

A biography of Gottfried Kirch

Gottfried Kirch: Astronom, Kalendermacher, Pietist, Frühaufklärer. Klaus-Dieter Herbst
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Gottfried Kirch (1639–1710), the best-known German astronomer around 1700, is here given a comprehensive biography. Its author, Klaus-Dieter Herbst, edited in 2006 a three-volume edition of Kirch's correspondence (895 letters). Since then Herbst has edited important works on calendar makers and has read hundreds of calendars, including many by Kirch. The correspondence and these calendars form the most important sources for this biography, which is filled with Kirch's own words.

Kirch was born in Guben, a small town in Brandenburg located at today's border between Germany and Poland. The first chapters treat Kirch's childhood and youth there, his *Wanderjahre*, his early career and editing of his initial calendar series, as well as his study travel which took him to, among others, Johannes Hevelius (1611–1687) in Danzig. The seventh and longest chapter (pp. 135–412) is dedicated to Kirch's time in Leipzig from 1676 to 1692, where he spent his most productive years as an astronomer. There he edited his ephemerides, which gave him an international reputation; there he developed an idea for an astronomical society, nearly a century ahead of its time.

In this chapter Herbst presents Kirch as an early Enlightenment figure, criticizing astrology but retaining "natural astrology" for weather prediction, agricultural fertility, and medicine. But rather than listening to astrologers on political events one should, according to Kirch, read newspapers and form one's own opinions. Herbst refers here to many newspaper reports reproduced by Kirch in his calendars. The calendars also present many fictitious dialogues; a particular event is discussed by voices from all possible perspectives with the final judgment left to the reader. Among other things the importance of practical experience to improve agriculture was discussed.

In Leipzig Kirch shared his ideas with some radical Pietists, which increasingly endangered his position. Hence in 1692, after the death of his wife Maria, he returned to Guben where the 52-year old astronomer married the 30-year younger Maria Margaretha Winckelmann, who would become an important astronomical collaborator with Kirch. She had even sought, without success, to matriculate at the Leipzig university. In Guben Kirch lacked material for his astronomical projects and could no longer publish annual ephemerides. Instead he took up problems with the calendar reform. Erhard Weigel (1625–1699) wanted to date Easter by astronomical computations rather than computistic cycles. But such computations require, Kirch argued, more accurate knowledge of geographical latitudes and more precise astronomical tables than Weigel had used.

At the end of the century, Kirch was called to Berlin to serve as official calendar maker and astronomer at the newly created Electoral Brandenburg Society of Sciences. Herbst does not discuss why Kirch's radical pietist ideas seem to have disappeared. However, the move to Berlin did not meet all of Kirch's expectations. The Society's astronomical observatory remained incomplete and it took years for Kirch to find a

suitable dwelling; he was forced to conduct astronomical observations from the roof of a rented house, work sometimes curtailed by neighbors hanging out their laundry.

On 21 April 1702 Maria Margaretha Kirch discovered a comet, but Herbst cautions against over rating this event. From 1709 to 1711 Winckelmann published three astrological works that damaged her scholarly reputation. She was an educated woman, which distinguished her from many women at the Brandenburg court but, concludes Herbst, she was not “a scholar of above-average significance” (p. 512).

Kirch died on 25 July 1710 in Berlin as a highly honored figure. Herbst ends the biography with a fictitious epilogue in which we accompany Winkelman to the burial of her husband. The book concludes with family trees that offer an overview of Kirch’s ancestors and his immediate family out to great uncles.

Herbst has written a biography overflowing of details, so many that readers at times may be overwhelmed, especially by the treatment of the two dozen calendar series that Kirch authored. In the Leipzig chapter, 14 of these series are described (pp. 375–408). However these details are made accessible by an exhaustive name and subject index of 54 pages. Thus, this biography also serves as a reference work for all aspects of Kirch’s life and for all the calendars he published.

Kirch has long deserved an independent biography; a better biographer than Klaus-Dieter Herbst could not be imagined.

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The coolest book cover ever

Public Astronomy, Los Angeles Style. Edited by David DeVorkin and E.C. Krupp (Griffith Observatory, Los Angeles, 2021). Pp. 134. \$30. ISBN 978057878415 (paper).

On January 6, 2013, the Historical Astronomy Division of the American Astronomical Society (AAS) held a special meeting to explore the topic, *Making Astronomy Public, Los Angeles Style*. Six essays covering different facets of the subject were delivered. In 2021, these six AAS essays were reprised and aptly repackaged for the public in a richly illustrated monograph, *Public Astronomy, Los Angeles Style*.

This 2021 reinvigorated version immediately grabs your attention with the coolest cover image—a 9.5-inch Zeiss refractor telescope with a user-friendly binoviewer mounted onto the roof of a Deuce, a 1932 V8 Ford, owned by amateur astronomers, Sheldon Stoodly and Ed Turner. The message is clear: amateur astronomers and telescopes can be as stylish and mobile as surfers and surfboards in LA. In the forward to the essays, two esteemed public astronomers who began their careers at the Griffith Observatory, David DeVorkin and Ed Krupp, offer personal context to the history of Public Astronomy in LA.