

The *editio princeps* of the first published work by Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher.

Kircher, Athanasius. *Ars magnesia: Disquisitio bipartita-empeirica seu experimentalis, physico-mathematica de natura, viribus, et prodigiosis effectibus magnetis*. Würzburg: Typis Eliae Michaelis Zinck, 1631. 7 7/8 inches (200 mm), 72 pp.

Like Walt Whitman, Athanasius Kircher embraced multitudes. He wrote about amulets, Noah's ark, numerology, calculating machines, Egyptian hieroglyphics, geometrical figures, alchemy, universal language, obelisks, China, mummies, geology, the Tower of Babel and the confusion of tongues, underground lakes and rivers of fire, the virtues of a ruler, Coptic (his was the first grammar of the language to appear in the West), the magic lantern, sundials, optics, magnetism, music, megaphones, cosmology, heaven, acoustics, archaeology, bubonic plague, the crosses that seem to appear on clothing whenever Vesuvius erupts—and all points in between.

How could such a man not fascinate his contemporaries and posterity? A conference at New York University in 2002, commemorating the fourth centenary of his birth, was entitled, presumably by graduate students: “Was Athanasius Kircher just about the coolest guy ever, or what?” Naturally, his works have been the subject of an exhibition at the Museum of Jurassic Technology. It used to be easy to dismiss Kircher as a credulous pseudo-polymath. So long as those who collected his books and studied his thoughts were historians of science for whom (say) alchemy was just a primitive pseudo-chemistry, Kircher was fated to remain a harmless eccentric who studied almost everything but never quite found the key. Non-positivistic post-modernity, however, has taught some of us the virtues of dwelling on the margins of truth, which is not immutable. Ezra Pound's Chinese poetics turn Kircher's lucubrations into that favorite phenomenon of the Pataphysician, “a plagiarism by anticipation.” Kircher's own life was punctuated by a series of signs, wonders, omens, and miracles: his scholarship reflected that experience.

Kircher (1602–1680) was a German Jesuit who spent most of his career in Rome,

arriving there in 1635 to fill the chair of mathematics at the Collegio Romano. It was the perfect central location for a man of encyclopedic interests. (Kircher had always wanted to go to China as a missionary. A man of his temperament would have “gone native” immediately, a result that his superiors almost certainly anticipated. He stayed home).

Ars Magnesia (here reproduced) is Kircher’s first work. The subject was of perennial interest to him: he published some half-dozen books (or re-editions of books) on the subject, the last in 1667. The volume describes his experiments with magnetism, with theoretical explanations and practical applications of the quasi-magical observed phenomena. His Jesuit training in allegory no doubt induced him to find a divinity in magnetism. According to Kircher, a magnet symbolizes the several trinities: the divine Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; the temporal Trinity of Emperor, King, and Prince; and the ecclesiastical Trinity of Bishop, Priest, and Preacher. It was the era of the Passion-flower. Kircher’s *Magnes, sive de arte magnetica* (1641) expanded on these observations to cover gravitation, the tides, music, and the magnetism of love—attraction and repulsion, friendship and hatred. (In this last aspect, his “magnetic attraction” proved to be a distant forerunner of the notion that lovers require “chemistry” between them). God remained for Kircher “the Central Magnet of the Universe.” Kircher may well have been as much crippled in his science by his religion, but in realizing that mystery is an essential part of knowledge, Kircher came close to absolute truth.

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