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Magic in the Cloister

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This essay will explore a number of possible characteristics and implications of 'monastic magic' which have been suggested to me by the case study I undertook for my doctoral thesis on magic texts belonging to the Abbey of St. Augustine's, Canterbury and by my ongoing research into cases described in visitation records.

St. Augustine's Abbey can be viewed as a centre of magical studies in the late Middle Ages because of the large and diverse collection of magic texts present in the library, the number of monks interested in unorthodox studies and the ways in which magic was integrated within the monastic context rather than being practised in a clandestine manner. One of the questions arising from this interpretation of the Abbey as a community in which unorthodox intellectual interests were sanctioned, tolerated or actively encouraged, is how far the nature of the monastic community itself provided an amenable environment for these studies. Could the monastery, for instance, have been seen as a refuge for those who wished to conceal their interests from the outer world? The entrance of three collectors of magic texts into the monastery - William de Clare, John of London and Michael Northgate - coincides with condemnations of magical texts in Paris (1277 and 1323), a city in which they had previously been living. Since two further donors of magic texts - Thomas Sprot and Thomas Wyvelsburgh - were already present in the Abbey, St. Augustine's may have acquired a reputation for tolerating unorthodox intellectual interests.

The monks of St. Augustine's would have possessed more than the 'rudimentary knowledge of Latin, ritual and doctrine' which Richard Kieckhefer associates with an interest in necromancy and they may have had access to the 'clerical underworld' he describes.¹ In particular, the three monks who had previously lived in Paris could have belonged to the kinds of clerical circles referred to in the 1277 condemnation by the Bishop of Paris and the

Chancellor of the University of necromantic works 'and all who shall have taught and listened to them'.² Unlike the unemployed or partly employed clerics who were most likely to be associated with necromantic practices, the monastic environment represents a community of religious insiders whose relative isolation combined with their perceived closeness to the supernatural may have created an ideal environment for cultivating an interest in magic texts donated to the library. The main distinguishing features of this monastic milieu, in my opinion, are the non-necromantic kinds of texts generally acquired by monasteries and the mechanisms within these religious institutions for integrating the illicit volumes and providing a relatively secure place for their study.

All the magic texts at St. Augustine's which drew upon the assistance of spiritual beings (as opposed to natural virtues) refer to God, spirits or angels rather than demons,³ and although a mixture of cosmological viewpoints - Hermetic, Platonic, Jewish and Christian - can be found in these texts, with a few exceptions they are predominantly practical in emphasis and can be related to an interest in the natural world. Not only the contents of these works, but also their manuscript context, suggest that an interest in the associated studies of astrology, medicine and natural philosophy would have been more appropriate than a grounding in orthodox ritual and doctrine. An exception to this emphasis is a work owned by two monks, the *Ars notoria*, which incorporates programmes of prayers and ascetic precepts appropriate to a monastic user. The pious and orthodox as-

pects of this work were prominent enough for it to be compiled with orthodox texts (albeit in partial form) and placed in the devotional or theological section of the library.

The integration of magic texts within their monastic context was particularly facilitated at St. Augustine's by their categorisation and placing within the library. Illicit magic texts were dispersed through a number of more licit areas: medicine, astrology/astronomy and devotional collections, which represented an extension and confirmation of their manuscript context. Although frequently condemned in the outside world, in the monastic library the integration of magic texts with acceptable works and genres would acquire a permanent aspect. The approach of the monastic library may be contrasted with that of Richard of Fournival's library - from whence a number of the magic texts at St. Augustine's probably derived - which had a separate, uncatalogued section for 'secret books' to which only the owner was permitted access.⁴

A second feature of the donated volumes assisted the integration of magic texts within their monastic context. At St. Augustine's prayers and masses were performed in gratitude for the donation of books, creating a pious association which would have made it harder to question the suitability of particular volumes. Moreover, a system of alphabetical cross-referencing in the library catalogue enabled all the works associated with a particular donor to be identified. It is unlikely that the suitability of magic texts donated by a monk such as Michael Northgate would have been questioned when his own translation of a penitential could be found on the

library shelves, and a devotional handbook he had probably compiled himself was apparently - given its presence in the chapel - still in use in the late fifteenth century.

As far as we know, monks at St. Augustine's were never publicly investigated or accused of the possession or use of magical books although William Thorne's chronicle of the Abbey records that the 'black arts' were practised 'many times' by monks in 1373 as part of the Abbey's efforts to try to recover some stolen money. This may be largely due to their choice of magic texts and the successful integration of these with licit and pious interests, but the powerful Abbey of St. Augustine's was also exempt from episcopal jurisdiction. My initial research into cases involving occult practices in other religious institutions suggests, however, that bishops were sometimes unable or unwilling to impose severe penalties. Thomas of Whalley, the Abbot of Leicester, refused to co-operate with Bishop Alnwick's investigation in 1440 in the course of which he was accused by many fellow monks of practising alchemy and divination and reciting charms and incantations. He cleared himself of the charge of divination, and none of the other accusations are referred to in the injunctions recorded in Bishop Alnwick's register. At a visitation of Newnham Priory in 1442 the same Bishop received an accusation that John Bromham, the prior, had consulted certain necromancers (*nigromantici*) regarding goods alienated from the Abbey and likewise omitted this charge from his injunctions. The Abbot of Selby, who was accused of consulting an sorcerer and diviner (*incantator et sortilegus*) to recover the body of his

drowned brother was excommunicated and deposed in 1262 but reinstated in 1269 before being finally deposed in 1280. A third Abbot, William Love, was accused of divination using a book and key to recover lost things. After an initially sympathetic report he was deprived of the abbacy in 1536, but the record of his misdoings did not prevent him from taking up the vicarage of Witham, Essex.

In each of these cases, the prominent position of the accused is striking, whilst an accumulation of charges by fellow monks of religious negligence, immorality, mismanagement and financial misconduct suggest that the association with occult practices was also an element in constructing the image of a 'bad Abbot' and getting rid of an unpopular one. In all the cases of occult practices in visitation records I have examined so far a single religious is involved which may be an indication of their vulnerability to accusation by contrast to the group of monks with occult interests at Canterbury. The absence of religious among William Love's associates - his servant was said to have consulted a local sorceress (*incantatrix*) and two alchemists were apparently in his personal employ - added to his fellow monks' suspicion of their position and activities.

Cases in the English visitation records of monks themselves being accused of necromancy or of directing their occult practises to malefic ends are rare - the typical motivation for occult practices in monasteries seems to have been the recovery of lost money or goods. This fits in with the absence of necromantic texts at St. Augustine's but both the non-malefic aims of magic and the

relatively light penalties referred to above are also fairly typical of cases involving male practitioners. Occult practices were linked to a false accusation (Leicester) and inappropriate expenditure (Selby) and indirectly associated in many cases with charges of religious negligence and immorality. Only at Leicester is an accusation more directly concerned with the impious implications of occult practice: the Abbot of Leicester's activities caused Robert Grene, the sub-sacrist, to comment that his practices of thumbnail divination and incantations were evidence that he was either wavering in his faith (*in fide dubius*) or deviant from the faith and fixed judgement of the Catholic Church (*a fide et determinacione ecclesie catholica devians*).

With regard to necromantic practices the stories of vagrant apostate monks practising magic fit more closely with Richard Kieckhefer's general picture of unemployed clerics disengaged from society and with time on their hands for mischief and plenty of scope for ambition. Belonging to this category are Godfrey Darel, previously of Rievaulx, who was said to have deceived people and endangered his own salvation through the practice of 'sorceries and abominable incantations' (*maleficia et incantaciones nefariae*) and the sixteenth-century ex-Benedictine William Stapleton who practised ritual magic deriving from 'Solomonic books' involving magic circles, swords and the invocation of demons.

Learned works of magic, astrology and alchemy provide evidence for the occult interests of the monks of St. Augustine's. In so far as the accusations recorded in visitation

records are mainly concerned with occult practices (of a monk or whom-ever he consulted) it is difficult to assess how far these may be associated with texts. Books do appear with the frequency which might be expected from accusations involving learned men and Thomas Wryght's (fairly typical) defence in 1500 that he 'speculated only' with his 'books of experiments' and did not proceed to operation demonstrates the greater acceptability of study over practice. Leicester Abbey is an interesting case because the surviving late fifteenth-century library catalogue shows that the monks had a large collection of learned works of magic (image magic texts and the *Ars notoria*), astrology and alchemy, yet accusations of occult practices from the Bishop's visitation refer only vaguely to divination, charms and incantations. This suggests a divergence between theological condemnations (e.g. those of Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus) of specific texts and a more vague and general awareness among the accusers of what constituted illicit magical practice.

This short piece on occult interests and activities in medieval monasteries has attempted to present some of the ways in which an interest in and practice of magic and divination is formed by this particular social context. It also aims to situate the evidence provided by magic texts and manuscripts in relation to some of the stories and accusations of monks involved in occult practices. The list below represents a selection from a range of monasteries of the most important manuscripts relating to this topic. For the cases cited from visitation records see, in particular: *The Register of William Wickwane, Lord Archbishop of York* (Surtees Society,

114), *The Register of John le Romeyn* (Surtees Society, 123), *Visitations of Religious Houses in the Diocese of Lincoln* (Canterbury and York Soc., 1919), *Visitations of the Diocese of Norwich 1492-1532* (Camden Soc., n.s., 43) and *Collectanea Anglo-Premonstratensia* (Camden 3rd series 12), vol. III.

¹ See Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 151-156.

² R. Hissette, *Enquête sur les 219 articles condamnés à Paris le 7 mars 1277* (Louvain, 1977), p.14.

³ A possible exception is the now non-extant pseudo-Solomonic work owned by John of London.

⁴ See L. Delisle, *Le cabinet des manuscrits de la bibliothèque nationale* (Paris, 1874), vol. 2, p. 521.

Select Bibliography of Monastic Manuscripts with Occult Contents (Magic and Divination)

Canterbury, Kent. Ben. abbey of St. Augustine

Oxford, Corpus Christi College 125 s.xiii-xv, donated by Thomas Wyvelsburgh and Thomas Sprot.

Natural magic: the pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *Experimenta*, an epitome of Sextus Placitus's *Liber medicinae ex animalibus* and a Latin translation of the *Kitab al-khawass* of Ibn al-Jazzar.

Image magic: a fragment of Ptolemy, *Opus Ymaginum*, the *Liber lune*, the *Glosule super Librum ymaginum lune*, the *Liber de quindecim stellis, quindecim herbis, quindecim lapidibus, et quindecim figuris* and the *Liber de septem figuris septem planetarum*.

The *Liber vacce*, a Latin translation of a late ninth-century Arabic

magical-alchemical work, the pseudo-Plato, *Kitab al-nawamis*.

Oxford, Bodleian, Rawlinson C117 s.xiii/xiv, donated by John of London Alkindi, *De Radiis*: a philosophical work on the mutual influence of celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies through harmonious and powerful rays which could be utilised for the purposes of magic.

British Library, Harley 13. s.xiii, donated by John of London

Al Kindi, *De Radiis*

Oxford, Corpus Christi College 221 s.xii-xiv, donated by Michael Northgate

Three works on the occult virtues of engraved stones: *Pseudo-Marbodus on engraved gems and two versions of the lapidary of Thetel*.

Oxford, Bodleian, Ashmole 341 s.xiii², donated by William de Clare

Image magic: the *Liber de quindecim stellis, quindecim herbis, quindecim lapidibus, et quindecim figuris*

Buckfast, Cist. abbey of B.V. M.

London, British Library, Sloane 513 s.xv, owned by Richard Dove

Orthodox prayers and devotional material followed by a short version of the *Ars notoria* and chiromancy, prognostics and works of alchemy and astrology.

Canterbury, Kent. Ben. cathedral priory of Holy Trinity or Christ Church

London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius A iii s.xi

Prognostications from the time of the year and from thunder.

Various lunar prognostics (for illness, dreams, characters of children etc.) in Latin and Anglo-Saxon and an alphabet of dreams.

Exeter, Ben. priory of St. Nicholas

Oxford Bodleian Bodley 463 s.xiv, the first part may be written in Spain. This MS was given to the priory after the death of its owner Edmund Lacy, bishop of Exeter, in 1455.

Image-Magic: Thabit's *De ymaginibus*

Hyde, Hampshire. Ben. abbey of Holy Trinity, B.V.M., and St. Peter

London, British Library, Cotton Titus D XXVI s.x

A list of Egyptian days, lunar prognostics (for illness, dreams, characters of children etc.), prognostications from thunder, an alphabet of dreams.

Kirkby Bellars, Leicestershire. Aug. priory of St. Peter.

Cambridge, Trinity College 1144 s.xv², owned by William Womyndam, 'canonicus de Kyrkeby'

Prognostics, chiromancy, astrological texts and horoscopes, the *Secreta philosophorum* (a work which includes instructions for conjuring tricks).

London, Lincoln's Inn 68 s.xiv, belonged to Bartholomew Brokesby at the beg. of s.xv. He gave it to Kirkby Bellars in 1427.

A divinatory method of discovering whether papal bulls are true or not.

Merton, Surrey. Aug. Priory of B.V.M.

Oxford, Bodleian, MS. Digby 147 s.xiv

The *Compendium aureum* ascribed to Flaccus Africanus, a treatise closely related to the *Kyranides*, on the seven herbs and seven planets.

The pseudo-Albertus Magnus
Experimenta on the magical virtues
of the parts of various animals

**Sherborne, Dorset. Ben. abbey
of B.V.M.**

Cambridge, *Corpus Christi* 422 s.x-xi.
A sixteenth-century inscription at the
end of this MS states that it was at one
time held in such reverence in Derby-
shire that it was believed that anyone
who swore falsely on it would turn
mad.

Prognostics in Latin and Anglo-
Saxon

**Tattershall, Lincolnshire. Colle-
giate church of the Holy Trinity**

London, *British Library, Royal 12 E.
XXV* s.xiii-xiv

Image magic: the *Liber de
quindecim stellis, quindecim herbis,
quindecim lapidibus, et quindecim
figuris*

Two Spheres of Pythagoras (a lunar
prognostic for determining whether a
sick person would die)

**Winchester, Hampshire. Ben.
cathedral priory of St. Peter, St.
Paul and St. Swithun**

Oxford, *Bodleian, MS Selden Supra
76* s.xiii

Al Kindi, *De Radiis*

A treatise on the occult virtues of
engraved stones □

Notes and Queries

Dissertations in Progress

David Porreca, Warburg Institute.
“The Influence of Hermetic Texts
on Western European Philoso-
phers and Theologians (1160-
1300)”

The influence of the corpus of texts
ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus on
Renaissance writers such as Marsilio
Ficino or Giordano Bruno has been
studied at length, but their interest in
this mythical authority was fostered by
many generations of thinkers who did
not have access to Ficino’s crucial
translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*
in 1462-3. It is this underlying, latent
interest in the writings of Hermes
during the Middle Ages which I wish
to uncover. The time-span of my
study will cover all material referring to
Trismegistus between 1160 and 1300.

The basic data which will serve as a
starting-point for the interpretation
of Hermes’ influence will be an
index testimoniorum of all the
references, allusions and quotations
of Hermetic works within the time
period under consideration. I will
trace the general evolution of how
Hermes was perceived, and I will
select a group of authors in whose

works Hermes is particularly promi-
nent. These include Albertus Magnus,
William of Auvergne, Alan of Lille and
Thomas of York. Other authors refer
to Hermes less frequently, but still
warrant inclusion collectively, such as
Michael Scot, Alexander of Hales,
Thomas Aquinas, Ulrich of Stras-
bourg, Ramon Marti, Richard of
Middleton, John Peckham, Alexander
Nequam, Siger of Brabant, Henry of
Gand, Vincent of Beauvais, Helinand
of Froidmont, Bartholomew of Eng-
land and Arnold of Saxony. The
following questions will be asked in
turn for each author: Were Hermetic
works used directly or indirectly (e.g.
via the works of Augustine or
Lactantius), and were they referred to
by direct quotation or paraphrase? In
what context were Hermes’ works
used? Were they used positively, i.e. to
support the views of the author, or as
an example of ideas with which the
author disagreed? In cases where
Hermes was used approvingly, what
place did Hermetic ideas have in the
author’s general philosophical system?

Ultimately, the objective is to find out
whether there was such a thing as a
‘Hermetic’ school of thought at any
point in the Middle Ages. Was there
a group of authors whose philosophical

systems all applied Hermetic ideas to a similar end? The textual transmission of the most important of Hermes' works to circulate during medieval times, the *Asclepius*, may be the key to answering that question. Were the manuscripts copied in a limited area, geographically and temporally? If so, can this area be associated with any of the authors who were known to have used the *Asclepius*? A systematic study of the annotations to the extant copies of the *Asclepius* which date from before 1300 will hopefully shed some light on these issues. □

Notes on the *Sworn Book of Honorius*

In his article, "A Thirteenth-Century Ritual to Attain the Beatific Vision from the Sworn Book of Honorius of Thebes," (Claire Fanger, ed., *Conjuring Spirits* (Sutton and Penn State, 1998), pp. 143-162), Robert Mathiesen drew together the known information about the Sworn Book of Honorius (*Liber sacer* or *Liber juratus*), dating the work to the first half of the thirteenth century. This article expands

substantially upon Thorndike's discussion (*History of Magic and Experimental Science* (HMES) 2, 283-89). In addition, K. W. Humphreys has suggested it was one of the works in the collection of the Monk, John Erghome at York (*The Friar's Libraries* (British Academy, 1990), York Austin Friars Catalogue A8 362). I have also suggested that the work *Liber sacratus petri abellardi* listed in another of his volumes (A8 364) is not very likely a work by Peter Abelard, but rather the work of the same name ascribed to Honorius. Although it may have been referred to by Roger Bacon (HMES 2, 285), a reference by William of Auvergne to a bad book of magic *quem sacratum vocant* very likely refers to our text (*De legibus*, 27. Mathiesen, "Thirteenth-Century Ritual," p. 146. Thorndike notes that William also refers to the work in chapter 24 of the same work. HMES 2, 281.).

Italian Marginalia

The *Sworn Book of Honorius* is unquestionably a very significant text of medieval ritual magic. But manu-

script and written witnesses to its presence in European libraries are tantalisingly few. The geographic origin of the manuscripts are all northern as are the authors who have made note of the work. It may thus be of interest that a reference to it may be found in a fifteenth-century Italian manuscript. Marginal notes in Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 89, Sup. 38, pp. 227-229 refer to *Sanctus Honorius in libro iurato*.

A Forthcoming Critical Edition

Scholarship on this work will be significantly advanced through the work of Gösta Hedegård, Ph. Lic., who is preparing a critical edition of the Latin *Sworn Book of Honorius* as a doctoral dissertation at the Department of Classical Languages, Stockholm University. Inquiries or suggestions from interested scholars are welcome. E-mail: familjen.hedegard@mail.bip.net.

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The Societas Magica invites proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter.

We are looking for essays of 1500 to 2000 words covering recent research in the history of magic and related topics. Essays may be bibliographic in orientation but need not be. Some of the topics we are considering for future issues include

Arabic, Renaissance, and Jewish Magic.

We are also looking for smaller peices for our notes and queries column; news about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries or other such items are all welcomed.

Proposals for essays, smaller peices, or notes on all topics of potential interest to members of the Societas Magica will be welcome. Please contact Lea Olsan, ENOLSAN@ulm.edu.