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The Demonology of William of Auvergne: By Fire and Sword (review)

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Abstract
William of Auvergne, bishop of Paris from 1228 until 1249, is one of the major figures in the medieval history of learned magic and demonology. In many later writings on these topics from the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, one finds his name cited as often as, if not more often than, that of his great slightly later contemporary Thomas Aquinas. Yet while scholarship on Thomas and this thought fills bookshelves, the bibliography on William is dramatically thinner. As de Mayo notes, the standard biography of William remains Noël Valois’s Guillaume d’Auvergne, Évêque de Paris (1228–1249): Sa vie et ses ouvrages, published in 1880. He receives thirty-five pages in Lynn Thorndike’s encyclopedic History of Magic and Experimental Science (volume two, 1923), but de Mayo’s book is the first to provide a monographic study of his magical and demonological thought.

Disciplines
Cultural History | European History | History of Religion | Medieval History | Other History

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William of Auvergne, bishop of Paris from 1228 until 1249, is one of the major figures in the medieval history of learned magic and demonology. In many later writings on these topics from the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, one finds his name cited as often as, if not more often than, that of his great slightly later contemporary Thomas Aquinas. Yet while scholarship on Thomas and this thought fills bookshelves, the bibliography on William is dramatically thinner. As de Mayo notes, the standard biography of William remains Noël Valois’s *Guillaume d’Auvergne, Évêque de Paris (1228–1249): Sa vie et ses ouvrages*, published in 1880. He receives thirty-five pages in Lynn Thorndike’s encyclopedic *History of Magic and Experimental Science* (volume two, 1923), but de Mayo’s book is the first to provide a monographic study of his magical and demonological thought.

The main argument of this book is that William appeared at a critical moment in the development of elite, learned (primarily university educated) thought on magic and the powers of demons. Ever since the early church fathers, Christian authorities had proclaimed that most magic operated by virtue of demonic power. All pagan religious rites were denounced as demonic ceremonies (since all supposed pagan deities were actually demons in disguise) and were therefore condemned as magical and idolatrous. By the thirteenth century, however, Western European intellectuals confronted a new stream of knowledge, transmitted via Arabic science and grounded in classical authorities. In particular, Arabic sources brought much more highly developed Aristotelian natural philosophical systems into Europe. They also brought extremely controversial systems of learned magic, some of it explicitly demonic but grounded in more Neoplatonic notions of potentially neutral or even benevolent spirits. The question facing Western Christian intellectual authorities was how much of these new systems to accept, and how completely to allow them to override older conceptions and condemnations of magic.

William was the first intellectual to address these questions in a comprehensive and systematic fashion, mainly in his works *De legibus* and *De universo*. Analyzing the demonological material in these treatises, de Mayo concludes that William staunchly rejected any quasi-Neoplatonic conception of demonic spirits as something other than fallen Christian angels, fully corrupted and entirely hostile to humankind. He did, however, work to situate demons in a more stringently understood Aristotelian natural universe. That world operated, for the most part, according to natural laws established by God.
Most of these operations were apparent, but some were occult, and those who knew how to manipulate occult forces could perform essentially natural magic. Demons too could operate in this way, for they were also strictly bound by natural law, which only God could supersede through miracle. Thus William helped to establish the basic intellectual framework for conceptualizing magic—natural, demonic, and the frustrating overlap between these categories—that endured for the rest of the medieval and early modern era until the basic Aristotelian system of natural philosophy was overturned centuries later. In broad outline, this is not a new story, but it is extremely useful to have fuller and more focused attention paid to William’s part in it.

That said, it is a shame that this book could not have been more fully developed than it is. This is a dissertation moved with great haste into print. The imperatives for a young scholar to get a book out, in any form, are obvious, and there is no denying the solid quality of the dissertation that became this book. There is also no denying its obvious shortcomings. Foremost among these is that de Mayo spends an inordinate amount of time proving that he has mastered the background and context of William’s thought. Obviously this is necessary to some degree, but here we spend the first three chapters moving through historiographically driven accounts of, first, France and the royal court in Paris at William’s time, then a summary of medieval natural philosophy, then a summary of earlier notions about demons, both learned and “common.” We are on page 119 out of only 219 pages of text before we finally encounter William’s own thought.

Despite all this setting of the stage, de Mayo’s broadest contextualization of William’s work is actually a weak point of the book. Certainly he succeeds in setting William’s demonology in the framework of an emerging, more rigorous Aristotelian natural philosophy, but the Aristotelian basis of late medieval and early modern demonology is a well-known story, to which specific focus on William is a welcome addition. The largest question de Mayo seems to pose is why William, writing at a moment of such great intellectual transition, worked so diligently to maintain traditional condemnations of demonic magic even while setting that magic in the new Aristotelian framework. At several points, de Mayo asserts that the story of William’s demonology is an important element of the emerging “persecuting society” in the high medieval period. While de Mayo invokes R. I. Moore, however, he never really engages with the specifics of his theory of intellectual anxieties and persecutorial tendencies, nor does he engage at all with the several counterarguments and modifications of Moore’s thesis that have appeared in the twenty years since it was first published. Nor, despite all the background on the Parisian royal court and its supposed anxieties about social turmoil and
heretical unrest, does de Mayo connect William’s thought to a courtly context with anything like the careful attention Jan Veenstra has shown for the French and Burgundian courts of a later period, or Hilary Carey has given to the English court and university scene.

Rather than spending so much time developing contexts that never quite blossom into a new and fully developed interpretation of William’s place within them, de Mayo could have spent more time on William himself. It is a shame, for example, that although we now have a focused study of William’s demonological thought, the only general biography remains over a century old. Also, while making some allusions to William’s influence and certainly to the endurance of Aristotelian demonology into the early modern period, this book makes no real attempt to trace the impact of William’s arguments in later works on magic or demonology. That, too, remains a broader context worth pursuing.

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In Amma’s Healing Room is a unique and absorbing ethnographic study of a Muslim female spiritual healer, known as Amma (“Mother”) to her disciples and patients, who lives and practices in the South Indian city of Hyderabad. Author Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger first came upon Amma’s healing room when she spotted the waving green flag, indicating Islamic ritual activity, flying above Amma’s and her husband Abba’s home in 1989. Flueckiger had been participating at the time in a three-week “Women, Folklore and Fieldwork” workshop at Osmania University, perched on a rocky hill overlooking Amma’s working-class neighborhood of university housing for non-academic employees. Thus began an intensive personal and research relationship that lasted more than ten years, as Amma and Abba grew old and passed on, and the book was written.

Amma sits at a desk in her healing room, crowded with a diverse clientele of hopeful male and female patients and disciples. Her husband Abba, himself a Sufi master, operates a modest convenience store in the room’s corner, chimes in with commentary and relevant teachings, takes on disciples, and presides over monthly devotional sama rituals meant to arouse mystical love