

Magic in the Cloister: Pious Motives, Illicit Interests, and Occult Approaches to the Medieval Universe

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Many scholars regard the history of magic as peripheral to mainline history, a lunatic fringe of the past which can be overlooked without sacrificing any understanding of past societies. This study demonstrates that, on the contrary, knowledge and study of magic formed part of scientific study in medieval England. Sophie Page focusses on a collection of more than 30 magic texts which were donated to the library of the Benedictine monastery of St Augustine's of Canterbury during the late 13th and early 14th centuries. Not all of these manuscripts still survive, but the collection can be reconstructed from a late 15th-century catalogue of the library which is now in Trinity College Dublin. The library was of course dispersed at the Reformation, but some of the volumes survived and at least 22 were purchased by the famous magician John Dee, who served Queen Elizabeth I. These volumes are now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and include Dee's marginal annotations. These works thus hold manifold interests for the historian: their contents, the use made of them by the monks of St Augustine's, and John Dee's use of them.

The library catalogue of St Augustine's shows that the books of magic were not separated from the rest of the collection or kept under lock and key but were in the main book collection, scattered among the books on astronomy, astrology, alchemy and medicine. Page explains that St Augustine's was a centre for study and research, and it appears that each monk could study what interested him. By the late 13th century the monks of St Augustine's each had their own personal collections of books that they had brought with them when they joined the monastery or copied themselves, and they would donate these to the abbey library. Clearly there was a group of monks at St Augustine's in the 13th and 14th centuries with an interest in magic. To judge from the arrangement of the books in the library, these monks regarded it as a branch of natural science rather than as an illicit subject, and there is no evidence that they practised its less pleasant aspects (such as vivisection). Like a medieval university, the enclosed monastic setting allowed the monks some protection from censure for interests that would be frowned on in the outside world.

Page discusses in detail four genres of magic covered by these magic texts: natural magic and monstrous creations, image magic and ritual magic. The book concludes with a consideration of the *Ars notoria* and how these magical rituals could have fitted into the monastic life. The epilogue considers the use that John Dee made of the books that he purchased. Page explains (pp. 2–3) that her purpose is to consider 'how these

educated members of religious orders sought to fit magic texts into their belief system': whether they believed their monastic vocation would protect them as they studied these texts, and whether they believed magic 'could be employed for pious ends'.

In the latter part of the 11th century and during the 12th century magical texts came to the notice of scholars in Western Europe as part of the collections of scientific Arabic, Greek and Jewish texts that they encountered in former Muslim libraries in Spain and Sicily, and in Greek Orthodox Byzantium. In translating these scientific texts into their own languages, especially Latin, these scholars made them available to their colleagues throughout Western Christendom. These scientific texts combined astronomy, astrology, alchemy, medicine and magic together, and indicated both that magic was based on rational assumptions about the working of the natural world and that it could be useful to humanity. Yet magic was spiritually dubious, for magical practitioners appeared to interfere with the natural course of events and claimed to call upon demons. By the late 13th century there was a backlash against magic in Western Europe and in the 14th century it was persecuted as severely as heresy. Nevertheless, some scholars continued to regard it as a valid area of scientific study, as did a group of monks at St Augustine's Abbey.

Page begins her study by considering what we can know about the magic texts in St Augustine's Abbey library and the monks who collected them. As the catalogue names the donor of many of the books, it is possible to build up a picture of their owners' interests. An early 12th-century donor, Adam the sub prior, was interested in Platonic philosophy, and also in marvels, monsters, and the mysterious powers of stones. Later in the 13th century William de Clara, who had been a student at Paris, was interested in astronomy, geometry and Platonic philosophy, and also in the powers of the stars, stones and herbs. In the early 14th century, one Thomas Sprot, who (Page shows) was probably also known as Thomas of Willesborough, was interested in natural philosophy and logic, geomancy, natural magic – including magical uses of animal parts – and image magic. But the most significant donations of magical books were made by John of London and Michael Northgate in the 14th century. Page points out that they were probably contemporary students at Paris before joining St Augustine's in the early 1320s. Their interests were very wide ranging, but alongside theology, natural history, philosophy, geometry and grammar (to name but a few) John of London had a lapidary (a book on the marvellous powers of stones), works on image magic, astromagic, a copy of the *Ars notoria*, and other magical texts. Michael of Northgate also owned books on astromagic, lapidaries, image magic, natural magic and extracts from the *Ars notoria*, but Page points out that unlike John of London he apparently did not have any philosophical or literary works, and so probably was interested in magic for its devotional and practical uses rather than out of an interest in philosophy.

Clearly the owners of these books were highly educated men, and they probably regarded magic as a branch of human knowledge that should be investigated despite its dangers. As a place of education and research, the monastic community valued all 'knowledge for its own sake' (p. 140) as a reflection of God's work in creation. But not everyone regarded magic in this way. Page notes a contemporary account of magic being used at St Augustine's in 1373 in an unsuccessful attempt to trace a thief, after other methods of detecting the thief had failed. William Thorne, who recorded this event, called the procedure 'nigromancia': necromancy, a pejorative term which at this time had come to mean black magic. Although the monastery provided a safe haven for those studying magic as science, the practical use of magic aroused opposition.

The term 'natural magic' sounds the least harmful type of magic, but arguably this is the most disturbing, as it could involve vivisection. Certainly much of 'natural magic' was simply the marvels of the natural world, such as the magnet's ability to attract iron. In this case, the term 'natural magic' was simply an attempt to provide a rational explanation for phenomena which humans could not explain. The practice of 'natural magic' could appear to be similar to modern science, and certainly magic texts note when a phenomenon has been tried out and demonstrated, although Page points out that the medieval 'experimentia' did not involve repeated testing of a hypothesis. But supplying a rational explanation for a natural phenomenon was not easy. Was the action of the magnet brought about by demons? – if a demon is a dangerous spirit then this was clearly dangerous, but if a *daimon* is simply the natural force or virtue of an object, then it was part of God's natural order. That said, Page points out that 'even texts on the virtues of natural objects ... tended to

include some ritual elements to increase their effectiveness' (p. 3).

Natural magic in the texts at St Augustine's abbey was used for medicine, surgery, and for 'creating marvels' such as dyeing flowers. These texts referred to animal parts for a wide variety of purposes, but as the texts discussing the use of animal parts 'are organized by animal rather than by illness, body part, or use' (p. 36), these works were not intended for practical use but as books of wonders. As such, they were more suited for inclusion in a collection of scientific texts (as in a learned monastic library) than for practical application. Page develops her study of these texts of natural magic by considering one of the texts in detail: the *Liber vaccae*, or 'Book of the cow' – so named from its first item – which comprises procedures for creating monstrous animals that are then killed and used for magical purposes. Although the desired outcomes of these procedures are common to humanity (such as providing a means to make oneself invisible), the processes for bringing them about were perhaps deliberately disturbing and inhumane: a female animal should be subjected to certain treatment, then placed in a dark cavity until its offspring was born; its offspring was then to be subjected to particular treatment such as starvation followed by being fed on its mother's blood, and then it would be killed – for example, by being cut open while still alive so that the internal organs necessary for the next stage of the experiment could be extracted. The unnaturally created creature would then be used to influence the natural world: for example, to make the magician invisible or invulnerable, to enable the magician to see spirits or demons, to bring rain, or to turn other humans into animals. Yet it is unclear whether any would-be magician ever actually tried any of these procedures. Page draws out the parallels between the processes described in these experiments and those set out in alchemy, and points out the similarity between the creation of monsters in the *Liber vaccae* and the medieval Jewish legend of making a golem. Readers may also note the inclusion of human parts in the *Liber vaccae*'s monsters and draw a comparison with Mary Shelley's 19th-century story of Frankenstein's monster.

Other forms of magic in the St Augustine's library magical texts are less damaging to animal life. Image magic involved harnessing the power of the universe through drawing the power of a spirit or (typically) a planet into a physical object such as a stone or ring. At St Augustine's, texts about image magic were shelved with books on astronomy, astrology, medicine and books on the natural world, indicating that the monks believed that image magic was 'an acceptable means of ... making use of the properties of natural objects' (p. 74). As image magic could involve harnessing the power of the planets or stars, it was associated with astrology and could claim the validity of that more respected branch of human knowledge. 'Astrological terminology gave image magic texts a scientific appearance' (p. 81), yet these magic texts involved reciting unknown names and drawing mysterious signs that had no clear basis in Christianity, despite the fact that the accompanying ritual had parallels in Christian religious ritual. Even though the spells included prayers to and invocations to God, implying that the magician's work was done through God's power or with God's permission, these procedures remained morally ambivalent.

Image magic and ritual could be combined in an attempt to expand one's spiritual knowledge and understanding, as in the *Ars notoria* (St Augustine's library held perhaps three copies of this famous work) which set out a regime of contemplation, ritual and prayer to lead to spiritual advancement. The library also held the only known surviving (although incomplete) copy of the *Liber de essentia spirituum*, which 'provides philosophical underpinnings within a monotheistic framework for magical practices' (p. 97). Page has supplied a translation of this text as appendix 2. Both the *Liber de essentia spirituum* and the *Ars notoria* could have been fitted into a monastic context as part of a monk's personal devotions and spiritual development, in an environment in which spiritual overseers did not enquire too deeply into individual devotions – as appears to have been the case at St Augustine's.

Like the monks of St Augustine's, John Dee, who acquired many of the library's magical volumes after the Dissolution, used them for spiritual development. We know from his writings that he also put some of their rituals into practice in the course of seeking spiritual advance (but still with philosophical and spiritual aims in mind), which we do not know for certainty for the monks. Page's final chapter examines Dee's use of these texts and concludes that his use of them was probably similar to the monks' – but unlike the monks he did not have a secure context in which to work. His magical activities were criticised and he ended his life in

poverty.

Page shows how magic texts could be created and used within an orthodox Christian context, even at a time when the practice of magic was being condemned. Her study provides a context for the widespread accusations of sorcery and diabolism against political opponents and rivals in the early 14th century (for instance, against Walter Langton, Pope Boniface VIII, the Templars, Bishop Guichard of Troyes and Enguerrand de Marigny) – knowledge of magic was assumed among the educated classes. The fact that these magic practices are deeply disturbing to modern sensibilities and are based on an understanding of the universe which the modern western world does not share should not blind us to their importance for our understanding of the past.

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