

FOREWORD

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In the early 1960s, when John Fletcher chose the correspondence of Athanasius Kircher for his dissertation topic, almost no attention was being paid to the Jesuit polymath. If it had, the young Germanist might have been warned that the task was too big for a Master's candidate, and advised to concentrate on a limited aspect of it. But there is something about Kircher that tempts scholars to take on the whole man, and this is what Fletcher did, with a panache and thoroughness that have not yet been equalled.

Kircher's fascination operates at several levels. First, there is the idea that emerges most plainly from Fletcher's study: that of Kircher as the universal oracle, the sage who could be counted upon to answer any question. The fact that the answers were sometimes so right (as when he attributed the plague to infection by living organisms), and sometimes so wrong (as in his misreading of the Egyptian hieroglyphs), is irresistible to scholars, who can analyze both types of answer with all the benefits of hindsight. Second, there is his peculiar position in the history of ideas, halfway between mediaeval and early modern world-views. On the one hand, he believed in dragons and demonic magic; on the other, he built precision instruments and tested his theories (for instance, in vulcanology) in field experiments. For a while he was in correspondence with the most eminent scientists of Europe. But while he still lived, the climate of the learned world shifted. The empirical method and the mechanical philosophy proved a more fruitful basis for scientific progress, and Kircher was left behind writing about Noah's Ark.

This brings us to a third reason to be fascinated by Kircher: the psychological state of a brilliant man with unshakeable convictions. Not for one moment in his long life does he seem to have questioned the fundamental, even fundamentalist, doctrines of Catholic Christianity. The Jesuits had hold of him by the time he was ten years old, and their ideals soon became his own. There is no doubt whatever of his sincere piety, of his devotion to the Virgin Mary, or of his zeal for converting Protestants to the Catholic faith. But his convictions circumscribed all

his researches, so that he was temperamentally unable to come to any conclusion incompatible with them. For example, although aware of ancient histories that exceed the biblical or rabbinic estimate of the age of the earth, Kircher did not lend them the slightest credence, to the detriment of his geological, historical, and linguistic studies. Admittedly, there is evidence that he favoured the Copernican cosmology, but could not publicly avow it in the atmosphere following Galileo's downfall. But this was a matter of opinion only, not of church dogma (though often mistakenly thought to be so). Kircher was no secret heretic.

The encyclopaedic breadth of Kircher's authority inspired awe among his contemporaries, and still does. His reputation would have been secured by his work in magnetism alone, or by his theory of light and darkness, his musicology, Egyptology, linguistics, geology, Orientalism, or bacteriology. How did he cover not one but all of these? Of course he had correspondents throughout the world, and some secretarial and research assistance towards the end of his life. And he had time, especially after he was relieved of teaching duties. As a religious, he never had to cook, clean, shop, look for a job, or have to do with women or children. But beyond this spare and dedicated lifestyle, his real secret must have been the gift of remembering all that he read and learned, instead of forgetting 90% of it, as most of us do.

Kircher's breadth impresses all the more today, when the disciplines are more sharply divided. Science is no longer a single field of "natural philosophy", and no Egyptologist writes a history of music. We, as spectators of this fragmentation, may well envy Kircher's freedom to range over the whole of human knowledge. One of the charms of studying him is that it gives one a temporary illusion of recapturing that universality. Whereas we cannot possibly master all his disciplines in their present form, we can leaf through nearly any of his books and get a fair understanding of what he has to teach. His encyclopaedism, with its detail and density of allusions, is another matter, but his own thought is not inherently complex; his scientific writing does not even require calculus.

The single best key to understanding Kircher is to recognize him as a Christian Hermetist, accepting the philosophy of the *Corpus Hermeticum* insofar as it did not interfere with his Catholicism. In cases of conflict, the Bible took precedence over the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus, as, for example, in Kircher's frequent mention of evil demons. Hermetism, being a pagan and polytheistic philosophy, populates its universe with gods, demigods, spirits, and daemons, all of

whom may have commerce with mankind. Its fundamental division, as in its parent philosophy, Platonism, is between the spiritual and the material world, with its ethical weight in favour of the former. Kircher's universe, on the other hand, is overshadowed by the fundamental dichotomy of God and Satan, each with his host of angels, vying for possession of human souls. The material world is not evil, but beautifully arranged for Man's benefit if only he will follow God's commandments. It is there to be enjoyed and explored, and the secrets of nature wait for man to discover and exploit them with 'natural magic'. The danger that Hermetism ignores is that evil spirits may seduce us with a simulation of this good magic, and thus gain a foothold in our souls. This made Kircher extremely cautious in his own practice of natural magic, avoiding all commerce with spirits and keeping within the boundaries of what we call technology.

Kircher's universe, too, is layered into material, spiritual, and intellectual worlds, all held together by a web of correspondences and all potentially accessible. This Hermetic chain of being, with its reflection of the macrocosm in the microcosm, is essential to his philosophy. It is the cause of the imprinting of images in stones and the spontaneous generation of insects. It causes the earth to be full of the 'signatures' of higher powers. And since the primary attribute of Kircher's God is Love, this, too, resonates down through all the levels of being, ending in the humble but astonishing phenomenon of magnetism, as the lodestone seeks and clings to iron. Like attracts like; the sunflower turns to face the sun, because it is marked by the solar signature. By the same token, sunflower seeds also turn to face the sun, and can be used to power a simple floating clock. The fact that Kircher and some of his correspondents owned such 'clocks', and believed them to tell the time, casts a shadow on the quality of their empirical science.

The paradox of Kircher lies in his being so broad in some respects, yet so limited in others. The tension reaches crisis point in his largest and, some say, most futile work, *Oedipus aegyptiacus*. Here his breadth is evident in the volume devoted to Egyptian history and geography, much of it published for the first time from Hebrew and Arabic sources. In the second volume, the horizon expands to twelve aspects of hieroglyphs, which include Kabbalah, both Hebrew and Arabic, as well as hieroglyphic medicine, music, and mechanics. In the third volume he writes a treatise on the Bembine Table of Isis (a spurious Roman concoction), then at last attacks the deciphering of the hieroglyphic inscriptions on obelisks and other Egyptian remains.

Here his narrowness appears. Although he possessed the ultra-rare instance of a genuine, ancient translation of an obelisk inscription, he had already pooh-poohed it: how could it merely hymn the praises of the Pharaoh Rameses? The obelisks were so grand, they *had* to be about the profound mysteries of Hermetic theology. And with this interpretive grid firmly in place, Kircher proceeded to mistranslate the hieroglyphs. The attempt was nothing short of heroic, and it made perfect sense to him.

Those who are attracted by the whole man will find ample grounds for their affection here. By his own standards, and by those of any earlier time, Kircher led an exemplary life, enriching the world of learning, furthering natural philosophy, and enjoining piety and respect for the wonders of God's creation. He was as generous a correspondent as he was a host in his own museum. When people began to laugh behind his back, he retreated with dignity into pious observance and fund-raising for his beloved shrine at Mentorella. He spent his last months in a state of second childhood, his memory gone. His great folios gathered dust in libraries, like megalithic foundation stones buried beneath the soil, on which others, almost unknowingly, would raise monuments to the grandeurs and follies of their own epochs.