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BOSCOVICH'S PROPOSED VOYAGE TO CALIFORNIA

In 1691¹ and in 1716² the British astronomer Halley had proposed using the transit of the planet Venus across the sun to obtain a more accurate value of the solar parallax. It was believed that this method could provide a better value of the distance of the earth to the sun and hence of the dimensions of the solar system. Needless to say such an observation was of great importance. But it was critical that the observation of this rare phenomenon be made from different sites which were as far apart as possible. One of the sites chosen for observing the transit of 1769 was California.

The man selected for this expedition by the Royal Society of London was Fr. Boscovich. He had been invited earlier to go to Constantinople in 1761 for a similar observation of the transit of Mercury. After a long preparation he arrived there too late. This time, adverse circumstances and the opposition of the Viennese court made his proposed trip impossible. However this invitation to go to California was of some consequence for him and his relationship with the Court of Vienna.

In the *Archives of the Society of Jesus* in Rome, besides the group of letters written by Boscovich to Fr. Puccinelli, there is another group of letters all relating to the proposed voyage to California. All these letters have been recently published by

¹ E. HALLEY, *De visibili conjunctione inferiorum planetarum cum Sole dissertatio*, "Philosophical Transactions", 1961, p. 511.

² E. HALLEY, *Methodus singularis, qua Solis parallaxis sive distantia a Terra, ope Veneris intra Solem conspiciendae, tuto determinari poterit*, "Philosophical Transactions", 1716, p. 454.

Rita Tolomeo³. The ones referring to the proposed voyage to California are 26: between *James Ear of Morton*, president of the Royal Society of London, and Boscovich; from Boscovich to *Carlo Count of Firmian*, the Austrian plenipotentiary in Milan, to *Fr. Joseph Liesganig*, professor of mathematics and physics in Vienna and a candidate to accompany Boscovich to the transit observation, and to the *Count Canal*, a confidant in Vienna.

The first letter of Morton to Boscovich⁴ proposing the voyage is missing from the collection. But from the subsequent correspondence we can deduce that Boscovich was asked to lead the expedition to the California. He should take along another Jesuit, so that the observations could be done from two different sites, to ensure the success of the expedition. All expenses were to have been paid by the Royal Society.

The choice of Fr. Boscovich was a logical one. He had been made a fellow of the Royal Society just six years before. Boscovich had proved his resourcefulness in his campaign to measure the two degrees of the meridian and had shown his ability in observations requiring the highest precision. It was out of question to ask permission from the Spanish government to allow an English astronomer to go to California, since he would probably have been suspected of using the occasion to explore those vast territories for the British Government. The American territories were diligently guarded from foreigners. Boscovich would be beyond suspicion in this regard.

Boscovich accepted the invitation to go to California with great enthusiasm. Not only because as an astronomer he was eager to observe this rare celestial event, which eluded him few years earlier in Constantinople, but also because it was a welcome opportunity to leave the asphyxiating atmosphere of the University of Pavia. Unfortunately for Boscovich his dream ended in 1767 with the expulsion of the Jesuits from Spain by the king Carlos III. Although the Spanish king did not immediately revoke permission for the expedition to California, it was evident that it would have been a very risky enterprise. In the

³ R. G. BOSCOVICH, *Lettere per una storia della scienza (1763-1786)*, a cura di R. TOLOMEO, Roma 1990, pp. 283-325.

⁴ Early 1766.