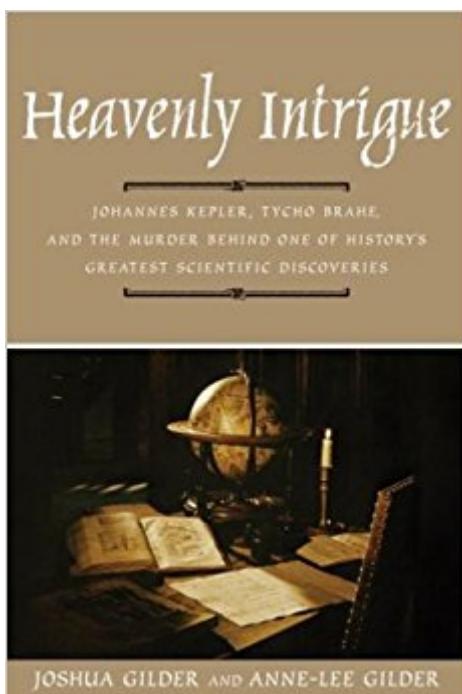


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# Heavenly Intrigue: Johannes Kepler, Tycho Brahe, And The Murder Behind One Of History's Greatest Scientific Discoveries



## 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

Johannes Kepler's laws of planetary motion rank among science's biggest ideas. But did Kepler lie, steal, or even murder for the data he needed to complete his revolutionary calculations? Joshua and Anne-Lee Gilder make this bold claim in *Heavenly Intrigue*, the story of Kepler's troubled relationship with Tycho Brahe. The astronomers are shown as polar opposites--Kepler the anguished, poor misanthrope and Brahe the blustering young noble on intimate terms with King Frederick II. Since the authors tip their hand early in the book, it's easy to mistake the two men's lives as predestined, their sad fates written in the stars. Kepler, the suspect, is revealed to be consumed with a "constant boiling anger" and beset by illness and unhealed sores. When Kepler and Brahe meet, it is under a dark cloud of misunderstanding that foreshadows later conflicts. Each genius offends the other, publicly and privately: Brahe, holding the money and power, makes Kepler do tedious calculations rather than sponsoring original research, while Kepler demands patronage and lusts after valuable data. When the story is done, the narrative moves quickly to the 20th century. The apocryphal tale of Brahe's demise by burst bladder is systematically countered by researchers who find toxic levels of mercury in hairs from what is presumed to be Brahe's corpse. Did Kepler, who had means, motive, and opportunity, poison Brahe? Readers will either be convinced by the end of the prologue or have lingering doubts about the case's holes that even the authors' certainty can't patch. --Therese Littleton

Novelist Joshua Gilder (*Ghost Image*) and his wife, former TV producer and investigative reporter Anne-Lee Gilder, offer a startling twist on the story of the troubled relationship of Tycho Brahe and his assistant, Johannes Kepler--who together laid the foundation for modern astronomy--and Brahe's unexpected and suspicious death at age 54 in 1601. The cause of Brahe's death had been debated for 400 years, but in 1991, forensic study of remains of Brahe's hair discovered lethal levels of mercury in his system. Dismissing other medical explanations for the mercury levels, the Gilders conclude that Brahe was murdered by Kepler, whose own work on the three laws of planetary

motion-laws that changed human understanding of the universe-would remain incomplete without Brahe's closely guarded observational data. The authors weave together the personal histories of Brahe and Kepler, as well as the political, religious and scientific debates that raged during their lives. They find evidence of Kepler's obsessive desire to obtain Brahe's observations in letters by the young scientist, whom they portray in 20th-century diagnostic terms as a sociopath, permanently scarred by an abusive childhood. The Gilders' portrait of Kepler is interesting, albeit unpleasant; they catalogue his penchant for fallings out, paranoia and scheming in off-putting detail, and the explanations of his early scientific theories, which were wrong and impenetrably dense, will not be of universal interest. The writing is professional but not noteworthy, and the Gilders occasionally stretch the inconclusive evidence into speculations too thin to persuade. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

As intricately layered as a microchip, as compellingly plotted as a Columbo mystery, as scrupulously factual as its hero astronomer Tycho Brahe himself, *Heavenly Intrigue* launches a new form of literature: history of science and technology as philosophical adventure and psychological thriller. Ostensibly the saga of struggle and collaboration between 16th century astronomer Brahe and his protege and putative killer Johannes Kepler, this book rises to the level of an inspired meditation on the twisted paths and passions that guide the advance of a fallen race as it reaches toward the stars and wrestles with its God beyond. In a beautiful consummation, the rigorous empirical and technological science that Brahe pioneered in his observatories gives birth over the centuries to yet more refined machines such as atomic absorption spectrometers and proton induced x-rays that enable twentieth century scientists to uncover his murder. In this book, the Gilders--Joshua, polymathic author with a gift for scientific analysis and Anne-Lee an investigative journalist with a linguistic bent--follow the trail of long lost or untranslated documents to solve, avenge and redeem the epochal crime.

When I very first spotted *Heavenly Intrigue* on my library shelves, I resisted picking it up because of the blatant sensationalism of the subtitle but I just couldn't pass up the chance to get a second perspective on the same story. As expected, this book presented a much less detailed overview of Kepler and Brahe's work than *Tycho and Kepler*, with a much greater emphasis on interpersonal relationships and drama. It was much easier to follow and I think this would have been the case even if I'd read it first as the book is clearly intended for a broader audience. In addition to glossing over some of the details of the history and the science, there were several cases where the

explanations of the instruments Kepler and Tycho used were much clearer and given with fewer astronomy terms. If asked in advance which book I would like better, I would have guessed that this lighter read might have appealed to me more. Unfortunately, after reading Tycho and Kepler, this book felt a little shallow. I didn't learn anywhere near as much from this book, which allowed me to breeze by the historical setting, and I felt much less accomplished finishing it. It made me very glad I already knew the full story behind some of the brief references made in this book, for two reasons. First, I knew what I would be missing if I hadn't read the other book first. The second, more troublesome reason, is that knowing the full story let me see where this book selectively left details out or interpreted events differently to cast a more favorable light on Brahe and a less favorable light on Kepler. I can't say *Heavenly Intrigue* wasn't convincing anyway. It seemed very well researched and included many fascinating quotes from primary sources to back up the claim that Kepler was the most likely person to have murdered Brahe. The analysis of Brahe's impressive mustache leading to the conclusion he was poisoned with mercury was also presented very convincingly. Unfortunately, this argument was only laid out in the last few chapters, while the majority of the book was spent biasing the reader against Kepler and for Brahe. So, while this was a nice easy read and might make a better introduction to Kepler and Brahe as a result, I would definitely recommend *Tycho and Kepler* as the more informative and satisfying read.

Exceptional book! Masterfully written to provide deep insight and knowledge into both Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler, more than a biography it's like getting to know them in person. Exciting and hard to put down this book takes an in depth look at the circumstances of Brahe's death and uses the best of the best in resources to investigate and shows you the compelling and condemning evidence that Kepler murdered Brahe. They carefully examined several arguments to suggest Kepler's innocence. It was well worth the read, one of those historical books that is an easy read and full of gems of knowledge.

The Gilders have done a great service by compiling the research surrounding the murder of Tycho Brahe. The claim that Tycho was murdered dates from before his funeral and was given forensic backing in the 1990s and early 21st century. The Gilders also give a more balanced view of Tycho's personality. Kepler is held in high regard around the world, while Tycho is despised: but without Tycho, no one would ever have heard of Kepler. It was Tycho's observations that allowed Kepler to formulate his three laws of orbital motion. And after having read Kepler's writings, I can readily believe him capable of murdering Tycho. The debate surrounding Tycho's death led to the reopening

of Tycho's crypt in 2010. Unfortunately, the results of that opening, which were published late 2012 and claimed to exonerate Kepler, were so shoddy that they amount to a shameful travesty when compared to the care taken in presenting the earlier forensic evidence, which may explain why the results were not given the public acclaim that accompanied the 2010 crypt opening."Heavenly Intrigue" remains the definitive work about the mysteries surrounding Tycho's death.

The conclusion that Kepler killed Brahe is certainly speculative. One compelling reason against Kepler murdering Brahe comes from the lengthy behavioral analysis of Kepler, from his own words and the Gilders. I don't believe Kepler could have resisted implicating himself at some point after the death of Brahe - either in the form of a careless letter as he was apt to do, or in his autobiographical analysis.Regardless I found this book to be a great read. The biographical information presented on both Brahe and Kepler was extremely interesting. The historical perspective was also very interesting. I wish more time had been spent on details regarding Keplers specific use and application of Brahes data.

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