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Unlocked Books: Manuscripts of Learned Magic in the Medieval Libraries of Central Europe (review)

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Unlocked Books: Manuscripts of Learned Magic in the Medieval Libraries of Central Europe (review)

Abstract
Magic in the medieval past is often seen through the eyes of its opponents, through trial records, inquisitorial texts, denunciatory sermons, and theological treatises explaining and condemning the demonic nature of virtually all magical rites. Yet there is another way to approach at least elite, learned magic in Europe’s medieval period, namely through the texts that literate practitioners of those forms of magic have left scattered through libraries across the continent. This method of studying magic is not new, but has undergone significant development in recent years, with Richard Kieckhefer, Claire Fanger, Frank Klaassen, and Sophie Page leading the way, at least in terms of publications in English (in French, one would certainly add Jean-Patrice Boudet, Julien Véronèse, and Nicholas Weill-Parot). Now Benedek Láng adds his voice to this chorus. While the wealth of Western European libraries has hardly been exhausted—indeed it has really only begun to be sifted through—Láng usefully turns his attention, and his considerable linguistic skills, to “Central Europe,” by which he means the medieval kingdoms of Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary, and ultimately their great intellectual centers at Kraków, Prague, and Buda. His purpose is to identify and analyze magical texts that can be associated with these regions, and to characterize, insofar as he is able, the circle or circles of people who produced and patronized them, and among whom they circulated.

Disciplines
European History | History of Religion | Other History | Social History

Comments

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Every chapter is followed by a focused bibliography, and a place index ends the work. The only weakness, more relevant to the specialized reader than the novice, is Johnston’s use of secondary sources. Here there is a strong sense of nepotism. In 2001 Peter Struck of the University of Pennsylvania organized a conference on “Greek and Roman Divination” at which Johnston delivered a paper. The presenters at that conference and its resultant publication Mantikē (co-edited by Johnston) feature extremely prominently in Johnston’s book. As a result, Johnston often overlooks critical work by other scholars. For example, when discussing the female body’s potential for possession by deities, she cites a forthcoming work by her husband Fritz Graf (p. 45) rather than the standard work on this topic, Ruth Padel’s 1983 “Women: Model for Possession by Greek Daemons.” Her section on gender in the cults of Apollo would have benefited by a look at Mary Voyatzis’s 1998 “From Athena to Zeus: An A–Z Guide to the Origins of Greek Goddesses,” (which studies Apollo’s adoption into the Greek pantheon through displacement of female deities). Johnston cites work as recent as 2008 (p. 141), and yet makes no mention of Joan Connelly’s 2007 Portrait of a Priestess regarding the Pythia, or Michael Flower’s 2008 The Seer in Ancient Greece on manteis. It also seems inconceivable that Johnston could find nothing more meaningful in all the works of Daniel Ogden than one point about necromancy that she feels the need to excoriate twice (pp. 97 and 175). Furthermore, Johnston relies too much on the works of Walter Burkert when dealing with Near Eastern influences and imports, leading to some infelicities (e.g. p. 172: that Typhon is the name of a Greek deity; the Egyptian name is Seth). Bibliography pertaining to Near Eastern and Etruscan comparanda is lacking, and thus repeated references to Near Eastern origins remain unsupported, even speculative.

In spite of these shortcomings, the book is highly recommended for anyone who wishes to learn more, or at all, about ancient Greek divination. It provides well-researched, well-organized information on several aspects of this important area of ancient Greek religious ideology and praxis, as well as locating divination in the modern discipline of Classics.

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Magic in the medieval past is often seen through the eyes of its opponents, through trial records, inquisitorial texts, denunciatory sermons, and theologi-
cal treatises explaining and condemning the demonic nature of virtually all magical rites. Yet there is another way to approach at least elite, learned magic in Europe’s medieval period, namely through the texts that literate practitioners of those forms of magic have left scattered through libraries across the continent. This method of studying magic is not new, but has undergone significant development in recent years, with Richard Kieckhefer, Claire Fanger, Frank Klaassen, and Sophie Page leading the way, at least in terms of publications in English (in French, one would certainly add Jean-Patrice Boulet, Julien Véronèse, and Nicholas Weill-Parot). Now Benedek Láng adds his voice to this chorus. While the wealth of Western European libraries has hardly been exhausted—indeed it has really only begun to be sifted through—Láng usefully turns his attention, and his considerable linguistic skills, to “Central Europe,” by which he means the medieval kingdoms of Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary, and ultimately their great intellectual centers at Kraków, Prague, and Buda. His purpose is to identify and analyze magical texts that can be associated with these regions, and to characterize, insofar as he is able, the circle or circles of people who produced and patronized them, and among whom they circulated.

Every student of historical magic must define the scope of that term, and Láng’s first task is to identify what kinds of texts he will take as “magical.” Drawing mainly on categories he finds in the texts themselves, but also relying on his own perspective, he develops five varieties of magical practice found in his texts: natural magic (bordering on science), image magic (involving mainly the use of inscribed astral talismans), divination (defined more by its intended goal than its varied methods), alchemy, and ritual magic (that is, ceremonial magic intended to invoke the power of spiritual forces, angelic or demonic). He deliberately omits astrology, regarding it as implicated in many forms of magic, but not in itself a magical practice. This exclusion would no doubt have shocked many medieval authorities, for at least since the time of Augustine they had standardly recognized a category of dangerously superstitious astrology alongside legitimate forms, and they explicitly condemned superstitious astrology, by that name, alongside other forms of practice Láng recognizes as magical. Nevertheless, Láng’s decision not to employ astrology as one of his categories, based on the medieval position that astrological observation untainted by other forms of superstitious or magical practice was entirely licit, is not unreasonable. Ultimately, the categories for magic employed in the past are often just as vague and slippery as those used today.

Having established his categories, Láng then looks for texts and their practitioners. While magical texts are not so thick on the ground in Central as
in Western Europe, mainly because Central Europe’s universities were later foundations and hence the intellectual milieu that produced such texts was slower to develop there than in the West, he still finds a number of significant texts produced in this region mainly in the fifteenth century. He also cautiously asserts that the atmosphere at these younger universities and their attendant royal and noble courts was less stringently hostile at least to some forms of magic than was the case in the West, where in Paris the theological faculty condemned a long list of superstitious errors in 1398, the great occult library of Jean de Bar was burned in that same year, and in 1402 the leading theologian of his era, Jean Gerson, wrote specifically _On Errors Surrounding the Magic Art_. Of course, magic was condemned in Central Europe, and the decrees of Paris and the writings of Gerson were influential there, but in general, according to Láng, there was more overall tolerance.

Throughout his book, Láng carefully nuances the notion of Central Europe as a unique region. In addition to being somewhat more tolerant of magic generally, for example, he argues that Central Europe saw particular innovations in alchemy. Yet he also acknowledges that his region participated fully in general European trends. Many magical texts produced in the West, including such famous tomes as _Picatrix_, _Speculum astronomiae_, and the _Liber visionum_ entered Central European libraries and influenced texts produced in that region. In analyzing the themes found in his texts, Láng often, indeed almost always, finds himself discussing general themes of a pan-European learned magical tradition, not ones unique to the geography he specifies. This, of course, illustrates the reality of border-spanning elite magical culture, and indeed of Latinate intellectual culture generally, in medieval Europe. Ultimately, then, Láng’s book is partly a study of his region, carefully identifying its unique traits, and partly a study of medieval learned magic in general, usefully illustrated (especially for Western European and American scholars whose language limitations often cut them off from Polish, Czech, and Hungarian scholarship) by mainly Central European examples.

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In recent years, regional and cultural studies concerning early modern witch hunts in the Holy Roman Empire have multiplied due to the com-