

Magic in the Middle Ages

Third edition

How was magic practiced in medieval times? How did it relate to the diverse beliefs and practices that characterized this fascinating period? This much revised and expanded new edition of *Magic in the Middle Ages* surveys the growth and development of magic in medieval Europe. It takes into account the extensive new developments in the history of medieval magic in recent years, featuring new material on angel magic, the archaeology of magic, and the magical efficacy of words and imagination. Richard Kieckhefer shows how magic represents a crossroads in medieval life and culture, examining its relationship and relevance to religion, science, philosophy, art, literature, and politics. In surveying the different types of magic that were used, the kinds of people who practiced magic, and the reasoning behind their beliefs, Kieckhefer shows how magic served as a point of contact between the popular and elite classes, how the reality of magical beliefs is reflected in the fiction of medieval literature, and how the persecution of magic and witchcraft led to changes in the law.

Richard Kieckhefer has taught in Religious Studies and History, and is now Emeritus Professor at Northwestern University, where his work focuses on the history of late medieval religious culture and the history of magic and witchcraft, with particular focus on the late Middle Ages. His published books include *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300–1500* (1976), *Repression of Heresy in Medieval Germany* (1979), *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and their Religious Milieu* (1984), *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (1997), *Theology in Stone: Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley* (2004), and *Hazards of the Dark Arts: Advice for Medieval Princes on Witchcraft and Magic* (2017).

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Preface to the Third Edition

Since this book was first published three decades ago, our understanding of medieval magic has broadened and deepened dramatically. Numerous studies and editions have appeared. The Magic in History Series that began in 1997 and the Micrologus Library, initiated in 1998, have both contributed much new material on medieval magic. The journal *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* was inaugurated in 2006. Since the mid-1990s, the University of Lausanne has been a leading center in the study of early trials for witchcraft. International conferences on medieval magic and cognate fields have occurred regularly, strengthening a sense of community among scholars from several disciplines working on magic, witchcraft, and related fields. The scholarly *Societas Magica* has played a role in this exchange since its founding in 1995. So far as possible, this new edition of *Magic in the Middle Ages*, while remaining recognizably the same book, tries to take into account the proliferation of material and the multiplicity of perspectives that did not yet exist in the late 1980s.

There are subfields in the history of medieval magic that give new understanding of the subject. One could list many such areas of inquiry, but they would include magic and material culture, the archaeology of magic, magic and visual culture, and the psychology of magical illusion and delusion. The connection between Christian magic and Muslim magic was already well-known thirty years ago, but recent scholarship has begun to explore more fully the links between Christian and Jewish magic. And areas of Europe that had been peripheralized – Ireland, Scandinavia, and eastern Europe – now count as part of a broader mainstream.

Surely the most important development, however, has been the rise of interest in angelic magic, and the publication of fundamentally important editions and studies on the invocation and conjuring of angels. The rise of this subfield is particularly significant because it challenges the very definition of magic. Medieval people who spoke of magic often distinguished between demonic magic (which calls on the powers of demons to achieve magical effects) and natural magic (which exploits occult or

hidden powers within nature). But how does one classify angelic magic? Must one assume that angelic magic was actually demonic? Or must the conjuring of angels be excluded from the field of magic on principle, even when it closely resembles other activities that would be included? We may wish to take account of medieval definitions of magic (or anything else), because the ways our historical subjects mapped their world of experience is an important part of our historical understanding. But if their definitions do not recognize one of the most important forms of magic practiced at the time, what use were those definitions? Are we forced to recognize that their conceptual map was not fully adequate to the terrain of experience on which they traveled, because it did not recognize the territory of angelic magic? If so, are we licensed to substitute our own definitions for those of our historical subjects?

Anthropologists once gave us definitions of “magic,” “religion,” and “science” as distinct phenomena. Few today would persist in drawing sharp conceptual lines between magic and religion, or between magic and science. Recent work on angelic magic, however, points helpfully in a different direction, suggesting that what is at stake are two different approaches to religion. On the one hand there is religion which may delight in paradox but has little use for ambiguity: it prefers certainty and clarity about its theological and philosophical teachings, its distinction between the forces of good and those of evil, the moral principles it upholds, and the power structures with which it is allied. On the other hand there is religion that has considerable tolerance for ambiguity: such religion admits a wider range of spiritual beings, not all clearly good or manifestly evil; it may be used for harm, but then even the Psalms call down the wrath of God upon enemies; it may be used to uphold power structures, or to challenge them, or both. At times, adherents of one religion may claim that theirs is unambiguously good, while the religion of their enemies or of the people they have subjected is messy and ambiguous. But even within the same religion – certainly within medieval Christianity – both tendencies can be seen side by side. What gets called magic is often religious ritual that seems to have a strong tolerance for all these ambiguities. They can be seen with special clarity in the case of angelic magic, but once they come into focus there, they become more apparent in other forms of magic as well.

Similarly, there are different approaches to science. Some medieval sciences worked with principles and forces that could be clearly discerned and accounted for, while other sciences talked about the “occult virtues” or hidden powers in nature. But what exactly were these, and how could they be discerned? They might arise from “sympathies” or “antipathies” between one object and another, from a kind of radiation

streaming down from the heavenly bodies and captured by plants and stones and talismans, or from the power of the soul itself mediated by language. Somewhat as religion could be less or more tolerant of ambiguity, so too could science, and the science that spoke about occult virtues in nature tended in the thirteenth and following centuries to be called “natural magic.”

The study of medieval magic may have been a complex area of historical inquiry three decades ago, but in the meantime it has become far more so, partly because there is so much more material to take into account, but also because all these ambiguities make it as challenging a subject of inquiry now as it was then.

In view of these shifts in the field, this new edition adds an entirely new chapter (Chapter 7) on angelic magic, a new section (in Chapter 1) on the magical efficacy of words and of illusion, a new section (in Chapter 4) on the archaeology of magic, and reference to numerous recent studies and editions, which are reflected in larger or smaller revisions to the text. The original edition of the book was meant to have light annotation and to acknowledge sources partly in footnotes and partly in the list of further reading. As much as possible, this arrangement has been preserved, although the state of the field has required considerable expansion of both notes and bibliography. When I have added notes without altering the text, I have usually introduced the insertion with “See now.” At several points this edition calls attention to recently published collections of articles meant as general guides to the study of magic. Of particular importance is Sophie Page and Catherine Rider’s *Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, which brings together work by leading scholars from many countries and provides up-to-date introductions to texts, traditions, and themes in the history of medieval magic. Valuable in themselves, these books also serve as pointers to recent literature, and they thus provide indirect access to bibliography far beyond what can be listed here.

For this edition it is a special pleasure to acknowledge the help I have received from friends and former students, which are very much overlapping categories. As doctoral adviser or as outside examiner, I have learned as much as I have taught. Michael Bailey’s work on witchcraft has led him to become our main expert on the theme of superstition. Maeve Callan has expanded our notions of how heresy and witchcraft were pursued even where they did not exist. David Collins, S.J., has brought new sophistication to the study of magic and scholasticism. Claire Fanger has worked with me as co-editor of a book series and a journal and has impressed me constantly with her judgment and dedication. Frank Klaassen is known particularly for his work on magical books,

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but is no less expert in the study and reproduction of magical objects. Benedek Láng's study of magical texts in central European libraries testifies well to the scholarship fostered at the Central European University. Katelyn Mesler's remarkable powers of analysis and synthesis have given her unparalleled expertise in the relationship between Jewish and Christian magic. Sophie Page has developed several new areas of study and shown how they can be brought before a broader public. She provided invaluable help for preparation of this new edition.

I am further indebted to the publisher's readers and Alison Tickner for providing invaluable feedback as I prepared this revised edition. Stephanie Pentz, too, has performed the invaluable service of double-checking the text of this book. Barbara Newman has borne with me through both the writing and the rewriting of this book. To all of them, to William Paden and Elizabeth Wade, and to others too numerous to name, I owe deep gratitude.

Preface (1989)

Some years ago I wrote a book about notions of witchcraft in late medieval Europe. My own greatest reservation about that book, after I had written it, was that it seemed artificial to discuss witchcraft in isolation from the broader context of magic in general. I thus accepted the invitation to write this present book partly as an opportunity to do what I did not do earlier: examine the full range of medieval magical beliefs and practices. In the process of research and writing I have come to realize more fully the complexity of this topic, and the need to see each of its parts in the light of the whole.

I have written for an undergraduate audience, although I hope others as well may find the book useful. In attempting to do a rounded survey I have had to synthesize a wealth of secondary literature in some areas, while for other topics there is such a dearth of usable material that I have turned mainly to manuscripts. The result is in some ways a new interpretation. I have tried, first of all, to rethink the fundamental distinction between demonic magic and natural magic. Secondly, I have tried to locate the cultural setting of the magicians (as members of various social groups) and of magic (as a cultural phenomenon related to religion and science). Especially in my presentation of necromancy I have had to tread on uncharted ground.

Nonetheless, I have of course stood on the shoulders of Lynn Thorndike and other giants. While I have provided only a minimum of notes, I trust that the notes and bibliography taken together will sufficiently indicate my indebtedness to these scholars.

My personal debts of gratitude are many. My colleague Robert Lerner and my wife and colleague Barbara Newman read the book as it progressed, provided numerous valuable suggestions about matters of detail, and helped in repeated conversation to clarify the focus of my presentation; their aid has been invaluable. I am grateful also to Robert Bartlett, Charles Burnett, Amelia J. Carr, John Leland, Virginia Leland, and Steven Williams for reading one or another version of the typescript, making helpful comments, and correcting errors. David d'Avray,

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Timothy McFarland, W. F. Ryan, and students in my classes were useful sounding-boards for my ideas and sources of further insight and information. Dr. Rosemary Morris and the staff of Cambridge University Press provided expert assistance. Christine E. E. Jones of the Museum of London gave me important references, and Margaret Kieckhefer helped by providing valuable bibliography.

Librarians at several institutions aided my efforts patiently. Without listing them all, I must at least thank those at Northwestern University and the University of Chicago, the Warburg Institute, the Bodleian Library, and the libraries of Trinity College and St. John's College, Cambridge. My debt to both the British Library and the British Museum goes well beyond what the notes and the list of illustrations might suggest.

I am indebted also to the National Endowment for the Humanities, whose support for an unrelated project allowed me the opportunity to gather materials and carry out revision of this book.

Finally, I must thank T. William Heyck, without whom this book could have been written, but might not have been.

Richard Kieckhefer

Note. Translations in Chapter 2 are from the sources cited. Elsewhere translations are my own except where noted. Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version, but are consistent with the Vulgate text.