

ATHANASIVS KIRCHER'S CONSTRUCTION OF THE HIEROGLYPHIC TRADITION¹

Joscelyn Godwin

Introduction

Of all the accomplishments of the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680), the one that won him the most acclaim in his lifetime was his decipherment of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. This is of particular interest to us because of Kircher's lifelong commitment to one of the main currents of the Western esoteric tradition: Christian Hermeticism. The latter both inspired and constrained his philological work, convinced as he was that the ancient Egyptians had possessed a true, though partial, knowledge of God. Evidence was to hand in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the collection of writings attributed to the Egyptian priest-king Hermes Trismegistus. But this was a secondary source, compiled by Alexandrian Greeks. The primary source lay in the Egyptians' own sacred script: the mixture of human and animal forms with abstract symbols, known as hieroglyphs.

Nowhere was this enigmatic script more conspicuous than on the obelisks of Rome. Imported from Egypt under the Roman Empire, these monuments became status symbols for the popes and their families, who re-erected them as focal points of the city's main piazzas. Yet no one had the slightest idea of how to read their inscriptions.

Kircher came to Rome in 1633 with a reputation as a brilliant scholar with the potential for cracking the code of the hieroglyphs. His first years as professor at the Collegium Romanum (headquarters of the Society of Jesus) witnessed his apparent success, which reached its apogee in the 1650's with the publication of *Œdipus Ægyptiacus*, a three-volume work that contained everything known about ancient Egypt, including translations of all the inscriptions on the Roman obelisks. However, after his death, philologists began to doubt his accuracy, and when in the 1820s Jean-François Champollion arrived at the

¹ An abbreviated version of this article appeared in chapter 4 of Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher's Theatre of the World*.

correct principles of translation, Kircher's were shown to have been false from beginning to end.

How and why did Kircher go so spectacularly wrong in his translation of the Egyptian hieroglyphs? We must seek out the first foundation stones on which he built his formidable edifice, and, as the reader will discover, these turn out to have been almost incredibly shaky.

Kircher's presuppositions: the prisca theologia

When Kircher encountered hieroglyphs, he already had a profound knowledge of the esoteric philosophies of the ancient world, and an evident sympathy for them. He had absorbed the canon of the *prisca theologia*, the "earliest theology" that was supposedly the common inheritance of all peoples. It was the Florentine Platonists of the fifteenth century who had promoted this idea, especially Marsilio Ficino with his translations of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the Platonic dialogues, and the Neoplatonists: a mixture to which Pico della Mirandola added a Christianized Kabbalah. Three other important elements were the Hymns of Orpheus, which Ficino used for the magical invocation of planetary influences, the gnomic sayings known as the Golden Verses of Pythagoras, and the Chaldaean Oracles ascribed to Zoroaster. The fact that several of these sources, which the Florentines believed to be as old as Moses or older, dated from late Antiquity was neither here nor there. What was important, both to them and to Kircher, was the theology and cosmology that seemed to be common to all of them.

Theologically it was a kind of monotheism, with an impersonal One that was ultimately responsible for emanating all that is. It was also a polytheism, for among the first emanations from the One were powers that the ancients knew, and worshipped, as gods and goddesses. Cosmologically it was a hierarchy, a ladder or chain of beings descending from the One, through the gods, to lower spiritual beings like genii, daemons and the souls of heroes, to mankind, then further downwards to animals, vegetables, and the four elements of the earth itself. An important corollary, never quite spelled out in antiquity, was the "doctrine of correspondences": that each level of being corresponded to, or reflected, the adjacent ones. This doctrine supplied a rationale for magic, in which something on a lower level, such as a metal or a herb, could be used in order to pull on the chain of being and cause a reaction from the corresponding entity on a higher level, such as a planet or a god.

Since the only surviving “Egyptian” scriptures, the *Corpus Hermeticum* with its supplement in the Latin *Asclepius*, was filled with such ideas, Kircher was convinced that if the hieroglyphs could be read, one would find the same ideas there. He never swerved from this conviction. It was firmly in place from his earliest efforts at decipherment, published in 1636, through his great *Œdipus Ægyptiacus* of the 1650s, to the late *Sphinx Mystagoga*, published in 1676, four years before his death.

First encounters with hieroglyphs

The starting-point of this lifelong preoccupation began shortly after Kircher's ordination in 1628, while he was at the Jesuit College of Speyer. In his Autobiography he writes:

The task was given me to locate a book—I forget the title—in the college library. Whilst examining the books one by one, I stumbled, be it by chance or through divine providence, upon a book which depicted, with illustrations, all the obelisks with hieroglyphic characters re-erected by Pope Sixtus V in Rome.²

No book perfectly fills the description, but Kircher's examples and texts make it clear that his source was Herwart von Hohenberg's *Thesaurus Hieroglyphicorum*. This exceedingly scarce book is nothing more than a folio of twenty-nine engraved plates.³ Its compiler, Johann Georg Herwart von Hohenburg zu Perg und Planegg (1553–1622) is best known as a friend and correspondent of Johann Kepler, whom he helped to obtain the post of Court Mathematician and Astronomer at the court of Emperor Rudolf II.⁴ Born to a prominent Augsburg family, Herwart became a privy councillor of Elector Maximilian I of Bavaria, who commissioned him to catalogue and arrange the electoral

² Cited from Kircher's Autobiography in the Appendix to Fletcher. I am grateful to Elizabeth Fletcher for allowing me to read this indispensable work in manuscript.

³ Herwart von Hohenberg, *THESAVRVS HIEROGLYPHICORVM*. The work appeared without place, publisher, or date, possibly in 1607, though some bibliographers date it 1610, and both Munich and Augsburg are given for its place of publication. I consulted the copy in the library of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

⁴ On Herwart's biography, see Janssen, *Geschichte des deutschen Volkes*, 333–334; Vehse, *Geschichte der Höfe*, 156–157. For his friendship with Kepler, see Caspar, *Kepler*, passim but especially chapter 2.

library.⁵ He was also an historian and a collector of antiquities, with a particular fascination for Egypt. *Thesaurus Hieroglyphicorum* was a “paper museum” typical of its period, containing illustrations of all the relevant objects that Herwart had been able to locate.

This was Kircher’s first source for his hieroglyphic studies, to which we will return. His second is more mysterious. Before he left Germany as a refugee from the Thirty Years War, he had somehow obtained an Arabic manuscript in which an obelisk inscription was translated. The author was a Babylonian rabbi, Barachias Nephi or Abenephius, of whom nothing is known; nor has anyone seen the manuscript since the 1630s. But it did exist, for in 1633 Kircher had it in Avignon and showed it to his patron, the distinguished antiquarian and collector Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580–1637).⁶

Although Kircher’s *curriculum vitae* as he entered his thirties was primarily as a scientist and applied mathematician,⁷ Peiresc immediately spotted the young Jesuit’s potential for assisting in his great project: the assembly of all existing sources of the Scriptures. This was the era of enthusiasm for “polyglot bibles” and the beginning of comparative studies of scriptural sources. Peiresc had gone to considerable pains and expense to acquire a number of Coptic manuscripts which he was impatient to have studied. Although the hieroglyphs of the pagan Egyptians were not among the scriptural languages—so far as anyone could tell—their decipherment promised to supply an essential link in the understanding of Coptic, the language of Christian Egypt.

Kircher made a copy, which has survived,⁸ of one page of the manuscript, showing Barachias’s translation from hieroglyphics into Arabic, adding his own translation into Latin. Reading the obelisk from the top downwards, it says:

Here the Sun, the Moderator of all things, the fertile divinity of the Nile, on account of the benefits conferred on mortals, is to be celebrated with divine service. Here the inventor of agriculture, planting, seeding, the

⁵ Vehse, *Geschichte der Höfe*, loc. cit., gives Herwart’s titles as ‘Geheimer Rathspräsident, Landschaftskanzler, und Pfleger zu Schwaben’.

⁶ On Peiresc, Kircher, and the Barachias manuscript, see Miller, ‘Copts and Scholars’. For a detailed evaluation of the lost manuscript, see Stolzenberg, ‘Egyptian Oedipus’, 23–69.

⁷ His first book was on magnetism: Kircher, *Ars Magnesia*. He had also performed land surveys and constructed sundials.

⁸ Kircher’s copy is in the library of the Ponteficia Università Gregoriana, Rome. A facsimile appears in Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher’s Theatre of the World*, 63.

preserver of Egypt, the Genius of the Universe, the repeller of evils, the fertile divinity of the Nile, the vigilant guardian of things, on account of the benefits conferred on mortals, is to be celebrated with divine honours and service.

Given such a reading, from such an authority, it is no wonder that Kircher went on to read all the obelisks in this fashion, as statements of a Hermetic-inspired cosmology and theology. The first that he attempted to translate on his own was one in Herwart's book, and he presented Peiresc with the first draft of his work, entitled *Protheories* or *A Preconsideration*.

Peiresc's doubts

Peiresc's antiquarian scholarship, at this point, was not inferior to Kircher's own, and he had the advantage of maturity, scepticism, and solid Cartesian reasoning. The ambitious young linguist disillusioned him, for Peiresc knew something about this very obelisk, which now stands at the Lateran Palace in Rome, moved there in 1587 at the order of Pope Sixtus V. It happens to be the only obelisk of which an ancient author provides a translation. The 4th century chronicler Ammianus Marcellinus, in his *Rerum gestarum*, quotes the Greek translation made by an Egyptian priest called Hermapion. One section of it runs thus:

Dedicated to King Rameses, whom Sol and mighty Apollo, ruling the whole earthly globe, love; lover of truth, son of Heron born from God, ruler of the earthly globe, chosen by the Sun, King Rameses of strong Mars; to whom with fortitude and bravery the earthly globe is subject, King Rameses immortal son of the Sun.⁹

When Peiresc pointed out to Kircher that the inscription had nothing Hermetic about it, but was purely in praise of the pharaoh Rameses,¹⁰

⁹ Kircher, *Obeliscus Pamphilius*, 149–150.

¹⁰ In the light of modern scholarship, even Ammianus's informant was far off the mark. The Egyptologist Abdel-Kader Selim translates the inscription as follows: 'Horus, mighty bull, son of Seth; Horus of gold, rich in years, great in victories; king of Upper and Lower Egypt: son of Rê, who fills the castle of the ba with his splendid acts, lord of the two lands: the son of Rê, blessed in life, for ever!' Concerning Ammianus's text, Selim comments that 'here and there, a few phrases of the translation correspond to those appearing frequently on the Lateran and Flaminian obelisks, but there the resemblance ends; and one may conclude that the priest, eager to oblige his superiors,

there was embarrassment on both sides. As Peiresc relates it in a letter (1633) to his friend Cassiano dal Pozzo:

I made him see this and, in the end, admit it, though with difficulty, because he had found some fine interpretations, and, as it seemed to him, well authorized by all the figures contained in it, or by most of them. There was something admirable in this, since the human mind is easy to trick, and imposture is sometimes powerful, of which he was quite ashamed in the end. He was very regretful at being forced to confess the deceit by which he had been taken in...¹¹

Nonetheless, Peiresc continued to give Kircher moral support and encouragement in his linguistic studies, as is evident from his letters of 1633–1635.¹² For all his disappointment at Kircher's attempt to translate hieroglyphs and at his stubborn reaction to criticism, he still valued him for his knowledge of languages and his potential for the Coptic project. Consequently, when Kircher was ordered to Austria to take up a chair of mathematics, Peiresc appealed to his important friends in Rome, including Cardinal Francesco Barberini, the Pope's nephew, who as it happened had just come into possession of an obelisk. Peiresc suggested that Kircher be commissioned to interpret the hieroglyphs on it, and this is in fact what took place.

Once he was settled in Rome, Kircher put the embarrassing affair of his mistranslation behind him. Since he was convinced that the hieroglyphs were, as the name suggests, a sacred writing, he refused outright the suggestion that they were used for secular purposes, like the praise of pharaohs. He continued from where he had left off, with Barachias as his guide and the Neoplatonists and Hermes Trismegistus as his authorities. The first fruit of his Roman period, *Prodromus Coptus* (1636), included a hundred-page treatise on the hieroglyphs and an Appendix outlining an 'Idea or Map of *Ædipus Ægyptiacus*'¹³ which corresponds almost exactly to that work as eventually published from 1652 to 1655. So in producing this, the giant among his many large

either faked a knowledge that he did not possess, or else ordered the phraseology of the text in a way that would fit their prejudices'. Selim, *Les Obélisques égyptiens*, 221.

¹¹ For Peiresc's letter to Cassiano, see Peiresc, *Lettres à Cassiano dal Pozzo*, 133–134.

¹² The letters are among Kircher's correspondence in the Archive of the Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Rome, Ms. 568.

¹³ 'IDEA sive Ichnographia Ædipi Ægyptiaci', Kircher, *Prodromus Coptus*, 333–338.

works, he was following a plan conceived in detail almost twenty years earlier. This illustrates both his stupendous industry and persistence, and his chief failing in this field: an overweening self-confidence. Once his principles were established, the translation of the hieroglyphs held no surprises for him, for wherever he looked, he saw what he expected to see.

The Mensa Isiaca

Returning to Herwart von Hohenberg's *Thesaurus Hieroglyphicorum*, we find nearly half of its pages devoted to illustrating the Mensa Isiaca. Also called the Bembine Table of Isis, this is a bronze table-top or tablet inlaid with silver and niello and depicting mysterious Egyptian figures.¹⁴ The humanist Cardinal Pietro Bembo (1470–1547) had reputedly discovered it in a Bologna blacksmith's shop. After his death it passed to the collection of the Dukes of Mantua, where it disappeared after their city was sacked in 1630. As far as Kircher knew, it was lost,¹⁵ but fortunately in 1559 Bembo's nephew had commissioned Enea Vico to copy it in a full-sized copper engraving, 125 centimeters by 75. This became the basis for all later reproductions, including the reduced version in Herwart's work (to which Herwart added numerous enlargements of details), the one in Lorenzo Pignoria's *Vetustissimae Tabulae Aeneae* of 1605,¹⁶ and the one in Kircher's *Œdipus Ægyptiacus*.¹⁷

Although Herwart's *Thesaurus* was only a picture-book, he annotated the Mensa Isiaca with the names of the winds, the ecliptics, the poles, and the centre of the world. This had to do with his theory that the great secret of pagan theology was the magnetic compass, and that the Table was an encoding of this secret. Herwart's son would write in 1623 that 'in all the most ancient nations, the magnetic stone was worshipped as a god, and the art by which magnetic navigations were undertaken throughout the globe was carefully concealed by the priests of the ancients in the guise of gods and goddesses, and under the husk of other fables'.¹⁸

¹⁴ The definitive study of the Bembine Table is Leospo.

¹⁵ Years later it resurfaced in the collection of the Dukes of Savoy, who presented it in 1832 to the Egyptian Museum of Turin, where it still resides.

¹⁶ See Pignoria, *Vetustissimæ Tabulæ*.

¹⁷ See Kircher, *Œdipus Ægyptiacus*, vol. III, between 80–81.

¹⁸ Translated from the title of Herwart, *Admiranda* 1623.

It is surprising that Kircher, with his interest in all aspects of magnetism, had no sympathy for this theory.¹⁹ Whereas Herwart's interpretation reduced the images to a concrete meaning, Kircher's elevated them to a metaphysical level. He regarded the Mensa Isiaca with awe, and used it twenty years later as a portal to the third volume of *Œdipus Ægyptiacus*. There he calls it 'no less than the epitome and summation (*anacephalaeosin*) of the whole Egyptian Theology, both practical and theoretical'. At the same time, he was afraid that there was a lot of unhealthy pagan magic tied in with it, so he hedged his admiration with a warning:

Therefore I trust the Christian reader to discern clearly the thousand tricks that the Devil has devised for the ruin of souls, hidden beneath the mask of some religion or divine worship, so that once these are known, he may steer clear of them with oars and sails, to his soul's great fruit and benefit.²⁰

In *Œdipus Ægyptiacus* the Mensa Isiaca was reproduced as a large folding plate and analyzed in every detail, its 35 principal figures each being treated from eight viewpoints: its shape, place, gesture, operations, costume, headdress, staff, and the smaller symbols around it. But back in the 1630s, at the formative stage of his work, these were not nearly so important as a tiny figure in the margin of the Table: a scarab beetle with a human head (see Illustration).²¹

Dissection of a beetle

This beetle was to Kircher what the Rosetta Stone would later be to Champollion. He reproduced it in his works six times over a span of thirty years,²² and never went back on his original interpretation of it. There he announced that he was going to dissect it like an anatomist, to show its separate parts and their interrelations. This is how he explains it, basing his analysis on the classical Neoplatonic authors Macrobius, Martianus Capella, and Apuleius.²³ The winged orb with

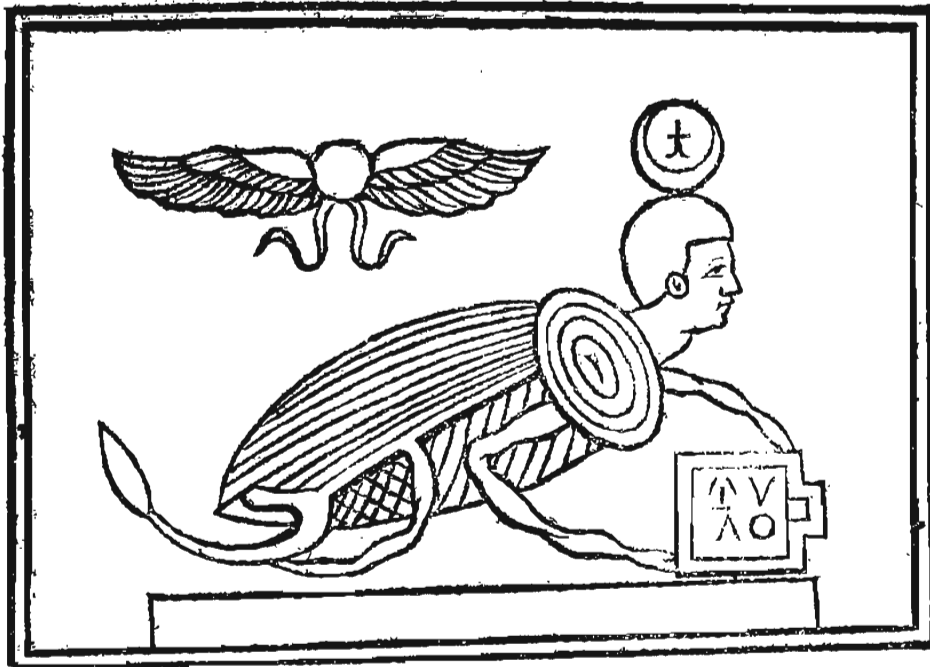
¹⁹ He mentions and dismisses Herwart's theory in Kircher, *Obeliscus Pamphilius*, 153.

²⁰ Kircher, *Œdipus Ægyptiacus*, vol. III, 86.

²¹ From Kircher, *Œdipus Ægyptiacus*, vol. II, i, 415.

²² In Kircher, *Prodromus Coptus*, 224, 239; Kircher, *Œdipus Ægyptiacus*, vol. II, i, 415; vol. II, ii, 405; Kircher, *Obeliscus Ægyptiacus*, 25, 88.

²³ Kircher, *Prodromus Coptus*, 248, 254–255.



a serpent represents the subtle energy penetrating the world, or the Anima Mundi infusing life into things. The body of the dung-beetle symbolizes the moderator or motive power of the whole world. The Egyptians chose this symbol because of the scarab's habit of rolling around a ball of dung containing its egg: it symbolized the Moderator of the universe, propelling the heavenly bodies. The concentric ovals are the planetary orbits, nested inside each other. The youthful human head is that of the god Horus, who in Egyptian religion represented the Sun. The Moon is simply the Moon. The cross has nothing to do with Christianity, but stands for the four elements Earth, Water, Air and Fire, hence for the elementary or physical world.

In *Obeliscus Pamphilius* (1650),²⁴ Kircher added more details: the beetle's hard shell represents the heavens; its diaphanous wings, the airy and fiery spaces above the earth; the rest of its body, the earth, marked by five lines representing its five zones (two arctic, two temperate, one tropical). The thirty claws on its six legs correspond to the 30-day months of the sun's journey through the zodiac. Its rolling ball imitates the sun's course through the sky, and the hatching of its egg correlates closely with the lunar cycle.

²⁴ Kircher, *Obeliscus Pamphilius*, 337–339.

Thus this humble insect was for him a compendium of the whole universe. We may wonder why, if it was so important, the designer of the *Mensa Isiaca* had made it so small and placed it in the margin, but Kircher was not deterred by such questions. In fact, he drew even more significant meanings from the writing-tablet in the beetle's front claws. In the various engravings, one can make out four letters on this tablet, each no more than two millimetres across. Kircher read them as four Coptic letters, $\Phi V \Lambda O$. In Herwart's version, the only letter that looks similar to Kircher's reading is the O, but Kircher says that it is much plainer on Vico's engraving, which he must have seen once he arrived in Rome. One can argue about these details, but the crux of the matter, in Kircher's mind, was that Coptic letters appeared in a context of hieroglyphs.²⁵

The contribution of Coptic

To draw out the significance of this fact, Kircher turned to Clement of Alexandria,²⁶ who wrote that the Egyptians used three sorts of characters. The first became the letters of Coptic. The second were symbols used by priests to write about sacred things. And the third were images, mainly of animals, the sun, and the moon. On the basis of this tablet, Kircher could now correct Clement's mistake: here was evidence that the three types of writing were not separate, but all of a piece. The images came first; the symbols were no different from the images, but made simpler for the sake of those who could not draw; and the Coptic letters, as he proceeded to show, were a further stage of simplification.

At this point of Kircher's explanation, he introduced some supporting witnesses: other examples of Coptic letters mixed with hieroglyphs. He found them on mummy wrappings, on engraved gems and medals, and again in the objects illustrated by Herwart. In particular, several hieroglyphic inscriptions included a symbol that resembled the letter A.

Now the A in question was in fact Kircher's mistaken reading of two different hieroglyphs. One of them is a stylized plow, common

²⁵ A more plausible rationale is that the tablet reads $NV \Lambda O$, Nilo, and is simply the artist's signature. This is suggested in Rachewiltz & Partini, *Roma Egizia*, 156.

²⁶ What follows is paraphrased from Kircher, *Prodromus Coptus*, 225–233.

on the obelisks; the other, the flail that some Egyptian pharaohs and divinities hold in their hand. We must remember that he had never seen an authentic object with this attribute, such as we know well from Tutankhamun's coffin, etc. He was basing his theories on a handful of illustrated books, in which the artist, then the engraver, had distorted what they could not understand. In one illustration from Herwart, showing an Egyptian statue, the angled flail acquired a kind of cross-bar, and this is what made it look like the plow-hieroglyph, hence like the letter A.

Finding letters among the hieroglyphs might have led Kircher to the correct assumption: that the hieroglyphs themselves were phonetic, but he took exactly the contrary view: that all the signs, both alphabetic or pictorial, were symbolic. Needing a meaning for this letter A, he makes a leap in the dark which few of his readers can have caught. Without the slightest explanation, he writes that the A stands for *agathos daemon*, the "good genius" of the Nile Delta and of Egypt in general. He had come across the two words in his study of Coptic. Like many Coptic words, they are Greek, but he had already made up his mind that the Greek language and alphabet had derived from Coptic, because Egypt was older than Greece.

Pursuing this argument, he takes a detail from one of Herwart's plates of obelisk inscriptions. It shows two instances of the A beside a seated, hawk-headed figure. Kircher then offers his very first translation. The two hieroglyphs, taken in conjunction, mean: 'Osiris, that is, the Sun, the source of light and heat, the *agathos daemon* or good genius of Egypt.'²⁷

As further proof, Kircher shows two other details from Herwart's collection. One is the horned head of the god Amon; the other, a hieroglyph resembling a capital M in a triangle. The hieroglyph, he writes, 'signifies none other than these Coptic words: *Agathos Daemon*, since all the letters of the word AMON can be seen expressed in it'.²⁸

Having satisfied himself that the Egyptians wrote in a mixture of Coptic letters and pictorial symbols, Kircher explained how it had happened. Every letter was nothing less than the stylization of an original pictorial hieroglyph, and eventually the letters took over altogether, becoming fully alphabetic scripts like Greek or Latin. So every letter

²⁷ Ibid., 232.

²⁸ Ibid., 233.

must have had a prior, pictorial meaning, and it only remained to find or deduce them.

He began by seeking the image behind this conspicuous letter A. He found it not in the plow, but in the ibis, a wading bird with a long curved beak, sacred to the Egyptians. Indeed, according to Kircher they revered it as the *agathos daemon* on account of its services in ridding the Nile Delta of poisonous snakes. They pictured the ibis by drawing only its legs, with its beak thrust across them. This formed a shape like the letter A, or alternatively the letter Δ, which also happened to be the shape of the Nile Delta. Hermes Trismegistus, who invented hieroglyphs, made A the first letter in honor of the sacred bird, and when Cadmus created the Greek alphabet, he did likewise.²⁹

Love, the universal mover

We return now to the beetle of the Mensa Isiaca, whose body was a cosmography in miniature and whose writing-tablet bore four letters. Reading these as *philo*, the Coptic or Greek word for love, only reinforced Kircher's conviction that he had discovered something of great philosophical import. This is how he explains it, citing Plato, Dionysius the Areopagite, Porphyry, and Hierotheus.³⁰ According to these and many others, it is love that moves upper things for the providence of lower ones, and attracts equals to one another. In Christian terms the first kind of love, of superiors to inferiors, has its model in God's love for all his creation, while the attraction between equals is the love of one's neighbor.

Kircher now says that one can express this all in a scheme not so very different from characters that appear everywhere in the Bembine Table. In other words, he is going to concoct a hieroglyph to express this doctrine of love. He does it by combining the four letters of the tablet with the winged sphere, the scarab, and a diagram of the geocentric cosmos. This, too, was an image that he reused in later works.³¹ Naturally he had no difficulty interpreting his own hieroglyph: it means that the World-Soul enters the world and stirs up its contents,

²⁹ Ibid., 234. Further on Kircher's hieroglyphic reading of the Coptic alphabet, see Beinlich, 'Athanasius Kircher und die Kenntnis vom Alten Ägypten', 86–92.

³⁰ What follows is summarized from Kircher, *Prodromus Coptus*, 252–256.

³¹ See Kircher, *Œdipus Ægyptiacus*, vol. II, ii, 112, 115.

filling them with love. So the scarab-man does not only contain the cosmos, but he also tells us what makes it work. This little hieroglyph, tucked away in the frame of the *Mensa Isiaca*, turns out to carry the combined weight of Egyptian cosmology, the Neoplatonic concept of Eros, and the Christian doctrine of divine love!

Intersecting pyramids

But that is not all that Kircher read into these four Coptic letters, ΦΥΛΟ. The two middle ones, like two pyramids pointing in opposite directions, put him in mind of another Christian Hermetist, Robert Fludd (1574–1637), who in his treatise on the Macrocosm had made much use of the symbol of intersecting pyramids.³² A dark pyramid with its base on earth represents matter, becoming more attenuated until its apex reaches the heavens; a light pyramid with its base in heaven represents spirit, diminishing until it disappears on reaching earth. Kircher would use the symbol extensively in his later work, to explain how the spiritual and material influences permeate the universe. Their presence on the scarab-man's tablet could have no lesser meaning for him, and it also provided a rationale for the Egyptians' predilection for building pyramids and obelisks.

As for the letter Φ, Kircher calls it a symbol of the world, with its two poles. In his subsequent charts of the Coptic alphabet, he always shows this letter, not with a simple vertical line through it but with the two intersecting pyramids, implying thereby to have "corrected" the simplified Coptic form of the letter and to have restored the intention of its inventor. Thus Fludd's pyramid symbol is retrospectively attributed to Hermes Trismegistus—which for all its indefensible logic is a conclusion that Fludd himself might have approved!

The readers of *Prodromus Coptus* may not all have grasped the distinction between authentic hieroglyphs and ones invented by Kircher. But from our privileged standpoint, there is irony here. The consensus of modern scholars is that the *Mensa Isiaca* is not very ancient, nor does it come from Egypt. It was probably made for an Isis temple in Imperial Rome, by which time no one could read or write hieroglyphs correctly. Its designer filled it with pseudo-hieroglyphs, invented to

³² See Fludd, *Utriusque Cosmi Maioris*, especially 82–89. The symbol derives from Nicholas Cusanus.

make it look Egyptian and mysterious. So Kircher's prize exhibit was unfortunately a fake.

The pagan pantheon

Presuming, as he did, to have penetrated the depths of the Egyptian theology, Kircher needed to link it to the images of the gods and goddesses. There was no doubt in his mind that the central figure of the *Mensa Isiaca* was Isis, but where were her consort Osiris and their son Horus? Here again, he lacked any authentic Egyptian sources such as the *Book of the Dead*, and had to rely on classical works such as Herodotus's *Histories*, Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, and, above all, Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*. One of the small images on the Table showed a standing figure wrapped in a net-like garment, holding a staff and various symbols. Thanks to later Egyptology, we may recognize it as the god Ptah, standing and wrapped as a mummy. Here he holds not only his usual attribute, the staff known as a *was*, but also Osiris's pharaonic attributes of the crook and the flail. Understandably, given the ignorance of the original designer and the tiny dimensions of the image, Kircher mistook the attributes: he thought that the flail was an architect's square or gnomon, and that the crook was a lituus or curved trumpet. This led him into learned interpretations based on harmony and cosmic order, impeccably Neoplatonic but completely off the track.³³ And his conclusion was that this compound figure was a representation of Osiris's son Horus, who in the Kircherian version of Egyptian theology, represents the sensible world.

If this figure represented Horus, then what was the iconography of Osiris? Kircher believed him to be the enthroned figure with the head of a falcon, a staff and the double crown of Egypt. Not knowing the significance of this headdress, Kircher interpreted the crown as a basket with a fruit inside, indicating the 'fruitfulness of the Intellect'.³⁴ The whole figure was therefore an 'archetype of the Intellect', which, he was convinced, was the true meaning of the god Osiris. Again, we

³³ See the explanations accompanying the appearances of this illustration in Kircher, *Obeliscus Pamphilius*, 212, 330; Kircher, *Œdipus Ægyptiacus*, vol. I, 40, 151; vol. II, ii, 24, 101, 128, 510.

³⁴ See the explanations accompanying the figure in Kircher, *Obeliscus Pamphilius*, 213; Kircher, *Œdipus Ægyptiacus*, vol. I, 152; vol. III, 561.

have the advantage of knowing that the falcon-headed god is, in fact, Horus. When such basic mistakes were coupled with Kircher's titanic erudition and his ability to call on supporting documents in a dozen languages, they could spin off into realms of fantasy that have few equals in antiquarian studies. Yet for the duration of Kircher's long life, his claim as the "Egyptian Oedipus" went unchallenged, as did the status of the Mensa Isiaca as an ancient Egyptian artefact.

There was an important evangelical aspect to Kircher's invention of this spurious tradition. In his view, the hieroglyphs were mankind's first script, designed by Hermes Trismegistus, first ruler of Egypt after the Flood, in order to record what remained of the primordial Adamic wisdom. By deciphering them, Kircher had confirmed the Florentine Platonists' contention, namely the possession of revealed wisdom by the Gentiles. Of course, to a Jesuit the Christian revelation superseded that, just as it did the revelation to the Jews. The Catholic faith was destined to become the faith of all humanity, and the Society's missionaries, now encircling the globe, were the spearhead of this future conversion. But from a practical point of view, if heathens possessed, or had once possessed, some fragment of divine truth, the process of evangelization might go more smoothly. As happened most conspicuously in China, they could seek out the best in the indigenous religions and rites, confident that it was a remnant of a primordial truth, and use it as a foundation for their Christian edifice. This confidence was at the core of the 'native rites controversy' that troubled the Church throughout the seventeenth century.³⁵ The threat it posed to the Counter-Reformation is obvious: if a partial revelation were conceded even to pagans, then such could hardly be denied to Protestants (or, from the Protestant side, to Catholics).³⁶

³⁵ On Kircher's relation to the 'rites controversy', see Hsia, 'Athanasius Kircher's *China Illustrata*'.

³⁶ Kircher had a Protestant publisher (Jansson, in Amsterdam) and several Protestant friends, patrons, and correspondents. His *Itinerarium Exstaticum* contains a spirited conversation in which he defends Protestants against the insistence of an angel who states that they are all damned. In the end he submits to the angel's higher wisdom, but his own convictions are obvious to the sympathetic reader. See Kircher, *Itinerarium Exstaticum*, 405–440.

The reception of Kircher's theories

Through his hieroglyphic studies, however mistaken, Kircher had founded the discipline of Egyptology, yet by the following century, no one (outside Russia)³⁷ was quoting his Egyptological works except to disassociate themselves from his theories. The most devastating blow was probably dealt by Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646–1716), who after a youthful enthusiasm simply dropped Kircher from his list of useful sources.³⁸ Kircher was left to the mercy of unkind critics such as William Warburton (1698–1779), Bishop of Gloucester and the author of *The Divine Legation of Moses*, whose scheme of divine history required pagan religion to be void of any revelation or profundity. He did not think it worth trying to interpret the Mensa Isiaca, dismissing it as a specimen of the typical imagery that decorated the ‘mystic cells’ in which the Mysteries were celebrated.³⁹ In his view, Kircher’s work was futile from beginning to end, and as Warburton snidely adds: ‘it is pleasant to see him labouring through half a dozen folios with the writings of late Greek Platonists, and the forged books of Hermes, which contain a philosophy, not Egyptian, to explain and illustrate old monuments, not philosophical.’⁴⁰

A different attitude marks the work of Bernard de Montfaucon (1655–1741), the Benedictine author of *L’Antiquité expliquée, et représentée en figures* (1719), who borrowed several of Kircher’s illustrations, and repeated the misidentifications of Horus and Osiris. He did not attempt to explain the Mensa Isiaca, unlike Kircher who, he says, ‘explains all boldly, seldom or never doubting; In short, there’s nothing so enigmatical, but he unriddles it’.⁴¹ But Montfaucon did not deny that there was meaning there. Being unable to penetrate it, he restricted himself to pure description, concluding thus: ‘For these were Mysteries not to be understood but from the *Egyptian* Priests, and that after one had been a long time under their Discipline.’⁴²

³⁷ For the survival of Kircher as universal authority in the Russia of Peter the Great, see Collis, ‘Freemasonry and the Occult’.

³⁸ On Leibniz’s relation to Kircher and the connections of hieroglyphic studies with projects for a universal language, see David, *Le Débat*, 60–71.

³⁹ Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, vol. II, 147–148. Warburton claims to find in the Book of Ezekiel, chapter 22, an unsurpassable description of the Mensa Isiaca.

⁴⁰ Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, vol. II, 44.

⁴¹ Quoted from the contemporary English translation: Montfaucon, *Antiquity*, vol. II, 210.

⁴² Montfaucon, *Antiquity*, vol. II, 216.

This sentiment was the true legacy of Kircher's work: that even if he, the self-styled Oedipus, had not succeeded in solving the Sphingian riddle, there *were* mysteries in ancient Egypt. Such feelings—for, with the riddle unsolved, they could be no more than that—fed a new wave of Egyptomania in the eighteenth century.⁴³ To them we owe the architectural fantasies drawn by Johann Fischer von Erlach (1656–1723) and those painted by Hubert Robert (1733–1808); the surreal fireplace designs of Giambattista Piranesi (1720–1778); the Egyptian Room in the Villa Borghese, Rome (1779); the utopian architectural designs of Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728–1799); the *Magic Flute* (1791).⁴⁴ When artists and stage-designers adorned their works with hieroglyphs, it was in the same spirit as the creator of the Mensa Isiaca: they used pseudo-hieroglyphs and did not expect anyone to decipher them. Egyptomania even thrived on *not* knowing what the hieroglyphs meant: the more enigmatic they were, the more they carried a charge of numinosity.⁴⁵ It was sufficient that they signified Egypt; and Egypt signified ancient wisdom, mystery, and, for architects, the most titanic achievements of their craft in the service of absolute power. When eventually the hieroglyphs were deciphered, and the famous obelisk inscriptions were revealed in all their blandness (or as Roman fakes), a new academic Egyptology was born, whose experts shunned any taint of Egyptomania, especially of the mystical and occult sort.

Something, of course, had been lost in the process. In excavating the shaky foundations of Kircher's hieroglyphic theory, I do not mean to disparage the philosophy that underlaid it. As Erik Iversen writes, Kircher's hieroglyphical expoundings

present one of the last deliberate efforts to combine the total religious, philosophic, and scientific knowledge of a whole period into a grandiose vision of a living cosmology, still governed by the doctrines of Christianity. As such it is certainly no laughing matter, but represents an intellectual achievement which should command awe and respect.⁴⁶

⁴³ For the phenomenon of Egyptomania, see Curl, *The Egyptian Revival*; also, for later manifestations, the exhibition catalogue *Egyptomania* (Humbert, *Egyptomania*).

⁴⁴ On all of these, see the illustrations and analyses in Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt*, Curl, *The Egyptian Revival* and Humbert, *Egyptomania*.

⁴⁵ On the role of esotericism and Hermetism in the European vision of Egypt, see Curl, *The Egyptian Revival*, 128–137.

⁴⁶ Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt*, 97.

Iversen believed that attitudes such as Warburton's 'heralded not only the disappearance of Neo-Platonism from the hieroglyphical studies, but its total disappearance as an active element in European culture as well'.⁴⁷ But that disappearance, as has become clear in the decades since Iversen was writing, was not total. Kircher's hieroglyphic tradition marked the point at which Christian Hermetism parted company with the official world of learning, not to die out but to lead its own life among the currents of esotericism. Kircher's translations of the Roman obelisks had been philologically mistaken, but they were not, as his critics thought, nonsensical. Anyone familiar with esoteric notions could see what he was driving at.

Reading an obelisk

To illustrate this last statement, here is one of Kircher's briefest translations, interpreting the fragmentary obelisk now in the park of Villa Celimontana. The monument comes from the Egyptian city of Heliopolis, where it was dedicated by Ramses II. Modern scholars, who read the hieroglyphs phonetically, agree that the inscription says something like this: 'Horus, powerful bull, beloved of Maat, king of Upper and Lower Egypt, son of the Sun, Ramses II.'⁴⁸

To Kircher, on the other hand, each hieroglyph was a self-contained symbol or statement. Here is his reading:

Supramundane Osiris, concealed in the centre of eternity, flows down into the world of the genii that is most near, similar, and immediately subject to him. This into the Osirian spirit of the sensible world, and its soul, which is the sun. This into Osiris Apis, the benefic Agathodaemon of the elementary world, who distributes the participated virtue of Osiris into all the members of the lower world. His minister and faithful assistant, the polymorphous daemon, shows by the variety which he causes and controls an abundance and plenty of all necessary things. But the benefic energy of the polymorphic daemon can be variously impeded by adverse virtues; hence the sacred tablet of Mophta and Mendes must be employed, through whom it acquires the humid strength and fertility of the Nile, so that it can make the good influences flow unimpeded. Because the polymorphous daemon is unable to complete this unaided,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 105.

⁴⁸ Selim, *Les Obélisques égyptiens*, 247; a similar reading is found in Marucchi, *Gli obelischi egiziani di Roma* 101.

the cooperation of Isis is needed, whose humidity tempers Mendes's dryness; for obtaining which the following sacred Osirian tablet is ordained, by which sacrifices may be conducted as prescribed in the Comasian rites. Through this tablet, then, and through the sight of it, supramundane Osiris shows the wished-for bounty of necessary things.⁴⁹

The rebarbative prose is unfortunate; that is why, while many people would like to read what Kircher wrote, no one wants to translate him. But if one persists, one discovers a Hermetic, or perhaps a Plotinian spectacle of energies proceeding down the Great Chain of Being from the divine Intellect (itself an aspect of the One), mediated by the Genii (the Nine Orders of Angels, in the Christian system), into the spirit, the soul, and finally the body of the solar system. The locus of transition from the spiritual to the material is the Sun (a notion that might well be rephrased in the formulae of modern physics), and from this point on, the text moves from a metaphysical to an allegorical scientific mode. It speaks in terms of the Aristotelian qualities (heat and cold, dryness and moisture, the four elements or states of matter) and of their equilibrium that makes life possible on earth. Neither Kircher nor his Egyptian predecessors could have thought otherwise than to attribute the whole arrangement to Divine Providence. We may smile, as Kircher did, at the ancient Egyptians' reverence for beetles, but that scarab with a human head in the margin of the *Mensa Isiaca* served him well. It was the catalyst for his contribution to the 'grandiose vision of a living cosmology' that the esoteric traditions, from Egyptian times to the present, have offered to the human imagination.

List of References

- Beinlich, Horst, 'Athanasius Kircher und die Kenntnis vom Alten Ägypten', in: Beinlich, H. (ed.), *Magie des Wissens. Athanasius Kircher 1602–1680. Universalgelehrter, Sammler, Visionär*, Dettelbach: J. H. Roll 2002, 85–98.
- Caspar, Max, *Kepler*, London & New York: Abelard-Schuman 1959.
- Collis, Robert, 'Freemasonry and the Occult at the Court of Peter the Great', *Aries*, 6/1 (2006), 1–26.
- Curl, James Stevens, *The Egyptian Revival: Ancient Egypt as the Inspiration for Design Motifs in the West*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005.
- David, Madeleine, *Le Débat sur les écritures et l'héroglyphe aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles*, Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N. 1965.

⁴⁹ Kircher, *Œdipus Ægyptiacus*, vol. III, 325.

- Findlen, Paula (ed.), *Athanasius Kircher, The Last Man Who Knew Everything*, New York & London: Routledge 2004.
- Fletcher, John Edward, *Athanasius Kircher, 'Germanus Incredibilis': a Study of His Life and Works with a Report on His Unpublished Correspondence*, Leiden: Brill forthcoming.
- Fludd, Robert, *Utriusque Cosmi Maioris scilicet et Minoris Metaphysica, Physica Atque Technica Historia, Tomus Primus*, Oppenheim: De Bry 1617.
- Godwin, Joscelyn, *Athanasius Kircher's Theatre of the World*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2009.
- Herwart von Hohenburg, Johann Friedrich, *Admiranda ethnicae theologiae mysteria propalata, ubi lapidem magnetem antiquissimis passim nationibus pro Deo cultum et artem qua navigationes magneticae per universum orbem instituerentur, a veterum sacerdotibus, sub involucris deorum, dearumque et aliarum perinde fabularum cortice, summo studio occultam esse, noviter commonstratur*, Ingolstadt 1623.
- Herwart von Hohenberg, Johann Georg, *THESAVRVS HIEROGLYPHICORVM è museo Ioannis Georgij Hervvart ab Hohenburg, vtrivsq; Iuris Doctoris, & ex Assessore summi Tribunalis Imperatorij, atq; ex Cancellario supremo Serenissimi vtrivsq; Bauariae Principis, suae Seren.^{mae} Celsitudini à consiliis intimis, Praesidis Svvabiae, & inclytorum Statuum Bauaricorum Cancellarij*, Munich or Augsburg, 1607 or 1610.
- Hsia, Florence, 'Athanasius Kircher's *China Illustrata* (1667): An Apologia Pro Vita Sua', in: Findlen, Paula (ed.), *Athanasius Kircher, The Last Man Who Knew Everything*, New York & London: Routledge 2004, 383–404.
- Humbert, Jean-Marcel, Pantazzi, M., Ziegler, M. und C. (ed.), *Egyptomania: Egypt in Western Art 1730–1930*, Paris: Musée du Louvre, Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada 1994.
- Iversen, Erik, *The Myth of Egypt and Its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition*, Copenhagen: Gec Gad Publishers 1961.
- Janssen, Johannes, *Geschichte des deutschen Volkes*, vol. VII, 3. Bd., Freiburg i.B.: Herder 1904.
- Kircher, Athanasius, *Ars Magnesia*, Herbipoli: Zinck 1631.
- , *Itinerarium Exstaticum*, Rome: Mascardus 1656.
- , *Obeliscus Aegyptiacus*, Rome: Varesij 1666.
- , *Obeliscus Pamphilius*, Rome: Ludouici Grignani 1650.
- , *Ædipus Aegyptiacus*, Rome: Mascardus 1652–55.
- , *Prodromus Coptus*, Rome: Fide 1636.
- Leospo, Enrico, *La Mensa Isiaca di Torino*, Leiden: Brill 1978 (Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain, vol. 70).
- Marucchi, Orazio, *Gli obelischi egiziani di Roma*, Rome: Ermanno Loescher 1898.
- Miller, Peter N., 'Copts and Scholars: Athanasius Kircher in Peiresc's Republic of Letters', in: Findlen, Paula (ed.), *Athanasius Kircher, The Last Man Who Knew Everything*, New York & London: Routledge, 2004, 134–148.
- Montfaucon, Bernard de, *Antiquity Explained and Represented in Sculptures*, London: J. Tonson and J. Watts 1721–22.
- Peiresc, Nicolas-Claude Fabri de, *Lettres à Cassiano dal Pozzo*, Jean-François Lhote and Danielle Joyal (ed.), Clermont-Ferrand: Éditions Adosa 1989.
- Pignoria, Lorenzo, *Vetustissimæ Tabulæ Aeneæ Sacris Aegyptiorum Simulachris cœlatae accurata Explicatio, in qua antiquissimarum superstitionum Origines, Progressiones, Ritus ad Barbaram, Græcam, Romanamque Historiam illustrandam enarrantur, & multa Scriptorum veterum loca qua explanantur, qua emendantur*, Venice: Ram-pazettus 1605.
- Rachewiltz, Boris de, & Partini, Anna M., *Roma Egizia: culti, templi e divinità egizie nella Roma imperiale*, Rome: Edizioni Mediterranee 1999.

- Selim, Abdel-Kader, *Les Obélisques égyptiens. Histoire et archéologie*, Cairo: Organisme général des Imprimeries gouvernementales 1991.
- Stolzenberg, Daniel, 'Egyptian Oedipus: Antiquarianism, Oriental Studies and Occult Philosophy in the Work of Athanasius Kircher', Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford University, 2004.
- Vehse, Eduard, *Geschichte der Höfe der Häuser Baiern, Württemberg, Baden und Hessen*, 1. Theil, Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe 1853 (Vehse, E., *Geschichte der deutschen Höfe seit der Reformation*, Bd. 23).
- Warburton, William, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, London: Thomas Tegg & Son 1837 (first ed. 1738–41).