

## Sacred Spectacle, Imperial Stage: Welcoming Hasekura Tsunenaga in the Mediterranean

Song No\*

### Abstract

This article reinterprets the Keichō Embassy (1613–1620), led by Hasekura Tsunenaga, through the lens of Mediterranean studies rather than conventional transpacific frameworks. It examines the embassy's passage through Seville, Madrid, Genoa, and Rome, focusing on the diplomatic, religious, and performative cultures of the Western Mediterranean. Drawing on the concepts of ritual economy and composite contact zones, the study reveals how each city re-scripted the embassy's meaning according to local visions of power, faith, and civic identity, distinguishing Mediterranean ceremonial adaptability from continental imperial logic. It analyzes the role of Franciscan Luis Sotelo as a Mediterranean intermediary whose ambitions shaped the embassy's reception. Contrasting Seville's spectacular incorporation, Genoa's strategic restraint, and Rome's liturgical absorption with Madrid's bureaucratic containment, the article demonstrates how Mediterranean ceremonial economies simultaneously welcomed and regulated foreign difference. Through analysis of visual culture, liturgical art, and the enduring legacy of Coria del Río's Japón community, the study presents the Mediterranean as both a stage for cultural diplomacy and a contact zone of transcultural memory.

Keywords: Keichō Embassy, Hasekura Tsunenaga, Luis Sotelo, Transcultural Memory, Mediterranean Studies

\* Professor, Purdue University, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, School of Languages and Cultures, email: [sno1@purdue.edu](mailto:sno1@purdue.edu)



## 1. Introduction

When Hasekura Tsunenaga<sup>1</sup> and his diplomatic entourage arrived in Seville in October 1614, they stepped into a world far more complex than traditional narratives of early modern diplomacy suggest (Chino 2016, 346). The Keichō Embassy (慶長遣欧使節, *Keichō Ken'ō Shisetsu*)<sup>2</sup> of 1613–1620 has long been situated within the broader currents of global early modern diplomacy, often framed as a transpacific link between Japan and the Spanish Empire that exemplified the unprecedented scope of seventeenth-century globalization (Gil Fernández 1991, 291–395; Lee 2008, 345–380; Fernández Gómez 2009, 275–295; Barrón Soto 2014, 43–65).

While C. R. Boxer's *The Christian Century in Japan* (1951) offered one of the earliest English-language references to the Keichō Embassy, more comprehensive and diverse historiographical treatments have since emerged. Foundational Japanese studies such as Kiichi Matsuda's *Embajada del Keicho* (1969) helped consolidate early understandings of Hasekura's mission within the framework of Tokugawa diplomacy. More recently, Koichiro Yaginuma has synthesized Japanese-language scholarship to contextualize the embassy within domestic politics, religious suppression, and Tokugawa realpolitik, offering critical insight into its symbolic contradictions (Yaginuma 2014, 285–330). Chino Keiko (2016, 345–352) and the *Yomiuri Shimbun* (2021) further demonstrate the mission's ongoing resonance in Japanese public memory. On the Western side, Derek Massarella (1990), Juan Gil Fernández (1991), and

<sup>1</sup> Hasekura was originally named Yoichi in childhood, later adopted the name Rokuemon Nagatsune, and upon his Christian conversion took the baptismal name Don Filippo Francisco Hasekura (rendered as Felipe Francisco Faxicura in Spanish sources) (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2021, 1).

<sup>2</sup> The Keichō Embassy (1613–1620) was Japan's first formal diplomatic mission to Europe, launched during the Keichō era (慶長, 1596–1615) under the leadership of Hasekura Tsunenaga (Frédéric 2005, 504). It differed fundamentally from the earlier Tenshō Youth Embassy of the 1580s, in which four young Japanese Christians were sent to Rome at the behest of Jesuit-aligned daimyō to seek papal support for missionary efforts (Cooper 2005, 22–31). Unlike that earlier religious initiative, the Keichō Embassy constituted a formal diplomatic overture between sovereign powers, making its designation as an “embassy” both politically and historically significant (Corradini 2018, 21).



Christina H. Lee (2008, 345–380) have explored early modern Spanish perceptions of Japan, while Marcos Fernández Gómez (2009, 275–295) and Ma. Cristina E. Barrón Soto (2014, 43–65) have illuminated the embassy’s ceremonial trajectory through Seville and Madrid. Piero Corradini (2018, 21–24) and Andrew Hess (2010) situate the mission within broader frameworks of global encounter. Most recently, Birgit Tremml-Werner’s *Spain, China, and Japan in Manila, 1571–1644* (2015) advances a translocal, comparative approach, highlighting diplomacy as a multiscalar process shaped by language, ceremony, and shifting regimes of global knowledge.

Yet despite this proliferation of research, most studies continue to focus on bilateral relations between Japan and Spain or Rome. This article builds on that foundation while advancing a new line of inquiry: the Mediterranean not as a mere corridor of passage but as a densely ritualized arena in which the Keichō Embassy underwent serial transformations in meaning. By tracing these localized rearticulations, I propose a transcultural reading of early modern diplomacy—one that attends not only to movement across space but to iterative reinvention within contested ceremonial economies. Building on prior scholarship, this study contends that fully grasping the Keichō Embassy’s impact and significance requires locating its journey within the dynamic and deeply textured world of the early modern Mediterranean. Fernand Braudel’s concept of the Mediterranean as a “complex of seas and networks” suggests that the embassy’s route through Seville, Madrid, Genoa, and Rome should be seen not merely as a European itinerary but as a sequence of ritual encounters staged in the heart of a vibrant, multi-centered maritime world (1972, 17–25). David Abulafia’s conception of the Mediterranean as a contact zone shaped by commerce and religious competition further illuminates how the embassy became a catalyst for multiple, overlapping performances of political spectacle and spiritual authority (2011, 11–15). This Mediterranean lens reveals how each city reinterpreted the embassy’s presence to assert its own identity within imperial and ecclesiastical frameworks, transforming what might appear to be a linear diplomatic mission into a polyphonic performance of cultural negotiation—where political display, religious assertion, and civic pride converged at each port of call.

To interpret the Keichō Embassy’s Mediterranean passage, this study draws on two complementary frameworks: the ritual economy of the early modern



Mediterranean, as articulated by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, and John H. Elliott's notion of composite monarchy. Horden and Purcell emphasize that the Mediterranean was not a homogenous cultural space but a dynamic assemblage of ritual practices that structured social and political life (2000, 89–93). These rituals—processions, religious festivals, and civic ceremonies—formed a shared symbolic vocabulary that Mediterranean cities adapted to assert local identities. As the embassy moved through these urban stages, it encountered not a single diplomatic script but a repertoire of ritual grammars that mediated hospitality, hierarchy, and political calculation. Elliott's analysis of composite monarchies offers a valuable analogy for interpreting the overlapping and at times contradictory ceremonial logics observed in the Keichō Embassy's Mediterranean passage. In such monarchies, multiple polities retained distinct legal and cultural identities while acknowledging a shared sovereign authority (1992, 48–52). Similarly, Mediterranean port cities functioned as composite contact zones: each was embedded within broader imperial and ecclesiastical frameworks, yet each mobilized its own ceremonial codes to assert local autonomy or spiritual prominence.

The Mediterranean's distinctive approach to diplomacy emerged from its position as what Braudel famously termed a “complex of seas and networks”—a space where multiple empires, religions, and commercial interests intersected on a daily basis (1972, 17–25). In contrast to the centralized, bureaucratic protocols of continental imperial capitals, Mediterranean cities developed what might be called *adaptive ceremonial economies*: flexible ritual repertoires designed to accommodate the constant movement of foreign merchants, pilgrims, and emissaries that defined both maritime and spiritual life. This adaptability led to fundamental differences in how diplomatic encounters were staged across the region.

Mediterranean cities also operated within what John H. Elliott describes as “composite” political structures, where local autonomy coexisted with imperial or ecclesiastical allegiance (1992, 48–52). Such composite sovereignty granted port cities considerable discretion in shaping ceremonial responses to foreign embassies. Whereas continental capitals typically enforced uniform bureaucratic protocols, Mediterranean cities could calibrate their receptions to reflect local commercial, religious, or political priorities. This autonomy fostered ceremonial diversity: cities like Seville and Genoa might privilege



either spectacular incorporation or pragmatic restraint, while spiritual centers such as Rome deployed liturgical theater to assert universalist authority.

Mediterranean port cities shared a common experience of managing cultural difference as a routine feature of commercial life. Cities such as Seville and Genoa regularly hosted merchants from across the known world, cultivating institutional familiarity with foreign customs, languages, and ceremonial expectations. This sustained exposure fostered what Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell describe as *ritual flexibility*—the capacity to adapt local ceremonial forms to accommodate foreign visitors while preserving civic identity (2000, 89–93). Although not a port, Rome developed similar adaptability through its role as a hub for pilgrims and diplomatic missions from across Christendom.

The region's intertwined commercial and spiritual networks encouraged a calculated approach to diplomacy—one that prioritized long-term relationship management over strict adherence to protocol. Mediterranean cities understood that ceremonial investment should reflect strategic value: spectacular receptions for potentially valuable allies, restrained courtesy for neutral parties, and liturgical absorption for spiritual conquest. This strategic flexibility enabled cities to modulate ceremonial intensity in response to local priorities and shifting imperial contexts.

Continental imperial capitals like Madrid operated according to fundamentally different diplomatic imperatives. As administrative centers of vast territorial empires, they prioritized bureaucratic consistency over local adaptation and systematic control over ceremonial flexibility. Madrid's role in managing diverse imperial territories demanded uniform protocols applicable across multiple contexts—what might be termed *administrative diplomacy*: careful, standardized, and ultimately subordinated to imperial bureaucratic logic rather than the creative latitude of local ceremony. This continental orientation explains why, even within Mediterranean Spain, Madrid's reception of the Keichō Embassy diverged so sharply from the adaptive strategies employed by other port cities.

By bringing together Horden and Purcell's notion of the Mediterranean as a dense web of symbolic performances with Elliott's vision of governance as accommodation, this study reinterprets the Keichō Embassy's journey as a sequence of ritual negotiations. These encounters did not merely facilitate cross-



cultural communication; they actively performed and reshaped political identities, mapping local authority and spiritual ambition onto the shifting landscape of Mediterranean hegemony. The embassy thus emerges not as a straightforward diplomatic mission, but as a travelling catalyst that activated distinct ceremonial economies in each city according to its specific position within broader imperial and ecclesiastical networks. Early modern diplomacy, in this light, was fundamentally performative—driven not only by geopolitical aims, but by spatial scripts, ritual economies, and the self-fashioning of cultural intermediaries (Dursteler 2006, 43–45; Subrahmanyam 2012, 98–101).

At the heart of these Mediterranean encounters stood Luis Sotelo, the Franciscan friar who orchestrated the embassy's journey and whose dramatically shifting reception across different cities serves as a diagnostic lens for understanding Mediterranean diplomatic cultures. Far from a mere cultural intermediary, Sotelo actively shaped how each city interpreted the embassy's meaning. In Seville, he emerged as an architect of meaning, transforming the embassy's arrival into a carnival of Christian triumphalism that celebrated both imperial hospitality and providential encounter (Fernández Gómez 2009, 282–284). Yet his carefully constructed narrative of successful mediation met with sharply different receptions in Madrid's bureaucratic corridors, Genoa's pragmatic commercial culture, and Rome's universalizing liturgical theater.

As a Franciscan missionary with deep ties to Seville's municipal elite, Sotelo was uniquely positioned to reframe the embassy's arrival as a spiritual triumph for the city. His letters and *relaciones* portrayed the Keichō Embassy as a providential encounter, weaving together narratives of Catholic expansion and civic grandeur (Barrón Soto 2014, 89–91). In Seville, he was more than an interpreter: he was a ceremonial architect, embedding the embassy's presence within the city's ongoing performance of imperial and spiritual authority.

Yet Sotelo's role was not uniformly welcomed across the Mediterranean. While Seville embraced his rhetorical flair and religious zeal, Madrid's bureaucratic caution and Rome's universalizing liturgies significantly constrained his agency. His myth of triumphant mediation in Seville clashed with imperial suspicion in Madrid, where his self-fashioned authority met the skeptical scrutiny of the Council of the Indies. In Rome, he was recast as a spiritual broker within the Vatican's carefully orchestrated liturgical theater—an essential but ultimately overshadowed figure in the Church's triumphalist



narrative. By tracing Sotelo's evolving role across these Mediterranean nodes, this study foregrounds the tension between individual ambition and collective ceremonial economies. Sotelo's story is not merely an addendum to the Keichō Embassy—it is a diagnostic lens through which the ambiguities of Mediterranean diplomacy and the contested meanings of cross-cultural encounter come into sharper focus. His trajectory reveals how cultural mediators operated within—but could never fully control—the ritual frameworks that conferred meaning upon diplomatic events.

This study argues that the Keichō Embassy's journey through the Mediterranean was not a linear diplomatic mission but a polyphonic performance, in which each city's reception re-scripted the embassy's meaning to reflect local visions of power, faith, and civic identity. In this Mediterranean theater of negotiation, the embassy functioned both as a foreign presence to be managed and as a canvas for urban self-assertion—a dynamic process that reveals how ritual economies could simultaneously welcome and discipline cultural difference. Four distinct but interconnected scripts emerge from this analysis. Seville orchestrated a triumphal pageant celebrating imperial grandeur and global convergence, weaving the embassy into a narrative of Christian expansion and municipal pride (Fernández Gómez 2009, 275–278). In contrast, Madrid's reception embodied continental imperial logic, stripping away Mediterranean theatricality to contain the embassy within the empire's systematic bureaucratic hierarchy (Lee 2008, 355–58). Genoa displayed pragmatic courtesy rooted in its maritime commercial ethos, acknowledging the embassy while maintaining diplomatic distance (Fusaro 2015, 63–70). Finally, Rome deployed the ultimate Mediterranean strategy, drawing on the region's tradition of ritual adaptability to transform the embassy into a liturgical pageant that subsumed political negotiation within the Church's universalist project—absorbing foreign difference into the sacred theater of Catholic triumph (Amati 1615, ch. 28, 62–63).

By tracing these four unique yet interrelated encounters, this study demonstrates how the Mediterranean's composite contact zones functioned as stages of symbolic appropriation—spaces where foreign emissaries were absorbed, contested, or sidelined in ways that reveal the enduring complexities of cross-cultural diplomacy. The Keichō Embassy's Mediterranean journey thus offers a revealing window into the ritual mechanics of early modern



diplomatic culture: a world in which local identity and imperial authority were continually negotiated through carefully choreographed encounters with difference.

## 2. Seville

### 2.1. Imperial Gateway

When the Keichō Embassy arrived in Seville in October 1614, it encountered a city that was both a maritime hub and a symbolic threshold of the Spanish Empire (Gil Fernández 1991, 291–395). Seville’s location on the Guadalquivir River—its bridges linking Atlantic trade routes with Mediterranean networks—made it the natural gateway for encounters between Europe and the wider world. At this confluence, land and sea generated a ceaseless flow of goods, ideas, and ceremonies (Braudel 1972, 369–371). The rhythms of empire and the logics of commerce merged into a single, resonant performance.

Seville’s identity as an imperial entrepôt shaped both its self-perception and its reception of foreign emissaries. With the Casa de la Contratación as the administrative heart of transatlantic trade, Seville envisioned itself not merely as a city of ships and markets, but as the embodiment of imperial destiny—a place where the spiritual and commercial imperatives of the Spanish monarchy converged (Gil Fernández 1991, 223–226). The embassy’s presence in Seville inaugurated a month-long celebration beginning on October 28, 1614, which revealed the city’s ability to transform diplomatic encounters into civic spectacle (Fernández Gómez 2009, 282). David Abulafia expands this vision by situating Seville within the broader Mediterranean world—a city simultaneously Atlantic and Mediterranean, Christian and cosmopolitan, poised to absorb distant visitors into its grand civic narrative (Abulafia 2011, 356–358). Seville’s approach exemplified the Mediterranean characteristic of adaptive ceremonial economies discussed above, deploying spectacular incorporation to assert its identity as an imperial gateway. For Seville, the arrival of Hasekura Tsunenaga and his Japanese entourage went beyond diplomatic courtesy; it





became an opportunity to reaffirm the city's status as the spiritual and commercial portal of the Spanish Empire. This self-image was not simply a function of geography or trade policy—it was enacted through ritual, spectacle, and ceremonial codes that transformed the embassy's presence into a carefully choreographed performance of spiritual and political legitimacy. In this setting, the Keichō Embassy appeared not merely as visitors from a distant shore, but as actors in a Sevillian script crafted to weave them into the city's continual pageant of monarchic magnificence and religious authority.

Far from a routine civic event, the Keichō Embassy's arrival in Seville became a moment of ritual investment and symbolic staging that epitomized the Mediterranean tradition of adaptive ceremonial economies. As discussed above, Seville's reception of the embassy reflected the strategic deployment of ritual characteristic of Mediterranean port cities—what Horden and Purcell describe as the “ritual economy” of the early modern Mediterranean (2000, 89–93). In Seville, this ritual economy was embedded in the city's very fabric: from its bustling maritime markets to its cathedral spires, every element of urban life became a platform for ceremonial display—affirming and organizing the city's civic identity through layered performances of power and piety. The city council's preparations for the embassy's arrival illustrate how Seville's ritual economy mobilized all available civic and symbolic resources. On October 8, 1614, the municipal government appointed Diego Caballero de Cabrera—brother of Fray Luis Sotelo—to receive the distinguished visitors and oversee their welcome, establishing a commission to coordinate all aspects of the embassy's accommodation and logistics (Fernández Gómez 2009, 283). Decorative arches erected along the procession route served not merely as festive embellishments, but as narrative structures—visual scripts that encoded Seville's self-conception as a bastion of imperial majesty and spiritual authority. Constructed from ephemeral materials and adorned with iconography exalting both the Spanish monarchy and the Christian faith, these arches transformed the city's streets into a living text of civic pride and religious devotion.

The processions that guided Hasekura's retinue through Seville further underscore the interplay of spectacle and hierarchy. Local clergy, municipal authorities, and merchant brotherhoods participated in ceremonies choreographed to blend spiritual solemnity with civic celebration. The embassy's triumphal entry—accompanied by thousands of spectators from Coria to



Triana—demonstrated Seville’s capacity to orchestrate mass participation in diplomatic theater (Fernández Gómez 2009, 284). In this context, the embassy’s passage was more than an act of diplomatic courtesy; it was a reaffirmation of Seville’s identity as a city situated at the intersection of empire and faith. They echoed the city’s traditional festivals and maritime blessings, threading the embassy into Seville’s liturgical rhythms.

The embassy’s reception in Seville was also woven into the liturgical calendar, linking it to the city’s Baroque culture of sacred theater. Sermons and masses reframed the embassy’s presence as a providential event, incorporating it into the city’s theological worldview. The archbishop’s comparison of the Japanese envoys to the Magi from the East exemplified this symbolic reframing, casting the embassy as a sign of divine convergence. Meanwhile, an array of cultural programming—including visits to the Giralda, the Cathedral, and various convents—underscored Seville’s commitment to transforming the diplomatic mission into a holistic cultural and spiritual encounter (Fernández Gómez 2009, 285). In this moment of ritual synthesis, Seville reasserted its civic identity—not simply as a mercantile hub, but as a sacred gateway capable of absorbing and sanctifying even the most distant guests. The Keichō Embassy thus became integral to Seville’s ritual economy of self-affirmation, exemplifying the Mediterranean capacity for ceremonial adaptability that would stand in stark contrast to the continental logic of bureaucratic containment awaiting the embassy in Madrid.

## 2.2. Sotelo’s Myth-Making: Mediator, Mythographer, and Missionary

Central to Seville’s reception of the Keichō Embassy was the figure of Luis Sotelo, whose rhetorical artistry transformed the embassy from a fleeting diplomatic episode into a symbolic affirmation of Seville’s spiritual destiny (Gil Fernández 1991, 391). A Franciscan friar born into the prestigious Caballero de Cabrera family (Fernández Gómez 2009, 279), Sotelo was both an emissary of the embassy and a native son whose ambitions were interwoven with the city’s



civic identity. His speeches, letters, and published *relaciones*<sup>3</sup> became integral scripts in Seville's performative economy of grandeur and faith.<sup>4</sup>

Sotelo's writings did more than document events—they actively shaped how the city imagined and remembered the embassy's presence (Barrón Soto 2014, 89–91). In his letters to the city council and his *Relación breve y sumaria* of 1614, Sotelo carefully reframed Hasekura and his companions not as secular envoys but as spiritual pilgrims (Barrón Soto 2014, 52–54),<sup>5</sup> likening them to the biblical Magi—wise men from the East bearing homage to Christendom's spiritual center (*Relación breve y sumaria* 1614, fols. 2r–3v).<sup>6</sup> This comparison found fertile ground in Seville, where the archbishop himself echoed the association between the Japanese envoys and the Magi (Fernández Gómez 2009, 285). This was no rhetorical flourish. By invoking biblical archetypes, Sotelo recoded the embassy's political ambiguity into a narrative of divine providence, transforming a pragmatic mission into a spiritual testament to

<sup>3</sup> *Relaciones* were detailed narrative accounts or reports that served multiple functions in early modern Spanish culture—from official diplomatic correspondence to widely circulated pamphlets describing notable events. In the context of the Keichō Embassy, Sotelo's *relaciones* operated both as documentary records and promotional literature, shaping public perception of the Japanese mission while advancing his own missionary agenda. These texts were part of a broader documentary ecosystem within Spanish imperial administration, which also included *consultas* (formal recommendations issued by councils), *memoranda* (administrative briefings), and *pareceres* (expert advisory opinions). *Consultas*, in particular, were formal advisory reports prepared by councils for the king, offering detailed analysis, recommendations, and occasionally dissenting views. In the case of the Japanese embassy, these documents shed light on how Spanish officials debated the legitimacy and geopolitical implications of Date Masamune's diplomatic initiative.

<sup>4</sup> This practice of appropriating foreign voices through translation characterized early modern diplomatic encounters, where translators created “third spaces” that transformed source materials to serve the political interests of their patrons rather than providing neutral linguistic transfer (Pérez Fernández 2019, 156).

<sup>5</sup> Although published anonymously, stylistic analysis and content strongly suggest authorship by Sotelo or his immediate Franciscan collaborators, reflecting common practices of missionary self-promotion through ostensibly objective accounts.

<sup>6</sup> The practice of reading diplomatic letters aloud in municipal councils served both to authenticate their contents and to transform private correspondence into public spectacle, thereby integrating foreign affairs into local ceremonial life.



Seville's imagined role as a sacred bridge between worlds. His rhetorical triumph reveals how Mediterranean port cities rewarded cultural entrepreneurs who could embed foreign encounters within local narratives of Catholic expansion and imperial vocation. This symbiosis between individual ambition and civic ceremonial economy exemplified the ritual flexibility that defined Mediterranean diplomacy—and prefigured the institutional skepticism that would later constrain Sotelo's influence in Madrid.

Sotelo's myth-making extended beyond the written word; he orchestrated not only the embassy's narrative but also its entire reception in Seville (Lee 2008, 351–353). In sermons delivered during the embassy's stay, he employed the rhetoric of triumphant conversion to portray the mission as evidence of global Catholic unity, deliberately downplaying the complex political motivations that underpinned the Japanese initiative. His dual role as interpreter and cultural mediator during the embassy's month-long residence in Seville (Fernández Gómez 2009, 285) positioned him uniquely to shape local perceptions of the Japanese visitors. In doing so, he elevated Seville's hospitality into a form of spiritual conquest—casting the city not merely as a host, but as a sanctified participant in the cosmic drama of Christian salvation.

Yet Sotelo's rhetorical strategies were not acts of spiritual zeal alone; they were also calculated performances of personal and institutional self-fashioning. His narratives consistently emphasized his own mediating role, presenting himself as a providentially appointed agent of East-West reconciliation. This self-positioning reflected his broader reputation as a controversial figure—active, ambitious, and widely discussed, both praised and criticized (Fernández Gómez 2009, 281). His justification for intervention in Spanish-Japanese relations—claiming that it would bolster Spain's commercial ambitions in Japan while countering Dutch and English influence (Fernández Gómez 2009, 280–281)—underscores how personal aspiration was tightly interwoven with imperial ideology. Within Seville's Baroque culture of spectacle and self-display, Sotelo's rhetorical ambition contributed not only to his personal mythos but also to the city's collective narrative as a port of global consequence.

The convergence of Sotelo's personal ambition and Seville's civic aspirations underscores the mutually constitutive relationship between individual agency and municipal ritual. Seville needed Sotelo's narratives to frame the embassy's arrival within its Baroque pageantry of faith and empire,



just as Sotelo needed the city's ceremonial stage to legitimize his self-image as a global Christian intermediary. His deep knowledge of the Japanese language and customs—acquired during years of missionary work in Japan (Fernández Gómez 2009, 280)—rendered him indispensable as a cultural bridge, even as it advanced his episcopal ambitions within the contentious landscape of early modern missionary politics. Together, Sotelo and Seville produced a performance in which the Keichō Embassy was not merely received but symbolically transformed into a chapter of Seville's spiritual and political grandeur, woven into the city's enduring self-image as a crucible of empire and faith. This symbiotic success—where Sotelo's rhetorical artistry aligned seamlessly with Seville's appetite for spectacular self-display—would prove impossible to replicate in the more constrained environments that awaited the embassy.

### 2.3. Hierarchies of Welcome: Ritual Inclusion, Ceremonial Control

While Seville's reception of the Keichō Embassy was marked by an exuberant display of arches, processions, and liturgical celebration, these spectacles were not simply expressions of collective wonder—they were also performances of hierarchy and exclusion. The city's ceremonial grammar encoded hospitality alongside the assertion of social and spiritual order, exemplifying what Natalie Zemon Davis has termed the “rites of violence”—rituals that affirm communal identity even as they delineate internal and external boundaries (1973, 51–52).

The processions that wound through Seville's streets were meticulously choreographed, serving not only to honor the Japanese visitors but also to reaffirm the stratification of the civic body. Each participating guild, religious brotherhood, and municipal faction seized the embassy's passage as an opportunity to display loyalty, rank, and prestige. In these performances, the spectacle of welcome did not suspend hierarchy—it dramatized it. The visual and auditory grandeur of the pageants addressed not just foreign guests, but local spectators, reaffirming who held power within the city's social order.

This layering of hospitality and hierarchy was particularly evident in the spatial choreography of the reception. While Hasekura and his entourage were welcomed with festive arches and solemn masses, they were also subtly



positioned within the city's ritual landscape in ways that affirmed Seville's spiritual and political preeminence. The frequent comparison of the Japanese visitors to the Magi elevated them within a cosmic drama of conversion, yet simultaneously reduced their political agency, casting them as spiritual pilgrims rather than diplomatic equals. Luis Sotelo's framing of the embassy further reinforced these dynamics. His sermons and letters celebrated the embassy as a sign of divine favor uniquely bestowed upon Seville, while translating the embassy's cultural difference into a reaffirmation of the city's centrality. The Japanese mission thus became a mirror in which Seville saw itself magnified: a city capable of absorbing distant difference into its Baroque performance of Catholic universalism.

Although Seville's rituals were undeniably welcoming, they were structured by a logic of hierarchical reaffirmation. The embassy's presence was carefully inscribed within the city's ongoing performance of spiritual and civic authority—welcomed, but always on terms that upheld Seville's dominance. In this sense, the grandeur of the reception functioned as both an act of wonderment and a demonstration of ritualized power—a testament to how early modern Mediterranean cities deployed ceremonial spectacle not merely to host foreign guests, but to discipline and define their place within established symbolic orders (Davis 1973, 51–52). The animated pageantry of Seville—with its triumphal arches, choreographed processions, and Baroque exuberance—had marked the Keichō Embassy's reception as a moment of civic triumph and spiritual affirmation. Yet this fervent embrace, meticulously crafted through Luis Sotelo's rhetorical strategies and the city's ritual economy, was not echoed across the broader landscape of the Spanish monarchy. As the embassy journeyed to Madrid, it entered a vastly different ceremonial and political terrain—one that restrained the exuberance so central to its Sevillian welcome.

Madrid, as the administrative heart of the Spanish Empire, operated under a logic of bureaucratic caution rather than municipal spectacle. Where Seville had interpreted the embassy as an opportunity to reaffirm its identity as an imperial gateway, Madrid perceived it as a possible source of political entanglement and economic risk. This contrast—between Seville's expansive hospitality and Madrid's calculated restraint—exposes the fragmented character of the monarchy itself: a political entity that, as John H. Elliott observes, functioned as a composite monarchy (1992, 60–61). Just as the crown



managed a plurality of legal systems and regional autonomies, its constituent cities rearticulated the meaning of foreign diplomacy according to their own institutional logics and local priorities.

For Sotelo, this shift in reception was not merely institutional—it was deeply personal. In Seville, he had been hailed as a celebrated intermediary, a native son whose narratives of spiritual triumph elevated both his own stature and the city's sense of providential destiny. In Madrid, however, he encountered a political atmosphere marked by skepticism and restraint. The very rhetorical strategies that had secured his acclaim in Seville—his portrayal of the embassy as a harbinger of global Catholic convergence—were now met with caution by imperial bureaucrats wary of unapproved initiatives and foreign entanglements. This transition from Seville's exuberant carnival to Madrid's cautious containment marks a critical turning point in the embassy's Mediterranean journey. It underscores that the ritual economies of the region were far from monolithic; rather, they were intensely localized, shaped by each city's place within the broader architecture of imperial power. It also exposes the limits of Sotelo's myth-making: the celebratory spectacle of Seville gave way to Madrid's administrative scrutiny, revealing the fragile balance between religious fervor and political control in early modern diplomacy.

### 3. Madrid

#### 3.1. Administrative Control

Unlike Seville's exuberant performance of maritime power and spiritual grandeur, Madrid—though geographically part of the Mediterranean world of Habsburg Spain—responded to the Keichō Embassy according to the logics of continental imperial administration rather than the adaptive ceremonial economies characteristic of Mediterranean port cities. As the bureaucratic capital of a vast composite monarchy, Madrid prioritized institutional protocol and political restraint over the civic theatricality that defined receptions in cities like Seville, Genoa, and Rome. Whereas Seville's identity was forged in the rhythms of maritime exchange, Madrid derived its authority from centralized



governance—a city of councils and dossiers, where power was enacted not through processions but through paperwork (Braudel 1972, 452–454).

Madrid's dual role—as the courtly center of Catholic majesty and the administrative core of an expansive empire—produced a political culture grounded in calculation. While Seville embraced the embassy as a providential spectacle, Madrid regarded it as a potential liability requiring meticulous oversight. Every decision passed through a lattice of councils—the Council of State, the Council of the Indies, the Council of Finance—each deliberating the costs and consequences of extending hospitality to a foreign delegation bearing uncertain political intentions. The Keichō Embassy arrived in Madrid on December 20, 1614, following its month-long triumphal progression through Seville. What awaited them, however, was not a gesture of royal pomp but a carefully managed series of administrative gestures—subdued, strategic, and above all, controlled (Fernández Gómez 2009, 286). This ethos of containment was evident in both the spatial and ceremonial dimensions of the embassy's reception. No arches were erected, no public processions unfurled. Instead, the embassy was housed in the austere Convento de San Francisco—a monastic space more suited to silence than spectacle. Far from the jubilant displays of imperial grandeur seen in Seville, Madrid offered a cloistered welcome: one that reflected not indifference but deliberate institutional caution. The location signaled not only religious hospitality but regulatory control, positioning the embassy within the bureaucratic framework of a city that governed through documents, not displays.

In this context, the Keichō Embassy was not received as a moment of spiritual exaltation or civic affirmation, but as a matter of imperial business—to be reviewed, classified, and either contained or cautiously acknowledged. The delegation's extended stay reflected the need for deliberation among the monarchy's highest administrative authorities—privados, royal counselors, and secretaries—who sought to clarify the mission's objectives amid troubling reports of renewed Christian persecution in Japan (Fernández Gómez 2009, 286). Madrid's reception thus marked a decisive inflection point in the embassy's Mediterranean passage, revealing how continental capitals, even within the Mediterranean world, operated according to different diplomatic imperatives. Whereas port cities had cultivated adaptive ceremonial economies through centuries of managing foreign difference, Madrid's identity as an





imperial centre demanded bureaucratic consistency and systematic control over unpredictable diplomatic variables

### 3.2. Imperial Suspicion

Madrid's reception of the Keichō Embassy was shaped not only by bureaucratic habit but also by a deep-seated imperial suspicion. Unlike Seville's eagerness to stage the embassy as a spectacle of civic and spiritual grandeur, Madrid approached the delegation with calculated reserve. This suspicion aligns with what Sanjay Subrahmanyam terms "courtly disciplining"—the process by which early modern courts, particularly within composite empires like the Habsburgs, sought to domesticate foreign presence by classifying, containing, and ultimately controlling it (Subrahmanyam 2012, 110–113).

Council records from the period reflect anxiety over the embassy's legitimacy, particularly the motivations of Date Masamune, the daimyo of Sendai, whom officials viewed as acting without authorization from Japan's highest authorities (Boxer 1986, 314). Far from being interpreted as a providential encounter, the embassy's arrival raised concerns about political coherence and commercial disruption. During the delegation's ten-month stay in Madrid, the monarchy's top administrative bodies—privados, counselors, and secretaries—sought clarity regarding the mission's goals, especially in light of renewed reports of Christian persecution in Japan (Fernández Gómez 2009, 286). In Madrid, every diplomatic initiative had to be weighed against the delicate balance of power both within the empire and across its Mediterranean and transatlantic frontiers. Andrew Hess's notion of "frontier caution" offers further insight into this mentality (2010, 207). Madrid's suspicion mirrored the logic of Spain's frontier governance, where hospitality was always entwined with surveillance. Confronted with intensifying Dutch and English maritime competition and wary of unauthorized trade or religious incursion, the monarchy saw the Japanese mission not as a diplomatic breakthrough but as a possible liability. Its ambiguous provenance—originating not from the Shogun or Emperor, but from a regional daimyo acting independently—complicated the diplomatic options available to both the Spanish crown and the papacy. The embassy was, from Madrid's perspective, not a clear-cut opportunity but a problematic overture.



This cautious scrutiny was more than a matter of foreign policy—it constituted a performance of imperial hierarchy. Through *consultas* and memoranda, Madrid's councils enacted a subtle yet powerful ritual of containment. Hasekura was no longer the celebrated guest of Sevillian pageantry but a figure subjected to administrative discipline—a transformation from exotic envoy to ledgered anomaly in the empire's archive. Madrid's reception of the Keichō Embassy was thus not a failure of hospitality, but a deliberate assertion of imperial order—a ritual of suspicion that affirmed the city's primacy in the spatial hierarchy of the Spanish monarchy. In this environment, Luis Sotelo's role as mediator was sharply constrained, his rhetorical prowess muffled by the procedural authority of bureaucratic rationality. Here, diplomacy unfolded not beneath triumphal arches or civic ceremony but within the structured choreography of memoranda, council deliberations, and administrative restraint. The consultative process that took place in Madrid functioned as a performance in its own right—one that displaced Seville's visual exuberance with hierarchical scrutiny and calibrated reserve.

The Council of the Indies and the Council of State led the assessment of the embassy's legitimacy and broader implications. Their *consultas*—meticulously composed and framed in cautious language—reveal a world in which foreign presence was evaluated through the lens of imperial security. In these documents, the embassy was refracted into a series of inquiries: the lineage of Date Masamune, the credibility of the Japanese envoys, the possible ramifications for Spanish commercial and religious interests. The Council of the Indies ultimately recommended against the embassy's continuation and rejected most of its proposals, confirming the bureaucratic scepticism that defined Madrid's response (Fernández Gómez 2009, 288). Each question became a symbolic gesture of containment, reducing transcultural possibility to administrative risk.

This bureaucratic logic was perhaps most evident in the shifting terminology used to describe Hasekura Tsunenaga. Initially addressed with diplomatic courtesy as *embajador* or *embajador del Rey de Boxu*, he was, following his February 1615 audience with the king, increasingly referred to in council documents as *el japon* or *el japon que está/estuvo en la corte* (Lee 2008, 357–358). This rhetorical shift—from formal title to ethnic category—



epitomizes what Subrahmanyam calls “courtly disciplining”: the reduction of foreign agency to a managed difference, rendered legible only through bureaucratic taxonomy. Even the decision to house the embassy in the Convento de San Francisco rather than in royal lodgings reinforced this disciplinary choreography (Fernández Gómez 2009, 286). The monastery’s cloisters offered a space of containment: respectable, religious, but spatially removed from public view. Hasekura’s presence, while acknowledged, was carefully circumscribed. Madrid’s handling of the Keichō Embassy thus discloses the monarchy’s self-image as an empire of administrative order. In this centre of imperial governance, the rituals of paperwork and protocol were no less performative than the arches of Seville—yet they enacted a very different script: one of vigilance, categorization, and control.

### 3.3. Sotelo’s Marginalization

Luis Sotelo, who had orchestrated the Keichō Embassy’s triumphant entrance into Seville with rhetorical flourish and spiritual zeal, found himself increasingly marginalized within the bureaucratic corridors of Madrid. The very strategies that had served him so well in Seville—his framing of the embassy as a providential encounter and his self-fashioning as a Christian intermediary—were met with suspicion by imperial administrators who valued order over spectacle (Braudel 1972, 452–454). The contrast was stark: whereas Seville had embraced his role as cultural mediator and interpreter during the embassy’s month-long stay (Fernández Gómez 2009, 285), Madrid’s administrative machinery viewed his interventions with growing unease. Letters from New Spain and Japan described him as “reckless, dishonest, and self-serving,” prompting the court to delay the royal audience and initiate a formal inquiry into his credentials and motivations (Lee 2008, 355–357).

In Seville, Sotelo’s eloquence and theological vision had elevated him to the status of a civic priest-hero, celebrated for transforming a diplomatic visit into a spiritual drama. In Madrid, however, his voice was muted beneath layers of council scrutiny and consultative restraint (Subrahmanyam 2012, 110–113). His efforts to present the embassy as a Christian triumph clashed with the capital’s cautious deliberations on trans-Pacific trade, religious orthodoxy, and geopolitical risk. The kingdom’s senior administrators—privados, counselors,



and secretaries—sought to clarify the embassy’s purpose amid troubling reports from the Viceroy of New Spain about renewed persecution of Christians in Japan (Fernández Gómez 2009, 286). Once embraced as the mouthpiece of Seville’s spiritual centrality, Sotelo now appeared as an errant agent whose rhetorical ambition threatened to disrupt the fragile equilibrium of imperial governance (Hess 2010, 207). This sidelining was not merely a matter of political prudence; it illuminated the structural divergence between the diplomatic cultures of Mediterranean port cities and continental imperial capitals. Madrid, though geographically Mediterranean, functioned effectively as a continental capital—prioritizing bureaucratic coherence over the ceremonial flexibility of cities like Seville or Genoa. This distinction explains why the Keichō Embassy encountered such contrasting reception strategies within a single imperial framework. It also exposes Madrid’s understanding of power: here, the rituals of empire were enacted not through Baroque pageantry, but through the measured silences of council chambers, where foreign difference was managed through procedure rather than celebrated in spectacle.

Sotelo’s appeals for expanding Spanish-Japanese trade—framed as a strategy to bolster imperial influence and counter Dutch and English competition (Fernández Gómez 2009, 280–281)—found little traction. His petitions were not rejected outright, but their urgency dissolved in the slow circulation of memoranda and the deliberative language of *consultas* (Dai Nippon Shiryo 1929, vol. 12, 114–120). Sotelo’s diminishing influence in Madrid underscores the limits of personal charisma when confronted by institutional suspicion. The embassy’s stay extended beyond eight months—far longer than anticipated—resulting in mounting costs and logistical discomfort (Fernández Gómez 2009, 288). Over this protracted period, Sotelo’s prominence faded as the Council of the Indies and other administrative bodies deferred decisive responses to the embassy’s religious and commercial appeals, offering vague assurances while withholding substantive commitments (Fernández Gómez 2009, 288). His marginalization encapsulates the broader contrast between the polyphonic ethos of Mediterranean port diplomacy and the austere logic of the imperial centre. In Seville, Sotelo had been a master of transcultural meaning; in Madrid, he became a diminished figure, subsumed by the empire’s machinery of containment. His fate illustrates Madrid’s diplomatic ethos: where Mediterranean cities rewarded cultural entrepreneurship, the



imperial centre demanded procedural orthodoxy.

## 4. Genoa

### 4.1. Maritime Pragmatism

As the Keichō Embassy journeyed northward from Madrid to Rome, it paused in Genoa—a city whose response revealed yet another dimension of Mediterranean diplomacy. In contrast to Seville’s exuberant spectacle and Madrid’s bureaucratic suspicion, Genoa offered a reception defined by mercantile restraint and ceremonial moderation. Its response embodied a distinctive Mediterranean strategy: ritual economy calibrated not to imperial grandeur or theological symbolism, but to the pragmatic rhythms of maritime commerce. Centuries of seaborne trade and cautious diplomacy had shaped Genoa’s ethos; ceremonial display was subordinated to the careful management of political and economic capital. Molly Greene’s analysis of Mediterranean port cities underscores how commercial imperatives frequently tempered ritual performance: in places like Genoa, diplomacy was filtered through the lens of mercantile pragmatism rather than civic exaltation (Greene 2010, 113–115). Genoese elites, acutely aware of their city’s prosperity as a transit hub, prioritized flexible alliances and avoided symbolic gestures that might entangle them in imperial agendas. This logic shaped their reception of the Keichō Embassy, which arrived in October 1615 en route to Rome (Fernández Gómez 2009, 289). While formal courtesies were extended—including respectful addresses from the Doge and Senate, who consistently referred to Hasekura as “*Illustrissimo*” (Lee 2008, 358)—the overall tone remained one of polite reserve rather than celebratory investment.

Genoa’s restrained hospitality exemplified what Greene calls *maritime pragmatism*: a mode of diplomacy in which ceremonial engagement is conditioned by risk aversion and economic calculation. Ritual was present, but stripped of spectacle. The Japanese delegation received dignified lodgings and official recognition, but there were no triumphal arches, no sermons of conversion, no visual theatrics echoing Seville’s pageantry or Madrid’s



administrative choreography. The embassy was neither woven into a narrative of spiritual destiny nor absorbed into an imperial protocol. It remained, quite deliberately, external to Genoa's civic self-representation. This economy of ritual reserve reaffirmed Genoa's identity as a commercial mediator—a node of connectivity rather than a stage of incorporation. By offering diplomatic courtesy without symbolic overreach, Genoa reinforced its position as a maritime intermediary whose primary concern was preserving transactional neutrality in a volatile Mediterranean. Its reception of the Keichō Embassy thus illuminates the heterogeneity of Mediterranean ceremonial scripts: a constellation of urban performances, each modulated according to local priorities, strategic anxieties, and historical self-conceptions.

#### 4.2. Minimalist Courtesy

Genoa's reception of the Keichō Embassy exemplified a distinctive ceremonial minimalism—a form of diplomatic engagement that drew on the shared ritual grammars of the Mediterranean while recalibrating them to reflect the city's mercantile ethos. While Genoa participated in the broader Mediterranean tradition of adaptive ceremonial economies, its approach was pared down, reflecting a calculated ethos of courtesy without spectacle. This ritual austerity aligns with what Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell describe as the Mediterranean's "ritual economy," in which symbolic gestures and formal greetings persisted even within cities oriented toward commerce rather than spectacle (2000, 89–93).

Unlike Seville's jubilant arches or Madrid's bureaucratic orchestration, Genoa's ceremonial vocabulary conveyed dignified neutrality. Official titles were respected, audiences granted, and the protocols of inter-Catholic diplomacy observed. Yet these gestures were marked by containment rather than incorporation. The absence of processions, triumphalist sermons, or iconographic display revealed Genoa's unwillingness to transform the embassy into an opportunity for civic exaltation or religious performance. Ritual was deployed, but only to the extent necessary to maintain diplomatic formality—not to embed the encounter within a narrative of local destiny. This minimalist diplomacy was not a failure of imagination but a deliberate affirmation of Genoa's identity as a republic built on economic agility and geopolitical



discretion. As Horden and Purcell suggest, in the Mediterranean world ceremonial restraint could signify as strongly as ritual exuberance—each city crafting its own reception script in response to local constraints and aspirations (2000, 89–93). Genoa’s measured hospitality, devoid of spectacle yet replete with calculated formality, confirmed its status as a port of passage rather than a theatre of transformation.

For the Keichō Embassy, Genoa offered a moment of courteous neutrality—a brief interlude between the theatrical fervor of Seville and the bureaucratic rigour of Madrid. It was a reception that upheld the decorum of diplomacy while eschewing grandeur: a quiet assertion that, in Genoa, ritual economy operated not as an arena for spiritual conquest or civic drama, but as a calibrated choreography of polite detachment. In this restrained environment, Luis Sotelo’s role as mediator—so central in Seville—receded into near invisibility. In Seville, his sermons and rhetorical framings had woven the embassy into the city’s spiritual narrative, elevating him as both interpreter and cultural bridge (Fernández Gómez 2009, 285). But in Genoa, there was little room for such personal myth-making. The city’s ethos of commercial pragmatism and diplomatic reserve offered no appetite for the religious triumphalism that had animated Sotelo’s voice in Andalusia.

Genoese elites, steeped in traditions of maritime diplomacy and strategic moderation, saw no advantage in amplifying Sotelo’s theological rhetoric or casting the embassy as a providential sign. His vision of global Christian unity found no echo in Genoa’s calibrated minimalism. Instead, he faded into the background—a marginal presence in a diplomatic encounter that the city neither celebrated nor absorbed into its civic narrative. Sotelo’s sidelining underscores both the adaptability and the limits of Mediterranean ceremonial logics. Genoa did not exclude the embassy, nor did it silence Sotelo outright—but it declined to elevate his mediatory authority. Ritual containment prevailed over rhetorical elaboration. The city’s quiet courtesy, rooted in commercial interest and geopolitical prudence, neutralized the performative ambitions that had thrived in Seville. Sotelo’s silence in Genoa thus reveals how the same ceremonial repertoire could yield radically different outcomes, contingent on local ritual economies and political dispositions. In Genoa, the logic of trade triumphed over the theatre of conversion.



### 4.3. Transitional Gateway

Within the broader arc of the Keichō Embassy's Mediterranean journey, Genoa functioned less as a site of transformation than as a transitional node—a maritime waypoint between Seville's exuberant embrace and Rome's liturgical absorption. Cities like Genoa, deeply embedded in commercial networks, approached diplomacy through the lens of maritime pragmatism, valuing trade continuity and political discretion over symbolic spectacle (Greene 2010, 113–115). This ethos shaped Genoa's reception: it was neither celebratory nor dismissive but deliberately calibrated to affirm the city's role as a conduit rather than a destination. Unlike Seville's theatrical self-fashioning or Rome's universalist triumphalism, Genoa offered a polite but uninvested reception. Its mercantile identity and diplomatic caution dictated a style of engagement that was formally correct but emotionally muted (García-Arenal and Wiegers 2003, 42–45). Seville had embraced the spectacle of incorporation; Rome would orchestrate a pageant of spiritual triumph. Genoa, by contrast, deployed a strategic ceremonial minimalism—preserving diplomatic form while avoiding symbolic entanglement. This modality aligns with Horden and Purcell's concept of flexible “ritual economies”—a repertoire of ceremonial forms that could be amplified or muted to reflect local priorities (2000, 89–93). Genoa's reception by the Senate in October 1615 followed this minimalist script: respectful titles were employed, appropriate lodgings arranged, but there were no triumphal arches, no sermons, no iconographic gestures (Fernández Gómez 2009, 289). In this brief interlude, the embassy encountered a city that declined to become a stage. Genoa opted to remain a gateway—a port of passage rather than a theatre of political or spiritual affirmation. Its minimalist diplomacy illustrates the diversity of Mediterranean ceremonial regimes, revealing how cities could manage foreign presence not through overt incorporation or rejection, but through calculated neutrality. This understated reception would soon be eclipsed by Rome's performative absorption of the embassy into a liturgical drama of universal Catholicism.





## 5. Rome

### 5.1. The Eternal City

When the Keichō Embassy arrived in Rome in late 1615, it encountered not merely another Mediterranean capital but the theological heart of Catholic Christendom. In the early modern imagination, Rome was both a physical center and a metaphysical axis—a city where sacred history, ecclesiastical ritual, and imperial aspiration converged. Fernand Braudel aptly described it as a “universal city,” a place where liturgy and architecture coalesced into a tangible display of papal supremacy (1972, 444–446). Unlike other cities along the embassy’s route, Rome did not simply receive foreign emissaries; it ritually redefined them, integrating their presence into the Church’s dramaturgy of universal salvation.

Where Seville had mounted exuberant civic spectacle and Genoa offered polite neutrality, Rome pursued a strategy of ecclesiastical incorporation. Its ritual logic was totalizing, transforming diplomacy into theology and foreign envoys into symbols of providential outreach. This was the apex of the Mediterranean’s ceremonial adaptability—not containment or negotiation, but absorption. Rome’s ceremonial grammar aimed not merely to engage with the foreign but to sacralize it, to convert political presence into spiritual affirmation. The Keichō delegation, with its exotic appearance and transoceanic narrative, was ideally suited to this project. Unlike in Madrid, where Hasekura had been gradually reduced to “el japon,” in Rome the embassy was exalted as a harbinger of divine providence—a living testament to Christianity’s global reach. Their arrival became a performance of ecclesial destiny, in which every procession, prayer, and reception marked the expanding circumference of the Catholic world.

Thus, the embassy’s presence in Rome was less a diplomatic episode than a ritual encounter. Audiences, processions, and liturgical acts were choreographed not only for earthly diplomacy but for cosmic theater, rehearsing the Church’s universal embrace. In this framework, Hasekura was no longer merely a political envoy; he became a sacred figure woven into the Church’s spiritual narrative, a representative of souls awaiting salvation in the East.



Rome's reception of the Keichō Embassy embodied the city's defining ambition: the fusion of theology, spectacle, and empire. In this culminating point of the Mediterranean network, diplomacy was aestheticized and the foreign sacralized. The Eternal City reaffirmed its self-image not only as the papal capital but as the eschatological terminus of global itineraries—where even the most distant emissaries could be ritually transformed into witnesses of Catholic truth.

## 5.2. Visual Theater

The grandeur of Rome's reception of the Keichō Embassy extended well beyond liturgical ceremony. In the city that imagined itself as the visual heart of Catholicism, diplomacy became a matter not only of doctrine but of spectacle—unfolding through architecture, iconography, and ceremonial motion. This visual dramaturgy, what might be called the Church's "sacred optics," transformed diplomatic presence into a tableau of spiritual absorption. Unlike the civic theatricality of Seville or the commercial protocol of Genoa, Rome staged the embassy through a choreography of space and sight designed to manifest its theological universality.

Scipione Amati, who joined the embassy during its Spanish leg, recorded a detailed account of the Roman phase (Fernández Gómez 2009, 288–289). On November 3, 1615, in a solemn public consistory before Pope Paul V and the Sacred College of Cardinals, the Japanese delegation was received with full ceremonial gravity. Their entrance into papal territory had already been marked by processional flourishes: cavalry escorts, cannon salutes, and crowds lining the streets. The ritual triad of genuflections before the pope, the delivery of Date Masamune's letter (read aloud in Latin), and the invocation of special prayers all followed a tightly scripted liturgy of absorption (Amati 1615, Chs. 28–29, 59–64). Every gesture reinforced Rome's capacity to reframe foreign difference as sacramental potential. This symbolic reconfiguration reached its visual apex in the Borghese Chapel of Santa Maria Maggiore, where a sculpted bas-relief immortalized the embassy's audience with the pope. There, Hasekura is depicted kneeling in reverence beside Persian and Congolese ambassadors—a scene that renders global plurality harmonious within the Church's spiritual geometry (Amadei 1953, 236–238). Such artworks were not, merely



commemorative; they were ecclesiastical inscriptions, encoding papal authority in marble and spatializing Catholic universality.

Additional acts of ceremonial inscription further anchored the embassy within Rome's visual economy: the baptism of Hasekura's secretary, the conferral of Roman citizenship and senatorial honors upon Hasekura, and the commissioning of frescoes in the Quirinal Palace. Each of these gestures advanced a visual theology of inclusion, in which ritual display functioned as both political message and theological proof. Yet beneath this aesthetic triumph lay a subtle diplomatic deferral. While Rome celebrated the embassy in pageantry, it offered only vague assurances in policy. Pope Paul V delegated all substantive decisions—trade negotiations, ecclesiastical infrastructure, missionary dispatch—to the Spanish nuncio, effectively outsourcing responsibility (Fernández Gómez 2009, 289). The grandeur of Rome's welcome thus cloaked a strategic ambiguity: a spectacular embrace that neither resolved nor fully endorsed the embassy's proposals. For the Japanese envoys, the encounter became a visual redefinition. Their political mission was transformed into a sacred episode, recast as an affirmation of Rome's universal mission rather than a bilateral engagement. What they had hoped would be a dialogue became a pageant—a narrative into which they were visually written but rarely allowed to speak.

Luis Sotelo's role in this tableau reveals the ambiguous status of the missionary intermediary. Recognized formally as Date Masamune's *legatus* (Amati 1615, Ch. 29, 65–66), Sotelo nonetheless found his agency constrained by the Church's script. No longer the dominant orchestrator as he had been in Seville, he became a ceremonial facilitator—an interpreter whose function was increasingly to reinforce papal choreography rather than to shape its meaning. His linguistic skill and cultural knowledge, honed during years in Japan (Fernández Gómez 2009, 280), remained indispensable, but they served the Church's liturgical design rather than his own diplomatic vision. Sotelo's transformation—celebrated visionary in Seville, cautious intermediary in Madrid, and liturgical assistant in Rome—exemplifies how ecclesiastical power could subsume individual initiative. The Church welcomed his zeal, but only insofar as it fit the architecture of its global narrative. He became not the author of meaning, but its vessel.

Rome's visual staging of the Keichō Embassy thus exemplifies how early



modern diplomacy could be less about policy than performance. Through coordinated gestures, spatial hierarchies, and artistic inscription, the embassy was rendered not as a political delegation but as a ritual offering. In this theater of vision and grace, the foreign was not engaged—it was reimagined, beautified, and absorbed.

### 5.3. Spiritual Absorption

Rome's reception of the Keichō Embassy was not merely an act of protocol or hospitality—it was a sacramental exercise in the ritual mastery of difference. At the culmination of the embassy's Mediterranean passage, Rome enacted a spiritual economy of incorporation that transcended political negotiation. Where Seville had embraced ceremonial incorporation and Genoa had favoured procedural containment, Rome deployed what might be called liturgical universalism: a ritual system in which foreign presence was not accommodated but transformed into a sign of divine convergence. As Serge Gruzinski observes, Catholic engagements with distant cultures in the early modern period frequently relied on ceremonies that translated cultural ambiguity into sacred narrative (2014, 112–114). Rome followed this dramaturgy with precision. Every facet of the embassy's Roman itinerary—processions, papal audiences, baptisms, artistic commemorations—participated in what Nicholas Terpstra terms a “spectacle of charity,” wherein gestures of welcome masked exercises of symbolic domination (2013, 48–52). Grace was the form, but hegemony the function. Hasekura's baptism, widely celebrated, was more than a sacrament—it was a triumphal inscription of Catholic expansion, a sanctification of the Church's reach into the furthest corners of the known world.

To render this triumph legible, the Church minimized the embassy's political ambiguity. Spanish officials had already expressed unease regarding the diplomatic legitimacy of the mission, noting that it emanated from a regional daimyo rather than from the emperor or shogun (Fernández Gómez 2009, 289). Such concerns, however, were suppressed beneath the weight of ecclesiastical spectacle. Rome reimagined the embassy not as a geopolitical anomaly, but as providential evidence of Christian teleology—a movement from periphery to center, from fragmentation to unity. Nowhere was this absorptive logic more palpable than in the Borghese Chapel's marble bas-relief, where Hasekura



kneels before Pope Paul V, flanked by envoys from Persia and the Congo. This orchestrated harmony condensed Rome's global vision into iconographic form—a tableau in which distant difference dissolved into papal symmetry. The scene conveyed not cultural exchange, but theological resolution. All tributaries, it implied, led to Rome.

For the Japanese delegation, this translation of meaning represented both a diplomatic elevation and a symbolic effacement. They entered the Eternal City as emissaries but were recast as penitents and pilgrims. Their mission, rooted in complex political, commercial, and religious motivations, was ceremonially rewritten as a pilgrimage of the soul. As Fernández Gómez observes, the grandeur of the papal reception ultimately hollowed out the embassy's political agency while preserving its visual solemnity (2009, 289). Presence was preserved, but purpose redirected.

Luis Sotelo, too, was drawn into this process of ceremonial redefinition. Once the architect of spiritual theater in Seville, he now appeared as a supporting figure in Rome's ritual architecture. His voice—once central, fervent, even polemical—was integrated into a broader ecclesiastical rhythm. He remained a visible intermediary, but his interpretive authority was confined to reinforcing the papacy's universalist staging. He had not disappeared but had been choreographed.

Rome's reception of the Keichō Embassy thus illustrates how early modern diplomacy, especially in Catholic contexts, could shift from deliberative exchange to ritual conquest. The embassy was not debated or contested—it was curated, mythologized, and monumentalized. The rituals of welcome were acts of subsumption, aimed not at mutual recognition but at theological finality. The implications of this liturgical absorption were far-reaching. In hosting the Japanese embassy, the papal court projected not just hospitality, but primacy. The encounter was staged not as a bilateral meeting of civilizations, but as a confirmation of Rome's spiritual centrality. Even the Pope's decision to name Sotelo bishop of the Mutsu region—though never implemented due to lack of royal authorization—was part of this dramaturgy (Fernández Gómez 2009, 289): a gesture of ecclesiastical sovereignty that bypassed secular diplomacy to assert the Church's apostolic authority across oceans.

In this theatre of grace, Rome spoke as much to European monarchs as to its visitors. The ceremonial enfolding of the embassy signaled to Catholic



powers—especially Spain—that ultimate spiritual authority resided not with kings but with the pope. It was a gentle, gilded rebuke to secular control over mission and diplomacy. Rome’s message was clear: the world might be mapped by empires, but it would be claimed by liturgy. Thus, the Mediterranean arc of the Keichō Embassy concluded not in political resolution, but in spiritual transformation. Sotelo’s journey—from celebrant in Seville to vessel in Rome—embodied this shift. He became not merely a cultural translator, but a figure absorbed into the very ritual architecture he had once helped construct. His diminishing agency revealed the paradox of missionary diplomacy: empowered to cross borders yet ultimately confined by the theological scripts of the institution he served. Rome’s choreography of the embassy was more than ceremony. It was a performance of power, a rewriting of history in the language of ritual. In transforming the Keichō Embassy into an icon of ecclesiastical absorption, Rome reaffirmed its vision of Catholic universality—a world not just evangelized but staged.

## 6. Conclusion

The Mediterranean passage of the Keichō Embassy reveals a world that was anything but monolithic. Instead of a singular diplomatic trajectory, the embassy encountered a mosaic of ceremonial economies—each port city reworking its presence to assert local meanings, ambitions, and hierarchies. From Seville’s exuberant spectacle and Sotelo’s triumphant narratives, through Madrid’s cautious bureaucracy and Genoa’s reserved pragmatism, to Rome’s liturgical grandeur, the embassy’s journey became a palimpsest of ritual scripts—layered performances that alternately welcomed, contained, or absorbed foreign difference.

As Fernand Braudel observed, the Mediterranean was a world of “unity in diversity” (1972, 128–29). Despite its interconnected maritime and commercial networks, the region did not operate under a single hegemonic logic. Each port shaped the embassy’s reception according to its own political economy and spiritual priorities. The Keichō Embassy’s itinerary thus illuminates how Mediterranean unity was built not through uniformity, but through the very



capacity to stage and accommodate difference—a dynamic interplay of local sovereignty within an overarching imperial web. The notion of *composite monarchies* offers a useful analogy (Elliott 1992, 52–54). Just as the Spanish Crown managed the competing privileges of disparate kingdoms, the Mediterranean functioned as a composite contact zone—a constellation of cities that enacted their own ceremonial logics while operating within broader imperial and ecclesiastical frameworks. Seville performed civic exuberance; Genoa maintained mercantile discretion; Madrid enforced bureaucratic rationality; Rome asserted spiritual universalism. These ritual economies coexisted—sometimes in tension, sometimes in harmony—each expressing a vision of global order that reflected local concerns as much as transoceanic aspiration.

The Keichō Embassy's Mediterranean journey, then, was not a linear mission but a sequence of symbolic negotiations—a choreography of power, piety, and prestige. It transformed a complex initiative dispatched by Date Masamune—part trade venture, part spiritual outreach—into a stage for the self-fashioning of the Mediterranean world. In Seville, the embassy became a baroque affirmation of global ties and Franciscan wonder. In Madrid, it was subsumed by bureaucratic suspicion. In Genoa, it was acknowledged yet diplomatically neutralized. In Rome, it was re-scripted into a triumphalist liturgy of Catholic absorption. Each city redefined the embassy's meaning, revealing how early modern diplomacy was less a practice of mutual negotiation than a ritualized assertion of difference and hierarchy. The original goals—commercial alliance, religious tolerance, cultural recognition—were repeatedly transformed, leaving a residue of layered meanings that spoke less to Japan's diplomatic objectives than to the Mediterranean's ceremonial imagination.

Luis Sotelo's personal trajectory mirrored the mission's evolving fate. In Seville, he rose as the visionary intermediary, weaving the embassy into a narrative of spiritual awe and civic glory. In Madrid, his voice faltered before imperial caution. In Genoa, he faded into procedural anonymity. By the time the embassy reached Rome, Sotelo had become a supporting actor in the Church's grand liturgical pageant. Celebrated but constrained, his agency was instrumentalized by institutions more powerful than his rhetoric. His journey underscores the tension between individual ambition and structural absorption



in early modern diplomacy. From architect of spectacle to vessel of papal theater, Sotelo's arc demonstrates how even the most rhetorically agile intermediaries were shaped—and ultimately constrained—by the ceremonial logics of the systems they sought to navigate.

Yet the embassy's resonance did not vanish with its return. In Coria del Río, near Seville, descendants of the Japanese envoys still bear the surname “Japón.” These quiet genealogies and commemorative practices are not mere nostalgic curiosities; they are living archives of transcultural encounter—testimonies to the embassy's enduring afterlives in local memory and identity (Chino 2016, 392; Fernández Gómez 2009, 291).

Indeed, this Mediterranean model of ritual reception was not unique to the Spanish world. Other early modern courts—from Versailles to Vienna—employed ceremonial strategies to domesticate foreign emissaries. But the Mediterranean's unique combination of maritime pragmatism, commercial pluralism, and layered sovereignty created distinctive patterns of diplomatic staging. Unlike the more rigid ceremonialism of Northern Europe, Mediterranean cities balanced protocol with performance, absorption with ambiguity. The Keichō Embassy reveals that diplomacy was never merely a matter of treaties or alliances. It was a performance—a ritual negotiation of identity, authority, and imagination. This layered spectacle—where civic pride met imperial administration, where liturgical absorption masked geopolitical ambiguity—reminds us that cross-cultural encounters were always staged. They were choreographed and contested, remembered and reframed, in ways that affirmed local visions of the global.

The Mediterranean's composite scripts—Seville's theatricality, Madrid's suspicion, Genoa's neutrality, Rome's spiritual triumph—continue to shape how this embassy is remembered today. As Peter Burke has argued, ceremonial memory often outlives its political context, inscribing power relations into cultural forms that persist long after treaties are forgotten (2001, 138–142). Through its polyphonic itinerary, the Keichō Embassy illuminates the deep entanglement of hospitality and domination in early modern diplomacy. In understanding these divergent ceremonial economies, we gain more than a case study in global encounter. We glimpse the ritual infrastructures that underpinned imperial order and transcultural memory in an interconnected yet fragmented world (Connerton 1989, 44–47). The Keichō Embassy, shaped by





ritual and re-scripted by power, becomes both a mirror and a lesson: transcultural contact is never neutral. It is staged, inscribed, and remembered—through ceremony, spectacle, and the stories we continue to tell.

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