

Boscovich, Copernicus and Cosmological Authority in mid-Eighteenth-Century Rome

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In 1777, a significant yet largely overlooked book was published in Rome. It included a series of poems on astronomical matters composed by a former student of the Collegio Romano, Camillo Garulli. One of the poems, the largest in the volume, was titled *Hypothesis Copernicana*. In it, Garulli illustrated the downfall of an outdated scholarly paradigm through the symbolical death of its main authority: Aristotle. Following the popular legend, Garulli claimed that Aristotle had failed to explain the origin of the tidal motions in the strait of Euripus and thrown himself into the sea, thus giving way to a new, Copernican/Newtonian framework. Not only did Garulli feel that he was in a comfortable position to ridicule Aristotle and the scholastic tradition as a whole, but he could also for the first time put the expression *Hypothesis copernicana* on the cover of his book. Although the poem was preceded by a standard warning that the “hypothesis” was only one of the possible explanations of the world system, Garulli did not have to hide what was at the heart of his work and could expose it freely.

This paper investigates how around the mid-eighteenth century, Roman Jesuits began to advocate and propagate the heliocentric system. As we will see, as a peculiar shield against any potential accusations, they largely exploited the authority of Isaac Newton. The central figure in this process was the leading Jesuit scholar of the time, and Garulli’s former teacher at the Collegio Romano, Roger Joseph Boscovich. I will thus demonstrate how Boscovich’s and his peers’ work was instrumental in lifting the formal prohibition against the works that endorsed Copernicanism and consequently making the Catholic Church accept it as the sole mathematically reliable model of the universe.