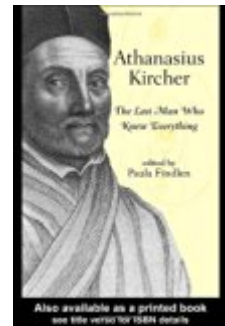


Paula Findlen, ed. *Athanasius Kircher: The Last Man Who Knew Everything*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004. xii + 465 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-94016-0.

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The Man Whose Birthday Lasted Three Years

It may not be inappropriate to consider it a true miracle that Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680) was resurrected from the pseudo-scientific realm of charlatans to which some of his younger contemporaries and the scholarly community of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had relegated him. In his long, influential 1882 entry in the *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, Adolf Erman summarized Kircher's scholarly approach by saying, "Er war kein Forscher ...; was seine Natur brauchte, war die leere Bewunderung der sogenannten 'weiteren Kreise' und um die nicht einzubüßen, erlaubt er sich selbst Fälschungen" ("He was no researcher...; what his nature craved was the vain admiration of the so-called 'wider circles,' and in order not to lose that he even resorted to falsifications"). Guided by the positivist approach of his time and his post-Champollion vantage point, the egyptologist Erman virtually ridiculed Kircher's entire oeuvre. The Jesuit did not fare much better in the first half of the last century until Fritz Krafft vindicated him in 1977 in his assessment in the *Neue Deutsche Biographie* and freed him from the fetters of suspicion, thus re-establishing Athanasius Kircher as one of the most important polyhistorians and universal scholars before Leibniz (who was perhaps the very last one of this breed).[1]

Paula Findlen's extensive collection of essays grew out of a conference at Stanford University which she had organized in April 2001. It presents this "new" Athanasius Kircher and contributes substantially to the justification of this German Jesuit as seen and judged from within the seventeenth century. The Stanford symposium coin-

cided with another early celebration of Kircher's 400th birthday, the splendid exhibition that re-created his Museum Kircherianum in Rome, thus highlighting—among other things—the organizational skills that led to the assemblage of such a Baroque *Kunst- und Wunderkammer*. [2] Further "exhibits and events in [Kircher's] honor occurred in cities as far-flung as Palo Alto, Chicago, New York, Rome, Madrid, Wolfenbüttel, and of course, Fulda," Findlen chronicles in her acknowledgements, to which one should add Würzburg, and—of course—Geisa, his birthplace (p. xi). Most of these events took place in 2002, the actual anniversary year of Kircher's birth; the Fulda symposium followed in early 2003. Findlen's publication of the Stanford essays nicely rounds out this celebratory period in 2004 and presents papers dealing with several aspects of Kircher's work not covered in some of the other catalogs and conference accounts.

The publication of these essays marks the surprising—and spectacular—acquisition of most of Kircher's works, followed by the sponsorship of the Athanasius Kircher Correspondence Project, which turned Stanford University Libraries almost overnight into the center of Kircher studies in the new world. It should not surprise that most of Findlen's contributors hail from America—unfortunately, this means that they "rely principally on English-language sources," as Antonella Romano has to admit in the closing essay (p. 417, n. 3). And this may also account for Findlen's own lack of information on the revival of interest in Kircher's work that had less to do with the spurious "Internationale Athanasius Kircher

Forschungsgesellschaft” than she assumes (p. ix). It was the late Australian scholar John Fletcher, whom she duly credits, who contributed important sections to the catalog of the 1981 Kircher exhibit in Rastatt and Fulda and organized the first Athanasius Kircher symposium at the Herzog August Bibliothek in 1981 to (belatedly) commemorate the 300th anniversary of his death.[3] An important collection of essays followed in Venice in 1986 and further documents this reassessment of the Jesuit father’s oeuvre.[4] While the Wolfenbüttel papers were not published until 1988, events and publications in Rastatt, Wolfenbüttel, and Rome bear ample testimony that Kircher research had been rekindled long before Findlen “became interested in Athanasius Kircher in the mid-1980s ... [as one of] very few people” (p. ix). For the first time, scholars from West and East Germany, Rome, and the United States discussed the renewed importance of the German Jesuit in late 1981 in the so-called *Bibelsaal* of the Wolfenbüttel library with its 3,000 bibles—a setting of which Kircher would have approved. The library was the ideal center for such activities as Duke August the Younger (1579-1666), its principal benefactor, became one of Kircher’s major sponsors and faithful correspondents during the last sixteen years of his life.[5]

Findlen’s collection of essays begins with her detailed introduction, which justly questions the book’s potentially provocative title by raising doubts as to Kircher’s purported omniscience. The chapter coyly entitled, “The Last Man Who Knew Everything ... or Did He?,” presents an exhaustive overview of the Jesuit’s rise to fame in Rome while documenting some of the objections and doubts among his fellow scholars and mentors that were raised early on. Findlen chronicles his ascent; his astute marketing and publishing endeavors; the wide reception of his works, but also the dismantling of Kircher’s status beginning in the 1670s. Her brief overview of his early life and education should be seen together with an in-depth treatment of this period that was researched for the 2002 Würzburg exhibit and presents new, reliable information.[6]

The main part of the volume is organized in five sections that do not purport to cover the entire range of this polyhistor’s publications but add important stones to the ever-building mosaic of Kircher studies. In each of these parts, I feel that some of the three or four essays contribute particularly valuable information to the body of knowledge about the German Jesuit. In section I, “The Art of Being Kircher,” Martha Baldwin’s paper, “Reverie in Time of Plague: Athanasius Kircher and the Plague Epidemic of 1656,” presents convincing arguments for

the author’s taking time out from his well-laid research plans after the publication of the controversial *Itinerarium extaticum* of that same year. Further warned by the abrupt transfer of his capable *adlatus*, Kasper Schott, from the Collegium Romanum to Würzburg (with its university hardly the German “hinterlands” as Baldwin makes it to be, though—p. 69), Kircher temporarily shifted gears and researched the plague that broke out in Rome in 1656 and 1657, which resulted in his publishing the 1658 *Scrutinium ... pestis*.

Harald Siebert’s essay, “Kircher and His Critics: Censorial Practice and Pragmatic Disregard in the Society of Jesus,” discusses the role of the College of Revisors and “censors extraordinary” and analyzes these reviewers’ forty-eight surviving reports on Kircher’s publications, which are listed in a valuable appendix (pp. 100-102). Siebert shows that only half of these documents criticized matters of content; the other half addressed “formal or literary qualities” of his books (p. 82). Most of the reports in this second category also accused him of “bragging,” a judgment even sympathetic modern readers will share. In a well-researched piece of analysis, Siebert discusses overt and covert strategies that Kircher used to meet some of the censors’ objections while subverting or blatantly disregarding others—and ultimately transferring the printing of his most successful books to Amsterdam, thus further removing his materials from the board’s immediate supervision. Nonetheless, it is clear that one of Kircher’s long-heralded books, the *Iter (H)etruscum*, was never published, since he could or would not engage in the thorough, additional research that one of the two “censors extraordinary”—specialists in the field—demanded when they perused the manuscript (pp. 84-85). Indeed, such sloppy work—to put it bluntly—would have offended the inhabitants of the Etrurian lands, something the Societas Iesu obviously could not afford.

The third essay in this group was authored by Angela Mayer-Deutsch, who discusses “‘Quasi-Optical Palimpsest’: The Circulation of Portraits and the Image of Kircher.” She outlines the ways in which Kircher solicited portraits from some of his sponsors and interprets images of the Jesuit both in engravings and in painted portraits. It is surprising that Mayer-Deutsch—a native speaker of German, after all—covers some of these materials rather superficially: Johann Georg Anckel was never the “librarian and adviser of Duke August of Brunswick-Lüneburg” (pp. 105, 106)—in 1659, when Kircher wrote this letter, Anckel was one of the agents purchasing books in Augsburg (and via Augsburg in Italy) for the Wolfenbüttel

ruler, who by that time was *not* “a duke of minor importance” (p. 107).[7] Much to the contrary, he was a highly regarded senior member of the German nobility who (a devout Protestant himself) single-handedly assembled almost all of Kircher’s books in his library. (His third son—for whom Kircher was a cicerone in Rome in 1663—was Ferdinand Albrecht I, not simply “Albert” [p. 123]). The translation on page 105 of her second opening quotation from Burckhardt’s 1746 history of the Wolfenbüttel library—“I would make the whole German Nation into a name”, which she footnotes as “correcting” John Fletcher’s 1986 translation—may work nicely into Mayer-Deutsch’s argument of combining “images, texts, and names ... to produce a certain form of presence of absent individuals” (p. 105). Nonetheless, it is a gross distortion of the German “wolt ich der gantzen Teutschen Nation einen Nahmen machen” (p. 124, n. 2), which suggests that hanging the duke’s portrait in Kircher’s Museum would enhance the standing of the entire German nation. (The second occurrence of this translation on p. 106—now reworked to “make the whole German nation a name” is closer to the original, but not a correct rendering, either). In her section on painted portraits, Mayer-Deutsch discusses the iconography of “the three known paintings of Father Kircher made in 17th and 18th centuries” (p. 114). Since she does not limit this overview to portraits in Germany, the full-length painting of Kircher in the Aula Leopoldina in Wroclaw (the former Breslau), executed around 1740, should have been included.

Section II of the collection of essays is devoted to “The Sciences of Erudition.” Peter N. Miller presents an in-depth view of “Copts and Scholars: Athanasius Kircher in Peiresc’s Republic of Letters.” His view of the souring relationship between the young Jesuit and his French mentor is intriguing—the new materials assembled here will need to be seen in the larger context of Miller’s forthcoming book on *Peiresc’s Orient*. The rather strong statement that “Kircher’s departure for Rome was something of a defection” (from Peiresc and his circle—p. 136), which totally contradicts Kircher’s autobiographical (though not always reliable) account, may be justified, after all.

Anthony Grafton discusses “Kircher’s Chronology” and points out the two major informants that led the Jesuit to establish his chronology, which allows for “a whole series of Egyptian kings [that] had ruled before the Flood” (p. 180)—information that he had culled from a fifteenth-century Arabic writer from Cairo. His findings were supported by one of his friends in the Vatican, a Maronite priest in charge of oriental manuscripts. It is intriguing to learn that Kircher’s extension of the world’s

chronology was supported by one of his most erudite pupils: The Sinologist Martino Martini ultimately applied his teacher’s methods when he came to the conclusion that the Chinese had preceded Moses (p. 184)—thus “radically challenging traditional ways of writing world history” (p. 185).

The third section of the book is devoted to “The Mysteries of Man and the Cosmos.” It is dominated by the late Stephen Jay Gould’s magisterial contribution, “Father Athanasius on the Isthmus of a Middle State: Understanding Kircher’s Paleontology,” which deals with the developing view of fossils in the early modern period. The Jesuit father fares well in this analysis, which culminates in Gould’s “adding a final word of admiration for Kircher” (p. 235). Gould’s parting expression of respect is meant “not so much for the power of his insights and assertions, but for the *quality of his doubts*, and for the willingness to grope and struggle with material that he understood only poorly by his own admission.” This epilogue could stand over much of Kircher’s work, and I hope that this essay—challenging all but the most specialized readers—will be republished in a scientific journal as a testimony to Gould’s unflinching humanity.

Section IV focuses on “Communicating Knowledge.” While the title of Haun Saussy’s essay, “Magnetic Language: Athanasius Kircher and Communication” plays on the theme of Michael John Gorman’s well-documented paper at the end of the previous section (“The Angel and the Compass: Athanasius Kircher’s Magnetic Geography”), Saussy deals with Kircher’s *Polygraphia nova et universalis*, which—as the author posits in his opening sentence—“offers little that was new in the world of cryptography or language theory in 1663” (p. 263). The paper provides linguistic background information on the *Polygraphia* and considers the various other uses of cryptology, especially in some of Kircher’s earlier, scientific works, but it is unfortunately too superficial to add anything substantive to this subject: There was no “first edition” of the *Polygraphia* that Kircher presented to select members of the nobility (p. 271); at best, this was a first print-run, identical with the second run later in the same year, if it ever existed.[8] The problematic, be-deviled *Steganographia* of Trithemius was first published in 1606 (not 1608, which was a second printing—p. 273); it did take a full *three years* to put the book on the *Index*. What is more serious is Saussy’s reliance on a whole tradition of either seeing the entire work as “a major Renaissance manual of conjuring” (Frances Yates, quoted on p. 273), which he corrects with reference to Duke August’s deciphering of most of Books I and II, but also cer-

tainly considering the third book (not “the last chapters” – p. 281, n. 30) of the *Steganographia* “as straightforward conjuring (for example, Eco 2001)” (n. 30). Saussy’s subsequent admission (“it is at least possible that a further sense hides beneath the necromantic rhetoric”) is based on a false premise, though. In two independent though virtually simultaneous analyses, two Americans showed in 1998 that the *magic* third book can be deciphered—a rather momentous solution of a 500-year-long puzzle that even made the pages of *New York Times*.^[9] This might have escaped Umberto Eco in 2001; by now, all previous references to the magic or demonic character of Trithemius’s *Steganographia* have to be seen from an historical perspective.

Fortunately, Nick Wilding’s further analysis of this subject—“Publishing the Polygraphy: Manuscript, Instrument, and Print in the Work of Athanasius Kircher”—provides valuable new material on the various stages toward the publication of the *Polygraphia*. Wilding outlines this arduous road, documenting the surprising find that the change-over from the use of icons in the 1659–1660 manuscript versions—and thus from a conceptual to an alphabetic system—was not the result of a profound philosophical re-orientation. Are these icons truly “derive(d) from Kircher’s interpretation of hieroglyphs” (p. 289), though? Wilding shows that this important alteration in the printed *Polygraphia* simply met the objections of Erzherzog Karl Joseph, the eleven-year-old Habsburg prince who had diligently worked his way through the dedicatory copy of the manuscript sent to the emperor. The boy had a hard time drawing “the little icons of angels, trees, and the like” (p. 289)—a rather banal solution of yet another puzzle in Kircher studies.^[10] Wilding outlines the hierarchical distribution of the printed *Polygraphia*, but his assumption of “a limited edition print run” (p. 290), though based on Kircher’s own allegation made one year before his death in his late *Turris Babel* of 1679 (p. 296, n. 43), may be based on the aging Jesuit’s failing memory. After all, a true second edition of the *Polygraphia* announced at the same time never materialized.

The fifth and last section of Findlen’s collection of essays is devoted to “The Global Shape of Knowledge.” Her own essay, “A Jesuit’s Books in the New World: Athanasius Kircher and His American Readers,” masterfully outlines the dissemination of his works with the help of Jesuit missionaries, who also acquainted the Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz with a number of his books. The main part details the reception of Kircher’s works by several other Mexican religious men, among them the

unfortunate cleric Alejandro Favián, who penned two Kircherian manuscripts of 3,000 and 2,500 pages that he hoped his Roman model would help him publish in Europe (pp. 341–343). In Mexico, Kircher’s materials were increasingly used to prove that this was not “a country without a past” (p. 345), a view that Kircher’s description of the perceived similarities between Egypt and the rituals of the Aztecs would support—which, however, soon led to a more critical reception of Kircher in the new world as Mexicans kept learning more about their own history. Findlen’s essay ends with an in-depth analysis of Sor Juana’s reading and refashioning of Kircher’s materials, including his images.^[11] It is quite disillusioning (if unfortunately borne out by Juana’s biography) to read Findlen’s closing remark, “Sor Juana’s kircherizing was a perilous if pleasurable occupation for a nun who was perceived to be too worldly” (p. 359).

J. Michelle Molina’s subsequent paper, “True Lies: Athanasius Kircher’s *China Illustrata* and the Life Story of a Mexican Mystic,” deals with an unexpected aspect of the impact of Kircher’s book in the new world. Molina chronicles the tragic interaction of another Mexican Jesuit priest, Alonso Ramos, with Kircher: Ramos drew on Kircher’s work on China to construct the early biography of Catarina de San Juan, a fascinating, saintly woman born in India and sent to New Spain as a slave. Ramos, her confessor during the last fifteen years of her life, made use of and refashioned Kircher’s accounts of the Far East to suit his purposes and flesh out Catarina’s youth. Alas, the multi-volume biography was put on the *Index*—“too hot to handle,” Molina quotes a recent source (p. 378); its author took to alcohol and was locked away in the cell of a Jesuit monastery for the rest of his life.

The last essay in this section, written by Florence Hsia on “Athanasius Kircher’s *China Illustrata* (1667): An Apologia Pro Vita Sua,” initially looks at this encyclopedic work through the eyes of “wary Protestants” (p. 385) who doubted the veracity of a great deal of the material in this folio. Hsia then focuses on key concerns of Kircher’s in the work: the Nestorian stele, Chinese superstition, but also Kircher’s and his fellow Jesuits’ claim to membership in the elusive Republic of Letters. The paper, excellently documented, manages to show how Kircher considered the *China Illustrata* the fulfillment of his early dream, that of becoming a missionary in China, and how much he had alienated himself “from the ideal of ‘apostolic mobility’” (p. 398) by the time he published this tome.

To balance the introduction, the volume sports a

shorter but equally valuable “Epilogue: Understanding Kircher in Context,” written by Antonella Romano. Her goal is to “highlight the ‘Kircherian moment’—the world that encompassed him” (p. 406). For this purpose, she first quotes from 1633 letters that herald “Father Athanasius Kirker,” the “great mathematician ... knowledgeable in letters and languages,” as he is expected at Aix. Unfortunately, he never filled the newly endowed chair in mathematics at the Jesuit college. Romano, referring back to several other essays in this volume, draws attention to the early Society of Jesus as a missionary order; Kircher’s attempt “to explain the entire world”—arrogant and utopian as it may have been (p. 410)—nonetheless is clearly in line with the order’s original intent. Lastly, and befittingly, she manages to situate Kircher in the Rome of his days, “a city that functioned on so many different levels as a capital”—and “in just this sense, Kircher was profoundly Roman” (p. 416).

From Findlen’s German-born Kircher to Romano’s “Kircher ... profoundly Roman,” this collection of essays indeed presents a wide range of interpretation of a number of central works of this rediscovered Jesuit polyhistor. For this, we owe Paula Findlen our gratitude; this volume will certainly become a standard reference work, at least in the English language. As I have tried to show, there are outstanding contributions but also some problematic essays, but this may be the crux of any collection of almost twenty essays on such a wide—and mostly divergent—range of aspects of one and the same universal person and his oeuvre.

Notes

[1]. Fritz Krafft, “Kircher, Athanasius,” in *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 7 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1977), pp. 641-645; Adolf Erman, “Kircher, Athanasius,” in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 16 (Berlin 1875-1912; reprint Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1969), p. 3.

[2]. Eugenio Lo Sardo, ed., *Athanasius Kircher: Il Museo del Mondo* (Rome: Edizione de Luca, 2001).

[3]. Reinhard Dieterle et al., eds., *Universale Bildung im Barock: der Gelehrte Athanasius Kircher. Eine Ausstellung der Stadt Rastatt [...]* (Rastatt: Stadt Rastatt, 1981).

[4]. Maristella Casciato et al., eds., *Enciclopedia in Roma barocca: Athanasius Kircher e il Museo del Collegio Romano tra Wunderkammer e museo scientifico* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1986).

[5]. The Wolfenbüttel exhibit mentioned on p. xi highlighted this aspect: *Athansius Kircher und Herzog*

August der Jüngere von Braunschweig-Lüneburg, <http://www.hab.de/ausstellung/kircher>.

[6]. Berthold Jäger, “Athanasius Kircher, Geisa und Fulda;” and Klaus Wittstedt, “Athanasius Kircher—Ein Jesuit des 17. Jahrhunderts,” in *Spurensuche: Wege zu Athanasius Kircher*, eds. Horst Beinlich et al. (Dettelbach: J. H. Röhl, 2002), pp. 9-40, 41-56.

[7]. During Anckel’s eight years of employment at the Duke’s Wolfenbüttel court, he never rose beyond his initial appointment as “Diener-Schreiber” (servant [to the young dukes] and secretary in the chancellery). See Wolf-Dieter Otte, “Johann Martin Hirt und die Augsburger Agentur 1647-1661,” in *Colloquia Augustana: Augsburg in der Frühen Neuzeit. Beiträge zu einem Forschungsprogramm*, vol. 1, eds. Jochen Brüning and Friedrich Niewöhner (Berlin: Akademie Verlag), (1995), pp. 106-109.

[8]. The two dedicatory copies of the *Polygraphia* to Duke August and his son, Ferdinand Albrecht I, at the Herzog August Bibliothek are identical with copies possibly coming from a second print run (see also the similarly problematic statement in Wilding’s essay, p. 290).

[9]. Thomas Ernst first announced the solution in German in 1996: “Schwarzweiße Magie. Der Schlüssel zum dritten Buch der *Steganographia* des Trithemius,” *Daphnis: Zeitschrift für Mittlere Deutsche Literatur* 25 (1996): pp. 1-205. In view of the limited circulation of this publication in a German journal devoted to Early Modern Studies, he translated a condensed version into English in an important journal in the field: “The Numerical-Astrological Ciphers in the Third Book of Trithemius’s *Steganographia*,” *Cryptologia* 22 (1998): pp. 318-341. At the time the journal had accepted Ernst’s translation, the same solution was proposed by Jim Reeds, “Solved: The Ciphers in Book III of Trithemius’s *Steganographia*,” *Cryptologia* 22 (1998), where both articles appeared in sequence (pp. 291-317).

[10]. The list of princes to whom Kircher sent presentation copies of his manuscript should include Johann Philipp von Schönborn, Kurfürst-Erzbischof of Mainz, in whose service Johann Joachim Becher saw Kircher’s material before the publication of his *Character, Pro Notitia Linguarum Universali* of 1661—which caused Karl Joseph’s 1663 allegation (later retracted) that Kircher had plagiarized Becher, as cited by Wilding (p. 291 and n. 47). The Mainz manuscript was lost during WWII. For the éclat following Becher’s presentation to the Mainz archbishop—who withheld the 100 ducats he

had promised the author for the preparation of the book as he, too, detected Becher's plagiarism—see Gerhard F. Strasser, *Lingua Universalis: Kryptologie und Theorie der Universalsprachen im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988), pp. 191-193.

[11]. It is stretching the definition of an emblem book

almost beyond limits to call Kircher's *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* "one of the greatest Catholic emblem books ever produced" (p. 351), even though Sor Juana "transformed many of [his] best images into her poetic expression as an exercise of her 'iconic imagination'." She transformed images and possibly text, but not emblems.

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