

A Present of Arabian Horses

Yuki Ryogo, translated by Fumiko F. Earns

This tale begins with the rather typical dream of four young men for horses. What makes their story special is that the youths in question were the Japanese Christian envoys from the Nagasaki area selected by the Jesuit Alesandro Valignano to accompany him to Europe on a goodwill mission in 1582. To the young envoys, the large Arabian horses they saw on their trip seemed extraordinary; beautiful, spirited creatures, with long manes flowing in the wind as they galloped across their dreams. It is a story long kept secret that can now be told using letters and documents stretching from Europe to Japan from 1586 to 1591.

The desire of the four young men – Mancio Ito, Miguel Chijiwa, Martin Hara and Julian Nakaura – for horses was first recorded during their return voyage from Lisbon to Goa after visiting the court of Philipp II, the king of Spain and Portugal. The writer was Father Jerome Cardoso, Procurator of the Jesuits in Lisbon, in a communication to the Father General.

“Those who traveled to India [from Portugal] encountered various problems, but the four [young Japanese envoys] eventually received everything they needed from the king’s [Philipp II’s] officials. The money spent by the king on the Japanese envoys and the accompanying Jesuits amounted to more than 7,000 ducats. The Cardinal [Albert of Lisbon] promised that the four envoys from Japan would be provided with horses in India. (This would involve a large amount of money as well.) The Cardinal, however, did not give any money toward the Japanese college and seminary or other items requested for India.”

The poor man in charge of economic matters could only think of the money involved, but the four envoys saw things in a very different light. They left Lisbon on April 13, 1586 and arrived in Goa on May 29th the following year, and the four horses were waiting for them, as they hoped, in the shade of the palm trees on the banks of the Mandovi River. This time our story teller is Father Valignano, who is informing Philipp II about the arrival of the envoys.

“The four envoys from Japan arrived in the town of Goa on May 29. On the way, they had to spend the winter in Mozambique. The local commander, Don Jorge De Meneses, was a great help, providing them with a small galleon, as had been ordered by the Viceroy Don Duarte. The Viceroy himself received them warmly and welcomed them with honor. In addition, he presented them four fine horses so that they could go about freely. Everything is being done according to the king’s orders.

The envoys have been extremely satisfied with the hospitality and honors that they have received from the king, the Pope, nobles, and Christian lords of the territories through which they have passed. Therefore, I believe that if they can return safely to Japan with the help of God, they will have a tremendous impact [on the future of Christianity in Japan]. The mission [to Europe] was necessary to ensure this great influence. That is to say, those who were raised as Japanese needed to go to Europe and then to testify to their countrymen about the things that we have said about Christianity in Europe. These high ranking Japanese envoys were pleased with their experiences and have learned quite a lot; they will, therefore, be accepted by their own people and be a great

help in our evangelical efforts. Thus, I believe that this mission was planned with the Providence of God and that it was the right thing to do.”

Valignano’s optimism allowed him to overcome a potential problem. The four young envoys had quickly become attached to the Arabian horses, but transportation to Japan would be difficult. Fortunately, when the departure day arrived, Valignano thought of an answer: since he was going to Japan as Ambassador of the Viceroy of India, he could take at least a few of the horses as one of the presents to be offered to Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Therefore, two of the horses, notwithstanding the protests of some of the passengers, found room on the ship for Malacca and Macao. The group arrived in Macao on July 28, 1588, just in time to find that changes in the political situation in Japan prevented them from making the last leg of their journey home. An old friend, Father Lorenzo Mexia, was waiting for them, and later informed Rome of the situation.

“The Japanese envoys were disappointed, but they did not waste time. They kept themselves busy studying Latin and practicing music. They are treasures. They bothered no one. However, the horses brought here by [Valignano] as tribute to Japanese authorities were a little troublesome. They were always tied up at the entrance to a house. Considering [Valignano]’s good intentions, everyone put up with them.”

Valignano, the four envoys and one horse arrived safely at Nagasaki on July 21, 1590. Here, the envoys had to part with the horse and they did not see it again until visiting Kyoto in March 1591. The main speaker from this point on will be the historian, Father Luis Frois.

In parts of Frois’ book, *The History of Japan*, beautiful Arabian horses pass before the reader’s eyes. These were the horses promised in Lisbon and presented to the four envoys by the Viceroy in Goa. Among them, two made the passage to Macao, where they became unwanted guests, tied to the entrance of the college. One horse survived to impress spectators in the Japanese capital with its graceful gait. The heroic Arabian horse must certainly have been a wonderful sight to behold.

When Frois talked about the mission, he spoke often of the horse and told the reader various interesting stories. For instance, among the mission’s planned tribute to Hideyoshi by Valignano were “two Arabian horses.” Only one, however, arrived in Japan. “The horses were adorned in an extremely beautiful manner; one with a short-stirruped saddle and the other with a long-stirruped saddle with purple and black velvet cloth, saddlery, silver ornaments and gold-plated stirrups.”

It is not clear whether the other horse died in Macao or on the way to Nagasaki. Whatever the truth, Frois described the surviving horse in great detail.

“At the front, a beautifully adorned horse strode forward. The horse was not only beautiful, but large as well, so it drew everyone’s attention, as was always the case whenever it appeared. In fact, any Japanese horse looked pathetic compared to that horse.

In the procession, numerous people, including the four Japanese envoys, rode Japanese horses, so it was easy for anyone to notice the difference between the Japanese horses and the Arabian horse. After the procession was received by Hideyoshi, the kampaku came out to the courtyard to see the tribute gifts.

“[The kampaku] ordered the tent to be put up. He also wanted to see the Arabian

horse, so he ordered a Portuguese to ride it. After the elegant and impressive tent was put up for him, he stayed under it for a while, discussed various things about the tent and watched the Portuguese man ride the horse. The man rode it quite skillfully. [Hideyoshi] and the other samurai were extremely impressed by the beauty, size and speed of the horse and praised it vociferously. It seems that the horse pleased Hideyoshi more than any other item presented.”

Portuguese horsemanship was well known at the time, as is the case today. Joao Rodriguez and Mancio Ito stood next to Hideyoshi, adding various comments and answering his questions. The reason Ito could answer the questions was because the envoys had ridden horses quite often in Lisbon and later had practiced horsemanship as guests of the Duke of Bragauca.

The fine Arabian horse presented to Hideyoshi as a tribute gift also became an aid to Valignano in explaining the truth about the mission to Europe. It seems that Hideyoshi, who had prohibited Christianity in Japan five years after the departure of the envoys, had heard rumors which made him doubt the validity of the mission. In order to clarify the question, Hideyoshi called Joao Rodriguez and asked him directly if the mission sent by the Viceroy of India had, indeed, taken place. Rodriguez answered that it had, and to prove his point, he cited the following:

“There is no question about the mission, because it was an official event and to falsify it would not be allowed. The mission left India with a number of people accompanying it, passed through various countries of different religions and finally returned to [this country]. [The mission] stayed in China (Macao) for a long time and brought a horse and numerous other items unique to India. As soon as thekampakū heard this, he expressed his satisfaction and said, ‘That makes sense’ and ‘That’s how it must have happened.’”

The story of the Arabian horse seemed to be over when, two years later, a voice from India severely criticized Valignano and rumors about the horse reached all the way to Rome. Father Francisco Cabral wrote a letter from Cochin to Father General Aquaviva complaining about Valignano’s extravagant and lavish behavior.

Cabral’s accusation is correct to some extent. Cabral, who had preceded Valignano as head of the Jesuit mission in Japan, was attempting to defend his own behavior during his stay in Japan by arguing that the development of Christianity in Japan during this time (1570-1580) was due to his own work. But his statements lack credibility. The reason why the Christian population of Japan had increased from 30,000 to 120,000 was the result of the considerable work of Cabral’s predecessors such as Torres, Fernandez and Almeida. They were the ones who cultivated the land, planted the seeds, and began to harvest the results.

In a letter from Cochin dated December 15, 1593, Cabral cited the Arabian horse as an example of Valignano’s extravagance.

“Judging from the way that [Valignano] operates, he prefers to do everything by himself and does not want to leave any of God’s work undone. Therefore, God probably is being modest and may let him do everything. This was already evident at the time that Valignano traveled with the Japanese envoys and from the tribute gifts that they brought back with them. I estimate that the tribute gifts presented to the kampaku

exceeded more than 10,000 pardao. The two horses taken from here, together with their accessories, alone cost more than 2,000 gold pardao. This is only a small portion of the money spent during the journey to Japan. That is to say, a veterinarian, horseshoer, and riding master had to be brought along as well. Also, there was much criticism concerning the transportation of the horses by ship, which resulted in scuffles among the passengers.”

Indeed, when presenting souvenirs and tribute gifts, Valignano could be overly generous. Other Jesuit missionaries had voiced similar complaints about him. Having said this, however, it was Valignano, not Cabral, who paved the way for the development of Christianity in Japan. As proof of this, Cabral was the one asked to return to India. Cabral’s way of thinking was a mixture of devotion to ‘holy poverty’ and bigotry toward other nations and cultures. On the other hand, Valignano forgot the fact that his generosity was sometimes frowned upon by other missionaries. The Cabral letter, although affected by personal disagreements between the two Jesuit missionaries, sheds light on the human and financial resources needed to care for the horse and to get it to Japan as a tribute present for Hideyoshi.

An Arabian horse that began as the dream of four young Japanese envoys in Europe, evolved into a gift to mollify the feelings of the Japanese ruler Hideyoshi after his ban on Christianity and to provide proof that the mission actually did occur. The last time the great steed appears in historical records, it is a pawn in a dispute between two high-ranking Jesuit officials concerning the money spent and credit received for proselytizing successes in Japan.

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