

Irven M. Resnick, Kenneth F. Kitchell Jr., *Albertus Magnus and the World of Nature*, Reaktion Books, London 2022, pp. 272, £ 16.95, ISBN 9781789145137

Marco Vorcelli
Università degli Studi di Padova

From the English translators of Albert the Great's monumental *De animalibus* (Kitchell Jr., Resnick 2018) and *Quaestiones super De animalibus* (Resnick, Kitchell Jr. 2008), here comes a praiseworthy book on the life, the cultural *milieu*, and, most importantly, the celebrated natural investigations of the great Dominican master. As informative as it is pleasant, *Albertus Magnus and the World of Nature* is a piece of scholarship that happily defies the expectations of the reader of historical-philosophical monographs: indeed, one cannot but be positively surprised by the set of 40 illustrations (34 of which in colour), as well as by the attempt of the Appendix to estimate the number of kilometres Albert walked in his lifetime (about 30.000), features that significantly enhance our appreciation of the "materiality" of XIII century life and culture. In effect, the authors seem to be particularly concerned with forming a concrete picture of how the Dominican's scientific research actually unfolded: "Did he keep writing materials with him when he went out to study nature? Did a secretary record his observations? Did he organize what he had seen each night?" (p. 151), they pressingly ask. Thus, what Resnick and Kitchell Jr. aim to present is a vivid portrait of the *Doctor Universalis* qua natural inquirer, and it can be safely said from the beginning that, on the whole, they have hit the mark.

The book consists of eleven consecutive chapters, but it can be divided into three main parts. The first, which comprises chapters 1-4, charts Albert's biography and intellectual development against the backdrop of the environments he inhabited, with a focus on XIII century Cologne (pp. 22-31), aptly locating each of his works within the time and place of its composition. In the biographical reconstruction, the authors understandably display the virtue of caution: in fact, the exact date (and sometimes even place) of several events in Albert's

life – including key moments such as his birth, his entrance into the Dominican Order, and his arrival at the University of Paris – cannot be precisely determined; therefore, Resnick and Kitchell Jr. justly confine themselves to listing the various hypotheses and to deriving from them the time frame in which a given event occurred. Chapter 3 also offers a general exposition of the Dominican’s “Aristotle project”, that is, his amplified paraphrastic rewriting of the whole Aristotelian corpus, which, as the authors rightly affirm, represented a radical departure from the traditional *ratio studiorum* and “a bold statement in defence of philosophy and of Aristotle” (p. 67). In a nutshell, the first section of the book, in providing such a detailed account of Albert’s life and of its “material” context, is highly valuable and enjoyable. In reading it, however, one has the impression that it could have been better balanced: indeed, a good deal of space, roughly one quarter of the whole section, delves into questions pertaining to medieval Judaism, such as the presence of Jews in XIII century Cologne (pp. 31-37) and the condemnation of the Talmud (pp. 50-61), whereas, for instance, only one page is devoted to the relationship between Albert and Thomas Aquinas! Drawing the reader’s attention from widely known issues to less familiar ones – on which one of the authors possesses an undisputed expertise (Resnick 2002, 2004) – may well be a sensible move, but one cannot help noticing the striking compositional imbalance.

The second part of the book, which spans chapters 5-10, is dedicated to Albert’s natural philosophy. By way of introduction, chapters 5 and 6 survey the principal authorities that preceded the Dominican in the field and examine his relation to XIII century encyclopedists (Arnold of Saxony, Alexander Neckam, the disciple Thomas of Cantimpré, Bartholomew the Englishman, and the confrère Vincent of Beauvais). This introductory section undoubtedly contains much relevant information – the examples of corruption of Aristotle’s zoological texts in the transmission from Greek into Arabic and, in turn, into Latin (pp. 110-117) being especially remarkable. However, in coming across a relatively lengthy description of the theories of the Presocratics (pp. 94-98), compositional concerns resurface, and one is left wondering if an essay on a XIII century thinker should transport us so far back in time. Chapters 7-10 then go on to address numerous aspects of Albert’s inquiries into the natural realm. Chapter 7

deals with his method of investigation, which, although it did not rely on the controlled and reproducible experiments of modern science, it certainly consisted in running first-hand tests and in “carefully weighing received tradition against personal observation and the opinions of *expert*” (p. 148), i.e., trustworthy witnesses of natural phenomena such as farmers, fishers, and hunters whom the Dominican reached out to and interrogated. Chapter 8 includes a plethora of his observations on topics as varied as mineralogy, animal behaviour, and hygiene, while chapter 9 reports his account of the multifarious manifestations of human sexuality, as well as his understanding of biological generation and ethnic differences. Interestingly, Resnick and Kitchell Jr. remark that, even with respect to the most delicate of these matters, Albert consistently “attempts a scientific, technical explanation” (p. 199), slipping very rarely into moral condemnation or gratuitous discrimination. Accordingly, to mention a notable case, what the authors label “racialism”, that is, the association of negative traits with black people, is not tantamount in Albert to outright racism, since he lucidly derives it from the long-established theory of humoral complexion and from his belief in “environmentalism”, namely the at-the-time-science-backed conviction that climate has an influence on body and character. Finally, chapter 10 explores Albert’s analysis of “monsters”, a term which, far from referring to “the stuff of Hollywood movies” (p. 221) – or of the *fabulae* of the poets, as the Dominican would put it – denotes all the physically explicable “errors” that originate whenever a natural form, which invariably aims to generate single and perfect males, fails to actualize its purpose: “females, twins, hermaphrodites and individuals with ordinary birth defects, abnormalities or disabilities” (p. 216).

The third and last part of the book according to my division consists of the sole chapter 11, entitled “Albertus’ Legend and Influence”. If upon reading this heading one legitimately expects to be offered a treatment of the legacy of the *Doctor Universalis* qua naturalist and, for example, a comparison between his research method and that of early modern science, one will probably be disappointed to find very little, if anything, of that and to be presented with several details of hagiographic flavour. Nevertheless, the discussion of how Albert’s supposedly excessive *curiositas* regarding natural philosophy – and, to a certain extent, related disciplines such as alchemy,

magic, and astrology – hampered his canonization process for centuries (until 1931) is thoroughly documented and insightful.

Albertus Magnus and the World of Nature is a must-read monograph for anyone interested in the figure of the great German Dominican and, more generally, in the practices of medieval science. Since it teems with the most diverse creatures, its vocabulary range goes well beyond the limited confines of the “koiné English” of academic writing, with the result that the non-native English speaker might need the support of a dictionary to fully grasp a few passages (something which I personally welcome as an added bonus). However, if the reader is willing to plough his way through the many descriptions of the quirks of animal behaviour, he will no doubt be rewarded. What puzzles me, though, is the overall interpretative approach that Resnick and Kitchell Jr. seem to adopt. Indeed, throughout the book, they recurrently account for Albert’s motivation to pursue science solely in terms of his “insatiable curiosity” (p. 157) and of his consequent “compulsion to study nature” (p. 154). Being well aware that the Dominican was not only a scientist, but also “a staunch theologian, biblical commentator and high cleric” (p. 233), the authors tend to present the activities entailed by these roles as totally opposed to his research, as if this were a committed *divertissement* for which he carved out time whenever not burdened with professional duties: “It is clear that Albertus, amid all his ecclesiastical work and travels, always found time for personal observation of nature” (p. 137); “Albertus’ curiosity was boundless, and no matter the official task at hand, he would invariably take time to stop and observe the wonders of nature” (p. 151). Nowhere does one find even a hint of the possibility that the study of nature, as well as that of philosophical books, however compelling *per se*, could be for the Dominican not a tempting diversion from his profession, but a precious ally for it: it is legitimate to assume that Albert believed that the mastery of science and philosophy could equip the Christian theologian and biblical exegete with the necessary tools to detect the innermost meanings of Scripture and to found the articles of faith on a more solid basis, so as to be much better armed in combatting heresy. On the contrary, already in the preface to their translation of the *De animalibus*, Resnick and Kitchell Jr. embrace the perspective – not

uncommon in the literature on Albert and partly justified by some statements of his – according to which the Dominican “showed an almost modern ability to separate his theological and ‘scientific’ sides” (Kitchell Jr., Resnick 2018, p. xx). This narration of his intellectual enterprise may need a deep reassessment, whereas *Albertus Magnus and the World of Nature* does nothing but reinforce it. In spite of this, it surely remains a significant and delightful book that every *Doctor Universalis* aficionado will gladly keep on his shelf.

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