

Author: Nicolas Antoine Boulanger (or Boullanger)

Date of Birth: 11 November 1722

Place of Birth: Paris

Date of Death: 16 September 1759

Place of Death: Paris

Biography:

The life of this author remains little known to this day. Born into a family of modest means — his father was a paper merchant on the rue Saint-Denis in Paris — Boulanger demonstrated little enthusiasm for study during his youth. He nevertheless completed his studies at the College of Beauvais, under Jansenist influence, but did not study mathematics and architecture until later, teaching himself. He was also fascinated by ancient languages, and in particular oriental languages. In 1743, he was appointed private engineer to Baron de Thiers, who made him responsible, during the War of the Austrian Succession, for executing the excavation works during the siege of Freiburg im Breisgau. In 1745, Boulanger joined the Corps d'ingénieurs des Ponts et chaussées, under whose aegis he travelled throughout France, observing the terrain on which roads were to be constructed, often in harsh living conditions. He completed the construction of the Pont de Vaucouleurs, but his fragile health forced him to leave the construction site of the Pont de Foulain and to take early retirement from his post as engineer. He died soon afterwards, at the age of 37.

During his visits to Paris, Boulanger associated with the milieu of the enlightened philosophers, with whom he collaborated. A close friend of Helvétius, who he called “Papa” and with whom he also corresponded briefly, he also contributed to the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d’Alembert, authoring the articles “Corvée”, “Déluge”, “Guèbres”, “Hébraïque (Langue)” and “Economie politique”. His most prominent works were quite widely distributed in manuscript form, and were finally published posthumously by Baron d’Holbach (in collaboration with Naigeon), in order to support the ideological struggle for the Enlightenment.

Primary sources:

[Diderot], “Extrait d'une lettre écrite à l'éditeur sur la vie & les ouvrages de Mr. Boulanger”, in *L'Antiquité dévoilée par ses usages*, 1766, pp. iii-xiv.

Secondary sources :

J. Hampton, *Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger et la Science de son temps*, Geneva, Lille, 1958. — Jeroom Vercruysse, *Bibliographie descriptive des écrits du baron d’Holbach*, Paris, 1971. — P. Sadrin, *Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger (1722-1759) ou avant nous le déluge*, Oxford, 1986.

Works :

Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental, s.l. [Geneva], 1761.

L'Antiquité dévoilée par ses usages, ou Examen critique des principales opinions, cérémonies et institutions religieuses et politiques des différens peuples de la terre, Amsterdam, Marc-Michel Rey, 1766

Œuvres mêlées, contenant différents articles extraits de l'Encyclopédie, savoir: Corvées, Déluges, Guêtres, Langue hébraïque, 1791

Œuvres de Boulanger, 10 vol., 1791

Œuvres de Boulanger, 6 vol., 1794.

Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental, édition Paul Sadrin, Paris, Les Belles-Lettres, 1988.

Dissertation sur Élie et Énoch:

This treatise was, in all likelihood, composed at the very end of Boulanger's life. His purpose is to "unmask" an historical and theological deception and to reveal the true face of two imaginary figures on whom Scripture imposed the mythical persona of prophets: Elijah and Enoch. In the opening lines, he explains that Elijah is merely the embodiment of an astronomical symbol shown to the peoples after many years and centuries, and who was subsequently hidden, provoking the anguished expectation of the return of a fictional character to whom divinity was ultimately attributed. Boulanger supports his assertion using the customs of the Jews, the Bible and etymology.

However, before coming to the case of Enoch, the *Dissertation* examines two figures that were not named in the title : the Roman Valerius Volusius and Ali, son-in-law and cousin of Mohammed, who are also presented as recurring symbols and emblems of the Great Judge. The goal of the treatise is unambiguous : the figures studied are but two examples selected from thousands of others, extending throughout geography and history, which confirm the universal character of human beliefs and the universality of the phenomenon by which primitive catastrophes are made the point of origin of the intellectual and religious history of mankind. The *Dissertation* ends with the study of Enoch, who merely confirms the same pattern ; the patriarch is simply an embodiment of the same principle, the illustration of the psychological mechanisms that lead to the development of religious beliefs.

Manuscripts:

Aix-en-Provence, B.M. 828 (844)

Paris, Mazarine 1197

Saint-Petersburg, R.N.B. Voltaire 240 (IX).

Éditions :

Dissertation sur Élie et Énoch, ed. Paul Sadrin, Besançon / Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1991.
Œuvres mêlées, contenant différents articles extraits de l'Encyclopédie, savoir : Corvées,

Significance:

The works of Boulanger are those of a monomaniac. His works overlap, complementing and repeating each other – from the *Nouvelle Mappemonde* (1753) and his *Mémoire sur une Nouvelle Mappemonde* (1753) to his major treatises, *Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental* (1761), *L'Antiquité dévoilée par ses usages* (1766), passing by way of the *Dissertation sur Élie et Énoch* and the articles published in the *Encyclopédie*. The reason for this all-consuming passion is grounded in science. Through his experiences as an engineer and field observations, Boulanger determined that the formation of the earth occurred over a considerable period of time. Moreover, the presence of various fossils in the layers of the earth attests to the historical reality of major geological catastrophes, preserved by tradition in the biblical story of the flood and the mythologies of almost every people on earth. According to Boulanger, our species, which almost perished in these primitive cataclysms, has lived continuously in a state of unconscious fear, obsessed by the idea that a new catastrophe might occur, destroying us forever. Every historical belief and activity of mankind, including its political forms, retains the mark of this primitive fear. Religion is not the product of divine revelation or political deception, but emanates from the primitive psychological trauma of humanity. It is this terror that explains the importance that human beings have continuously attributed to the natural cycles (day, lunar month, solar month, year, great year), which are

enduring signs of death and resurrection. It is this terror that explains why, in all ages and places, religious institutions always offer a phase of anxiety followed by a phase of joy when the world, which appeared to be threatened with destruction, is “renewed”.

This theory makes Boulanger an original thinker. Whereas the philosophers of the Enlightenment rely on a form of relativism in order to destroy the sacred character of the Christian religion, Boulanger, by contrast, demonstrates that Christianity as a religion resembles the others and that it is, for the same reasons as the other beliefs, a product of natural forces and of fear. The author also claims, following Bayle and Fontenelle, that the fables are not the product of a dysfunctional imagination, but that they speak to us about man, his concerns, his hopes, and his history.

Studies :

J. Hampton, *Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger et la Science de son temps*, Geneva, Lille, 1958.

Jerome Vercruysse, *Bibliographie descriptive des écrits du baron d’Holbach*, Paris, 1971.

Paul Sadrin, *Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger (1722-1759) ou avant nous le déluge*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1986.

Maria Susana Seguin, *Science et religion au XVIIIe siècle. Le mythe du déluge universel*, Paris, H. Champion, 2001.

— “Boulanger lecteur de manuscrits philosophiques clandestins?”, (International Congress on the Enlightenment, Los Angeles, UCLA, 3-10 August 2003), *La Lettre Clandestine* 12, 2004, pp.121-134.

— “Le traitement des sources érudites dans *L’Antiquité dévoilée par ses usages* de Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger”, *La Lettre clandestine* 20, 2012, pp.169-185.

Contributor:

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