

## Barrels and Wines, Old and New Mnemohistory and Microhistory<sup>1</sup>

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1. In his posthumous book *La mémoire collective* Maurice Halbwachs remarked that the expression “mémoire historique”, historical memory, “is not very well chosen, since it associates two words which are, on many levels, opposed”.<sup>2</sup> Jan Assmann, who repeatedly emphasized the importance of Halbwachs’s path-breaking approach to memory, did not agree on this point. In a dense footnote of his *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* Assmann argued that Halbwachs’s distinction between memory and history, in the sense of “historiography”, “represents a positivistic, old-fashioned concept of history”, which “does not stand up to scrutiny”. On the contrary, Assmann remarked, Peter Burke’s definition of “historiography [...] as a specialized kind of social memory”, was much more acceptable – although one element, Assmann pointed out, was missing from it: “the neutrality of history writing”. This comment paved the way to Assmann’s conclusion: “scholarly historiography is a form of ‘cold’ memory”.<sup>3</sup>

In Peter Burke’s essay words like “truth” or “proofs” are missing—but not in Assmann’s work. “I do not mean to say that there are no ‘proofs’ in history and

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<sup>1</sup> Honouring Jan Assmann is a joy and a privilege. I have a vivid recollection of the year we spent together in 1994–95, as fellows of the Getty Center, at that time located in Santa Monica. During our long conversations I learned about Jan’s ongoing project, which later became his powerful book *Moses the Egyptian. The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*. This paper is a small sign of gratitude for what I learned, and I am still learning, from him.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, préface de Jean Duvignaud (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 1968), 34 ff. (ch. II: “Mémoire collective et mémoire historique”, especially 68: “l’expression mémoire historique, n’est pas très heureusement choisie, puisqu’elle associe deux termes qui s’opposent sur plus d’un point”).

<sup>33</sup> Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization. Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 29 note 35. See also Jan Assmann’s introduction to Gerald Echterhoff and Martin Saar, ed., *Kontexte und Kulturen des Erinnerns. Maurice Halbwachs und das Paradigma des kollektiven Gedächtnisses* (Konstanz: UVK, 2002), 7–11. Assmann referred to Peter Burke’s essay “Geschichte als soziales Gedächtnis” in *Mnemosyne. Formen und Funktionen der kulturellen Erinnerung*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Dietrich Harth, ed. (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2005), 289–304 (see “History as Social Memory”, in Thomas Butler, ed., *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 97–113).

archaeology” he wrote, but “the images of retrospective self-modeling have a truth of their own, and [...] the investigation of this truth requires a different methodology, which is mnemohistory.”<sup>4</sup> A few remarks, followed by a case study, will comment on this “different methodology”.

2. Two of the most important contributions to 20th century historiography were written in the same city, in a few years’ distance: Marc Bloch’s *Les Rois thaumaturges* (1924), and Georges Lefebvre’s *La grande peur de 1789* (1932), translated into English, respectively, as *The Royal Touch* and *The great fear of 1789*.<sup>5</sup> Both Bloch and Lefebvre taught at Strasbourg, at the University that had become a symbol of France’s victory in the First World War. Both books focused on a not-existent phenomenon. In the case of *Les Rois thaumaturges*, the power ascribed, since the Middle Ages, to France and English kings to heal, with the touch of their hand, men and women with scrofula—an illness affecting the lymph nodes, especially of the neck. In the case of *La grande peur*, the bandits who in the Summer of 1789 allegedly wandered in the French countryside, seeking a revenge for the storming of the Bastille: an imaginary event which triggered the peasants’ most real attacks against their landlords. In both cases, a close analysis of a non-existent phenomenon, transmitted either in a long or in a short time perspective, threw an unexpected, oblique light on the roots of monarchical power in the long Middle Ages, on the one hand; on the deep attitudes of French peasantry at the very end of the *Ancien Régime*, on the other.

3. It would be tempting to regard these two case studies, focusing on an in-depth analysis of non-existent phenomena transmitted by memory, as precedents of two historiographic trajectories which developed into different directions: mnemohistory and microhistory. Many years ago I argued that Bloch’s extraordinary essay “Réflexions d’un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre” (1921)—a reflection on his own experience as a soldier in First World War – clarified the existential roots of *Les Rois thaumaturges*, conceived as a huge “fausse nouvelle”—or, as we would say today, a huge instance of “fake news”. Let me immediately point out that this translation, literally unobjectionable,

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<sup>4</sup> Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: the memory of Egypt in western monotheism* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 220 note 17.

<sup>5</sup> I am developing here a remark I made in *Il filo e le tracce. Vero falso finto* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2006), 12.

would be in fact misleading. Today's "fake news" would be inconceivable outside the web, the electronic space in which it is rooted and in which it grows. But the word "post-truth", that has been so often, albeit ambiguously, associated with the notion of "fake news", compels us to reconsider, from a new angle, whether the traditional claim of historiography to look for truth can be easily dismissed as a positivistic legacy.<sup>6</sup>

4. Peter Burke's definition of history as social memory, shared to a certain extent by Jan Assmann, is in my view misleading, insofar as it misses the distinction between (to quote Kenneth Pike's well-known dichotomy) *etic* and *emic* levels, referring to, respectively, the observer's and the actors's categories.<sup>7</sup> The issue of truth, in its manifold meanings, comes again to the forefront. The truth of memory as *expérience vécue* (to quote Maurice Halbwachs) and the truth of history as historiography are far from being synonymous. To exemplify this divergence I will briefly evoke an event which took place some years ago: the case of Ivan Demjanjuk, a Ukrainian-born man who was put on trial in Israel, in 1986, for having allegedly committed a series a criminal deeds in Nazi-occupied Poland, at the Treblinka extermination camp. Some survivors from the camp recognized Ivan Demjanjuk as "Ivan the Terrible", a particularly cruel guard; some painful scenes took place in the court. Ivan Demjanjuk was first condemned to death, then acquitted by the Israeli Supreme Court, since there were reasonable doubts about his personal identity. He left for the US, was charged on new grounds in 2001, sent to Germany, put again on trial, condemned to five years of prison (!), appealed against the sentence, but died before the new trial took place.<sup>8</sup> Whether Ivan Demjanjuk was guilty or innocent, I don't know: but the survivor's painful memories that were triggered when they saw him in the court didn't prove his identity. We have to admit that, on an elementary issue like this, the judge's and the historian's aims can converge.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> On this point Peter Burke ("Geschichte als soziales Gedächtnis", 295), has a quick, dismissive remark.

<sup>7</sup> See my essay "Our Words, and Theirs: A Reflection on the Historian's Craft, Today", in *Historical Knowledge. In Quest of Theory, Method and Evidence*, ed. Susanna Fellman and Marjatta Rahikainen (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publ., 2012), 97–119.

<sup>8</sup> See the entry "John Demjaniuk" in *Wikipedia*, with a large bibliography upon the case.

<sup>9</sup> I analyzed this (partial, but meaningful) convergence in my book *The Judge and the Historian. Marginal Notes on a Late-Twentieth-Century Miscarriage of Justice* (London: Verso, 1999).

Innumerable examples would prove that history *as* social memory and history *of* social memory are not synonymous. “Unlike history proper” Jan Assmann wrote “mnemohistory is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered”. I would translate this definition as follows: mnemohistory is concerned with a remembered past, as a topic belonging to the emic, not to the etic dimension. But I wonder whether this translation would be compatible with Assmann’s suggestion that mnemohistory is a branch of history, “but it deliberately leaves aside the synchronic aspects of what it is investigating”.<sup>10</sup> In the case study I am going to deal with I will argue for the opposite.



Figure 1: Agostino Scilla, *La vana speculazione disingannata dal senso* (Napoli: Colicchia, 1670), frontispiece.

<sup>10</sup> Assmann, *Moses*, 8–9.

5. I will begin with an image: the front page of *La vana speculazione disingannata dal senso* (figure 1) (Empty speculation disproven by senses).<sup>11</sup> The author of the book, published in Naples in 1670, as well as of the etching facing the frontispiece, was a painter, Agostino Scilla. Born in Messina in 1629, he died in Rome in 1700. His long-term fame was remarkable; his *Vana speculazione*, dealing with fossils and their origin, was translated into English, possibly plagiarized, and quoted by Leibniz in his posthumously published *Protogaea*. Some recent, remarkable essays by Paula Findlen have thrown much light on the context in which Scilla wrote his book, as well as on the reception of his book in England.<sup>12</sup>

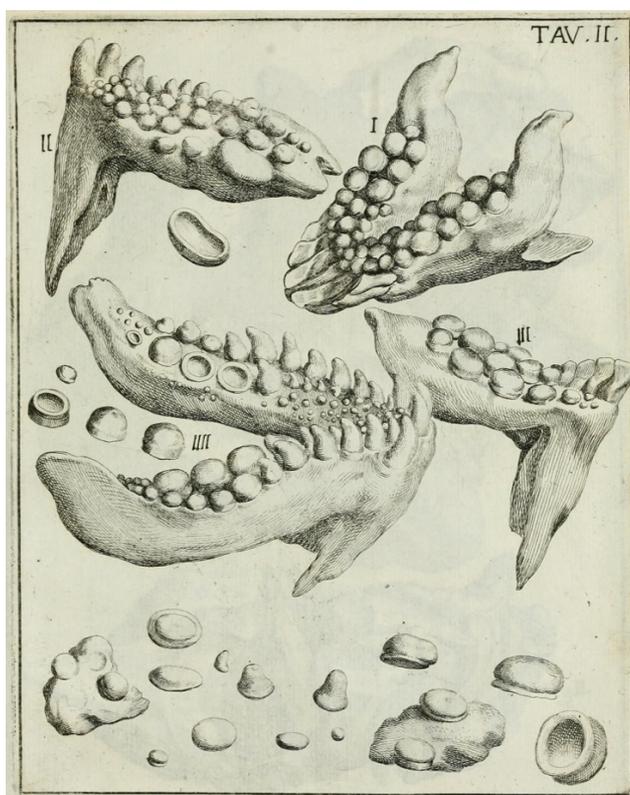


Figure 2: Scilla, *La vana speculazione disingannata dal senso*, plate II.

<sup>11</sup> Agostino Scilla, *La vana speculazione disingannata dal senso*, ed. Marco Segala, intr. Paolo Rossi (Firenze: Giunti, 1996). See Paula Findlen, “Agostino Scilla: a Baroque Painter in Pursuit of Science”, in *Science in the Age of Baroque*, ed., Ofer Gal and Raz Chen-Morris (Dordrecht et al.: Springer, 2013), 119–159; Italo di Geronimo, *Agostino Scilla paleontologo. Fossili e filosofie tra '600 e '700*, intr. Paula Findlen and R. Moscheo (Messina: Società messinese di storia patria, 2014); Paula Findlen, “The Specimen and the Image: John Woodward, Agostino Scilla, and the Depiction of Fossils”, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 78, Number 2 (Summer 2015): 217–261.

<sup>12</sup> See Paula Findlen, “Agostino Scilla”; Paula Findlen, “The Specimen and the Image”; on Leibniz see Paula Findlen, “Agostino Scilla”, 124.

Scilla argued that shells and other fossils, although they were often found in mountainous regions, were relics of sea animals (figure 2). His target was a monumental work by the enormously learned Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, *Mundus subterraneus*, in which a variety of images generated by Nature’s pictorial activity were listed side by side: fossil skeletons of fish, accidental natural formations, figures inscribed in stone, possibly through divine intervention (figure 3 and 4).<sup>13</sup> Scilla’s approach was completely different. Before describing it in detail we have to remind ourselves that fossils were at that time a very sensitive topic, since they potentially questioned the chronology of the earth, and therefore the Mosaic narrative about the Deluge.

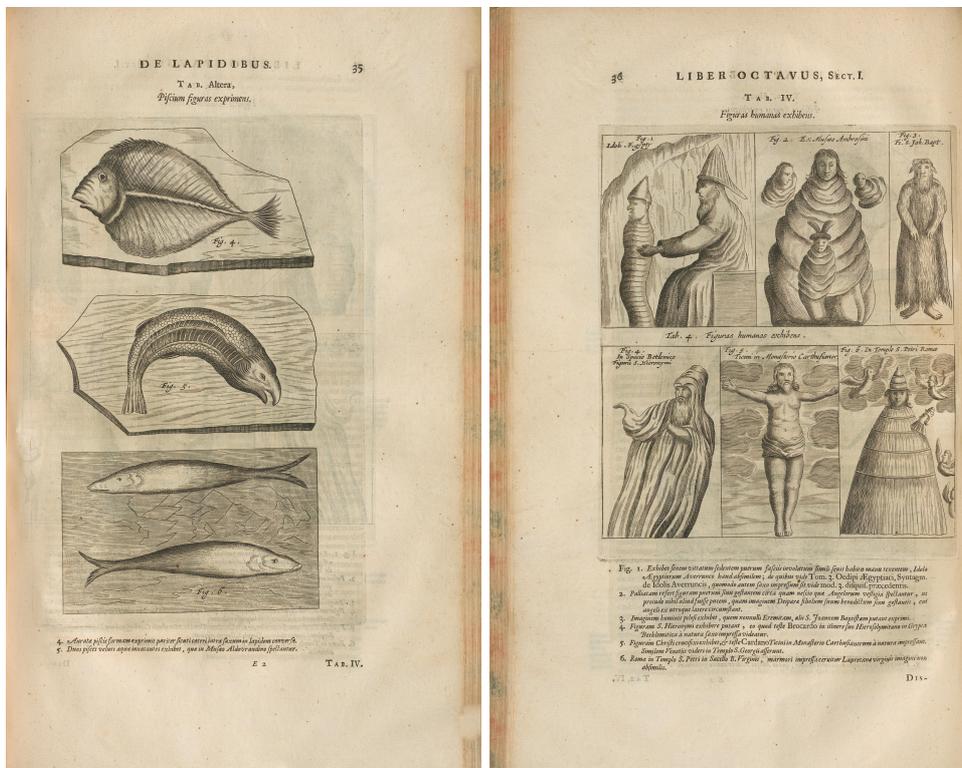


Figure 3 and 4: Athanasius Kircher, *Mundus Subterraneus II* (Amstelodami: Janssonius, 1665), 35f.

In 1669, one year before the publication of Agostino Scilla’s *La vana speculazione*, a book appeared, entitled *De solido intra solidum naturaliter contento* (On solid bodies naturally embedded into other solid bodies), usually regarded as the earliest

<sup>13</sup> Athanasius Kircher, *Mundus subterraneus, in XII libros digestus* (Amstelodami: Janssonius, 1665), 2 vols., especially II, 37–45. Kircher is mentioned in Scilla, *La vana speculazione*, 47, 54, 72.

geological treatise.<sup>14</sup> Its author, Nicolaus Stensen, also known as Niccolò Stenone, was a Danish scientist who went to Italy, converted from Lutheranism to Catholicism, and was appointed as a bishop, in recognition of his outstanding contributions to anatomy and geology. His commitment to Catholic orthodoxy is witnessed by a document preserved in the Roman Holy Office Archive, in which Stensen denounced Spinoza's *Ethica more geometrico demonstrata* as a dangerous atheistic book. Recently, the discovery of Stensen's denunciation led to the not less momentous discovery of an early manuscript copy of Spinoza's *Ethics* in the Vatican Library.<sup>15</sup>

In Scilla's *Empty speculation disproven by senses* we hear a completely different voice. The polemical edge of the title was reinforced in the introduction by warm praise of Epicurus, the Greek philosopher. He is usually described, Scilla remarked, as a "sciagurato crapulone", a wretched gluttonous guy: but in fact he was one of the most serious philosophers of antiquity, as we learn from Seneca and the "most erudite" Pierre Gassendi (in a series of remarkable portraits Scilla proved, as a painter, his admiration for Epicurus).<sup>16</sup> This praise of Epicurus would have immediately attracted the attention of religious censorship. Presumably anticipating this, Agostino Scilla went on, in a seemingly humble, in fact almost defiant tone: "I am a Catholic, and I submit the whole book to the censorship of superior authorities".<sup>17</sup>

Scilla had chosen for himself, as a member of the Academy La Fucina (the Workshop), a possibly self-ironical nickname, "lo Scolorito", the discoloured one: in fact, his prose was colourful and explicit, and his attitude contentious.

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<sup>14</sup> Nicolaus Steno [Stensen], *De solido intra solidum naturaliter contento dissertationis prodromus* (Lugduni Batavorum 1675). See, however, a possible allusion in the following passage: "non mi riesce tanto facil cosa il credere, che un corpo possa penetrare o trasmutarsi in altro tutt'affatto diverso" (Scilla, *La vana speculazione*, 45).

<sup>15</sup> Pina Totaro, "Ho certi amici in Ollandia", in *Stensen and Spinoza*, in *Niccolò Stenone (1638–1686) anatomista, geologo, vescovo. Atti del seminario organizzato da Universitetsbiblioteket i Tromsø e Accademia di Danimarca, 23 ottobre 2000*, ed. Karen Ascani, Hans Kermit and Gunver Skytte (Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2002), 27–38; Pina Totaro, "Un manoscritto Vaticano dell'«Ethica» di Spinoza", *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 7 (1) (2011): 27–41; Pina Totaro, "L'«Ethica» de Spinoza: un manuscrit au Vatican", *Archives de Philosophie* 74 (2011): 699–708; Pina Totaro, "The Young Spinoza and the Vatican Manuscript of Spinoza's *Ethics*", in *The Young Spinoza. A Metaphysician in the Making*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed, (New York et al.: Oxford University Press, 2015), 319–32.

<sup>16</sup> Floriana Giallombardo, "L'«Epicuro» di Agostino Scilla, un'iconografia inedita per la filosofia neoterica", in *I filosofi antichi nell'arte italiana del Seicento. Stile, iconografia, contesti*, ed. Stefan Albl and Francesco Lofano, (Roma: Artemide, 2017), 127–60

<sup>17</sup> Scilla, *La vana speculazione*, 27.

“In analyzing natural bodies (in which it is possible to identify some traces of truth)” he bluntly wrote, “we should not rely upon the foggy abstractions of metaphysical philosophers (*le caliginose astrazioni de’ Metafisici*).” His emphasis on experience, on the senses, was rooted, as he pointed out, in his professional background. In dedicating the book to his patron he wrote:

I am not a man of letters but a painter, who pretends to be able to have an eye appropriate to evaluate things, which we can analyze with more solid truth than those who are mere professors of blind speculations (*meri professori di cieche speculazioni*).

The shift from the singular to the plural was eloquent: Scilla, the painter, was talking as a member of a professional body. Equally eloquent was the opposition between the painter’s eye and the blind speculations of academics, evoked in the title as well as in the opening illustration of Scilla’s book (figure 1).

In his introduction to *La vana speculazione* Paolo Rossi perceptively noted that the young man who points at fossils on the ground with one hand, and gives a shell to Speculation flying over him with the other, has an eye on his chest.<sup>18</sup> Rossi’s comment—interpreting the eye as the eye of mind—is convincing: Scilla was fully aware that senses are the ultimate source of truth, but they do not speak by themselves. As he pointed out in his dedicatory letter, his own argument (*concetto*) had to be conveyed through the many etchings by Pietro Santi Bartoli, based on Scilla’s drawings, which accompanied the book.<sup>19</sup> Images, Scilla argued, allow the eye of anybody to check the demonstration of his extensive research conducted especially in the island of Malta, showing the identity (*istessità*) of fossil fragments usually called “serpent’s eye” with the teeth of living fish (figure 5).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Scilla, *La vana speculazione*, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Scilla, *La vana speculazione*, 33.

<sup>20</sup> Scilla, *La vana speculazione*, 64.

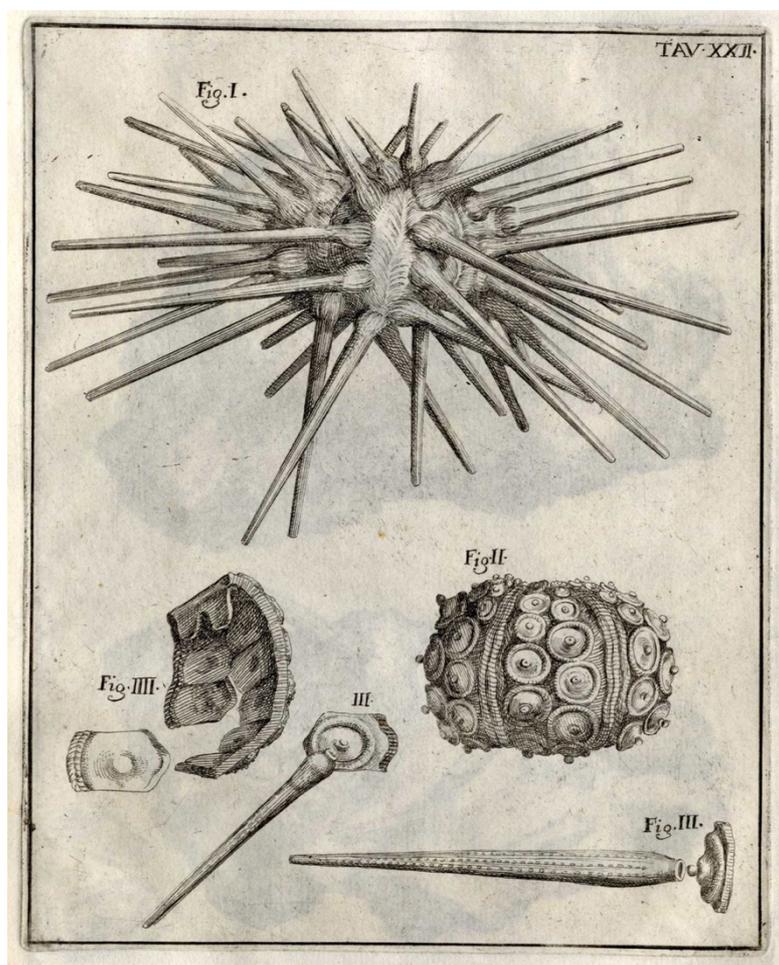


Figure 5: Scilla, *La vana speculazione*, plate 22.

6. A painter—but an unusually well-read painter, who was able to quote passages translated into Latin from Greek authors like Strabo and Plutarch. In his impressive book *The Abyss of Time* Paolo Rossi argued that Scilla’s quotation of a passage by Giovanni Ciampoli, friend and disciple of Galileo Galilei, proved a closeness to the Galilean tradition.<sup>21</sup> This conclusion, accepted as a fact in the scholarly literature on Scilla, should be nuanced. Ciampoli was quoted in a context which echoed a page of Galileo’s *Letter to Christine of Lorraine*—but with a significant difference. Galileo had opposed the flexible approach of merchants and lawyers to the “necessary inferences” (*necessarie illazioni*), of philosophers and

<sup>21</sup> Paolo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time. The History of the Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), (Italian ed.: *I segni del tempo. Storia della terra e storia delle nazioni da Hooke a Vico* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1985).

mathematicians, and their “demonstrative sciences”.<sup>22</sup> Scilla commented, in a seemingly modest tone: “I would be happy enough with those conjectures, those pieces of evidence, those arguments which I was able to extract from a very quick, messy observation of the few things I have with me”.<sup>23</sup> This remark implicitly suggests a dismissive attitude towards mathematics, that was presumably inspired by the philosopher Bernardino Telesio. In his work *De rerum natura iuxta propria principia* (On the nature of things, according to its principles), published in Naples in 1586, which had been included in the Index of forbidden books, Telesio had pointed out that evidence based on senses is stronger than mathematical demonstrations, since the former is based on causes, the latter on signs.<sup>24</sup>

Only a reader familiar with the *Letter to Christine of Lorraine* would have been able to detect that Scilla’s “conjectures” were a polemical comment on Galileo’s “necessary inferences”. But perhaps even that reader would have been unable to decipher the allusion to the “few things I have with me”. If I am not mistaken, Scilla was alluding to his “private passion, which is completely absorbed by ancient medals”.<sup>25</sup> In analyzing fossils, Scilla argued, we must recall that the teeth of an animal are different from each other; likewise, human faces are different from each other; and in a bunch of grapes, “as I realized in depicting them”,

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<sup>22</sup> Galileo Galilei, *Nov-Antiqua Sanctissimorum Patrum, et Probatorum Theologorum Doctrina, De Sacrae Scripturae Testimoniis, in Conclusionibus mere Naturalibus, quae sensata experientia, et necessariis demonstrationibus evinci possunt, temere non usurpanda, in gratiam Serenissimae Christinae Lotharingae, Magnae Ducis Haetruriae* (Augusta Trebecorum: Hautt, 1636), 27: “Io vorrei pregare questi prudentissimi e sapientissimi padri che volessero con ogni diligenza considerare la differenza che è tra le dottrine opinabili e le dimostrative: acciò [rappre]sentandosi bene avanti la mente con qual forza stringhino le necessarie illazioni, accertassero maggiormente come non è in potestà de’ professori delle scienze dimostrative il mutar l’opinione a voglia loro applicandosi hora a questa, et hora a quella; e che gran differenza è tra il comandare a un matematico, o a un filosofo, e ’l disporre un mercante o un legista; e che non con l’istessa facilità si possono mutare le conclusioni dimostrate circa le cose della natura e del cielo, che le opinioni circa quello che è lecito o no in un contratto, in un censo o in un cambio”.

<sup>23</sup> Scilla, *La vana speculazione*, 80: “io mi contento di quelle conghietture, di quelle evidenze e di quelle ragioni che ha potuto suggerirmi l’osservazione brevissima e tumultuaria delle poche cose che conservo appresso di me”.

<sup>24</sup> Bernardino Telesio, *De rerum natura iuxta propria principia* (Neapoli: Saluianus, 1586), 318 (l. VIII, ch. V).

<sup>25</sup> Scilla, *La vana speculazione*, 40: “continuando a leggere qualche libro, per interesse del mio genio privato, che tutto è posto nelle medaglie antiche”. His unpublished treatise has been recently rediscovered: Luigi Hyerace “De’ discorsi sopra alcune medaglie delle siciliane città di Agostino Scilla pittore”, in *Wunderkammer siciliana*, ed. Vincenzo Abbate (Napoli: Electa Napoli, 2001), 55–60.

Scilla went on, “I was compelled to make a specific portrait of every grape”. The same difference will be found in the teeth of a fish. There is more: an expert in ancient medals knows that is “extremely difficult to find two medals” from the same coinage—even if we know that they existed.<sup>26</sup>

Medals taught Scilla a sensitivity to small differences that proved to be crucial in his scrutiny of fossils. Morphological comparison (as we would say today) paved the way to the demonstration of identity (*istessità*) between fossils and living fish, based on close observation, helped by microscope (“occhialino”) and conveyed by a detailed, nuanced verbal description (*ekphrasis*), which is a distinctive feature of Scilla’s *Vana dimostrazione*.<sup>27</sup>

7. A synchronic, contextual analysis of Scilla’s work makes clear that it belonged to a tradition which, as Erwin Panofsky demonstrated in a memorable essay, Galileo looked at sarcastically, i.e. the cabinet of curiosities (*Wunderkammer*).<sup>28</sup> But Scilla’s range of intellectual curiosities was extremely broad, as one example will show.

In Plutarch’s little treatise *De Iside et Osiride*, one finds a passage, which was bound to become famous:

In Sais the statue of Athena, whom they [the Egyptians] believe to be Isis, bore the inscription: “I am all that has been, and is, and shall be, and my robe no mortal has yet uncovered”.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Scilla, *La vana speculazione*, 59: “perciocché, bisognandomi alle volte dipignerne, sono stato costretto a fare un particolare ritratto ad ogni granello [...]. Dirò di più, che chi è pratico delle medaglie antiche la grandissima difficoltà di trovare due medaglie, non più d’un istesso Imperadore, d’un medesimo rovescio, e d’un medesimo tempo, che siano state coniate da un’istesso conio”. The passage has been quoted also by Paula Findlen, “Agostino Scilla”, 129.

<sup>27</sup> Scilla, *La vana speculazione*, 107 (“Occhialino”), 88 (“occhialetto”). For a typical example of *ekphrasis* see 98.

<sup>28</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Galileo as a Critic of the Arts* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1954). See Horst Bredekamp, *Nostalgia dell’antico e fascino della macchina. La storia della Kunstammer e il futuro della storia dell’arte* (Milano 1996), German ed.: *Antikensehnsucht und Maschinenglauben. Die Geschichte der Kunstammer und die Zukunft der Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> Plutarch, *De Iside and Osiride*, ch. 9 (354), in *Plutarch’s Moralia*, tr. Frank Cole Babbitt, vol. V (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), 25. A different, shorter version of the inscription, from a marble statue of Isis from Capua, is recorded by Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* I (Romae: Mascardus, 1652), 188: “TE, TIBI,

A slightly different version of the same inscription was provided by Proclus, the neoplatonic philosopher (3rd century). In his book *Moses the Egyptian* Jan Assmann has shown the crucial role played by these passages in the perception of Egypt in European intellectual history. “The first to give Plutarch’s and Proclus’s famous descriptions a prominent place in Egyptian religion”, Assmann suggested, was Ralph Cudworth, in his extremely learned treatise *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678).<sup>30</sup> It must be noted, however, that eight years before, in 1670, Agostino Scilla had already quoted the Isis inscription, from the most authoritative Latin translation of Plutarch, in a passage emphasizing the consistent behavior of nature.<sup>31</sup> (Scilla’s interest in ancient Egypt may have been inspired by his aforementioned polemical attitude against Athanasius Kircher, the author of the four thick folios entitled *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*). In Plutarch’s text, the description of the statue of Isis was introduced by the following remarks on the Egyptian kingdom—a passage which Scilla obviously read, but did not mention:

He who was appointed [as king] from the military class was at once made one of the priests and a participant in their philosophy, which, for the post part, is veiled in myths and in words containing dim reflexions and adumbrations of the truth, as they themselves intimate beyond question, by appropriately placing sphynxes before their shrines, to indicate that their religious teaching has in it an enigmatical sort of wisdom.<sup>32</sup>

Isis was regarded by Egyptians, as Plutarch explained, as a veiled goddess, part of a deeply enigmatic, exoteric religion, and therefore inaccessible to mortals. Scilla ignored all this, quoted the inscription and laconically commented:

E quel ch’è meglio[,] parla per tutti – And best of all, she speaks to everybody.<sup>33</sup>

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UNA, QUAE ES OMNIA, DEA ISIS”. If I am not mistaken, in this work Kircher did not mention Plutarch’s version.

<sup>30</sup> Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 86–87, 118–119. See Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe: The First Part, Wherein All the Reason and Philosophy of Atheism is Confuted and Its Impossibility Demonstrated* (London: Royston, 1678; 2nd ed. London: Walthoe et al., 1743), 341.

<sup>31</sup> Scilla, *La vana speculazione*, 104: “Ego sum omne quod exstitit, est, et erit; meumque peplum nemo adhuc mortalium detexit” (I corrected a small typo—*extitit*—which is present already in original 1670 edition). Scilla may have consulted Plutarch’s *Opera*, II, *continens Moralia, Gulielmo Xilandro interprete* (Francofurti: Aubry & Schleich, 1620), 354, or some earlier edition, like the one published in Basel, 1572 (II, 164).

<sup>32</sup> Plutarch, *De Iside and Osiride*, ch. 9, 23–25.

<sup>33</sup> Scilla, *La vana speculazione*, 104.

Scilla anticipated the interpretation of Plutarch's passage that Ralph Cudworth was eager to reject: "as if that deity therein described, were nothing but the senseless Matter of the whole corporeal Universe".<sup>34</sup> According to Scilla, Nature is, has been, and will be, accessible to everybody, through the senses. His attack against "empty speculations", announced in the title of his book, surfaced over and over, with unfailing energy, in the text:

I apologize for being banal, but I wish that philosophy could embrace some little fragments of history. We should refrain from flying in the distant and vast spaces of what is possible, as some noble contemporary minds do, who disdain pure history in dealing with what it is (che sdegnano la pura storia in tutte le faccende).<sup>35</sup>

These are striking words: but we should keep in mind that "history" and "pure history" here mean *historia rerum gestarum*, both a narrative and a description—a double meaning inherited from the Greek word *historia*.<sup>36</sup> But who were the "noble contemporary minds [...] who disdain pure history in dealing with what it is"? Another passage of *La Vana speculazione* shows that Scilla's target was indeed Galileo:

I am not ashamed of my perplexity [vis-à-vis philosophers's speculations]: I feel safe, if I reflect upon the hypotheses related to the huge machine of the Universe (la gran machina dell'Universo). One of them was put forward with great energy by Tolomeus who, with clear and invaluable demonstrations, put forward a distinction between stable and movable parts; but others, with equally clear demonstrations, destroyed everything, unhinged the earth, and nailed movement itself, disregarding the eyes of every living being (a dispetto degli occhi d'ogni vivente).<sup>37</sup>

"*A dispetto degli occhi d'ogni vivente*": Scilla, antiquarian and painter, could not accept a theory which went against the evidence provided by the senses. He looked at reality with a close attention to the perception, description, and possibly depiction of small differences. This approach, if I am not mistaken, is still with

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<sup>34</sup> Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, 341.

<sup>35</sup> Scilla, *La vana speculazione*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> See Gianna Pomata and Nancy G. Siraisi, ed., *Historia. Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> Scilla, *La vana speculazione*, 00 [1670, 9–10].

us, insofar as the antiquarian's emphasis on visible evidence is a crucial part of historical knowledge, in all its varieties (mnemohistory included).<sup>38</sup>

8. In his essay "Globalization, Universalism, and the Erosion of Cultural Memory" Jan Assmann pointed out that "the imperialism and internationalism of globalization in antiquity finds its most explicit expression in the Graeco-Egyptian Isis religion".<sup>39</sup> The case of Agostino Scilla can be added to the long-term memory of Isis, mediated by Plutarch, as a symbol of the perpetuity of nature: a theme which Jan Assmann explored, in its manifold dimensions, in his outstanding historical work.

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<sup>38</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano, "Ancient History and the Antiquarian", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13, 3/4 (1950): 285–315, cf: Arnaldo Momigliano, *Contributo alla storia degli studi classici* (Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1979), 67–206.

<sup>39</sup> Jan Assmann, "Globalization, Universalism, and the Erosion of Cultural Memory", in *Memory in a Global Age. Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 124–137, 130 ff.