

HISTORICAL NOTE

A Common Miscitation of William Gilbert

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Dozens of scientific textbooks [e.g., Spaldin, 2011, p. v; Krijgsman and Langereis, 2009, p. 252; Pröls, 2004, p. 211; Merrill et al., 1996, p. 7; Livingston, 1996, p. 27; Blakely, 1996, pp. xiv, 154; Gillmor, 1990, p. 9] attribute the famous dictum *magnus magnes ipse est globus terrestris* (“the terrestrial globe is itself a big magnet”) to the English physician and scientist William Gilbert (1544–1603). It is repeatedly claimed that these words were contained in the title of Gilbert’s book or one of his chapters [e.g., Carlowicz and Lopez, 2002, n.p.; Courtillot, 2002, pp. 26, 49; Lang and Whitney, 1991, p. 120]. Certainly, they convey the thrust of Gilbert’s *De Magnete*, in which it was argued for the first time that the Earth sustains its own magnetic dipole field, on the basis of experimentation on magnets.

However, the quote itself does not appear to be found either in the first edition of the book, published in London [Gilbertus, 1600], or in the edition published in Szczecin, Poland [Gilbertus, 1633]. The earliest appearance of the phrase can be traced to the Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), who discussed Gilbert’s work as follows [*de Humboldt*, 1837, pp. 50–51, note 1]:

“Gilbert (*Tractat. de Magnete*, 1633, p. 42, 98, 152, 155) Il se moque des pôles magnétiques de Fracastoro, le célèbre contemporain de Colomb (*Rejicienda est vulgaris opinio de montibus magneticis aut rupe aliqua magnetica aut polo phantastico a polo mundi distante. Magnus magnes ipse est terrestris globus.*)”

A German translation of this work had actually appeared a year earlier [*von Humboldt*, 1836, p. 35]. In English this reads, “Gilbert (*Tractat. de Magnete*, 1633, p. 42, 98, 152, 155). He mocks the magnetic poles of Fracastoro, the famous contemporary of Columbus (*To be*

rejected is the popular opinion of magnetic mountains or some magnetic rock or an imaginary pole distant from the pole of the world. The terrestrial globe is itself a big magnet.)”

Comparison of von Humboldt’s citation with Gilbert’s original Latin reveals that the sound bite is really a paraphrase. The first sentence has been clipped, whereas several sentences have been omitted in between the two sentences. The winged words repeated so often today are actually von Humboldt’s rewording of Gilbert’s original wording in *De Magnete*: “Magnus magnes siue terrestris globus” (from Gilbertus [1600, p. 153] and repeated in Gilbertus [1633, p. 152]), or in English, “The great magnet or the terrestrial globe.”

It seems salutary to set the record straight, both because of Gilbert’s profound stature as the founding father of geomagnetic studies and because of the striking frequency with which he is quoted in modern scientific discourse. The difference between a quotation and a paraphrase deserves to be acknowledged, along with von Humboldt’s role in presenting the work of Gilbert.

Historical and scientific accuracy go hand in hand. Scientists would do well to work from original sources at all times, even if these were written in Latin and a few centuries ago.

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