Book Review Essay

Father Kircher's Big Beautiful Books

Athanasius Kircher, *Musaeum Celeberrimum*, ed. Frank Böhling, introduction by Tina Asmussen, Lucas Burkart, and Hole Rößler, and *Vita*, ed. and trans. Frank Böhling. Hildesheim, Zurich, and New York: Olms-Weidmann, 2019 (Athanasius Kircher, *Hauptwerke*, ed. Anne Eusterschulte, Olaf Breidbach, and Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, Band 11). Pp. 319. Hb, € 184,00.

Athanasius Kircher, *China monumentis illustrata*, ed. Frank Böhling, introduction by Wenchao Li. Hildesheim, Zurich, and New York: Olms-Weidmann, 2020 (Athanasius Kircher, *Hauptwerke*, ed. Anne Eusterschulte, Olaf Breidbach, and Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, Band 9.1). Pp. 496. Hb, € 188,00.

Publishing the German Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher (1602–80) has always been a daunting enterprise. By the end of his life, Kircher produced a vast scholarly corpus. In 1634, he arrived at the Roman College from war-torn German-speaking lands; by 1641, the Society of Jesus relieved him of his professorial obligation to teach mathematics and Oriental languages to focus on his publications. Almost fifty bulky tomes (mostly in Latin but occasionally in German, Dutch, French, Italian, and English) bore his name. Most were authored by Kircher; key disciples who assisted him and promulgated his work (Gaspar Schott, Georg de Sepibus, Gioseffo Petrucci, and Johannes Kestler) also published Kircherian books.

In the first part of Kircher's career, he published his books in German towns, Avignon, and especially Rome; after signing an exclusive contract with the Dutch publisher Johannes Janssonius in 1661, most of his books appeared in Amsterdam, which had the broadest distribution network. An entire network of imperial agents and Jesuit confrères helped to distribute them throughout the world. Today, one can find copies of his books from Florence, Madrid, Prague, London, and Göttingen to Beijing and Puebla—wherever Jesuits

created significant college libraries and wherever there were eager readers, not all of them Catholic since the Puritan divine Cotton Mather was among the many Protestants who had Kircher's works in his library.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, Kircher was a baroque publishing sensation. The subjects of Kircher's volumes were as varied and dazzling as the author himself: magnetism, music, mathematics, and natural history; Egypt, China, and the Roman province of Latium; Noah's Ark and the Tower of Babel; ancient, universal, and artificial languages. Examining his large, highly illustrated encyclopedias, bursting with the kind of global erudition informed by a century of Jesuit missionary activity and scholarship, we understand why Kircher appealed to curious readers who wanted to decode the great secrets of knowledge of their age, which is why the Voynich manuscript passed through his hands since Marcus Marci hoped he might decipher the indecipherable. In their totality, his books became a world unto themselves.

Then, of course, there was the Roman College Museum. Inaugurated officially with Alfonso Donnino's donation of art, antiquities, and curios in 1651, it was curated by Kircher whose own collection became the most celebrated and discussed part of the museum. Visiting Father Kircher in the Roman College Museum became one of the great tourist attractions of the Eternal City; it was an experience intimately entangled with the progress and publication of his research. Kircher and his disciples described and illustrated many missionary artifacts, marvelous machines, imperial gifts and other curiosities of nature and art in his books. To take one famous example, the rubbing of the Nestorian stele (an eighth-century limestone monument in Chinese and Syriac testifying to the early presence of Christianity in China, discovered outside of Xi'an by Jesuit missionaries in the 1620s) on display in the Roman College was first discussed and reproduced in rough form in the *Prodromus Coptus sive Aegyptiacus* (1636) and brought to perfection in Kircher's *China monumentis illustrata* (1667) with the assistance of returning Jesuit missionaries. Long before de Sepibus published an image of this artifact in the 1678 museum catalogue, *Musaeum celeberrimum*, this Nestorian stele was a well reproduced and discussed image.

After Kircher's death in 1680, interest in his work began to wane. Given the variety of subjects on which he claimed expertise, later generations of scholars were increasingly critical of his accomplishments. The 1740 Augsburg edition of his plague treatise, *Scrutinium physico-medicum contagiosae luis, quae pestis dicatur* (Rome, 1658), represents a unique example of an eighteenth-century reprint of one of his many books. Mostly, Kircher embodied an increasingly remote world of scholarship whose priorities were not those of the European Enlightenment and its readers. His books themselves became antiquities

awaiting periodic rediscovery; they inspired the occasional modernist painting; fantastic, novelistic historical episodes; and a thin trail of scholarship on subjects such as whether he anticipated germ theory by looking at the blood of plague victims under the microscope.

The past fifty years brought renewed interest in Kircher as a historical figure and a great deal of new scholarship. The idea of publishing his works in facsimile has been part of this modern project of intellectual recuperation. In 1968, the Internationale Athanasius Kircher Forschungsgesellschaft announced an ambitious plan to reprint Kircher's works and his correspondence (largely unpublished) in luxurious modern editions. Despite a glossy brochure advertising the virtues of owning copies of Kircher's rather prolix, neo-Latin prose, this publication never materialized, save possibly for Ulf Scharlau's reprint of the *Musurgia universalis* with Olms in 1970; it reappeared in 1999 and became a two-volume edition in 2006. The scholarship on Kircher grew steadily, but it was not until the beginning of the twenty-first century that Kircher fully came into his own as a historical subject. Modern exhibits reconstructing aspects of his museum played a role in the revival of Kircher studies as well as a changing zeitgeist in fields such as the history of science and intellectual history, the growth of museum studies and book history, and an explosion of interest in the history of the Society of Jesus as part of global early modern history.

The digitization of the Kircher manuscripts in the Archivio della Pontificia Università Gregoriana in Rome, containing the bulk of his correspondence in fourteen volumes, made a great deal of fascinating material previously studied by only a few scholars, most notably John Fletcher, more accessible. The original Athanasius Kircher Correspondence Project (<http://kircher.stanford.edu/>) inaugurated by Michael John Gorman and Nick Wilding in 2000 inspired an enriched database of Kircher's correspondence curated by Iva Lejková and Suzanne Sutherland available through EMLO (Early Modern Letters Online: <http://emlo-portal.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/collections/?catalogue=athanasius-kircher>). An even more ambitious digital archive, the *Monumenta Kircheri* (https://gate.unigre.it/mediawiki/index.php/Monumenta_Kircheri) is now under construction at the Gregorian University. In between, Kircher has become the subject of a popular biography, John Glassie's *A Man of Misconceptions: The Life of an Eccentric in an Age of Change* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012). I am not sure if he is the only Jesuit to be the subject of an illustrated children's book, but Marilee Peters and Roxanna Bikadorff, *The Man Who Knew Everything: The Strange Life of Athanasius Kircher* (Toronto: Annick Press, 2017) revels in the explosive visuality of Kircher's books and his boundless intellectual ambition.

Since 2013, the German publisher Georg Olms has been producing scholarly facsimiles of Kircher's books. Their online brochure advertises plans to

publish 11 of Kircher's books in 19 volumes (actually 14 in 22 volumes, since several volumes pair two separate publications). Additionally, volume 11 includes a German translation of Kircher's *Vita* with de Sepibus's *Musaeum celeberrimum*. To date, four of the fourteen have appeared, and two are the subject of this review.

Who really is the author of the *Musaeum celeberrimum*, the Roman College Museum catalogue? This is one of many puzzles artfully explored by Tina Asmussen (Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte), Lukas Burkart (University of Basel), and Hole Rößler (Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel) in their extensive introduction to this facsimile. Asmussen is the author of *Scientia Kircheriana: Die Fabrikation von Wissen bei Athanasius Kircher* (Affalterbach: Didymos-Verlag, 2016) and the entire team previously coedited *Theatrum Kircherianum: Wissenskulturen und Bücherwelten im 17. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013). They bring their combined expertise in history of science, cultural history, theater history, and the history of books and authorship to bear on their analysis of this famous catalogue, with Frank Bölling providing a bio-bibliographic index of all the authors referenced in the museum catalogue.

Assmusen, Burkart, and Rößler make excellent use of archival and printed evidence to reconstruct the full history of the museum catalogue. They reconstruct discussions between Kircher and his disciple Schott, in the years immediately after Schott's departure from Rome in 1655 for the Jesuit college at Würzburg, regarding the desire for a catalogue, especially of Kircher's machines. The Bohemian Jesuit Valentin Stansel was asked to bring a copy of the *Museum Kircherianum*, as Schott described it early in 1657, to German-speaking lands. Various delays ensued. Schott publicized Kircher's museum and his machines in his *Mechanica hydraulico-pneumatica* (1657) and *Magia universalis* (1657–59) but no catalogue appeared. Schott's death in 1667 ended his role in this endeavor. The idea of a printed version of the museum became one of Kircher's many slow food projects that evolved over time and ended up in different hands to reach its conclusion in 1678.

In 1672, Kircher mentioned publishing a catalogue by his curator of machines, Georg de Sepibus, in a letter to Johannes Janssonius van Wesberghe, Janssonius's son-in-law. After Janssonius's death in 1666, the younger Johannes took over the family business with his niece Sara and her husband Elizaues Weyerstraten. The *Musaeum celeberrimum* became one of their publishing ventures. Kircher advertised its imminent appearance in his *Arca Noë* (1675). He discussed it with correspondents such as the Augsburg canon Hieronymus Langenmantel, both before and after its publication. Assmusen, Burkart, and Rößler offer a close examination of the book's contents, including the recycling

of thirty-eight of the forty-one images in the catalogue from Kircher's earlier works (a reminder that the Dutch publisher had access to his entire archive of materials as part of their agreement). They provide a useful concordance of images so readers can see how engravings were selected and incorporated into this culminating and highly synthetic artifact.

Drawing upon their prior research, Assmusen, Burkart, and Rößler raise many interesting questions about early modern publishing, authorship, and scholarly collaboration. They also go farther than previous scholarship in attempting to resolve the mystery of Georg de Sepibus. Who was this curator of machines? He was a Catholic scholar from the Swiss town of Mörel in the Wallis canton, hence calling himself *Valesius*. De Sepibus attended the Jesuit college in Fribourg, then studied theology, philosophy, and medicine at the University of Salzburg, and enrolled in the Jesuit college in Milan in 1663 without becoming a Jesuit. By 1668, he was in Rome and remained there for several years, taking a short trip to Naples in 1670 to perfect some machines under Kircher's patronage. His work on the catalogue was complete before 1674 when Kircher inquired of a mutual friend whether de Sepibus was still alive and well. He had returned home and become a public official. Their collaboration was finished even though it took four more years to print the book.

Assmusen, Burkart, and Rößler explore the nature of this catalogue in light of Kircher's collaborative patterns of publication and tendency to recycle his most valuable material. They also consider the *Musaeum celeberrimum* in relation to other early modern catalogues of collections, rightfully arguing that Kircher and de Sepibus would have been well-informed about this genre including recent Roman examples such as the visual catalogue of the Giustiniani gallery. In short, this is a volume that has much to offer its readers, including Böhling's critical edition and a new German translation of Kircher's autobiography appended to the catalogue facsimile (the previous translation was published in 1901 and certainly needed to be redone). The original Latin printed *Vita* appeared in Hieronymus Langenmantel's *Fasciculus epistolarum Adm. R.P. Athanasii Kircheri Soc. Iesu*, published in Augsburg in 1684. Five extant manuscript copies survive. Böhling builds on the previous work by Giunia Totaro for her critical edition of Kircher's autobiography in Latin, French, and Italian, *L'autobiographie d'Athanasius Kircher: L'écriture d'un jésuite entre vérité et invention au seuil de l'oeuvre* (Frankfort: Peter Lang, 2009). He also incorporates other scholarship such as Howard Louthan's excellent essay on Kircher's vita as a form of pious propaganda in a bid for posterity's recognition of his more saintly qualities. Most importantly, he offers a fresh and carefully done German translation that will now make this work more widely available in a useful scholarly edition.

The Olms-Weidmann edition of Kircher's *China monumentis illustrata* contains a lengthy introduction by Wenchao Li, a philosopher at the Leibniz University who is a specialist in early modern European and Chinese philosophy and knowledge exchange. His introduction offers a comprehensive analysis of the circumstances that inspired Kircher to publish a book on China dedicated to Superior General Gian Paolo Oliva in light of the state of European knowledge of Asia and several generations of Jesuit missionaries in this part of the world. Readers who come to this text guided by Professor Li will be well informed about the history of European travelers and missionaries in Asia since the age of Marco Polo and Prester John. Many specific subjects discussed in Kircher's book—European geographic and linguistic knowledge, the discovery and discussion of the Nestorian stele, the creation of a Chinese catechism, their understanding of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Brahmanism, and many natural, historical, architectural, and technological marvels—are carefully contextualized.

Li is rightfully concerned with situating Kircher's book at a precise moment in the history of the Jesuit missions to East Asia and especially China. Kircher's book included information culled from the Japan mission, which, after early successes, had ended disastrously with the Great Martyrdom of Nagasaki in 1622 and the expulsion of the Portuguese in 1639. It included some information from the Jesuit mission in India. Its most novel contributions came from Kircher's contact with missionaries returning from China—his former student Martino Martini, the Polish Michael Boym, and Johannes Grueber who provided new information about Tibet in particular from his epic overland journey. Li discusses how Kircher integrated this material with published accounts by Jesuit procurators Nicolas Trigault and Alvaro Semedo. More generally, he helps us to see this book as part of a concerted effort to advertise Jesuit expertise in Asia within western Europe.

The intrepid missionary Grueber may not have been entirely happy with what Kircher did with his hard-earned knowledge of China, Tibet, and Central Asia, when he finally got his hands on a printed copy of the *China monumentis illustrata*, but Kircher's Dutch publishers were thrilled. They followed the success of the 1667 original with an expanded French edition, which included even more of Grueber's account of his travels, and a Dutch translation. Lengthy excerpts also appeared in English, making this work one of Kircher's most widely read books in the late seventeenth century. Between Li's introduction, Böhling's bio-bibliographic index, and their joint glossary of Chinese terms, this is a very useful critical edition that provides readers with much better understanding of how to read the *China monumentis illustrata*.

Li is less of a specialist in Kircher than Asmussen, Burkart, and Böhling. The payoff is his vision of the *China monumentis illustrata* as an important artifact of European Orientalism and the Jesuit missions and their mutual fascination with theology, faith, history, science, and language. He is especially attentive to early modern German Orientalism, as we should expect from someone who has edited and studied Leibniz's writings on China very closely. Readers have less of a fine optic on the making of this book, Kircher's relations with his collaborators and publisher, and the book's immediate reception as seen through his correspondence. Such subjects are naturally of greater interest to Kircher specialists but both approaches serve readers well. Instead, they learn a great deal about the broader context that inspired this book after publishing multiple volumes on Coptic, Egyptian knowledge, magic, idolatry, and hieroglyphs. The Kircher of the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* lurks in the background of his work on China, inviting analogies and comparisons.

It is probably a good thing that the plan to publish scholarly facsimiles of a good number of Kircher's books has only fully taken shape in the past decade. This delay has allowed the current team of editors to integrate new scholarship and new approaches to researching Kircher, his books, and his world. I look forward to seeing more of these volumes in print and hope that Olm will consider doing a modern critical edition of the *Scrutinium pestis*. Writing in the midst of COVID, it seems appropriate to revisit the significance of this, like so many of Father Kircher's fascinating works.

Paula Findlen

Department of History, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA

pfindlen@stanford.edu