

---

## The De Mundo Nostro Sublunari of William Gilbert

SISTER SUZANNE KELLY, O.S.B., Marquette High School, Tulsa

The *De mundo nostro sublunari philosophia nova* of William Gilbert was published by Isaac Gruter in Amsterdam in 1651, about fifty years after the death of the author. Of the many uncertainties which arise from a study of the book, this paper will deal only with three: the history of the manuscript from the time of Gilbert's death in 1603 until its publication; the meaning of the phrase "ex duobus MMS. codicibus editum" on the title page of the printed edition; and a comparison of the manuscript of the *De mundo* in the King's Library of the British Museum and the book.

In discussing the history of the manuscript from 1603 to 1651, there is little that is known for certain and much that seems probable. The "can be documented" column contains only five entries at present.

1. William Gilbert of Melford, younger half-brother of William Gilbert of Colchester, assembled the *De mundo* from his brother's papers after Gilbert's death.

2. The younger William added a dedication to Prince Henry to these papers.

3. Thomas Harriot mentions the *De mundo* in a letter to Johann Kepler dated July, 1608 (Caspar, 1954, p. 173).

4. Francis Bacon refers to Gilbert's map of the moon, a map found only in the *De mundo*, in the *Descriptio Globi Intellectus* published in 1612 (Bacon, 1864, pp. 131-2).

5. Isaac Gruter published the book from two codex manuscripts which he received from the library of Sir William Boswell.

In the dedication William the Younger offered the papers to the Prince for his library or to be published. Although there is no direct evidence that the papers were given to Henry, when one considers that the papers were not published elsewhere at this time; that the dedication to the Prince has remained with the *De mundo*; that there is no record of direct contact between the Gilbert family and either Harriot or Bacon, but that both of the latter would have had access to the Prince's library and thus could have become acquainted with the *De mundo* through it; and finally, that there is a manuscript copy of the *De mundo* in the King's Library of the British Museum, and that Henry's library was added to the King's library after Henry's death, it would seem that the work had been given to the Prince.

Furthermore it can be assumed that the dedication was written before 1610 since Henry is not addressed by the title of Prince of Wales which he received in that year. Also if Harriot knew of the work through the Prince's library, then the manuscript was in the library before July, 1608.

The only difficulty with placing the manuscript in this library is that one must then get it or a copy of it into Boswell's library. The most probable explanation for this at present is that Francis Bacon somehow obtained a copy of the manuscript in the Prince's library and that this copy was among the Bacon papers which Sir William Boswell received after Bacon's death. Boswell then passed the Bacon and Gilbert papers on to Isaac Gruter who published both.

On the title page of the *De mundo*, Gruter states that it is published from two codex manuscripts from the library of Sir William Boswell. This statement is ambiguous: were the two manuscripts two copies of the same thing, or were they two manuscripts that he joined into a single volume? Most of the commentators make no distinction between "manuscript" meaning "one completed work" and "manuscript" meaning "one set of written works." Obviously there has been much quoting because one group refer to the work as "published from a MS." and another as "left in manuscript." Of those who refer specifically to two manuscripts only Park Benjamin and Robert Ellis make a definite statement on the meaning of the phrase.

Ellis favors the two similar manuscripts and states, "Two copies of it, both imperfect were among the papers which Sir William Boswell, sometime English minister in Holland, gave to Isaac Gruter; and from them the work was published in 1651" (Bacon, 1864, p. 195). Benjamin, after discussing the first two books of the *De mundo*, which he calls the "Philosophia," adds, "Appended to the new philosophy is a treatise on meteorology 'contra Aristotelem' but this seems to be a distinct production and not necessarily related to the first named treatise" (Benjamin, 1898, p. 317).

If the Ellis interpretation is accepted, the question arises where did Boswell get the second copy, assuming that he received the first from Bacon. George Sarton states that "it is probable that other manuscripts had been in circulation before that [publication]" (Sarton, 1957, p. 97), but does not identify these other manuscripts in any way. Until some trace of these other manuscripts appears, the Benjamin hypothesis seems more acceptable since the two parts of the *De mundo* are different and there is some indication that William Gilbert, himself, considered the two as separate works. Four times in the "Physiologiae" Gilbert refers to the "Meteorologicis." At other times when a question about either the winds, the air, or the milky way arises in the "Physiologiae," the subject is dismissed with either "de qua plura suo loco" or "cum de . . . disputabimus" as if these were topics not proper to the "Physiologiae" but to another work—the "Meteorologia"—where all are discussed. If the two are separate works, Gruter's two codex manuscripts could have been a manuscript of the "Physiologiae" and a manuscript of the "Meteorologia."

The Latin in the manuscript is considerably different from that in the book. These differences may be placed in groups of changes in word order, variations in spelling, verb tenses and moods, omissions of words and phrases, differences in constructions. At this time they appear to be forming a somewhat consistent pattern but it will take specialists in medieval Latin and manuscript characteristics to make a statement on the meaning of the discrepancies.

Part of the manuscript is in English. This part is in Latin, English, and Dutch in the book and is preceded by a note to the reader informing him that the following is a translation.

The table of winds which is said to have been missing from the manuscripts from which the book was printed and which was added by Gruter to complete the text is missing from the manuscript in the British Museum.

A diagram is missing from the manuscript which is found in the book but which could easily have been drawn from the accompanying text.

The last chapter listed in the Index in both book and manuscript is not found in the book. This chapter is present in the manuscript but is a repetition of part of a previous chapter which appears in both book and manuscript.

In the manuscript the surface of the map of the moon is marked off in squares. These lines which resemble lines of longitude and latitude are not on the map in the book.

Gruter's dedication to Antonia Viviano and his address to the reader are not found in the manuscript.

From these differences the only definite statement that can be made is that the manuscript in the British Museum is not a copy of the book.

It seems unlikely that the book was printed from this manuscript, as it could not have been the two manuscripts Gruter speaks of. It is clearly one manuscript: it is in a single binding, the pages are continuously numbered, and the paper is the same throughout. If this manuscript were in the King's Library at the time of publication, it could not have been one of the two from Boswell's library; and if it were one of the two from Boswell's library, how did it get into the King's Library and why was not the other one placed there with it?

There are many more questions unanswered at present. Some certainly will be resolved and others may not. Until they are, the best supposition seems to be that the manuscript in the British Museum and the manuscripts from which the book was published were both copies of an earlier manuscript or manuscripts, possibly even from the one or ones which William of Melford prepared for the Prince.

#### REFERENCES

- Bacon, Francis. 1664. *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Ellis, Douglas Heath.
- Benjamin, Park. 1898. *The intellectual rise in electricity*. Longmans, Green and Co.
- Caspar, Max. 1954. *Johannes Kepler Gesammelte Werke*. Munchen, XVI.
- Gilbert, Guilielmi. 1651. *De mundo nostro sublunari philosophia nova*. Elsevir.

Sarton, George. 1957. *Six wings*. Indiana University Press.

Tedder, H. R., and J. D. Brown. 1911. *Libraries*. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* 11th ed.

---