

Sunspots and the IGY: The Mechanism of the Sun

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AMONG the great secrets which the efforts of the International Geophysical Year (IGY) are geared to solve or to clarify is the great mystery of solar spots. Sunspots had been noticed when Christianity was still in its infancy. The Chinese had seen spots on the sun like eggs when they viewed the sun through fog.¹ By modern standards, however, the Jesuit, Father Christopher Scheiner deserves the credit for their discovery.² He was the first to publish the results of his observations of the sunspots with a telescope. It is of course not impossible that Fabricius and Galileo had seen them through a telescope before him.

Sunspots were a puzzle then, and though less so, still a puzzle now. They have resisted great attempts to solve their riddle completely. Philosophers who had never looked through a telescope said that sunspots argued an imperfection on the sun or that the spots must be the passage of unknown planets across the face of the sun. Initially, Father Scheiner's superiors would not let him publish his results under his own

¹ Clyde Fisher & Marian Lockwood *Astronomy* (New York 1940) p. 49.

² H. M. Brock "Christopher Scheiner, German Astronomer" *The Catholic Encyclopedia* XIII:526.