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## Interpreting New World Nature: Nieremberg's *Historia Naturæ* as a Palimpsest of Fantastic Literature

Revisions to our understanding of the Scientific Revolution in the history of science over the last several years, have prompted greater interest in subjects related to transcendental philosophy, colonial spaces, teratology and religious corporations such as the Jesuits. The Society of Jesus, since the time of its inception, exhibited a strong vocation for the accumulation of knowledge. A vast corpus of works written by Jesuits suggests their curricular diversity: theology, historiography, natural philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy. In their schools, intellectual activity was heightened by newfound knowledge of cosmography and nature coming from the overseas missions. This information on remote regions and their inhabitants prompted the creation of a vast number of books on natural history.

The figure and work of the Spanish Jesuit Juan Eusebio Nieremberg, professor of Holy Scripture and of natural history at the Imperial Jesuit College of Madrid, takes on an important role within the process of reevaluating Early Modern science. His more important scientific work *Historia Naturæ, Maxime Peregrinæ* (1635), compiles in encyclopedic form all knowledge about nature in New World regions that had remained dispersed in various manuscripts and printed works. [Fig. 1] Nieremberg's sources were in part derived from reports sent by Jesuits missionaries, as well as Spanish chronicles of the 16th century. He compiles this vast encyclopedia combining sources as the work of Francisco Hernández, Nicolás Monardes, Jean de Lery, Pierre larric, Giovanni Maffei, José de Acosta, Fernandez de Oviedo, André Thevet, etc. A piece of literature difficult to categorize, *Historia Naturæ* is a hybrid encompassing novelties, rarities and shocking natural occurrence, and it can be situated half way between the symbolic and allegoric natural history of Renaissance humanism and the morphological and taxonomical discipline

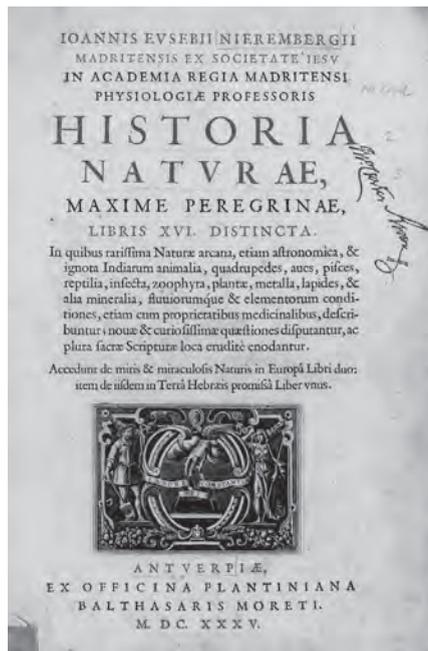


Fig. 1: Title page of *Historia Naturæ, Maxime Peregrinæ*. Antwerp: ex officina Plantiniana Balthasaris Moreti, 1635. Photo: Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University

that will impose itself during the Enlightenment. *Historia Naturæ* follows the model of Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* in its division of plant and animal kingdoms, and in the inclusion of legends and stories to illustrate the peculiarities and rarities of nature. From this point of view we also find ourselves with what seems like a palimpsest or anthology of fantastic literature.

Nieremberg's book describes and classifies the flora and fauna of the New World, especially that of the Mexican region and the Andes of Peru, and includes information regarding the customs and rituals of the Aztecs and the Incas. Importantly, within his meticulous descriptions of nature Nieremberg preserves the indigenous names of plants and animals, in Nahuatl and Quechua and other indigenous languages. *Historia Naturæ* discusses a wide variety of phenomena and curiosities, particularly those of the New World. The accounts, chronicles, and reports of nature that were his authoritative sources, offered him a catalog of curiosities to sustain the most fantastic theories. Though operating at the center of the Jesuit world, Nieremberg manifests a tradition that is in great measure neoplatonic and inclined to the rationalization of fantastic events. Nieremberg forms what could be termed an aesthetic-theological theory of nature. He studies it as a harmonious entity of strange beauty, full of symbols through which one can understand or intuit the unseen work of the Creator. By explaining and justifying the existence of natural phenomena and curiosities, Nieremberg postulates an interpretation of nature in which even the existence of monsters and

miracles springs from a divine order and harmony. Nature is a sacred book where God has encoded his mysteries and wisdom. Nieremberg's task then is to interpret God's enigmas and derive from them a lesson consistent with Christian dogma.

In his dedication to the Archduke of Olivares, Nieremberg indicates the key to comprehending and reading his work: "I will make an interpretation of nature," an affirmation that defines the intellectual and cultural criteria of his natural history. Along with the systematic description of the natural world, he's interested in finding a hidden meaning to the flora and fauna he describes. The order of nature pertains to a sphere of knowledge that is inaccessible to him. But, his particular expertise as a scholar gives him the tools to literally read, interpret, and comment on the curiosities of nature.

Scarcely studied, *Historia Naturæ* has been labeled fantastic and unscientific, criticisms that miss the purpose and meaning of the book. It is above all else an exegesis of nature within the traditions of biblical commentaries and emblematic interpretation, similar in purpose to Nieremberg's works on biblical exegesis. Considering this fact helps to understand the work without the scientific prejudice of our times, and opens up the possibility of reading it for its imaginative and symbolic aspects.

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