

A PAPER ARCHIVE OF EVERYTHING WRITTEN:

ULISSE ALDROVANDI'S *PANDECHION EPISTEMONICON*

The ongoing discussions on the effects that the use of humanist reading and note taking practices, notably commonplaceing, had on the composition of scholarly texts in the late Renaissance have transformed the way we think about the history of natural history and other early modern learned activities that relied on the respective “paper technologies”, to use Anke te Heesen’s term. Te Heesen stresses the importance of the materiality of paper: together with the special tools that typically go with it, she argues, paper can perform certain tasks that other materials are unable to perform. It thus came to be intimately bound to note taking in two senses – taking note *of* as well as taking notes *on* something.

Early modern commonplace books were much more than “paper technologies”, however. Organized in a particular way these notebooks arguably had epistemic effects, that is, they contributed to shaping the ways in which the respective scholar approached, and wrote about, a given subject matter. At the same time, the scholar’s concrete reading and observational practices were inscribed into them.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the ways in which early modern naturalists organized their notes is that up to a certain point observations by the owner of the commonplace book could happily coexist with the tidbits of knowledge he culled from the literature. An essentially bookish, humanist technology in many ways provided the model for the recording of minute observations, for instance in natural history. Broadly speaking, an analysis of “paper technologies” of this sort can afford us a glimpse at the relation between erudition and observation in the concrete everyday practice of a given scholar in the early modern period.

My current research project centers on an especially salient single source of this kind: the *Pandechion Epistemonicon*, Ulisse Aldrovandi’s (1522-1605) commonplace book extant in Bologna. Aldrovandi was the first professor of natural history at the University of Bologna. He is well known amongst historians of science today mainly for two reasons. First, he is well known for his gigantic encyclopedia of natural history, on which he started working in 1572. It is comparable in scope only with that of his Swiss contemporary Conrad Gesner (1516-1565). He is also well known for his vast *museum* or cabinet of curiosities. The *Pandechion*, on the other hand, has attracted surprisingly little scholarly attention. Many important details concerning both the composition and application of this work remain to be clarified. Given the prominent place that Aldrovandi has been allotted in the history of natural history, these insights might be of great value for the historiography of reading and the historiography of science more generally.

An analysis of this notebook can provide us with valuable information on how Aldrovandi read, and on how he managed the finds he made thus. How and on the basis of what literature were the notes taken, and by whom? Did Aldrovandi cut up letters in order to paste the relevant passages into his commonplace book, as we know Conrad Gesner did? An examination of the *Pandechion* can also help us arrive at a better understanding of the role these practices played for the composition of Aldrovandi’s printed encyclopedia of natural history and thus shed some light on the intermediate steps that lead up from the initial note to the printed scholarly text.

For a humanist natural historian like Aldrovandi the literature was arguable still the most important source of “data”. Does knowledge acquired through observation play a role in the *Pandechion* at all and if yes, how was it related to knowledge acquired through reading? Aldrovandi’s commonplace book appears to represent an early stage of the process indicated above. But the history of scholarly reading and note-taking practices in the early modern period may well turn out to be too complex to be related as a linear narrative that starts with purely bookish knowledge and ends in collections of equally pure empirical observation.

There is another important context with regard to which Aldrovandi’s manuscript encyclopedia warrants further analysis. His *Pandechion Epistemonicon* has yet to be allotted a place within the history of humanist encyclopedias. The fact that the *Pandechion* was never published should not keep us from doing so. On the contrary, analyzing Aldrovandi’s commonplace book in this vein could help us flesh out more an oft-neglected aspect of early modern encyclopedism: the fact that printed encyclopedias are based on very much the same practices as are manuscript commonplace books. Many of the metaphors used in the titles of sixteenth-century encyclopedias – such as *bibliotheca*, *museum*, *pandectae* or *thesaurus* – hint at the practices of collecting and taking notes that underlie these works. The insights this research is likely to bring forth might be of considerable interest not only for the history of early modern natural history and medicine; they can also contribute to our knowledge of the scholarly practices that were in use across the porous disciplinary boundaries of the early modern *respublica litteraria*.