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CONSTRUCTION HISTORY

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Book Reviews

Naufragi di terra e di mare. Da Leonardo da Vinci a Theodor Mommsen alla ricerca dei Codici Albani

Antonio Becchi Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2017

With a facsimile reproduction of Bernardino Baldi's original manuscript from the Biblioteca Nazionale in Naples: Ms. XIII.F.25, fols. 129–136, with transcription by Oreste Trabucco, 206 pp., ISBN 978-8-89359-001-3. €23.80

The interdisciplinary research carried out by Antonio Becchi at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin takes on a new and meaningful form in this volume which represents the natural development of themes addressed in a previous book by the same author (*Q. XVI. Leonardo, Galileo e il caso Baldi: Maganza, 26 marzo 1621*, Venice: Marsilio, 2004). Becchi's scholarly profile, which has long been engaged with the history of theoretical and applied mechanics, the history of construction, and the relationship between mechanics and architecture – clearly emerges in the current study published in the series *Between Mechanics and Architecture* edited by Becchi and Federico Foce. The author is also a founding contributor to the *Bibliotheca Mechanico-Architectonica* project (www.bma.arch.unige.it).



At the heart of this study are the handwritten papers of Bernardino Baldi (Urbino, 1553 – Urbino, 1617) on diverse subjects held in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Naples known as Ms. XIII.F.25. In the last two decades, our understanding of the figure of Bernardino Baldi has been expanded through an open, multidisciplinary approach integrating the work of specialists in the history of science, the history of architecture, and the history of language. The accumulation of research on the works of Baldi has highlighted the importance of his contributions to culture, not only to late Renaissance science and technology.

Becchi presents folios 129r to 136r of the Naples manuscript, *Testi e figure di materia meccanica*, with reproductions of the illustrations and the transcription by Oreste Trabucco. The folios are then also published as full-page, high-resolution images. The subject of this study is of particular importance in that it is "the only document directly connected to the text of the *Exercitationes* ever found" (p. 54). This work, Baldi's *In mechanica Aristotelis problemata exercitationes*, can now be read in a new edition edited by E. Nenci (open access: Max Planck Research Library for the History and Development of Knowledge, 2011). It was first printed in 1621 (with origins that date from around 1612). The *Exercitationes* represents a fundamental turning point in the development of construction science in that themes from the Aristotelian school are addressed with a critical approach that delineates a hermeneutical path separate from the Renaissance tradition which was at length occupied with the recovery of technical and scientific thinking from antiquity.

Becchi dedicates an extensive and well-documented commentary to each single folio of this group of

papers (pp. 53–96). This allows for understanding the content (often varied), and the relationship with the other principal Baldian manuscript on the same subject held in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris (Lat. 10280), as well as the relationship with the printed edition. The reader is guided in the analysis of each passage of the manuscript and shown the main themes while being supplied with useful bibliographic references in notes on the general arguments and on specific points: it is thus possible to precisely contextualise individual topics of Baldi's tracts, but also have the essential coordinates to get closer to complex problems in the history of science and technology. The way in which Baldi's reflections are posed is of great interest because his observations often open up to expansive digressions that contribute to clarify Baldi's conceptual framework in facing static problems, or rather – according to established tradition – its anthropomorphic roots. This is the case, for example, of folio 131r dedicated to the "problem of the kneeling man and the reasons that make this position so lacking in comfort" (p. 68): "the problem of the kneeling man is followed by two drawings, with no commentary, linked to *Questio 16* and specifically, to the figures that in the *Exercitationes* accompany the digression about the stability of columns. The first sketch alludes to the stability of the superimposed elements (bricks and stone), the second, shows the problem of the column loaded by a weight placed symmetrically on it. . . . from this point [XVI] Baldi launches into a long architectural digression that touches on the problem of columns, beams, floors, trusses, relieving arches, and arches" (pp. 68–71). Becchi underscores rightly that *Questio 16* was addressed by Galileo as well.

In tracing this Cinquecento and early Seicento vein of thought dedicated to the pseudo-Aristotelian lesson, Becchi takes on the question of whether Baldi was familiar with the manuscripts of Leonardo, as laid out from the beginning of the twentieth century by Duhem (pp. 100–14). The analysis in these pages is thorough, with precise observations that show a comprehensive knowledge of Leonardo's manuscripts, so much so as to arrive at the point of saying, "It is difficult to follow Duhem along this road, where the historiographic thesis is as bold as the proofs that ought to corroborate them are weak, if not inconsistent" (p. 103). Nevertheless, Becchi leaves the question open, "In fact, an actual temporal coincidence remains to be investigated: the first significant dispersion of drawings and writings of Leonardo came about between the end of the sixteenth and the first years of the seventeenth century" (p. 111).

Thus, Becchi offers meaningful insights on the question of the circulation of Leonardo's manuscripts which, in widening the horizons of the limited perimeter of Vincian studies, opens new fronts for investigation. The capacity to reason along the path of the *longue durée* characterises Becchi's entire volume, especially the first part where the scholar reconstructs the story of the acquisition of the manuscript for the Biblioteca Nazionale of Naples. Ms. XIII.F.25 comes, in fact, from the Albani Library, "where it remained for a long time as the large part of the unpublished works of Baldi" in view of the family ties of his brother with the Albani family (p. xiv). The author, on the question of the dispersion of the Albani Library, offers the reader a detailed picture with an abundance of chronological and bibliographic references which, to extend and broaden the discussion, constitute not only a complementary text insofar as a real independent study. On this subject, it is worthwhile to take note of the project Archivio Albani (<http://www.archivioalbani.it>) and Tracing the History of the Albani Libraries (<http://www.archivioalbani.it/index.php?id=29052>).

Emanuela Ferretti