a Spanish boat skippered by one D. Miguel de Cloriola.²

"Before setting foot on land, he tried to acquaint himself with the territory through some simple fishermen, and having made up his mind to remain even alone in the empire, disembarked by nightfall.

"All his personal effects consisted of the Roman breviary, some devotional books, a rosary, a crucifix, an image of Our Lady and some religious pictures. However, the Spanish Captain prevailed on him to accept some gold coins, and after having tenderly kissed those famous shores for which he had yearned long since, he went inland, not certain of what laid in store for him.

"It has been verified also as a historical fact that he was arrested soon thereafter and brought to Nagasaki, where he was subjected to a relentless grilling, and that he was therefrom sent to Yedo (Tokyo), where he languished during some years in jail, but kept himself busy therein by preaching the Gospel. It is further known that he baptized some Japanese who used to visit him while in prison. When the Governor of the city heard of all this, he ordered him thrown into a well, where he was being scantily fed through its narrow opening, until he breathed his last therein, a victim of infection and putrefaction.³

It has been established that he died on November 16, 1715, according to Japanese and European sources, which also added details about his exploits upon landing near Nagasaki, such informa-

¹ It was four years, viz. from 1704 to 1708.

² Should be 'Eloriaga'.

³ Juan Ferrando and Joaquín Fonseca, O.P., *Historia de los PP. Dominicos en las Islas Filipinas*, etc., Madrid, 1870, Tomo II, pp. 309-310.

tion having been unknown to former historians and researchers in the Philippines. This additional knowledge was unearthed through the investigations over a period of years undertaken by Prof. Tollini, the present article being a digest thereof.

It is fitting that we give the reader a backgrounder on the various attempts undertaken by missionaries based in the Philippines over a period of fifty years, that is, from 1593 to 1644, to penetrate Japan and spread the Gospel therein, until Abbé Sidotti entered the scene in 1708.

The very first missionary from the Philippines who entered Japan was the Franciscan Juan Pobre, who landed there in 1582. He soon left, and in a second trip thereto in 1585, he was blown off by a storm to the port of Hirado.

On his wake followed the Dominican Juan Cobo, who was assigned by the Governor of the Philippines as ambassador to Japan with the principal purpose of calming down the warlike stance of Shogun Hideyoshi, who was threatening to invade the Philippines with a big army. Father Cobo was successful in his commission, but on his return trip to Manila he drowned off the coast of Formosa during a storm.

St. Pedro Bautista took over as the emissary from Manila to put the finishing touches to the negotiations so tactfully started by Father Cobo, and in stride succeeded in opening a flourishing Franciscan mission in Japan in 1593.

Thereafter the Dominican and Augustinian missionaries vied in pouring into Japan in 1602, followed by the Recollects in 1623. Their apostolic labors, blessed from the very start with an abundant crop of conversions, suffered a serious setback in 1614, due to the persecution started by Shogun Ieyashu, who in that year ordered all foreign missionaries to leave Japan and had their churches demolished. Some missionaries, however, managed to abscond and stay behind, and even a few more succeeded in coming over clandestinely.

As the persecution raged and grew in virulence from year to year, many missionaries left Japan, but a few stayed put to receive the crown of martyrdom, while new reinforcement continued to venture into that empire from Manila to stay or slow down the agony of that dying church. Further attempts to provide it with missionaries proved nearly fruitless, especially after the suspension of all trade between Japan and Manila about the year 1640.

Some Jesuits and Catholic laymen, however, succeeded to enter Japan in the following years, but they either suffered martyrdom or languished in prisons, or met a slow death from their physical sufferings and diseases and moral tribulations, if we were to give credence to Dutch and/or Japanese documents. The last of this group, who was a lay Christian, died in 1700.

Under such circumstances Abbé Sidotti, in compliance with the wishes of the Pontiff Clement XI, undertook the nearly impossible task of reviving the Catholic mission in Japan in 1708.

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II

The Christian faith was introduced in Japan for the first time by Francis Xavier in 1549. It had a certain degree of success during the second half of the 16th century and the first decade of the 17th, until the anti-Christian edicts were issued.¹ After that, terrible persecutions followed and missionaries were banned from Japan, or else, they were martyred among horrible tortures, especially after the adoption of the policy of isolation in 1639.

This notwithstanding, there were still attempts by Catholic missionaries to force their way into Japan; many of them, however, were immediately seized and put to death.

The last and most famous of these attempts was that of the Italian missionary G. B. Sidotti who arrived in Japan in 1708 from Manila.

It is my intention in this short essay to retrace the facts related to Sidotti's arrival in Japan starting from the moment of his departure from the bay of Manila in August 1708, to the time of his departure from Nagasaki for Edo.

The reason for choosing this period of Sidotti's history is that, though many studies have developed around Sidotti's attempt

¹ The edicts of banishment of Christianity started with that of Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1587, which, however, was not severely enforced. After the coming to power of the Tokugawas, at the beginning of the 17th century, the anti-Christian policy was intensified.

to evangelize Japan, the actual circumstances of his journey to Japan and of his landing are still relatively scarcely known. On the contrary, the following period, that which was spent in Edo, is described in the report of the cross-examination, called *Seiyô Kibun* written by Sidotti's questioner, the scholar Arai Hakuseki.

The present essay is an abridged version of a more extensive study I carried out in Japan on the same subject and has the purpose of presenting the main results of my research, to which I refer for more details.

This study has developed on a comparative basis, viz. I examined both Western and Japanese available sources and tried to put them together in order to have an exhaustive reconstruction of the facts. Now, before proceeding to the body of this essay, it may be convenient to jot here the main sources used.

European sources:

1) *Relación del Viage que Hizo el Abad don Juan Bautista Sydot, desde Manila al Imperio del Japón, embiado por Nuestro Santissimo Padre Clemente XI*, written by Fray Agustín de Madrid, provincial of the Philippines, and published in Madrid in 1717. It is written in Spanish.

It is a revised edition of the log-book of the journey of Sidotti's ship from Manila to Japan.

2) *Breve Relazione estratta da Varie Lettere... sopra l'arrivo nella città di Manila, partenza per l'Impero del Giappone, arrivo e dimora in quello dell'Abbate D. Gio. Battista Sydoti*. This is the translation of the above-mentioned book. It was published in Rome in 1718. The translation, however, is not faithful and in some parts it deviates from the original.

3) The documents named "*fascicolo 1635*" (file number 1635) preserved in the Casanatense Library of Rome.

They contain a few versions of the log-book of Sidotti's journey, dated from 1708 to 1709, and the declarations of the members of the crew about the journey and the landing of the missionary. An autograph letter by Sidotti is also included here.

It is highly probable that Fray Agustín de Madrid's book was derived from the documents of the Casanatense Library.²

Japanese sources:

The most interesting and useful are gathered in the *Nagasaki Chûshin Rômajin no Koto*. They contain the exchange of information between Sidotti and the authorities of Kagoshima and those of Nagasaki. The two cross-examinations are likewise included.

Other sources are: *Dejima Ran Kan Nisshi*; passages regarding Sidotti taken from the documents of the Dutch Trading House in Dejima (Nagasaki), and the *Seiyô Kibun*, Arai Hakuseki's relation on Sidotti.

Short history of Sidotti until his departure from Manila

Sidotti was born in the capital of the Italian island of Sicily, Palermo, in 1668, from a noble family. He studied in Rome where he showed a good disposition for literature. But he preferred to follow his vocation and in 1702 he received from Pope Clement XI the mission of re-opening the way to the faith in Japan.

In 1704, Sidotti reached Manila where he served in a local hospital for four years waiting for a good occasion to cross the sea to Japan.

During this period Sidotti strove also to learn the Japanese language, which he intended to study in order to make himself understood by the Japanese once he could get there.

We know from Sidotti's own words that he studied Japanese for about three years before leaving Italy.³ In Manila, according to professors Miyasaki and Matsuda's assertions, he looked for Japanese who could teach him their language, but he found only

² In the first page of Agustín de Madrid's book it is written: "Brief Relation taken from various papers and documents...", but he does not specify which.

³ Sidotti used for his study the so-called *Kirishitan-ban*. They are books written in movable types in Amakusa, Nagasaki, Kyôto, etc. from the end of the 16th century to the beginning of the 17th. The printing was started when the Italian missionary, A. Valignano, brought to Japan the first movable-type printing-machine in 1590. The printed books dealt mostly with the Christian faith, and some were dictionaries of the Japanese language.

descendants of banished converts who by that time could speak but little Japanese.⁴

In many parts of the Japanese documents, on the other hand, it is clearly written that Sidotti's knowledge of the language was very poor,⁵ which constituted a serious hindrance to his plan of evangelization.

Anyhow, his stay in Manila came to an end on 22nd of August 1708, when he left the Philippines for Japan.

The journey from Manila to the first Japanese islands

The long-awaited good opportunity had come for Sidotti. A ship called "Santísima Trinidad"⁶ was specially built in Manila through the financial support of Governor-General of the Philippines, don Domingo Zabalburu Echeverri. The General don Miguel de Eloriaga offered himself as captain of the ship.

They boarded the ship on the 22nd August at 8:00 in the morning, but not being blessed with a favorable wind, the actual departure had to be delayed till the 25th.

Before leaving Manila, Sidotti fixed his daily schedule which he followed until he left the ship, the day of his landing. It is a very severe schedule which exemplifies the strong nature of Sidotti's character and his firm will to achieve a goal to which he devoted his whole life.

There are three versions of the schedule: the first, contained in the documents of the Casanatense Library is the *Instrucción que dio el Abad Juan Bautista Sidotti de lo que se habría de hacer (?) en el viaje del Japón* (Instructions given by the Abbé J. B. Sidotti as to what should be done during the journey to Japan).

This is probably the most reliable version and it runs as follows:

⁴ See: Miyazaki Michiô, *Arai Hakuseki no Yôgaku to Kaigai Chishiki*, Tôkyô, 1973, p. 206; and Matsuda Ki'ichi, *Shidotti no Nihon Sen'nyû*, pp. 130-131, in: *Dai Kôkai Jidai no Nihon*, No. 3, Shôgakkan, Tôkyô, 1978.

⁵ See; e.g. *Seiyô Kibun*, Tôyô Bunkô, Heibonsha, Tôkyô, 1976 p. 3.

⁶ The ship was a small two-mast reconnaissance ship, (in Spanish: *Patache*).

"From 5:00 to 6:00 in the morning, meditation. From 6:45, examination of the meditation and devotions. From 7:00, first Mass. At 8:00, second Mass, thanksgiving prayers and breakfast. At 9:00 reading of spiritual books, confessions and a lesson on the Japanese language. At 11:00 visit to the sick. At 12:00 dinner. At 1:00 rest. At 2:00 breviary. At 3:00 reading of spiritual books and another lesson on Japanese language. At 4:00 breviary and other devotions. At 6:00 Our Lady's Rosary. At 7:00 meditation. At 8:00 particular examination of the meditation and of the devotions of the whole day. At 9:00 supper and rest. At 10:00 general examination and particular prayers. At 11:00 to bed."

The second version of the schedule is that of the *Relación del Viage*...., which is very similar to the above-mentioned one; while the third, that of the Italian edition of 1718, is very different and rather unnatural in its disposition.

Anyhow, after 48 days of journey, Tuesday, 9th October, around 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, the men on the ship saw, for the first time, the Japanese island of Yakushima (which they believed to be Tanegashima).

The first Japanese islands

"Tuesday 9th: at daybreak we were in view of 4 islands, of which we had already seen one around 3:00 in the morning.

... on three of them there were volcanoes, two of which emitted fire. At midday, passing through these islands, we measured 30° of latitude.

... hence we can see another island, very high and long from one end to the other and 3 more islets to the north of it. Having approached the said island, now we can also see the other islands of Japan.

Wednesday 10th: we woke up in front of the island called Tanegashima which belongs to the Kingdom of Sacsuma (Satsuma). It lies at 30° 48'. It is very high and mountainous. On the southern part of it there is a wide plain which we coasted at a distance of less than a league of land, so that we could see

men angling on the rocks. There were houses on the said beach, but we did not see any inhabitant because they were frightened (by our presence). Then, we saw ten or twelve headlands (?).

The slope of the mountain is cultivated. This land extends from east to west for about 9 leagues and from north to south for about 3 leagues. Its trees are for the most part pines.”

This is the most detailed description we have of the first sight of Yakushima by the men on the “Santísima Trinidad”.

The four islands seen at 3:00 in the morning of 9th October are probably those of Tokara archipelago: Kuchinoshima, Nakanoshima, Suwaseshima and Akusekitô; they are, in fact, of volcanic origin. The three islets seen to the north of Yakushima are probably the Osumi archipelago.

The houses seen on the coast may correspond to Yudomari, the westernmost village on the southern coast. The mountain is Miyanouragadake, 1935 meters high, in the centre of the island.

The measures given for Yakushima and its geographical position are not accurate. Yakushima, in fact, has a circumference of 30 Kms. and lies at a latitude of 30° 20' north.

Sidotti's landing in Japan

a) Encounter with a Japanese fishing-boat

The morning of the day when Sidotti landed, there was an encounter in the sea before Yakushima between some Japanese fishermen and a few men sent by Sidotti in a shallop.

Since Japanese nationals were involved, the authorities drew a report that represents the earliest historical source related to Sidotti's attempt. Therefore, from now on, Japanese sources will also be used along with Western ones. Indeed, the encounter, which will be dealt with in the first part of this chapter, is the only event in the history of Sidotti's landing in Japan to have the privilege of being reported by both Western and Japanese sources.

¹ *Traslado Simple de la Información que de orden del Superior Gobierno de estas Islas se hace sobre el Viaje que hizo el señor Abad don Juan Bautista Sidotti al Reyno del Japón*, dated 1709, belonging to the documents of Casanatense Library.

In the following lines, I shall synthesize the facts of the encounter gathering the information from various sources.

Wednesday 10th of October, in the morning, while sailing along the southern coast of Yakushima, off the village of Koidomari, about 10 Kms. from the coast, the men on the ship saw two Japanese fishing-boats. They called them with various signals, but they did not approach, so Sidotti and the captain decided to send them a shallop with eleven armed men on board, one of whom was a heathen Japanese brought from Manila, who, for the occasion, put on Spanish clothes. The shallop approached one of the boats with seven men on board and at a distance of about 18 meters, the Japanese began to speak with them. What happened during this encounter is not certain because the sources give incomplete or different versions of the fact. According to Agustín de Madrid who relates the event in a most detailed way, the men sent by Sidotti, with the excuse of asking for water, of which, they said, they had run short, came to know that the policy followed by the *Shôgun* was still strongly xenophobe. As to the water, they should go to Nagasaki; in other places they could not disembark. They also learnt that in order to prevent a night landing, many sentries were put on guard and many bonfires lit all along the coast that same night.

Around 11:00 or 12:00 in the morning they returned to the ship.⁸

b) *The landing.*

After the encounter with the Japanese boat, Sidotti continued his daily activities according to the schedule, until around 5:00 in the afternoon when he resolved to land that same night. Accord-

⁸ Western sources:

a) *Relación del Viage...*, op. cit., p. 11-12.

b) *Traslado Simple...*, op. cit., p. 14.

c) *Declaración de Joseph Alexandro Juanes (?) de Edad de 26 años*, p. 83. In the documents of Casanatense Library.

Japanese sources:

Nagasaki Chûshin Rômajin no Koto, Appendix of *Seiyô Kibun*, op. cit., pp. 245, 252 and 259. The last two pages report Sidotti's own declarations during the cross-examination.

ingly, he had a long talk with the captain, whom, at last, Sidotti managed to persuade. After that, he sat to write some letters. Later, he addressed the crew thanking everybody and finally performed the ceremony of the washing of the feet.

Having finished, he began to get ready to disembark and, first of all, prepared his luggage which consisted of a small suitcase in which he put a picture of Our Lady, a missal, a breviary, a book of the Japanese language, everything necessary to say Mass, the Holy oils, some devotional books, a small crucifix that had belonged to Marcello Mastrilli⁹ and two pairs of whips and three rigid hair-shirts. To this, the General added some food and clothes.¹⁰

Sidotti wore a light blue *kimono* and a Japanese *katana* or sword; his head was shaven in the Japanese way (*sakayaki*). This, he did — he explained to his questioners — in order not to be laughed at by the Japanese not accustomed to see European attire, and in compliance with the trend of living and the customs of the country where the missionary went to preach.¹¹

All the preparations being finished, he boarded a shallop together with the General and other men. In great silence they rowed towards the coast and went into an inlet. First, they tried one side of it, but the steep cliffs kept them from landing. So, they rowed to the opposite side where they also found rocks, which, however, could be climbed. Sidotti decided to land there and left a few men to guard the boat. The rest accompanied Sidotti on the slope, in whose ascent they had to use hands and feet.

Eventually, they came to a plain where Sidotti said that he could be left alone. After having prayed all together, the General gave the missionary a bar of gold.

The place of landing is clearly stated in the Japanese sources: Matsushita, that is, on the southern coast of Yakushima. Near

⁹ Marcello Mastrilli (1603-1637). Italian Jesuit. Arrived in Japan in 1637 and was immediately captured and martyred in Nagasaki.

¹⁰ Cfr. *Relación del Viage...*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

Declaración del General don Miguel de Eloriaga; belonging to the documents of Casanatense Library, p. 29.

Nagasaki Chûshin..., *op. cit.*, Part II, pp. 262-275.

There is a list with a description of all the contents of Sidotti's

¹¹ Cfr. *Declaración de J. A. Juanes (?)...*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

Nagasaki Chûshin..., *op. cit.*, pp. 240 and 260.

Matsushita there is an inlet called Tô no Ura which corresponds fairly well to the description given in the Western sources.¹²

Though we know the events and the place of Sidotti's landing in a rather detailed way, there are still doubts about the hour when Sidotti with a few men left the ship.

According to most of the Western sources, it was around 11:00 or 12:00 in the night,¹³ but in the *Breve Relazione*... it is stated that it was 4:45 in the morning of the 11th of October.¹⁴

There are scholars who uphold this theory, but my personal opinion is different. In fact, a few pages after the hour of departure, it is written that, going back to the ship, they got lost and: "...they went on rowing until, the moon rising, they could see the ship. The moon appeared a little earlier than one hour before daybreak, but nothing could be seen..."¹⁵

Around the 10th of October, the sun has risen a little before 6:00 and daybreak was about 30 minutes before it, therefore at 5:30.

According to what is written in the book, the moon must have risen at 4:30 and, in consequence, it is impossible that they departed at 4:45. On the contrary, the other theory seems to me to be much more acceptable. Considering the difficulties encountered in landing, it is reasonable that it took them from midnight to 4:30 to accomplish the deed. Therefore, I prefer to consider as the right version that which states that the departure from the ship took place at midnight and the return to it at 8:30.

At midday they left Yakushima¹⁶ and on the 29th of October arrived in Manila.

¹² On the 5th April 1967, prof. Matsuda Ki'ichi made an investigation on the spot. The results are published in: Matsuda K.; *Kirishitan Kenkyû Dai Ni Bu*, Kazama Shobô, Tôkyô, 1975, pp. 372-3 and p. 375 note 5. Of the same author see also, *Shidotti no Nihon Sen'nyû*, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-136.

There are also photos of the spot where Sidotti is said to have landed.

¹³ *Traslado Simple*..., *op. cit.*, p. 15.

Declaración de J. A. Juanes (?)..., *op. cit.*, p. 84.

Declaración del General..., *op. cit.*, p. 29.

Relación del Viage..., *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁴ *Breve Relazione*..., *op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹⁵ *Idem*, pp. 30 and 31

¹⁶ The time of departure from Yakushima is reported in: *Nagasaki Chûshin*..., *op. cit.*, p. 242, and in *Seiyô Kibun*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

Sidotti in Japan.

The only sources available on the subject concerning Sidotti in Japan are Japanese.

When Sidotti was left alone on the plain, he probably walked toward the interior of the island until he came to a trail which led to the village of Koidomari. There, on the trail, he met a Japanese named Tôbei who was on his way to fetch firewood.

When they met, Tôbei was afraid of the foreigner but gave him a little water to drink. After that, he went to inform two other peasants Gojiueimon and Kiueimon of the village of Hiranai. They went on to Matsishita and took Sidotti to Koidomari. Sidotti was lodged in Tôbei's house until the arrival of the officials who took him to Miya no Ura, the main village of the island.¹⁷

From there, the authorities of Yakushima informed those of Kagoshima under whose jurisdiction the island was. In their turn, they informed the Magistrate of Nagasaki who was in charge of the matters concerning foreigners in Japan. The Magistrate of Nagasaki asked that the foreigner be sent to him, but bad weather prevented the journey. So, in its stead, 4 reports were sent, the last of which is dated 9th of November.

Some time later, it was decided to set out for the journey notwithstanding the bad weather¹⁸ and on the 20th of December 1708, Sidotti arrived in Nagasaki.¹⁹ That same day he was cross-examined, but they could not understand each other,²⁰ so on the 30th of December, a Dutchman, who said to have studied some Latin many years before, was summoned and thus the cross-examination could go on.²¹

Sidotti expressed repeatedly his wish to go to Edo, the capital, probably because he considered it the most suitable place for his preaching.

Eventually, he was escorted to Edo. It was the 27th of October, 1709, when he left Nagasaki in a palanquin and he arrived in Edo around the middle of December of the same year.²²

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¹⁷ *Nagasaki Chûshin...*, op. cit., p. 252.

¹⁸ *Seiyô Kibun* op. cit., Appendix, pp. 23-24.

¹⁹ *Nagasaki Jitsuroku Dai Sei* in: *Seiyô Kibun*, op. cit., p. 361.

²⁰ *Dejima Ran Kan Nisshi* in: *Seiyô Kibun*, op. cit., pp. 201-202.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 203. The Dutchman was a certain Adrian Dau (Douwe).

²² *Seiyô Kibun*, op. cit., p. 25, and *Nagasaki Chûshin...*, op. cit., p. 257.