

## NATURALISTIC OBSERVATIONS IN APULIA DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY. VINCENZO DE ROMITA AND ENRICO HILLYER GIGLIOLI

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### Abstract

After the 1861, year of the Unity of Italy, a new and different circulation of goods and then of naturalistic finds and scientific instruments among the different areas of the country begins. The south, far from Europe, poor of material and intellectual resources goes on finding its reference centre in Naples. In Naples there is the University and so people go to Naples to study and to teach. In Naples there has been for some years the Zoological Station with the Aquarium, made by Anthon Dohrn (1872). But something happens also in the far province of Bari (Apulia) where a young scholar, Vincenzo de Romita, manages to create, with personal sacrifice, two collections: a naturalistic one and another of Neolithic finds. He goes down into the caves, catches snakes, walks tens of miles looking for carved flint stones. But, most of all, he weaves an important net of exchanges with the most important scholar of his time. In particular, he is friend of Enrico Hillyer Giglioli who studied at the London School of Mines, where he knew Darwin and Huxley and who was back from an adventurous travel around the world with the Magenta corvette. Twelve letters found in the La Specola Museum of Florence witness a decade of exchanges. Finally, Giglioli entrusts him the responsibility of writing the observations on the Apulia avifauna for the making of the *First Report of the Results on the Ornithological Inquiry in Italy* (1890). The de Romita's collection; which soon reaches some notoriety, is the basis of a series of publications: the *Apulia avifauna* (1883), the *Addition to the Apulia Ornithology* (1890), *The new Additions to Apulia Ornithology* (1900) and the *Materials for the Fauna of Bari* (1900). This last one will be presented during the universal Exposition of Paris in 1900 inside the volume *The Land of Bari from the historical, economical and naturalist point of view* realized by the Province of Bari.

### The Mediterranean dream

Between the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, the observations and the research initiatives in the naturalistic field increased in Italy and Europe. The south of Italy was, in this period, destination of foreign scholars, attracted by the mediterranean faunal richness. Particularly, Naples and its gulf (but also Sicily) appealed to many scientists, most of them German, who, following Goethe, pursued "the South, the Sun, the orange gardens sung by Johann Wolfgang Goethe and set in music by Franz Schubert"<sup>1</sup> but they also knew they can count on the promises of an unexplored, full of life sea. The special compulsion to particular initiatives given by the debate caused by



Figure 1- The Zoological Station in Naples (1874).

<sup>1</sup> B. Fantini, *La Storia della Stazione zoologica Anton Dohrn di Napoli* in *La scienza nel mezzogiorno dopo l'Unità d'Italia*, Rubettino, Catanzaro 2009, pp. 353-356.

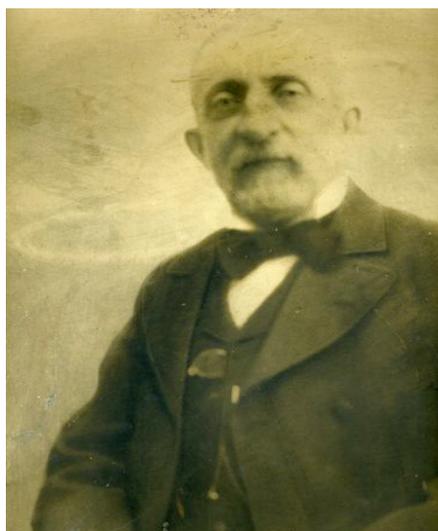
Darwin is to be added. It should be sufficient to remember, among the others, the creation of the Zoological Station and the attached Aquarium inaugurated by Anton Dohrn in Naples in 1874 (Figure 1).

There have already been native initiatives of research, even notable, before the south was affected by this “mediterranean dream” that led Haeckel among the “ostricari” (oystermen) in S. Lucia and generations of scholars to bow their head on the microscopes of the Neapolitan laboratory. Think about the monumental work by Oronzio Gabriele Costa about the fauna in the Kingdom of Naples. You can find numerous southern scholars interested in natural sciences also in the post-unitary period.

Even if Naples remained the obliged reference and unavoidable destination of the intellectual immigration as it happened for the Apulian Salvatore Trinchese or Achille Costa, there were also figures who remained in such a way anchored to Apulia, doing a naturalistic inventory of it. The names of Achille Bruni from Barletta, Achille Barba from Salento, Alfonso Palanza from Abruzzo, the author of the *Flora della Terra di Bari* who taught at the Liceo Carmine Sylos in Bitonto, Antonio Jatta, lichen scholar, come to our mind. But the forgotten, or nearly, and the lost collections are many.

I would like to dedicate a bit of attention to one of these stories that sees scientific passion and personal sacrifice together with the desire to overcome the cultural isolation by creating a wide and even international net of relations.

## Vincenzo de Romita



Vincenzo de Romita (Figure 2), son of Raffaele and Felicetta Laudati, was born in Bari the 23rd May 1838 at 22 via Palazzo di Città, a short walk from the white Saint Nicholas Basilica and nearby Mercantile place and the ancient walls, then overlooking directly the sea and housing inside the ships shelters.

He studied in Naples where he knew Achille Costa who will remember him in his *Relazione di un viaggio nelle Calabrie fatto nella state del 1876*.<sup>2</sup>

Left from Naples the evening of the 11<sup>th</sup> July by train, I stopped in Bari the 12<sup>th</sup>, being very uncomfortable going on towards Calabria. I spent a few hours in the city with Mr. Vincenzo de Romita, already scholar of our University and now professor of Natural History in that Technical Institute, who with zeal deals with the collection of the most particular and interesting things the region could offer him: objects I could observe, others in the Institute office, others in his particular collections. For example I could notice various species of birds not easy to find in southern Italy. Among the Reptiles he had the *Coluber leopardinus*, variety described by Pallas with the name of *Col. Lineatus*. Among the fish, a notable two-headed Shark foetus, a not common monstrosity in that class of Vertebrates. Finally, among the insects there was the *Cicindela dilacerata*, D.c.j., which appeared for the first time in the Fauna of the Neapolitan provinces.

**Figure 2 – Vincenzo de Romita (1838-1914).**

The collection of which Costa talks about is that of naturalistic finds the scholar, then thirty-eight aged, started some years ago both privately and as a collection of didactic use at the “Reale Istituto tecnico e nautico” he had been teaching science since 1874. Later, in order to classify and describe the Apulian Fauna (with particular reference to ornithology), de Romita will publish the *Avifauna*

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<sup>2</sup> *Relazione di un viaggio nelle Calabrie fatto nella state del 1876*. Memory from the IX<sup>th</sup> volume of *Atti della Reale Accademia delle Scienze Fisiche e Matematiche di Napoli*. Read during the Meeting of the 11<sup>th</sup> May 1881. Tipografia dell’Accademia Reale delle Scienze, Napoli 1881, p.2.

*pugliese* (1883), the *Aggiunta all'Ornitologia pugliese* (1890), the *Nuove aggiunte all'Ornitologia pugliese* (1900) and the *Materiali per una fauna barese* (1900).

During his youth he dealt with great enthusiasm and energy to search the countries of Canosa, Toritto, Terlizzi, Altamura, Cassano, Alberobello, Monopoli, Fasano, looking for Neolithic artefacts and further moving to Gargano and Basilicata. These excursions allowed him to fit out a collection of more than one thousand and five hundred exemplars such as arrows heads, knives, spears, hatchets, scrapers. He presented a significant selection of them during the “Esposizione italiana di Antropologia ed Archeologia preistorica” (Italian Exposition of Prehistoric Anthropology and Archaeology).

The Province of Bari could so appear, not making a bad impression<sup>3</sup> on the other hand, during the exposition, which came alongside the International Congress of Bologna in 1870.

In a booklet of 1876 named *Gli avanzi antistorici della provincia di Bari* he wanted to describe these researches of his own, the long soil searching, the findings emotion, the hard talks with the farmers who, considering the silica objects provided of “the virtue of keeping the evil eye far”, appeared very reluctant to give them up.

“Not without great difficulties” - as he writes - “and using any kind of persuasion, I sometimes succeeded in taking away an arrow head, handed down from generation to generation and attached of the strangest virtues.” He proceeded from the fact that the province of Bari had been, from this point of view, not much studied “even if very rich of rock artefacts” and it had not had “so far someone who had designedly collected and studied the prehistoric archaeology treasures which it was throughout strewn with”. And he came to a surprising result: “My researches were crowned by a so splendid outcome that it overcame my conceived hopes.”<sup>4</sup>

The criteria he followed trying to date the finds on the basis of the possible remains of the ancient fauna were also, if one might say so, modern as “trying to date the human artefacts when the fauna horizon which goes with the finds is missing you run the risk of judging rashly.”<sup>5</sup> Starting from 1875 and, for at least 10 years, de Romita had a correspondence with Enrico Hillyer Giglioli (Figure 3), then director of the “La Specola” museum in Florence as the 12 letters kept in it attest.<sup>6</sup>

### Enrico Hillyer Giglioli



Figure 3 - Enrico Hillyer Giglioli (1845-1909)

Enrico Hillyer Giglioli studied in England as a young man at the Royal School of Mines where he knew Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley and Charles Lyell.

He rather edited the publication of Huxley's lessons on the journal *Lancet* before being obliged to come back to Italy because of the missed renewal of his own grant.

The following year, only twenty year-old, on the scientist and senator Filippo De Filippi's recommendation, he embarked the Magenta “pirocovetta” for a voyage of circumnavigation around the world. In Hong Kong, on his way back, De Filippi, struck down by amoebic dysentery, died at the age of 53. At the end of the voyage Giglioli stayed for some time at the “Regio Museo Zoologico” (Royal Zoological Museum) to reorganize the wide collected material under the management of Michele Lessona, who by then had also replaced

<sup>3</sup> V. de Romita, *Gli avanzi antistorici della provincia di Bari*, Stabilimento tipografico Cannone, Bari 1876. Anastatic reprint in P. Zeller (edited by) *Vincenzo de Romita e il suo tempo*, Adda Editore, Bari 2010, p. 4. The contribute of de Romita to the Exposition is also reported in L. Pigorini, *Relazione sulla Esposizione italiana di antropologia*, 1871, pp. 30-31. See also: *Bull. paletnol.it*, II, 1876, p. 207.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p.4

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p.7

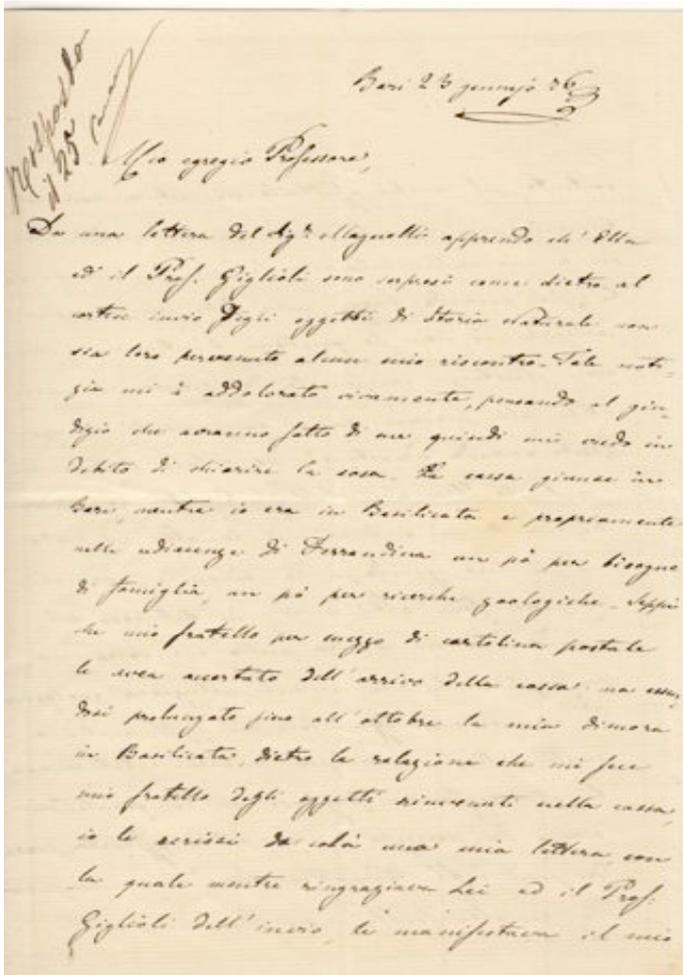
<sup>6</sup> See: *Vincenzo de Romita e il suo tempo*, cit.

De Filippi in the role of Italian divulgator of Darwinism.

Moved to Florence, in 1874 he was appointed full professor of Zoology and Compared Anatomy of the Vertebrates. He started to create, in those years, the Central Collection of the Italian Vertebrates as well as ethnographic and anthropologic collections.

He wrote 400 scientific publications most of which about natural sciences, among them *Zoologia della Magenta*, a wide report of his adventurous voyage, praised by the minister Quintino Sella. He made a lot of research trips to Europe and organized a wide net of relations aimed also at obtaining exemplars to improve his collections. A considerable part of his attention was occupied by ornithology. In 1879 he started the publication of the *Iconografia dell'Avifauna italica* (incomplete) the aim of which was that of offering a realistic picture of all the bird species in Italy. In 1881 he published two works about the Italian Avifauna and afterwards he organized an ornithological survey by sending modules to the observers all over Italy. The *Primo Resoconto dei Risultati dell'Inchiesta Ornitologica in Italia*, her first account of the results of the ornithological survey in Italy, was published in the years 1889-1890, while the *Secondo Resoconto dell'Inchiesta Ornitologica* in 1907. He died the 16<sup>th</sup> December 1909 after a heart attack.

### The de Romita-Giglioli correspondence



The correspondence between de Romita and Hillyer Giglioli is mainly made of proposals of exemplars exchange or, sometimes, selling. However their personal relation went far from these negotiations and materialized into mutual visits, de Romita remembered in his *Materiali per una fauna barese* a work later presented in the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900, one of his visit in Apulia:

I have to thank the fortune of having accompanied the eminent professor during an excursion in Taranto for ichthyologic researches if I have the pleasure to number also this species (*Cygnus Bewickii*), native of the extreme north of Europe and Asia, in the *Avifauna pugliese*. In the “Swan pharmacy” we admired one exemplar which had been caught in the gulf of Taranto and properly in the Mar Piccolo during the winter of 1878.

We also know from the correspondence that de Romita submitted the proofs of the *Avifauna pugliese* to the younger but very famed professor for examination. In a letter of 1885 we can read:

**Figure 4 – A letter from the correspondence between de Romita and Hillyer Giglioli**

Finally my poor work about the Apulian Avifauna is at the printing house and within few days I will be able to collect the first proofs!” I also would like to contribute to the development of the Italian ornithology; and if I succeed with this

7 *Materiali per una fauna barese*, p.63. Anastatic reprint in P. Zeller (edited by) *Vincenzo de Romita e il suo tempo*, cit.

work I will let you and the experts judge. Meanwhile I would have a singular fortune if, before releasing it, I could submit it to you for examination, for this reason I will send you the proofs as soon as they are ready so that you may write your observations down in the margins. But this only if it would not cause you too much trouble, therefore I look forward to your adhesion.<sup>8</sup>

Actually the work was published only months later without the examination of the proofs:

The printing of my memories about the Apulian birds embarrasses me a lot because of the typographer, who after leaving whole weeks pass without composing a word, when he in a rush has composed a sheet, he does not give me the necessary time to correct it thoughtfully. As it happened with the first sheets, for which it was not possible for me to submit them to your examination. Meanwhile I send them to you adding the composed pages, not already printed. I will consider with great favour all the observations you will do about it and I will wait for the corrections of the part not already published, with the hope of using it.<sup>9</sup>

Hillyer Giglioli was the representative of a prestigious research centre, provided of adequate means. “Not on another pact the poor can give to the rich, and I am very poor, and you are very rich” de Romita wrote him in March 1883, talking about the necessity for confidently waiting for the exchange compensations despite of the great delays.

In this symmetry, nevertheless, we surely know that Giglioli really appreciated the work of his “poor” colleague, so much that he got him to provide the data concerning Apulia for his famous ornithological survey. In the *Primo Resoconto dei risultati dell’inchiesta ornitologica in Italia* he wrote: “This list has been filled in by the eminent professor Vincenzo de Romita in Bari, author of an excellent work on the Apulian Avifauna published in Bari in 1884; in this list there are a lot of observations, unpublished so far.”<sup>10</sup>

Also later, in the second report in 1907, he will mention him dozens of times.

Ultimately we can here register as in the post-unitary context the need for nets of cultural relationships is getting stronger in order to achieve a deep comprehension of the national territory and the local realities. In such a pattern both the great initiatives, as Giglioli’s survey aimed at evaluating the Italian faunal reality, and the local but not isolated initiatives, directed to didactic and research aims, found their place.

De Romita’s work (both the collections and the publications) give us back the picture of Apulia as characterised by a richness of species, a biodiversity which can nowadays only appear as extraordinary. We can now read about the Great bustard (*Otis tarda*) again, here extinct, “this majestic bird, which was reasonably called the ostrich of Europe, not seldom appears in the Capitanata plains among the endless cultivated wheat fields [...]” We can also read about the Little bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*), also disappeared, “which you can meet with more frequency and nesting in Apulia.” About the beautiful Purple swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*), de Romita writes: “two exemplars of this beautiful small bird (“rallo”) were sent to prof. Giglioli, from the padule surrounding Lesina lake and, according to the eminent ornithologist, it may be sedentary and not rare there.”<sup>11</sup>

Sightings of golden eagles, spotted eagles and *Bonelli*’s ones in Bitonto, Santo Spirito, Taranto talk about a far-off time in which Apulian skies were crossed by impressive birds of prey’s shapes.

Worries about the excessive and indiscriminate destruction made by the hunting were not already then extraneous to these observations. His critics are often direct and explicit, sometimes in the context of impressionistic or poetic descriptions as in the case of the robins which “are in winter

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<sup>8</sup> Letter of the 17<sup>th</sup> February 1885 in P. Zeller (edited by) *Vincenzo de Romita e il suo tempo*, cit.

<sup>9</sup> Letter of the 25<sup>th</sup> April 1885 in P. Zeller (edited by) *Vincenzo de Romita e il suo tempo*, cit.

<sup>10</sup> See E. Hillyer Giglioli, *Primo Resoconto dei Risultati dell’Inchiesta Ornitologica in Italia. Parte Seconda. Avifauna locali. Risultati della inchiesta ornitologica nelle singole province compilato dal dott. Enrico Hillyer Giglioli.*, Le Monnier, Firenze 1890, p. 560.

<sup>11</sup> *Materiali per una fauna barese*, Anastatic reprint in P. Zeller (edited by) *Vincenzo de Romita e il suo tempo*, cit., p. 58.

the most beautiful characteristic ornament of the fields where there is a thick vegetation [...] and despite of this fact their massacre by snares is really dreadful.”

Talking, for example, about grebes he tells how:

In winter much more than in autumn or in spring you can see on the sea at a short distance from the shore some couples or a small number of this very moving creatures, singular as other congeners not only for their organization but for their essentially aquatic life. The bright white of their lower parts, the gracefulness of their movements, the really colourful poses they assume on the wave, their continue diving and floating back to the surface cannot pass unnoticed and the passer-by cannot avoid to stop ecstatic in a beautiful winter day and admire the show. Unfortunately our hunters' lead often takes this enchantment away.<sup>12</sup>

The worries for the hunt destructiveness are shared also by other (not so many) scholars of the time such as Giacinto Martorelli, Joseph Whitaker, Cecilia Picchi, Giovanni Salvatori, Arturo Francelli. Martorelli, for example, wishes “the preservation of our whole fauna the components of which are all so linked by very complicated biological relations we still know very little about, that it would be very risky trying to cut any one.”<sup>13</sup> In the opening relation of the “Congresso Cinegetico” (Cynegetic Congress) in Rome the 12th November 1911, he admonishes: ”Seeing continuously coming to us the innumerable crowds of passing birds with marvellous constancy of dates, without realizing their sensibly decreased number over the years, let us think their production was endless and we squandered killing them in millions .”<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, the post-unitary period, appears signed not only by the highest impulse in constituting zoological collections but also by the first worries (then often disregarded) for the preservation of a heritage of which we realize the extraordinary vastness only now. With the new collections, among which the one wanted by Hillyer Giglioli in Florence stands out (The Central Collection of the Italian Vertebrate Animals), stricter criteria of cataloguing are also needed. The labelling of each exemplar (date, place, gender, age), reported in a general catalogue, is substituting the custom according to which the information about date and place of collecting were generally omitted. Giglioli writes:

Each species, when necessary, should be represented by the places in which it lives, in order to obtain precise knowledge about its local distribution. No piece will be admitted in the collection if it has not been determined, registered, catalogued and labelled, so that the collection is always well-ordered.<sup>15</sup>



Figure 5 - De Romita's collection in Bari, actually.

De Romita's collection (Figure 5), who takes care of placing the vernacular names next to the traditional classification in his catalogues, certainly represents this new trend as it constitutes an important example of the so widespread appearing of local collections (private, in schools or in religious institutes) outside the great academic and museum institutions.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 73.

<sup>13</sup> See: Barbagli F., *Giacinto Martorelli: ornitologo, illustratore,protezionista*, in Martorelli G., *Monografia illustrata degli uccelli di rapina in Italia* (1895), *Memorie della Società italiana di Scienze Naturali e del Museo Civico di Storia Naturale di Milano*, Milano, 2002, vol. XXI, number II, pp. XII-XIII.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem

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