

The 'Moresca' and the 'Kolāṭṭam' Stick-Dances in Pietro della Valle's 17th century Travel Accounts of South India

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Introduction

In the beginning of the 17th century, the Italian nobleman and explorer Pietro della Valle (1586-1652; see Fig. 1) left his native city of Rome to travel to the East, not only to accomplish a number of diplomatic and scholarly missions, but also to fulfil his dreams and to satisfy his curiosity about visiting faraway countries and investigating their literary, religious and philosophical traditions. During his long journey (1614 - 1626), he travelled in Greece, the Middle East and Asia, visiting Palestine, Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, Arabia, Persia and India (See Fig. 2 overleaf). Interested by the customs of those regions, he even started to learn some of their languages in order to better understand and appreciate the local cultures and their related socio-religious beliefs and practices (Fig. 3 overleaf).

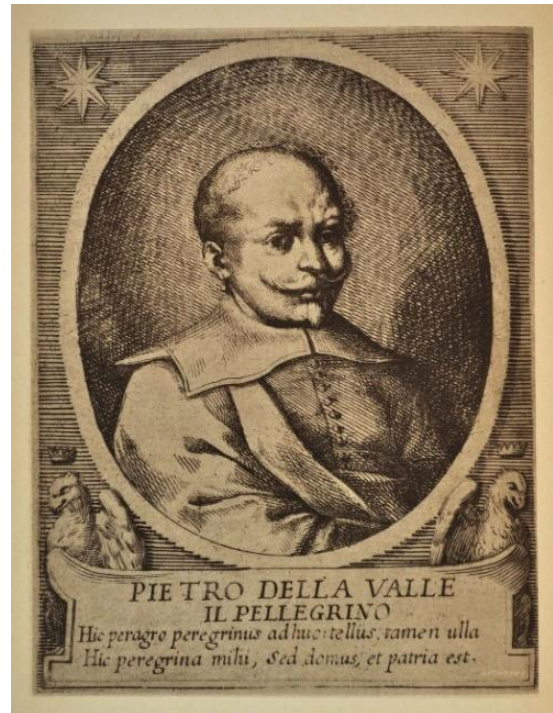


Figure 1: Portrait of Pietro della Valle



Figure 2: Libretto for the funeral ceremony of Pietro Della Valle's wife, Sitti Maani Gioerida. Rome 1627

Pietro della Valle is mostly known today for having identified the location of the ancient city of Babylon, for pointing out the existence of cuneiform scriptural letters on the clay tablets, some of which he brought back to Italy. He was one of the first experts in Assyriology, and also made known in his time Turkish coffee and Persian cats.

Being himself a fine scholar, a musician and a composer as well, he was particularly attracted by the poetry, the music and the dance traditions of the countries he visited. Though only a few of his musical works survive, we know that he composed a number of poems, some of them meant to be sung, and several *Oratori*, among which the *Oratorio Esther*, the *Oratorio del Crocifisso di San Marcello* (*Oratory of Saint Marcel's Crucifix*), and the dialogue *Sophonisbe and Massinissa*. Beside those works, he also

wrote for the Carnival of 1606 a play titled *Carro di Fedeltà d'Amore* (*Chariot of Love's Faithfulness*). Back in Italy from his travels to the East, he composed in 1627 the lyrics for the funeral ceremony of his first wife (Fig. 2) titled *In morte di Sitti Maani* ('*For the Sitti Maani's Demise*'), as well as a musical treatise *Discorso sulla musica dell'età nostra* ('*Discourse on the music of our time*'), published in Rome in 1640, and several other writings which, unfortunately, are lost today.

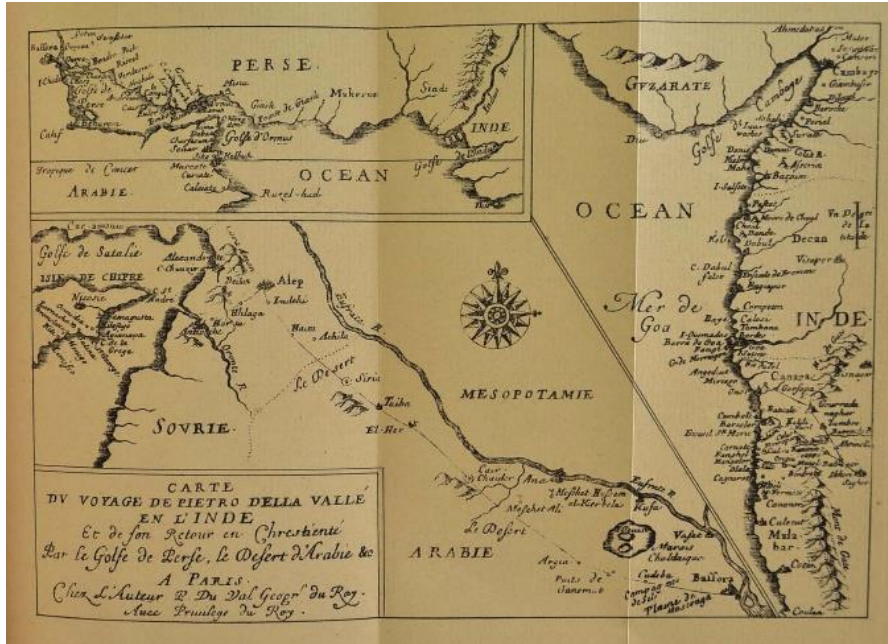


Figure 3: Della Valle's itinerary in the Middle East, Turkey, Persia, India and Arabia

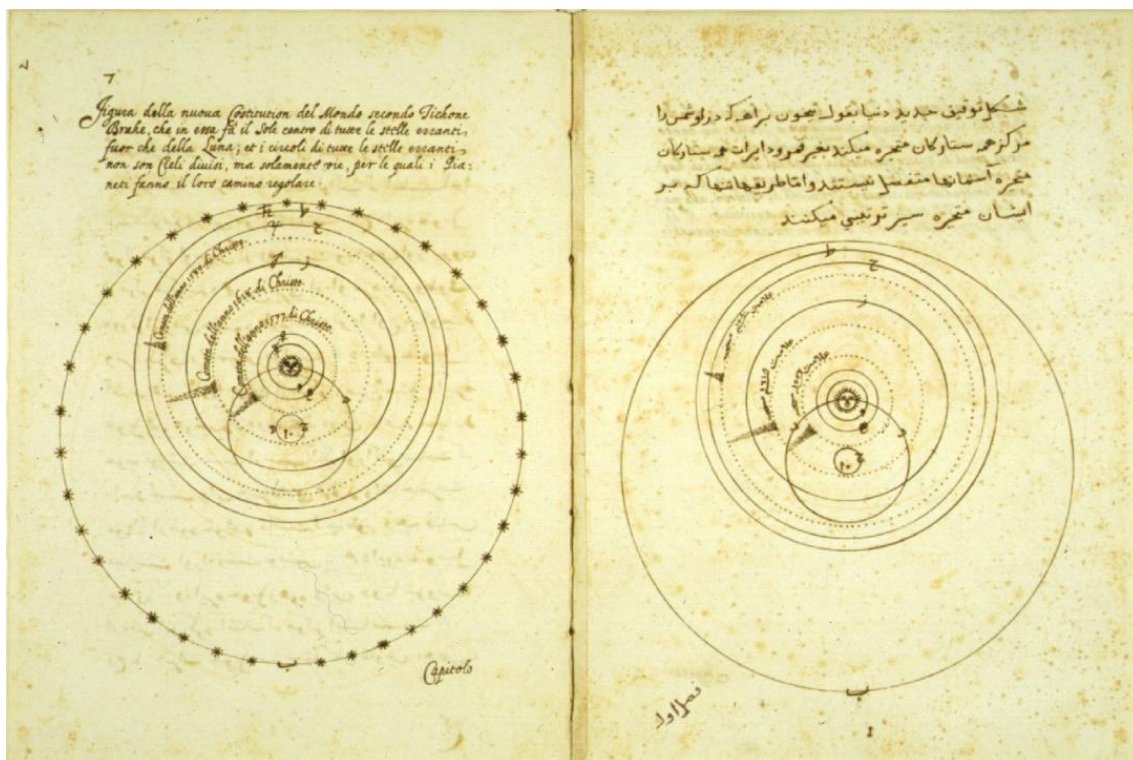


Figure 4: Pietro Della Valle's handwriting in the Persian language and his own translation into Italian of an Persian astronomical treatise.

During his long journey in the East, della Valle collected a large number of manuscripts, books, artefacts, archaeological objects and musical instruments, bringing them with him back to Rome. In his letters to his friend, the Neapolitan aristocrat and Professor of Medicine Marco Schipano, he narrated his experiences and encounters during his travels, an account later published (see Fig. 5). He refers in detail to the music and dance performances and musical instruments he observed in those faraway countries. In these letters Pietro della Valle defined himself as a “pilgrim,” leaving his native Rome in order to go in pilgrimage to the sacred places of the Middle East and Asia. Of all the lands he visited, he described minutely the cultural customs specific to each one of them, offering to his Neapolitan friend, and to us too, a rich

source of information in the fields of history, diplomacy, anthropology, science, religion, literature, musicology and more.¹

In India, Pietro della Valle was quite impressed by the local customs and beliefs. He observed and admired the temple and court dancers’ artistic skills,² their magnificent costumes and ornaments, and compared their vigorous movements and the holding of little sticks in their hands while dancing, with the *moresca*, that he was accustomed to seeing in his native country. The *moresca* was a Renaissance dance still popular in Europe at that period.³ In describing the Indian dances, he also compared their steps and jumps to those of the *bibasis*, a Greek warrior dance performed by young Spartan women in ancient times. Pietro della Valle’s music and dance descriptions are so accurate that he is considered today one of the first precursors of modern ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology.⁴

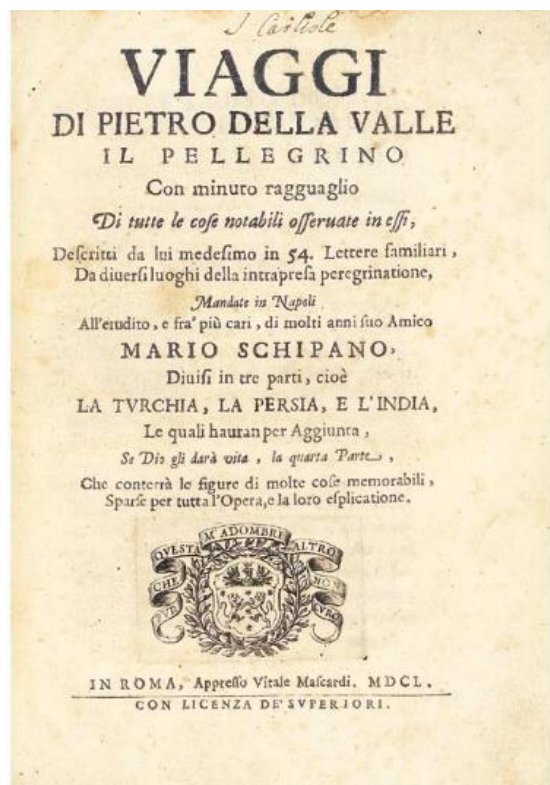


Figure 5 : Frontispiece of the Pietro della Valle’s volume about his travels (Viaggi) in the East. Rome 1650. Sitti Maani Giorida. Rome 1627

The Indian Stick Dance *Kolāṭṭam* and the Italian *Moresca*

Despite the large amount of ethnographic information provided in the letters, in this article I will focus mainly on della Valle’s perception and interpretation of the dance and music performances he witnessed, in 1623, in the South Indian Nayak kingdom of Ikkeri (in today’s Karnataka State), which reminded him of the Italian *moresca*.

Beside his first-hand accounts concerning the similarity of those two dance forms, he also underlined the affinities of Indian polymorphism and the polytheism of the local deities with those of the ancient Greek-Roman pantheons. Similarly, he compared the religious ceremonies and ritual offerings to the Indian gods observed by him, with those of ancient Greece and Rome.

Pietro della Valle rightly mentioned in his letters that the effigies of Hindu deities were treated and served by the devotees in their temples, as if they were true living beings. The Roman nobleman also recorded that the dancing ladies performed music and dance items for the local deities and for the king, particularly during the latter's official visits to the major shrines, where those female artists were appointed.

Pietro della Valle arrived in India in 1622, but he visited the Nayak kingdom of Ikkeri only at the fall of 1623. Here he could attend the processions of the major temple deities' effigies, which were carried inside a palanquin and taken outside the main shrine where the God Shiva was worshipped in the form of Aghoreswara (Sanskrit : *Aghora* "The Non Frightening One" and *Iswara* "the Lord, the God") along with his consort, the Goddess Pārvatī. Their images can be seen in Figs. 6, 7 and 8.



Figure 6 : The Aghoreswara temple at Ikkeri in the present Karnataka State, South India, 16th century



Figure 7 : Entrance of the Aghoreswara temple at Ikkeri



Figure 8 : Wall relief and perforated window detail at the Aghoreswara temple

In the Roman nobleman's description, the statues of the gods were taken around the temple accompanied by a royal cortege composed of a large number of female dancers, along with their dance masters and musicians, and by the king's soldiers, followed by the crowd of devotees. At Ikkeri, he also observed a procession by the local monastery's monks, one of whom had been just consecrated and carried inside a palanquin around the city, in a very majestic way. The newly consecrated priest was also accompanied by the songs of a group of dancing ladies and their musicians.

The following few paragraphs are taken from his long descriptions of those ceremonies animated by the dances and the sounds of several musical instruments:

“On November the Thirteenth 1623 [...]. Before the Palanchino march'd a numerous company of Soldiers and other people, many Drums and Fifes, two strait long Trumpets and such brass Timbrels as are used in Persia, Bells and divers other Instruments, which sounded as loud as possible, and amongst them was a troop of Dancing-women adorn'd with Girdles, Rings upon their Legs, Neck-laces and other ornaments of Gold, and with certain Pectorals, or Breast-plates, almost round, in the fashion of a Shield and butting out with a sharp ridge before, embroyder'd with Gold and stuck either with Jewels, or some such things, which reflected the Sun-beams with marvellous splendour; [...] When they came to the Piazza the Palanchino stood still, and, the multitude having made a ring, the Dancing-women fell to dance after their manner; by beating with those wooden small sticks, which was much like the Moris-dance [*Moresca*] of Italy, only the Dancers sung as they danc'd, which seem'd much better. One of them who, perhaps, was the Mistress of the rest danc'd along by herself, with extravagant and high jumping, but always looking towards the Palanchino. Sometimes she cower'd down with her haunches almost to the ground, sometimes, leaping up, she struck them with her feet backwards, (as Cœlius Rhodiginus⁵ relates of the ancient dance call'd *Bibasis*) continually singing and making several gestures with her Hands [...].”⁶



Figure 9: Colourful sticks used today for the Kollāṭṭam dance in the present Tamil Nadu State, South India

In this description, one can notice that the common elements between the Indian stick-dance and the Italian *moresca* lay in the use of small wooden sticks and the employ of some vigorous steps⁷. Another affinity could be that both the dances were performed during festival processions and in the Carnival corteges. *Last but not least*, another common element could be that the performers wore small bells around the ankles (as it always the case for Indian dancers), or around the wrists, as it was sometimes the case among the European dancers. Pietro della Valle seems also to suggest that the

peculiarity of the Indian stick dance lies in the fact that the performers themselves sang while they danced, which apparently was not the case for the Italian *moresca* at his time. He also mentioned that one of the dancers, perhaps the senior one, or the most proficient among them, both sang and accompanied her movements by the use of hand gestures and vigorous jumps. Noteworthy here is that both those elements were typical body language of the Indian temple and courtly choreographic traditions at that time⁸, some technical aspects of which have been preserved till today in the contemporary South Indian dance styles.

Interestingly, in the Tamil language, such dances are called *Kolāṭṭam* (Tamil: *Kol*, ‘stick’ and *āṭṭam*, ‘dance, drama’) and they are still performed today in both urban and rural areas during the major socio-religious festivals, by using colourful little wooden sticks (see Fig. 9).

Thus, Pietro della Valle’s description of the dances he observed at Ikkeri, indirectly throws light on how the *moresca* dance was performed at his time in Italy. The musicologist and dance historian Curt Sachs (1881-1959) in his *History of Dance*, wrote about the *moresca* as follows :

“The *moresca* [Morris-dance] is the most mentioned dance in the literature of the fifteenth century. Whenever dancing, carnivals, or ballets are described the texts say that people danced the *moresca*, whereas other dances as *basse danse*, *saltarello* or *piva* are rarely mentioned.”⁹

Despite the fact that the *moresca* was a dance quite common in Europe from the 15th century onwards, apparently very little is known about the exactly how this dance was performed, as it seems that a detailed description of it is quite rare in the texts of that time, as Alan Brown and Donna G. Cardamone, wrote in their entry ‘*moresca*’ of the *Oxford Music Online* :

“In the latter part of the 15th century *moresche* were danced in carnival processions and (especially in Italy) in *intermedi* between the acts of courtly dramatic entertainments. Although the dance is mentioned frequently in such connections, no detailed choreographic descriptions from this period survive.”¹⁰

Actually, before Pietro della Valle, another Italian traveller, the merchant Niccolo’ de Conti (c1395. – 1469) from the city of Chioggia near Venice, travelled to the Middle East and Asia. In India, he visited the magnificent capital city of Vijayanagar and its kingdom, located in the present Karnataka State of South India. In the 15th century, when Niccolo’ de Conti lived and worked in that capital, the city of Ikkeri, described by della Valle almost two centuries later, was also part of the powerful and large Vijayanagar Empire. Niccolo’ de Conti too described a particular dance, which he much appreciated, a dance employing small, colourful sticks held by the performers in their hands. He added that such a dance was performed in groups of several couples during the major local socio-religious celebrations, such as marriages and other festive ceremonies.¹¹ Interestingly, even today, visitors can admire sculptures, from the same era as Niccolo’ de Conti’s description, which portray dancing girls holding little sticks. Figs. 10 & 11 show them, beautifully carved, on the walls of the main temples located in the ruins of the ancient capital city of Vijayanagar:

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Figure 10 : Carved images of some female artists performing the Kolāṭṭam stick dance on the upper part of a 15th century temple bas-relief, portraying dancers, dance masters, musicians, soldiers, hunters, warhorses and elephants.



Figure 11: Carved images of female dancers performing the Kolāṭṭam stick dance on the 15th century Vitthala temple bas-relief.

Concerning the Italian *moresca*, Barbara Sparti, the well-known specialist in Renaissance dance, comments:

“There is a long and complex history of the *moresca* in Italy. It was performed for the most part of the 15th and 16th centuries, usually as an interlude in courtly banquets and plays. The term meant many things and above all a pantomimed ‘ballet’ in costume, often allegorical or exotic (featuring heroes like Jason or a fire-spewing dragon). *Moresca* also could indicate a sword or mock-battle dance, usually for four combatants, and common in Renaissance artisan plays.”¹²



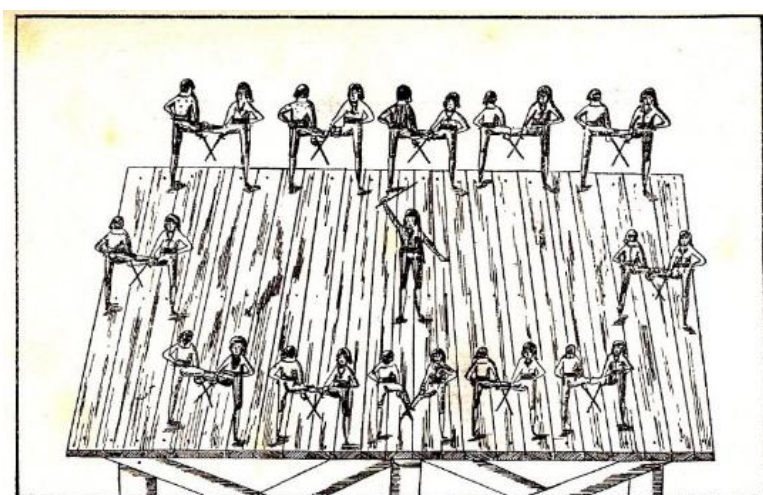
An image exists from approximately 1530-1540, created by Christoph Weiditz (1498-1559), a 16th century German painter (See Fig. 12). His painting shows the *moresca* (*Moriskentanz*). In Fig. 13 (overleaf), one can see that this dance is performed by a couple of male dancers. The one on the left is using some hand gestures, whereas the dancer on the right is holding the cloth of his mantle in both hands. Two musicians accompany the dancers, one is beating with two sticks on two drums and the second one is playing a string instrument, while a third young man holds a stick and a ring in his hands, perhaps marking with both items the rhythm, the *tempo* and the cadence of the dancers' steps.

Figure 12 : Christoph Weiditz, self portrait, 1523



Figure 13: The *moresca* dance (La Danza morisca) represented by Christoph Weiditz and dated around 1530-1540.

One of the images (Fig. 14) in Barbara Sparti's article describing an 18th Century Venetian *moresca*,¹³ clearly shows that the male dancers are moving in a group of several couples holding sticks in their hands and forming a geometrical figure in the dancing space. They seem to be directed by a man standing in the centre, that most probably guided the different sequence variations and steps. This image is similar to the formation of another of Pietro Della Valle's stick-dance descriptions, observed by him at Ikkeri. As in the case of the Venetian *moresca*, the Indian female artists were also directed in their sequences of steps by their own dance master that, according to the words of the Roman nobleman, was standing in the centre of the performers' group.¹⁴



La Moresca (un tempo)

Figure 14 : The image of the 18th Venetian *moresca* illustrated by P.V. 1815, cited by Barbara Sparti.

Epilogue

Like the majority of his European predecessors who travelled in India, Pietro della Valle too considered the Indian female artists, called by him '*ballatrici*' (*female dancers*), as accomplished singers and charming dancers. He must have found their performances quite seductive, since he described them as "pleasant", "vigorous", and even "lascivious". The beauty of their movements and hands gestures, their facial expressions, as well as the richness of their jewels and costumes, impressed him greatly and reminded him of the Italian *moresca* and the ancient Spartan dance *bibasis*.



Figure 15 : A contemporary painting of female dancers performing the Kolāṭṭam stick dance in the present Tamil Nadu State, South India.

Something of their effect may be conveyed by Fig. 15.

In 1663, eleven years after della Valle's death, the portion of his travelling accounts dealing with India was published in Venice by his sons (*Viaggi di Pietro della Valle il Pellegrino descritti da lui medesimo in lettere famigliari all'erudito suo Amico Mario Schipano. Parte terza cioè l'India, c'ol ritorno alla patria*). The volume was soon translated into

French and English in 1664, and published in English in 1665 (See Fig. 16). Beside the material mentioned already, his letters also contain accounts of his philosophical discussions with local Hindu Brahman priests about whether the Egyptians or Indians first developed the concept of reincarnation, a dialogue with a woman who invited him to her upcoming self-immolation, or *satī* (Sanskrit : *satī*, “faithful wife”), a description of the Indian Queen of Olaza, who was out on the embankments giving directions to her engineers, and many other examples of first-rate ethnography. For all these detailed accounts and his fine and scholarly musical and dance descriptions of the countries he visited in the Middle East and in Asia (particularly Turkey, Iraq, India and Persia), Pietro della Valle is today rightly considered an ethnomusicologist and an ethnochoreologist *ante litteram*!

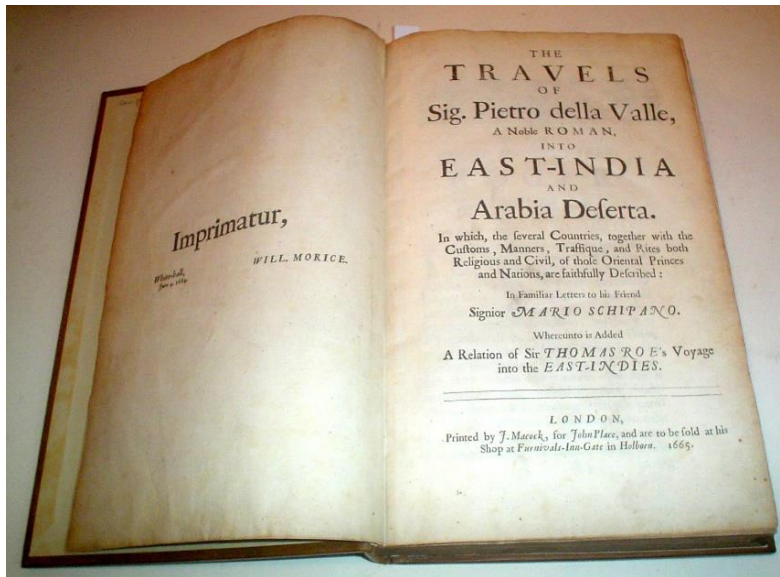


Figure 16: Frontispiece of Pietro della Valle’s volume, translated into English, about his travels in East India and Arabia. London 1665

End Notes

1 Avner Ben-Zaken, “From Naples to Goa and Back: A secretive Galilean messenger and a radical hermeneutist”, *History of Science*, XLVII, 2009, pp. 147–174.

2 The Indian dancing girls attached to the temples and the royal courts were also designated then with the generic Sanskrit terms of *devadāsī* (Sanskrit: ‘*deva*’, deities, and ‘*dāsī*’, devotee, attendant), *rājadāsī* (Sanskrit: ‘*rāja*’, kings, and ‘*dāsī*’, devotee, attendant). In Tamil, their dance was also known as *dāsī āṭṭam* (Tamil: *dāsī*, ‘devotee, attendant’ and *āṭṭam*, ‘dance, drama’), whereas their dance masters were called *nattuvanār* (Tamil: *nattu*, ‘dance’ and *vanār*, ‘the one belonging to the art’).

3 Barbara Sparti, “The moresca and ‘mattaccino’ circa 1450-1630” in Elsie I. Dunin, (ed.), *Proceedings Symposium Moreska: Past and Present*, Zagreb 2002, pp. 1-11. Barbara Sparti, “An 18th Century Venetian Moresca. Popular Dance, Pyrrhic, or Regulated Competition?” in Uwe Schlottermüller, Horward Weiner & Maria Richter, (eds.), ‘*All’Ungaresca-al Espagnol*’. *Die Vielfalt der Europäische Tanzkultur* 18. Jahrhundert. 2, Rothenfelser Tanzsymposium, Fa-gisis Musik und Tanzedition, Freiburg 2008, pp. 197-218. Barbara Alge “Die Mourisca aus Portugal. ‘Botschafterin’ zwischen den Kulturen”, in Uwe Schlottermüller, Horward Weiner & Maria Richter, (eds.), ‘*All’Ungaresca-al Espagnol*’. *Die Vielfalt der europäischen Tanzkultur 1420-1820*. 3. Rothenfelser Tanzsymposium, Fa-gisis Musik und Tanzedition, Freiburg 2012, pp. 9-22.

4 Joep Bor, “The Rise of Ethnomusicology: Sources on Indian Music c1780 – c1890” in *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 20, 1988, pp. 51-73. Tiziana Leucci, *Devadāsī e Bayadères: tra storia e leggenda. Le danzatrici indiane nei racconti di viaggio e nell'immaginario teatrale occidentale (XIII^o-XX^osecolo)*, CLUEB, Bologna 2005. Tiziana Leucci, “The Curiosity for the ‘Others’. Indian Dances and Oriental Costumes in Europe (1623-1821)”, in Schlottermüller, Uwe, Weiner, Horward, & Richter, Maria (eds.), *All’Ungaresca-al Espagnol’. Die Vielfalt der europäischen Tanzkultur 1420-1820*. 3. Rothenfelser Tanzsymposium, Fa-gisis Musik und Tanzedition, Freiburg 2012: pp. 109-131. Tiziana Leucci, “Between Seduction and Redemption. The European Perception of South Indian Temple Dancers in Travelers’ Accounts and Theatre Plays” in F..Kouwenhoven & J. Kippen (eds.), *Music, Dance and the Art of Seduction*, Delft, Eburon-Chime, 2013a , pp. 261-287, Notes & Bibliography, pp. 421-429. Tiziana Leucci, “Dance in Indian Society: Temple and Courtly Traditions” in Barbara Segal & Bill Tuck (eds.), *Dance & Society: Questions of Cultural Identity, Social Structure and Status, the Body Politic at Play*, Proceedings of the Biennial Conference 2012, London, Early Dance Circle, 2013b, pp.29-44. Tiziana Leucci, “De la ‘danseuse de temple’ des voyageurs et missionnaires Européens à la ‘bayadère’ des philosophes et artistes (XVII^e – XVIII^e siècle)” in Marie Fourcade & Ines Zupanov (eds.), *L’Inde des Lumières: De l’orientalisme aux sciences sociales (XVII^e-XIX^e siècle)*, Puruṣārtha, Paris, EHESS, 2013, Vol 31, pp. 253-288. Tiziana Leucci, “Fascinantes bayadères, mais étrange musique... Réception française des danseuses indiennes: des récits de voyage aux œuvres de Jouy, Gautier et Berlioz” in Luc Charles-Dominique, Yves Defrance & Danièle Pistone (eds.), *Fascinantes Etrangetés. La découverte de l’altérité musicale en Europe au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2014, pp. 343-365.

5 Cœlius Rhodiginus was a learned Venetian gentleman (1450—1525).

6 Edward Grey (ed.), *The Travels of Pietro Della Valle in India. From the Old English Translation of 1664 by G. Havers*, New Delhi, 1991, V. 2, p. 267.

7 Sparti, “An 18th Century Venetian Moresca...”.

⁸Leucci, “Dance in Indian Society: Temple and Courtly Traditions”

⁹ Sachs, Curt, *Storia della danza* (1937), Milano, Il Saggiatore, 1994, pp267 ff.

¹⁰ *Oxford Music Online*,

<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000019125>

¹¹ Giovan Battista Ramusio, *Navigazioni e viaggi*, (a cura di Marica Milanese), Torino, Einaudi, 1978, V. 2, pp. 815-816.

¹² Sparti, “An 18th Century Venetian Moresca...”, p. 198.

¹³ Sparti, “An 18th Century Venetian Moresca...”, p. 218, Figure 11.

¹⁴ Leucci, *Devadāsī e Bayadères...*, p.44.

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