The Man Who Knew Too Much: Athanasius Kircher

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Dragons and giants have dwelled within the earth. Musical harmony is but an echo of the harmony that exists out in the cosmos. Certain creatures, such as insects, can be spontaneously created from non-living matter. Atlantis is real and located in the North Atlantic, right in between Spain and the New World. Networks of fire and water course through the hollowed out spaces inside the earth. Mermaids and griffins rode in Noah's Ark alongside the other pairs of animals.



These are just a handful of the more fantastic notions put forth by Jesuit priest and scholar Athanasius Kircher, "the last Renaissance man" (per Edward W. Schmidt), a spirited polymath whose outlandish claims and pursuits continue to fascinate to this day, even as most of his ideas have been discredited. He taught and studied a wide range of topics, including numerous languages, grammar, mathematics, physics, ethics, Egyptology (a field he helped to create), geology, music, cartography, optics, and so much more. In his long life he published about forty books and became an intellectual celebrity. Although his star fell even before his death, Kircher's peculiar theories and the bizarre and striking engravings that illustrate them have survived into the present. The science may be bunk, but Kircher's superhuman curiosity, sensational imagination, and eclectic range of interests make him an enduring figure of interest.

Kircher was born during the feast of Saint Athanasius in either 1601 or 1602, in the town of Geisa in the center of present-day Germany. His father was a scholar of philosophy and

theology who briefly took a position as a councilor and bailiff that he eventually lost due to political upheaval; after this, his focus returned to scholarship and his family. Just as his five elder brothers had done, Athanasius joined a religious order. He selected the Society of Jesus for their intense focus on academics and entered the Jesuit order circa 1616. Until he was ordained as a priest in 1628, he studied at various Jesuit institutions, often teaching a variety of subjects as well.



Throughout his education, the Thirty Years' War (1618-48) and its attendant violence between Protestants and Catholics created problems for the young Jesuit. In 1621 Kircher was displaced from his lessons at Paderborn when Christian the Younger of Brunswick, a brutal Protestant military leader, brought troops into the principality. A few years later, he was nearly killed while passing through war zones under Protestant control on his way to Heiligenstadt, where he was to study languages and "physical curiosities" as well as teach grammar. Rather than travel in plainclothes, he wore his Jesuit robes, an act of defiance that caught the attention of some Protestant cavalrymen. They stripped Kircher, beat him, and were about to string him up on a tree when one of the soldiers, stirred by the Jesuit's nerve, convinced the others to let him be. By 1631 he had left Germany for Avignon after a portentous vision of soldiers outside his dormitory window -- a premonition that was fulfilled by the arrival of the fierce Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden. He would never return to Germany.

In Avignon he continued teaching and researching. He began making the astronomical observations that would form the basis of his second book, *Primitae gnomonicae catopricaeis* (published in 1635), and continued his obsession with hieroglyphics, ignited a few years earlier in Speyer. Fortunately, this interest in hieroglyphics overlapped with Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, a wealthy intellectual in contact with a vast international network of scientists. Peiresc became Kircher's first scientific patron. Their relationship was nearly cut short, however, as Kircher was soon called to Vienna to replace Johann Kepler as the court mathematician. This upset Peiresc, who appealed to Cardinal Barberini and Pope Urban VIII to reconsider. Peiresc's letters convinced the pope to reassign Kircher to professor of mathematics, physics, and Oriental languages at Collegio Romano in Rome. Improbably and completely by accident, the Jesuit was already in Rome, as his ship to Vienna had just washed up in nearby Civitavecchia.



Collegio Romano would be Kircher's home base until his death. It was here where he produced the majority of his sizable oeuvre, including his masterworks Oedipus Aegyptiacus (published 1652-55) and Mundus Subterraneus (published 1664-78). When the importance of Kircher's passionate and unvielding independent studies became clear, he was freed from his duties as a professor and allowed to pursue his own research fulltime. He achieved such recognition with his work that patronage was rarely an issue. Popes, princes, and Hapsburg emperors supported Kircher, and his ideas reached Catholic and Protestant audiences alike. His work earned him powerful supporters who could protect him against potential repercussions for his more controversial theories. The Jesuit ultimately became perhaps the first scientist to be able to survive off the sale of his work when he sold exclusive rights to publish his books to a major Dutch publisher circa 1660.

The book that rocketed Kircher to renown was the aforementioned *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*. The finished product of the scholar's long-time obsession with Egpyt, the book ran a staggering 2,000 pages over three volumes and covered Kircher's interpretations of Egyptian language, knowledge, and thought. First published nearly 150 years before the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, its third volume highlighted Kircher's florid and erroneous translations of hieroglyphics. Still, for all its inaccuracies, the Jesuit did connect the Coptic language used by Egyptian Christians to early Egyptian. Thanks to the popularity and (often preposterous) innovations of these volumes, Kircher is often labeled as one of the founders and pioneers of Egyptology.



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About a dozen years after the publication of *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, Kircher released *Mundus* Subterraneus, a work primarily focused on the insides of the earth, but that also covered topics such as bioluminescence, fireworks, and poisons and their antidotes. The principle idea in the sprawling two-volume work is that "the whole Earth is not solid but everywhere gaping, and hollowed with empty rooms and spaces, and hidden burrows" where Earth's bodies of water and fire are interconnected. Heavily illustrated with speculative maps and odd engravings -dragons, giants, the inner chambers of the earth, filled with raging streams of water and fire -the book looks today like a work of science fiction or fantasy. The roots of this captivating semiscientific text lie in Kircher's last big adventure, which began as an expedition to Malta in 1637 with Prince Frederik of Hesse. While there he found himself musing on the various geologic phenomena, subterranean passages, and the Megalithic Temples. Rather than return directly to Rome after his mission was complete, he tarried in Sicily, drawn to its cliffs, rock formations, and volcanoes. On this same trip he witnessed and survived the brutal earthquake that struck Calabria in 1638, killing approximately 10,000 people. This event only compelled the scholar to dig deeper, both figuratively and literally. Desperate to figure out if Stromboli, Mount Etna, and Mount Vesuvius were all connected, he was lowered into a crater of the last, just seven years after its last major eruption. The hellish sights he saw within the still-active volcano provided crucial inspiration for the wild theories in Mundus Subterraneus.



Kircher's other major accomplishment at Collegio Romano was what eventually became known as the Museum Kircherianum. Comprised of countless oddities, the Museum Kircherianum was, according to its eccentric proprietor, one of the defining sights of Rome. It was one of the first public museums -- although visitors often arrived with letters of recommendation, and many were denied admission. Inside was a strange assortment of artifacts: portraits of clergy, wooden models of obelisks, Kircher's correspondence, perpetual-motion devices, stuffed animals from the New World, vomiting machines, magic lanterns, and, allegedly, a cat organ, a cruel device wherein a line of living cats are "played" when the keys trigger injury to their tails.

As Kircher lost influence with age, his museum was transferred from its impressive gallery to smaller quarters. By the time of his death in 1680, the Jesuit genius had already begun to slip into obscurity. His critics' voices grew louder, and he became something of a joke, receiving trick manuscripts from fellow scholars that he unfortunately took seriously. Old age wore him down and made the typically cheerful scholar disgruntled and paranoid. His death was overshadowed by the ceremony surrounding the passing of the celebrated sculptor and architect Gian Lorenzo Bernini (with whom Kircher had collaborated), who died just one day after Kircher. But in recent history, there has been a revival of interest in the Jesuit whose

imaginative, esoteric research stood in contrast to the more rational, skeptical approach favored by his contemporaries such as Descartes. Literary giants such as Edgar Allen Poe and Jorge Luis Borges have referenced Kircher in their work. Dadaist Marcel Duchamp and proto-Surrealist Giorgio de Chirico were both enamored of the engravings in his books. These same engravings remain popular with modern collectors attracted to their aesthetic beauty and singular strangeness. The International Athanasius Kircher Research Society formed in 1968, and a New York-based Kircher Society began in 2007. An extensive exhibit on the Jesuit has been on display at the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Culver City for more than a decade. Despite the fact that most of his pseudo-scientific ideas have been debunked, the novelty of Athanasius Kircher's genius lives on.

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