

The Dragon and the Tartar Lamb

Dragons have always crawled out from their lairs deep in the beginnings of time to test the virtue of the faith of humankind. In legend, they appear before the city gates devouring innocent blood and challenging the greatest and the most pious warriors to defend the order of things by pitting sword against fiery breath.

When a 'fearsome dragon' was sighted in the marshes near Bologna in 1572 it might have stirred these ancient fears. This time, however, the hero of the hour was no knight in shining armour on his way to canonization, but a portly, balding scholar with nothing but a heroic name, Ulisse, to show by way of warlike credentials.

Despite the fact that the pope himself was visiting the city, the Church did not lay claim to what would have been seen only a century before as a victory of Christianity over the devil. Now a collector scientist, the renowned Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605), was thought competent to deal with strange creatures. The deadpan tone in which he relates the capture of the animal is in itself significant:

The dragon was first seen on May 13, 1572, hissing like a snake. He had been hiding on the small estate of Master Petronius near Dosius in a place called Malonolta. At five in the afternoon, he was caught on a public highway by a herdsman named Baptista of Camaldulus, near the hedge of a private farm, a mile from the remote city outskirts of Bologna. Baptista was following his ox cart home when he noticed the oxen suddenly come to a stop. He kicked them and shouted at them, but they refused to move and went down on their knees rather than move forward. At this point, the herdsman noticed a hissing sound and was startled to see this strange little dragon ahead of him. Trembling he struck it on the head with his rod and killed it.¹

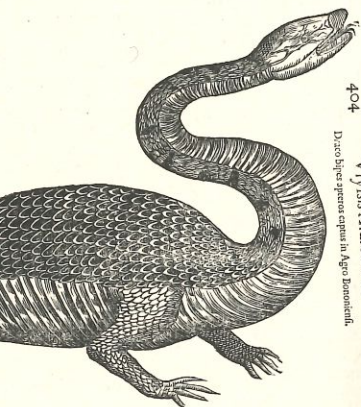
A simple bop on the head with a walking stick was all it took. What exactly this creature was is impossible to say. A large and rare lizard perhaps. Aldrovandi did what a man in his position was expected to do: he had the dragon preserved and set about writing a *Dracologia*, a Latin history of the dragon in seven volumes. It is a scientific treatise, attempting to explain the phenomenon before him as a natural occurrence, not in terms of metaphysics or religion. The animal, he wrote, was still immature, as shown by its incompletely developed claws and teeth. It had moved, he believed, by slithering along the ground like a snake, aided by its two legs. The corpse had a thick torso and a long tail and measured some two feet in all.



Parts of Aldrovandi's museum have survived to our day and are now housed in Bologna's Museo di Storia Nazionale in the Palazzo Poggia. Few tourists find their way in here and the wood-paneled rooms with their white cabinets are left in relative silence for much of the time. Two dried crocodiles mounted on the wall are watching over the birds' eggs, strange horns, stone samples, plants and learned tomes. Only the fluorescent lighting serves as a reminder that four centuries have passed. The dragon, which is now lost, had once been part of this display.

Scholars from all over Italy came to visit his collection to see the dragon for themselves. In its heyday the collection attracted scores of visitors, both learned and curious, and Aldrovandi kept an elaborate guest book, which was regularly inventorized and updated. Among those invited to sign the guest book were 907 scholars, 118 nobles, 11

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archbishops, 26 'famous men' and 1 single woman. More women had given the great man the honour of a visit, but even Caterina Sforza, the nearest thing Italy had to a queen, who had arrived with an entourage of 'fourteen or fifteen coaches and carriages containing fifty Gentlewomen, the flower of the first families of the city, accompanied by more than 150 Gentlemen',² was not thought of sufficient intellectual stature to be asked to sign.

Aldrovandi was at the vanguard of an explosion of scientific and collecting activity in the sixteenth century that emanated from Italy. He saw himself as the new Aristotle and it was his intention to finish what Aristotle and Pliny had started: a complete encyclopaedia of nature. To achieve this he needed facts, and the size of his collection became as much of an obsession to him as the gathering and description of the specimens. The museum held 13,000 items in 1577, 18,000 in 1595 and some 20,000 around the turn of the century.

Many Italian cities around this time had their own great collectors: men like Michele Mercati in Rome, Francesco Calceolari in Verona, Carlo Ruzzini in Venice, Aldrovandi and later Ferdinando Cospi in Bologna, and Athanasius Kircher in the Vatican compiled collections that, classified and catalogued, were instruments of scholarship and realizations of encyclopaedic knowledge. The cabinets of the richest collectors boasted the horns of unicorns, dried dragons with outlandish and fearsome shapes, skulls of strange birds and jaws of gigantic fish, stuffed birds of the most extraordinary colours, and parts of other, as yet unidentified, creatures that seemed to hover between reality and myth, between the hope of rational explanation and the fear of hell. Nor were these collections uniform in their content and orientation. The Veronese Maphes Cusanus, for example, was known to have a curious predilection for 'Egyptian Idols taken out of the Mummies, divers sorts of petrified shells, petrified cheese, cinnamon, sponge, and Mushromes'.³

This new spirit of Renaissance inquiry was driven by scholars and amateurs, not priests or ancient philosophers, and for the first time it became accepted that a fish market may be a better place to gather wisdom than a library. Fishermen were more likely to have caught in their nets rare and wonderful specimens and to be able to tell of their

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habits and their names than could any number of Latin manuscripts. It was no longer enough to sit at a desk in a monastery. Aldrovandi himself toured the fish markets for new finds and talked to the fishermen, just as Descartes would make observations about animal anatomy in a Paris butcher's shop a century later.



It would have been anathema to collectors even a century before to seek out objects in places such as these, for until the sixteenth century collecting had been the prerogative of princes, whose interest concentrated on objects that were both beautiful and precious, thus reinforcing their wealth and power. Tut Ankh Amon had collected fine ceramics while Pharaoh Amenhotep III was known for his love of blue enamels, and sanctuaries from Solomon's Temple to the Akropolis as well as the courts of noblemen had always held famous treasures.⁴ Ancient Rome had seen a brief blossoming of a culture of collecting, mainly of Greek works of art, but with the empire that, too, vanished.⁵

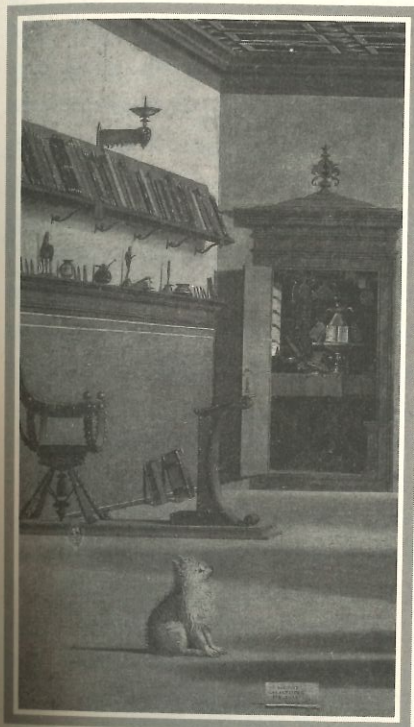
Throughout the Middle Ages princes of the Church and secular rulers accumulated great hoards of relics, luxurious vessels, jewellery and objects such as horns of unicorns (narwhales) or other legendary creatures.⁶ Out of these treasuries developed a more private form of

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appreciation, the *studiolo*, a purpose-built chamber filled with antiquities, gemstones and sculptures, popular in Italy among men of both means and learning from the fourteenth century onwards.⁷ Oliverio Forza in Treviso is thought to have had the earliest recorded *studiolo* in 1335. Collecting works of art and objects crafted from precious metals and stones became a pastime of princes, a diversion that could border on an all-consuming passion.



One day he may simply want for his pleasure to let his eye pass along these volumes [which he had bought and copied for him] to while away the time and give recreation to the eye. The next day . . . so I am told, he will take out some of the effigies and images of the Emperors and Worthies of the past, some made of gold, some of silver, some of bronze, of precious stones or of marble and of other materials which are wonderful to behold . . . The next day he would look at his jewels and precious stones of which he had a marvellous quantity of great value, some engraved, others not. He takes great pleasure and delight in looking at these and in discussing their various excellencies. The next

day, perhaps, he will inspect his vases of gold and silver and other precious material . . . All in all then it is a matter of acquiring worth or strange objects - he does not look at the price.⁸

The collector so engrossed in his treasures, Piero de' Medici, known as the Gouty (1416-69), could afford not to worry about the cost of the objects he was acquiring and commissioning wherever he could find them. Several of his descendants, most notably Francesco and Lorenzo the Magnificent, were also swept up in this passion. Francesco had a *studiolo* built and painted with panels depicting the twelve

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months and twelve orders of books that were to be found in his library.

There is, however, a world of difference between these 'armoriums for precious things' and Ulisse Aldrovandi's museum some 100 years later. Antonio Averlino Filarete, who observed Piero de' Medici in his *studiolo*, notes the kinds of possessions assembled here: antiquities, gems and works of art, as well as a few 'noteworthy and strange objects'.⁹ The significant distinction between the medieval treasuries and the new *studioli* was the privacy inherent in the idea of a study. In their programme and structure, however, little had changed. The walls that both shut out and represented the outside world with their symbolic order of things still resonated with the memory of plainchant and the vibrancy of heraldic emblems. The *studiolo* with its statues, painted panels and gems from antiquity expressed a love of art and beauty, and with beauty came virtue, faith, and what Umberto Eco called 'a kind of ontological humility before the primacy of nature'.¹⁰ The overwhelming curiosity that made collectors hunt not for what was beautiful and emblematic but strange and incomprehensible, that made them pit their wits and their erudition against that of the authors of antiquity, was still far away.

How, the French Huguenot pastor and America traveller Jean de Léry had asked in 1578, could he ask his French readers to 'believe what can only be seen two thousand leagues from where they live; things never known (much less written about) by the Ancients'?¹¹ *Things never known by the Ancients* – this phrase would echo throughout Europe until it had shaken its very intellectual foundation. With the exploration of new continents, of the planetary macrocosm and the microcosm of the smallest things, Europe was stepping out of the shadow of antiquity and its authors which had circumscribed what was known for more than 1,000 years. During the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance it had been thought certain there was no natural phenomenon, no animal and no sensation that had not already been dealt with conclusively by Aristotle and Pliny, by Cicero or Pythagoras. The rest, so the scholastics had asserted, was merely commentary and reinterpretation in the light of the gospels.

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pastor and America traveller Jean de Leveillé he ask his French readers to 'believe a thousand leagues from where they live; (as has been written about) by the Ancients?'¹¹ *Ancients* – this phrase would echo though in its very intellectual foundation. With the advent of the planetary macrocosm and the discovery of things, Europe was stepping out of the boundaries which authors had circumscribed what had been known for 1000 years. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance we had been thought certain there was no natural world beyond the animal and no sensation that had not been known to us exclusively by Aristotle and Pliny, by Cicero and the scholastics had asserted, was merely a fiction. The discovery in the light of the gospels. After the discovery of America, new discoveries kept pouring in seemingly every day. The old horizons were expanded beyond all

that had been thought possible. 'Neither Aristotle nor any other philosopher and ancient or modern naturalist has ever observed or known [these things],'¹² Francesco Stelluri exclaimed confidently after observing a bee under a microscope; another, Federico Cesi, wondered aloud what Pliny might have said had he had a chance to see 'the lion-maned, multi-tongued, hairy-eyed bee'.¹³ Collectors in Italy reacted to this change with an insistence on the empirical study of nature. Across the Alps, others did not feel that this paradigm offered them everything they hoped to know and went a different path, combining scientific, Aristotelian concepts with occult traditions.¹⁴

With the increasingly scientific spirit of the Renaissance in the second half of the sixteenth century came a profusion of collections seeking to explore and represent the world as it was then seen to be. The *studiolo* could no longer answer the need to understand the sheer profusion of the new in all its alien forms. 'It would . . . be disgraceful,' wrote Francis Bacon in his *Novum Organum* in 1620 'to mankind, if, after such tracts of the material world have been laid open which were unknown in former times – so many seas traversed – so many countries explored – so many stars discovered – philosophy, or the intelligible world, should be circumscribed by the same boundaries as before.'¹⁵

Those interested in maintaining these boundaries had put up considerable resistance. Already St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas were wary about where curiosity might lead the faithful. Bernhard of Clairvaux railed passionately against those more interested in things unknown to them on earth than in the heavens.

Why do the monks who should be devoted to their studies have to face such ridiculous monstrosities? What is the point of this deformed beauty, this elegant deformity? Those loutish apes? The savage lions? The monstrous centaurs? The half men? The spotted tigers? You can see a head with many bodies, or a body with many heads. Here we espy an animal with a serpent's tail, there a fish with an animal's head. There we have a beast with a horse in front and a shegoat behind; and here a horned animal followed with hind-quarters like a horse . . . In the name of God! If we are not ashamed at its foolishness, why at least are we not angry at the expense?¹⁶

Well aware of what curiosity could do to cats, the theologians were none too sure that faith would fare any better. Curiosity, they decided,

was a bad thing and those who were reluctant to listen to their message could find it reinforced by excommunication and by burnings at the stake.¹⁷ Even Michel de Montaigne, whose insight into human nature was not hidebound by Church teachings, was no friend of too much inquisitiveness. Having met a man who had lived in the New World, Montaigne was unimpressed: 'I am afraid our eyes are bigger than our bellies, and that we have more curiosity than capacity; for we grasp at all, but catch nothing but wind.'¹⁸ Men who spent their lives investigating obscure questions without properly knowing themselves were fools, he thought.

Montaigne's opposition to curiosity as an intellectual form of escapism had a very different motivation to the theologians', who feared that their entire world might be turned upside down. They were right, of course, as some 300 years later collections of curiosities proved a veritable engine of secularization. Collections of *naturalia*, of animals, plants and minerals, mushroomed around Europe, each one a small encyclopaedia of nature, of knowledge not dependent on the Church. Between 1556 and 1560, the Dutch collector Hubert Goltzius itemized 968 collections known to him in the Low Countries, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France and Italy, while a century later another collector, Pierre Borel, boasted of having seen 63 collections. The Venetian Republic alone had more than 70 notable collections within its borders.¹⁹

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The answer, it seems, lies partly in this world and partly in the next. The worldly explanation is that the expansion of knowledge in the sixteenth century necessitated new responses, new approaches to new phenomena. Scholars across Europe explored the macrocosm through the telescope and the smallest things through the microscope. Technological innovations, such as the printing press, advances in ship building and navigation facilitated trade across the globe and brought more and cheaper wares to Europe. At home, a more sophisticated banking system smoothed the exchange of goods. With trading empires such as the Dutch and Venetian republics came unprecedented wealth,

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another crucial factor for a flourishing collecting culture. In order to take objects out of circulation or to devote oneself to finding useless things, one has to be able to afford the time and resources to do so. Indeed, collections flourished wherever commerce did.

Together with these earthly revolutions, though, another, less palpable, one was occurring, a change in the perception of death and the material world.²⁰ Medieval Christians were forced to choose either to love the physical world and the pleasures in it and suffer eternal damnation, or to renounce it in favour of heaven – for little it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his own soul, as the gospel put it. From the perspective of the faithful, death was a transition, a moment of reckoning marked by public spectacle and common ritual. Even for those few able to afford it, accumulating objects without immediate use was acceptable only if they were in accordance with this conception of the world: relics and works of beauty, glorifying God. We do not know of any collection of plants, stones or animals during this time, though individual pieces with seemingly otherworldly properties such as 'dragon bones', usually fossils, often found their way into the treasuries of Church and nobility.

By the increasingly secular and capitalist 1500s attitudes to mortality and to worldly goods had changed. A heightened awareness of the impending end dominated poetry and art, as witnessed by the innumerable vanitas still lifes that were part of every wealthy home. In every one of them, the seductive beauty of the here and now is contrasted with its inherent decay. Every blossom was seen to contain the germ of putrefaction, and on every canvas the passage of time was counted down by hourglasses, skulls or burning candles among the sumptuous displays of fruit, precious objects or beautiful flowers. There was no delicate bud without a beetle crawling over it, waiting for it to wilt and die. The Elizabethan poet Robert Herrick (1591–1633) encapsulated this sentiment of futility by appealing to his readers to seize the day:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
 Old Time is still a-flying:
 And this same flower that smiles today
 Tomorrow will be dying.²¹

Death is only frightening if it really is the end, and if the dying of the flowers suddenly no longer signifies the eternal cycle of God's creation but irreparable loss. In a world in which death was looming larger,



attention was now directed towards the rosebuds themselves, to the material world, and to those who inhabited it. Portraiture asserted itself at the same time as the still life. It was this new conception of life that made collecting possible as it was transformed from an indulgence in *avaritia*, one of the seven deadly sins, and from the rejection of eternal life into a search

for God through his creation, into practical theology. For men like Aldrovandi, the awareness of the mortality of the world's splendours only spurred them on to make their collections a testament to future generations.

The new breed of collectors had ceased to appeal to the authority of the Church. As cardinals and bishops flocked to see Aldrovandi's dragon and the other wonders he had assembled in his house, they tacitly acknowledged the validity of his secular approach to nature, and one of the most important collections of this time, that of the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, was housed in the Vatican. Nature and the arts had broken free from their theological shackles, and the princes of the Church were eager to be part of the excitement, marvelling at the intricacies of human anatomy during dissections, at the mysteries of magnetism and at beautifully woven garments made of asbestos which would not burn even in the hottest fire – all phenomena their teachings had nothing to teach about.

There were, of course, still the great princely collections, immense treasures such as those owned by August, the Elector of Saxony, by Ferdinand II on Castle Ambras near Innsbruck, and of the great royal houses. Beginning during the 1550s, however, a network of scholarly collections spread throughout Europe, as recorded by the Dutch collector Hubert Goltzius. These scholars were in regular correspondence

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with each other and carried on their arguments about the purpose and
 order of their collections in learned books.²² Ole Worm in Denmark,
 universities such as Leiden in the Netherlands, Oxford, the city
 museum in Basel, Switzerland, and Pierre Borel in Paris all participated
 in this exchange of ideas and in the hunt for items that were strange,
 precious and unknown, ranging from bizarrely formed tree trunks to
 exotic fruits, nautilus shells and fragments of dragons and mermaids.

With the dissemination of collecting as a serious pursuit another
 phenomenon appeared: collecting became popular among people who
 had neither great means nor great scholarly ambitions; ordinary people
 who had a little bit to spare. The Netherlands were an interesting
 special case. In this republic, living from its access to the wider world
 and off its trading connections reaching from the East Indies to the
 Baltic Sea, the harbours of Amsterdam and Rotterdam were full of
 wonderful and exotic things. Captains were under instruction from
 merchants and collectors to note down and purchase everything they
 thought worth taking home, and sailors commonly increased their
 wages by hawking stuffed animals, shells or foreign artefacts around.²³

In a society without aristocracy many people could partake of this
 plenty and buy objects that they could store in their cabinets and
 display to friends, evidence of the wonders beyond the waves and of
 the staggering success their own small and marshy country had made
 of necessity by turning the hostile sea into its marketplace. There were
 dealers who specialized in such exotic wares, and apothecaries would
 commonly store items of curiosity such as Egyptian mummies and
 dried foreign fish, often leaving it up to chance whether they were to
 be powdered and taken as medicine or sold intact to become part of a
 collection. When the Leiden apothecary Christiaan Porret died in 1628,
 the auction catalogue of his shop itemized a cornucopia that would
 not have been out of place in any cabinet of its time: 'curiosities or
 rarities and selected delights of Indian and other outlandish sea horns,
 shells from the dry land and from the sea, minerals and also strange
 creatures, as well as some artificially made objects and paintings'.²⁴

Long before the famous and fevered speculation on tulips made and
 broke fortunes on the stock exchange, the admiration of colourful
 exotica was already established, and the cabinet of curiosities, initially
 a piece of furniture in which such items could be stored, became a

great fashion among the burghers of Dutch cities, so much so that even dolls' houses were not thought complete without their own miniaturized collectors' cabinets complete with tiny sea shells and carvings in drawers no larger than a thumb.²⁵



In Amsterdam alone, just under 100 private cabinets of curiosities were recorded between 1600 and 1740, testament to the great prestige collections had acquired and to the availability of objects to fill, according to inclination and purse, individual drawers or entire rooms.²⁶ The cabinet became an integral part of the Dutch interior, beginning with the mahogany cupboard crowned by oriental porcelain that can still be found in Dutch houses, and culminating in the famous private museums of amateurs such as

Nicolaes Witsen, Bernadus Paludanus or Frederik Ruysch. These cabinets really were microcosms behind doors: while poor weather and Calvinist principle meant that wealth could and would not be displayed in the street, be it on the façade of houses or in dress, the same restrictions did not apply to drawing rooms, where objects of interest, fine furniture, carpets and of course paintings defined their owners' status and taste.²⁷

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When an admirer wrote about the famous collection of Bernadus Paludanus that it contained specimens 'Ut alle hoecken claer, des werelts' ('From all corners of the world'), he did not just use a figure of speech.²⁸ The sheer variety of items collected as early as the seventeenth century is astonishing and reflects the extent of the Dutch trading empire: from Japanese arms, porcelain and calligraphy, items recorded in Dutch cabinets have their origin in outposts of a mercantile world stretching across China and India, Indonesia, Australia, African regions as diverse as Nigeria, Ethiopia and Angola, the Malaccan Islands, the Caribbean, North and South America, Egypt, the Middle

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East and right up to Greenland and Siberia. This profusion of exotica, and the manner in which it was transported, often brought back by seamen unconcerned about the intricacies of preservation, had curious side effects, such as the long-running debate on whether or not birds of paradise had legs (inspiring the beautiful and tragic legend that they were condemned to keep flying until they died – colibris were thought to drill their beaks into trees and stay fixed there if they needed rest), as the overwhelming number of specimens to reach Europe consisted only of the body, usually even without tail and head. Shells and coins, being easy to preserve and store, and decorative to boot, were especially sought-after.

While many of these rarities were used for diversion and display, other collectors applied themselves to methodical study and used their collections as repositories of knowledge, comparison, and as an encyclopaedia. Jan Jacobsz. Swammerdam (1606–78) wrote a monograph on 'bloedelose dierkens' ('bloodless little animals' or insects), which appeared sixty years after his death under the title *Bybel der natuure* (*Bible of Nature*), a daring phrase in a pious country. Apart from some 3,000 insects, his collection also contained specimens that were right at the borders of current knowledge, such as 'The fur of a Tartar Lamb which grows out of the earth', a woolly plant, which was thought to turn into a lamb at night to graze off the surrounding plants and to bleed when cut.²⁹

Accepting such creatures as at least possible until conclusively disproved was good science, not superstition, especially in a culture reared from early childhood on biblical stories and miracles, and on ideas about natural history proposed by Pliny, Plato and Aristotle, which still exerted considerable influence.



Good science and the spirit of empiricism, however, were only one answer to the multiplicity of things pouring into Europe and European minds. While scholars in Italy and the Netherlands were counting beetles, another, infinitely richer, collection was growing in the heart of Europe, at the court of the Saturnine Prince, the Habsburg Emperor Rudolf II.

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A Melancholy Ailment

You marvel that this matter, shuffled pell-mell at the whim of Chance, could have made a man, seeing that so much was needed for the construction of his being. But you must realize that a hundred million times this matter, on the way to human shape, has been stopped to form now a stone, now lead, now coral, now a flower, now a comet; and all because of more or fewer elements that were or were not necessary for designing a man. Little wonder if, within an infinite quantity of matter that ceaselessly changes and stirs, the few animals, vegetables, and minerals we see should happen to be made; no more wonder than getting a royal pair in a hundred casts of the dice. Indeed it is equally impossible for all this stirring not to lead to something; and yet this something will always be wondered at by some blockhead who will never realize how small a change would have made it into something else.

Cyrano de Bergerac, *Voyage dans la lune*¹

It was a magnificent flotilla that landed in Genoa in 1571. The banner of the Habsburgs was flying from its masts, and the cargo being transferred carefully on to the pier of the busy harbour consisted of travel chests full of gifts, weapons, books and precious clothes, and of two princes with their entire entourage of advisers, armed guards, servants and dignitaries. The commander of the ships, Don Juan of Austria, had just defeated the Ottoman fleet in the celebrated Battle of Lepanto; he now oversaw a gentler, peaceful mission. One of the passengers under his care was by all accounts a rather severe young