

Pimentel, Juan *El Rinoceronte y el Megaterio. Un ensayo de morfología histórica*. Abada Editores, Madrid, 2010, 316 pp. ISBN: 978-84-96775-67-1.

By Maria Margaret Lopes \*

Objects as sites of knowledge: on the instability of the rhinoceros and the megatherium

In “El Rinoceronte y el Megaterio. Un ensayo de morfología histórica, Juan Pimentel – the renowned historian from the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas de Madrid – in a sophisticated manner constructs an argument that it is possible to establish analogies or homologies between disparate episodes separated in space and time. It concerns the production of knowledge about two quadrupeds and their images, originating in India and South America, one in the 16th century and the other in the first half of the 19th century, both icons in the history of the arts and sciences.

The histories narrated in this essay are interlinked in an attempt to track the circulation of fantastic objects and creatures deriving from the human imagination. They are histories about the innumerable aspects that shape the construction of knowledge. For readers of Latin American literature, it is impossible not to associate Juan Pimentel’s text with those imaginary beings of Jorge Luis Borges and Margarita Guerrero. To readers of Portuguese history and the history of art, Juan Pimentel proposes the challenge of re-examining images as powerful and commonplace that are present in monuments, in iconography, in historiography. Touching on the rhinoceroses and the empires of Damião de Góis and Abel Fontoura da Costa, and a whole set of erudite bibliography, he proposes the challenge of seeing Ganda – the elephant’s cheery and astute enemy, which from exotic attraction will transform itself into a diplomatic object – ‘disappear’, submerged into an age when Dürer’s rhinoceros exalted the imaginary and created an artistic tradition. To readers of the history of Palaeontology, the essay, indebted to a broad range of classical studies of comparative anatomy and especially to the recent works of Martin Rudwick, López Piñero, Francisco Pelayo, Irina Podgorny, among others, picks up the subject of the megatherium, the articulator of a whole structuring controversy within the discipline in the first half of the 19th century.

Rhinoceroses and divers megatheria that appear in these histories – and I prefer to understand them in the plural – share trajectories of descriptive, conceptual instabilities, of ‘natural hatreds’, of form and function immortalized in their images, from Strabo to Pliny or from Cuvier to Owen, among many others. In their ‘circular lives’ (to use Juan Pimentel’s title to the book’s epilogue) Dürer’s rhinoceros and the quadruped megatheria of Bru y Navarro or Hawkins’ biped (we recall, in an even more persistent image) rapidly escaped their control, became unstable, in the countless reproductions and/or classifications.

In the ‘itinerary’, in the ‘words’ and in the ‘engraved’ subtitles of the first part of the book, it is the ‘armed pachyderm’ – the rhinoceros – that articulates the construction of arts and sciences on beings from faraway territories through which the Europeans were beginning to circulate. In the second part of the book – a strange cadaver – the megatherium continues to accrue multiple identities such as ‘chimera’, ‘bones’ and finally ‘fossil’. Like a fantastic being from temporalities in which one can only circulate through the imagination.

In the first part of the book Juan Pimentel lets us know more of the histories of the images of Ganda, Bada, or of Dürer’s rhinoceros and less of their natural histories, although there is no lack of these. This movement is inverted in the natural histories of the megatheria of Lujan, Cuvier, Madri, Pander, Dalton and Owen. But, far from becoming established beings in their families or habits, the megatherium of Cuvier acquired from Larrañaga the cuirass that inaugurated its instability. Among others, Pictet imagined it living underground and Lund, with his extensive ‘field work’ experience in scenes from deep time, imagined it living in the branches of gigantic trees. Why not a carnivore? Palaeontologists continue to imagine. To imagine is just as much their function, as it is that of historians, artists.

As Juan Pimental warns his readers in the first pages, the weakness of this kind of research resides in the fact that the phenomena compared may reveal themselves to be disparate, heterogeneous and immeasurable. And perhaps for this reason, we might add, all the more enticing.

The book may be a source of inspiration for a wide audience. It not only serves to stimulate reflection on interactions in the construction of themes in the arts and sciences, the circulation of knowledge, objects as sites of knowledge, but also reflects on the current construction of the history of scientific cultures.

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