

*Spontaneous Current Sheets in Magnetic Fields* is a major work that should be read by anyone interested in magnetohydrodynamics or plasma astrophysics. It will be an influential book for a long time to come.

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## Courtly Naturalism

**Possessing Nature.** Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy. PAULA FINDLEN. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994. xviii, 449 pp., illus. \$55 or £42. *Studies on the History of Society and Culture*, 20.

Paula Findlen's study contributes in important new ways to our understanding of science in the 16th and 17th centuries, the period of the "Scientific Revolution." The development of physics and mechanics in the period has received most of the attention from historians of science in the last 40 years. Findlen's book is one of several that have recently taken up other aspects of early modern science. By exploring two related developments in Italy during these two centuries—the foundation of museums and the establishment of natural history as a discipline—Findlen is able to shed light on the growth of scientific culture in Europe. Focusing on the ideas and practices of



Experiments with asbestos as depicted in Ferrante Imperato's *Dell'istoria naturale* (Naples, 1599). "Imperato was instrumental in establishing an experimental culture that moved away from the humanist view of knowledge as a textual entity and toward a more artifactual understanding of nature. . . . Physicians such as Bartolomeo Maranta and the Lincean Nicola Antonio Stellio collaborated closely with Imperato in their research on theriac and other medicines. . . . The experiences that occurred within Imperato's museum were not dissimilar to those in Aldrovandi's *studio*, although Imperato more often personally demonstrated artifacts for his visitors whose social status, as physicians, was higher than his own." [From *Possessing Nature*]

Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605) and Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680), but including accounts of many other naturalists resident in Italy during the period, Findlen explores the attitudes of the time toward "collecting and the interrogation of nature." She looks at the new naturalism in both its relationship to changing Aristotelian ideas and its dependence on Renaissance courtly culture. She is interested in the audience for the new natural science as much as in its most illustrious practitioners, in how and where it was practiced as much as in why.

Findlen's study develops a number of important arguments. First and foremost is that the contemporary culture of the Italian courts is a key to explaining the development of the new science. Museums and natural history emerged from humanists' emphasis on sociability as much as from their interest in exploring (and, soon, in correcting) ancient literature. Without the courtly audience for the new learning, the naturalists would not have found patrons for their endeavors or markets for their books. In light of the importance Findlen attaches to courtly culture in this regard, she examines the ways in which values such as memory, civility, and curiosity shaped the new science, and she does so impressively. In the concluding chapters, she even makes much of the ways in which the new and protean possibilities of exploring the self could be mirrored through exploring nature. Second, Findlen finds the major shift in attitudes toward nature occurring among some groups just after the beginning of the 17th century, when the private *studio*

became the public *galleria* and when the relation of authority between experience and ancient texts reversed itself, so that where once the credibility of experience was derived from the authority of the texts experience came to be seen as a guide to their interpretation. Not everyone adopted these changed attitudes immediately, however, so Findlen has many telling remarks about the differences between proponents of the new science such as Francesco Redi and exponents of an older view, such as Kircher. And third, in the latter parts of her book, Findlen is clear about the strong relationship between the new naturalism and contemporary medical studies, with their connections to botanical gardens, anatomy theaters, and medicines.

Findlen's concentration on courtly culture may be too strong for some. She has many intelligent things to say about academic traditions, new markets, and the explosion of interest in the new worlds of east and west, but she keeps coming back to courtly life as her explanatory device. Although she is aware that museums and natural history could grow in soil that was not Italian, aristocratic, or courtly, she concludes that "the museum was the quintessential product of the patronage culture of early modern Europe" (p. 346) and that "mastery of nature went hand in hand with the rhetoric of absolutism; museums were an eminently visible reminder of how political might, new forms of knowledge, and power over nature could be combined" (p. 407). Whether this is a general causal explanation or only a fine description of the way things often worked in Italy must be left for others to decide.

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## Other Books of Interest

**The Aye-Aye.** Madagascar's Most Puzzling Primate. ANNA C. FEISTNER and ELEANOR J. STERLING, Eds. Karger, Farmington, CT, 1994. iv, 180 pp., illus. Paper, \$78.50 or sFR 98 or DM 117. *Folia Primatologica*, vol. 62, no. 1–3.

In its native habitat *Daubentonia madagascariensis*, the subject of this work, is, according to the editors, alternately feared, perse-



Ulisse Aldrovandi as depicted in his *Ornithologiae hoc est de avibus historiae libri XII* (Bologna, 1599). A legend accompanying the portrait reads, "Non tua, Aristoteles, haec est, sed Ulyssis imago: Dissimules vultus, par tamen ingenium." [From *Possessing Nature*]