



LEARNED MAGICAL WRITINGS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

A Select Annotated Bibliography for Instructors



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Introduction

In the summer of 1997, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was first published in Great Britain. The American edition (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*) came out the following year. This means that in 2018, huge numbers of college students (and even growing numbers of graduate students) grew up reading and loving J.K. Rowling's stories of adventures at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. For such students, it will come as a revelation--and, hopefully, a thrill--that real scholars can actually study and teach about the history of magic in our own world.

The curious student will quickly discover that this is a growing field, as evidenced by publications, journals, book series, and scholarly societies devoted to the topic. Prominent scholarly societies include the Association for the Study of Esotericism (<http://www.aseweb.org/>) and Societas Magica (www.societasmagica.org). Societas Magica sponsors the journal *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* and the Magic in History book series at the Pennsylvania State University Press. Another important journal in the field is *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* (also from Pennsylvania State University Press).

These societies and publications certainly indicate that there are many ways to approach this topic. In this annotated bibliography, I hope to assist instructors who want to begin understanding and teaching about the history of magic through the literature of the magicians themselves. Grimoires--books of magic spells and charms--flourished across the Mediterranean since Hellenistic times. By the Early Modern era, magical literature flourished in both the Christian and Muslim spheres of the Mediterranean.

Since I am concentrating on the study of different grimoires, I will neglect several occult topics which might also be of interest--for example, astrology, alchemy, and witchcraft. These subjects (and many more) are all worthy of attention, but I have omitted them in the interests of specificity and clarity.

Furthermore, it goes without saying that even within this restricted field, my list here is selective, not comprehensive. Where possible, I have called attention to ways in which the works in question include good references to additional material.

I have also sought to indicate in the annotation possible uses for texts in the classroom. Generally speaking, the works listed here would be an excellent starting point for introducing magic as a part of Mediterranean history, religious history, or the history of science. It is offered to all those teaching at universities who want to emulate Professor Binns--or perhaps do a bit better.

Annotated Bibliography

Attrell, Dan and David Porreca, translators. *Picatrix: A Medieval Treatise on Astral Magic, translated by Dan Attrell and David Porreca*. Magic in History. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019 (forthcoming).

Picatrix is the Latin translation of an Arabic grimoire, *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* (The Goal of the Sage), originally written by Maslamah al-Qurṭubī (d. 964 CE). The text was translated into Latin between 1256 and 1258 CE. This will be an English translation of the Latin version. While I have not been able to examine this forthcoming text, I can definitively state that once it is available, this will be an immensely valuable resource for study and teaching. **See Also:** Saif, *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy*; Saif, *Goal of the Sage*.

Copenhaver, Brian P. "Natural Magic, Hermeticism, and Occultism in Early Modern Science." In *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Robert S. Westman, 261-301. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

As noted in the discussion of her essay (see below), Renaissance historians have hotly debated Frances Yates' assertions regarding the role of magic writings and the *Corpus Hermeticum* (texts attributed to Hermes Trismegistus). Copenhaver's essay is one of the best thought-out and most sympathetic refutations of the so-called "Yates thesis." On the one hand, Copenhaver refutes specific aspects of Yates thesis. In particular, he argues that terms like "Hermeticism" must be used much more precisely if they are to have any meaning or utility for the history of the period. At the same time, he encourages the broader thrust of Yates' work, namely the "catholic and imaginative desire to explore areas of thought and culture hitherto considered insignificant or inappropriate to serious historical discourse" (290). Copenhaver also does an excellent job introducing the controversy surrounding Yates' work and points the reader to some of the extensive scholarship by her detractors and her supporters. **See Also:** Yates, Frances, "The Hermetic Tradition in Renaissance Science."

Davies, Owen. *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

This wide-ranging book provides examples of the production, use, and reception of grimoires in Western Europe and the Americas from Antiquity to the present, with a particular focus on the Middle Ages and later. For the study of the Early Modern period, the first three chapters are most useful—“Ancient and Medieval Grimoires,” “The War against Magic,” and “Enlightenment and Treasure.” Notably, Davies mentions the significance of Arabic grimoires in Western Europe and he also refers to several cases in which Arabs, “Moors,” or Moriscos were involved in witchcraft cases in Western Europe.

Davies constructs his overall narrative with examples of specific books, authors, and even witchcraft accusations. These specific cases are all extensively documented in endnotes. Any one of these endnotes could be the start of a worthwhile case study or a research project for a student.

Gardiner, Noah. “Forbidden Knowledge? Notes on the Production, Transmission, and Reception of the Major works of Aḥmad al-Būnī.” In *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 12 (2012):81-143.

Numerous grimoires are attributed to the thirteenth-century Sufi Aḥmad al-Būnī (d. 1225 CE), and one of the best known of these works is *Shams al-Ma‘ārif wa-Laṭā‘if al-‘Awārif al-Kubrā* (“The Sun of Gnosis and Delicacies for the Wise—the Long Version,” AKA The *Kubrā*). The *Kubrā* and other works attributed to al-Būnī are different from *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* in that while the latter emphasized the properties of stars, precious stones, and the like, the *Kubrā* added to that discussions of the special properties of Islamic symbols, such as the Arabic names of God, verses of the Quran, and even Arabic letters (and their associated numbers). Interestingly, the *Kubrā* has had little impact on the works of Western occultists, unlike *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* (AKA *Picatrix*).

In this article, Gardiner greatly expands our understanding of al-Būnī and the works attributed to him. Specifically, Gardiner addresses four major areas: (1) The biography of the historical al-Buni, (2) establishing which works can authentically be attributed to al-Buni, (3) the spread and reception of works attributed to al-Buni (AKA the “Corpus Bunianam”), and (4) establishing the date for the *Kubrā* in the seventeenth century CE—long after al-Buni’s death.

This is a challenging article for undergraduates or non-specialists, but it will be rewarding. Most notably, Gardiner shows how a close study of manuscripts and paratextual information can reveal new insights about a collection of texts. This has implications beyond the study of occult texts.

Otto, Bernd-Christian and Michael Stausber. *Defining Magic: A Reader. Critical Categories in the Study of Religion*. Series Editor: Russel T. McCutcheon. Sheffield, UK: Equinox 2013.

This is a collection of different approaches to the problem of how to define magic in a Western context—especially a scholarly one. As such, it is an excellent tool for starting any classroom discussion on the topic.

The collection is organized into four parts. Part I include a collection of historical sources in translation, which sought to define or describe “magic” as a phenomenon from antiquity up until the dawn of modern scholarship. Selections in this section come from Plato, St. Augustine, Agrippa, Desi Diderot, and many others. Parts II and III include modern scholarly attempts to define “magic” as a field of study for modern scholarship. As such, it includes many foundational essays in the field, including the work of Tylor, Frazer, Malinowski, Mauss, and others. Part IV is different. This part consists of a selection of original essays specifically composed for this volume addressing the question of how to define and study magic.

In addition to the selections themselves, the book includes introductory essays for each selection and each section, providing a strong framework for all the selections included. For the student (or instructor) who wants to pursue these questions further, all of the introductions and explanations include extensive documentation, pointing to scholarship not reproduced in the book. Furthermore, the book boasts an impressive bibliography of related scholarship.

Saif, Liana. *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy*. Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, Series Editors Jonathan Barry Willem de Blécourt, and Owen Davies. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015.

In this book, Saif demonstrates how certain Arabic theories of magic--centering on the influence of heavenly bodies on earth--influence prominent European occult authors. She begins by explaining the different Arabic theories, with reference to al-Kindi's *De Radiis* (On Rays), Maslamah al-Qurṭubī's *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, and the works of the astronomer Abū Ma'shar al-Balkhī. She discusses in detail how these works influenced the thought of different European writers, devoting separate chapters to the work of Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Roger Bacon, Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and John Dee. **See Also:** Attrell and Porecca, *Picatrix*; Saif, *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy*.

Saif, Liana. *The Goal of the Sage: An English Translation of Maslama al-Qurṭubī's Ghāyat al-ḥakīm (Picatrix)*. Forthcoming.

As noted in the citation, this translation is forthcoming. However, once it is available, this will be an immensely valuable resource for study and teaching. Note that this will be a direct English translation of *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* (Goal of the Sage). **See Also:** Attrell and Porecca, *Picatrix*; Saif, *The Goal of the Sage*.

Savage-Smith, Emilie, ed. *Magic and Divination in Early Islam*. The Formation of the Classical Islamic World 42, general editor, Lawrence Conrad. Wiltshire, UK: Ashgate Variorum, 2004.

This volume brings together ten important essays originally published between 1937 and 2003 which provide excellent starting points for the study of magic and divination in the Muslim world. Savage-Smith frames the collection with her own introductory essay. Taken together, this is an essential tool for any student with an interest in the topic.

Yates, Frances. "The Hermetic Tradition in Renaissance Science." In *Art, Science, and History in the Renaissance*, ed. Charles Singleton, 255-74. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967. Reproduced in *Renaissance Magic*, ed. with introduction by Brian P. Levak, 233-252. New York: Garland Publishing, 1992.

This essay summarizes Yates' famous arguments regarding the importance of Hermeticism for the history of science in the Renaissance. In short, Yates argue that study of the Corpus Hermeticum (i.e., the texts attributed to Hermes Trismegistus) encouraged a new view of humanity's relationship to the world. Specifically, Yates argues that this introduced the idea that since the corpus introduced the idea that a magus could change the world through magic, this was an important for the development of sciences in the Renaissance and ultimately the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century. Historians have come to reject many of Yates' specific findings (see: Copenhaver). Nevertheless, her work will be incredibly useful for stimulating discussions about the history of magic and science--in part precisely because her work was so controversial.

Credits

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