



The censoring of Galileo's *Sunspot Letters* and the first phase of his trial

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 26 January 2011

Keywords:
Galileo
Sunspot Letters
Roman Inquisition
Bible
Censorship
Heliocentrism

ABSTRACT

Galileo's *Sunspot Letters*, published in 1613, underwent extensive censorship before publication. It seems likely that the Roman Inquisition had charge of the pre-publication review of Galileo's work, rather than the usual organ, the Master of the Sacred Palace. A study of that process demonstrates that the issue to which the censors objected was Galileo's use of the bible, not his allegiance to Copernicus. In the course of the first phase of Galileo's trial, orchestrated by one of the most powerful Cardinal Inquisitors, two propositions allegedly drawn from the book were judged either "formally heretical" or "at least erroneous in the faith." These judgments might have come not from the published book but from the Inquisition's censorship of its drafts. They supported Galileo's silencing in 1616.

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When citing this paper, please use the full journal title *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*

That Galileo believed Copernicus right is an utterly trivial claim.¹ When exactly he came to that position has engendered controversy, but it seems established that his conversion came as early as 1597.² Equally indisputable is that his allegiance helped to entangle Galileo with the Roman Inquisition, but how and when are much less clear. One reason is a large gap in the study of Galileo's troubles.³ The role of his *Sunspot Letters* (*Istoria e dimostrazioni intorno alle macchie solari [sic]*), published in 1613, has been almost completely overlooked. It is well-known that the book began Galileo's difficulties with the Jesuits, since he aimed it at earlier published reports of observations by their German confrere Christoph Scheiner,

leading to a truly nasty priority dispute.⁴ *Sunspot Letters* has been the subject of much attention recently for its illustrations, especially by Hans Bredekamp and Mario Biagioli; a new translation with extensive commentary by Albert Van Helden and Eileen Reeves has just appeared.⁵ Although the censorship to which the book was subjected has also been studied briefly by Paolo Rossi in 1978 and by Richard J. Blackwell in 1991, and at greater length by Giorgio Stabile in 1994, the work's genesis has not received much attention and its role in his trial has been overlooked.⁶ Rossi, speaking of "i significativi interventi della censura" nevertheless discussed the alteration of only one passage on the corruptibility of the heavens in

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¹ Abbreviations: ACDFSO, Archivum Congregationis Doctrinae Fidei Sanctum Officium; CL, G. Gabrieli, "Il carteggio linceo della vecchia accademia di Federico Cesi: 1603–1630," *Atti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Memorie della Classe di Scienze morali, storiche et filologiche*, ser. 6, vol. 7, fasc. 1–4 (1938), pp. 1–1446; reprinted Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1995; EN, Antonio Favaro, ed., *Le Opere di Galileo Galilei*, 20 volumes (Florence: G. Barberà, 1933; reprint of 1890–1909 ed.).

² See most recently Bucciantini (2003, reprinted 2007), p. 29.

³ Incredibly enough, although Galileo's case has been done to death, his trial has never been studied as such. The closest to such a study is a short article by Giacchi (1942). Three recent books claiming to treat Galileo's trial in fact do not: Blackwell (2006), Speller (2008); Hofstadter (2009), the last a trade publication. Francesco Beretta has made an excellent start in an imposing series of articles, but is still a long way from a full-dress treatment. See, for example, Beretta (1999, 2000, 2005). I hope to remedy the lack of a study of Galileo's trial. For now, see Mayer (2010) on the trial's pivotal moment.

⁴ See especially Dame (1966), van Helden (1996).

⁵ Biagioli (2006), Bredekamp (2007), Galilei & Scheiner (2010).

⁶ Rossi (1978); Blackwell (1991), pp. 57–58, the only previous student to note that the censors let stand at least one statement of Galileo's Copernicanism and "focused more on scriptural than astronomical claims;" Stabile (1994), pp. 37–47. The great Galileo editor Antonio Favaro limited his introduction mainly to the work's printing and Galileo's controversy with Scheiner. He mentioned its censorship in one sentence and treated how it came to be written in a page. EN, 5, pp. 9–19, pp. 11 and 12. Favaro (1992) considered the question of the cost of publication and described four copies of the book then in the Biblioteca nazionale centrale di Roma. Far the best study of the book's argument is Shea (1977), chapter 3.

light of Galileo's attempt to use scripture to support his position.⁷ Stabile concluded that the book caused problems because of its defense of the Copernican thesis that the earth moved around the sun together with its appeal to scripture, but the first was far the more important irritant.⁸ Maurice A. Finocchiaro and Ernan McMullin, without reference to *Sunspot Letters*, go further and flatly reject any suggestion that Galileo's use of the bible caused his problems with the Roman authorities.⁹ McMullin says "[i]t has sometimes been suggested that Galileo's supposed use of Scripture to bolster his Copernican claims was what brought down the wrath of the Holy Office on his head. There is no evidence of this in the record . . . [T]here is no hint of the charge that he was using Scripture to support Copernicanism [emphasis in the original] . . . The further charge of his employing Scripture to make his own case for Copernicanism is nowhere mentioned."¹⁰ This claim is strictly true only if "the record" does not include the censorship of *Sunspot Letters*.

This comparative lack of attention to the book's content is the more surprising in that 1) it is the only one of Galileo's works, other than the *Dialogue on the Two Chief World Systems*, to be named in his sentence, 2) Galileo announced in it his explicit adherence to heliocentrism, and 3) it underwent extensive pre-publication censorship. In this article I suggest that the Roman Inquisition censored the book in advance of publication, and then examine the role it played in the first phase of Galileo's trial. Against the received opinion, I shall argue that the book got him into trouble not for its Copernican allegiance, but almost exclusively for his efforts to interpret the bible.

1. Who censored *Sunspot Letters*?

At what date Galileo began to study sunspots is obscure. Fortunately, it is easy to be precise about when he began to write the *Letters* and indeed we can track the composition and printing of the book almost day by day. From very early on, Roman censors took a hand. Although the role of the proto-modern scientific body the Lincean Academy in the revision of Galileo's later *Assayer* has been well studied, it has been insufficiently stressed in the case of *Sunspot Letters* which the Academy used almost as a token of admission to its ranks.¹¹ This oversight is serious, given that nearly all the same issues arose in the earlier case (if Massimo Bucciantini is correct, including atomism) and Federico Cesi, founder of the Lincean Academy, and other Linceans offered Galileo the same advice at least to try to meet the censors' objections, much of which he took only with an ill grace and some of which he rejected, to his cost.¹²

The Augsburg patrician, banker, publisher, Lincean, "exceedingly good friend" of the Jesuits (and Inquisition informant) Mark Welser was behind *Sunspot Letters*.¹³ After publishing Scheiner's original three letters on the phenomenon, he asked Galileo's opinion. He also innocently invited Galileo to get himself into trouble with

the very first line of his letter which would also be included in *Sunspot Letters*, albeit with a significant alteration. Originally Welser quoted Matthew 11.12., "The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent have carried it off by force" (*Regnum caelorum vim patitur, et violenti rapiunt illud*), not perhaps the most tactful way to describe Galileo's endeavors, even had Welser not been citing scripture.¹⁴ A month later Cesi forwarded Welser's report of Scheiner's work, adding that he, Cesi, was defending Galileo's telescopic observations, "provoked [or urged] by my friend Signor [Antonio] Buzio."¹⁵ Buzio is the official who will issue the judgment supporting the imprimatur, the permission to publish, for the *Letters*. Galileo first wrote Welser on 4 May 1612; in his reply Welser praised Galileo for outdoing Scheiner and expressed interest in publishing his letter.¹⁶ Cesi and Galileo had other plans, at first intending to put Galileo's short reply into a collection on scientific discoveries sponsored by the Linceans.¹⁷ Galileo also circulated manuscript copies, including one to the Florentine cardinal most important to his story, Maffeo Barberini, the future Urban VIII.¹⁸

By the 9th of June, Galileo had finished his second letter to Welser which Cesi also offered to publish. Since Scheiner could not read Italian (the use of which for such serious purposes Galileo defended in the *Letters* on the possibly specious grounds that Tuscan was the most perfect language), Galileo had asked some of his Paduan satellites to translate his work into Latin. Meanwhile, he would publish in Italian in Rome. The change in plan produced immediate consequences. Late in May Cesi raised the first alarm, telling Galileo that "the revisers" had raised difficulties over another work the Linceans meant to publish because it was "greatly contrary to Aristotle."¹⁹ Unfortunately, neither in this case nor that of Galileo's book did (could?) Cesi identify these revisers nor for whom they were acting.

What appears to be the best evidence about the agency in charge comes from Welser's agreement in February 1613 to the change of his first letter's opening in order not to annoy "the Master."²⁰ Welser meant the Master of the Sacred Palace, who originally had sole authority to license books for publication in Rome and its "district" but by now had been reduced to one of three separate but overlapping organs controlling papal censorship. The other two were the Congregations of the Index and of the Inquisition, the second far the most powerful of the three and in a position to override the others.²¹ Contemporaries knew this. As one instance, the author of a book placed on the Index wrote the Inquisition asking to have it removed.²² Commentators nonetheless seem to have been a little confused about the precise authority each had. One of the clearest statements relied on recently to sort out their relations came from the famous canonist and cardinal Giovanni Battista de Luca in his *Relatio romanae curiae*, first published in 1673. His discussion of the Master was apparently straightforward.

"[T]he duty of this Master [of the Sacred Palace] principally seems to consist in the revision of works or books to be printed in Rome and its district, since printing is prohibited without prior

⁷ Rossi (1978), pp. 47–49.

⁸ Stabile (1994), p. 46.

⁹ Finocchiaro (2002), McMullin (2005).

¹⁰ McMullin (2005), pp. 111–112.

¹¹ Redondi (2004), p. 182; Redondi (1987), p. 145. For the emphasis the Linceans put on the book, see its presentation to Francesco Barberini at the time of his induction. *CL*, pp. 813–814.

¹² Bucciantini (2003, reprinted 2007), pp. 228–233.

¹³ ACDFSO, Decreta S.O. 1612, p. 112 and paraphrase of Giovanni Francesco Sagredo's description of Welser in his letter of 2 June 1612 in *EN*, 11, no. 687.

¹⁴ *EN*, 5, p. 93.

¹⁵ Or Bucci. *EN*, 11, no. 653. Cesi probably referred to his "Celiospicio." See below.

¹⁶ *EN*, 11, no. 683.

¹⁷ *EN*, 11, no. 675; *CL*, no. 117; *EN*, 11, no. 676; *CL*, no. 118; cf. *EN*, 11, no. 665. This remained Cesi's plan as late as 7 July. *EN*, 11, no. 725; *CL*, no. 138.

¹⁸ *EN*, 11, nos. 684, 690, 694 and 697.

¹⁹ *EN*, 11, no. 682; *CL*, no. 121.

²⁰ *EN*, 11, no. 847; *CL*, no. 221.

²¹ For the most recent discussion, see Brevaglieri (2009). I am grateful to Dr. Brevaglieri for sending me a copy of her article.

²² ACDFSO, Decreta S.O. 1614, p. 531.

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