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; Prölls, 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 to be found either in the first edition of the first time that the Earth sustains its own magnetic dipole field, on the basis of experimentations. 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 salutory 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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