

W.

WILHELM SCHMIDT - BIGGEMANN

B E R L I N

ATHANASIUS KIRCHER'S CONCEPT
OF PREHISTORY

Kircher as Egyptologist

Athanasius Kircher was born the son of theology professor Johann Kircher on May 2, 1602 near Fulda, where he attended the Jesuit college until 1618. At the age of sixteen he was admitted into the Order as a novice. He studied at various universities and Jesuit colleges (Cologne, Koblenz, Heiligenstadt, Aschaffenburg and Mainz) until his ordination to the priesthood in 1628 in Mainz. At this point he was already more interested in bringing disciplines together than strictly separating them as advised by the *Ratio Studiorum*. Kircher's primary focus was on the classical languages, Hebrew, mathematics (geometry) and philosophy.¹

From 1629 to 1631, Kircher was professor of ethics, mathematics and oriental languages at the University of Würzburg. The Thirty Years' War forced the Jesuit to flee to Avignon in 1631, where he taught mathematics and philosophy at the Jesuit college and pursued his studies in astronomy and hieroglyphics. It was here that he got to know J. Hevelius, N. C. Fabri Peiresc and Pierre Gassendi. His steadily increasing celebrity led to two lucrative and influential employment offers: presented with the choice between Vienna and Rome, he chose the city where the Jesuit Order had its headquarters. Kircher taught mathematics, physics and oriental languages at the college in Rome from 1633 until his death in 1680. The conditions there were quite favourable, allowing him to make progress in his own research. "His impressive achievements are also the product

¹ Thomas Leinkauf, *Mundus combinatus. Studien zur Struktur der barocken Universalwissenschaft am Beispiel Athanasius Kirchers SJ (1602–1680)* (Berlin, 1993), p. 21.