

Suicide and its Meaning in History: Rethinking Francesco Carletti and Japanese Writers

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The topic of the Trento conference in 2016 may allow me to speak about my own body, not only my soul and mind as before. Because hurting one's own body is to be talked about, too. I broke the left upper arm, falling down on the floor six months ago. So I got surgery under full anesthesia more than 3 hours. I was in a temporary state of apparent death during these times. Fortunately, the operation was successful, but I am still suffering from its aftereffects (sequelae). Under the situation like this, I would like to thank Dr. Fernanda Alfieri and her colleagues for the theme of the conference, for my discourse is based not only on my historical knowledge, but also on my real operation. And then my first step to respond to the subject starts as follows.

(1) Francesco Carletti's *Ragionamenti*

Japan, during its age of the Civil Wars in the Sixteenth Century, directly encountered Europeans for the first time. Among them was a Florentine Merchant named Francesco Carletti (1573/74–1636). Like many such merchants at that time, one of the goods in which Carletti trafficked was human slaves. Carletti's story includes not only the depictions of exoticism cited under, but also ones of eroticism, much like those found in travelogues and letters by Niccolo de' Conti of Venice or Amerigo Vespucci of Florence¹. These latter two will have to wait for another time, although the exoticism and the eroticism go on side by side in their voyages.

Carletti was born in Florence one generation after the first Europeans had come to Japan in 1543, and he died in his home town the same year that the Portuguese, together with their wives and children, were exiled to Macao, 287 in total. In 1637, the year after Carletti's death, the Shimabara Rebellion broke out in southern Japan. This revolt, in which a great many Catholic peasants participated passionately, was guided

¹ Kenichi Nejime, *Il viaggio di Niccolo de' Conti, la carta del Toscanelli ed India recognita del Poggio* (in Japanese). <https://dspace.wul.waseda.ac.jp/dspace/handle/2065/37339>.

by Amakusa Shirō, a young and charismatic Catholic leader. He and his followers were all killed by shogunal forces in 1638. This was a kind of religious war between Christianity and Buddhism.

After his return to Europe, while serving the Medici, Carletti wrote a memoir, *My Voyage around the World (Ragionamenti di F.C. fiorentino sopra le cose da lui vedute ne' suoi viaggi dell' Indie Occidentali, e Orientali come d'altri Paesi*, Firenze, 1701. fig.1), and this includes information on Japan. In the *Ragionamenti*, Carletti describes various world religions, customs, and conflicts, with a curious and objective eye. I would like to introduce here his experiences in Japan and Asia. Carletti arrived in the port of Nagasaki in June 1597². Twenty-six people, who today are known as Catholic saints, had been put to death there four months before. As soon as he was permitted to land, he went to the place of execution together with other passengers of his ship. Of what he saw there, he writes as follows.

We went immediately to see the spectacle of those poor (as regards this world) six monks of Saint Francis, of the discalced Spanish order, who had been crucified with twenty other Japanese Christians—among them three who had donned the habit of the Jesuits on the fifth of the month of February of the same year, 1597. They all remained whole up on the crosses placed on the top of a mountain that is an arquebus shot from the city. The crosses were made like that one on which our Redeemer was crucified, but each additionally had a piece of wood in the middle of the shaft or trunk and emerging from the back; the suffering one was placed astride this, which thus helped to hold up the body. At the feet, furthermore, there was a piece of wood across, resembling the crosspiece above, but not so large. And to it the feet were fastened, with the legs apart. And instead of nails they used iron straps hammered into the wood and holding the wrists, the neck, and the legs close to the feet. Or they bind the entire body with ropes and keep the cross on the ground while attaching the body to it in one manner or another, stretching the victim out over it. And once he has been settled there, they at once raise the cross, putting its foot into a specially dug hole, which they fill with earth and stones so that the cross will stand firm and solid. When that has been done, the judge—who in that country is by custom present at the carrying out of justice—orders the executioner to pierce the crucified victim.

² Angelo de Gubernatis, *Storia dei viaggiatori italiani nelle indie orientali*, Livorno, 1875. Gemma Sgrilli, *Francesco Carletti. Mercante e viaggiatore fiorentino 1573(?)–1636*, Rocca San Casciano, 1905, pp. 67–70, 75. Stefania Pineider, *In così immensa pellegrinazione : la scrittura del viaggio nei Ragionamenti di Francesco Carletti*, Roma, 2004. Carletti, *Giro del mondo del buon negriero (1594–1606)*, Milano, 1941.

And the lance, being inserted through the right side and passing out through the left shoulder, passes through the entire body from side to side. Many times there are two executioners, each with a lance, one operating from one side, the other from the other. And their lances, crossing, emerging at the two shoulders simultaneously, and thus take away life instantly. But if, as sometimes happens, the victim does not die from those two first lancings, they return to wound him in the throat or, from behind, in the left side corresponding to the heart. And then he dies quickly. That is the manner of crucifixion in Japan. But they also leave some alive on the crosses, to die by themselves of privation or hunger, and they do this according to the crimes. Also, they similarly crucify women with babies still nursing at their breasts, so that both the one and the other die of privation. A form of justice no less cruel than barbarian, it being their custom to punish for the misdeeds of one person all of the family in his house, and often also of his relatives. ... in this case they give no more thought than we give to killing flies. And along all the streets and roads in that country one sees nothing, on one side or the other, but crosses full of men, and women, or of children or even babies, not to mention that those whose heads have been cut off, who make up an infinite number³.

Carletti's minute descriptions continue. The scimitars, which the Japanese call *Catane*, are said to be tested upon the dead bodies⁴.

But his detailed sentences range from eating and drinking to the living things, plants, and animals in various regions. The Florentine had an acutely observant eye for Japanese people and things. Tea (cha) and vases, especially Luzon pots, are very interesting to him. He recounts how people drink this "cha" are so often that one never enters a house without being offered it in a friendly way, out of good manners, as a matter of custom to honour the guest, as they do with wine in the regions of Flanders and Germany⁵. I would like to think that, in the words of Prof. Pauline Moffitt Watts, the Age of the Discovery was the age of the *venator*, not the *viator*⁶. Quite not a few European explorers of the Early Modern age made journeys for satisfying their own desires intellectually, not for converting the people whom they met to the

³ *My Voyage around the World by Francesco Carletti, A 16th Century Florentine Merchant*, translated from the Italian by Herbert Weinstock, New York, 1964, pp.105-07.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁶ Pauline Moffitt Watts, *From the Desert to the New World: the Viator, the Venator, and the Age of Discoveries*, in *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Craig Hugh Smith*, edited by A. Morrogh et al., Firenze, 1985, I, pp. 519-30 : 526-27.

Christian religion as all the missionaries did without exception.

The issue of different time zones and calendars also catches Carletti's interest, as in the following passage.

It is true that in the Philippine Islands on that same day when the Spaniards and their Church are celebrating Holy Saturday, those who are in Japan—that is, the Portuguese and their Church—are eating meat, because for them it is the Day of the Resurrection. So that if they were moving swiftly enough to reach Manila the next day, as is said to have happened to some navigators, they would celebrate the same Easter or other solemnity twice⁷.

In describing the Japan he saw, Carletti often refers to Taico Sama, or Quam Bacco Dono. This is Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598), one of the warlords who was in the process of unifying Japan at this time, and whom he describes as follows

Later he became the tyrant of all that region, though he was not a born king or even of royal blood. He reached that position by violence of arms and by his own valour, having at another time period been in a rustic captivity⁸.

After the assassination in 1582 of Oda Nobunaga, his lord, he became took his place as the foremost warlord in Japan. According to Carletti, he alone remained as conqueror, and made himself monarch of seventy-six (*sic*) kingdoms. Hideyoshi carried out diplomatic exchanges with Philip II, king of Spain, Portugal, Naples, etc. Nobunaga remained friendly to Christians, but Hideyoshi excluded them in 1587, declaring publicly that Japan is the country of Shintoism, and that the coming missionaries had destroyed many temples of Buddhism with Japanese Christians, and that they occupied Nagasaki illegally.

Not content with great victories here, Hideyoshi invaded Korea (1596-97) with a great army, whence a great number of men and women, boys and girls, were sold as slaves at the very lowest prices. Carletti obtained five of them for little more than twelve scudi. I cite his *Ragionamenti* again.

Having had them baptized, I took them with me to Goa in India, and there set them

⁷ *My Voyage around the World by Francesco Carletti*, pp. 102-03.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

free. I brought one of them with me to Florence, and I think that today he is to be found in Rome, where he is known as Antonio⁹.

(2) The immortality of the Soul

While I was reading the *Ragionamenti*, I noticed that Carletti refers to the immortality of the soul. Two years ago here in Trent, I referred to the doctrine of the immortality and its problems in the Renaissance and in Japan. It seem to me that it was the problem of the immortality of soul that had been discussed most passionately between the Jesuits coming to Japan and the Japanese including principally Buddhists in the Christian Century of Japanese history. I published the essay of the development and meaning of its discussion from Francis Xavier to Alessandro Valignano.

The theory of the immortality of soul became an article of the faith with *apostolici regiminis* at the Fifth Lateran Council in 1513. The religion of Catholic Christianity was introduced for the first time into Japan by the Jesuit Xavier in 1549. When he came to Japan, he was astonished to know the Japanese denied the afterlife according to the Buddhism. Finding its theory wrong and misleading, he decided to emphasize the immortality of soul as the most valuable truth of Christian religion. The visiting Christians and missionaries after him, especially Valignano, continued to advocate it against Buddhists, based upon the Christian truth and the article of the faith.

Would the theory of the immortality of soul have belonged to the Christian religion? In fact, the immortality of soul was most platonic, while the resurrection was Christian. According to the Aristotelian tradition, the theory was vague and uncertain. There were the controversies between the religious orders and some distinct philosophers in the European Renaissance. I already reviewed the meaning of coming-across of the thought and custom between the West and Japan¹⁰.

First, according to Carletti, Hideyoshi rejected the Jesuits' religion, but he did not believe in any religion, as in the following passage.

[Hideyoshi] often used to say that laws and religions had been founded only to regulate men and force them to live with modesty and civility, and for no other purpose, he believing firmly that after the body's death there is no other spirit or life that is

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁰ Kenichi Nejime, The Immortality of the Soul and Japan : the Worldwide Problem of the Italian Renaissance, *Bulletin of Gakushuin Women's College*, No. 17, 2015, pp. 99-108.

immortal or eternal. By now he will have become aware, though very late and past all remedy, of his barbarian bestiality, there in the Inferno, where he is at present to be found, having died later in that error¹¹.

Second, Carletti left Nagasaki for Macao on 3 March 1598, together with some religious of the Society of Jesus and other merchants and Portuguese passengers. A craft built in the Japanese style, on which he embarked, was commanded by a captain who was Portuguese by nationality, though born in Nagasaki of a Japanese mother. This craft which they called *somma*, was a bigger ship than *Funee*, boat. 'A strange, frightening disagreement'¹², as Carletti says, sprang up between those merchants and the Japanese sailors who ran the ship, and it came to the point that the missionaries had to stop them killing each other. Here, Carletti refers to *harakiri*, or ritual suicide, reminding us in the process of the immortality of the soul. Once again I cite *Ragionamenti*.

For more than an hour, everything was confusion and struggle and frightening tumult, as you can well imagine, thinking of a ship in mid-sea and on it a war between equal groups, which is what that struggle was coming to—and, what is more frightening still, with one of the groups formed of men so fierce and barbarian that many of them deny the immortality of the soul and have no care at all for the body, which, for the sake of their reputation or other worldly honour, they very often themselves cut open, as I have said elsewhere, with one of their smaller scimitars, making a cross on their belly with it, and then deepening the cross into the intestines. They hold that to be a very honourable sort of death. And one friend will do the same for another friend who does not find within himself the spirit with which to commit suicide¹³.

(3) Yamamoto Tsunetomo's *Hagakure* in Edo Period (Early Modern Japan)

About two months ago, I was astonished to see the expression 'un esempio da manuale di *harakiri* politico'¹⁴ in the online edition of the *Corriere della Sera*. Until then, I never knew that the word *harakiri* was in use in Italy, like *kamikaze*. Accordingly, I

¹¹ *My Voyage around the World by Francesco Carletti*, p. 116.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁴ 2 September 2016. «Questa storia brutta, bruttissima del capo di Gabinetto e dell'assessore al Bilancio che lasciano la sindaca Raggi sembra un esempio da manuale di *harakiri* politico...». Il commento di Pierluigi Battista.

would like to speak about *harakiri*, or *seppuku*, from a historical point of view. To be sure, Carletti was in Japan during the savage and tumultuous Age of Civil War, so it might have been ordinary then. However, long after the civil wars had given way to the *pax Tokugawa* in the seventeenth century, this samurai's custom would continue until the twentieth century.

In this connection, I would like to introduce two more books, which are not Italian but Japanese. The first is *Hagakure*, whose title is translated variously as *In the Shadow of Leaves or Hidden Leaves*¹⁵. The samurai who wrote this book during the Tokugawa peace was Yamamoto Tsunetomo (1659-1719), and he regards bushidō, the code or spirit of the samurai, as the way of living and dying as if one were already dead. In this way, a samurai is pleased to die at any moment for his lord. I cite *Hagakure*.

In a word the essence of the code of a *samurai* is death. When you are placed in a situation of living or surviving, don't hesitate to choose to die. There is nothing to worry about. Rush in and be killed. That is all. People in other clans may say that it is to die for nothing, but let them say so. They are only trying to escape from death. We are not. In a situation in which you live or die, it is impossible to make things flow as you want. Everybody prefers to live, but you will be a coward if you should survive without achieving your purpose. On the other hand, if you lose your life without achieving your purpose you will have died a miserable death, but you will not be called a coward at all. It is a crucial turning point in judgement. It is a way of dying, most suitable for a samurai. Therefore, every morning and evening imagine yourself being killed on the battlefield and abandon yourself as dead, and you will not make a serious mistake as a *samurai* as long as you live.

For thirty years, Tsunetomo devoted himself to the service of his lord Nabeshima Mitsushige in Saga, near Nagasaki. To tell the truth, I feel they had quasi a homosexual relationship. In any case he prepared to die for his love toward Mitsushige. When he lived in Kyoto, Tsunetomo knew that Mitsushige would die soon. Then he hastened back to Saga day and night to arrive at Saga Castle, be in time for lord's last day. In fact, he had hardly dreamed that lord Mitsushige's condition was so serious when he was still in Kyoto, but he had a kind of feeling. I cite *Hagakure* again.

¹⁵ <http://www.sagalibdb.jp/hagakure/html/list03.html>

Probably it was because I had long conceived the notion that I was only a dependable retainer of the lord. Lord Buddha and the Shinto gods must have responded to piety. I was a petty retainer and had not done him any great service, but made up my mind to follow him to the grave when he passed away. Unless someone did so, the lord would feel lonely in going over to the other world. Sure enough, no one else offered to follow him to the grave. If only they had abandoned their lives! How cowardly and selfish they were! I felt disgusted by their attitude and my heart was not at peace for years after that.

Nevertheless, when Mitsushige died in 1700, Tsunetomo did not choose to follow him to the grave with *harakiri*. This was because his lord had expressed a dislike of the practice in his life and had forbidden it. Respecting his lord's wishes and refraining from killing himself, Tsunetomo renounced the world and retired as a Buddhist monk to a hermitage in the mountains, also owing to some disagreements with his master's successor. I cite *Hagakure* once again.

There are retainers who continue to work for the clan till they are 60 or 70 years old, but I shaved my head at the age of 42, to take up this lonely life. My career was quite short in the world. I was grateful to have been able to perform my duty well as a retainer. I then renounced the world and shaved my head, becoming a dead person, so to speak. I am afraid that lots of hardship would have awaited me if I had remained at the castle, as many colleagues did. For the past 14 years I had been really lucky in this cottage in peace.

(4) View of Life and Death in Modern Japan

Tsunetomo's way of life, or his *Weltanschauung*, world view, reminds me of Nogi Maresuke (1849-1912) in the early twentieth century. In modern Imperial Japan, Nogi was held up as a model of loyalty and self-sacrifice, especially in his suicide. In the Satsuma Rebellion in 1877, he lost the banner of the Emperor in battle, and he tried to atone for this mistake with suicidal efforts to recapture it until he was ordered to stop. The Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) opened at the battle of Port Arthur (Lüshun) whose harbour was heavily fortified. Nogi captured Port Arthur, but he felt that he had lost too many of his soldiers together with his own sons, so he requested permis-

sion to commit suicide. However, the Emperor again refused.

These two events, as well as his desire not to outlive his master, motivated his suicide, together with his wife, on the day of Emperor Meiji's funeral. He said in his death note that he wished to expiate for his disgrace in Kyūshū, and for the thousands of casualties at Port Arthur. He also donated his body to medical science. The ritual suicide was in accordance with the *samurai* practice of following one's master to death, such a wish as Tsunetomo hoped but was never realized. It seems me that Nogi was alive in the world, while being dead. His example revitalized the Japanese tradition of ritual suicide without any doubt.

The other book I would like to introduce is even more famous than *Hagakure*, and its title is *Bushido, The Soul of Japan* written by Nitobe Inazo (1862-1933) and published in 1900¹⁶. Nitobe treats *harakiri* in Chapter 12, <The Institutions of Suicide and Redress>, 'of which (the former known as *hara-kiri* and the latter as *kataki-uchi*) many foreign writers have treated more or less fully.' Nitobe is certainly a modern, intellectual scholar and leader influenced strongly by the European culture. He was born in the Edo period but grew up after the disestablishment of Buddhism and the reintroduction of the Christianity in the Meiji era. In fact, he became a Christian and married an Anglo-American wife while living in the United States. Here is a relevant passage from his *Bushido*.

The Semites habitually spoke of the liver and kidneys and surrounding fat as the seat of emotion and of life. The term *hara* was more comprehensive than the Greek *phren* or *thumos*, and the Japanese and Hellenese alike thought the spirit of man to dwell somewhere in that region. Such a notion is by no means confined to the peoples of antiquity. The French, in spite of the theory propounded by one of their most distinguished philosophers, Descartes, that the soul is located in the pineal gland, still insist in using the term *ventre* in a sense, which, if anatomically too vague, is nevertheless physiologically significant. Similarly *entrailles* stands in their language for affection and compassion. Nor is such belief mere superstition, being more scientific than the general idea of making the heart the centre of the feelings. Without asking a friar, the Japanese knew better than Romeo "in what vile part of this anatomy one's name did lodge." Modern neurologists speak of the abdominal and pelvic brains, denoting thereby sympathetic nerve-centres in those parts which are strongly affected

¹⁶ <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12096/12096-h/12096-h.htm#PREFACE2>

by any psychical action. This view of mental physiology once admitted, the syllogism of *seppuku* is easy to construct. “I will open the seat of my soul and show you how it fares with it. See for yourself whether it is polluted or clean.”

The place of the soul here (Nitobe Inazō's *Bushido*) makes me think over the problem of death with dignity, which has been debated in various countries in recent years. Nitobe's insistence upon the *hara* reminds me of Mishima Yukio's suicide by *harakiri* forty-six years ago, in 1970, when I was a student in Tokyo. This event, known as the “Mishima Incident”, was broadcasted live on television. Through it, he is remembered for his ritual suicide by *seppuku* after a failed *coup d'état*.

Mishima was a versatile, intellectual novelist and playwright, and his favorite book was the aforementioned *Hagakure*. It influenced his life and death. On the one hand, *Hagakure* is not only a book about death, but also about morals in the strict sense, including practical advice on a wide range of topics, from the proper behavior for a samurai at a drinking party to proper way to raise a child. I feel like comparing *Hagakure* with the works of some French moralists. Mishima was interested in *Hagakure's* teaching on action, meditation, culture, history, tragedy, and love. He saw striking similarities between his own criticisms of materialistic post-war Japan and Yamamoto Tsunetomo's ones of the sumptuous decadence of his own age in *Hagakure*.

On the other hand, Tsunetomo's precept, ‘The way of the samurai is to die,’ became a slogan to spur on *Kamikaze* pilots, Mishima's contemporaries during the Second World War. Mishima in his youth was mentally attracted by Hasuda Zenmei (1904-45), poet and scholar of Japanese literature. Hasuda killed his superior officer and then himself in the aftermath of World War II, and as it happens, Hasuda was born near the battlefield of Tabaruzaka, where Nogi Maresuke had been robbed of the banner of the Emperor. The ferocious Battle of Tabaruzaka is one of the most famous in the Satsuma Rebellion. This Rebellion was raised by Saigō Takamori (1828-1877), formerly a samurai of Satsuma and one of the most respected heroes in Japan. Takamori is said to have committed *harakiri* on this battleground in his hometown.

(5) Arai Hakuseki and Sidoti (or Sidotti)

I have already mentioned that Buddhism was disestablished as a state-supported religion during the Edo-Meiji transition. In the immediate sense, this was a reaction to the special status which Buddhist temples had had as agents of surveillance and

social order since the “Christian Century”: it was with Buddhist temples that former Christians had to register to prove that they were no longer Christians. However, the Meiji-period anti-Buddhist movement (*haibutsu kishaku*) was not a restoration of Christianity, to be sure. Rather, it participated in nativist currents of thought which have made themselves felt at various times in Japanese history. In the Meiji period, this led to the destruction of Buddhist temples, images and texts, and the forced return to secular life of Buddhist monks under the pressure of State Shinto. This movement was aided by scholars of the *Kokugaku* or Native Studies school, which aimed at a restoration of ancient Japanese thought and culture. Under their influence, Shintoism became the established “native” religion under the new Meiji state, although there were many more Buddhists than Shintoists, and far fewer Christians, in Japan.

One more book which I would like to discuss is *Seiyo-Kibun* “A Record of Questions about the Western Sea,” by Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725). Although this manuscript was never published until after the Meiji Restoration, Hakuseki was a contemporary of Yamamoto Tsunetomo of *Hagakure*. In *Seiyo-Kibun*, Hakuseki records the conversation he had with the Italian Giovanni Battista Sidoti (1668-1714). Sidoti was a missionary who had entered Japan from Manila in 1708, dressed as a Samurai, but then was arrested and taken to Edo, modern-day Tokyo, the following year. By speaking with Sidoti, Hakuseki obtained tremendous amount of knowledge about western countries and their thought, even though Japan had cut off relations with Europe at this point. When I read it for the first time, I could not help but be surprised with Hakuseki’s detailed memoranda and with Sidoti’s wide erudition.

Hakuseki knew that Sidoti would never abandon his own religion and convert to Buddhism. He would rather become a martyr, not fearing the death on the cross. The Christian Sidoti, for his part, certainly could not commit suicide by *harakiri*, although he had been an Italo-Japanese in the guise of a samurai. Hakuseki thought it best to expel this exponent of the forbidden Christian religion from Japan. Sidoti, however, died after a few years in house arrest. Before being put in jail he baptized two Japanese. The bones of three persons were discovered at the same spot in 2014, and this year, the National Museum of Nature and Science in Tokyo identified one of these as belonging to Sidoti.

Hakuseki studied Zhu Xi-style Neo-Confucianism under Kinoshita Jun’an, and he was an influential advisor under the shogun Tokugawa Ienobu. Therefore his social status was much higher than Tsunetomo, but I think that Hakuseki’s sense of samurai honour was very similar to Tsunetomo’s, considering from another of Hakuseki’s

works, entitled *Oritakushibanoki*, his own autobiography. Because when he thought of those violent days of the Civil Wars that Xavier, Valignano and even Carletti had witnessed, Hakuseki felt he lived in a completely different age. As for the immortality of the soul, Hakuseki wrote *Kishinron*, criticizing Buddhism from a Confucian standpoint. He did not necessarily deny the theory. It seems that *Kishinron* was written after he had met Sidoti, but no scholar has investigated a relationship between this meeting and Hakuseki's view of the soul.

Francesco Carletti suggested me such a presentation as this, since he gave a vivid description about *harakiri*, as told initially. Thanks to you for careful listening.

P.S. This treatise is derived from my presentation made on 25th November in *Medieval and Early Modern Religious Histories: Perspectives from Europe and Japan*. Third Meeting: *Religion and Violence* at ISIG (Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico, Trento, Italy).

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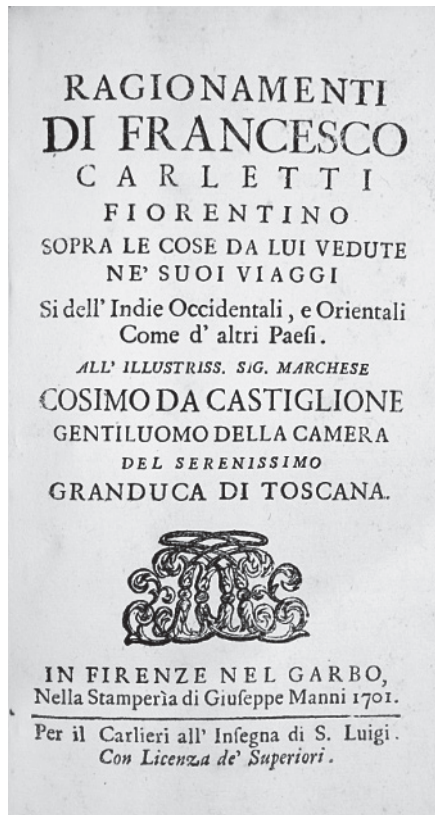


Figure 1.