

Kircher adopts the trappings of science fiction to convey his not-quite-orthodox sense of the cosmos—one that floats somewhere between a geocentric Aristotelianism and a heliocentric Copernicanism.

Kircher, Athanasius. *Iter extaticum coeleste, quo mundi opificium...* Herbipoli, Sumptibus Joh. Andr. & Wolffg. jun. Endterorum hæredibus, prostat Norimbergæ apud eosdem, 1660. 8 1/4 inches (210 mm), [24], 689, [18] pp.; XII leaves of plates.

Much of the polymathic scholarship of the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602–80) has a fantastical air, poised as it is between rival systems—as, for instance, between superstition and biological fact in his book on the plague (1658), or portents and miracles, as in his book on the crosses of Vesuvius (1661). The *Iter Extaticum* (1656), known in its second (German) edition as *Iter Extaticum Coeleste*, is perhaps the most fantastical of all, for in it Kircher adopted the trappings of science fiction to convey his not-quite-orthodox sense of the cosmos—in this case, one that floats somewhere between a geocentric Aristotelianism and a heliocentric Copernicanism. As Kircher put it, he hoped to make an unfamiliar subject more palatable by presenting it in the garb of an ingenious fiction, in the guise of a feigned rapture—*Sub ingeniosi figmenti velamine, seu ficti raptus integumento exhibita* (**Spread 23**).

The *Ecstatic Journey* of the title is a dream in which Kircher, under the pseudonym of Theodidactus (“Taught by God”) is guided through the heavens by his Guardian Angel Cosmiel, a spirit who plays Virgil to his Dante. The two of them may be seen setting out in the frontispiece at **Spread 3**, a plate that appears for the first time in this edition.

First stop is the Moon (**Spreads 48–83**) which seems to have lost much of its Aristotelian polish, being pocked with craters, scarred with mountains, and buffeted by waves. Venus comes next (**Spreads 83–97**), then other planets, and the fixed stars. Kircher’s celestial bodies turned out to be formed of the four earthly elements rather than the Aristotelian fifth, quintessential, element. The second dialogue deals with the Earth, its creation and position in the universe, adopting the Tyconic compromise between geocentrism and heliocentrism by making the sun part of a geocentric system, with a

subsidiary heliocentric system for the other planets.

This was the favored planetary arrangement of most Jesuit scientists of the period, but one that was not welcomed universally throughout the Roman Catholic church, or even by the Jesuit censors. Playing “good cop, bad cop,” Kircher had protected himself by making Cosmiel (rather than his own *alter ego*) the mouthpiece of Copernicanism and the scourge of Aristotle. Although he took care to quote scriptural authority, some of Kircher’s scientific authorities were more heterodox—Hevelius and Galileo, for instance. When Kircher and his guardian angel reach the Sun, they encounter an old friend from *Magnes* (1641), Kircher’s book on the Lodestone. *Panspermia rerum* had been a passive seed some twenty years earlier, but has now evolved into the Universal Seminal Force, the Spark of Life, borne on the rays of the Sun—see **Spread 122, right**. In Tycho’s system, the fixed stars orbit the Earth, but Cosmiel shows to his companion a number of stars that revolve around the sun, and an infinite distance of space beyond. This astronomical vision, even when presented as fiction, far exceeded what any Roman censor was willing to tolerate.

The second edition, reproduced here, benefitted from the less rigorous censorship that prevailed in Germany. Gaspar Schott (1608–66), Kircher’s devoted pupil (he had taught him mathematics thirty years earlier) and assistant—the two had worked closely together in Rome for several years—arranged for publication in Würzburg, revising (but not censoring) the text, and adding notes and explanations and defenses, including an apology by an influential theologian, Melchior Corneus, against charges of heresy (**Spreads 281–83**). Schott even dared to quote on Kircher’s behalf the heterodox opinions of Giordano Bruno, a man who had been burnt by the Church at the stake.

Kircher published a sequel, entitled *Iter Extatum II*, in Rome in 1657. This second iteration (**Spreads 283–366**) continues the dialogue, introducing a second interlocutor Hydriel, who serves as Kircher’s guide to the realms of water. Cosmiel reveals, in turn, the wonders of dry land. Ventures into the submarine and the subterranean follow, serving as an introduction to Kircher’s forthcoming *Mundus Subterraneus* (Amsterdam, 1664–65), of which a synopsis is provided on **Spreads 367–69**. All this was reprinted in the Würzburg edition presented here.