The twentieth century literature on the Hypnerotomachia is very extensive in its discussion of the book’s contents, authorship and place in the history of the printed book. Mario Praz, the author of the classic bibliography Studies in 17th Century Imagery, Rome: Edizione de Storia e Letteratura, 1964 calls it “doubtless, the most extraordinary book of the Renaissance”. See ‘Some Foreign Imitators of the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili’, Italica, XXIV, March, No. 1, 1947, pp. 20 – 25 and Carl Jung in his introduction to Linda Fierz-David, The Dream of Poliphilo, Dallas: Spring Publications, 1987 goes further and calls it “a work that may well claim to be among the most beautiful printed books of all time”. A bibliography is given on line at http://knops.home.xs4all.nl/hypo1.html which is derived principally from Pozzi and Ciapponi’s edition of the Hypnerotomachia, Padua: Antenori, 1964. This contains the full text and a critical edition of the Poliphilean language and sources. References to this edition are given in the notes to the present text.


CHAPTER 4

C FRA FRANCESCO COLONNA AND HIS HIEROGLYPHES

The playful character of the artistic imagination does not always appear nor is it revealed in such a purely decorative manner and this is particularly true when the artist is known to be prone to speculation and open to the influence of scholars. Thus the limits imposed on Annius are extremely uncertain because they rely on subjective criteria in judging whether a picture is more or less a hieroglyph. That in the same period as Annius another cultured and sensitive humanist had produced an exemplary collection of hieroglyphic inscriptions, is a fortunate coincidence that allows us to gain an overview of hieroglyphic studies of the time, and provides further evidence of the context in which in the early Renaissance it was believed that a certain wisdom could be achieved through hieroglyphs and therefore an attempt should be made to imitate them. The author of this collection was the famous Dominican Francesco Colonna, born in Venice in 1433, and the monumental work containing this collection is the famous Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, ubi humana omnia non nisi somnium esse docet, [Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, in which it is shown that all human things are but a dream] printed by Aldus in December of 1499.

As with Annius it was not enough that there existed already literary and artistic monuments of antiquity from which an image of the past that he cherished could be constructed, for in the same way Colonna with his enthusiasm for the beauty of the ancient world, felt that what had been handed down by tradition was insufficient. His imagination could see the splendor of antiquity in an even more dazzling manner, even more grandiose its construction, more luxurious the life that was lived, more enchanting its cults, its wisdom more rich in secrets. For Colonna’s literary reputation the fact of his being a poet was a stroke of fortune. He transposed his picture of antiquity into a dream creation under the name of Poliphilo, dedicated to Polia queen of his heart who embodied his beloved antiquity. In this way, contrary to what occurred to his fellow Dominican Annius, he avoided being branded as a forger. He succeeded, however, in following his secret wish, to stand out as a person who was familiar with both unknown authors and architectural images. In fact,
linking known to fictional elements, adding abundant citations to his fantastic imagination and using his great archaeological knowledge to describe non-existent works of art, he gave his contemporaries the impression that even the most daring creations of his imagination were based on things actually seen or read. No less a mind than that of Erasmus was deceived into assuming, based on the description of the hieroglyphs made by Colonna, that they derived from the lost works of Chaeremon. No wonder then that this collection of inscriptions was considered authentic and frequently reprinted, or that the forger Boissard himself was misled by it, and cited as an ancient work existing in Rome, the sacrifice of Priapus, described by Poliphilo, which actually refers to a simple Priapic relief. This happened without the direct intervention of the author and the term itself Hypnerotomachia clearly alludes to the dreamlike nature of this poetry. A century later the severe archbishop of Tarragona, Antonio Agostino, in an attempt to eliminate the false opinion which he believed was widespread, while justly defining the work of Colonna as a joke, mistakenly assumed that the author was Annius of Viterbo. Today, there is a renaissance of studies in the field. Those of the calibre of Ilg have given the Hypnerotomachia, the woodcuts of which had already established it as a splendid work of art, a primary role amongst the sources of the period.1

1 J. Boissardus, I Pars Romanae Urbis Topographiae et Antiquitatum Francofurti 1597, fol. K refers to “ejus ergo Priapi effigiem Romae positam nos in apposito schemate exhibemus”. The engraving cited is nothing but a free copy of the woodcut of the Hypnerotomachia, whose ancient models corresponded to the findings probably represented by the reliefs of Boissard VI Pars I sive III Tomus Inscriptionum et Monumentarum, quae Romae in saxis et marmoribus visuntur, Francofurti 1598, pl. 36: herm of Priapus, surrounded by donkey heads, sacrificial knives, fruit baskets, etc.; pl. 73: herm of Priapus, along with two women and scythes.

ii Albert Ilg (1847-1896) was an Austrian art historian. His article has been digitized and can be found at https://play.google.com/store/books/details/Albert_Ilg_Ueber_Den_Kunsthistorischen_Werth_Der_H?id=1DoCAAAQAAJ. One of his principal conclusions, not now generally accepted, was that there were at least two separate artists for the anonymous illustrations of the Poliphili.