

**Kircher's impressive three volumes covers Egyptian history, cross-cultural religious influences, and interpretations of hieroglyphics.**

Kircher, Athanasius. *Vniuersalis hieroglyphicae veterum doctrinae temporum iniuria abolitae instauratio*. Romae: Ex typographia Vitalis Mascardi, 1652–1654. 14 1/8 inches (360 mm), 3 vols. in 4; vol.1: [98], 424, [40] pp., [3] leaves of plates (folded); vol. 2; pt.1: [2], 440, [30] pp., [2] leaves of plates (folded); vol. 2; pt.2: 546, [26] pp.; v.3: [2], 590, [36] p., [10] leaves of plates (folded). Numerous illustrations within the text in addition to the plates. ill., maps.

The Egyptian enthusiasms, pursued with remarkable industry, exceptional learning, and supreme confidence by Athanasius Kircher (1602–80) for over two decades, culminated in three impressive folio volumes entitled *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652–54). Here the German Jesuit casts himself as a modern Oedipus attempting to guess the riddle of the Sphinx (**Spread 3**). By modern standards of evidence and scholarly method, he was hopelessly wrong-headed, even without the benefit of the Rosetta Stone.

Although Kircher was correct to connect early modern Coptic with late ancient Egyptian, he unwisely dissociated the spoken ancient Egyptian language from the sacred hieroglyphs. Like any good Catholic, he had a firm faith in the weight of tradition and even of precedent. It was therefore perfectly natural for him to accept enthusiastically the judgment of previous elitist poets and scholars, and to consider hieroglyphic writing to be a symbolic language of the priesthood, incomprehensible to the ignorant Egyptian multitude.

The first volume of *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (**Spreads 1–294**) offers a preliminary survey of the history, chronology, and geography of Egypt, with an account of cross-cultural religious influences and affinities that includes plates of Isis (**Spread 154**), Horus (**Spread 167**), Mithras (**Spread 168**) and deities from China (**Spread 259**), Japan, (**Spreads 262–63 and 265**) and Mexico (**Spreads 271 and 272**). There is a folding map of Egypt at **Spreads 58–59** and maps of the source of the Nile at **Spreads 83 and 87**.

Volume two consists of two parts. The first (**Spreads 295–539**) follows on the tracks of *Obeliscus Pamphilius* to discuss the interpretation of hieroglyphics in relation to

other cultures and cults, including those of Zoroaster, Orpheus, Pan (illustrated, full-page and full-frontal, on **Spread 400**, repeated at **515**) and the Jewish Kabbalah. At **Spread 444** is a *Speculum Cabalae Mysticae*, a folding plate with the 72 names of God in 72 languages. The second part (**Spreads 540–830**) is devoted to “Hieroglyphic mathematics” and the mysteries of geometry, number, music, astrology, magic, and medicine.

The third and final volume, subtitled *Theatrum Hieroglyphicum* (**Spreads 831–1167**), prints all hieroglyphic inscriptions known to Kircher, with his own translations. This corpus was to Egyptology what Janus Gruter’s collection of Latin inscriptions was to the study of ancient Roman epigraphy: it was the largest yet published, exceeding the collection in J.G. Herwart van Hohenburg’s *Thesaurus Hieroglyphicorum* (1610), the book that had apparently first inspired Kircher’s Egyptological studies some 25 years earlier. Here again, Kircher indulged in cross-cultural comparisons, reproducing an Aztec inscription (**Spread 850**) that a fellow Jesuit had sent him from Mexico for the light that it seemed certain to cast on Egyptian writing. Sources of his hieroglyphs include mummies (**Spreads 1039–1067**) and obelisks, with impressive folding plates at **Spreads 915, 943, 967, 977, 995** and **1004**.

Even some of his contemporaries found it difficult to credit Kircher’s interpretations, but one of them (at least) was astonishingly prescient. His derivation of the letter M from the wavy hieroglyph for water (**Spread 858**) accords with modern scholarly interpretation. Unfortunately, it is the only bull’s eye of a willfully blind archer.

**Spread 2** bears the dated signature of Frederick Shelley Ryman (1858–1929), whose sole fame today is derived from his voluminous diaries now at the Massachusetts Historical Society. The ambivalent, all-over-the-map sexuality that they reveal—“atheistic bisexual misogyny” covers a few of the bases—has been a documentary godsend to several recent historians of bachelor life and same-sex relationships in 19th-century America.