

Alessandro Ottaviani, *Natura ed esattezza all'alba della scienza galileiana. Le 'Observationes' di Fabio Colonna*. Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2021. LVIII, 279 pp. ISBN: 9788893595650.

For several generations, the main task of historians of science was to edit sources. The tremendous scholarly effort that went into editing a historical scientific text with rigour and method was more than justified in view of the precarious state of conservation of some of those texts, especially, but not only, manuscripts. Those who practise the history of science in these first decades of the 21st century owe a great deal to that activity, whose roots lay in the positivism of the 19th century, that in which the discipline was born.

What is certain, however, is that the laudable work of recovery was often no more than that: the recovery or 'archaeological' recuperation (to use the term a little pejoratively) of certain texts that, in most cases, were interpreted as relics of ancient scientific thought, lucid anticipations of contemporary science, or as a pretext to claim priorities that placed thinkers, theories and 'scientific' progress within a nationalist framework, making use of discourses that hardly, if at all, took the context of the original production of those texts into account. The later critical move away from that way of writing the history of science led to renewed, plural and at times conflicting historiographical practices. The result was a marginalisation of the task of editing texts and, perhaps, a distrustful view of those who continued in their dedication to its pursuit. Fortunately, there were always individuals and groups—and *Nuncius* can praise itself for representing the best of that tradition in a tough and durable way—who maintained a practice that was and continues to be essential for the history of science.

This volume by Alessandro Ottaviani, the result of many years of scholarly application, provides us with an excellent example of how the editing of texts can be renewed today: to do it in a rigorous fashion with bibliographic erudition and the technical mastery in the fields of philology, ortho-typography and iconography that is indispensable for the historian and philosopher. Add to this the debate with recent historiography, without losing sight of the horizon of the most classic ones. Ottaviani's years of experience as a historian of philosophy and science align him with the most genuine Italian tradition of the discipline and have led him to tackle a great variety of themes, authors and intellectual concerns. In the number and richness of those contributions, I would single out—on the basis of personal tastes and preferences—those connected with the Neapolitan and Roman world of the last decades of the 16th century and the first of the 17th: the period that the title of this book calls "the dawn of Galilean science."

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The volume under review is the edition of the original Latin together with a parallel Italian translation—the ideal presentation for the reader—of the *Aquatilium et terrestrium aliquot animalium aliarumque naturalium rerum observationes* [Observations on some aquatic and terrestrial animals and other naturalia] published in Rome in 1606 as part of the *Minus cognitarum stirpium aliquot ac etiam rariorum nostro coelo orientium Ekfrasis* [Commentary on some less familiar and rare plants that grow under our sky]. The author, Fabio Colonna, was destined to become undoubtedly the most outstanding Neapolitan member of the Accademia dei Lincei, although he was not officially inducted into the Roman academy until 1612, a few months after the admission of the most famous of the Lincei, the Pisan Galileo Galilei.

Ottaviani has compiled a complex but tremendously useful volume. It opens with an extensive and documented introduction (pp. 1–LVIII) which presents the precise historical context of Colonna and his interests in the natural world. It was a particularly promising moment for the shaping of a natural history enriched by new experimental practices and the writings of two generations of scholars from various geographical and intellectual backgrounds who together wove an early web of scientific communication and exchange. Without it the later development of the République des Lettres would be impossible to understand. We could take as emblems of the first generation, known to a greater or lesser degree in the historiographic literature, Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605) and Charles de l'Écluse (Carolus Clusius, 1526–1609). As for the second, closely connected with but at the same time marking a sharp contrast with its predecessor, it could be represented by Caspar Bauhuin (1560–1624) and Fabio Colonna himself (1567–1640).

This introduction is followed by the original Latin text (with references to the notes) on the left-hand page, and the Italian translation on the right (pp. 1–156). For this reviewer, the notes—collected in a separate section entitled *Commento* [Commentary] (pp. 157–263)—are the most valuable part of the publication. This bold proposal permits an authentic re-reading of the entire treatise, enriching it with explanations, citations of the passages of works by classical or contemporary authors mentioned by Colonna, clarifications of obscure passages in the text, and reproductions of the contemporary iconography—Rondelet, Belon, Gessner, Paré, Mattioli and others—of the aquatic and terrestrial animals described by Colonna. The commentary is thus not confined to merely erudite or bibliographical notes, although it does contain the sources and fundamental bibliography on the natural history of the period. In slightly more than a hundred of pages, Ottaviani immerses the reader in the world of relations and connections that constructed a knowledge about a handful of specimens of the animal kingdom, inseparable from the discussion between

classical authors and the novelties resulting from a natural history that took into account the enormous expansion of the natural world experienced by European culture through its colonising activity. It was this natural history that was to make a decisive contribution to the shaping of the new political, economic and epistemological order represented by Baroque culture.

There is a list of some fifty sources (pp. 265–270) that appear in the text in abbreviated form because of the frequency of their use, and a useful index of names (pp. 271–279). The engravings reproduced in the volume include those from the original edition of Colonna's *Observationes*. Their quality could have been better, but in all other respects this is an elegant and serviceable book, a meticulous edition, in spite of its typographic complexity, that matches the high standard demanded by Alessandro Ottaviani's rigour and intellectual honesty. One may only hope for more enterprises like this in the years to come to demonstrate the need to continue the time-hallowed and noble task of editing the scientific texts of the past.

José Pardo-Tomás

Institucion Mila y Fontanals (CSIC), Barcelona, Spain

pepeprimo@gmail.com