

HOW
THE BOOK OF MORMON
CAME TO PASS



THE SECOND GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

LARS NIELSEN

How *The Book of Mormon* Came to Pass
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The engraving of Athanasius Kircher on the title page (left) is taken from his *China Illustrata*, 1667.

The photographic print of a drawing of Joseph Smith on the title page (right) is taken from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (item# 2009632233).

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*For Chris, who chose to stay with us.
For Susan, who tried to do likewise.*

Trigger Warning: This book is not written for true-believing Mormons (TBMs). If you are a TBM and you do not yet have a robust support system outside of the Mormon church, *do not read this book*. If you continue to read it, you accept the responsibility of managing your immediate or eventual faith crisis in a way that will not result in harm to yourself or others.

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Now, gentle reader, the author who wishes well to thy present and thy future existence entreats thee to peruse this volume with a clear head, a pure heart, and a candid mind. If thou shalt then find that thy head and thy heart are both improved, it will afford him more satisfaction than the approbation of ten thousand who have received no such benefit.

CHAPTER 1

The Hierophant's Tale

Athanasius Kircher, “the last man who knew everything,”¹ was born in 1601 near Fulda, Germany. As the youngest of nine children, he spent his formative years in relative bliss, fully content with his parents’ expectation that he would one day become a priest. He was, after all, the namesake of St. Athanasius, the same who was exiled to Germany from the Holy See of Alexandria in the fourth century by Constantine. Between 1624 and 1628, Kircher studied theology in Mainz, where he was ordained to the Jesuit order in the Catholic Church (Figure 1). For much of his life, he was employed by the Vatican as a linguist, serving as its Professor of Oriental Languages at Collegio Romano (Figure 2). He was quite famous in his day, publishing more than forty books between 1630 and 1680, largely due to his position as a “spanner node” at the intersection of the world’s two largest social networks: the Society of Jesus and the more secular Republic of Letters.² Most historians today conclude that at the center of his meteoric rise to fame, there was, disappointingly, a categorical lie. At best, he told this lie to get himself out of a *serious predicament*. At worst, he did not.

Early in his career, Kircher claimed to have found a key to deciphering ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs: the lost manuscripts of Rabbi Barachias Nephi, a source he fabricated. Kircher presented Nephi as if he were a Jewish rabbi, an Egyptian Arab, and a bygone linguist, speaking both Hebrew and Arabic but writing in the language of the Coptic Egyptians. Kircher would sometimes refer to him as Rabbi Nephi, Abba Nephi, Abbe Nephi, Abbenephi (a contraction), Abenephi (a contraction with fewer b’s), and the Latinized Abenephius. For context, “Abbe” is the Hebrew word for “father,” and “Abbe” is to “rabbi” as “father” is to “priest.” Incidentally, all English-speaking Mormons today pronounce Nephi, the first character of *The Book of Mormon*, as 'NĒ-fī (rhyming



Figure 1. An engraving of Athanasius Kircher (age 62) taken from *China Illustrata*.



Figure 2. Collegio Romano, where Kircher received the title of Professor of Oriental Languages. The central edifice, above, was literally built atop the cavernous ruins of an ancient Temple of Isis.

with “knee-high”). In all likelihood, Kircher probably pronounced it 'NEF-ē (rhyming with “hefty” but without the /t/ sound), which is how it is pronounced by Mormons when speaking in a Romance language.

The Vatican quickly promoted Kircher, making him the chair of his department, and charged him with publishing translations of the many obelisks that it had pillaged throughout the centuries, one of which is depicted in Figure 3. Hundreds of such monoliths had been transported to Italy by its emperors and popes, which were subsequently “cleansed by exorcism, crowned with crosses or statues of saints, and ornamented with pious descriptions.”³ And they were in desperate need of translation. Were the engraved symbols pagan? Or did they have ancient wisdom waiting to be deciphered? If the latter, then the Jesuits of Rome simply had to be the first to know.

Having put his own feet to the fire, Kircher announced after a short span of four years that he was ready to publish the first of three keys that together would unlock the ancient wisdom that had been preserved in the pyramids of Egypt. Several of his colleagues had posited that Coptic was somehow descended from hieroglyphics, but none could discover precisely how the modern language might have evolved from its predecessor. In *Prodromus Coptus*, Kircher claimed to have reverse-engineered a “forerunner” of the Coptic language—with reformed characters somewhere between modern Coptic and ancient hieroglyphs, which he wholly invented (Figure 4). A good example of one of his many reformed characters involves the Coptic letter phi, Φ:

Kircher calls it a symbol of the world, with its two poles. In his subsequent charts of the Coptic alphabet, he always shows this letter, not with a simple vertical line through it but with two intersecting pyramids, implying thereby to have ‘corrected’ the simplified Coptic form of the letter and to have restored the intention of its inventor, [which] is retrospectively attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. ... The readers of *Prodromus Coptus* may not all have grasped the distinction between authentic hieroglyphs and ones invented by Kircher.⁴

To properly understand Kircher’s obsession with the restoration of hieroglyphs, we must go back to one of the founding narratives of Egyptian mythology. Thoth was one of the first deities; he came to life from the lips of Ra and was therefore birthed without a proper mother.⁵ He was credited with the invention of hieroglyphic writing, which was thought to be a vehicle for the storage and transmission of not only knowledge and ancient wisdom but also sacred magic. With the head of an ibis, he was also a messenger of Ra, thereby becoming associated with the Greek god Hermes. And because he was sometimes worshipped as “Thoth the great, the great, the great,” in time, he evolved into the syncretic deity Hermes Trismegistus, whose final appellation means “thrice great” in Greek. For context, during the Renaissance, Hermeticism pervasively grew into a complex, philosophical, and religious system that purportedly was based upon the pseudepigraphic, sacred, and sealed scripture that was *The Book of Thoth*. In classic Hermetic tradition, *the gift of wisdom (prisca theologia)* was the greatest of all the gifts of Thoth, which he would only reveal to the



Figure 3. The Lateran Obelisk. The oldest and largest obelisk in Rome (height: 32 m, weight: 455 metric tons). *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, Tomus III, pages 160–161.

	Charaeter Zoogra- phus.	Figura literarum Vulgaris.	Græcorum ad eas affinitas.
I.		Ⲁ ⲁⲩⲁⲤⲐⲚⲔ ⲁⲩⲁⲤⲐⲚⲔ dicitur, id est, Bonus Dæmon.	Α
II.		Ⲧ ⲛⲁⲗⲁⲗⲁⲗⲁ dicitur, id est, Norma.	Γ
III.		Ⲙ ⲁⲁⲗⲁⲗⲁⲗⲁ dicitur, id est Bonus ager.	Δ
IV.		Ⲫ Processus inferiorum ad superiora. Symbolum est.	Υ
V.		Ⲑ ⲟⲩⲁⲩⲁⲩⲁ dicitur, id est, Mundi Dominus.	Ⲑ
VI.		Ⲙ ⲛⲁⲗⲁⲗⲁⲗⲁ dicitur Processus superiorum ad inferiora.	Λ
VII.		Ⲫ Processus animæ mundi ⲁⲩⲁⲩⲁⲩⲁ.	Χ
VIII. IX.		Ⲙ Lunæ symbolum. Ⲑ O magnum.	Σ Ω
X.		Ⲑ ⲟⲩⲁⲩⲁⲩⲁ dicitur, id est, Visio.	Ⲑ Σ
XI.		Ⲫ ⲁⲁⲗⲁⲗⲁⲗⲁ dicitur, id est, Fecunditas.	Β
XII.		Ⲫ ⲛⲁⲗⲁⲗⲁ dicitur, id est, Vita.	Ζ
XIII.		Ⲑ ⲟⲩⲁⲩⲁⲩⲁ dicitur, id est, Litera Thoth.	Ⲑ Thita.
XIV.		Ⲑ ⲁⲁⲗⲁⲗⲁ dicitur, id est, Amor.	Ⲑ

Figure 4. An “intermediate” Egyptian alphabet with “reformed” characters somewhere between ancient Egyptian and Coptic (*Obeliscus Pamphilius*, pages 130–132).

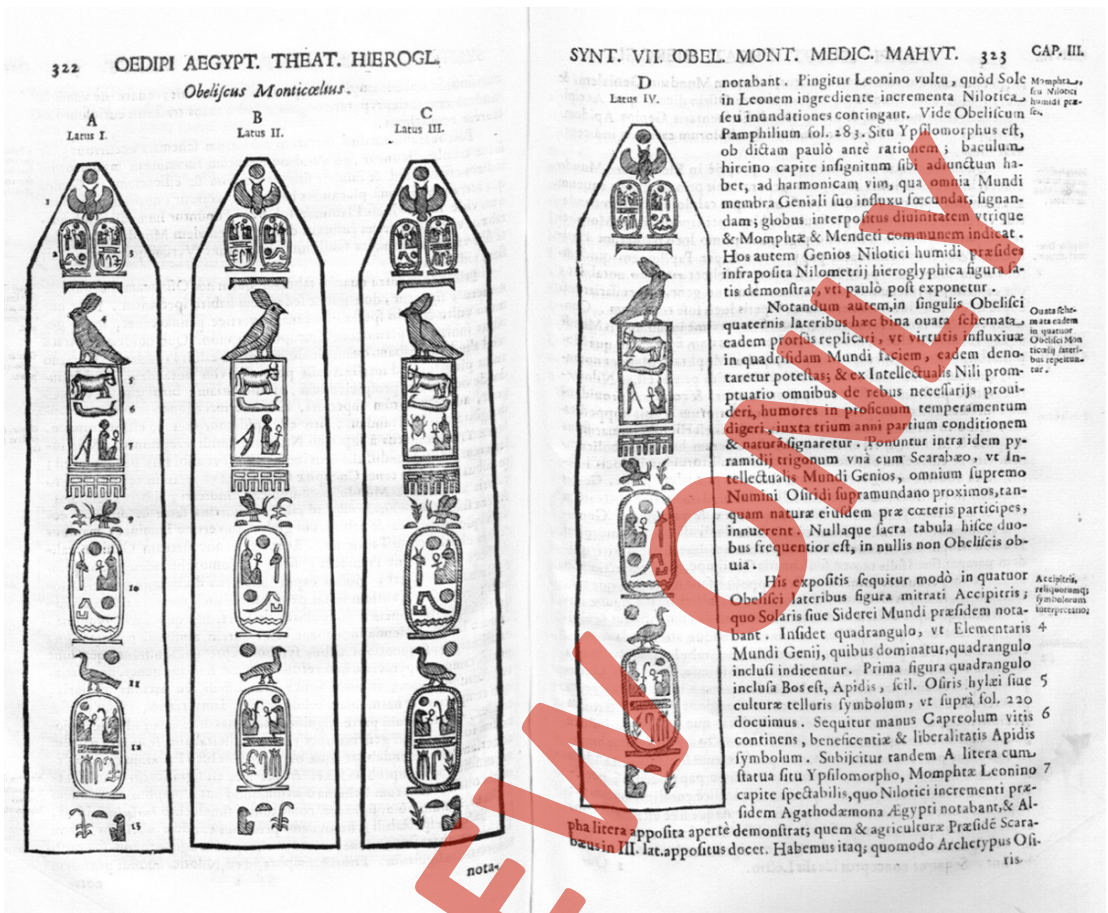
worthiest of sages. Some Jesuits in the 1600s, like Kircher, aspired to become such men through the reconciliation of Hermeticism with Catholicism and by mapping syncretic gods onto biblical patriarchs. Kircher, like many others before him, believed that Thoth should be mapped onto Enoch, whose prophetic book was conspicuously missing from the Bible.

One decade after publishing *Prodromus Coptus*, Kircher laid down another linguistic stepping stone—just as the general confidence in his ability to “translate” was starting to wane. In 1643 he produced his second key to unlocking the sacred wisdom of Hermes Trismegistus: *Lingua Aegyptiaca Restituta*. Kircher upheld the publication as “a complete translation of his Coptic-Arabic manuscript,”⁶ which Nephi had supposedly written. As the title declares, it was dedicated to finishing the “restoration” of the Egyptian language based on his forerunner of Coptic. Much more than a mere revision of his reformed characters, however, it was also the world’s first pretended “Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language” (GAEL), which one might call the “Kircher Egyptian Papers” (KEP). The word “hieroglyphs,” incidentally, is a Greek compound word that means “sacred carvings.” One decade after publishing his GAEL, Kircher produced his three-volume magnum opus, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, in which he boasted that he had finally solved the riddle of the Sphinx—an analogy he used to describe his “accomplishments” in the field of linguistics (Figure 5). This third key together with the other two promised to be “a complete ‘restoration of the hieroglyphic doctrine,’ [and of] all the lost secrets of religion.”⁷ It was Kircher’s greatest desire to discover the untold religious history of the world, to translate the forgotten stories from lost manuscripts found, and to reveal the *prisca theologia* of the true Hermes Trismegistus. But Kircher could not claim *The Book of Thoth* so easily. Unfortunately, he never realized that ancient Egyptian was almost purely phonetic, not ideographic, rendering all his “translations”—if that’s what we want to call them—semantically and syntactically useless. Among the most entertaining, flowery, and fanciful “translations” were the ones that he gave for certain obelisks, in which he sometimes generated long sentences (and even entire paragraphs) from a single character. Compare and contrast, for example, the accurate, seventeen-word translation of the Celian obelisk with the 203 words that Kircher provided (Figure 6). Most modern historians agree with Frank Manuel that Kircher’s *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* was “one of the *most learned monstrosities of all time*” (italics added).⁸

But Kircher’s ambition as a linguist did not stop with ancient Egyptian. According to many sources, he was proficient (but not fluent) in many languages beyond his native German: Arabic, Chaldean (biblical Aramaic), Coptic, French, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Latin, Samaritan, Spanish, and Syriac. The loftiest goal of his career, however, was to reconstruct the Adamic language, which God himself supposedly spoke to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before the Fall of Man. Taking the biblical story of the Tower of Babel literally rather than etiologically, Kircher, like most of the Jesuits in his day, believed that God had disguised and confused⁹ the primordial mother tongue by scattering pieces of it into a plethora of new, mutually incompatible languages—and this as punishment for Nimrod’s pride in thinking that he could build



Figure 5. Kircher commissioned an engraving of himself solving the Sphinx's riddle.



Kircher's translation: "Supramundane Osiris, concealed in the center of eternity, flows down into the world of the genii that is most near, similar, and immediately subject to him. This into the Osirian spirit of the sensible world, and its soul, which is the sun. This into Osiris Apis, the benefic Agathodaemon of the elementary world, who distributes the participated virtue of Osiris into all the members of the lower world. His minister and faithful assistant, the polymorphous daemon, shows by the variety which he causes and controls an abundance and plenty of all necessary things. But the benefic energy of the polymorphic daemon can be variously impeded by adverse virtues; hence, the sacred tablet of Mophta and Mendes must be employed, through whom it acquires the humid strength and fertility of the Nile, so that it can make the good influences flow unimpeded. Because the polymorphous daemon is unable to complete this unaided, the cooperation of Isis is needed, whose humidity tempers Mendes's dryness; for obtaining which the following sacred Osirian tablet is ordained, by which sacrifices may be conducted as prescribed in the Comasian rites. Through this tablet, then, and through the sight of it, supramundane Osiris shows the wished-for bounty of necessary things."

Figure 6. The Celian Obelisk. The actual translation is "Horus, powerful bull, beloved of Maat, king of Upper and Lower Egypt, son of the Sun, Ramses II."

his way to heaven. In his final book, *Turrus Babel*, which was published in 1679 (the year before he died), Kircher claimed to trace all tongues to the Tower of Babel, generating humanity's first complete linguistic family tree and depicting characters "from which all the alphabets of languages are clearly drawn"¹⁰ (Figure 7). According to Kircher, the true but untold religious history of the Aztecs was fundamentally Christian but with Egyptian roots. After "devot[ing] himself to the study of Mexican gods and codices kept in the Jesuit collections at the Collegio Romano,"¹¹ Kircher boasted that Catholic missionaries in Asia and America had "*rediscovered the message of Christianity in the 'hieroglyphic' writings of the Chinese and the Aztecs*" (italics added).¹² The following excerpt explains how, according to Kircher, all hieroglyphic writings connected back to the Garden of Eden:

Ancient wisdom, revealed to Adam and the other patriarchs, had inspired the rulers of Egypt before the Flood [to form] a lineage of erudite and powerful natural magicians. The original Hermes, who lived in their time, built the first pyramids, which were leveled by the Flood. But a cult of black magic and idolatry, created by Cain, had superseded the true Adamic tradition. After the Flood, Ham, Noah's evil son, combined the two traditions into a corrupt form of the ancient philosophy, which he taught to his children. They took it with them into the nations they founded. Centuries later, in the age of Abraham, a second Hermes recovered the fragments of the true ancient religion. He invented a new form of writing, the hieroglyphs, with which he hoped to preserve the ancient wisdom while keeping ordinary, ignorant people from profaning it further. And he devised the obelisk as *a durable, practical medium* on which he inscribed them (italics added).¹³

It is now abundantly clear that the actual function of obelisks was to mark temple and burial sites with proper names and titles. They were not durable, practical vehicles for hiding in plain sight ancient wisdom and Adamic magic. It is true that in Egyptian mythology, obelisks did have a spiritual significance as petrified rays from the Sun Disk of Ra, which is why some were capped with a gilded pyramidion and were sometimes called "the needles of Pharaoh."¹⁴ Kircher once "quoted" Nephi saying: "The king of Egypt in those days erected many needles of Pharaoh, that is, obelisks. The religious king followed suit and fell into these divine mysteries, ordering the priests to note down whatever they found in the sacred books."¹⁵ Notwithstanding, the earliest natural (and even spiritual) history of humankind is nothing like the Hermetic, Kabbalistic, and occult lore that Kircher had preserved in his writings. But that didn't stop him—or the French Jesuits especially—from trying to trace the secret combinations of Royal Arch Masonry to both the Temple of Solomon and the pyramids of Egypt. Such attempts to reconcile Hermeticism with Christianity and the Kabbalah (a movement that today is called Western esotericism) permeated much of 17th-century Europe. Vestiges of such thinking persist to some extent today—even on the one-dollar bill.

TURRIS BABEL LIB. III. 157

TABULA COMBINATORIA

In qua ex probatissimis Authoribus primævorum Characterum formæ eorumque Originem, qui ab ijs Originem duxerunt successiva temporum propagatione exhibentur; Ex quibus luculenter deducitur Omnia linguarum Alphabeta, nonnulla in scripturarum literarum vestigia tenere.

Valor Literarum.	Character duplex mysticus ab Angelis traditus dicitur.	Character tempore transfusus fluminis Authore R. Abrahamo Balmis.	Characterum veterum Samaritanorum formæ variæ ex nummis extractæ aliisque Authoribus.	Floridus Character Samaritanorum ex Vilalpando nummisque extractus.	Character Mosaicus quo legem in tabulis scripsit ex variis Rabbinarum monumentis depromptus.	Character Syriacus.	Character verus Hebræus sive Assyrius.
A	N	∞	F	F	∞ F F F	∞	∞
B	∑	∞	g	g	J	∞	∞
C	∞	∞	7	7	7	∞	∞
D	7	∞	4	4	∞	e	7
H	∞	∞	E	E	∞ E E	∞	∞
V	i	∞	3	∞	∞	∞	∞
Z	T	∞	∞	∞	J	J	∞
Ch	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞
T	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞
I	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞
C	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞
L	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞
M	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞

Figure 7. Kircher’s attempt to demonstrate that all languages have a common origin, which he called proto-Hebrew or the Adamic language. The headers for the columns read: “Letter Value,” “A double mystical character said to have been delivered by the angels,” “Intermediate character according to Abraham de Balmes,” “Characteristics of ancient Samaritan in various forms drawn from coins and authors,” “Lively Samaritan characters from coins extracted from Vilalpando,” “The Mosaic character, in which he wrote the law on tablets drawn from the tombs of various rabbis,” “Syriac character,” “True Hebrew or Assyrian character.”

It may not be all that surprising then to discover that Kircher was a staunch believer in magic; in his day, the concept of magic significantly overlapped with Jesuit beliefs without being too heretical. “Magician” was a title that he embraced and never repudiated. That said, his relationship with magic was quite distinct from how it is cinematically portrayed today and is summed up well by someone that Kircher had looked up to, Giambattista della Porta, who in 1558 wrote *Magia Naturalis*. Therein, he defined the term as follows:

Magick is nothing else but the survey of the whole course of Nature. For, whilst we consider the heavens, the stars, the elements, how they are moved, and how they are changed, by this means we find out the hidden secrecies of living creatures, of plants, of metals, and of their generation and corruption. ... This art, I say, is full of much virtue, of many secret mysteries; it openeth unto us the properties and qualities of hidden things ... and it teacheth us by the agreement and disagreement of things, either so to sunder them, or else to lay them so together. ... Thereby we do strange works, [which] the vulgar sort call miracles. The works of Magick are nothing else but the works of Nature, whose dutiful handmaid Magick is.¹⁶

This semi-apologetic definition of magic allowed Kircher to function in both academic and religion-adjacent spaces. That is not to say that Kircher wasn't a serious researcher in several disciplines—in some fields, he was even a mildly scientific one. Though the Scientific Revolution was well underway by most definitions, the Age of Enlightenment was still several decades away from earning its sister sobriquet: the Age of Reason. Acknowledging the problems with presentism, some have argued that we should resist the temptation to judge Kircher too harshly using today's standards of naturalism, ethics, and scholarship.¹⁷ Stolzenberg, for example, “manages to hold the difficult balance of reading Kircher [as] neither a vainglorious charlatan nor a pioneering scholar.”¹⁸ He does concede, however, that “the mysterious manuscript by Barachias Nephi” was little more than “Kircher's ticket into the Republic of Letters” and a repository “of quotes too good to be true (or, alternatively, in Arabic, too poor to be real).”¹⁹ Citing Marracci, Veyssiere, and Glasson, he posits that the many orthographic blunders in Nephi's quotations are further evidence that Kircher invented them: “Several readers of *Egyptian Oedipus* have observed that the Arabic in many of the Abenephius quotations is riddled with spelling and grammatical errors, leading them to suspect that they were forged by someone lacking full command of the language.”²⁰

We certainly can admire the relentless zeal, ebullient energy, and magical quality that Kircher put into all of his projects, despite how misapplied they might have been. But there is no reasonable doubt about whether he actually translated ancient or reformed Egyptian using the writings of Nephi. “Where Kircher lacked hard facts, as with his highly fanciful ‘translations’ of hieroglyphics, he simply made them up. Sometimes he invented whole sources. The mysterious manuscript of Barachias

Nephi, a supposed ancient Babylonian rabbi, [which] Kircher drew on for his mammoth occult compendium, *Egyptian Oedipus*, was full of statements that ‘support his own arguments so perfectly [that] it is believed [that] Kircher wrote many of them himself.’”²¹ “It is not an exaggeration to say that Barachias Nephi, though possibly imaginary, made Kircher’s career.”²²

Though ultimately destined to fail, Kircher’s categorical lie would garner him almost three decades of unchecked fame and notoriety. But all the shine of a thousand spotlights, so to speak, would never be enough for him. Desperate to be the Leonardo da Vinci of his day, he was also a prolific inventor. In his doctoral thesis, *Ars Magnesia*, Kircher concluded that spiritual forces, electric forces, and magnetic forces were three manifestations of the same phenomenon, for which he earned the title *Sacrae Theologiae Doctor*—with the memorable postnominal S.T.D. It would seem that he even coined the term electromagnetism, which is ubiquitously used today. For Kircher, magnetism was both an indication and a radiation of spiritual energy, which could vary from day to day as a function of personal righteousness. He even concluded that spiritual electromagnetism was the mechanism by which the apostle Peter repelled Earth’s magnetic field and thus was able to walk on water—that is, until his faith wavered. To further demonstrate his (rather forced) pseudoscientific principle, he produced hundreds of “balls of curious workmanship,” which he displayed in his Wunderkammer, or “Cabinet of Wonders,” and later on the colossal shelves of his Museo Kircheriano (Figure 8).

Many of these spiritually magnetic inventions were round balls made of glass and brass, having pointers, spindles, and writing on their sides. According to Joscelyn Godwin:

Glass globes contain Kircher’s favourite device of magnetized pointing figures, which rotate, as though by magic, but actually because a magnet is turning the column beneath them. ... Once he had found that a figure suspended inside a glass globe could be turned by an unseen magnet, the stage magician in him took over.”²³

Over the next several pages, various exhibits from Kircher’s museum are discussed in minute detail (Figures 9–15). All of them showcase his favorite devices, sometimes presenting them as if they were spiritually magnetic compasses. Because Nephi’s use of a spiritually magnetic compass in *The Book of Mormon* is a major plot-driving element, the features communicated in Figures 9–15 are most salient; such elements should be kept in mind when evaluating various authorship theories for how *The Book of Mormon* came to pass. Refer to Godwin’s *Athanasius Kircher’s Theatre of the World* for more detailed information.²⁴

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