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Accounting For Invention: Book-Keeping and the History of the Wish List

In his 1599-1602 work, *Two Books of Things Lost and Things Found*, the Paduan Professor of Law Guido Panciroli presented his patron, Carlo Emanuele, Duke of Savoy, with a powerful analogy. Just as merchants determined the state of their business by balancing columns of their debts and their credits, so too could the Duke determine the question of the ancients and the moderns by comparing Panciroli's books of ancient things lost and new things found. Given that Panciroli listed twice as many lost ancient things as modern inventions, it was clear which time period had greater credit. Yet many of Panciroli's readers, from Francis Bacon to J. A. Comenius to G. W. Leibniz to Robert Boyle, imagined ways that his accounting for inventions could be used to enrich man's estate. Such readers compared lists not only of ancient and modern inventions, but of future ones – longed-for objects often drawn from the category of the lost things. The practice of comparing time periods as lists of objects suggested that invention was contingent upon history rather than pre-determined by reason. Many of the most impossible seeming objects (flexible glass, the perpetual motion, the philosopher's stone, etc.) had been found before, and thus should be able to be invented again. While suggesting a widened horizon of possibility, the list of lost things also pointed to the fact that invention was not stable; objects might be discovered at a point in time, only to fall later into a "catalogue of lost things" conceptualized as a threatening and ever present space. It was the job of the historian, by listing and writing about inventions, to keep them from falling forever into the abyss. Textual techniques for listing inventions were central to early modern projects for the advancement of knowledge.