Locke made his most extensive use of travel literature in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Arguing against the theory that some ideas were innate to the human mind he referred to 16 authors who might be classified as travel writers. He chose these authors as reliable and important accounts. Some were eyewitnesses, others could be regarded as trustworthy reporters with access to a number of first-hand accounts, while one of the most frequently cited authors had a particular association with experimental science and a connection with Boyle. He cited Martin Baumgarten, Garcilaso de la Vega, Peter Martyr, Isaac Vossius, Jean de Léry and Thévenot to show that whole societies did indeed transgress, what were often thought by Christians to be, innate moral rules.

*Martin Baumgarten*

Locke gave pride of place to Martin Baumgarten from whom he took an extensive quotation discussing the sexual practices of the Egyptian holy men. Baumgarten’s book which was, according to Locke, “a Book, not every Day to be met with”, was originally published in German and appeared in Churchill’s first volume of travels, where it followed Navarrete’s account of China, another book Locke admired. Baumgarten was a German nobleman, born in 1473, who made a pilgrimage through Egypt, Arabia, Palestine and Syria to Jerusalem between 1505 and 1510 after the death of his wife and children.

The quotation Locke used came from the second book of his travels in which he described a Muslim saint whom he saw near Balbes in Egypt.
sitting among the sandhills as naked as he came forth from his mother’s womb.¹

His guide and translator, whom Baumgarten named as Mucrelus, told him that it was the practice among Muslims to

venerate and hold sacred those who are insane and devoid of reason.²

Those who had lived wicked lives but later repented and led a life of poverty were particularly revered. These holy men, his guide told him

have virtually unbridled liberty to enter any house they please, and to eat, drink, and what is more have sexual intercourse; and if there are any offspring resulting from the latter, they too are regarded as sacred.³

Great honours were conferred on these men during their lifetimes and when they died temples and monuments were erected to their memory. To touch their dead bodies or to bury them was considered a great blessing. The saint whom they saw at Balbes was regarded as particularly holy according to their guide because

he never had intercourse with women or boys only with she-asses and mules.⁴

Baumgarten’s reaction was one of mingled ridicule and horror that behaviour, which in Europe would be condemned, could be regarded in such a different light in another society. He commented

We could not forebear laughing at such sanctity, or rather such beastliness, that what in our judgement ought to be punish’d by burning alive, should by them be thought pious and praiseworthy.⁵

The importance of Baumgarten was that he wrote as an eye witness. The published account was taken from his diary, written in German and that of Gregory, his servant, who wrote in Latin. These diaries were written as they were travelling and their experiences still fresh in their minds. Returning to their lodging after witnessing a military display, which the Mamelukes had put on for a visiting Turkish ambassador, Baumgarten and Gregory

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¹ Locke, Essay, (1979) 71. (I. iii. 9).
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.