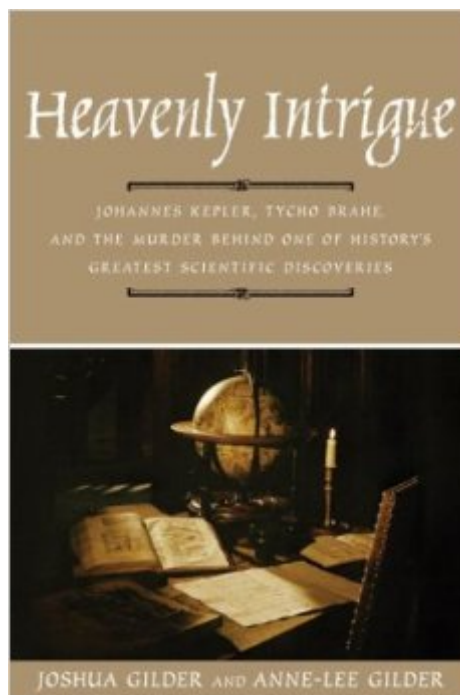


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Heavenly Intrigue: Johannes Kepler, Tycho Brahe, And The Murder Behind One Of History's Greatest Scientific Discoveries



Synopsis

A real-life Amadeus: Set against the backdrop of the Counter-Reformation, this is the story of the stormy collaboration between two revolutionary astronomers, Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler. That collaboration would mark the dawn of modern science . . . and end in murder. Johannes Kepler changed forever our understanding of the universe with his three laws of planetary motion. He demolished the ancient model of planets moving in circular orbits and laid the foundation for the universal law of gravitation, setting physics on the course of revelation it follows to this day. Kepler was one of the greatest astronomers of all time. Yet if it hadn't been for the now lesser-known Tycho Brahe, the man for whom Kepler apprenticed, Kepler would be a mere footnote in today's science books. Brahe was the Imperial Mathematician at the court of the Holy Roman Emperor in Prague and the most famous astronomer of his era. He was one of the first great systematic empirical scientists and one of the earliest founders of the modern scientific method. His forty years of planetary observations "an unparalleled treasure of empirical data" contained the key to Kepler's historic breakthrough. But those observations would become available to Kepler only after Brahe's death. This groundbreaking history portrays the turbulent collaboration between these two astronomers at the turn of the seventeenth century and their shattering discoveries that would mark the transition from medieval to modern science. But that is only half the story. Based on recent forensic evidence (analyzed here for the first time) and original research into medieval and Renaissance alchemy "all buttressed by in-depth interviews with leading historians, scientists, and medical specialists" the authors have put together shocking and compelling evidence that Tycho Brahe did not die of natural causes, as has been believed for four hundred years. He was systematically poisoned "most likely by his assistant, Johannes Kepler. An epic tale of murder and scientific discovery, Heavenly Intrigue reveals the dark side of one of history's most brilliant minds and tells the story of court politics, personal intrigue, and superstition that surrounded the protean invention of two great astronomers and their quest to find truth and beauty in the heavens above.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I debated over whether or not to read this book. I am fascinated by the relationship between Johannes Kepler and the lesser known but crucially important Tycho Brahe. Still, it was only about a year ago that I read Kitty Ferguson's excellent book, Tycho & Kepler. In addition, I was rather turned off by the Gilders' assertion that Kepler had murdered Brahe in order to get his astronomical data. Ultimately, however, I felt I had to give the book a chance. There is a lot of good stuff here. Though not as in-depth as Ferguson, the Gilders produce a very readable outline of the lives and relationship between Kepler & Brahe. It is solid prose that reads very quickly and hits all of the major points. I also enjoy their use of primary sources such as Kepler's letters and other writings. I felt I had a much more personal understanding of Kepler--his obsessions and irritations--after reading this. However, it is clear the Gilders prefer Brahe and, though I feel he is very underrated historically, he is by no means an angel himself. Still, if they wouldn't have gotten into the forensic information about Brahe's death they would have written a wonderful dual biography. So, what to make of this forensic evidence? I am generally suspect of these investigations because what can you really know for sure 400 years after the fact? Well, I found their evidence very convincing of one thing: that Tycho Brahe was murdered, most likely by mercury poisoning. On the other hand, I felt their assertion that Kepler was the perpetrator much less convincing. Certainly, Kepler was difficult to work with and sometimes weak on ethics where his science was concerned; however, it is a long way from jerk to murderer.

The Gilders have combined short biographies of both Brahe and Kepler to tell a story about early modern science, centered on their startling theory that Brahe was murdered by Kepler. I haven't personally researched these individuals outside this book, so I don't feel fully qualified to comment on the rather sensational accusation which other reviewers here have dismissed so emphatically. But even from this one book, it's clear that Brahe, although a nobleman, didn't own land or substantial wealth which he could leave to his survivors. His income depended entirely on his

professional skills and high reputation, which his children didn't share. So his death was an utter disaster for his family, rendering his wife an implausible suspect, notwithstanding the theories of some reviewers here. Kepler, who by winding up with control of Brahe's unique and immensely valuable body of astronomical observations was the greatest beneficiary of the scientist's death, is at least a plausible suspect. Some writers have suggested that Brahe's death was an accidental overdose. (Alchemists of the period, and Brahe was one, did employ mercury in various elixirs.) But the Gilders' argument that Brahe wouldn't have accidentally administered the very large doses of mercury that killed him I found quite persuasive. It's unfortunate that the discussion of this book has centered so strongly on the controversy of whether Kepler was the killer, because there's a lot of other interesting material here, all of it skillfully told.

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