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BOOK REVIEW

Benoît de Maillet (Édition établie, présentée et annotée par Claudine Cohen), *Telliamed: Entretiens d'un philosophe indien avec un missionnaire français sur la diminution de la mer*

Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2023. Pp. 408. ISBN 978-2-84137-408-3. €33.00 (paperback).

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With this brilliant edition, Claudine Cohen, a specialist in the history of evolutionary thought, has brought to public attention a little-known early Enlightenment treatise that profoundly influenced the later earth and life sciences. As a professor at EHESS Paris, Cohen draws on her extensive expertise in early modern natural philosophy and natural history. Notable works include her book *Science, libertinage et clandestinité à l'aube des lumières* (2011), in which she already addressed the work discussed here. In 2008, she also collaborated with Andre Wakefield to co-edit and translate Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's posthumously published *Protogaea* (1749).

Cohen's recent edition is dedicated to an equally remarkable treatise. Written before 1720 by the French diplomat and intellectual Benoît de Maillet (1656–1738), *Telliamed* outlines a speculative account of the Earth's formation, from a hot state to cooling, and the cyclical emergence and decay of life. Born into a distinguished Catholic family from Lorraine, Maillet gained his knowledge not from academic training but from classical education and field observations made during his professional travels as French Consul General in Cairo and later as overseer in the Levant. Similar to Athanasius Kircher's *Iter Exstaticum* (1657), in which an angel explains the Earth's inner structure to a Jesuit priest, Maillet's opus features a fictional dialogue between a 'French missionary' and an 'Indian philosopher' named Telliamed (the author's surname backwards), set in Cairo in 1715. In the guise of the 'philosopher', the author argues that the origin of all living beings lies in the sea and that all continents were originally flooded. Beyond minor effects of weathering, the receding water, according to Maillet, has shaped the contours of the landscape. In his argumentation, Maillet combines hypotheses of René Descartes and Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle with mythical narratives and empirical knowledge gained from his observations of coastlines and fossilized shells in sedimentary rocks on mountains. Plants, animals and even humans are said to have evolved independently in the sea from seeds dispersed there, with humans gradually losing scales, webbed feet and tails. Based on the rate of sea-level decline, Maillet concludes that the Earth was created more than two million years ago, which radically contradicted the Christian creation story and biblical beliefs that humanity is six thousand years old.

Cohen's book is divided into three parts. In her forty-page introduction, she familiarizes the reader with the theoretical tools essential to understanding the text, such

as *libertinage* and 'orientalism'. She situates *Telliamed* within the broader context of similar scholarly treatises aiming to present comprehensive 'theories of the Earth', including Thomas Burnet's *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1680) and John Woodward's *An Essay towards the Natural History of the Earth* (1695). Cohen also delves into the intricate history of *Telliamed*'s transmission, highlighting its circulation in various manuscripts before its posthumous publication by the Jesuit polymath Jean-Baptiste Le Mascrier in 1748. The second part of the book contains Le Mascrier's preliminary remarks, critically annotated by Cohen. The *abbé*'s explanations sought to reframe *Telliamed*'s content and soften its radical conclusions, which, unsurprisingly, contemporaries such as Voltaire had severely criticized. The third part of Cohen's book presents the text of *Telliamed* itself, based on Le Mascrier's most widely used edition of 1755. Cohen has also commented extensively on this section and provided numerous helpful literature references. Some thirty black-and-white illustrations, a comprehensive bibliography and an index of names, places and subjects complete the volume.

Cohen's edition stands out for a number of reasons. First, *Telliamed* provides valuable insights into how (individual) conceptions of the Earth's formation emerged in the early modern period through the employment of different sources and practices. The author's engagement with a wider intellectual sphere and cross-cultural interactions facilitated the integration of different forms of knowledge, sometimes disregarding ownership. The complex transmission history is equally significant. Prior to its publication, the text circulated for two decades in at least fourteen different manuscripts among savants, with readers adding their insights, resulting in multiple textual layers and avenues for interpretation. While *Telliamed* is often regarded as a precursor to early evolutionary thought, Cohen emphasizes that such attributions often overlook the specific contexts in which particular arguments or ideas were put forward. Instead, she argues that *Telliamed* should be seen as 'visionary', given the boldness, freedom of thought and naivety with which the author (and his historical editors) constructed their 'system(s) of the world' (p. 17). Maillet was undoubtedly one of the first to attribute a history to nature.

Overall, Cohen's lucid and accessible writing style, her profound discussion of the presented opus and her careful commentary are exemplary. The absence of an English translation is unlikely to diminish interest in *Telliamed*. Scholars of early modern natural philosophy will find the new edition indispensable for a thorough study of this exceptional historical source.

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