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EGYPTIAN OEDIPUS

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Athanasius Kircher and  
the Secrets of Antiquity

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HIEROGLYPHICS Language of the ancient Egyptians, invented by the priests to conceal their shameful secrets. To think that there are people who understand them! But perhaps the whole thing is just a hoax?

—Gustave Flaubert, *Dictionary of Received Ideas*

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## INTRODUCTION

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# Oedipus in Exile

The wisdom of the Egyptian philosophers truly seems to be something much too divine to be understood by any little man; for, in my opinion, the Egyptian system of the world, which was based on the laws of attraction and repulsion, seems to be the closest of all to the truth. This opinion of mine now has the consent of all Europe, which approved it not so long ago, but attributed it to Newton, in his calculus. But Kircher came before Newton; and lest someone thinks that I am daydreaming, I would have him read carefully and with an unprejudiced mind those things that Kircher wrote in the last chapter of *Coptic Forerunner* and *Egyptian Oedipus*.

—Adam František Kollár (1790)<sup>1</sup>

### MALTA, 1637

The summer of 1637 found Athanasius Kircher (1601/2–1680) marooned on a small Mediterranean island. After three felicitous years in Rome, the Jesuit priest had been transferred to Malta, a European outpost between Sicily and North Africa governed by the Catholic Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. He arrived at the end of May in the retinue of a young German prince, Landgrave Frederick of Hesse-Darmstadt. Following high-level ne-

1. Kollár, *Ad Petri Lambecii commentariorum libros VIII. Supplementorum liber* (1790), 357. Earlier, Kollár was less enthusiastic. In his revised edition of Peter Lambeck's bibliography of the Imperial Library at Vienna, he wrote: "The incredible temerity of the polymath Kircher in these studies is too well known to everyone to need to be confirmed by this example. It is irksome to examine and refute each thing that he imagines here, since I do not have time to consider difficult trifles and rightly consider it to be a foolish work of absurdities." Lambeck, *Commentariorum de Augustissima Bibliotheca liber* (1766–82), vol. 1, 192–94.

gotiations with Rome, Frederick had converted from Lutheranism to Catholicism. In reward, Pope Urban VIII promised him the Grand Cross of the Order of St. John and the lucrative office of coadjutor of the Grand Priory of Germany. This required Frederick to take up temporary residence on the island, and Kircher, a fellow German, was sent along to serve as the landgrave's confessor and teach mathematics at Malta's Jesuit college. It was a poor match. Kircher's talents and ambitions were scholarly rather than pastoral, while Frederick was a rowdy youth and Malta a cultural backwater.<sup>2</sup>

While Kircher made desultory efforts to instill Frederick with Catholic piety, back in the mainstream of European intellectual life, René Descartes (1596–1650) published his first book. *A Discourse on the Method for Conducting One's Reason Rightly and for Searching for Truth in the Sciences*, issued anonymously in Leiden in June 1637, announced a radical program to overhaul the whole of human knowledge. Surveying the state of learning, and looking back on his own education at the renowned Jesuit college of La Flèche, Descartes detected nothing but error and uncertainty. "There has been no body of knowledge in the world," he lamented, "which was of the sort that I had previously hoped to find."<sup>3</sup> To escape this impasse, he argued, it would be necessary to start from scratch, treating all received wisdom as so many prejudices and constructing a secure body of knowledge on foundations in no way dependent on tradition. In place of books, schools, and the accumulated learning of millennia, Descartes substituted a method based on the principle of accepting nothing as true that could not be demonstrated by a sequence of clear and distinct ideas. Beginning with only the indubitable *cogito ergo sum* (I am thinking, therefore I exist), he proved the reality of God, the human soul, and inert matter that could be studied through a mathematical science of nature. For the rest of the seventeenth century Cartesian philosophy was a lightning rod—scourge of traditionalists and rallying cry of *moderni*.

Descartes famously attributed his breakthrough to a period of forced isolation. Serving in the army of Prince Maurice of Nassau, he was detained one winter in Germany, where he found himself with abundant free time and few external distractions, such as books or conversation partners. One momentous day, alone with his thoughts in a stove-heated room, he experienced an intellectual epiphany that led to the insights on which he would base his life's work. In Descartes' vision, the most profound and certain

2. On Kircher in Malta, see Bartòla, "Alessandro VII" (1989); Borg, *Fabio Chigi* (1967); Zammit Ciantar, "Athanasius Kircher in Malta" (1991).

3. Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (1980), 5.

knowledge of the universe could be achieved by a solitary individual, unburdened of prior knowledge and properly exercising his reason.<sup>4</sup>

Kircher did not find isolation so stimulating. In Rome, he had thrived at the bustling Collegio Romano, the flagship school of the Society of Jesus and crossroads of its international missionary network, and moved in the city's leading cultural circles. Supported by powerful patrons, he was at work on an ambitious research project whose goal was nothing less than to decipher the Egyptian hieroglyphs. He had just published the first fruit of this research—a treatise on Coptic, which brought him a taste of literary fame—when Malta intervened.<sup>5</sup> Taking stock of his new surroundings, Kircher must have felt that a hitherto promising career had taken a sudden wrong turn. He watched with envy as Lucas Holstenius, another German émigré intellectual in the landgrave's entourage, hightailed it back to Rome at the first opportunity. Kircher passed the time devising a “physico-mathematical” instrument, hunting for manuscripts, exploring mysterious subterranean chambers, and befriending the learned papal nuncio and future pope, Fabio Chigi.<sup>6</sup> But, cut off from the libraries, collections, and community that had sustained him, his research came to a standstill. Feeling his talents waste away with the days, he sent letters to Rome, entreating his Jesuit superiors and influential protectors to release him from his exile. Eventually, his pleas were heard: the general of the Society dispatched a substitute German priest-mathematician, and in 1638 Kircher returned to the Eternal City to resume his studies.<sup>7</sup>

### THE HIEROGLYPHIC SPHINX

Like Descartes, Kircher went on to achieve considerable, if less enduring, fame in the international community of scholars that called itself the Republic of Letters. But his idea of the scholarly enterprise was different. To a certain extent, he represented the bookish learning, rooted in ancient tradition, which intellectual reformers like Descartes fought against in the name

4. Descartes acknowledged the need for collaboration in building on the foundations obtainable by solitary ratiocination. See *ibid.*, 33–34.

5. Kircher, *Prodromus Coptus* (1636).

6. The instrument is described in Kircher, *Specula Melitensis* (1638); republished in Schott, *Technica curiosa* (1664), 427–77. A facsimile of the rare first edition is appended to Zammit Ciantar, “Athanasius Kircher in Malta” (1991).

7. See Muzio Vitelleschi to Kircher, Rome, 30 July 1637, and 7 January 1638, APUG 561, fols. 18<sup>r</sup> and 19<sup>r</sup>; the latter is printed in Bartòla, “Alessandro VII” (1989), 83. See also Holstenius to Barberini, Naples, 7 September 1637, in *ibid.*, 80; Barberini to Holstenius, Rome, 24 September 1637, in *ibid.*, 82; Francesco Barberini to Fabio Chigi, Rome, 10 October and 15 October 1637, in Borg, *Fabio Chigi* (1967), 312, 318.

of a new philosophy. (In a 1643 letter to Constantijn Huygens, Descartes described Kircher as “more charlatan than scholar,” and refused to read his books.)<sup>8</sup> While Kircher, too, was devoted to natural sciences, these disciplines were only part of his encyclopedic vision. A quintessential polymath, of that soon-to-be-extinct academic species that eschewed specialization and aspired to master the entire panorama of human knowledge, he was renowned for the vast range of his scholarly output. Magnetism, music, optics, archeology, chemistry, geology, linguistics, cryptography, Lullism, and China were only some of the subjects to which he devoted substantial studies. Like other Jesuits, Kircher sought an accommodation between tradition and innovation, striving to reconcile the Aristotelian philosophy officially espoused by the Society of Jesus with new intellectual trends.<sup>9</sup> This balancing act could support a considerable load of novelty. In his major astronomical work, *Ecstatic Journey* (Rome, 1656), for example, Kircher paid heed to the condemnation of heliocentrism by endorsing Tycho Brahe’s compromise cosmology. (Mathematically identical to the Copernican model, it placed the sun and moon revolving around an immobile, central earth while the other planets orbited the sun.) But Kircher audaciously placed this geocentric planetary system within a quasi-infinite universe reminiscent of the views of Giordano Bruno, the Neapolitan heretic burned in Rome in 1600.<sup>10</sup> Even when challenging orthodoxy, however, Kircher remained faithful to the veneration of antiquity that was the common legacy of humanism and scholasticism.

This book explores one part of Kircher’s encyclopedic corpus: his study of Egypt and the hieroglyphs. After two decades of toil, Kircher brought this project to completion in his largest and most challenging work, *Egyptian Oedipus*, issued in four volumes in Rome in 1655.<sup>11</sup> With the title of his magnum opus, Kircher characteristically paid honor to himself. Like Oedipus answering the riddle of the Sphinx, Kircher believed he had solved the enigma of the hieroglyphs (fig. 1). Together with its companion volume,

8. Findlen, “Janus Faces of Science” (2000), 223.

9. On Jesuit science see: Hellyer, *Catholic Physics* (2005); Feingold, ed., *Jesuit Science and the Republic of Letters* (2003); Feingold, ed., *New Science and Jesuit Science* (2003); Romano, *La contre-réforme mathématique* (1999); Fabre and Romano, eds., *Les jésuites dans le monde moderne* (1999); Gorman, “Scientific Counter-Revolution” (1999); Giard, ed., *Les jésuites à la Renaissance* (1995); Baldini, *Legem impone subactis* (1992).

10. Kircher, *Itinerarium exstaticum* (1656). See Ziller Camenietzki, “L’extase interplanétaire d’Athanasius Kircher” (1995); Rowland, “Athanasius Kircher, Giordano Bruno” (2004); Siebert, *Die grosse kosmologische Kontroverse* (2006).

11. Kircher, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652–54). The work was printed over several years. Its three “tomes” bear the dates 1652, 1653, and 1654, but it was completed and made available to the public all at once in 1655.



*Pamphilian Obelisk*,<sup>12</sup> *Egyptian Oedipus* presented Kircher's Latin translations of hieroglyphic inscriptions—utterly mistaken, as post-Rosetta-Stone Egyptology would reveal—preceded by treatises on ancient Egyptian history, the origins of idolatry, allegorical and symbolic wisdom, and numerous non-Egyptian textual traditions that supposedly preserved elements of the “hieroglyphic doctrine.” In addition to ancient Greek and Latin authors, Kircher's vast array of sources included texts in Oriental languages, including Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, Coptic, Samaritan, and Ethiopian, as well as archeological evidence such as inscriptions, statues, amulets, idols, vases, sarcophagi, and monuments (figs. 2–5). The resulting amalgam is, without doubt, impressive. But it can also bewilder. Pondering its “elephantine” volumes, historian Frank Manuel memorably called *Egyptian Oedipus* “one of the most learned monstrosities of all times.”<sup>13</sup>

This book presents a new interpretation of Kircher's project in terms of an encounter between two early modern intellectual traditions: erudition (antiquarian research and philology) and occult philosophy (the Renaissance Neoplatonic tradition, based on a lineage of esoteric wisdom attributed to extremely ancient pagan wise men). Kircher's spectacular shortcomings have made it difficult to appreciate how much he participated in the important scholarly developments of his time. Once his proper measure is taken, he proves a useful figure for reassessing important aspects of seventeenth-century scholarship. By reading his hieroglyphic studies as a work of erudite historical research, instead of philosophy, I show that Kircher differed fundamentally from earlier writers in the so-called Hermetic tradition, whose work he has been seen as continuing, and that he shared more with his contemporaries than has usually been acknowledged. *Egyptian Oedipus* was not quite so monstrous as Manuel imagined. In particular, I argue that Kircher's use of occult philosophy in the service of antiquarian research was not anomalous, and that the prevailing chronology of the fate of occult philosophy must be revised. Behind Kircher's two greatest failures—his incredible translations of hieroglyphic inscriptions and his reliance on spurious documents—lay widely accepted principles about symbolic communication and the transmission of ancient knowledge. As a case study of seventeenth-century scholarship, this book illuminates a complex moment when empiricism and esotericism coexisted, and shows how the discipline of Oriental studies was born from an early modern Mediterranean world in which texts, artifacts, and scholars circulated between Christian and Islamic civilizations.

12. Kircher, *Obeliscus Pamphilius* (1650).

13. Manuel, *Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (1959), 190–91.





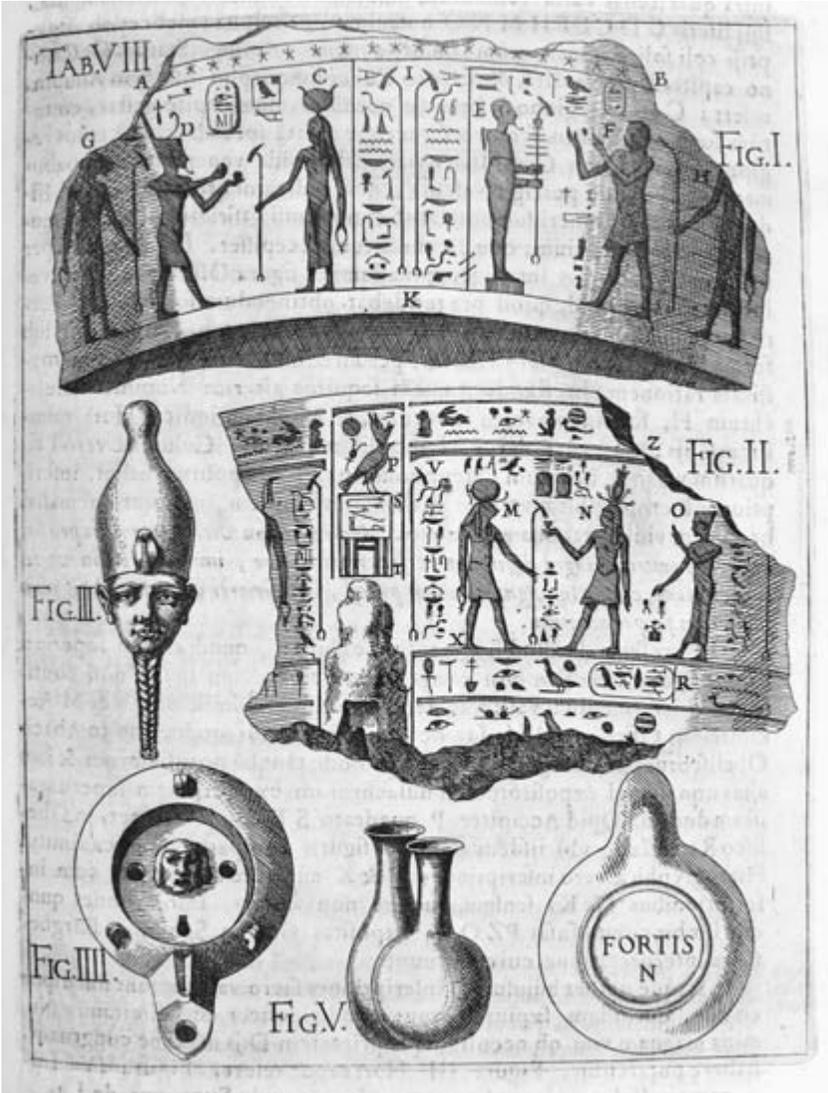


Fig. 4. Fragments of hieroglyphic inscriptions and other Egyptian antiquities. Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (Rome: 1652–54), vol. 3, 385. Courtesy of Stanford University Libraries.



Fig. 5. A mummy and inscriptions documenting Egyptian funerary practices. Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (Rome: 1652–54), vol. 3, 417. Courtesy of Stanford University Libraries.

A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY LIFE<sup>14</sup>

Athanasius Kircher was born in 1601 or 1602 in Geisa, a small town in Thuringia in central Germany.<sup>15</sup> From the age of ten, when his parents sent him to study in nearby Fulda, he spent his life, first as student then as teacher, at Jesuit schools in Germany, France, Malta, and Rome.<sup>16</sup> In 1618 he entered the Society of Jesus as a novice, beginning the intensive curriculum of philosophy and theology prescribed for future priests.<sup>17</sup> Over the next decade his training took him to Paderborn, Cologne, Koblenz, Heiligenstadt, Aschaffenburg, and Mainz. After taking holy orders in 1629, Kircher spent his tertianship (the year after ordination designated for withdrawal and spiritual contemplation) in Speyer, where he happened upon a book of engravings of Roman obelisks in the college library, which sparked his desire to decipher the hieroglyphs.<sup>18</sup> During university Kircher cultivated the two fields that would anchor his long, polymathic career: mathematical sciences and Oriental languages. His efforts were recognized in 1630 with an appointment as professor of mathematics, Greek, and Hebrew at the Jesuit college in Würzburg.

Kircher's admission into the Society in 1618 coincided with the Bohemian revolt, which soon escalated into the pan-European conflict known as the Thirty Years' War, devastating much of Germany. When Paderborn fell to Protestant forces in 1620, Kircher narrowly escaped with his life. By 1629 he concluded that his prospects were brighter elsewhere. Bitterly commenting that Catholicism had enjoyed more success in India in seven

14. On Kircher's life, the principal source is his Latin autobiography, Kircher, *Vita Admodum Reverendi P. Athanasii Kircheri* (1684), published posthumously by Hieronymus Langenmantel. Totaro, *L'autobiographie d'Athanasius Kircher* (2009) provides a critical edition with French and Italian translations, but the introductory essay should be read skeptically. An annotated English translation is now available in Fletcher, *Study of the Life and Works of Athanasius Kircher* (2011), 459–551.

15. Kircher was unsure of his birth year. He gave it as 1601 in Kircher, *Magnes* (1641), after index, but as 1602 in his *Vita*. Early archival records have 1601 (e.g., ARSI Rom. 57, fol. 153<sup>v</sup>; Rom. 58, fol. 15<sup>v</sup>; Rom. 59, fols. 12<sup>r</sup>, 198<sup>r</sup>). In 1664 Kircher wrote the canon of Geisa hoping to learn the truth, but by then his hometown's baptismal records had been lost. See Richter, "Athanasius Kircher und seine Vaterstadt" (1927). On Kircher's youth, see Jäger, "Athanasius Kircher, Geisa, und Fulda" (2002).

16. The literature on the early modern Jesuits has grown vast. An excellent entry point is a pair of conference proceedings: O'Malley et al., *The Jesuits* (1999); and O'Malley et al., *The Jesuits II* (2006).

17. ARSI Rhen Inf. 38, fols. 212<sup>v</sup>, 242<sup>v</sup>, 259<sup>r</sup>; Rhen Inf. 37, fol. 197; O'Neill and Domínguez, eds., *Diccionario Histórico* (2001), vol. 3, 2196.

18. ARSI Rhen. Sup. 25, fol. 49<sup>r</sup>; *Vita*, 36. The book was likely Herwart von Hohenburg, *Thesaurus Hieroglyphicorum* ([1610]).

years than in his homeland in seventy, he begged to be transferred abroad, lest "my mind waste away, cramped inside Germany's barren and dusty wasteland."<sup>19</sup> His superiors were unmoved. But in 1631, after the advancing armies of Gustavus Adolphus closed Jesuit colleges in Würzburg and elsewhere, Kircher fled to France, never to see Germany again. Assigned a new teaching post in Avignon,<sup>20</sup> Kircher remained in France less than two years, but they were decisive ones, due to his encounter with the brilliant Provençal impresario of learning, Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, who became his mentor and orchestrated his transfer to Rome in 1633. There, Kircher's life as a wandering scholar came to an end; after the trip to Malta in 1637–38, he rarely traveled beyond the Roman Campagna.

Kircher arrived in Rome at a delicate moment. Only months before, Galileo had been convicted by the Holy Office on charges of "vehement suspicion of heresy," ushering in a period of intellectual conservatism. The "marvelous conjuncture," during which the papacy of Galileo's supporter, Maffeo Barberini, fleetingly aroused hopes for an official Catholic embrace of Copernicanism, had passed.<sup>21</sup> But the new alignment proved auspicious for a rising star with the right intellectual skills and political dexterity. The Society of Jesus had been ambivalent about the Galileo affair. While Jesuit scholars played a leading role in the prosecution, prominent Jesuit mathematicians had been among Galileo's early supporters, and, as Kircher confided to Peiresc in 1633, some of them privately sympathized with the new cosmology.<sup>22</sup> Kircher, who inherited the mathematician's studio in the Collegio Romano, previously occupied by the great Christoph Clavius (architect of the Gregorian calendar) and the brilliant but discrete Christoph Grienberger, was deft at pursuing scientific investigations that were timely while avoiding controversy.<sup>23</sup> Arriving in Rome in autumn of 1633, Kircher might have appeared to Urban VIII as an ideal replacement for his recently

19. "Quare obnixè oro atque obsecro, per amorem Dei, ac sanctissime Virginis Matris, perquam illud ingens consequendae Apostolicae persecutionis desiderium, ne preces meas, ac obtestationes irritas esse patiatur, ne quaeso permittat, ut animus meus inter Germaniae huius sterilis ac aronosae angustias constrictus contabescat, exera<m> animum meum hactenus vinctum cum totum in obsequium divinae maiestatis effundendo, ne ego in offerendo me deo promptior liberaliorque, quam deus in beneficiis mihi refundendis esse videtur." Kircher to Father General [Vitelleschi], Mainz, 12 January 1629, ARSI Rhen. Sup. 42 ("Indiam petentes"), fols. 20<sup>r</sup>–21<sup>v</sup>. See below, n. 55, for more of this letter.

20. ARSI Rhen. Sup. 25, fol. 68<sup>v</sup>; Lugd. 14, fol. 239<sup>v</sup>, 19<sup>r</sup>, fol. 14<sup>r</sup>.

21. Redondi, *Galileo Heretic* (1987); Biagioli, *Galileo, Courtier* (1993).

22. Peiresc to Gassendi, 6 September 1633, in Tamizey de Larroque, ed., *Lettres* (1888–98), vol. 4, 353–54. On Galileo and the Jesuits, see Feldhay, "Use and Abuse of Mathematical Entities" (1998); Feldhay, *Galileo and the Church* (1995).

23. Gorman, "Mathematics and Modesty in the Society of Jesus" (2003), 13.

disgraced favorite, a practitioner of the up-to-date fusion of mathematics and experimental physics known as “physico-mathematics,” but with solid orthodox credentials.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps more attractively, his research agenda included investigations of an altogether different sort. During his first years in Rome, under Barberini patronage, Kircher mostly put aside scientific pursuits to study Oriental manuscripts and Egyptian antiquities.

Kircher had an uncommon gift for ingratiating himself among the rich and powerful, a useful talent encouraged by the Society of Jesus. Before completing his studies in Mainz, he had won the favor of the local archbishop, who took Kircher into his service after witnessing an impressive theatrical display that he designed.<sup>25</sup> In the years that followed, Kircher ascended from the favor of provincial notables to the highest levels of courtly patronage, as the Barberini were succeeded by Innocent X and other popes, the Habsburg royal family, Queen Christina of Sweden, and Duke August of Braunschweig-Lüneburg, among others.<sup>26</sup> Backed by powerful supporters, Kircher lived a life of which most scholars could only dream, enjoying a special status within the Collegio Romano, somewhat akin to a post at an institute of advanced studies. With only occasional teaching duties, and aided by a succession of younger Jesuit assistants, he could devote his ample energies to studying, experimenting, collecting, corresponding, and publishing, as well as strengthening his ties to the aristocratic world.

Under Kircher’s care, the mathematician’s studio gradually transmogrified into the *Musaeum Kircherianum*, one of Europe’s most famous collections of natural history, antiquities, scientific instruments, machines, and other wonders (fig. 6).<sup>27</sup> Kircher’s quarters in the Collegio Romano became the command center of the collaborative enterprise that Paula Findlen has aptly called the “Kircherian machine.”<sup>28</sup> From his privileged node at the center of the Catholic world, Kircher functioned as a conduit of information

24. Only after he had achieved a certain stature and level of protection from outside the Society did Kircher broach controversial astronomical matters in Kircher, *Itinerarium exstaticum* (1656). The fact that the controversy was kept under wraps and resolved in Kircher’s favor testifies to his dexterity at exploring the boundaries of acceptable Jesuit science. See references, n. 10, above. On “physico-mathematics,” see Dear, *Discipline and Experience* (1995).

25. *Vita*, 32–33.

26. On Kircher’s patronage strategies, see Baldwin, “Pious Ambition” (2003); Baldwin, “Reverie in a Time of Plague” (2004).

27. Mayer-Deutsch, *Musaeum Kircherianum* (2010); Lo Sardo, ed., *Athanasius Kircher* (2001); Findlen, “Science, History, and Erudition” (2001); Findlen, “Scientific Spectacle in Baroque Rome” (1995); Findlen, *Possessing Nature* (1994); Casciato, Ianniello, and Vitale, eds., *Enciclopedia in Roma barocca* (1986).

28. Findlen, “Last Man Who Knew Everything” (2004), 5.

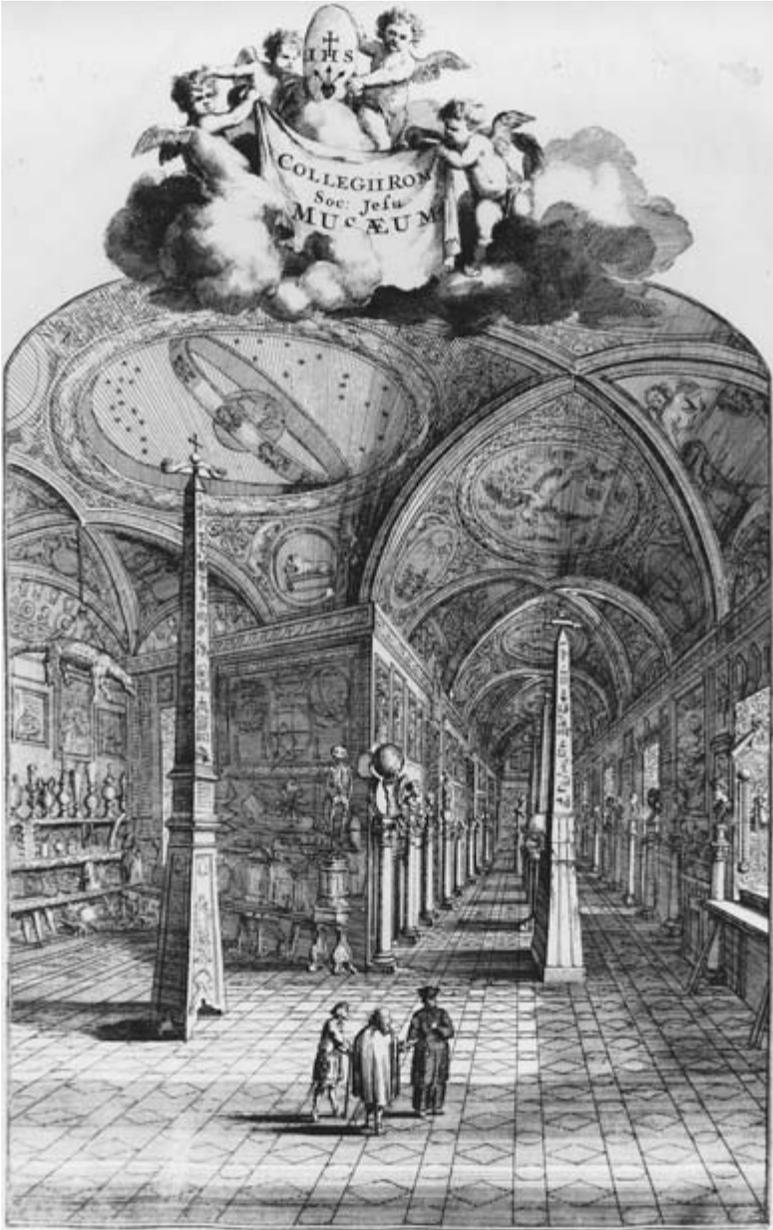


Fig. 6. Kircher greeting visitors in his famous museum at the Collegio Romano. The wood models of obelisks were recently rediscovered. Without pedestals, they measure about one meter tall. Giorgio de Sepibus, *Romani Collegii Societatus Jesu Musaeum celeberrimum* (Amsterdam: 1678), frontispiece. Courtesy of Stanford University Libraries.

from the Society of Jesus's incomparable global communication network to the international and multiconfessional Republic of Letters.<sup>29</sup> Intellectual leadership was a key component of the Jesuits' apostolic mission, and both Kircher and his superiors recognized his cosmopolitan role as a valuable asset for the Catholic cause. *Egyptian Oedipus* concluded with Kircher's personal elaboration of the Jesuit motto: "All for the greater glory of God, and the improvement of the Republic Letters."

Kircher exchanged letters with correspondents throughout Europe and the world, and his museum became a meeting place for scholars of all faiths who visited Rome.<sup>30</sup> But it was to books above all that he owed his fame. He published more than thirty, beginning with *Art of Magnesia* (Würzburg, 1631), a minor academic dissertation on magnetism, and ending with *Tower of Babel* (Amsterdam, 1679), an exploration of counterfactual architecture and historical linguistics based on the biblical story of the confusion of tongues. Beginning with *The Great Art of Light and Shadow* (Rome, 1646), an influential study of optics and solar timekeeping, Kircher's signature publications were large-format, heavily illustrated encyclopedic studies that balanced learning (they were all composed in Latin, though a few saw vernacular translations) and spectacle (a born showman, Kircher knew how to entertain as well as edify).<sup>31</sup> They proved so popular that a leading Dutch printer, Jan Jansson van Waesberghe, offered Kircher a lifetime contract.<sup>32</sup> Starting with *Underground World* (1666), a best-selling treatise on baroque earth science, most of Kircher's books were printed by Protestants in Amsterdam, the center of the European book trade.<sup>33</sup>

In the autobiography that Kircher wrote near the end of his life, the great self-promoter was surprisingly taciturn about most of his scholarly career. Major works like *China Illustrated* (Amsterdam, 1667) and *The Great Art of Knowing* (Amsterdam, 1669) were passed over in silence, and *Underground World* was mentioned only in passing to refer readers to its account

29. Gorman, "Angel and the Compass" (2004); Harris, "Confession-Building" (1996); Osorio Romero, ed., *Luz imaginaria* (1993).

30. Much of Kircher's surviving correspondence has been digitized by the Athanasius Kircher Correspondence Project, initiated by Michael John Gorman and Nick Wilding at the Institute and Museum of the History of Science in Florence, and continuing under the direction of Paula Findlen at Stanford University.

31. Kircher, *Ars magnesia* (1631); Kircher, *Turris Babel* (1679); Kircher, *Ars magna lucis* (1646).

32. "Estratto dalle lettere di Sig. Jansonio ed Eliseo Weyerstraed Mercanti de libri in Amsterdam intorno la vendita de libri del P. Atha. Kircher," 29 July 1662, APUG 563, fol. 244<sup>r</sup>.

33. Kircher, *Mundus subterraneus* (1665).

of God snatching him from the flames of Vesuvius.<sup>34</sup> Instead, Kircher narrated his numerous youthful scrapes with death: nearly crushed by a mill wheel, stampeded by horses, miraculously cured of gangrene, trapped on an ice floe in the frozen Rhine while fleeing an invasion, and almost lynched by Protestant soldiers. Above all, he dwelt on his discovery and renovation of a ruined shrine in Mentorella, in the Roman countryside, where Saint Eustace had been converted by a vision of a cross between the horns of a stag. Kircher saw his life as guided by special providence and believed that God had chosen him to achieve great things. In the scholarly realm, he discerned the divine plan most clearly in his hieroglyphic studies. The project that he affectionately called “my Oedipus” was the only aspect of his scholarship discussed at length in the autobiography. Together, the restoration of the hieroglyphic doctrine and the restoration of the shrine to Saint Eustace encapsulated Kircher’s self-image: a paragon of the Jesuit scholar, harmoniously balancing piety and learning (fig. 7).

### THE AGE OF ERUDITION

While the eighteenth century looked back upon Descartes as a harbinger of enlightenment who boldly cast off sterile tradition to clear the way for a modern science based on reason, Kircher was remembered as the butt of jokes satirizing the excesses of old-fashioned scholarship. The *Yverdon Encyclopedia*, published in Switzerland in the 1770s, included an entry on Kircher, which repeated what were by then well-worn anecdotes:

Everything that bore the mark of antiquity was divine in his eyes. His extreme passion for everything ancient exposed him to many pranks. They say that some young fellows, aiming for a laugh at his expense, had many imaginary characters engraved on an unshaped stone and buried this stone in a spot where they knew there was going to be construction. Sometime after, excavation took place, and the stone was found and brought to Father Kircher as something unusual. The father, overjoyed, set to work interpreting its characters with abandon, and finally succeeded in giving them the most beautiful meaning you can imagine.

After reporting another hoax in the same vein (like the first, it was borrowed from J. B. Mencken’s *Charlatanry of the Learned*), the article concluded: “Despite all this, Kircher’s *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, *Mundus Subterraneus*,

34. Kircher, *China illustrata* (1667); Kircher, *Ars magna sciendi* (1669).



Fig. 7. Kircher painted from life around the time he published *Pamphilian Obelisk*. Anonymous portrait of Athanasius Kircher, oil on canvas, c. 1650. Rome, Galleria Nazionale di Arte Antica.

etc., are expensive and sought-after, and one cannot deny this father's massive erudition."<sup>35</sup>

Even the grudging acknowledgment of Kircher's "massive erudition" may have been damning with faint praise. In the eighteenth century "erudition" had come to signify a style of learning that had fallen from grace in enlightened precincts of the Republic of Letters. Jean d'Alembert's manifesto, *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopædia* (1751), set forth the classic statement of this attitude, dividing the learned world into three realms, each associated with a corresponding mental faculty: erudition with memory, philosophy (including mathematics and the natural sciences) with reason, and *belles lettres* (literature, especially poetry) with imagination. Memory and erudition occupied the lowest rank in d'Alembert's taxonomy. Recounting the emergence of European minds from medieval barbarism, he described how the revival of learning began, appropriately, with erudition—the study of languages and history—since this was based on the simplest of mental activities: fact collecting and memory. Ignoring nature, d'Alembert wrote, erudite scholars

thought they needed only to read to be learned; and it is far easier to read than to understand. And so they devoured indiscriminately everything that the ancients left us in each genre . . . These circumstances gave rise to that multitude of erudite men, immersed in the learned languages to the point of disdaining their own, who knew everything in the ancients except their grace and finesse, as a celebrated author has said, and whose vain show of erudition made them so arrogant because the cheapest advantages are rather often those whose vulgar display gives most satisfaction.<sup>36</sup>

These harsh words were partially balanced by d'Alembert's acknowledgment that the popular scorn heaped upon erudition was excessive, and in a subsequent *Encyclopædia* article he took a softer tack, affirming erudition's potential to contribute further to the advancement of knowledge.<sup>37</sup> Justified or not, such contempt was fashionable, and d'Alembert observed that young scholars had turned away from erudite research, flocking instead to

35. , "Kircher, Athanase" (1770–75). Cf. Mencken, *Charlatany of the Learned* (1937), 85–86. These defamatory stories followed an ancient trope: see Grafton, *Forgers and Critics* (1990), 3–4.

36. d'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse* (1995), 63.

37. d'Alembert, "Erudition" (1751–65). On the *Encyclopédistes'* relationship to erudition, see Edelstein, "Humanism" (2009), and Edelstein, *The Enlightenment* (2010), 44–51, which present d'Alembert's attitude as more sympathetic.

fields of learning that appeared fresher and more fruitful: mathematics and the natural sciences.

“Erudition” as a distinctive type of scholarship, as opposed to its original meaning of learning in general, seems to have been coined in the eighteenth century as a pejorative. Such, at any rate, was the opinion of Edward Gibbon, who penned a spirited defense of erudition against d’Alembert’s calumnies.<sup>38</sup> Stripped of its negative connotation, erudition provides a useful label for the cluster of historically minded, early modern disciplines based on knowledge of languages, literature, and antiquities. If d’Alembert’s grim diagnosis described the mid-eighteenth century scene, especially in France, a century earlier the situation could not have been more different. Kircher lived at the climax of a golden age of erudition, when new methods and materials were transforming the study of the past. Even as the natural sciences began their steady ascent to intellectual supremacy, antiquity still beckoned. Erudition was not yet dry as dust. On the contrary, it glittered with the promise of new discoveries and profound intellectual rewards.

Erudition’s roots lay in Renaissance humanism, which revived the study of Latin and Greek literature, developed critical methods for emending and interpreting texts, and valorized classical antiquity as a model of virtue, wisdom and style. Ironically, the humanists’ quest to bring the literary culture of antiquity back to life ultimately led them to recognize the futility of that endeavor. Poring over classical literature, Renaissance scholars confronted the irreducible difference between the ancient and modern worlds. To fully grasp ancient texts, they discovered, it was necessary to understand the unfamiliar culture that had produced them. Not least, this entailed an appreciation of the historicity of language, which became the basis of the art of textual criticism. Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, practitioners of critical philology developed increasingly sophisticated techniques for authenticating claims made in and about old texts, Lorenzo Valla’s iconic debunking of the Donation of Constantine being an early example. By the time Kircher began his studies, many scholars were less invested in imitating ancient authors and more concerned with interpreting their texts as evidence of the human past. The result was a new type of historical research based on reconstructing the social and cultural contexts of former times.<sup>39</sup>

38. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* (1999), 141.

39. Grafton, *What Was History?* (2007); Grafton, *Forgers and Critics* (1990); Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship* (1970); Burke, *Renaissance Sense of the Past* (1969); Pocock, *Ancient Constitution* (1957), 1–29.

In forging this new kind of history, textual criticism was abetted by another discipline that evolved out of Renaissance humanism: antiquarianism.<sup>40</sup> Antiquaries were experts in the tangible remains of the past: “antiquities.”<sup>41</sup> Their quarry included old manuscripts, but above all, they pioneered the study of material artifacts such as coins, cameos, inscriptions, and ruins—any “primary source,” physical or textual, that might provide empirical evidence of past ages. Following ancient models like Varro, antiquarian scholarship often focused on the institutions, customs, rites, and topography of former times. In contrast to the classical tradition of humanist historical writing, which aimed to produce modern political and military histories in the style of ancient historians like Polybius and Tacitus, who had recounted events recent to their own time, antiquarianism was characterized by a fundamental curiosity about epochs distinct from “modern” times: “antiquity” and, also, the “Middle Ages.”<sup>42</sup>

Today, antiquarianism, often prefaced by the adjective “mere,” is used derisively to refer to a kind of historical research mired in trivia and devoid of larger significance—an echo of d’Alembert’s dismissal of the “vain show of erudition.” But in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, antiquarianism and its partner in erudition, philology, were on the cutting edge of scholarship, tackling matters of vital cultural importance. In a society as oriented toward tradition as early modern Europe, the past—the time of origins—was a crucial source of legitimacy for all manner of modern claims. As states tried to centralize power, for example, royal scholars combed the medieval archives for evidence of monarchical rights while the nobility employed similar tactics to bolster opposing feudal claims.<sup>43</sup> Erudition also played a central role in the theological controversies that permeated European culture in the centuries after the Reformation. As Protestant and

40. The classic studies are Momigliano, “Ancient History” (1950); Momigliano, “Rise of Antiquarian Research” (1990). See also: Stenhouse, *Reading Inscriptions* (2005); Herklotz, *Cassiano dal Pozzo* (1999); Schnapp, *Discovery of the Past* (1997); Haskell, *History and Its Images* (1993); Jacks, *The Antiquarian* (1993); Weiss, *Renaissance Discovery* (1969), and works cited in the following notes.

41. In early modern Italian, “antiquario” usually referred to collectors, artists, and architects who handled antiquities, rather than to scholars. I follow the now common usage in referring to scholars of antiquities as antiquaries. See Claridge, “Archaeologies” (2004).

42. Momigliano’s stark dichotomy between antiquarianism and history has been challenged by recent studies. In particular, Grafton, *What Was History?* (2007) shows how, during the sixteenth century, Renaissance theorists of the *ars historica* shifted the emphasis from writing new histories to reading ancient ones, eroding the boundary between antiquarianism (or erudition) and history. See also Franklin, *Jean Bodin* (1963), 83–88.

43. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship* (1970); Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (1990), ch. 2; Soll, “Antiquary and the Information State” (2008).

Catholic scholars sought the upper hand in debates over scriptural interpretation and church history, “sacred philologists,” working at the confluence of antiquarianism, Oriental philology, and biblical hermeneutics, generated some of the most innovative scholarship of the period.<sup>44</sup>

In sum, erudition was an array of scholarly practices aimed at knowledge of the past, an “archeology of past states of society and culture,”<sup>45</sup> defined in terms of their distinctive institutions, beliefs, and customs. Critical philology and antiquarianism were its two pillars.<sup>46</sup> Building on Arnaldo Momigliano’s pioneering studies, recent research has revealed early modern erudition as a laboratory of modern approaches to historical evidence and a progenitor of disciplines such as archeology, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and cultural history.<sup>47</sup> The idea of a fundamental clash between modern science and humanist scholarship, iconically embodied by Descartes, does not hold up as a generalization about early modern learning. On the contrary, with their shared concern for testimony, facticity, and discovery, erudite historical research and experimental natural science had much in common, which explains why they were frequently practiced by the same individuals, notably Leibniz and Newton.<sup>48</sup> Fundamentally concerned with evidence, erudition was empiricism applied to the study of the past.<sup>49</sup>

## EASTERN PROMISES

In Kircher’s day, no branch of erudition appeared more promising than the emerging discipline of Oriental studies.<sup>50</sup> An outgrowth of classical philol-

44. Miller, “London Polyglot Bible” (2001); Stolzenberg, “John Spencer” (2012).

45. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* (1999), 5.

46. I thus use “erudition” to cover the territory that scholars often refer to as “antiquarianism.” In proposing erudition as a preferable umbrella term, I mean to reinforce Ingo Herklotz’s argument about the crucial relationship between antiquarianism and philology (Herklotz, “Arnaldo Momigliano’s ‘Ancient History’” [2007]), as well as the recent qualifications of Momigliano by Miller, “Introduction” (2007) and Grafton, *What Was History?* (2007). My thinking has also been influenced by Pocock’s study of Gibbon.

47. Miller, ed., *Momigliano and Antiquarianism* (2007).

48. Spitz, “Significance of Leibniz” (1952); Manuel, *Issac Newton, Historian* (1963). On seventeenth-century empiricism, see Daston, “Moral Economy” (1995), 12–18.

49. On the links between empiricism in the study of the past and the study of nature, see Pomata and Siraisi, eds., *Historia* (2005); Cerruti and Pomata, eds., *Fatti: Storie dell’evidenza empirica. Theme Issue. Quaderni Storici* (2001); Siraisi, *History, Medicine, and the Traditions* (2007); Grafton, “Where Was Salomon’s House” (2009); Freedberg, *Eye of the Lynx* (2002).

50. I use terms like “Orient” and “Oriental languages” neutrally, following actors’ categories. The postcolonial framework for studying Orientalism, inspired by Edward Said, is not terribly helpful for making sense of Renaissance and seventeenth-century philology. I plan to address the relationship between early modern and modern Orientalism in a future work. I am

ogy, the modern study of Near Eastern languages was born at the turn of the sixteenth century, when Renaissance scholars began to study Hebrew.<sup>51</sup> In the wake of the Reformation, as the correct reading of scripture became a matter of increasingly high stakes, Hebrew, as well as Aramaic, Samaritan, Ethiopian, Armenian, and other languages that preserved versions of scripture and documents of the early church, became essential weapons of theological warfare. The desire of scholars to understand the Bible in historical context fed into a broader interest in the history of the Near East, inspiring the study of other Oriental languages, most importantly Arabic.<sup>52</sup> Oriental philology was driven largely by an inward-looking impulse: Europeans' desire to understand their own heritage.<sup>53</sup> But its realization was only possible because of increasing commerce between Europe and the Islamic world, which facilitated the circulation of information, materials, and people around the Mediterranean world.<sup>54</sup>

Oriental studies attracted Kircher from an early age. According to his autobiography, he took Hebrew lessons from a rabbi as a schoolboy in Fulda. As a university student he devoted himself to Oriental languages, beginning with Hebrew and branching out to Syriac and Arabic. In 1629, while preparing for ordination, he sent a petition to the general of the Society of Jesus requesting assignment as a missionary. While offering himself "indifferently" for service wherever there was the opportunity to promote the greater glory of God, he expressed his preference for North Africa and the Near East.<sup>55</sup>

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much in agreement with Suzanne Marchand's views in the introduction and first chapter of Marchand, *German Orientalism* (2009).

51. Grafton and Weinberg, *I Have Always Loved the Holy Tongue* (2011); Coudert and Shoulson, eds., *Hebraica Veritas* (2004); Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment* (2003), part 1; Cavarra, ed., *Hebraica* (2000); Burnett, *Johannes Buxtorf* (1996); Manuel, *Broken Staff* (1993); Zinguer, *L'hébreu* (1992); Rooden, *Theology, Biblical Scholarship, and Rabbinical Studies* (1989); Katchen, *Christian Hebraists* (1984).

52. Miller, *Peiresc's Orient* (2012); García-Arenal and Rodríguez Mediano, *Un Oriente español* (2010); Dew, *Orientalism* (2009); Hamilton, *Copts and the West* (2006); Hamilton, *William Bedwell* (1985); Toomer, *Eastern Wisdom* (1996); Contini, "Gli inizi della linguistica siriana" (1996); Piemontese, "Grammatica e lessicografia araba" (1996); Tamani, "Gli studi di aramaico" (1996). Russell, ed., "Arabic" *Interest* (1994); Dannenfeldt, "Renaissance Humanists" (1955); Levi della Vida, *Ricerche* (1939).

53. I refer specifically to the discipline of Oriental philology and not European literature on the Near East in general. Beyond academic Orientalism, there was great interest in Islam and the Ottoman Empire. See, e.g., Meserve, *Empires of Islam* (2008).

54. Hamilton, Van Den Boogert, and Westerweel, eds., *Republic of Letters and the Levant* (2005).

55. Kircher to Father General [Vitelleschi], Mainz, 12 January 1629, ARSI Rhen. Sup. 42 ("Indiam petentes"), fols. 20<sup>r</sup>-21<sup>v</sup>. The secondary literature commonly states that Kircher wished to be a missionary in China, but the archival record documents his persistent prefer-

Despite his claim that he had studied Oriental languages to prepare for missionary work, one rather suspects that he sought to become a missionary in order to increase his knowledge of Oriental languages and literature. The petition was denied. Kircher's superiors, noting his melancholic temperament, intellectual talent, and lack of practical experience, had marked him out for a career of teaching and scholarship, not missionary service.<sup>56</sup>

Languishing on Malta, it was not for Rome or any European center of learning that Kircher pined. Perched in the middle of the Mediterranean, he fixed his gaze on the other shore. Again he appealed to his Jesuit superiors, declaring himself willing to undertake any assignment that would bring him "to Egypt or the Holy Land, in order to see those countries and improve his knowledge of Oriental languages and studies."<sup>57</sup> Making his case to the officials in Rome who controlled his fate, he emphasized the relatively easy journey from Malta to Alexandria and described the scholarly riches that he was sure to encounter. Were his wish granted, he would examine "the countless antiquities surviving in Egypt" and explore its "very ancient libraries, most abundantly furnished with the rarest books," among them, manuscripts in Coptic, Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, and other languages—even papyri covered in hieroglyphs.<sup>58</sup>

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ence for the Near East. At the beginning of this letter, Kircher specified his desire to go the "the province of the Orientals or Abyssinians"; at its end he spoke more broadly, but the order is telling: "Iterum me offero indifferenter ad quasvis provincias, ibi maior honori Dei promouendi occasio, ad Abassiam [upper Ethiopia], Arabiam, Palestinam, Constantinopolim, Persiam, Indiam, Chinam, Iaponiam, Americam, maximè orientales quorum vernaculas, me brevisimo tempore dei gratiâ adiutum . . ."

56. In the 1633 triennial catalog of the College of Avignon, Kircher's superiors assessed him as follows: "Talent: good; judgment: good; discretion: some; experience of things: not great; accomplishment in letters: great; natural complexion: melancholic; for which ministry of the Society he has talent: teaching." ARSI Lugd. 19, fol. 17<sup>r</sup>. See the similar reports for 1639, 1642, 1649, and 1652 in ARSI Rom. 57, fol. 210<sup>v</sup>, 58, fol. 121<sup>v</sup>, 59, fols. 95<sup>r</sup>, 278<sup>r</sup>.

57. Lucas Holstenius (on behalf of Kircher) to Francesco Barberini, Naples, 7 September 1637, in Bartòla, "Alessandro VII" (1989), 80.

58. "Cum ex variis non Mahumetanis tantum; sed et Christianis, quia et ab < . . . > Patre nostro qui Aegyptum paenè totam ad nili usque Cataractes lustravit, mira perceperim cùm de antiquitatibus innumeris Aegypti superstitionibus; tùm de Bibliothecis antiquissimis, librorum reconditissimorum copia instructissimis, animus eius videndae desiderio aliàs aestuans dictarum rerum relatione iam paene in incendium erupit manifestissimum. Nihil igitur gratius in hoc mundo contingere posset quam si ego Illmae d.mae vrae opera ab Emmo Cardinale vel Sacra Congregatione aut etiam Adm. R.de P. Generale, obtinere possem, tam laudabilem expeditionem ut videlicet ἀντὸπτίσι ea omnia intueri liceret, quae absens tanta admiratione contempler, librosque Coptos, Arabicos, Graecos, hebraeos, aliosque, quorum supra memoratus Pater magnam se copiam in Matria totius Aegypti celeberrima Bibliotheca vidisse retulit, ab interitu vindicare possem." Kircher to dal Pozzo, Malta, 15 August 1637, BISM ms. H 268, 9<sup>IV</sup>. Kircher's mention of hieroglyphic papyri reportedly housed in a Cairo library is from *LAR*, 512. See also Barberini to Holstenius, Rome, 24 September 1637, and Muzio Vitelleschi to Kircher, 7 January 1638, both in Bartòla, "Alessandro VII," 81–83.

The ascendancy of Neoclassicism in the eighteenth century was attended by a waning of enthusiasm for Oriental studies, which was only to be reversed in the nineteenth century. By contrast, Kircher and other seventeenth-century scholars were convinced that invaluable literary treasures stood on the threshold of European discovery. This was the same moment when Europeans like Francis Bacon and Descartes envisaged a “great instauration” of natural science and philosophy. Although less well remembered, a similar sense of anticipation suffused the study of ancient history. In fact, Kircher and other Oriental philologists explicitly compared the new insights awaiting detection in Near Eastern literature to the epoch-making astronomic discoveries of Galileo and the discovery of the Americas.<sup>59</sup> What stood between them and the new historical horizon was access to sources. The library and the cabinet of antiquities would be their observatory, knowledge of Oriental languages their telescope.

### OCCULT PHILOSOPHY

Although Kircher claimed that Oriental texts were the key to his breakthrough, the hieroglyphic doctrine that he described in *Egyptian Oedipus* was, in its essentials, an elaboration of the occult philosophy that previous scholars had reconstructed from Greek and Latin texts. As is well known, the rediscovery of Plato in the Italian Renaissance was deeply influenced by late antique Neoplatonism. Marsilio Ficino, the most influential and profound of the early modern Platonists, viewed the Platonic tradition through the writings of Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, Synesius, and Iamblichus. Reading the Platonic dialogues as esoteric allegories, these late antique men had revered Plato as a theologian as much as a philosopher. They considered him not the originator but perhaps the greatest expositor of a much older tradition, a *prisca theologia* or ancient theology originating with legendary, often Oriental sages such as Orpheus, Hermes Trismegistus, and Zoroaster. Following Ficino, most sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europeans made no distinction between Plato’s philosophy and what we now call Neoplatonism. The term *Platonici* evoked followers not only of Plato and his self-identified successors in the Academy, like Plotinus, but also of his imaginary predecessors, like Hermes Trismegistus.<sup>60</sup>

59. OA I, 44<sup>v</sup>–41<sup>r</sup>. John Selden made the same analogy in a 1646 letter quoted in Toomer, *Eastern Wisdom* (1996), 69.

60. Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (1992), 14–18, 134–63; Allen, *Synoptic Art* (1998), 1–49; Hanegraaff, “Tradition” (2005); Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge* (2010),

Unlike Plotinus and his disciples, however, the Renaissance Platonists were Christians (Ficino was a priest) who sought a pious philosophy that would harmonize pagan wisdom with Christianity. This synthesis was facilitated, somewhat ironically, by recourse to early Christian writers, who had endorsed the genealogy of the *prisca theologia*, but with a very different aim. In battling the claims of pagan philosophers—especially the charge that Christianity had stolen teachings from Plato and other pagan traditions—church fathers such as Eusebius, Lactantius, and Augustine co-opted the Neoplatonists' doxography to argue that it was Plato and the Greeks who were unoriginal, and that resemblances between Christian and Greek doctrines were due to the influence on the latter of Moses or earlier Hebrew patriarchs via the ancient theologians (*prisca theologi*).<sup>61</sup> To these church fathers, the *prisca theologia* was an apologetic strategy to defend the originality and profundity of Christianity against a still powerful pagan tradition. For Renaissance Platonists like Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Cornelius Agrippa, and Agostino Steuco, on the other hand, the idea of the *prisca theologia* validated pagan wisdom against claims of Judeo-Christian exclusivity. They tended to vacillate, however, between asserting an independent tradition of pagan illumination and affirming the claim that the *prisca theologia* originated with Moses or earlier biblical personalities.<sup>62</sup>

I refer to this early modern tradition as “occult philosophy” in preference to the term “Hermeticism,” which overly privileges the role of Hermes Trismegistus.<sup>63</sup> (I use “Hermetism” more narrowly to refer to beliefs about Hermes Trismegistus and literature attributed to him.) Unlike its synonym, “Renaissance Neoplatonism,” “occult philosophy” emphasizes the essential claim of a genealogy of esoteric knowledge predating Plato, supposedly hidden beneath symbols and allegories. Since “occult philosophy,” which is a key analytical term in this book, may hold various and vague associations in readers' minds, I wish to emphasize that I use it consistently and

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25–42. See also Mulsow, “Ambiguities of the Prisca Sapientia” (2004); Celenza, “Search for Ancient Wisdom” (2001); Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* (1990), vol. 2, 460–64; and the classic study, Yates, *Giordano Bruno* (1964).

61. Walker, *Ancient Theology* (1972), 1–21.

62. Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge* (2010), 30–33.

63. Copenhaver, “Iamblichus, Synesius and the ‘Chaldean Oracles’” (1987); Copenhaver, “Hermes Trismegistus” (1988); Copenhaver, “Natural Magic, Hermetism, and Occultism” (1990). “Hermeticism” also tends to conflate the philosophical tradition that stems from Ficino (which I am calling occult philosophy) and the alchemical tradition associated with Paracelsus and Rosicrucianism, which were based on different Hermetic texts and had distinct histories. See Leinkauf, “Interpretation und Analogie” (2001); Mulsow, “Das schnelle und langsame Ende” (2002); Ebeling, *Secret History* (2007), 89–90.

narrowly to refer to the early modern Neoplatonist tradition as defined in this section, and not as a woolly catch-all or synonym for broader categories such as “occult sciences,” “occultism,” or “magic.”<sup>64</sup> Occult philosophy is part of the history of Western esotericism, but it is far from coextensive with that larger field.<sup>65</sup>

The *prisca theologia* provided occult philosophy’s legitimating pedigree. Its canon consisted of ancient Platonist literature as well as mystical works attributed to ancient theologians. In addition to texts such as the Hermetic Corpus, the Chaldean Oracles (ascribed to Zoroaster), and the Orphic hymns, which were first taken up by late antique Neoplatonists, early modern thinkers expanded the canon of esoteric wisdom to include other traditions, most significantly the Jewish Kabbalah. Early Christian Neoplatonic texts, like the writings of pseudo-Dionysius, were also treated as sources of occult philosophy. The content of occult philosophy varied significantly among interpreters, as did the details of its lineage and canon, but its foundation was a Neoplatonic metaphysics based on a hierarchy of levels of reality, emanating from a transcendent God. In its most schematic form, these were defined as the terrestrial, celestial, and angelic (or intellectual, or archetypal) worlds (fig. 8). This metaphysics supported a distinctive Neoplatonic semantics and hermeneutics, in which symbols and allegories were privileged as “nondiscursive” forms of communication, capable of mediating the ultimate truths that existed in the ineffable realm of ideas. It also sustained belief in certain kinds of magic—both “natural,” based on manipulating the links of sympathy and antipathy that connected the terrestrial and celestial realms, and theurgy, which sought the aid of angelic intelligences.

The relationship of occult philosophy to orthodox Christianity and to Aristotelianism was ambiguous. Important elements of ancient Neoplatonism contradicted Christian doctrine, but these could be explained as failings of pagan thinkers, who, despite their excellence, could only see

64. See Hanegraaff, “Occult / Occultism” (2005), 887. Thus, I do not consider alchemy and astrology as part of occult philosophy, although they could be incorporated into its historical and theoretical framework, as Kircher did in making them subfields of the “hieroglyphic doctrine.” The various “occult sciences,” too often conflated, led distinct if at times overlapping careers in early modern Europe. See Newman and Grafton, “Introduction” (2001).

65. “Western esotericism” refers to a series of interrelated currents in European culture since approximately the Renaissance, including Hermeticism, occult philosophy, natural magic, and alchemy. See Hanegraaff, “Esotericism” (2005); Hanegraaff, “Forbidden Knowledge” (2005); and Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge* (2010), who both describe “esotericism” as the retrospective product of polemical discourses. Cf. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (1994).

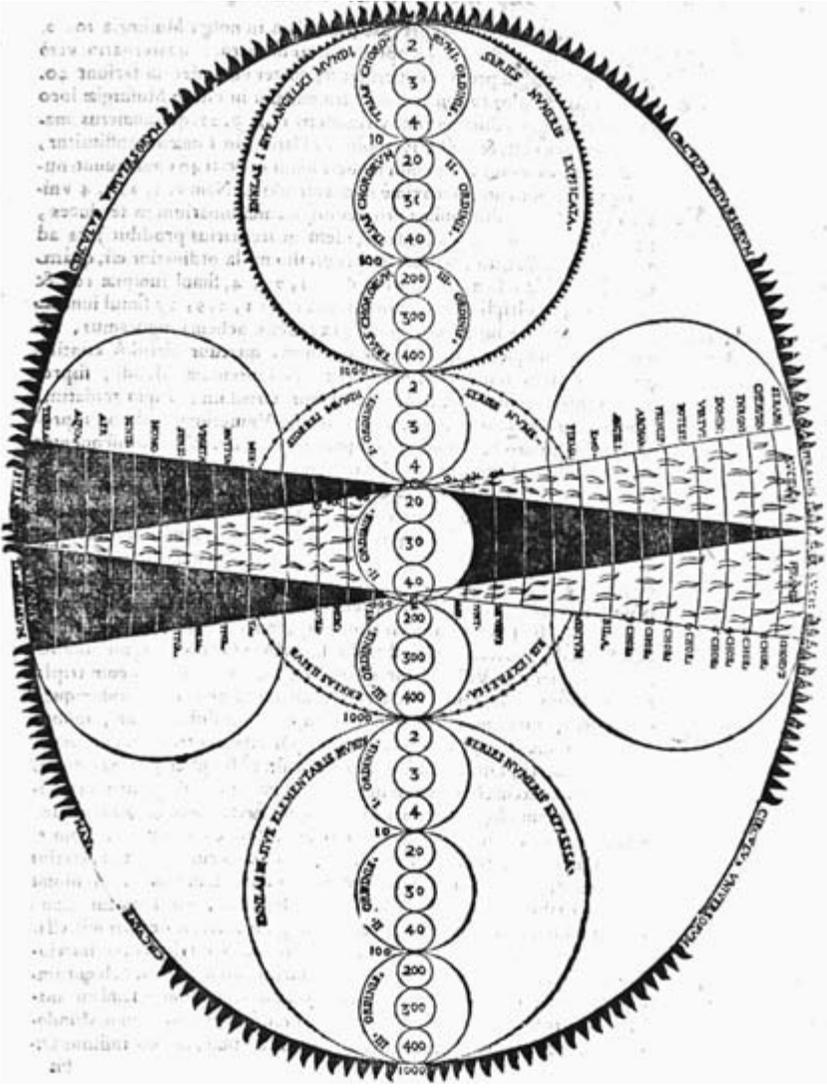


Fig. 8. Woodcut diagram illustrating Kircher's discussion of the numerological mysteries of "hieroglyphic arithmetic." From top to bottom and right to left, it depicts the hierarchical relationship of the angelic, celestial, and elemental worlds. Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (Rome: 1652–54), vol. 2, part 2, 15. Courtesy of Stanford University Libraries.

“through a glass darkly.”<sup>66</sup> Alternatively, one could engage in generous textual interpretation to argue that these contradictions were only apparent but not real; this solution, by so closely equating pagan wisdom to Christianity, was more dangerous, as it tended to make scriptural revelation superfluous. Despite such tensions, most early modern proponents of occult philosophy were convinced of the compatibility of Christianity and pagan esoteric traditions. Indeed, by the seventeenth century, occult philosophy was strongly associated with the controversial claim that ancient pagan sages and Jewish kabbalists had anticipated the doctrine of the Trinity. Nor did occult philosophy necessarily seem irreconcilable with Aristotelianism. Europeans had received Aristotle’s philosophy through successive layers of mediation in which pagan, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers had used Neoplatonic concepts to harmonize Aristotle with religious principles such as the immortality of the soul. The great architect of Christian Aristotelianism, Thomas Aquinas, relied on two Christian Neoplatonists, Augustine and pseudo-Dionysius, as his primary theological authorities.<sup>67</sup> It was only toward the end of the sixteenth century, when dissatisfaction with Aristotle began to ripen, that Francesco Patrizi, professor of Platonic philosophy at Rome, proposed that Christian learning be reformed by replacing the Aristotelian curriculum with Neoplatonist occult philosophy. To this end, his *New Philosophy of Everything* (1591) assembled the key documents of the *prisca theologia* in a single textbook. His efforts were not well received by the Catholic establishment, however, which promptly placed his work on the Index of Prohibited Books.<sup>68</sup>

Occult philosophy’s synthesis of Neoplatonism and Christianity was based on a series of misdated documents. The attribution of texts composed around the turn of the sixth century to the Areopagite disciple of Saint Paul made it possible to believe that Proclus had been informed by the Dionysian corpus rather than vice versa. Likewise, the Hermetic Corpus and the Chaldean Oracles were taken as evidence that Plato and his disciples were the heirs of more ancient sages who could plausibly have been influenced by Moses, when in fact they were pseudonymous texts composed under the influence of Platonism in the first centuries of the Christian era. The authority of the Kabbalah similarly derived from assigning late antique and

66. Allen, “At Variance” (2008), 32.

67. Dauphinais, David, and Levering, eds., *Aquinas the Augustinian* (2007), xii.

68. Patrizi, *Nova de universis philosophia* (1591); Leijenhorst, “Francesco Patrizi’s Hermetic Philosophy” (1998), 125–47; Vasoli, “Francesco Patrizi” (1980). For a contrasting view of Patrizi, see Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers* (1964), 11–26. See also the acute essay, Dietz, “Space, Light, and Soul” (1999).

medieval texts to authors in distant antiquity. During the early modern period, these chronological errors began to be corrected. Lorenzo Valla first expressed doubts about the Dionysian corpus in the fifteenth century, but it took several centuries for its authority to erode, especially among Catholics. More swift was the demise of the credibility of the Hermetic Corpus after Isaac Casaubon's demonstration in 1614 that these supposed testaments of remote antiquity must have been composed after the time of Christ.

### EMPIRICISM AND ESOTERICISM

This book is about the conjuncture of empiricism and esotericism in seventeenth-century scholarship. In contrast to prior studies, which have explained Kircher's investigation of the hieroglyphic doctrine as a vehicle to promote Hermetic philosophy, I argue that *Egyptian Oedipus* is better understood as an antiquarian treatise, which made use of occult philosophy as a historical framework to explain ancient objects and inscriptions. The idea of a nexus between erudite historical research and occult philosophy may seem paradoxical. After all, erudition revolutionized historical scholarship with empirical methods for evaluating textual and material evidence, whereas occult philosophy was based on erroneous historical claims, supported by misdated, pseudonymous documents. Casaubon's redating of the Hermetic Corpus has become iconic precisely because it symbolizes modern, critical scholarship demolishing the authority of a premodern tradition of esoteric wisdom. Kircher notoriously gave credence to the Hermetic Corpus a generation after Casaubon. As a result he has been seen as an anachronism himself, clinging to an idea of sublime primordial wisdom that had been upended by the modern spirit of criticism. But this view misjudges both Kircher and his age.

Kircher was selective in applying the methods of erudite research, in some respects practicing state-of-the-art scholarship, while in others ignoring critical standards of evidence. But he was not unique in thinking that occult philosophy offered valuable aid to the investigator of ancient paganism and the earliest ages of history. In the seventeenth century, contrary to a widespread assumption, erudite scholarship contributed to occult philosophy's ongoing vitality, even as it undermined the authority of key esoteric texts. Proving that Hermes Trismegistus had not written the *Corpus Hermeticum* was not the same as proving that the Egyptian sage and his esoteric wisdom had not existed. Thus, long after Casaubon, European scholars continued to equate the history of philosophy with the history of divine wisdom, lending credence to "perennial philosophy," the idea that the most

perfect knowledge existed at the beginning of time.<sup>69</sup> The enduring belief that Adam and his progeny possessed profound knowledge not only of God, but also of natural philosophy, dialectics, and the mechanical arts, and that the history of its transmission could be described by appealing to biblical narratives, such as the story of Noah and his sons, created an environment hospitable to the notion of a gentile *prisca theologia*.<sup>70</sup>

In the 1650s, despite cracks in the edifice, occult philosophy did not seem obviously irreconcilable with critical and empirical historical research. Ultimately, Kircher's attempt to constructively fuse erudition and esotericism may have been doomed to failure, but it was not out of step with his times. The truly consequential turning point came later, as the result of a more gradual process that reached fruition in the eighteenth century. It consisted in the marginalization not only of occult philosophy but of all versions of perennial philosophy in favor of theories of progress, which made the passage of time the precondition for the development of complex bodies of knowledge. In the end, empiricism was at odds with esotericism—and much else. But what distinguished the seventeenth century was precisely the coexistence of beliefs and modes of thought that the Enlightenment would sunder.

A comparison with the history of natural science is helpful. Recent scholarship has shown how, contrary to received wisdom, the emergence of new empirical methods for studying the natural world did not lead straightforwardly to the rejection of traditional beliefs in magic and marvels. On the contrary, the early phase of experimental science in the seventeenth century was characterized by intense, perhaps unprecedented, interest in phenomena such as witchcraft and the curing of wounds by sympathetic medicine. Effective protocols for assessing knowledge claims based on observation and experiment were far from self-evident. They took time to develop, and in the interval, empiricism encouraged rather than discouraged the study of phenomena that would soon be redefined as illusory or pseudoscientific.<sup>71</sup> This book makes the case for an analogous phenomenon in the realm of historical scholarship. Ultimately the critical and empirical methods of erudition were an important factor in the marginalization of occult philosophy

69. Schmitt, "Perennial Philosophy" (1966); Malusa, "Renaissance Antecedents" (1993); Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia Perennis* (2004).

70. Bizzocchi, *Genealogie incredibili* (1995), shows how aristocratic demand for "incredible" genealogies played a role in sustaining this historical framework.

71. Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (1998); Clark, *Thinking with Demons* (1997); Daston, "Marvelous Facts" (1991). See also Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature* (1994); Harkness, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels* (1999).

and other traditional beliefs about the past. But, for an important period in the seventeenth century, erudition and occult philosophy collaborated. Descartes was typical in treating marvelous facts, such as a corpse bleeding in the presence of its murderer, as parts of the natural order that his new science must explain.<sup>72</sup> But he was an outlier, even among the intellectual avant-garde, in his categorical rejection of the authority of tradition. More representative was Isaac Newton, who believed in a version of the *prisca theologia* and saw his theory of universal gravitation, like his alchemical investigations, in terms of the recovery of ancient wisdom.<sup>73</sup>

### HISTORY OF THE BOOK

Long relegated to the historiographic margins, in recent years Kircher has experienced a remarkable reversal of fortune.<sup>74</sup> Rising academic interest in Kircher has coincided with major trends in the history of early modern science and scholarship: the desire to move beyond the great men identified with the origins of modernity, increased attention to the vitality of older forms of knowledge and the proliferation of hybrids of tradition and innovation, and appreciation of the pervasive role of religion and apologetics in early modern thought. At the same time, the study of material culture, sociability, institutions, and scholarly practices has inspired research on topics such as collecting, correspondence, scientific societies, and the history of the book. Kircher, due to the character of his life and work as well as the abundance of surviving documentation, has proven an ideal subject for these new historiographic approaches.<sup>75</sup>

72. Daston, "Language of Strange Facts" (1998), 21.

73. McGuire and Rattansi, "Newton" (1966).

74. See, for example, Sarah Boxer, "A Postmodernist of the 1600s is Back in Fashion," *New York Times*, 25 May 2002.

75. These connections are especially evident in the contributions to Findlen, ed., *Athanasius Kircher* (2004) and in Findlen, *Possessing Nature* (1994). For Kircher's life and work see the splendid recent overview, Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher's Theatre of the World* (2009); Rowland, *Ecstatic Journey* (2000); Leinkauf, *Mundus Combinatus* (1993); Pastine, *Nascita dell'idolatria* (1978); Reilly, *Athanasius Kircher* (1974). The following monographs focus on specific aspects of Kircher's studies: Mayer-Deutsch, *Musaeum Kircherianum* (2010); Siebert, *Die grosse kosmologische Kontroverse* (2006); Englmann, *Sphärenharmonie und Mikrokosmos* (2006); Marrone, *I geroglifici* (2002); Rivosecchi, *Esotismo in Roma barocca* (1982); Scharlau, *Athanasius Kircher als Musikschriftsteller* (1969). Edited volumes devoted to Kircher also include Vercellone and Bertinetto, eds., *Athanasius Kircher* (2007); Beinlich et al., eds., *Magie des Wissens* (2002); Beinlich, Vollrath, and Wittstadt, eds., *Spurensuche* (2002); Lo Sardo, ed., *Athanasius Kircher* (2001); Stolzenberg, ed., *Great Art of Knowing* (2001); Fletcher, ed., *Athanasius Kircher* (1988); Casciato, Ianniello, and Vitale, eds., *Enciclopedia in Roma barocca* (1986). The late John

This book is a microhistory of the making and meaning of Kircher's hieroglyphic studies. Intensively investigated by appropriate methods, a book like *Egyptian Oedipus* is a powerful lens, capable of bringing into focus both fine-grained details and larger patterns of the culture to which it belonged. These methods include the traditional tactics of the intellectual historian—close reading of texts, identifying sources and influences—as well as approaches associated with cultural history, such as the study of practices, social networks, and material culture. In order to make sense of Kircher's publications, I situate his thought within intellectual genealogies going back to the Renaissance and late antiquity. At the same time, I anchor his work to a specific time and place—Rome in the middle of the seventeenth century—and trace the filaments that linked his chamber in the Collegio Romano to the worldwide web of the Republic of Letters. To understand *Egyptian Oedipus* we need to understand the broader European culture of erudition, but also the distinctive strain that flourished in Rome.

Above all, this book is a study of knowledge in the making. It treats Kircher's scholarship not as a static system of ideas, but as a process, to a large extent collaborative, that unfolded over time. I have sought insight into his hieroglyphic studies in the communities and institutions that made them possible and also set their limits—libraries, museums, the Society of Jesus, the Holy Office, patrons, collaborators, and critics—and I have tried to reconstruct his scholarly practices, “right down to the lowly and delicate technical details” (to borrow a phrase of Marc Bloch).<sup>76</sup> This approach depends on supplementing published sources with archival evidence. The investigator of Kircheriana is fortunate: as a member of a religious order still in existence, who spent most of his life in a city dominated by the world's oldest continuously functioning institution—and one of the most bureaucratic—Kircher left behind a hefty paper trail. The chapters that follow exploit the testimony of Kircher's surviving correspondence, extant portions of the manuscript of *Egyptian Oedipus*, Jesuit administrative records, and other unpublished materials. The result, I hope, is not only a more convincing interpretation of Kircher's studies, but also a depiction of the man and his world with sufficient color, texture, and shadow to give a sense of life to the thoughts and actions of a distant age.

This book has definite chronological and thematic limits. It focuses on

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Fletcher paved the way for modern Kircher studies. Happily, his 1966 thesis has at last been published: Fletcher, *Study of the Life and Works of Athanasius Kircher* (2011). Unhappily, it did not appear in time to be consulted in the preparation of this book.

76. Bloch, *Historian's Craft* (1953), 12.

Kircher's career from 1632, when we encounter the first traces of his study of Egyptian hieroglyphs, until 1655, when he published *Egyptian Oedipus*. During these years we can see Kircher become Kircher—the famous scholar, the “Roman Oracle,” curator of curiosities, and one-man publishing machine—gradually assuming the larger-than-life persona he would wear for the rest of his life. In speaking of Kircher's hieroglyphic studies, I refer to the full range of subject matter that informed his investigation of the “hieroglyphic doctrine,” including his study of Coptic and unfinished Arabic translation projects. I make no claim to offer a comprehensive study of Kircher's scholarship: only passing mention is made to his work in the mathematical sciences during these years, and his career after 1655 is omitted.<sup>77</sup> Even within this restricted purview, my treatment of Kircher's hieroglyphic studies is necessarily selective; but I have based my choice of topics on judgments about the significance of his project as a whole. My approach is thus very different not only from studies that have considered his hieroglyphic studies more partially, but also from those that have treated his massive oeuvre in its entirety. Inevitably, something is lost by examining only one side of a polymath, but much is gained as well. Only by limiting my scope in this way have I been able to carry out a detailed investigation of Kircher's scholarship in the making.

Chapter 1, “Esoteric Antiquarianism,” situates *Egyptian Oedipus* in its most important literary contexts: Renaissance Egyptology, including philosophical and archeological traditions, and early modern scholarship on paganism and mythology. It argues that Kircher's hieroglyphic studies are better understood as an antiquarian rather than philosophical enterprise, and it shows how much he shared with other seventeenth-century scholars who used symbolism and allegory to explain ancient imagery. The next two chapters chronicle the evolution of Kircher's hieroglyphic studies, including his pioneering publications on Coptic. Chapter 2, “How to Get Ahead in the Republic of Letters,” treats the period from 1632 until 1637 and tells the story of young Kircher's decisive encounter with the arch-antiquary Peiresc, which revolved around the study of Arabic and Coptic manuscripts. Chapter 3, “Oedipus in Rome,” continues the narrative until 1655, emphasizing the networks and institutions, especially in Rome, that were essential to Kircher's enterprise. Using correspondence and archival documents, this pair of chapters reconstructs the social world in which Kircher's studies

77. Kircher published two other Egyptological works after *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*—Kircher, *Ad Alexandrum obelisci interpretatio* (1666), and Kircher, *Sphinx mystagoga* (1676)—but they added little that was new.

were conceived, executed, and consumed, showing how he forged his career by establishing a reputation as an Oriental philologist.

The next four chapters examine *Egyptian Oedipus* and *Pamphilian Obelisk* through a series of thematic case studies. Chapter 4, "Ancient Theology and the Antiquarian," shows in detail how Kircher turned Renaissance occult philosophy, especially the doctrine of the *prisca theologia*, into a historical framework for explaining antiquities. Chapter 5, "The Discovery of Oriental Antiquity," looks at his use of Oriental sources, focusing on Arabic texts related to Egypt and Hebrew kabbalistic literature. It provides an in-depth look at the *modus operandi* behind Kircher's imposing edifice of erudition, which combined bogus and genuine learning. Chapter 6, "Erudition and Censorship," draws on archival evidence to document how the pressures of ecclesiastical censorship shaped Kircher's hieroglyphic studies. Readers curious about how Kircher actually produced his astonishing translations of hieroglyphic inscriptions will find a detailed discussion in chapter 7, "Symbolic Wisdom in an Age of Criticism," which also examines his desperate effort to defend their reliability. This chapter brings into sharp focus the central irony of Kircher's project: his unyielding antiquarian passion to explain hieroglyphic inscriptions and discover new historical sources led him to disregard the critical standards that defined erudite scholarship at its best. The book's final chapter, "Oedipus at Large," examines the reception of Kircher's hieroglyphic studies through the eighteenth century in relation to changing ideas about the history of civilization.

## THE SPACE BETWEEN

Suspended between East and West, Kircher longed to push onward from Malta to Egypt and the Holy Land. But the island in the middle of the Mediterranean was the closest he ever came physically to the lands of his learned dreams. Instead, back in Rome, immersing himself in manuscripts and antiquities preserved in the city's collections, and ruminating on the Egyptian obelisks scattered among its piazzas, he embarked on a virtual tour through Oriental antiquity, recording his discoveries in the erudite travelogue called *Egyptian Oedipus*. Even had he been able to visit the Near East, it is doubtful that the encounter would significantly have changed his ideas, shaped as they were by a mindset suspended between two ways of thinking about the past: the traditional reverence for antiquity, of which occult philosophy, with its ideal of esoteric wisdom passed on from the first age of the world, was a particular variety; and a more skeptical, empirical approach to history that developed out of critical philology and antiquarianism. Much of

the tension in his work, and its historical interest, can be traced to the tug of these opposing forces.

Kircher, whose career spanned the half century before 1680, died at the cusp of a period of unusually rapid cultural mutation. The age before, precisely because of the seismic shift that came after, has challenged historical interpretation. Half a century of intensive research on the Scientific Revolution has done much to clarify the relationship between the pre-Newtonian and post-Newtonian natural sciences, but parallel developments in the human sciences remain more opaque. Posterity has not esteemed Kircher as one of the seminal figures in the genealogy of modernity—a Galileo, a Descartes, a Hobbes—but in his day he was one of Europe's most successful scholars. He embodied the contradictions of a moment when recognizably modern ways of thinking about the past had become available, yet older and conflicting models remained appealing and, to many, persuasive. As such, he allows us to explore a side of intellectual history too often lost to view. Without this view we cannot fully grasp the work of the canonical thinkers, much less understand the age on its own terms.<sup>78</sup>

78. See Feingold, "Grounds for Conflict" (2003), esp. 122–23.