



PROJECT MUSE®

From the Editors

Michael D. Bailey, Brian P. Copenhaver

Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 1, Number 1, Summer 2006, pp. v-viii
(Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mrw.0.0066>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/236415>

From the Editors

The word “magic” covers a great deal of ground, encompassing or closely connecting with a number of theories, beliefs, practices, and technologies that include witchcraft, astrology, divination, demonology, alchemy, ritual, theurgy, Cabala, theosophy, spiritualism, numerology, and other related topics. For more than two millennia, many of these have also been objects of study for scholars working in the Western academic tradition. Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) opened the thirtieth book of his massive encyclopedia with a history of magic. Proclus (410–85), the last of the great Neoplatonists, joined his predecessors in seeking philosophical foundations for magic, astrology, and theurgy. Isidore of Seville (600–36), Pliny’s Christian successor, included a section “On Magicians” in his encyclopedia, which was constantly imitated in the later medieval centuries. In our own day, Lynn Thorndike described this early material in a Columbia dissertation that paved the way for his monumental *History of Magic and Experimental Science* (1923–58), which recapitulates the first thirteen centuries of a story that ends in the seventeenth century. The sheer density of information in Thorndike’s later volumes reflects profuse publication on his subject once printing was invented in the fifteenth century, and the flood has never slowed.

Meanwhile, Henry Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim had produced his *Occult Philosophy* (1533), the first summary of the subject after two books, both printed in the late 1480s, had transformed it. We know little about Heinrich Kramer and Jakob Sprenger, the authors of the *Hammer of Witches*, but their book became notorious. Written in Latin for priests and lawyers, it is a technical manual for interrogating witches and putting them on trial. The *Hammer* was reproduced in thirty editions, propagating the very thing that it was meant to stop. Partly because of this book, European witchcraft persecutions peaked not in the Middle Ages but in the early moments of the Scientific Revolution: Matthew Hopkins published his *Discovery of Witches* ten years after René Descartes had proposed a new way to do science in his *Discourse* of 1637.

1. Stobaeus, Fragment 23.68, in A.D. Nock and A.J. Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1972), IV, 22.

How were these horrors sustained? In part by social, economic, and institutional forces reflected in trial records and the witchcraft literature, and in part by a theoretical consensus among educated people: that belief in magic and related notions was intellectually justified. This consensus, which was certainly not unanimous, lies behind the enormous success of Marsilio Ficino's *Three Books on Life*. Just after the *Hammer of Witches*, Ficino's book was first printed in 1489 and went through thirty early modern editions, the last of them in the year of Hopkins's *Discovery*. Ficino's aims were benign, however. To heal the sick, he used magic and astrology in his medical practice, a controversial choice that he justified by proposing a philosophical theory for the beliefs that motivated his risky therapies. Agrippa's *Occult Philosophy* opens with a summary of Ficino's elegant theorizing, but then it becomes a more accessible and a more comprehensive work. Agrippa was more interested than Ficino in popular practices, more alert to witchcraft persecutions and, above all, more ambitious—prepared to cover his conception of the entire field that nineteenth-century thinkers would eventually call “occultism.”

As an adjective describing everything that this journal hopes to study—and more—the earlier word “occult” entered the English language almost four centuries ago, quickly assisted by its advertisement in the first English translation of Agrippa's compendium in 1651. For hundreds of years, then, the Anglophone world has had a rubric for what this journal aims to study, a term that the editors might have used for the journal's title. But to have done so, in our view, would only aggravate the pejorative character of the term “occult” by making it more prominent. Better, we believe, for the phrase *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* to signify the whole content of this journal's intentions, as informed by this editorial statement.

As an object of academic inquiry, in any case, our subject is a very old one, long studied by authorities in the arts and sciences and also in law, medicine, and theology—all the traditional faculties of the Western university. Now, in the contemporary world of learning, this venerable topic attracts the attention of experts from almost all the humanities and social sciences and from other disciplines as well, scholars working across the whole spectrum of world chronology and cultures. Thinking just of the *historical* study of the *Western* domain of our subject, one finds some topics especially well served. The literature on early modern European witchcraft and witch hunts is extensive, for example, and the study of magical theory in the Renaissance has thrived since the middle of the last century. But other areas of great interest are not so well developed. Given the long history of the subject, occasions for interdisciplinary study are abundant, but scholars looking to reach beyond their current expertise or disciplinary identities will not find enough oppor-

tunities of the kind provided by permanently established conferences, dedicated organizational structures, and well-defined programs of publication covering the whole field and distinctly identified with it. Most important for our purposes, and in the context described above, the editors know of no journal in the Anglophone world that has aims of this kind.

Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft hopes to serve scholars working on magic, witchcraft, and related subjects from Greco-Roman and biblical antiquity through the eighteenth century—but not exclusively so. Students of antiquity are now exploring magical rites and beliefs from the earliest days of attested human experience. Experts on modern Europe and North America, wondering whether Max Weber’s “disenchantment of the world” ever happened, are finding more than just traces of magic in contemporary Western culture. Research on decidedly modern or even postmodern movements, such as contemporary witchcraft or Wicca, is coming into its own. In Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, South Asia, and elsewhere, historians are working with anthropologists to investigate the effects of European colonization on indigenous magical beliefs and practices, including the persecution—even the legal prosecution—of people thought to be witches. The time is right for a journal to bring this exciting work together, drawing on many disciplinary approaches without strict limits on geographical scope or chronological range.

In the framework described above, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* will publish articles on any topic that illuminates the study of magic, witchcraft, ritual, and related subjects. If the editors have an ax to grind, it is this: we hope to challenge the prevailing assumption that the terms “magic,” “religion,” and “science” represent readily distinguishable historical or cultural phenomena. We believe that an effective means to this end is to invite broad, comparative, interdisciplinary studies, including projects covering long periods of time and crossing cultural boundaries, on topics of substance or of theory, which might be less appropriate for publications serving a particular discipline or dedicated to a particular period or place. On the other hand, submissions tightly focused on specific issues at particular times and pursuing them in detail will be equally welcome. We assume that good research on any part of our very large subject will attract attention from scholars in other areas—provided, of course, that submissions keep our broader audience in mind and address themselves to it. We will also publish reviews, both short and long.

This first issue of *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* is a beginning and a culmination. Our new journal is the product of long preparatory effort, during which we have been greatly encouraged by the enthusiastic interest shown by almost everyone who was asked about the project. Our editorial board—an

outstanding mix of senior and younger scholars—came together quickly, united by their common wish to make an important subject better known to the republic of letters. Excellent submissions arrived almost immediately after our initial announcement. Books for review piled up, and reviews were sent to the editors. In the beginning, however, the “onlie begetter” of this journal was Penn Press, whose staff have been exceptionally helpful and supportive through all the work needed to bring this first issue to birth. Our deepest and warmest thanks go to them, to our colleagues on the editorial board, and to our contributors and readers. In the ancient words that stand at the head of this inaugural announcement and statement of purpose, our wish for them is “that philosophy and magic too might feed the soul.”

Michael D. Bailey
Assistant Professor of History
Iowa State University

Brian P. Copenhaver
Udvar-Hazy Professor of Philosophy and History
UCLA