Galileo’s Idol
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Galileo’s Idol
Gianfrancesco Sagredo and the Politics of Knowledge

Nick Wilding

The University of Chicago Press
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Nick Wilding is assistant professor in the Department of History at Georgia State University.

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Introduction

*Galileo's Idol* is a historical case study of machinations, maneuvers, and masks in the making of early modern scientific knowledge. It pays special attention to the contributions of unacknowledged underground actors such as printers, publishers, forgers, diplomats, politicians and travelers. My book retells a familiar story, that of Galileo’s transformation of the cosmos via the introduction of astronomical telescopic observation, from a new and, I hope, newly productive angle. Rather than taking Galileo as the central voice and protagonist in this narrative, it approaches him askance, from the position of his closest friend, student, and patron, the Venetian patrician Gianfrancesco Sagredo. The raking light supplied by this approach not only casts long shadows, it also helps illuminate certain features not usually visible, and allows us to explore relationships between objects and practices rarely considered together. This tactic is not that of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* to *Hamlet*; Galileo still figures large in the narrative, but by coming at him sideways, we can both catch him unawares and observe him in his natural habitat, as it were. The historical contexts produced by and generating this line of inquiry are not limited to those of a single overprivileged relationship; my initial project of writing the history of an early modern scientific friendship, based on the rich documentation of Sagredo’s letters to Galileo, has here been eclipsed by a series of complimentary moves based on unexpected discoveries and improvised methodologies. An account of the friendship and, indeed, an intellectual biography of Sagredo remain to be written. Instead, this book attempts to capture something of the dynamics of early modern scientific practice in action. My aim is not to propose Sagredo’s inclusion in some canon of scientific revolutionaries, but to contextualize Galileo’s activities in a new way, by viewing him alongside his friend.
In the case of Galileo, there is no laboratory or observatory for us to enter, no space defined as scientific, even were such a term to have existed. When Galileo later imagined a proper space for talking about science, as the settings for his two great dialogues of 1632 and 1638, the best he could come up with was Sagredo’s palace (situated not on the Grand Canal, where the family later moved, but up in Castello against the walls of the Arsenal shipyard). Other contemporaries did conceptualize and utilize such spaces, and they have been well studied. Instead, in Galileo’s case, we have to identify and follow the material, intellectual, and social tools that he and his assistants, friends, patrons, enemies, admirers, rivals, and students constructed and used. I am less concerned here with telling the story again of the physical construction of the telescope and the observational breakthroughs of the winter of 1609–10, and more interested in trying to reconstruct the processes by which other tools and instruments were made and deployed. I aim to restore something of the social distribution of labor and historical contingency in the making of natural philosophical knowledge.

To this end, I have used as wide a variety of sources as possible. Paintings, ornamental woodcuts, epistolary hoaxes, intercepted letters, murder case files: these are not the normal materials for historians of science. This microhistorical case study is intended to investigate an abnormality, or rather, it is intended to challenge the picture that has emerged as dominant and normative, of early modern science as pious, serious, and ecumenical—one might say, as institutionalized. So powerful and perceptive were the original social constructivist studies which provided this picture, especially around central figures of the early Royal Society, that we have forgotten, against their authors’ wishes, that they were also intended as microhistorical analyses, inherently local and richly descriptive, rather than prescriptive checklists for a new generation.

Galileo emerges from this book as arrogant, manipulative, and scheming. This much was well known. These adjectives should not be understood as psychological traits, but as cultural resources, borrowed, deployed, and valued across a wide range of activities. Such resources are not amassed capital, but are generated in performance. As such, they depend on an audience, or rather, they are generated relationally. Whereas a natural philosopher such as Boyle might plead for toleration and moderation to produce nondogmatic facts, or Hobbes might insist on the right and need for an authoritative voice to stabilize truth, the cases here presented, emanating from a different space, time, and culture, show instead a divisive approach to the art of persuasion. These authors perform for modulated audiences, in curious contracts with variegated interpretative communities. Hoaxes are one of their most highly
prized productions, texts that simultaneously appear absolutely sincere to one group and outrageously funny to another—funny precisely because someone else fails to see the humor. Galileo’s *Il Saggiatore* is perhaps the best example of science in a satiric mode; his *Dialogo* the most complex, as it writes its victim into its plot. Natural philosophy takes place in fields, in dialect, behind masks, at carnival. It is polemical, rude, satirical, and enjoyable; it insults, misrepresents, tricks, and ridicules. Even when its setting is a Venetian palazzo, it nearly turns into a fistfight. Only later does it enter the pious space of academies, where monastic and courtly codes of dullness are imposed; and even there, we may have been too quick to miss the jokes.

Such works do not rely on a notion of credibility that is socially sanctioned, a fixed resource from which the truth of an utterance draws its strength. Rather, they are complex textual performances whose meaning is generated through a series of negotiations and partial releases of information. The early modern “discreet reader” was ideal but also real. Discernment in locating an author’s motives, subterfuges, identity, or humor was the same skill that allowed one to penetrate the secrets of nature. Wit, rather than sincerity, was the highest virtue of this epistemology. Trust was not guaranteed by an author’s name: it was perfectly possible for a pseudonym or an anonym to be more truthful than an onym.

Similarly, strong studies in the relationship between print and science have inadvertently created a normative procrustean bed into which quite different social relationships have been forced. The cases offered here show very clearly that the printer of Galileo’s *Sidereus nuncius* (Venice, 1610) did not even place his name on its title page, but hid behind a series of masks from a very real threat. The supposed “pirate” second edition from Frankfurt, by contrast, was by a highly reputable publisher. Both editions were probably “authorial,” but they served very different audiences. Readers did not discuss which edition they used, but did understand the work in very different ways, depending, in part, on their familiarity with what they deemed similar works. Furthermore, the primacy of print, a point of faith since at least Francis Bacon in its historical agency, no longer seems so secure. Letters and manuscript tracts make up the bulk of most early modern natural philosophers’ writing. For many texts they were the only, or privileged, or first, form of publication.

Patrons have generally been deployed as fixed rungs on a hierarchy up which our aspiring scientist, artist, writer, engineer, or doctor might climb. Instead, it might make more sense to consider entire systems of patronage in movement, with no fixed points, only shifting relations. This is more than a restatement of the reciprocity of the gift; it is both an attempt to restore early
modern notions of contingency and a way of undoing the teleology of our notion of actors’ strategies. Strategies have helpfully replaced intentions as a way of de-psychologizing actors and following behavior rather than mere words. In turn, though, the notion of strategy often reduces historical potentialities to their results, constructing linear and singular narratives with no space for failure, improvisation, or self-contradiction. The case studies offered here, by contrast, seek to restore multiple, contradictory tactics to actors. Galileo is here positioned alongside actors better known in the political arena, such as Paolo Sarpi. But he is also restored to a social context granting agency to amanuenses, printers, and publishers.

A nuanced notion of strategy allows us to reconsider some of the staple, even stodgy, components of Venetian intellectual history. Anti-Jesuitism can be studied and described with more sensitivity if we assume not that it was the presiding and universal sentiment of a monolithic political class for an entire generation, but rather that it was a tool that could be deployed in various situations on behalf of the interests of different groups. The conflict of the Venetian Interdict is approached here both through the long disputes over the Jesuits’ competition with the University of Padua, and through the lived, confused, and improvised experience of Sagredo based in the Friulian fortress of Palmanova. Such experiences, I show, directly informed Sagredo’s brilliant, funny, and cruel anti-Jesuit epistolary hoax of 1608 and his more general approach to documentary culture, whether dealing with diplomatic disputes or astronomical conflicts.

Venice’s empire, emporia, and interests lay in the eastern Mediterranean. Italocentric accounts of both the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution have traditionally cast Europe as the natural zone of innovation; this model still underpins many studies of imperial science. But both “Europe” and “Italy” are historiographically weak terms for accurately conceptualizing early modern space. As Braudel showed, in terms of both time traveled and cultural uniformity, Venice was probably closer to Istanbul than to London. When considering Venetian natural philosophy, we should map the geographical zones employed in experimentation, rather than assume an innate Europeaness to science. Sagredo again offers a good opportunity to study the dynamics of Venetian natural philosophy: while stationed in Syria, he corresponded with Isfahan and Goa; his network of correspondents, both direct and intercepted, extended across the Indian Ocean. Only one letter was ever sent to London; the furthest west Sagredo ventured was Marseilles. Galileo’s tidal proof for the rotation of the earth is compiled exclusively from Adriatic data. Universal macrocosms were easily extrapolated from extremely local microcosms; the solution to the problem of deduction was geopolitical.
Another recent historiographical trend is to reconstruct the relations between the nascent ways of knowing of the natural philosopher and those appertaining to other identities. The case of Sagredo, who himself overstepped the limits of professional decorum by purloining correspondence from travelers and messengers in Aleppo, is revealing, as it clearly demonstrates that the realities of these relationships will be found not only in guides and manuals, but also by following different people’s practices in the field.

Moreover, the proximity of the case of the dodgy diplomat to the supposedly pristine eponymous messenger guaranteeing the authenticity of the Sidereus nuncius’s observations should make us reconsider what was meant, and understood, by Galileo’s classic title. In what follows, new archival evidence is presented showing Galileo’s late alternatives for the book’s title; and this may be productively read alongside other contemporary cases of distant envoys with suspicious credentials, such as Xwâje Šafar, an Armenian merchant sent from Shah Abbas in Persia to Venice (stopping off in Aleppo on the way, where his mailbag was rifled by Sagredo), whose received identity was based on the difficult task of translating and authenticating his diplomatic documents.

What emerges from the following chapters will be, I hope, surprising and disconcerting, provocative, suggestive, and even entertaining. Their historiographical methodologies have been improvised and assembled as needed, rather than borrowed or preformulated, and while the results may be at times inelegant, they are offered as potential paths out of the confines of what some practitioners already describe as a self-regarding and hyperprofessionalized discipline. Inevitably, and for better or worse, to some extent we resemble our subjects. Sagredo tended to end up tangled in disputes, laughing. He may have something to teach us.
The Generation and Dissolution of Images

To contemporary readers of Galileo’s 1632 *Dialogue upon the Two Main Systems of the World*, one of its most stunning successes was the realism with which it depicted its protagonists, especially the Venetian patrician in whose palace the discussion took place, Gianfrancesco Sagredo. As Galileo and Sagredo’s mutual friend Fulgenzio Micanzio put it, “My God, with what dignity you brought that worthy character Sagredo to life! God save me, but I think I hear him speaking!” Galileo claimed in the book’s introduction that one reason for writing it was to memorialize his love for his dead friends: “May these two great souls [Sagredo and Salviati], always revered in my heart, accept with favor this public monument of my undying love, and with the memory of their eloquence may they help me explain to posterity the promised speculations.” Sagredo and Salviati are not generic types, but manipulated memories deployed both to make the dialogues convincing and to rest as a cornucopian wreath on their graves.

Sagredo is now remembered because of Galileo; he lived posthumously. Sagredo left no published work, invented nothing, gave his name to no theory or law. The archival skeleton preserved by Venetian bureaucracy is unremarkable: born in 1571 to a noble family with its eyes on the Venetian dogate, he studied with Galileo at Padua in the late 1590s. In 1605 he was appointed treasurer at the desolate Friulian fortress of Palma, where he sat out the greatest ideological conflict of the century, the Venetian Interdict. From 1608 to 1611 he served as consul in Aleppo, Syria. After his return he worked for a while in the equivalent of the Venetian Ministry of Trade; aged forty-nine and studiously avoiding doctors, he died of an excess of catarrh. Why, then, bother with him?

Part of the answer was provided by Galileo: Sagredo was an interlocu-
tor, a Socratic midwife, the charming embodiment of an ideal reader whose conversion to the new science might be witnessed and emulated. In the *Dialogue* Galileo narrates Sagredo’s experiences and makes them stand in for experiments. The construction of Sagredo’s identity and the credibility of his accounts underpin Galileo’s arguments concerning motion on a ship and the speed of wind, for example.\(^3\) Galileo depicts Sagredo as the ideal proponent of both common sense and shared experience. In order to do this, he deploys a carefully constructed image of Sagredo as he might have been during the period 1608 to 1611, when he served the Venetian Republic as consul in Aleppo. Galileo’s use of Sagredo’s image suggests an intriguing idealized exchange between Venetian state power and systems of credit in establishing the new sciences.

But Sagredo was also an interlocutor in a deeper sense: he intervened in debates and intercepted information, he transcribed and diverted documents, he manipulated knowledge through power and insisted on the political nature of scientific practice. Sagredo’s identity, as revealed in his one-sided extant correspondence with Galileo, was multiple and mutable. His contributions to natural philosophical matters were varied and complex: he negotiated with glass-makers to produce lenses for Galileo, he sent his own experimental results and descriptions of instrumental innovations to his erstwhile teacher, he read Galileo’s works in manuscript and print and, while his enthusiasm tended towards sycophancy, he often disagreed with him. But he performed stranger roles, too: his zealous loyalty to Venice led him to invent his own pseudonyms in his epistolary attacks on Jesuits after their expulsion from the Veneto.\(^4\) In the debate over the nature of sunspots between Galileo and a pseudonymous Jesuit, Sagredo not only copied and circulated Galileo’s texts as they passed through Venice on their way from Florence to Augsburg and Ingolstadt, but also made his own vicious, independent attacks on Galileo’s opponent “Apelles,” accusing him of hypocrisy and stupidity. His letters to Galileo display the witty and informal tone punctuated with mordant acuity celebrated in the *Dialogue*. There are many other versions of Sagredo also revealed in his correspondence: his instinctive sense of political satire, his refreshingly explicit accounts of his libidinal economy, his self-conscious experimentation in finding out his tastes and desires. Of all the narratives celebrating Sagredo that Galileo might have chosen for the *Dialogue*, the corpulent diplomat seems the least real and the most formal, authoritative only because false.

The only mention made of Sagredo in early biographies of Galileo from the 1650s either reduce him to his fictionalized persona in the *Dialogue* or invent details upon no factual basis. Viviani’s *Vita di Galileo* omits him from
Galileo’s circle of Venetian friends, and mentions him only within the context of Galileo’s written works (presumably Viviani knew something of Sagredo’s anti-Jesuit activities and feared censure); Gherardini’s notice imagines him a seasoned ambassador, instrumental in Galileo’s appointment at Padua, and, most improbably, first meeting him in Florence (where he never went) while returning from a nonexistent ambassadorial trip to Spain or Rome in 1592, five years before Sagredo would become legally eligible even for consideration for such a position. Sagredo’s subsequent posthumous fortuna was summarized neatly by Foscarini in 1754: apart from Galileo’s ventriloquism in the Dialogue, he said, “In Venetian books, one does not meet with a single person who even remembers that there had been in this world a Gianfrancesco Sagredo.”

Sagredo, though, was deeply concerned with constructing and disseminating his own image. His interventions in the sunspot debate elicited a splendid, and much-quoted, declaration of identity and interest in a famous letter to the Augsburg antiquarian Marcus Welser that Sagredo copied out and sent also to Galileo:

I am a Venetian gentleman, nor have I ever used the name of a “man of letters”; I am fond of those that do and always look after them, and expect no advancement of my lot, nor purchase of praise or reputation from the fame of understanding philosophy and mathematics, but rather from the integrity and good administration of rulers and the government of the Republic, to which I applied myself in my youth, following the customs of my elders, all of whom have grown old and consumed themselves in this. My studies tend towards the knowledge of those things that as a Christian I owe to God, as a citizen to my country, as a noble to my house, as a member of society to my friends, and as an upstanding gentleman and true philosopher to myself. I spend my time serving God and country; being free from familial cares I devote a good part of my time to conversation, service and the satisfaction of my friends, and the rest I dedicate to comfort and to my tastes; if sometimes I give myself over to speculating on the knowledge of things, Your Lordship should not think that I would presume to compete with that subject’s Professors, much less enter into a duel with them, for I do this only for the recreation of my spirit, freely investigating, unshackled from all obligations and interest, the truth of certain propositions which are to my taste.

In this performative story of the self, a hierarchy of loyalty is constructed. It should be read not as a timeless statement of what it means to be Venetian, but as part of a local campaign of vindication against Jesuit mathematicians in a polemic whose origin, for Sagredo, was the massive crisis of the Venetian Interdict (1606–7) less than a decade before, which had resulted in
the excommunication of the Doge and the traumatic suspension of Catholic rites throughout the Veneto. Mario Biagioli has pointed out that Sagredo divided the world into the local, independent, Republic and then everywhere else, run by Jesuits; this paranoid polarization rendered Sagredo’s identity-construction peculiarly visible. The loyalties that defined Sagredo (to God, to Venice, to the Sagredo family, to his friends, and to himself) were relationships that demanded constant work.

Various techniques were used to keep long-distance friendships alive during the early modern period: letter writing was an important instrument for papering over the troublesome absences in the metaphysical plenitude of the ideal Renaissance friendship. The blank (or occasionally printed) book of an Album (or Liber) amicorum would be filled with the devices and aphorisms of visiting acquaintances, who would read through the growing list they were joining. Books and medals disseminated the image and motto of some intellectuals: these might be displayed in a cabinet, where again the singular friendship was contextualized in a web of relations. The exchange of portraits was another way to become present permanently in the work space and heart of a friend. The Renaissance museum frequently created visual narratives, genealogies, or networks of friends, donors, or patrons. Giving a portrait as a gift not only established a virtual presence; it fulfilled the contract of a picture by granting it its ideal viewer, making explicit the implied gaze. This kind of portrait, then, does not just represent the sitter: it extends a third, social dimension through the perpetual motion of friendship. The presence of the recipient is required for the work to become whole.

We know, both generally from Sagredo’s correspondence with Galileo and specifically from a poem written for Sagredo, that the viewing of paintings was preferably a sociable act for him. In his 1601 Odes, the poet Guido Casoni describes Sagredo contemplating a Narcissus with his close friend Sebastiano Venier: the painting set them off on a discourse concerning the nature of love and the pitfalls of modern narcissism. Genuine love, Casoni’s comments imply, should reach out and embrace another, not destroy itself gazing in the mirror. Similarly, connoisseurship should be not a solitary vice but a social bond: Narcissus’s self-destructive spell could be broken by fertile conversation. This would restore productivity to the gaze.

From about 1599, Galileo frequently stayed with Sagredo in Venice when he visited from Padua. The last time the two friends saw each other was in 1608, before Galileo’s rise to astronomical fame and infamy, but he wrote to Fulgenzio Micanzio in 1636, nearly thirty years after he had last seen his friend, that he regarded him as his “Idol.” This is more than a figure of speech: in the summer of 1619, less than a year before Sagredo died, he and
Galileo exchanged portraits. Sagredo’s letters from 1618 and 1619 are full of references to the initial composition of his portrait by Leandro Bassano, its slow and troubled execution by his brother Gerolamo, and its eventual dispatch by Sagredo. The painting hung in Galileo’s living room while he wrote his two great final works, the 1632 *Dialogue* and the 1638 *Discourses*, both of which featured Sagredo. Upon Galileo’s death, “six portraits of his friends” were listed among his possessions, the only works of art he owned apart from two landscapes in the *salotto*. Despite the best efforts of the great nineteenth-century Galileo scholar Antonio Favaro to locate the portrait of Sagredo, it proved impossible to trace. The aura of this singular friendship seemed to have dissipated forever. The trail of this Galileian “Rosebud” did not die with its owner, however; its disappearance is a slow affair, lasting over a century.

All we knew of the subsequent history of the portrait is contained within a footnote to Marco Foscarini’s eighteenth-century guide to Venetian literary culture:

Galileo kept two portraits, just as he desired—one, of his student Viviani, the other of Sagredo. These are still in the possession of his heirs, and we have a copy of the Sagredo via [Dr.] Antonio Cocchi, in whom gentility of manners competes with solid science and choice erudition. The copy of the portrait was made from a life-size painting in the house of the Pansavini [sic, Panzanini], nephews and heirs of Vincenzo Viviani, who was Galileo’s last student, who bought from his heirs all his books, writings, instruments and learned things. After the death of Viviani, Galileo’s belongings (along with a lot of other things) passed into the hands of the Abbott Jacopo Pansavini [sic, Panzanini], whom Dr. Cocchi heard say a thousand times that the portrait was of Sagredo, introduced into the *Dialogues* of Galileo. The portrait was next to one of Galileo himself of the same dimensions. This tradition was kept alive after the death of the Abbott, and is still going. And while there is no inscription in the painting itself, the costume is of our [i.e., Venetian] gentlemen.

The only other trace of (perhaps) this painting in Florence is an undated inventory, probably from the eighteenth century, describing the portraits of famous men in the Capponi collection. In the company of Copernicus, Tycho, and Kepler (but also Savanorola, Erasmus, and Sarpi) are several portraits of Galileo at various ages, one of Salviati, and one of Sagredo. It is far from clear whether this series consists of later copies or originals, or when it was dispersed.

Less than one hundred and fifty years later, Antonio Favaro could find no trace of this painting or its copy, and supposed them destroyed or, almost worse, misattributed. The lack of inscription on the original noted by
Foscarini situated the identity of the sitter in a fragile oral tradition; with this tradition lost, a firm identification would seem unlikely. But there was a small clue that Favaro seems to have overlooked: Sagredo’s letters to Galileo describe in detail not only the painting of his portrait in 1619 by Gerolamo Bassano—based on a sketch by his brother, the more famous Leandro—but also, in a single reference, another portrait also by Gerolamo, executed in 1612. While the trail to the 1619 portrait seemed corpse-cold, there was still a chance that the 1612 painting might yield further clues. A combination of scholarship, serendipity, and developments in the digital humanities helped me solve the mystery of the missing portraits and identify not one but three portraits of Sagredo, including that belonging to Galileo.

Sagredo in Zhytomyr

The gradual digitization of back numbers of journals has strange effects on scholarship. Unless they are well indexed, many publications in journals swiftly become invisible; book reviews, especially, used to be hard to locate and impossible to skim. One of the most important changes wrought by projects such as JSTOR is that we can know again what has been forgotten, not only within the field in which we are specialized, but across fields. Here is a typical example: The Burlington Magazine, one of the world’s leading journals for art history news, digitized its archive, back to the first volume in 1903, in the early 2000s. Suddenly, every word of every article became searchable, including book reviews. Since reading Sagredo’s description of his portrait gift to Galileo and Favaro’s frustrated accounts of his failure to locate the painting, I had wondered whether some trace might not become visible in the flotsam of the digital wave. In 2000 Sagredo’s portraits were invisible to search engines, but in 2005 a peculiar notice appeared. A 1991 review in The Burlington Magazine of a 1986 catalogue of Italian paintings in Soviet museums included some unexpected finds: “Jitomir yields three remarkable attributions: a Portrait of Michelangelo by Jacopino del Conte, a Portrait of Giovanni Francesco Sagredo by Leandro Bassano and a portrait possibly by Annibale Carracci.” I rushed to locate the Soviet catalogue, which contained a description of the alleged Sagredo portrait by Viktoria Markova, as well as a decent reproduction. The entry referred, in turn, to an earlier description from a Ukrainian catalogue printed in 1981. It had taken twenty cold years for news of the painting to reach the West, and another ten for the announcement to be noticed.

The portrait (see plate 1) is in the Zhytomyr Regional Museum, Ukraine. It entered the museum in 1919, from the collection of the Shoduar family, along with the two other pieces mentioned in the review. Baron Stanislav
Shoduar (1792–1858) was a corresponding member of the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, and published a prize-winning account of foreign coins in Russia based partially on his own collection in 1837.\(^{21}\) The portrait of Sagredo was previously catalogued in the museum as by, or from the school of, Moretto da Brescia (Alessandro Bonvicino, c. 1498–1554) or Giovanni Battista Moroni (c. 1520–78). Since Sagredo was only born in 1570, neither of these is possible. The painting seems to have been unstudied by connoisseurs before the 1981 Ukrainian catalogue; neither was it mentioned in any discussion of Moretto or Moroni’s oeuvre. Markova’s new attribution to Leandro Bassano was extremely good and almost, as we shall see, right. It was made on stylistic rather than documentary evidence. On the back it has the inscription, in a seventeenth-century hand, “Giovanni Francesco Sagredo / Veneziano.”\(^{22}\) It is not a particularly good or interesting portrait, but its importance for this story is that I knew I had seen the sitter’s face before.

**Sagredo in Oxford**

Before seeing the Zhytomyr portrait, I had looked carefully through the extant catalogues of Bassano paintings in the hope that some iconographic detail might jump out and identify the sitter as Sagredo. None did, but I had compiled a mental short list of possible contenders of unknown or unconvincingly identified subjects, and one of these bore a startling similarity to the Zhytomyr portrait of Sagredo. The portrait had never been displayed, but was reproduced in a catalogue: it was in storage in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (see plate 2).\(^{23}\)

The museum had acquired the portrait in 1935, attributed, on stylistic grounds, to Leandro Bassano. Its 1977 catalogue gave it the title *Portrait of a Procurator of St. Mark*, and wondered, with scant evidence, whether it might depict the senator Paolo Nani (1552–1608). The Bassano expert Edoardo Arslan had dated the portrait to around 1590.\(^{24}\) The main evidence for this was that stylistically the portrait was thought to be by Leandro, that Leandro was ennobled in 1595, and that thereafter he tended to sign his portraits with his full title; the lack of such a signature secured the early date.\(^{25}\) The portrait is obviously semiofficial, continuing the tradition of Tintoretto and his school in celebrating the Venetian oligarchy. The Ashmolean catalogue pointed out, despite the title given to the painting, that the sitter’s *dogale* robe was not only worn by procurators of St. Mark, but also by other holders of high office. The *dogale* could also be worn by ambassadors and consuls.\(^{26}\) Sagredo had described the portrait he sent Galileo as depicting him “in consular dress.” The clothes of the Ashmolean portrait independently backed up the claim on
the back of the Zhytomyr portrait that this was Sagredo.27 Is the identity of
the sitter, though, indicated by other clues within the painting?

Let’s move through the painting to see what we can find (see plate 3). The book the sitter is fondling and tilting towards our view, in marked dif-
fference to the two heavy printed folio tomes behind it bound in vellum, is a
gilt-edged manuscript volume bound in red velvet with ornate metal clasps
and bosses. Protruding from the top is a red silk cord, on which is clamped a
lead seal. This book is a Ducal Commission [Commissione Dogale] or prized
illuminated volume of official orders, usually given to podestà, captains, and
provveditori (who wore different robes), and sometimes to ambassadors and
consuls, but not to procurators of St. Mark. Sagredo’s own Commissione is
lost, but the book nicely supplements the information supplied by the robe.
The combination of robe and book in fact makes it impossible for the sitter
to be a procurator, and means instead that he must be either an ambassador
or a consul.28

The sitter’s right hand points towards the sumptuous carpet on the table. The
gesture is almost a caress, as though both the visual and tactile qualities
of the piece are being experienced and offered to the viewer. At first glance
this might look like a generic Renaissance Oriental carpet, but expert analysis
of the texture and design of the fabric shows that it is, in fact, an extraordi-
narily rare and precious silk tapestry kilim. The soft fold at the corner and
the floral medallion design indicate that the carpet was produced in Persia,
probably in Isfahan, Kashan, or Yazd, under the patronage of Shah Abbas the
Great.29 Four such objects entered Europe in 1602 when King Sigismund III
Wasa of Poland sent an Armenian merchant, Sefer Muratowicz, to Kashan
to have tapestries made with the royal coat of arms incorporated.30 Another
silk kilim which probably shares the Polish provenance is now in the Res-
idenz Schatzkammer in Munich; its border design is almost identical to that
depicted in the Ashmolean portrait.31 This is probably the earliest pictorial
depiction of such a rug in European art.

Again, this evidence backs up the claim on the back of the Zhytomyr
painting that the sitter is Sagredo. While consul in Aleppo, from 1608 to 1611,
Sagredo corresponded with Shah Abbas the Great of Persia.32 After Sagredo’s
return to Venice, he sent Abbas not only letters, but also his entire collec-
tion of devices manufactured by his instrument maker Spontino. In return,
the shah promised to send him a rug. Sagredo complained to Galileo in 1612
that the rug was only worth a third of the amount he had spent on his own
presents, and was still in Persia.33 While we never receive positive confirma-
tion that it arrived, it seems likely that this is the rare rug depicted.34 As this
may well have been the only Persian kilim in private hands in Venice at the