CHAPTER 10

“Copernicus Found a Treasure the True Value of Which He Did Not Know at All”. The Life of Copernicus by Pierre Gassendi

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1 Introduction

‘Of course everyone speaking of Copernicus has scribbled off from Gassendi [...]’; Georg Christoph Lichtenberg remarks in a letter that heralds his own life of Copernicus. He hurries to add: ‘and this is exactly what I will do also.’ Lichtenberg’s unvarnished confession hits one fundamental point: Gassendi’s relevance as a critical mediator of Copernicus’s teachings cannot be assessed based on the quotas of citations but has to be deduced by the text itself. In view of the innumerable hagiographic clichés that stick tenaciously to Copernicus’s name and establish his fame, looking at Gassendi’s early biography provides the opportunity to see through some of the formative principles of the subsequent legends.

In 1654, 21 years after Galilei’s conviction, Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655) published a collection of astronomers’ lives, which also contains a vita of Copernicus. In that year, Gassendi is at the peak of his fame and, at the same time, the end of his life. He worked coevally with Hobbes and Descartes and was regarded as their equal in the 17th century. Today, he is at best remembered

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1 A German version of this article, focussed more on a functional analysis of the vitas, has been published in Enenkel K. – Zittel C. (eds.), Die Vita als Vermittlerin von Wissenschaft und Werk (Berlin: 2013) 123–156.
3 Gassendi Pierre: Tychonis Brahei, Equitis Dani, Astronomorum Coryphaei, Vita [...] Accessit Nicolai Copernici; Georgii Peuerbachii & Joannis Regiomontani, Astronomorum celebrum, Vita (Paris, Vidua Mathurin Dupuis: 1654); 2nd edn. (The Hague, Adriani Vlacq: 1654); 3rd edn. (The Hague, Adriani Vlacq: 1655). The 1654 edition only with the Copernicus frontispiece, the 3rd (most of the time erroneously regarded as the 2nd) edition now also has the Brahe frontispiece.
as the author of the fifth objection against Descartes’ *Meditationes*, by some also as the refounder of atomism and epicureism. Gassendi’s work, however, has also an essential share in the transformation and reformulation of natural philosophy in the 17th century, which is usually ascribed to Descartes. In intellectual history, Gassendi is among those revealing figures, who appear like dwarfs to us today but were giants to their contemporaries. What is little known today is that Gassendi was also the leading astronomer of France, who had—among other things—been the first to watch the transit of Mercury, observed the moon and published numerous astronomical works. For his merits in astronomy, a moon crater was named after him.

Gassendi’s lives of famous astronomers is therefore the rare stroke of luck in the field of scientists’ vitas that were not published by disciples or friends but come from the pen of a colleague of the highest repute in the same discipline. At the early age of sixteen, Gassendi became professor of rhetoric, a few years later of philosophy; in 1645, he was appointed professor of mathematics at the famous *College Royal*, which helped him to gain a strong international influence. He had a lot of interests and talents in fields as diverse as medicine, astronomy, physics, the study of antiquity, literature and languages. His mentor, Peiresc, had introduced him to the circles of the humanist scholars, through his educational journeys and his network of letters he was in touch with the leading scholars of Europe. He was friends with Hobbes and Mersenne, exchanged letters with Schickhardt and Hevelius, was a priest and humanist scholar, provost and experimental scientist, materialist and sceptical natural philosopher. Above all, however, he also possessed a sense for historical research, which predestined him as an author of vitas. The vita of scientists as a genre was virtually reinvented by him: with his biographies he set new standards of the critical evaluation and explication of past scientific achievements.

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