

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Olaf Hein** *Die Drucker und Verleger der Werke des Polyhistor Athanasius Kircher S.J.* (The printers and publishers of the works of the "polyhistor" Athanasius Kircher S.J.) Boehlau publishing house Cologne, Weimar, Vienna; hardback; pp 435 with colour and black and white photos and plates : plus appendixes with statistics and tables.

Although today overshadowed by names like Spinoza, Galilei, Descartes and Leibniz, there was hardly a scholar and man of letters who enjoyed greater esteem and fame in 17th century Europe than the German "polyhistor" and Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602 - 1680). Born in 1602 near the town of Fulda, Kircher earned his first merits in universities in Germany and in Provençal Avignon. During the early 1630s he was called to Rome where he stayed until the end of his life in 1680. The only long break of his encyclopedic studies which included mathematics, philosophy, linguistics, ancient languages, archaeology, astronomy, egyptology, geology, natural science and musicology in the eternal city was a half-year sojourn at the island of Malta between June 1637 and February 1638. Given this encyclopedic interest of his, to study Kircher means always to delve automatically in the multi-faceted history of science in 17th century Europe. Therefore the reconstruction in full of the activities of Kircher and the study of the various aspects of his long scientific life in Germany, France and Rome together with his connections and communication with the scientific celebrities as well as with the clerical and political figures of the time can be truly regarded a Sisyphean, if not impossible, task.

After more than twelve years of assiduous research and numerous travels to European archives especially to Rome and the Vatican, the German scholar Dr Olaf Hein has now concluded the work on one important aspect which certainly helps to understand better not only Kircher but also the overall 17th century scientific context within which Kircher operated. In 1993 the first volume of Hein's study of the printers and editors of Kircher's more than thirty published works - many of them classical and much appreciated by his contemporaries - came out. The other four of this five-volume series are due to be published in the near future. This first volume contains (in part A) an introduction to Kircher's life and scientific activities and (in part B) analytical essays on the historical background of the time, printing privileges, distribution, censorship, technical aspects of book production and financing of books. One should underline in the first place that this work has to be regarded as a main reference work not only for the study of Kircher but also for that of the editing and publishing of scientific literature during the 17th century in general. Hein's detailed description of every German, Dutch, French or Italian printer and publisher connected with Kircher includes many names up to now neglected by researchers and forms a most useful tool for students of early modern book-science. We have indeed a comprehensive picture of 17th century scientific crosscurrents with the deeply-rooted internationality of the then contemporary

literary community. In the profuse and maybe overrich footnotes, Hein not only describes the professionals but also the specimens of the representatives of the various monarchs and aristocratic classes of the time involved in printing and with whom Kircher kept contacts and correspondence. Among them one finds names, Christine of Vasa, queen of Sweden, emperors Ferdinand III and Leopold I and popes Innocent X, Alexander VII and Clement X. Hein furthermore unfolds the manner in which the scientific circles of Catholic Rome were in contact with the leading printing houses and booksellers in Protestant and Reformist countries in northern Europe, such as the Netherlands and parts of Germany, during the period.

Hein's scrupulous approach to the subject, his perfectionism in minute detail and his rich apparatus of footnotes and appendices - in short the concept and structure of the book - might limit readership to the connoisseur and expert. However, for this group, Hein's work is a treasure and a major reference work. For libraries or archives somehow connected with the history of book science or the history and culture of the 17th century in general, this work, which has been a *desideratum* for such a long time, is now available. For Malta research on Kircher has a special significance. Besides his sojourn on the island Kircher spent a period of time as a confessor to Landgrave Friedrich of Hessen-Darmstadt who, (later) became Captain General of the Galleys of the Order of St John) and as a teacher of mathematics to the Order's novices. Moreover he wrote no less than four books which are somewhat connected with this sojourn. In his *Mundus Subterraneus* (first edition Amsterdam, 1665) and in *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae* (first edition Rome, 1646) Kircher presents scattered proofs of his investigations of Maltese folklore, geology and mineralogy. Some of the observations in astronomy for Kircher's *Iter Exstaticum Coeleste* (first edition Rome, 1656) are supposed to have been composed in Malta. Even more interesting is the background of the rare book *Specula Melitensis Encyclica* (first edition, Naples 1638), a work which seems to have been conceived by Kircher himself but finalised by the Maltese historian and prior of St John's, Salvatore Imbroli. The National Library of Malta owns a copy of this controversial book. As Dr Hein will show in a forthcoming publication, Kircher took the fourth vow of the Jesuits in Malta. It cannot be doubted that there is much more to discover for Hein and other scholars in Malta. How useful and interesting for Malta it would be to have such an authority in Kircher as Dr Hein, to go deeper into the subject of Kircher's relation with Malta. Then it might emerge from the neglected facts that for example the Maltese physician, poet and traveller Gio. Francesco Buonamico kept correspondence with Kircher and that whilst in Malta, Kircher informed European scholars like professor Johannes Buxtorf from Basle about his experiences on the island. For his previous works and achievements in the study of Kircher and the natural sciences during the 17th century Dr Hein merits our deep gratitude. May he succeed in his role as the president of the International Athanasus Kircher research society, the encouraging further studies of Kircher's relations with Malta.

*Thomas Freller*

**John Debono, Trade and Port Activity in Malta 1750-1800**  
(MALTA 2000, 266 pp; ISBN: 99909-68-77-2)

John Debono must be congratulated for presenting this important work about the role of the Grand Harbour of Malta for the years 1750 - 1800. Three different flags of three different nations were hoisted in the Grand Harbour in quick succession between 1798 and 1800. During those two hectic years the harbour witnessed the disruption of all mercantile activities which had been so well established under the Order of St John. With the establishment of British Rule in Malta the Grand Harbour was to regain its importance. Old types of small lateen-rigged merchant ships were to disappear from the harbour and their place was taken up by the latest brigs and barks built according to British standards.

The expert and professional approach of Dr Debono can be judged by the valuable information he presents. This was well sieved from a huge amount of primary sources. He must have applied a careful selective method vis-a-vis the archival material he consulted in various places. Debono touched vital topics for further study of the harbour such as anchorage, the *macina*, passenger boats, quarantine facilities and fishing restrictions. It, for example, emerges that the civil arsenal situated behind Senglea catered for all merchant ships not belonging to the Order. References to such localities and to the apprenticeship system of craftsmen like carpenters, caulkers, blockmakers and others, together with the names of the principal shipbuilders of the period like Scolaro are of the utmost importance. He gives a good account of the working of the local merchant ships when he refers to ownerships, the role of masters, the chartering of vessels and the recruitment of crews. When referring to the endemic problem of acquiring timber for ship-building purposes, Debono discovered essential references which will open the eyes of all those who opt to research further into the problem.

Debono managed to propose a chart of the ships that frequented the harbour like those hailing from Venice, Ragusa (Dubrovnic), Greece, the Two Sicilies, France and England. All this has laid the groundwork for further studies in marine insurance, risks at sea and companies.

The tables presented occupy 127 out of the total of 266 pages of the book. If, at first sight, this seems to be an unbalanced content of the volume yet, when examined carefully, the author has made available precious information which otherwise would have taken researchers a lot of their time to obtain from the primary sources. The specialist more than welcome such details as the lengths of a *xprunara* or that of a *martingana* found in the tables, just to mention one point of interest. The classification of the available tables is a ready-reckoner to the many facets of the study of the Grand Harbour. The few well-chosen pictures greatly enhance the presentation of the book which should earn a place in all libraries and should appeal

to the general public.

Unfortunately it is quite natural to come across unavoidable and very minor mistakes in similar works which entail an enormous amount of time to check all the details. In the case of the locally-originating *xprunara* I would have preferred to see it written in Maltese instead of *speronara* (Italian). When referring to the 1555 incident in the Grand Harbour, Bosio, (iii, 366) mentions four galleys that were involved in the incident mentioned by author. The shipbuilding yard of the Order located behind Senglea was a different establishment from the *Parco delle Navi* which comprised the sea area in front of the stores of the ships at Bormla. The number of *bolli* referred to in connection with the imported planks of wood qualify the rating of excellence of the timber and not its length.

The period chosen by Debono presents the researcher with the difficulty of having to choose his material from a lot of written primary information available in Malta. The painstaking research by the author which is the result of long years of steady work has resulted in an exhaustive and scholarly survey which is a milestone in the study of our magnificent Grand Harbour

*Joseph Muscat*

**Two books based on exhibitions organised by  
The Malta Historical Society**

In 1981 and 1984, Mr. Guido Lanfranco set up two exhibitions - under the auspices of the Malta Historical Society - on Transport in Malta and Maltese Titular Statues and their Statuaries. As is his wont, Mr Lanfranco thoroughly researched his subjects and collected all his findings in a mass of written notes and observations which he has now updated and published in the following two books:

**G. Lanfranco, L-Istorja tat-Trasport f'Malta, Malta -PIN 1999, xii  
+ 204 pp. illus. ISBN:99909-41-52-1.**

This book is the first volume of a collection of 60 books about Maltese culture and history called *Kullana Kulturali*. As stated above, its basis was an exhibition organised and set up by the author in November 1981 at the annexe of St. John's Cathedral. The exhibition consisted of photographs, sketches, maps, photocopies of original documents, models, postcards, reproductions of litographs and engravings, tickets and other objects relevant to the subject. The items were arranged in a combination of chronological and sectional sequence starting from pre-history down to the present times but, at the same time, arranged in sections devoted to particular topics which included: transport of the dead and the sick, the railway, the tram, the buses, carriages and cabs, carts for pleasure and trade, inter-island transport, and other aspects.

All this entailed a great deal of research and the end result can be seen in the book under review which he has divided into 18 sections. As one would expect, Mr Lanfranco has updated his work to cover the intervening 18 years since the exhibition was held and he has succeeded, in my opinion, in presenting a comprehensive but detailed and annotated account of the history of Maltese transport. The book is well illustrated and includes a 16 page coloured section between pp. 100 and 101, a very useful glossary and a good index.

The layout of the book is attractive and proofing is good though I can't understand how the last sentence of the second paragraph (repeated on p.35) found its way to page 24. Although the chapters are well annotated, I would have preferred footnotes to endnotes, though this is not the author's fault since it is the publisher's decision for the whole series.



**G. Lanfranco, L-Istatwi Titulari u l-Istatwarji taghhom. Malta-Klabb Kotba Maltin 1999, xiv + 174 pp. illus, ISBN: 99909-75-37-X.**

Once more, the basis of this book was an exhibition set up by the author in November 1984. The visual exhibits have been transformed by the author into a very readable volume which comprises a wealth of information about the titular statues of all the Maltese and Gozitan parishes together with pen-portraits of all the sculptors and statuaries who produced the statues. A volume of this kind, giving chapter and verse, was needed and Mr Lanfranco has ably filled the void.

The first chapter lists all the statues in alphabetical order in accordance to the name of the town or village, all 79 of them. Each statue is reproduced in black and white together with the relevant information concerning its sculptor (or statuary), year of manufacture, provenance, and information about its plinth, gilding, embellishments etc. In the second chapter, we have pen-portraits of 29 sculptors and statuaries, again in alphabetical order. Mr Lanfranco also pays tribute, in Chapter III, to all those who helped him collect his material and he lists all his helpers and, at the same time, pointing out the type of help he was offered by each individual. The fourth and final part lists 573 notes and references presented in an unorthodox but efficacious manner. An extensive index together with colour photos of all the statues round up the book.

It is quite clear that, before writing this book, the author updated the information presented in the 1984 exhibition. The book itself is a very handy reference work on the subject which contains much more information than one suspects. All festa aficionados, together with "popular art history" lovers, should be grateful to Mr Lanfranco for collecting so much information in one handy volume.

*Joseph F. Grima*