

## A LOOK AT ARACHNOLOGY IN THE 18TH CENTURY

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“Mit Aristoteles, dem Vater der Naturgeschichte, 384-322 v. Chr. nimmt auch die Geschichte der Spinnen ihren Anfang” (“The history of spiders also starts with Aristoteles, 384-322 B.C., the father of natural history”) (MENGE, 1866). Aristoteles’ work was so comprehensive that it dominated the next 2000 years. Natural science consisted mainly of looking up what Aristoteles had written about any topic.

We can take Thomas MOFFET as an example: His “Insectorum sive minimorum animalium theatrum”, completed in 1589, published in 1634, was essentially a compilation and re-arranging of the writings of ancient authors (Aristoteles, Plinius, and Gessner), and he also wrote down in a most uncritical way whatever he had heard or read, e.g. about spiders as remedies.

The first arachnologist whom we would call a scientist by today’s standards was the English physician Dr Martin LISTER. In his “Historiae animalium angliae tres tractatus: Unus de araneis” (1678), he described 34 species. He did not name the species, but numbered them and grouped them in a quite reasonable way. He was less of a taxonomist than a biologist and observer and even experimentator; he described copulation, spinning, feeding, molting, etc.

His work was written in Latin, of course; it seems like an irony that it was published in an enlarged German edition 100 years later (MARTINI, GOEZE, 1778), but it was not until 1992 that an English translation was published (PARKER, HARLEY, 1992).

“A natural history of spiders and other curious insects” (ALBIN, 1736) was published 58 years after LISTER (1678); this book was rather a step backwards. Eleazar ALBIN was a watercolour painter; his motives were more on the commercial than on the scientific side, and the contents of his book were stolen from Joseph Dandridge, a collector and much more careful drawer (BRISTOWE, 1967). The 181 “species” that ALBIN described included

several exotic species and also members of other orders. Many of the figures and descriptions are not precise enough to allow an identification of the species. Beside many repetitive figures there are also downright mistakes, e.g. with respect to the number of eyes.

Only 22 years later “Svenska spindlar” was published (CLERCK, 1758). This book can be called the start of arachnological taxonomy; CLERCK described, named and illustrated 65 species, grouped them in a quite modern way and even provided illustrations of male palps.

It seems that the outstanding quality of CLERCK’s work was not immediately recognised: 35 years later, “Aranei, or a natural history of spiders” by Thomas MARTYN was published (MARTYN, 1793). This book consists of two parts: A second edition of ALBIN’s “A natural history of spiders and other curious insects” and an English translation of CLERCK’s “Svenska spindlar”. MARTYN illustrated both books anew in outstanding beauty, but the improvement was only in beauty, not in content. Apparently he regarded both works as being equivalent.

## Conclusion

The 18th century marks the transition from a medieval to a modern era in arachnology. This change was not gradual, but happened in leaps, and true progress was not recognised immediately by all. LISTER as an observer and CLERCK as a taxonomist can be regarded as the pioneers.

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