

From Prodigies to Meteorites (1492-1803)

MATTHIEU GOUNELLE¹

¹Muséum national d'histoire naturelle & Institut universitaire de France, Paris, France. Email: gounelle@mnhn.fr

In November 1492, a meteorite fell in Ensisheim, an Alsatian town ruled by Maximilian of Habsburg, King of Romans [1,2]. Soon after the fall, Sebastian Brant, a renowned scholar attached to the Prince's court, published a widely circulated pamphlet in which the fall was understood as a prodigy [3]. While Brant positively interpreted this divine sign and encouraged Maximilian to wage battle against the French, town people hung the meteorite in the local church where it stayed for more than three centuries.

In 1803, almost ten years after Ernst Chladni first proposed the extraterrestrial origin of fallen stones [4], and a decade of bitter debates, thousands of stones fell at l'Aigle, in Northern France. Following that event and its relation by Jean-Baptiste Biot, the whole European scientific community acknowledged the reality of meteorites' falls as well as their extraterrestrial origin [5].

What happened between these two dates? How did marvellous stones become objects worth of a scientific study? How did courtiers acting as scholars and prophets turned into professional scientists engaged in Europe-wide debates? Why are meteorites now hosted in Museums and not within churches?

I will show that answers to these questions can be found within the building of a "modern" scientific ethos which went hand to hand with the invention of a new natural world, whose advent made it possible to turn prodigies into meteorites.

[1] Ursula Marvin (1992) The meteorite of Ensisheim: 1492 to 1992, *Meteoritics & Planetary Sciences*, **27**, 28-72. [2] Odile Kammerer (1994) Un prodige en Alsace à la fin du XV^e siècle : la météorite d'Ensisheim. In *Actes des congrès de la Société des historiens médiévistes de l'enseignement supérieur public*, 25^e congrès, Orléans, 293-315. [3] Jean Céard, La nature et les prodiges, Droz, 1977, 512 pp. [4] Ursula Marvin (1996) Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni (1756–1827) and the origins of modern meteorite research, *Meteoritics*, **31**, 545–588. [5] Matthieu Gounelle (2013) Comment les chutes de météorites sont-elles devenues une « vérité » scientifique ? in *La Vérité*, Olivier Guerrier Ed., Presses Universitaires de Saint-Étienne, 73-89.