ATHANASIUS KIRCHER · COMPLETE, FROM THE LATIN

The Ecstatic Journey

Through the Heavens

WITH AN ANGEL TO THE MOON, THE PLANETS AND THE SUN



FROM THE LATIN EDITION · ROME 1656

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The Ecstatic Journey Through the Heavens

Rome, 1656

Athanasius Kircher's dialogues with the angel Cosmiel on a journey to the Moon, the planets, the Sun and the fixed stars. Complete in modern English from the Latin edition of 1656

BlusaBooks · MMXXVI

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FOREWORD

A journey that began with music. One evening in Rome three virtuosi play on two violins and a theorbo. The listener — a Jesuit who in this book calls himself Theodidactus, "taught by God" — falls asleep, and an angel named Cosmiel appears to him. The angel takes him up in his wings and carries him aloft: first to the Moon, then to Venus and Mercury, to the Sun itself, to Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, and at last out among the fixed stars. So begins *The Ecstatic Journey*, the book Athanasius Kircher published in Rome in 1656. It is one of the first "space flights" in European literature, and its author was one of the most famous scholars of his age.

Who was Kircher? Athanasius Kircher was born in 1602 in Geisa, a small town in Germany not far from Fulda, and died in Rome in 1680. As a young man he joined the Society of Jesus — the Jesuit order — fled the ravages of the Thirty Years' War, and around 1633 came to Rome, where for almost fifty years he worked at the Roman College, the chief school of the Jesuits. He wrote about everything: magnetism, music, light and shadow, Egyptian hieroglyphs, China, volcanoes and underground waters. To see the crater of Vesuvius from the inside he had himself lowered into it; he also studied Etna. His museum at the Roman College was one of the first public cabinets of nature and curiosities in Europe. Today he is often called "the last man who knew everything" — and he really did try to take in the whole of the knowledge of his time.

A book for a queen. *The Ecstatic Journey* is dedicated to Queen Christina of Sweden. In 1654 she gave up her throne, became a Catholic, and in December 1655 made her solemn entry into Rome. Kircher knew her personally. In the dedication he "opens the heavens to her like a book" whose letters are the stars,

and invites her, "a true watcher of the heavens, an Urania", to come with him on the journey.

Between the telescope and the Inquisition. Kircher wrote at a strange moment. Less than fifty years earlier the telescope had shown things no one had ever seen: mountains on the Moon, spots on the Sun, the phases of Venus, four moons around Jupiter and a puzzling "threefold" Saturn. But in 1633 the Roman Inquisition had condemned Galileo Galilei for defending Copernicus's teaching that the Earth moves, and in 1642 Galileo died under house arrest. A Jesuit in Rome who wrote about the structure of the heavens had to write very carefully. So Kircher chose the form of a dream or rapture — like Plato, Cicero and Lucian — and reminds us in his preface that this is only a literary "feigned rapture", not a revelation. And that is why his angel repeats, more than once and very firmly, that the Earth stands motionless at the centre of everything.

What Kircher was allowed to say, and what he dared. The framework is the system of Tycho Brahe — the compromise held by Jesuit astronomers after Galileo's trial: the planets circle the Sun, but the Sun with its whole train of planets circles the motionless Earth. Yet everything else belongs to the new astronomy. Cosmiel mocks the solid "crystal" spheres of heaven in which the followers of Aristotle had believed for centuries: the planets swim in a fluid, clear ether. The heavenly bodies are not made of an unchanging "fifth essence" but of the same elements as the Earth, and they change. The Moon has mountains and valleys, the Sun has fiery oceans and spots, Jupiter and Saturn have companions. And when Theodidactus reaches the fixed stars he looks back: from there our Sun is only a small star, while the other stars are suns just like it, each with its own dark "moons" circling it. Kircher is careful to add that the world is "immeasurable" but not infinite — unlike Giordano Bruno, who was burned in 1600 for similar ideas.

The angel and his pupil. Theodidactus is Kircher himself — a curious pupil, sometimes terrified, sometimes too ready to believe, who asks everything the reader wants to know. Cosmiel's name is made from the Greek *kosmos* (world) and the Hebrew *El* (God): "the angel of God's world". His dress is a language of

symbols: the radiance about his head stands for a cherubic mind, the many-coloured feathers of his wings for knowledge of nature's secrets, the sphere in his hand for the guardianship of the starry world, the measuring staff for the truth that God made all things "by measure and harmony". During the flight the angel anoints Theodidactus's nostrils with a heavenly liquid so that he can breathe the subtle ether, and shields him from heat, cold and hunger — almost a spacesuit, three centuries before the space age. And the first thing the traveller sees from above is the Earth: brighter than the Moon, with shifting patches of cloud, darker oceans and gleaming polar ice.

Two dialogues. The book is a conversation between Cosmiel and Theodidactus. The First Dialogue is the journey itself — nine chapters from the Moon to the stars, full of sights, dangers and wonders: a little asbestos boat on the Sun's sea of fire, the sulphur mountains of Mars, the crystal-clear oceans and silver mountains of Jupiter, the gloomy, freezing globe of Saturn. The Second Dialogue is a calmer conversation about the creation of the world, its size and order, the speed of the heavens, the harmony of the world, the "waters above the heavens", the Empyrean heaven, the end of the world and the purposes of God. At the end of the book Kircher gathers many authorities to show that his "new hypothesis" does not contradict the faith.

What became of the book. *The Ecstatic Journey* stirred up controversy. In 1660 Kircher's pupil Kaspar Schott republished it with lengthy explanations and a new title, *Iter exstaticum coeleste* (The Ecstatic Heavenly Journey), to defend his teacher. In 1657 Kircher published a second part of the journey — into the depths of the Earth, its underground fires and waters. Our book is the first part, the heavenly journey, complete, translated from the first edition of 1656.

What we know today. There is no water on the Moon and there are no seas — they are plains of solidified lava. The Sun is not an "ocean of fire" but a huge ball of hot gas that really does "boil" without rest and breeds spots. Saturn's "companions" turned out to be a ring, explained by Christiaan Huygens in exactly those years. The Earth goes round the Sun. But in two things Kircher was

astonishingly right: seen from space, the face of the Earth is changed most of all by clouds; and the stars are suns, and planets circle many of them. Today we know of thousands.

How to read this book. Kircher writes as a seventeenth-century Jesuit: his natural science is closely woven together with theology, quotations from the Bible and the ancient authors. We have softened and modernised nothing — the text is translated in full and as it stands in the original. Notes at the foot of the page explain words, people and places; at the end of the book there is a commentary in plain words and on what modern science says about each subject. This book belongs to the series *Other Worlds* — old journeys to the Moon, the planets and the stars, as people imagined them before the space age.

TITLE PAGE

THE ECSTATIC JOURNEY
of ATHANASIUS KIRCHER
of the Society of Jesus,
in which
THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF THE WORLD,
that is,
the nature, powers and properties of the expanse of heaven and of the stars,
wandering as well as fixed,
and the composition and structure of each of them,
from the lowest globe of the Earth to the farthest bounds of the world,
explored under the cover of an imagined rapture,
is set forth according to the truth in a new hypothesis.
Speakers:
COSMIEL AND THEODIDACTUS.
Dedicated
to the Most Serene
CHRISTINA ALEXANDRA,*
Queen of the Swedes, Goths
and Vandals.
Rome, printed by Vitale Mascardi, in the year 1656.
With the permission of superiors.

* Christina (1626–1689), Queen of Sweden, abdicated in 1654, converted to Catholicism and made her solemn entry into Rome in December 1655. Kircher knew her personally.

ATHANASII KIRCHERI
E SOC. IESV

ITINERARIVM EXSTATICVM

QVO

MVNDI OPIFICIVM

ID EST

Cœleſtis expanſi, ſiderumque tam errantium, quàm fixorum natura, vires, proprietates, ſingulorumque compoſitio & ſtructura, ab infimo Telluris globo, vſque ad vltima Mundi confinia, per ficti raptus integumentum explorata, noua hypotheſi exponitur ad veritatem.

INTERLOCVTORIBVS
COSMIELE ET THEODIDACTO

AD

SERENISSIMAM

CHRISTINAM ALEXANDRAM

Suecorum, Gothorum, & VVandalorum Reginam.

ROMÆ, Typis Vitalis Maſcardi, Anno 1656.
SVPERIORVM PERMISSV.

The original title page: "The Ecstatic Journey of Athanasius Kircher of the Society of Jesus... Rome, printed by Vitale Mascardi, 1656"

DEDICATION



SERENISSIMAE

CHRISTINAE
ALEXANDRAE

Suecorum, Gothorum, & VVandalorum Reginæ

Cœleſtis felicitatis vbertatem precatur

ATHANASIVS KIRCHERVS
Soc. IESV.

COELVM Tibi pando Regina ſapiens, Cœlum dico, ceu complicatum librum in varias ſiderum ſyſtaſes, in totidem veluti capita multiplicis ratiocinij parti-

The first page of the dedication in the edition of 1656: a headpiece ornament and the initial C with a seated woman

To the Most Serene Christina Alexandra, Queen of the Swedes, Goths and Vandals, Athanasius Kircher of the Society of Jesus wishes an abundance of heavenly happiness.

I open heaven to you, wise Queen. Heaven, I say, like a folded book, divided into the various constellations of the stars as into so many chapters, arranged in the parts of a manifold argument. Its letters are the stars themselves; its printing house is the Archetypal Mind; its typesetter is God, Three in One. By day He sets this book before you to read as on the whitest of pages, filled with a countless variety of things; by night on black pages, it is true, but written in golden letters, that is, wonderfully conspicuous in the radiant mantle of the stars. Man is the index and summary of the book; its censor and approver was He who saw that everything He had made was very good.* In this Journey the hidden mysteries of the heavenly book will be unfolded to you, so that with the freest flight of the mind you may see how many crowns in exchange for the crown of this earthly speck, how many kingdoms in exchange for kingdoms, how broad and spacious the dwellings that God, Best and Greatest, has prepared in the recesses of the higher world.

The heaven that Khosrow, King of the Persians, had built for himself, as Cedrenus attests,† gave showers and rain; its lamps of stars were lit, and with every effect of the meteors known to philosophy it flashed wonderfully with lightning, raged with thunderbolts, and roared with thunder. There, besides the eclipses of the Moon and the Sun, each star turned in its own course; there night followed day and day followed night in turn; and the king alone, at the very centre, as on a throne in the middle of the world, triumphed unpunished. Not unlike him, O Queen, you will hold the middle of heaven, untouched and free from every injury of the weather, and you will become the centre and the heart of the planets and the stars. This place in heaven has been destined for you by your wise mind, your heavenly nature, and the eminence of a spirit eager to embrace the whole circle of learning. So travel for a while as a stranger in this heaven, so that in that true kingdom of the heavens, in your homeland, you may rest no longer as a guest. For to seek that Kingdom you willingly went forth as a pilgrim from your kingdom

* Genesis 1:31.

† The Byzantine chronicler George Cedrenus (11th century) tells how Khosrow II built a throne hall with an artificial sky in which machinery produced stars, rain and thunder; the Emperor Heraclius destroyed it.

and your country, rose above the glory of a crown, and showed how highly you value that Kingdom, the Kingdom of all ages.*

Enter, O Queen, this heaven of mine; enter it with that Wisdom as your companion *who alone compassed the circuit of heaven*;† for from this heaven, as by a stairway of many steps, you will ascend to the very Author of heaven, as to the throne of the eternal Solomon. There you will look more deeply into what that golden eternity of immortal treasures in the Kingdom of God may be, which you, a true Urania gazing upon heaven,‡ have sought with this so lofty, more than royal majesty of your spirit and with so unexpected a proof of royal example. And you will find that among the works which God, the Author of all, brought forth in the beginning, the first book was heaven. That, having unrolled it in constant contemplation, you may at last attain to the possession of His incorruptible goods, I beseech God from the very marrow of my soul. Farewell, and may you long be preserved for the Christian commonwealth.

From the Roman College, 1 June 1656.

* Psalm 145:13 (Vulgate 144:13).
† Sirach 24:5 (Vulgate 24:8), where Wisdom speaks of herself.
‡ Urania was the ancient Muse of astronomy.

LICENCE

Goswin Nickel, Superior General of the Society of Jesus.[*]

Since several theologians of our Society have examined the little work entitled *The Ecstatic Journey*, by Father Athanasius Kircher, a priest of our Society, and have approved it for publication, we grant permission for it to be printed, if those whom it concerns see fit. In witness whereof we give this letter, signed by our hand and sealed with our seal, at Rome, 15 November 1655.

Goswin Nickel.

Let it be printed, if it please the Most Reverend Master of the Sacred Apostolic Palace.

M. A., Bishop of Hierapolis, Vicegerent.

Let it be printed.

Brother Raimondo Capizucchi of the Order of Preachers, Master of the Sacred Apostolic Palace.[†]

[*] Goswin Nickel (1584–1664) was the tenth Superior General of the Jesuits, from 1652. No Jesuit could send his work to press without the General's permission.

[†] The Master of the Sacred Palace was a Dominican, the papal court theologian who gave the final licence for books printed in Rome.

PREFACE TO THE READER

To the reader devoted to the philosophy of the heavens

So it is, reader: so delightfully does the eternal Wisdom of God play in the circle of the earth* that there has hardly been an age so rough and unpolished in which she did not cheer the world, sick almost to nausea of old things, with new spectacles of her divine power, and teach it with new preludes on the great stage. In this way she would draw people to love and wonder at her, and if they ever strayed from the path of God's commandments, she would use fearful and monstrous portents to bring the transgressors back to their senses. As it happened in the past, so it has happened in these last centuries most of all, to the great astonishment of mortals. Venerable antiquity knew nothing of the existence of a New World in nature, nothing of the vast spread of the Ocean around the globe; it had learned nothing about the state of the Antipodeans. And then, behold, God, Best and Greatest, when the times of His unsearchable counsel were fulfilled, opened to us a new theatre of the world, filled with as great a variety of exotic things as we now read about with wonder in the records of the historians of the New World. Had anyone told these things to the ancients, they would without doubt have counted them, I will not say among plausible histories, but among pure fables and old wives' ravings.

The play of divine kindness did not stop there. Not so many years after the discovery of the New World, it spread before us a new theatre of heavenly spectacles and, by the gift of the heavenly tube, that is, the telescope,† revealed things unheard of in all past ages. For time out of mind the fabric of the world-

* Proverbs 8:31: "playing in the habitable world of his earth".

† Galileo first turned a telescope on the sky in 1609 and described his discoveries in *The Starry Messenger* in 1610; see also our No. 78, Galileo's *Dialogue*.