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BOOK REVIEW

Astronomy in and around Prague. *Colloquium of the Working Group of the History of Astronomy, Prague, September 30, 2004.* (*Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Mathematica et Physica Vol. 46 Supplementum*)

Gudrun Wolfschmidt and Martin Šolc (Eds.)

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This publication appeared in the series *Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Mathematica et Physica*. Nevertheless, it has also an ISBN book number – but it does not have a title page, and does not mention any editors. A foreword in which “the editors” are mentioned is signed by G. Wolfschmidt and M. Šolc, thus I will assume that they are indeed the editors of this volume.

As mentioned in the title, a meeting of the Working Group of the History of Astronomy (*Arbeitskreis Astronomiegeschichte*), which is a formation within the *Astronomische Gesellschaft*, took place in Prague on September 20, 2004. Twenty written contributions – fifteen in English, five in German – cover topics ranging from astronomy in medieval Prague to Czech and German astronomers at the Prague University in the 20th century, with a main focus on Brahe, Kepler, and their contemporaries.

While *Astronomy in Medieval Prague* by Alena Hadravová and Petr Hadrava gives a brief overview of the field, the following contribution by Ingrid Guentherod deals with one of the early women astronomers, Maria Cunitia (= Kunitz, 1604?–1664), and her planetary tables, *Urania Propitia*, published in 1650. The author complains, in my opinion a little bit too strongly, about the terrible neglect that Kunitz suffered from most historians of astronomy. I believe, however, that the complaint of neglect is not valid; Delambre, Wolf and Mädler deal extensively with Kunitz in their history books (only Zinner keeps silence in 1931), she is also mentioned in Montucla’s and Kästner’s histories of mathematics; the latter offers eight pages of information, besides praise he also adds background information on her life, which is not drawn from Kunitz’ book itself (as is done in the other sources). True, Delambre is quite critical about Kunitz – but certainly not as devastating as with Ptolemy...

The next contribution, by Alena Šolcová, deals with the incorrect name “Tycho de Brahe”, and who might have been responsible for this version of the Danish astronomer’s name. She traces the name back to a novel of the affluent German writer Amalia Schoppe, *Tycho de Brahe. Ein historischer Roman* of 1839, and to the Bohemian journalist Anton Fähnrich, who wrote an article on *der große Sternenforscher Tycho de Brahe* in 1841. The author gives a brief biography of Fähnrich, but not one of the quite colorful Mrs. Schoppe (Burg auf Fehmarn 1791 – New York 1858). But are these the earliest occurrences? Using the *Karlsruher virtueller Katalog* (<http://www.ubka.uni-karlsruhe.de/kvk.html>), it was easy for the reviewer to find an earlier, and much more authoritative source, the Göttingen mathematician and historian of science Abraham Gotthelf Kästner, who used “de Brahe” in an article of 1783 and later in his verbose, and thus quite voluminous *Geschichte der Mathematik*. And this may not be the earliest occurrence of “de Brahe” in the printed record. Tycho is also called “von Brahe” in the first German biography, translated by Philander von der Weistritz (= Chr. Gottlob Mengel).

An interesting article by Zdislav Šíma and Jiří Valeška deals with the identification of true handwritten notes by Tycho Brahe. The next article, by Josef Smolka, deals with *G.J. Rheticus und Prag*, and I like to praise the author for not expressing himself in the standard scientific language of poor English, but, instead, in German. However, I deplore that none of the editors (assuming

that there are German-speaking persons among them) has taken the effort to eliminate the numerous typographic and stylistic inaccuracies that distract from the reading of this interesting article. And not only that – the book is full of misprints, errors and inaccuracies; in the year of Mozart’s 250th birthday, let us paraphrase the words which were first sung in Prague: “Ma in questo libro son già mille e tre”!

Armin Gerl investigates the relations between Galilei and Kepler, and tries to find out the reasons why the former did not recognize the latter’s insight, and only quoted him in order to criticize him. Besides Kepler’s dark and mathematically demanding texts it especially was Kepler’s mystic world view and his speculations about forces acting at a distance which Galilei abhorred. The “pansophy” cultivated at Rudolf II’s Prague court, the longing for universal knowledge and the unveiling of God’s master plan culminated in Kepler’s *Harmonice Mundi*; Galilei, however, was afraid that such mystical speculations discredited Copernicus’ teachings.

Thomas Posch and Franz Kerschbaum deal with a “hot topic” of 2004: the Venus transits of 1631 and 1639, their prediction by Kepler and Horrocks, the planetary theories on which these predictions were based, Horrocks’ observation and reduction of the event, and the posthumous publication of his results by Hevelius.

Klaudia Einhorn and Günter Wuchterl analyze Kepler’s Wallenstein-horoscopes that bring some light into Kepler’s relation to astrology. Rahlf Hansen deals with another aspect of Kepler’s astrology, i.e. the explanation of the star of Bethlehem, which was presumably caused by a rare planetary constellation – the brightening of Kepler’s supernova of 1604 indeed was preceded by another such rare constellation. Hansen argues that there is no need to postulate a historic event, but that there were strong political-theological reasons to include such an event in the Christmas texts. Let us quote another confusing misprint here: “Münter (1821) Quoten in Zdeler (1826)”. After a vain attempt to find the Zedler Lexicon in the list of references, an Ideler is finally found: thus the section should read: Münter (1821) quoted in Ideler (1826)!

Franz Daxecker gives a summary of Christoph Scheiner’s principal work “*Rosa Ursina*”, which also form part of his Scheiner biography, p. 124–144 (see JAD 11-3).

René Zandbergen and Rafał T. Prinke give a summary of the astronomical contents of the mysterious Voynich Manuscript, presumably written by Roger Bacon (13th century) and presumably bought by Emperor Rudolf II for his art chamber, but these things, as well as the general purpose and the meaning of the (undecipherable) text remain obscure. Maybe the whole thing is just a hoax of a 15th century predecessor of Konrad Kujau¹.

Georg Schuppener gives a very instructive review article on the astronomical activities cultivated by the jesuits at the Prague Clementinum (founded in 1556, abolished in 1773). Pavel Chadima and Martin Šolc, in a well-illustrated contribution, describe the astronomical instruments which were on display in the Musaeum Mathematicum of the Clementinum, which existed from 1722 to 1785. Today, the items are kept in various collections, and they were reunited, in 1998 in the framework of an exhibit celebrating the 650th anniversary of Charles University.

Peter Brosche reminds us of the life and work of Alois David, who was the director of Prague Observatory between 1800 and 1836. In his younger years, David corresponded with Franz Xaver von Zach, and the latter one encouraged him to carry out astronomical position-finding in Bohemia.

Ivan Štoll and Gudrun Wolfschmidt deal with Christian Doppler and the effect that carries his name. While Štoll’s article focuses on Doppler’s life, Wolfschmidt broadly deals with the astrophysical applications. To mention again a funny misprint: the title of Doppler’s famous paper is quoted as “Ueber das farbige Licht der *Dopplersterne*. . .” (p. 196) – a few pages later, the title page is shown in facsimile, where the proper title is given.

¹In the 1970s, K. Kujau wrote 63 “diaries of Adolf Hitler” and sold them to the magazine Stern for more than 3 million German marks.

Gudrun Wolfschmidt's second report deals with Joseph Petzval, who was born in Hungary (today his birthplace is situated in Slovakia). His life and work is briefly described on two pages, the remainder of the long article deals with astronomical photography. The reviewer stumbled over the technical details of William Usherwood's "portrait lens of short focal length of 2.4 m" (p. 216), which would have been bulky and heavy. Indeed the reference quoted in the article does not lead to any technical details, but the reviewer found an article by Pasachoff et al. (J. Hist. Astr. 27, 129, 1996) that displays not only interesting photographic documents, but also quotes from a letter of Usherwood: "my camera is for plates nine inch square Lens three & a quarter inch. A Portrait lens twelve inch focal length. . ." (i.e. 1:3.7, $f = 305$ mm).

Izold Pustyl'nik describes the history of the Petzval astrograph of Tartu Observatory, which was put into operation in 1911 and was used in the 1920s and 30s by Öpik and collaborators for different types of research. Does it still exist? The author only says "it has been used for many years". In the next article, Martin Šolc describes the fate of a Prague astrograph, which was acquired from Max Wolf in 1892. Again, the history is given only vaguely – in any case, the telescope was reconstructed recently from fragments found in ruins.

The concluding paper by Martin Šolc and Alena Mišková deals with Czech and German Astronomers at the Prague University. This $1\frac{1}{2}$ page contribution is labelled as an "abstract", and it is noted that "a more extensive meeting" would be necessary "to cover all the different facets of this time in an unbiased way." Let us mention that more than 40 years after the Elysée Treaty, a – hopefully unbiased – "Multinational History of Strasbourg Observatory" has appeared in 2005, edited by André Heck. I wonder how long it will take to carry out the same task for Prague Observatory.

To conclude: a collection of interesting papers, sometimes not very thoroughly researched, and in addition very sloppily edited – or is editing nowadays nothing more as the uncontrolled (?) processing of L^AT_EX files?

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