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Magic for Healing in Late Medieval Castile

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This article presents the main arguments of my book *Magia contra la enfermedad en la Castilla Tardomedieval*. This book, published by the Editorial Service of the University of the Basque Country at the end of 2021, is the result of the research conducted for my doctoral thesis. It analyses discourses developed by Castilian theologians and healers on the magical practices used to prevent or cure illnesses.

The research focuses on the study of documentary sources written or disseminated in the Crown of Castile during the late medieval period. A chronology framed between two major ecumenical councils – The Council of Constance (1414-1418) and the Council of Trent (1545-1563) – whose main aim was to strengthen Church reform by reaffirming ecclesiastical structures and renewing the practice of the care of souls. Two councils in which there was a strong demand to remove the threat posed by heretical movements in various regions of Europe, as well as the presence of magical beliefs and practices in medieval society.¹

In the Crown of Castile, this period was also marked by an increase in reform activity, shown by the rise in the production of pastoral works (confessional manuals, synodal constitutions, pastoral visitations, sermons and exempla), as well as the appearance of specific treatises written with the sole intention of condemning superstitions and common magical practices.

At the outset of this research, I could see there were countless references to magic in Castilian pastoral works. Confessional manuals, synodal constitutions, visitation records or sermons described in explicit detail the remedies that implied sinning against the first commandment. Among all the magical practices referred to by theologians in pastoral works (practices used to predict the future seeking good luck, avoiding weather disasters, or even to procure the

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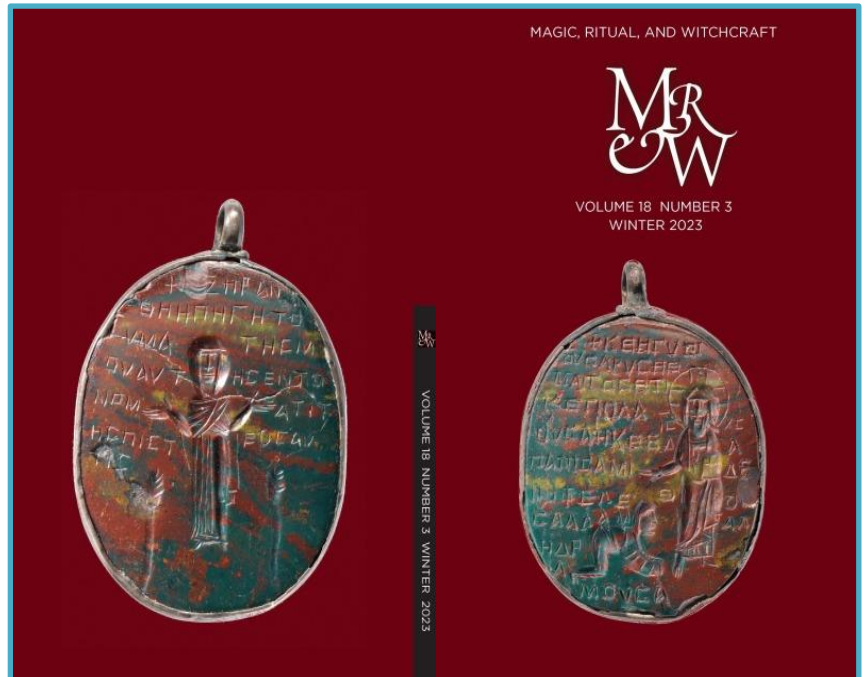
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2025 INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON MEDIEVAL STUDIES

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Call for Papers

This call for papers includes all sponsored and special sessions approved by the Program Committee for the 60th International Congress on Medieval Studies (held in a hybrid format Thursday through Saturday, May 8-10, 2025), hosted by Western Michigan University's Medieval Institute.

You are invited to make **one paper proposal to one session of papers**: that might be to one of the sponsored or special sessions, which are organized by colleagues around the world, OR to general sessions, which are organized by the Program Committee in Kalamazoo. You may propose an unlimited number of contributions to roundtables, but you will not be scheduled as a named participant in more than three sessions.

All those hoping or invited to make contributions to sessions of papers or roundtables at the Congress need to make proposals in the Confex system (<https://icms.confex.com/icms/2025/cfp.cgi>) by the deadline of **Sunday, Sept. 15**. Contributions to performances and workshops are not solicited through Confex.

Societas Magica has a number of panels at ICMS that are open for submissions. Interested individuals should approach the contact person directly.

Grimoires of the Greater West (1): From Arabic and Persian to Hebrew and Latin (hybrid)

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Queer Occult Utopias (hybrid)

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“Sandalphon, send me a dream”: Dream Books, Spells, Divination, Incubation, and Interpretation (in person)

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Sponsoring Organization: Polytheism-Oriented Medievalists of North America (P-OMoNA)
Sponsoring Organization: Societas Magica
Organizers: Phillip Bernhardt-House and Claire Fanger

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admiration of a loved one), it was magical remedies used to prevent or to cure illnesses which were described most meticulously. A feature also found in English confessional manuals of the 13th-15th centuries, as reported by Catherine Rider.²

Moreover, in several of the pastoral works analysed, it has been observed that when considering magic used for healing purposes, theologians not only condemned the behaviour of illiterate parishioners (*illiterati*) – as they did when referring to the use of other types of magical practices –, but also pointed out the activity of academic physicians and their tendency to use magical remedies to cure their patients. Pedro Ciruelo in his treatise *Reprovación de las supersticiones y hechizeras* condemned, for example, doctors using prayers to treat the sick.³ The Aragonese theologian criticised the use of illicit remedies (by means of prayers or spells) by physicians, alluding to the effectiveness of these practices. As stated by Ciruelo in his anti-superstitious treatise, doctors defended that this type of remedy could be effective due to the power of the patient's imagination (similar to what contemporary medicine would understand as the placebo effect) and defended themselves by claiming that the use of these practices was justified when no other remedy was able to cure the sick.⁴

Pedro Ciruelo's arguments are influenced by Jean Gerson's treatise *De erroribus circa artem magicam* (1402). The French theologian, at that time Chancellor at the University of Paris, wrote the treatise specifically for the students and professors of medicine at the University of Paris in order to condemn the use of magic by physicians in the exercise of their profession. For the first time, Gerson focused on work done by academic physicians, rather than on the magical and superstitious behaviour of the *vulgus*,

as had been done in sermons and pastoral works written up until that time. He strongly condemned the use of charms, incantations, and prayers by physicians. He tried to make medical students see that when using magical remedies, the devil could also be involved, even if they were practices used with the intention to cure. He strongly underlined that, even if there was good intention behind these actions, those who used them were making a pact with the devil. It was an implicit pact, therefore less visible, but just as nefarious as those who participated in a necromantic ritual, an explicit pact with the devil.⁵

In this context, the second main objective of this book was to examine whether the discourse presented by theologians corresponded to the reality reflected in the texts written by physicians and healers. The result was to see that Castilian physicians and healers included magical remedies in their treatises and recipe compilation manuals, as had been denounced by the ecclesiastical institutions. For the treatment of inflammation of the lymph nodes, Fernando de Córdoba in his *Suma de la Flor de Cirugía*, ordered the reciting of an Our Father, a Hail Mary, and the Creed whilst extracting the herb *corrihuela* and then leaving the plant in the sun so that the inflammation would also «dry up».⁶ In his *Menor daño de medicina*, Alonso de Chirino recommended that anyone who had been bitten by a dog should carry a tooth from a rabid dog.⁷ In the anonymous compilation of medical recipes from the Zabálburu Codex, to facilitate childbirth, it was recommended that a virgin woman should tie a coriander root to the leg of the woman in labour.⁸ None of the texts consulted specified that this type of practice should only be used as a remedy of last resort. Nor did they allude to the power of the imagination to explain the effectiveness of such treatments. Instead, most of these magical remedies were

recommended alongside other treatments, without making any distinction between them. Others were prescribed with the evidential criteria used in the framework of scholastic medicine: experience (explaining that the remedy in question had been «tried» before), and the *auctoritas* (referring to authorities who had made use of the same remedy). In this way, they were endorsed by scholastic medicine.⁹

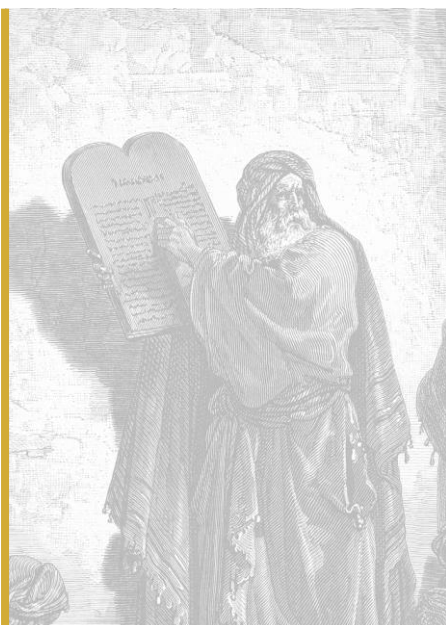
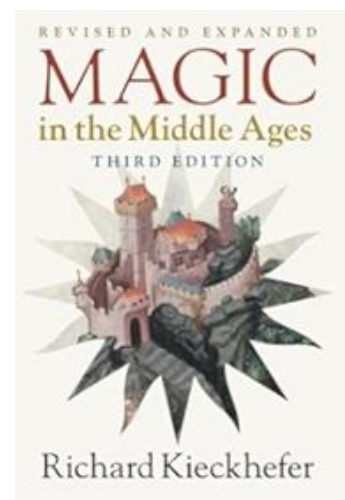
By jointly examining pastoral works and sources related to health practices, we are able to understand and compare the discourses developed in two distinct traditions: theology and medicine. Two traditions that coexisted in the same period, but which, nevertheless, have typically been studied separately. By analysing them together, we can reach very interesting conclusions. The most notable is the contrast between the two types of sources in how they deal with magic: physicians and healers recommended remedies that fellow theologians strongly condemned as sins against the first commandment, the most terrible sin of all.

By analysing the magical remedies included in medical treatises and manuals we can, in turn, dismantle the theses that during the 20th century, healing magic was placed solely in the sphere of popular culture, was generally linked to health practices employed by a largely illiterate population and considered contrary to learned medicine practiced by doctors with academic training.

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Magic in the Middle Ages teaching materials

For those teaching undergraduate classes from Richard Kieckhefer's *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 3rd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), note that there are teaching materials, including discussion questions and PowerPoint slides, to be found at <https://www.cambridge.org/highereducation/books/magic-in-the-middle-%20ages/1C5265332B3780583587235BFE38EDB7/resources/questions/3054%2088D3C61BA7F31F828C188D81CE50%20>



Call for essays for future newsletters

We invite proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter. We are looking for short essays (1500-2500 words) announcing new developments deriving from research in the study and teaching of magic and its related topics. We are interested in relevant articles dealing with all regions and time periods.

We are also looking for smaller pieces, such as interviews or announcements for our notes and queries column. News about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries, or other such items are welcomed.

Send your proposals to the editors at newsletters@societasmagica.org

Thesis Announcements

Communing With Nature: Fairies in English Ritual Magic and Occult Philosophy, 1400-1700

Sam Gillis Hogan,
University of Exeter
Doctor of Philosophy in
History awarded July 2024

https://www.academia.edu/120585894/Communing_With_Nature_Fairies_in_English_Ritual_Magic_and_Occult_Philosophy_1400_1700

This study examines extant British fairy summoning rituals written between 1400 and 1700, as well as the occult philosophy that increasingly informed them. These operations took the technology of medieval ritual magic (traditionally used to summon demons and more nebulous spirits) and redirected it to invoke the fairies of medieval romance and ballads. I argue that, contemporaneously, a new conceptualization of fairies began to emerge among Renaissance magic theoreticians and practitioners. This occult philosophical fairy merged literary fairies with medieval magical theory, revived classical texts about daemons/various numina, and the wondrous beings of European popular tradition.



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Unlike popular depictions of fairies which closely associated them with Faerie (another land or realm which was their primary habitation), occult philosophical fairies were understood to ubiquitously fill this world. In this framework they were presented as morally ambiguous and intrinsically aligned with various elements and natural features.

I demonstrate that influence from these occult philosophical discussions about fairies is evident in some sixteenth-century English fairy summoning rituals, but that this became much more pronounced after the influx of German occult philosophy (particularly that attributed to Agrippa and Paracelsus) in English translations which were produced during the mid-seventeenth century.

Based upon the manuscript context of fairy summoning rituals, I argue that many of those interested in these spells were service magicians with a particular interest in ritual magic. Some of these magicians clearly had a utilitarian approach, being more interested in what a summoned fairy could do for them rather than in what it was. Others, however, increasingly drew from occult philosophical discourses and elaborated fairy summoning rituals with this material, emphasizing their connection to the natural world and making it a source of power used when summoning them. I argue that this can be most helpfully understood as the development of a learned Christian animism at the cusp of modernity.

Conceptions of the Dead and the Divine in Curse Tablets

Charlotte Spence, University of Exeter
Doctor of Philosophy in Classics and
Ancient History awarded October 2023

<https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10871/134154?show=full>

The purpose of this research is to systematically analyse the ways in which ancient individuals conceived of the involvement of the restless dead and the divine in curse tablets. The scope of the research has been to include any curse tablet irrespective of language, date, or discovery location. As a result, examples are included from across the ancient Mediterranean and Northern Europe in Celtic, Coptic, Greek, Latin, and Punic, ranging in date from the end of the sixth century BCE through until the seventh century CE.

Three different roles for the dead and the gods have been identified and this thesis is structured around these groups. The dead were conceived of as having three roles: as actively carrying out the curse, either physically or metaphysically; being used analogically, alongside ideas of sympathetic magic; and finally, as intermediaries and witnesses. The gods were predominantly conceived of as actively carrying out the curse and were therefore often turned to for various forms of help. They could also be appealed to as witnesses, and this introduces the idea of engagement with external powers through ritual action.

When approaching reading and interpreting these inscriptions, the focus is always on the individual, with questions such as: Why have they chosen this form of engagement? Why have they interacted with the ritual in this way? How has their lived experience informed these decisions? Here the focus is on the people who created these curse tablets, as well as

maintaining an awareness of each text's individuality. Through this analysis what can at times appear to be an extremely formulaic body of evidence can be extremely illuminating for understanding conceptions of the dead and the divine in the ancient world. The purpose of this research is to systematically analyse the ways in which ancient individuals conceived of the involvement of the restless dead and the divine in curse tablets. The scope of the research has been to include any curse tablet irrespective of language, date, or discovery location. As a result, examples are included from across the ancient Mediterranean and Northern Europe in Celtic, Coptic, Greek, Latin, and Punic, ranging in date from the end of the sixth century BCE through until the seventh century CE.

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It should be noted that the medical treatises, manuals and prescriptions included in the documentary corpus of this research have not been studied for this purpose before. Neither have the pastoral works examined in this book, with the exception of the treatises by Martín de Castañega and Pedro Ciruelo, analysed mainly to examine the anti-superstitious discourse of both Castilian theologians.¹⁰ Focusing on pastoral works (confessional manuals, treatises on doctrine, diocesan synods or pastoral visits) it is surprising that there is no prior research which makes use of these sources to analyse the discourse of Castilian ecclesiastics towards magic. With this book, therefore, I would like to contribute to emphasising the interest of both types of sources: pastoral manuals are ideal to know the position of theologians towards these practices. Being works aimed at correcting people's behaviour, they described in detail the behaviours they considered wrong to avoid any doubts. Thanks to this, we can see that the position of Castilian theologians regarding these practices changed between the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century due to the theological and philosophical transformations that were taking place at the time. The sources related to medicine and health practices are, in turn, quite unique in understanding the position of doctors and healers regarding the use of amulets, incantations or prayers for healing.

Finally, I would like to highlight the catalogue of magical practices included as a documentary appendix to the book. It is a catalogue in which all the magical remedies cited in the sources are listed one by one, identifying the illness for which they were used, the ingredients or elements involved and the ritual that accompanied the practice. This tool can be used to learn in detail about the magical remedies described in each work, identifying the characteristics of each one and examining the similarities and differences that existed between the practices cited in each source.

Endnotes

¹ Edward Peters, "The Medieval Church and State on Superstition, Magic and Witchcraft: From Augustine to the Sixteenth Century", in Helen Parish (ed.), *Superstition and Magic in Early Modern Europe. A Reader*, 52-90 (Bloomsbury, London, 2015), 70-74.

² Catherine Rider, *Magic and Religion in Medieval England* (Reaktion Books, London, 2012), p. 26.

³ Pedro Ciruelo, *Reprovación de las supersticiones y hechizeras (1538)*, José Luis Herrero Ingelmo (edition, introduction and notes) (Diputación de Salamanca, Salamanca, 2003), 181-183.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁵ Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. IV (Columbia University Press, New York, 1934), 122-124; Michael D. Bailey, *Fearful Spirits, Reasoned Follies. The Boundaries of Superstition in late Medieval Europe* (Cornell University Press, New York, 2013), 127-147; Béatrice Delaurenti, *La puissance des mots. «Virtus verborum». Débats doctrinaux sur le pouvoir des incantations au Moyen Âge* (Les Editions du Cerf, Paris, 2007), 490-499.

⁶ José Ignacio Pérez Pascual (ed.), *La Suma de la flor de cirugía de Fernando de Córdoba* (Toxosoutos, Noya, 2002), 122.

⁷ María Teresa Herrera (ed. critique and glossary), *Menor daño de la medicina de Alonso de Chirino* (Universidad de Salamanca, Salamanca, 1973), 226.

⁸ Jesús Pensado Figueiras, "El código Zabálburu de medicina medieval: edición crítica y estudio de fuentes" (PhD thesis, Universidade da Coruña, 2012), 171.

⁹ See Lea T. Oslan, "Charms and Prayers in Medieval Medical Theory and Practice", *Social History of Medicine* 16, no. 3 (2003): 343-366.

¹⁰ Above all, see Fabián Alejandro Campagne, *Homo Catholicus, Homo Superstitiosus. El discurso antisupersticioso en la España de los siglos XV a XVIII* (Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, 2002).

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Hieronymus Bosch, *Die Entfernung des Steins des Wahnsinns -Extracting the Stone of Madness* (1490), Museo del Prado

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