

Some Remarks on the Maltese Athanasius Kircher Commemoration-Stamp

by

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On the occasion of the 400 birthday of Athanasius Kircher S.J. (2nd of May 1602 - 27th of November 1680), well known throughout the scientific world as the famous German polyhistor, the Malta-Post-Office, realizing an idea of Cavaliere Rolf Mader, Acc. and Commendatore Dr. phil. Olaf Hein, M.A., Acc. (President of the International Athanasius Kircher Society R.S. Wiesbaden/Rome) issued a commemoration-stamp on 18th of October 2002.

The stamp, drawn up by the Maltese designer Harry Borg and printed in miniature-sheets of ten items in offset at the Bundesdruckerei in Berlin with a face-value of 15 cents, shows the erudite's portrait in accordance of a rare and anonymous oil-painting, conserved at the *Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität* of Munich (original – size: height 195cm; breadth 183cm).

Kircher, born at Geisa near Fulda, is numbered to the most significant scholars of the 17th century. During the Thirty Years War confusion he fled, by way of Avignon, to Rome, where he found a second home and where he taught until his death at the Collegium Romanum, the famous antecedent institution of the today's papal élite-university *Pontificia Università Gregoriana* (Piazza della Pilotta 4).

He published more than thirty volumes, all together fundamentally and exhaustively composed in Latin and concerning nearly all fields of sciences, enriching many scientific branches multifariously. Moreover he is founder of the formerly world-famed *Museum Kircherianum*, out of which many exhibits today are preserved in the Vatican Collections or in the museums of the city of Rome as well as in those of the Italian State.

With Malta, at that time seat of the Order of the Knights of Malta (Ordre Souverain Militaire de Saint-Jean de Jérusalem, de Rhodes et de Malte / Sovrano Militare Ordine di Malta – SMOM), Kircher had very close ties as a result of his exploring expedition to the Maltese islands in 1637/1638. Kircher had visited Malta from 2nd of June 1637 to 1st February 1638 and in his book *Mundus Subterraneus* (Amsterdam, editio princeps: 1665) he described, among other things, the then still inhabited caves of *Għar il-Kbir* near the Dingli Cliffs on the island's southern coast. He even taught mathematics to young Maltese Knights.

During his Maltese sojourn, Kircher got in close, trustful and life-long touch

with the Apostolic Fabio Chigi, living in those days in Malta, who on 7th of April 1655 ascended the Pontifical throne, accepting the name Alexander VII (coronation: 18th of April 1655; death: 22nd of May 1667). Kircher corresponded with the most important personalities of his time, e.g. with the Spanish king, Charles II, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.

The pre-mentioned Kircher-Commemoration-Stamp was issued within a set of five Personalities stamps; the other honoured persons of this set were the Maltese lawyer Sir Adrian Dingli (1817-1900; 3 cents), the Maltese opera-singer Oreste Kirkop (1923-1998; 7 cents), the Maltese priest and fighter for liberty Saverio Cassar (1746-1805; 35 cents) and the Maltese fighter for freedom Emmanuel Vitale (1758-1802; 50 cents).

An official FDC, issued through the *Philatelic Bureau* of the Malta-Post, for all the five personalities of the set; is featured with the portrait of Oreste Kirkop and bears the official first-day date stamp with the following text: *Jum il-Hruġ 18. X. 2002 Personalities Valletta Malta.*

A unique official *Commemoration-Cover*, issued by Cavaliere Rolf Mader and Commendatore Dr. Olaf Hein in commission and in collaboration with the *International Athanasius Kircher Research Society R.S. Wiesbaden/Rome*, whose edition is limited to only 200 (two hundred) numerated copies was issued. This cover shows a coloured, size-reduced reproduction of the already mentioned oil-painting, which had been used as pattern for the Kircher-stamp itself; (the cover explanations- in English language); moreover it is fitted with the Kircher-stamp and the official first-day hand stamp of the Malta Post.

Worth mentioning is the fact, that the Kircher stamp (and even the stamp in remembrance of Saverio Cassar) exist in two variants: with and without dot above the indication of value c (cent). Every sheetlet, consisting of 10 (ten) stamps in two horizontal rows, contains 6 stamps with and 4 stamps without dot.

With a dot are the stamps of the upper row and the last stamp (5th stamp) of the lower row; the first four stamps of the lower row are missing this dot. How and why this could happen, is completely a mystery!

A leaflet (Nr. 201), published by the Maltese Post Office and containing further information concerning the issue in question, is distributed free (Philatelic Bureau, Maltapost plc, 305 Qormi Road, Marsa GFO 01/Malta). In the leading Maltese newspapers (e.g. *The Times*; *The Malta Independent*) you could find exhaustive accounts dealing with the stamps mentioned above.

The authors of this report hope, to have contributed with dignity to the glory of Kircher, one of the most important universal scholars of the baroque era, on the occasion of his anniversary, having induced the issue of the first and so far unique Kircher-stamp in the world.

It is a strongly felt desire, to the initiators of the Maltese Kircher-stamp, and to the authors of these lines, to express their most cordial thanks to the following personalities in Malta, who effectively promoted the authors' project of the Kircher-stamp: Mr. Anthony Fenech (Member of the Maltapost plc Stamp Advisory Board and Member of the Royal Philatelic Society in London), Mr. Joseph Buttigieg (Proprietor of *The Sliema Stamp-Shop*, Malta), Mr. Tony Barbaro Sant (Philately Executive Maltapost plc) and Mr. Noel Gauci (Manager, Maltapost plc).

Literature:

HEIN, OLAF / MADER. ROLF: Athanasius Kircher S.J.; sein Viertes Gelübde und Malta (–Studia Kircheriana/Scripta Minora, Heft 3). Berlin (Akademie-Verlag), 1996.

HEIN, OLAF / MADER. ROLF: Athanasius Kircher S.J. in Malta (Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Mittelmeer-Insel, zur Biographie Kirchers sowie zur Kultur – und Wissenschaftsgeschichte des 17. Jahrhunderts) (Studia Kircheriana, tom. VII). Berlin (Akademie-Verlag), 1997 (with presentation of His Excellency, the State-President of Malta, Dr. Ugo Mifsud Bonnici).

