THE TRANSMISSION AND BIBLIOGRAPHIC STUDY
OF THE PIGAFETTA ACCOUNT:
SYNTHESIS AND UPDATE

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ABSTRACT: For its value as a historical source and as a singular piece of writing, Antonio Pigafetta’s account of the Magellan-Elcano expedition has appeared in diverse places, and over the centuries. Numerous scholars have worked to establish the history and nature of those editions and translations. This study pursues three objectives related to Pigafetta’s account: to articulate a synthesis of the publication history; to summarize the development of research on that transmission; and to identify trends, controversies and possible gaps in that scholarship.

KEYWORDS: Antonio Pigafetta; Magellan; book history; bibliography.

The history of European maritime expansion in the Early Modern period is a story of ships crossing seas, but also of books moving across linguistic, cultural and geographical boundaries. For its value as a historical source and as a singular piece of writing, Antonio Pigafetta’s account of the Magellan-Elcano expedition has appeared in diverse places, and, over the centuries, numerous scholars have worked to establish the history and nature of those editions and translations. As we observe the five-hundredth anniversary of the journey, this study seeks to pursue three objectives related to Pigafetta’s account: to articulate a synthesis of the publication history; to summarize the development of
research on that transmission; and to identify trends, controversies and possible gaps in that scholarship.¹

**TRANSMISSION**

After returning to Spain in 1522, Pigafetta composed an account that is understood to have existed first as a summary or summaries — unknown today — and later as a fuller version he sought to publish in 1524, apparently without doing so. Four known manuscripts document the latter, or some version of it. One is in Italian at the Ambrosiana Library, Milan, and three others in French are located at other repositories.

The first printed version, *Le voyage et nauigation*, appeared in Paris around 1525. That French text then informed all other editions through the end of the eighteenth century. It was translated to Italian with abridgement, and printed in the volume *Il Viaggio fatto dagli Spagnivoli* (1536, probably Venice). Giovanni Battista Ramusio included that translation in the first volume of *Navigationi et Viaggi* (Venice, 1550), and it figured as well as in later editions of that collection (1554, 1563, 1588, 1606, 1613). Richard Eden printed a translation, based on the version in Ramusio, first in his edition of the *Decades* of Peter Martyr (London, 1555), and later in *History of Trauayle* (London, 1577). Eden’s version was likely the source for the version in *Purchas His Pilgrimes* (London, 1625-1627).

¹ Due to space considerations, this study is bound by limitations in scope and in the construction of the bibliography. Pigafetta’s treatise on navigation has often appeared with his account of the expedition, but is not considered here, nor is the letter by Maximilian of Transylvania. With limited exceptions deemed to be significant, this essay excludes consideration of extracts, adaptations and narrative accounts based on Pigafetta’s text, and versions in languages other than English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. To conserve space and reduce redundancy in the bibliography, I employ the following conventions: I list under Pigafetta full details for all versions that can be reasonably understood as editions and translations, and cross-reference those in an abbreviated fashion in the corresponding entries for editors’ introductions. When versions of Pigafetta’s text are included in volumes that also present other texts (as in the 1874 Hakluyt edition), however, I have included full information in both the entry under Pigafetta and in the entry for the respective introduction, as in such cases the introduction is to the entire volume, not just to the Pigafetta text. I mention reprints only in the body itself (employing the abbreviation rpt.), and only by year. I have shortened titles and other information wherever possible.
1626, rpt. 1905-1907, 1965). M.C. Sprengel published a translation to German (Leipzig, 1784), derived, according to Leoncio Cabrero (1985: 36), from the version in Ramusio.

In 1800, Carlo Amoretti published in Milan a new version based on the Ambrosiana manuscript, to that time unknown. The following year, Amoretti’s own translation to French was printed in Paris2 and a German translation from that French appeared in Gotha. Both included Amoretti’s introduction, as did the English translation of the 1800 edition that John Pinkerton included in A General Collection (London, 1812, rpt. 1819).


The second half of the twentieth century also saw numerous new editions. In 1956 Léonce Peillard published in Paris a modernized French version based

2 The text itself bears the date «l’an IX» (revolutionary calendar), corresponding to 1800.

twice, 2005). In 1957, a translation to Spanish by an F. Ros was published in

Madrid. Charles Nowell included Robertson’s 1906 translation in a collection

published in 1962 in Evanston, Illinois, and George Sanderlin published a some-
what abridged edition in English in New York in 1964, based on the same trans-
lation. A Portuguese translation was printed in 1966, and an English version

was published in Manila in 1969, based on Robertson (1906). That same year,

Paula Spurlin Paige printed in New Jersey a facsimile edition and translation

into English of a copy of the c. 1525 French version, and R. A. Skelton printed

in Connecticut a translation to English from one of the French manuscripts


Aires a new edition of Medina’s Spanish translation (rpt. 1997). Leoncio Cabre-

do printed in Madrid a Spanish edition based on the 1957 F. Ros translation in

1985 (rpt. 1988, 2002), and translations to Portuguese appeared in 1986 in Brazil

and Portugal (the latter rpt. 1990). In 1987, Mariarosa Masoero published in

Rovereto, Italy, a new edition based on the Ambrosiana manuscript, as did both

Luigi Giovannini in Milan and Michele Amendolea in Rome in 1989. Mario

Pozzi published an abbreviated Italian version based on the Ambrosiana manu-

script in Milan in 1991, and in 1994 another edition and facsimile of that manu-

script. In 1995, T. J. Cachey published in New York a translation to English


a Spanish edition in Buenos Aires, as did Ana García Herráz and Mario Pozzi in

Valencia. That same year, a translation to Portuguese was printed in Mem Mar-

tins. In 1999, the following were published: a new Spanish translation by Isabel

de Riquer in Barcelona, and a new Italian edition by Andrea Canova in Padua.

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, several editions have

appeared. In 2004, Martín Casariego published in Madrid a new edition in

Spanish and in 2007, Xavier de Castro published a version in Paris in a collec-

tion in French, reprinted in 2010. A new German edition was published in 2013

(rpt. 2017).

THE BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Antonio de León Pinelo’s 1629 Epitome appears to be the first bibliographical

work to register Pigafetta’s account, mentioning (perhaps speculatively) a manu-

script, the c. 1525 French text, and the version in Ramusio (88). In the follow-

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In the first half of the twentieth century, Robertson discussed briefly matters related to transmission in the preface to his edition (1906a), and provided
the most extensive discussion to date of the manuscripts and printed editions in the appendix (1906b). Antonio Palau y Dulcet registered in Manual del librero hispano-americano the c. 1525, 1536, and 1800 editions, as well as numerous of the subsequent versions in various languages (1948-1980: nº 225739-225755). In the second half of the twentieth century, Charles E. Nowell discussed the 1906 version (1962: 4), Léonce Peillard considered the four manuscripts in the preface to his 1956 edition (48-57), and Howard H. Peckam (1969: xii-xv) and R. A. Skelton (1969: 8-9, 13-18) examined the transmission of the Pigafetta story more extensively. Cabrero (1985: 34-39) reviewed the historical sources and provided a listing of editions, as did Mario Pozzi, more briefly in 1991 (518-20). In 1994, Pozzi considered the writing of the account and the manuscripts and editions (20-30). In the introduction to his edition (1995: xli-lvii), Theodore J. Cachey discussed the circumstances around the c. 1525 edition, as well as the manuscripts.

**TRENDS, CONTROVERSIES AND GAPS**

As this review of the bibliographical scholarship makes clear, most sources provide fragmentary versions. The c. 1525 and 1800 editions comprise the center of gravity of this body of studies, a logical circumstance since both are in a sense first editions, each the starting point for a separate textual tradition. Different sources, however, include different combinations of other editions and translations, and until Robertson (1906b), no study stands out as exhaustive. In many ways Robertson’s work has not been superseded, but necessarily misses over a hundred years of more recent textual history. Skelton (1969) and Cachey (1995) are the other two major studies in the twentieth century, but neither was designed to be comprehensive, and, given the quantity of editions published since 1995, also cannot tell the entire story.

One of the most obvious deficiencies in the current scholarship is the lack of attention to nearly all the versions in Spanish and Portuguese. Robertson (1906b) misses the Spanish translation by Medina, as do Skelton (1969) and Cachey (1995), omitting mention as well of all the subsequent Spanish versions published in the twentieth century. None of the Portuguese texts appear to be contemplated in the bibliographic scholarship. Beyond the matter of the exclusion of these editions, some larger questions present themselves. Why was no version of the Pigafetta story produced in Spanish until the Medina
translation, nearly four centuries after the c. 1525 edition? Why, subsequently, were so many editions, translations and reprints produced in Spanish since that time — more, it seems, than in any other language? Why do we find no version in Portuguese until 1938?

Another, perhaps lesser, question surrounds the 1784 German version, which appears to have been the first version in any language since 1626. Why were no editions produced in the interim? Why, after such a long gap, was the first new incarnation of the text in German?

Throughout the bibliographic scholarship on Pigafetta’s account, certain common threads of confusion or doubt also exist. The foremost deals with the nature and circumstances of the c. 1525 version, and as a corollary, the language in which Pigafetta composed his original text. Following a statement in Ramusio, the traditional understanding has been that Pigafetta first wrote a brief summary of events in Italian, which he presented to Louise de Savoy, the mother of King Francis I of France, at the behest of whom Jacques Antoine Fabre prepared a translation to French, which was published as the c. 1525 first edition. According to this tradition, Pigafetta later composed a more complete version, in either French or Italian — the languages of the four extant manuscripts — that was not published until the Amoretti edition in 1800. This is the story told, for example, by Sabin (1961-1962 [1868]: 62803).

Others, however, disagree with this version. León Pinelo (1629, 88), Brunet (1999 [1862]: vol. iv, 650-651), Harisse (1866, 229, 249), Robertson (1906b, 273), and Palau (1948-1980, 225739), among others, all seem to assert that Fabre did not work from an initial, short version, but rather from the full manuscript, which he abridged as well as translated. Robertson, for instance, terms the c. 1525 text «a summary made from the Italian manuscript» (1906b: 273). Two scholars offer particularly divergent opinions on this matter. Peckham (1969: vi-vii) seems to suggest that the 1525 first edition was Pigafetta’s original text, not a translation, apparently proposing that Pigafetta had written in French, not Italian. Skelton, in contrast, looks skeptically on the Fabre story altogether, for which, as he points out, the only source is Ramusio (Skelton 1969: 18).

If Skelton’s doubt is merited, the legend of a Fabre translation stands as a notable example of hearsay or invention transforming itself, over the centuries, into apparent bibliographic truth. The bibliographic history of the Pigafetta text appears to harbor other ghosts as well. In some cases, we find the perpetuation of inaccurate information. For example, the 1784 Sprengel translation to German appears in Palau (1848-1980, 225748) as Erste Reise um die
Welt durch Ferdinand Magelhan, which is, in truth, the title of the anthologized text that occupies pp. 1-155 in the volume Beiträge zur Völker und Länderkunde. The Palau entry, which itself may be drawn from somewhere else, is repeated in the Cabredo edition (1985, 36) and elsewhere.

The 1884 French edition registered by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France may not actually exist, or may not exist as listed. Perhaps following the BNF catalog entry, however, Joseph Blanc (1972 [1886], col. 1462), Palau (225747) and Giovanni Dotoli et al. (2004: 593) also register this text, for which scant evidence otherwise seems to exist.

Other curiosities have not been perpetuated across various bibliographic works, but nonetheless may merit attention. For example, an edition printed in 1971 in Buenos Aires purports to be based on an Italian version from 1827 and a French text from 1798. Neither of those texts appears to exist.

Another tendency throughout the bibliographic tradition is for scholars to judge certain versions as inherently defective. Such criticism begins with the denigration of the hypothetical unknown Italian original from which the c. 1525 edition was supposedly derived. Apparently extrapolating from the language of the Ambrosiana manuscript or some other text, Harisse supposes that the French queen requested the translation because she could not comprehend «the kind of patois used by Pigafetta… which resembles a mixture of Italian or Venitian and Spanish» (1866, 249).

A critical view of the c. 1525 French edition is nearly universal. Harisse describes what he understands as Fabre’s translation to be a «garbled version» that is «scarcely intelligible» (1866, 250). Robertson likewise uses the term «garbled» in discussing what he also assumes to be Fabre’s translation (1906b, 273). All versions based on the c. 1525 are also, by extension, thought of as defective, with the version in Ramusio, for instance, generally considered to be a further deformation.

Despite its importance, the 1800 edition also does not escape criticism. Robertson says Amoretti «committed the sin of editing the precious docu-

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3 This contains an introduction that begins on page 3, but I have not been able to determine where the introduction ends and the text itself begins.

4 See the catalog record at http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb31110657h. It may be one of the 12 volumes of «Nouvelle Bibliothèque des voyages».

5 The volume contains no introduction, name of editor or any additional information that might help clarify the case.
ment, almost beyond recognition in places» (1906a, 14). As he states of Amoretti, «Unfortunately... he had the bad taste to try to put that document into good Italian, and in so doing made considerable changes both in text and meaning» (1906b, 295).

The edition of Lord Stanley of Alderley has been likewise decried. Robertson, for instance, questions Lord Stanley’s mixing of source texts, observing that «[t]he translation is not above reproach in several other ways besides the very unscholarly one of shifting from MS. 5650 to Amoretti». He additionally accuses the editor of «prudery» in his approach to the more graphic or salacious aspects of the text (1906b: 301).

After Robertson, editors have seemed less prone to engage in such free-handed criticism of their predecessors. Curiously, however, only Peckham (1969: xii) seems to have offered a vindication of the c. 1525 edition, arguing that it is a textual fact that must be respected. Until 1800, he points out, this was the only version available and hence was the text that informed a great deal of Early Modern thinking about the voyage and its ramifications. To date, no one seems to have similarly refuted previous evaluations of the 1800 edition and 1874 translation.

**Conclusion**

As we observe he five-hundreth anniversary of the Magellan-Elcano voyage, we find ourselves in an opportune moment to consider the complex history of the transmission of Pigafetta’s account. This is also, perhaps, a time to look forward a few years to when we might celebrate the publication of the c. 1525 first edition, as well as to 2029, the four-hundredth anniversary of León Pinedo’s *Epitome*, and hence the apparent inauguration of the bibliographical tradition surrounding the Pigafetta account. While scholars have invested much effort over the centuries, renewed attention to the transmission and related bibliographic scholarship is needed.

The implications of the current study go beyond the Pigafetta account. This article assumes that bibliographic traditions are valid objects of study, but little recent work explicitly of this nature seems to exist. This is a fact that we might find troubling; if the publication history of such a canonical text as Pigafetta’s account remains incomplete, the same must surely be the case for many other key texts, as well as for lesser known but surely valuable works.
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