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Volume 7

1984

Number 2

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Giuseppe Tucci (1894–1984)

by Luciano Petech

Now and then some towering personalities appear, who leave their mark in more than one field of research, with equal intensity and equally lasting influence. One such man was Professor Giuseppe Tucci.

Tucci was born at Macerata in Central Italy on June 5th, 1894. He received a good humanistic education, and until the end of his long life he maintained an uncommon mastery of Latin and Greek, although he seldom chose to show it. He was a precocious boy and at the age of 17 he published his first article, a study of Latin inscriptions found near his native town. Already at that time he felt the attraction of Oriental thought. He graduated from the University of Rome and almost at once showed himself to be quite at home in such widely different fields as Avestic, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan. His main interest lay, and always remained, in subjects connected with philosophy and religion, although later he developed also a penchant for historical studies. His life and work can be roughly divided into five periods.

1) After having taken an honorable part in the First World War as a subaltern in the Italian army, he started an untiring publishing activity, which lasted with few breaks until his last years of life. At first he seemed to feel his way in several directions, being attracted mainly by Chinese philosophy. His translation of Mencius (1921) and his history of early Chinese philosophy (1922) can still be read with some profit. Then he turned increasingly to Indian studies, being chiefly interested in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

2) This trend was confirmed and became paramount when in 1925 he went to India, where he taught Italian language and literature at the universities of Shantiniketan and

Calcutta. His long stay in India, which lasted till 1930, brought to full maturation his scientific personality and gave him that intimate knowledge not only of religious and literary texts, but also of the living spirituality among the common people, acquired in the course of his rambles on foot and by boat in the lower Ganges valley. He was in close contact with Rabindranath Tagore, of whose friendship he was particularly proud. The result of his Indian years was a series of accurate and philologically impeccable editions of Mahāyāna texts, with constant use of the Tibetan and Chinese translations to correct and complete corrupted or lacunous Sanskrit manuscripts. At the same time he never neglected another task, that of making Eastern thought better known in his country; we may only mention his little book on Buddhism (1926), a fine but perhaps premature effort. His growing fame was acknowledged at home; in 1929 he became one of the first members of the newly-founded Academy of Italy, and upon his return home he was given in 1931 the chair of Chinese at the Oriental Institute in Naples, from where he was soon called to the University of Rome as professor of Religions and Philosophies of India and the Far East; he taught there till his final retirement in 1969.

3) During his stay in India he had already made two trips (1928, 1930) to Ladakh, Rupshu and Lahul; a third followed in 1931. In this way he came to be deeply interested in Tibetan studies, which till then had been a field reserved to academic scholars or else to explorers with mainly geographical interests. He was the first to combine both qualities. After his return from India he dedicated himself with characteristic energy to the task of organizing, with private and public means, a series of expeditions in the Himalayas. This was the Tibetan period in his life, lasting approximately from 1932 to 1950. As he felt his activity somewhat cramped in the rather rigid frame of the university, in February 1933 he founded the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (IsMEO), intended to be a center for research and cultural exchanges with Asia. Four missions to Tibet followed with a regular biennial cadence: 1933 and 1935 to Western, 1937 and 1939 to Central Tibet; their aim was the artistic exploration of those countries. The second World War interrupted the series of expeditions, but not his scholarly activity, although he had to go through a rather difficult and un-

pleasant period. As soon as things became settled, he resumed his activity in the field, culminating with his mission to Lhasa and to various temples and monasteries of Central Tibet (1948). It was his last opportunity; shortly afterwards the integration of Tibet into the Chinese republic put an end to any possibility of further missions.

In Tibet Tucci felt at home. Tibetans accepted him warmly, marveling at a Western traveler who would hold disputations with learned lamas in their own language on difficult points of religion. On the other side, it was characteristic of Tucci's enormous capacity for work that the years between each mission were utilized for writing and publishing his fascinating travel accounts, and for making available at once the scientific results obtained; they were mostly included in the seven volumes of the series *Indo-Tibetica* (1932–1941). The enforced rest at the end of the war gave him the leisure for compiling his magnum opus, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls* (1949); in spite of its unpretentious title, it is a real summa of the art, literature, religion and history of Tibet. It was a landmark in Tibetological studies. But even after this great effort he never quit this field, where he remained active till almost the end.

4) The new circumstances compelled Tucci to look for another field for his never-abating activity, and he found it in Nepal, mainly in border areas inhabited by Tibetans. His two missions in that region (1952 and 1954) started a trend of research which was almost at once taken up and continued by his pupils Raniero Gnoli and Luciano Petech. In this period he also produced some works of synthesis on a large scale, such as his history of Indian philosophy and his monograph on the theory and practice of the maṇḍala.

5) The Nepalese period was rather short, perhaps because of the relatively limited scope of this field. Soon, starting from the connections between Tibet and Uḍḍiyāna (Swat), the home of Padmasambhava, he turned to the absorbing problems concerning the interacting cultures in the areas on both sides of the present Pakistan-Afghanistan border. In 1955 he carried out a preliminary survey of possible sites for excavation in Swat, selecting with an almost uncanny archaeological flair the most promising ones: Mingora and Udegram. This was the start for a rapidly increasing activity, carried out through a special Cen-

ter for Studies and Excavations in Asia, set up within the IsMEO under Tucci's overall control. For many years, till he was well over eighty, he went out year after year to direct personally in the field the various enterprises of the Center, which extended gradually to other sites in Pakistan, and then to Afghanistan (1957) and Iran (1959). Restoration work was also undertaken, for which a highly specialized team was organized (e.g., restoration of Persepolis; rehabilitation of the main buildings in the historical center of Isfahan). Tucci was everywhere, organizing, directing, inspiring. Another important step was the creation, due to his initiative, of the National Museum of Oriental Art in Rome, to which the archaeological collections of the IsMEO were entrusted on deposit. It is to be deeply regretted that later political events in Afghanistan and Iran interrupted excavations in these two countries.

Publication of the excavation and conservation results was of course left to the archaeologists who collaborated with Tucci, while he himself slowly receded into the background. He remained active till his last days, chiefly in preparing revised editions of older works that had been long out of print, but also working at a new study (*Eros and Thanatos in India*) that was interrupted by his death. Of course, he realized the limits imposed upon him by advancing old age; in 1978 he retired from active work, relinquishing the presidency of the IsMEO. But even as honorary president he continued to follow the work of his successors, and his advice was taken on every major issue. Two years ago an untoward accident (a broken femur badly set) confined him to his home at San Polo dei Cavalieri, in the hills north of Rome, where he was devotedly tended by his wife; and there he died on the 5th of April, 1984.

Tucci's scientific achievements were recognized all over the world and brought him many acknowledgements. He was doctor h.c. of the universities of Kolozsvár (now Cluj), Delhi, Louvain, Teheran and Kathmandu; member of many academies and learned societies in Europe, Asia and America; recipient of the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for international understanding (1978) and of the Bazan Award for history (1979). He accepted all honours, but remained superior to them and never spoke on this theme. Being always attracted by philosophical thought and above all by Buddhism, he understood and respected

the numinous element in all creeds and in all countries. As a teacher, he gave university lectures that were absorbing and stimulating. But he did not lay great store upon academic teaching, and the best portion of his formative work with his pupils was done in the course of personal encounters in his home; he opened to them a liberal access to his amazingly rich library, which he later donated to the IsMEO.

Italy and the learned world at large have lost with him a great scholar, an inspiring force in many directions of research, and above all a man who was intensely human, in the best and highest meaning of the word.

A complete bibliography of Tucci's books and articles down to 1970, compiled by the present author, is found in G. Tucci, *Opera Minora*, Rome 1972. It was continued down to 1974 in the preface to *Gururājamañjarikā: studi in onore di Giuseppe Tucci*, Naples 1974. A complete and final bibliography is being compiled by the IsMEO. A select list of Tucci's most significant contributions to research (excluding travel accounts, etc.) is appended below.

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