Telling the Untellable: The Geography of Conversion of a Muslim Jesuit

Emanuele Colombo and Rocco Sacconaghi

[. . .] the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens [. . .]. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.¹

Ships, dreams, and seas—these are recurring motifs in the remarkable conversion story of Mohammed el-Attaz (1631–1667). Born in 1631 to the king of Fez of the Sa'adian dynasty, Mohammed grew up studying the Qur'an, and was married with three children before turning twenty, at which point he embarked on a pilgrimage to Mecca without his father's consent.² While sailing near Tunis,

his ship was intercepted by the Knights of St. John. Mohammed and his entourage were held ransom in Malta for the next five years. There, saddened by the ignorance of the local Muslims, Mohammed devoted himself to teaching and copying the Qur’an. His ransom was paid. His bags were packed. And just as he was about to leave, he received a vision that resulted in his decision to convert to Christianity. He was catechized and baptized, and chose for himself the name of the captain of the ship that had taken him prisoner five years before, adding the name ‘Loyola’ in honour of St. Ignatius, on whose feast day he was baptized. Mohammed, now known as Baldassarre Loyola, went to Palermo and Messina, where he came into contact with some local Jesuits and decided to join the Society. In 1661 he settled at the novitiate in Rome; he was ordained a priest two years later. For about three years (1664–1667) he devoted himself to the conversion of Muslims in the seaports of Genoa and Naples with considerable success. Even the Italian nobility and prominent churchmen took a liking to him. Yet his heart was elsewhere: he petitioned to be assigned to a Muslim territory, with the hope of receiving the gift of martyrdom. He was eventually permitted to go to the Mughal court, but he never arrived. In 1667 he died in Madrid after falling sick travelling to Lisbon, from where he was supposed to sail.

Baldassarre’s story is not unique: in the early modern period several noblemen left the Maghreb to go to Italy or Iberia for political and economic reasons, and sometimes they converted. However, Baldassarre is the only Muslim prince who became a Jesuit, one of the few exceptions to the decree *De genere* (1593) that prevented New Christians from joining the Society. Additionally, while we usually have only formulaic accounts of most converted Muslim rulers, here we have access to a range of sources, including first-person accounts by Baldassarre himself: more than two hundred letters, an unpublished auto-

---

3 We write the name as Baldassarre himself used to sign his letters after his conversion.

4 Alonso Acero B., *Sultanes de Berbería en tierras de la cristiandad: Exilio musulmán, conversión y asimilación en la monarquía hispánica (siglos xvi y xvii)* (Barcelona: 2006).

5 The Fifth General Congregation of the Order (1593) determined that the so-called New Christians (people of Jewish and Muslim ancestry) could not join the Society; the law was abrogated in 1946. See Padberg J.W. – O’Keefe M. – McCarthy J. (eds.), *For Matters of Greater Moment: The First Thirty Jesuit General Congregations: A Brief History and a Translation of the Decrees* (St. Louis: 1994).