
The Accademia del Cimento was founded in Florence in 1657 with the generous support of enlightened Medicean princes, Ferdinando and Leopoldo. Its mission was to develop experimental programs to understand various problems of natural science. Historians have regarded its short but intensive activity as a fertile continuation of Galilean science and as a model for European scientific academies in later centuries. The Cimento also had several peculiarities in its lack of statutes, headquarters or periodic meetings; that is, the absence of a rigid institutional structure—unlike other seventeenth-century European academies such as the Royal Society of London or the Académie Royale des Sciences of Paris. These peculiarities and the entire history of the Cimento can be understood only in its broader cultural context, which is the goal of the volume under review. It consists of fifteen articles based on papers presented in the conference “The Accademia del Cimento in the European Context (1657-2007),” held in Florence to commemorate the Accademia’s 350th anniversary. These articles study the Cimento from wide-ranging and original points of view. The first half examines the personalities involved in the Cimento’s scientific activity, revealing great intellectual diversity. The other articles place the Cimento in a broader cultural context represented by contemporary European academies and the correspondence networks that linked scholars from multiple nations.

Marco Beretta argues that corpuscularism was adopted by many members of the Cimento. Tracing the reception of Lucretius in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, he views the Roman author’s work as a hidden resource for the Cimento’s predilection for atomism. Antonio Clericuzio discusses the chemical investigations carried out in the Cimento, with Alfonso Borelli as the major figure in this domain. This study makes clear that although the *Saggi*—the Academy’s only official publication—omitted related topics, chemistry played an important role in the Cimento’s activities. Maria Conforti focuses on Borelli’s physiology based on mechanics and corpuscularism to reevaluate Borelli’s role in the rise of the “life sciences” in Italy. Susana Gómez analyses the experiments related to optics and the ideas on the nature of light in the Cimento; she suggests the necessity of further comparative studies to take into account other scholars’ contributions to these experiments. With special attention to his corpuscular theory of air, Stefania Montacutelli studies Borelli’s mechanical philosophy and illustrates how he explained the properties of bodies according to the movements of their constituent particles. For her, Borelli’s experiments and ideas contributed to the development of a harmonic view of nature, where living and non-living beings follow the same mathematical-geometrical laws.

Giorgio Strano addresses the controversy over the nature of the planet Saturn, caused by the limited resolution power of early telescopes. Analyzing the series of experiments conducted principally by Borelli, Strano emphasizes the problem of the Grand Duke’s censorship and the question of objectivity in Borelli’s method. Federica
Favino’s argument centers on the polemic about the insects generated by oak galls; the protagonists of her paper are Antonio Oliva, the most troublesome member of the Cimento, and Francesco Redi. Through a careful reading of the source material that uncovers the structure of information exchanges among academicians, Favino presents Oliva as a talented naturalist. Domenico Bertoloni Meli examines the four, apparently heterogeneous, experiments related to the air pressure, spontaneous generation, medical waters and the germination of plants. The common thread linking these experiments is the “parallel trial” based on the comparison of the two barometers. According to Meli, this thread leads us to a more profound understanding of experimental procedures in the seventeenth century. Alfonso Mirto reconstructs the long and difficult process of the publication of the Saggi and traces its success until the nineteenth century, concluding that centuries of reprints reflect not only its literary importance, as evaluated by the Accademia della Crusca, but also its scientific value.

The following five papers examine the Cimento in its European context, namely its relationship with other contemporary scientific academies. Maria Pia Donato takes the reader to Rome, where various new organizations were born following the model of the Cimento. Positioned at the intersection of culture, patronage and propaganda, these organizations were a real mirror of the Roman society. They played an important ideological role in the social and philosophical legitimatization of experimental philosophy. Robert Alan Hatch tackles the network of correspondence (1657-1667) among Ismaël Boulliau, Prince Leopoldo and the members of the Cimento. He reveals how, due to its flexibility, the private letter exchange within the Republic of Letters contributed to the emerging new science. David J. Sturdy casts doubt on the widely accepted differentiation between the Accademia del Cimento as a traditional Renaissance organization and the Académie Royale des Sciences as a ground-breaking, modern institution. Sturdy emphasizes their complementary roles, at least in relation to the early years of the French academy. Similarly, Luciano Boschiero reconsiders the differences between the “deductive” method of the Cimento and the “inductive” approach of the Bolognese Accademia della Traccia. In reality, both academies focused on finding physical causes on the basis of preconceived notions of natural philosophy. Their experiments in published works and in correspondence were also persuasive rhetorical devices to convince readers of the efficacy of their work. Rob Iliffe studies the techniques used by Henry Oldenburg to promote the circulation of scientific information. A skillful mediator in the communication between Italian and British natural philosophers, Oldenburg tried to create a perpetuum mobile of information sharing based on gift-giving and value systems of publication. Mordechai Feingold explores the parallels between the Accademia del Cimento and the Royal Society, emphasizing the similarities of the first two “modern” scientific societies both in their institutional structure and in their practice.

As a whole this excellent volume manages to explore new aspects of the Florentine academy in its broader social and cultural context. However, there remain even more topics to be examined: the collection of scientific instruments, courtly patronage, natural historical method, etc. As the editors themselves point out in their Introduction, there are numerous unedited manuscripts and new sources of information to be uncov-