



IN SEARCH OF A HOLY MAGIC

AN ESSAY ON THE EMERGENCE OF
MAGIC IN THE EARLY 16TH CENTURY

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PREFACE

Researching this subject has been a such humbling experience on so many levels. First and foremost because of the incredible academic publications that have come out on this topic in recent years. Neglected for centuries by scholars of all ways, ritual magic has found its way back into universities and into scholarly circles since the late 1980s. If interest at first was sparked from a purely sociologist and historic perspective, tides have slowly turned. Today books such as Frank Klaassen's outstanding '*Transformations of Magic*' approach this complex matter with more respect for our living tradition than found amongst many modern books on magical practice.

Secondly, it has been a humbling experience because of the limitations I discovered in my own perspective on the topic. I now understand much better what sparked sociologists' interest in medieval and Renaissance magic in the first place. Coming from a tradition of practicing magicians myself, it took a while before I allowed myself to look at our own past through the eyes of an academic outsider. Once I managed to shift perspectives, however, it was breathtaking to see how much there is to learn about a certain period, culture or even community just by understanding the way they practiced, preserved and passed on magical techniques. No different to any cultural artifact produced for practical purposes, we can decide to 'use' these artifacts and thus learn directly about their application and impact. Or we can choose to 'read' them as expressions of people's beliefs, assumptions and everyday realities of their times. The former is the approach of the experimental practitioner, the latter of the academic researcher. In the case of Medieval and Renaissance ritual magic - a subject of so much more ephemeral

nature than e.g. a Renaissance chair or chain-mail - bringing these two perspectives together is of a power that I had significantly underestimated.

Finally, I have been humbled by my research into the topic as it presents such a vast field, so interconnected to so many factors of people's everyday lives; thus constantly requiring to reach deeper and further back in time. At best, the below pages are scratching the surface, and certainly cannot replace reading the fascinating literature on the subject oneself. What I hope to be able, though is to spark further debate and research on the subject amongst practicing magicians. Misperceptions of our own past can exert powerful influences on our present of course, and magic is no exception to this rule. Man is a story-telling species. It is the stories - not the blank facts - that create meaning and identity and thus exude control over who we believe we are, or have to be, or maybe once were.

Giving oneself permission to understand these stories for what most of them truly are - mythical patterns at best, wishful thinking at worst - is an equally painful as liberating act. Either way, without such openness no truly new and unique stories will ever be able to emerge and find their place within our hearts and blood. Our readiness to let go equals our readiness to discover the new.

LVX,

Frater Acher

IN SEARCH OF A HOLY MAGIC

SEEING THE MAP

1. MAGIC AND THE EARLY 16TH CENTURY

As a first step on any new journey we might want to ask ourselves:

‘Why does it matter?’

Or in our present case more precisely:

*‘Why does it matter to understand how ‘high magic’
was invented during the early 16th century?’*

They say we are standing on the shoulders of giants. Well, in most cases unless we choose to examine them carefully, that also means we are blind to the forces that carry us ahead. Our modern understanding - or shall we say: construction of - ‘high’ or ‘ritual magic’ is such a giant we are standing on. Unless we pause and examine the tradition we form a part of, we’ll never be free of the patterns that formed us and many of our ancestors.

Of course the above is true for all historic research into the tradition of Western Magic. So why the beginning of the 16th century? What is so special about this period, that it might deserve more specific time and attention.

To start with the end, we can identify three tipping points that happened to coincide in the cultural climate of Continental Europe during this time. Each one of them was centered around an essential human drive. And all of them

were intrinsically connected to what people in the early 16th century hoped to gain from or achieve with magic:

1. Magic presents by far the most personal relationship with the divine possible. While mysticism in large part depends on an aspect of divine grace, that is not true for its promethean twin. Whatever the purpose and goal of the magician - how morally high or low, how pragmatic or sublime - he rarely ever accepts second-hand mediation but pushes through boundaries of time, space and substance to experience the divine with his own human senses. As such magic is a testament to *man's unruly drive to escape his own mortality* and reconnect with his divine or daemonic origins - not theoretically or philosophically, but through direct sensual experience. – At the beginning of the 16th century for almost 1400 years such attempts had been heavily sanctioned and pushed into the underground by the Catholic Church. Yet, Renaissance scholars dared to challenge the most powerful authority on the planet and aimed to bring back magic into the social discourse - and possibly even into actual practice.
2. Even magicians - once such sensual contact to the divine is established - cannot escape man's eternal drive to create coherence and meaning from the new material gathered. At the end of the day *all humans are sense-making machines*. – During the turn of the 16th century this process took the most fascinating turn: After centuries of oblivious forgetfulness the writings of the Greek and Arabic philosophers suddenly resurfaced in the Christian heartland of Europe and prompted a radical re-evaluation of Christian doctrine and orthodoxy. Forgotten stories were rediscovered as new ones, and seemingly new sense-making mechanism could be explored in secrecy or even shared with the public.
3. Finally, even where scholars resisted the temptation of filling in the blanks of their own experience through the words of the ancient Greek, they still found magic to be one of *the most promising tools of exploration*. Magic - and ritual magic in particular - claimed to provide instructions which if followed accurately would open the same mental or even physical doors

each time the same procedure was applied. Not only did magic promise to make the practitioner independent of divine grace, but it was perceived to fulfill the most basic requirement of any scientific research we still adhere to today: *same process produces same results every time*. In short, magic promised an ever increasing level of control over an ever increasing base of knowledge and power. – During a time filled with heretic revolt and social revolution such prospect was incredibly tempting.

The above description wouldn't be complete without pointing out that by the end of the 15th century all of these three essential human drives had been blocked off successfully by the Catholic Church. Experience of the divine was only allowed through the Church's intervention and heavily prosecuted and sanctioned elsewhere. The reservoir of collective stories from which individual and cultural meaning was created had turned repetitive for decades at least: People lived under the impression that all major discoveries had been made and with authorities such as Aristotle in philosophy, Geber in medicine and the Church fathers in orthodoxy no new advancement in human knowledge and civilisation should be expected. Of course the Church tried hard to keep its prerogative of interpretation on the status quo; and yet the new, rather secular young sciences emerging in the Arabic countries and the multi-cultural melting pot of 15th century Spain shone a bright light through the first cracks of European's so-called medieval darkness. – All of this made the subject of magic not only tempting to Christian scholars and potentates. It essentially required a complete re-interpretation of this infamous category of heretic knowledge and practice - a re-branding we would call it today - in order to allow legitimate access to doors whose keys had been exchanged in secrecy only for centuries.

Another aspects needs to be highlighted as part of this introduction. Many of the recent studies on magic have attempted to differentiate their ambiguous subject into several clear categories and thus narrow down their own focus of research. Often times this is why we come across a term labelled as '*learned magic*' or '*high magic*'. This makes sense in so far as we have to assume that at any point in time currents and common practices of magic

existed that never were captured in books. The term '*learned magic*' thus acknowledges the limitations of a written tradition during a time when writing and reading still formed a privilege of the learned and rich.

However, it is not helpful to distinguish the magical practice of cunning folks, wandering healers and countryside witches from more complex ritual structures forming an altogether separate category of so-called '*high magic*'. At least for medieval and early Renaissance times such distinction is artificial and rather detrimental to a better understanding of the subject. The magical literature of these times shows no attempt to uphold such differentiation or separation of categories. Quite the opposite: scribes were perfectly comfortable to place recipes for the healing of toothache next to a rite for enlightenment and we might find a basic love-spell traveling next to an elaborate ceremony to attract an astral spirit-guide. While even Renaissance scholars might have differentiated between these two categories - and in search of a re-definition of the entire category of magic rightly tried to do so - our own practicing ancestors might have laughed at their highly sophisticated and yet completely superfluous interpretation to a practice that ultimately always held very pragmatic goals. Irrespective from which layer of society the neophyte of magic stemmed, their essential goal never changed too much from time immemorial to the present day: to lead a happy life, to live free of enemies, illness, poverty and in blissful absence of all threat or crisis. Whatever alley chosen the ultimate goal of magic always remained protection, power and prosperity.

So what makes the beginning of the 16th century stand out in this ancient tradition of man's strive to re-establish the Garden of Eden in the present day world?

Well, towards the end of the 15th century all three of the above mentioned drives were not only blocked off by the Catholic Church, but equally experienced a critical tipping point that supported revolt against the established power-balance. This uprising wasn't done with swords and shields, but with paper and with the help of the recently invented letter-press and resulted in dramatic changes to our perception of the Western magic tradition

- whether founded on facts, faith or forgery we will examine further. The 16th century formed the heart of the Italian Renaissance, saw the beginning of the Protestant Revolution as well as the Discovery of a New World in the West. It was home to many of the most influential figures of our tradition to the present day - Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Faust, Trithemius, Agrippa, Dee, Shakespeare - whose larger-than-life shadows began to cast darkness on the living magical tradition they had borrowed from. The 16th century thus forms the foundation of how we like to remember our Western magical past in the 21st century.

2. THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

At the turn of the 16th century Agrippa of Nettesheim was a young man of fourteen about to immerse himself into a life weathered by more storms than many of us could imagine today. For decades already these storms had been gathering forces over the continent. Now they were about to unfold on what we have come to know as Europe today, overthrowing and changing the very foundations of society as people had known it and never questioned it for centuries.

To highlight some of the epicentres of these storms from the middle of 15th to the early 16th century, let's take a look at a few historical dates:

- 1231: Gregory IX begins Medieval Inquisition
- 1434: Cosimo de'Medici (d.1464) becomes ruler of Florence
- 1438: Under the patron-ship of Cosimo de Medici Gemistus Pletho establishes the Platonic Academy in Florence
- 1442: Johann Gutenberg's invention of the letter press begins to revolutionise the distribution of knowledge
- 1451: Pico della Mirandola publishes his major work *De animae immortalitate*
- 1452: Birth of Leonardo da Vinci (d.1519)
- 1453: Fall of Constantinople to the Turks
- 1478: Sixtus IV authorises the Spanish Inquisition

- 1484: Marsilio Ficino's collected translations of Platon's work are published
- 1486: Marsilio Ficino finishes his translation of Plotin's Enneads
- 1486: Pico della Mirandola publishes his 900 theses *Conclusiones philosophicae, cabalasticae et theologicae* and offeres to pay the expenses of any scholars who came to Rome to debate them publicly
- 1487: Pope Innocent VIII proclaims thirteen of the 900 theses as heretical
- 1492: Columbus discovers the New World
- 1492: Jews and Moslems are expelled from Spain
- 1498: Girolamo Savonarola is publicly burned on the pyre in Florence
- 1500 Birth of Charles V of Hapsburg, who became Lord of the Netherlands in 1515, King of Spain in 1516, and was elected Holy Roman Emperor (German-speaking region) in 1519. He ruled most of Europe until his abdication in 1556.
- 1509: Henry VIII ascends the throne of England. He rules until 1547.
- 1515: Leo X institutes pre-press censorship
- 1517: Martin Luther nails his 95 theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. Beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

Now, what do these dates really tell us? Well, what I am taking away from much smarter people than me who explored the intellectual climate at the turn to the 16th century is this: For centuries the power base in Europe's mainland had been firmly established around the sacrosanct authority of the Catholic Church. In a world that knew no national states, but only rising and faltering lineages of rulers, it was the blessing of the Catholic Church that justified or prevented the claim to power. Yes, that authority had been under threat many times. During the 15th century Europe had gone through a phase of revolt with up to four competing popes at once. However, even this political game of chess had not questioned the general power-base of the Church - but only who held the key to it and how it was gained. Whoever would be able to establish 'his pope' would still emerge as God's blessed king. Because the sceptre of the highest ruler needed blessing by the highest

institution on God's earth. These were the rules of the checkerboard that was perceived to be the eternal centre and surface of a flat world, Europe.

What these dates show us are flashlights of how for the first time the Catholic Church ran risk of losing its institutional power-base - as well as the countermeasures it willingly took to defend it at all costs. The foundation of the Spanish Inquisition as well as the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain were not measures the Catholic Church took from a position of strength - but to re-establish such strength where it had almost been lost. Most concerning, at its heart this threat did not stem from a famous king, ruler or even a competing religion - but from the free-spirited community of scholars and emerging scientists that had begun to blend and exchange vast amounts of uncontrollable knowledge across cultural boundaries which used to demarcate communities for centuries. This battle wasn't won by defending or extending physical boundaries, but by defending the way people thought about the world and their position in it. The threat was not an enemy in robe or uniform, but an intangible chaotic swarm of free-thoughts, of wildly flowering imagination of what might be possible after all as well as the first groping attempts to test these limits through literature, science and art...

While this mental war began to rage and pyres across Europe lit up, completely unexpected another, very physical one broke out: a New World, wide open and unexplored was discovered far out in the West. From one day to the next the checkerboard expanded - and quickly boundaries of power and the rules of the game needed to be equally extended. An entire army of missionaries needed to be built from ground up. They had a world to conquer - to baptise whole tribes and kingdoms of indigenous souls or to burn them to the ground.

And then, just when you think it cannot get worse you are betrayed by your own kind! A crazy, Jew-hating professor of theology in Germany nails his ninety-five heretic theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg - preaching that one of the most critical sources of Church revenue, the selling of indulgences is actually against the spirit of Christ? No longer should it be subordination to the church's authority and the ongoing payment of

indulgences that buys your path out of hell, but the genuineness of your faith in Christ alone? Worse still: that crazy professor dares to hold the mass in German, even translates the Bible into German, and allows the plebs to understand the word of God that had been held in secrecy for centuries. Confining the hearts of uneducated farmers through self-righteous morals, suffering statues and colourful pictures is a pretty different basis of power than needing to explain your authority based upon a one-thousand-five-hundred years old collection of cryptic stories.

To make a long story short: by the beginning of the 16th century, when a New World dawned and Renaissance was catching the hearts of scholars across Europe, the Catholic Church was facing its worst crisis ever. In order to defend it they were more than happy to demonise, torture and burn more than 60,000 people across Europe in less than two-hundred years to follow. What they needed more than anything was a bold, fresh enemy that re-united their scared and defenceless flocks under the only available protection - their own.

It's against this colourful, raging and cruel background that we shall take a look at magic at the turn of the 16th century. Two major forces were gearing up to reclaim ownership of this ancient and highly ambiguous term. On the one hand it was the Catholic Church - for all the motives described above. There simply was no better projection screen than the collective fears and uniting menace of an army of witches and magicians killing kings and children, ruining crops and weather, poisoning health and morals of entire peoples. If the war the Church fought was not about physical territory but mental realms, than no weapon was sharper than the indistinct fear of a constant thread to your health, safety and wellbeing by your actual neighbour. Whatever 'magic' ever really had been, it was clear what it needed to become in order to do the job for the Church. And so the biggest, most bloody PR campaign the world had ever seen was about to unfold.

Trying to oppose the Church's interpretation ex cathedra of what magic was and how it threatened everyone's lives, was amongst the most foolish things one could have done. And yet, it was during precisely the same time

that a select group of courageous scholars did exactly that. All of them held positions visible to the public eye - or at least the inquisition - and all of them over the course of their short lives needed to manoeuvre smartly between the protection of worldly potentates, the persecution of a raging Church and their genuine desire to renew the intellectual climate of their time.

IN SEARCH OF A HOLY MAGIC

SEEING OURSELVES

3. LETTING GO OF 21ST CENTURY ASSUMPTIONS

To truly understand how our Renaissance forefathers navigated this complex, constantly evolving territory, we need to zoom in even closer into the reality of their time. For to understand the true meaning and impact of their works we need to be able to assess them relative to the times they emerged from. Risking to end one's life prematurely on the pyre seems courageous, if not heroic today. Yet such intuitive judgement can easily be misleading - as assessing 16th century behaviour from the reality of the 21st isn't a great compass to navigate the Renaissance map.

As astonishing as it might seem to our 'millennial generation' that decided to accept '*Now!*' as its only operating mode, people five-hundred years ago perceived, thought, lived and judged in very different ways than we do today.

In a time where the notion of human rights was laughed at, where public codices of city laws were just emerging, where even national or federal states didn't exist and the climate of entire regions would change with the uprise of a new ruler, personal security was a good hard to come by. Whoever was in power was the most highly sought after alliance for everyone. Besides the Catholic Church, their hand alone would guarantee at least some level of fleeting security or complaisance. Such protection would need to be rebuilt at least after each potentate's death when the cards were reshuffled, yet it was the best people of all traits had to hope for... Being political - both in your

alliances as well as in how one published one's books - wasn't a derogative term in a world where laws lasted less than one's own lifetime.

On the other hand the 16th century world was a vast place - abundant with the unknown, with rumours, distance and the foreign waiting to be explored. Power in this time was still bound to specific, even though often shifting territories. So for anyone prepared to travel light and often that was good news: Wherever one alliance was lost, a day-trip or two would get one onto the doorstep of another court, another ruler and a new bond to be forged. As fleeting as security, prosperity and even power were, as many places existed where one could try one's luck again when it was lost elsewhere.

Growing up in such an environment breed very different people from us today. To be fair, some of this 'difference' is but a fleeting finish of gloss - easily cracked and rubbed off modern man by a few days out in the wilderness, without electricity, warm water and constant supplies of ready-made food. Civilisation is not what changes human nature, at best it numbs and puts to sleep our more archaic drives born from millennia out in the wild. The relevant difference between us and our Renaissance forefathers thus isn't one of style, habitus or bare conditions of living, but one of inner and outer perception. Growing up in a world with only natural ambient noise - no radio, no cars, no tubes rattling underground - affected people's ability to perceive and listen. Being thrown into a world where hardly anybody was capable of reading and one's own mother tongue had not even been fixed in a single written form, affected the way people thought and spoke. Being part of a world where the most essential way for any news to reach you was through the mouth of your neighbour, affected the vital relevance of social contact. In short, we have to let go of our own inner compass of judgement, of the things we like to take for granted, when trying to understand the lives and motives of our forefathers several hundreds years ago. Just as people looked and smelled differently, so they also felt differently, thought differently and appreciated things in very different ways from us today. Modern day gut feel thus is a terribly bad tour-guide to explore our ancestors' actual living realities.

Now, why does that matter? A particular reason stands out for our exploration: Magic is a subjective science conducted mainly through the human senses. Communication with spirits functions through the medium of the human senses and mind; anything that affects, changes and alters the way these function has to be of interest to the magician trying to understand the practices of their own tradition. A rite from the 16th century, designed to activate and open doors to certain sensory perceptions, was designed for a set of human senses that essentially functioned in different ways than our 21st century minds do today. Think about it - people who lived without the daily experience of a 'virtual world', no TV, no tablets and computers were grounded in the present in a very different way. If they underwent a cycle of several weeks of retreat, lent, prayer and even further withdrawal from the outside world, they arrived at a very different place than we do today were we to follow the same instructions... Movies, TV, computer games, even our ability to read in silence created a fluidity of perception, an ability to switch between the perception of the physical world and an inner 'virtual' or 'imagined' world that our ancestors would have been completely unaccustomed to. As we significantly changed the experience of the world we live in, not the nature but the configuration of our senses has changed as well.

On the other hand the use of incense, daggers, robes and chalices by far might have seemed less romantic to our ancestors than to us today? At the dawn of the 16th century these implements were not considered to be archaic, but expressions of orthodox power and wealth. Look at it in detail and how many of the magical rites of that time mimic aspects of the Catholic mass and the paraphernalia used on its altars? For the 16th century mind creating, adorning and using these tools by oneself and with oneself in the central role of the priest was a huge and deliberate act of heretic revolt. What act in our modern day could compare to it? Which insignia of (spiritual) power are still charged with such much meaning and social hierarchy, that re-creating them for one's own use would seem such a dangerous act of promethean self-empowerment? (Not much comes to my mind, but I am thinking of the Occupy-movement that annexed social space in front of Wall

Street and elsewhere - normally reserved to the powerful and rich. I am also thinking of terrorist-cells annexing the insignia of national military and governments to prove their claim to power...) – So when our Renaissance forefathers brought that chalice filled with wine to their lips and spoke the prayer of blessing - what happened to their senses then? Which reactions and subconscious impulses did such an act trigger? How did it change - even if only for the duration of that rite - their social persona, their unspoken beliefs, the image they held of themselves, the taboos and collective laws they had respected for entire lives?

Now let's turn the mirror and look at ourselves: When that 25-year old 'adept' of today is drinking from that same chalice - what is happening to their inner and outer senses then? What once was an act of revolt, might now have turned into its opposite? A world that has grown empty of deep roots, ancient traditions, Latin ritual and thick clouds of incense suddenly is reborn. On a purely social level we might come to the conclusion: What once was an act of breaking away from existing structures of power, might have become a romantic way of re-enacting them? What once were instructions for social revolution five-hundred years later has been turned into recipes of romantic nostalgia. Yes, magic as such is eternal and doesn't change with the tides of our times or civilisations. However, how we access it, connect to it and tune our senses into it might very well be dependent on the times we grow up in. Because we are as much children of magic, as we are children of our time.

So the 16th century made people grow up with a different experience of the world and their place in it. This difference was not just superficial and an expression of a change in style or conditions of living. Instead, it created a different kind of thinking, of feeling and even appreciating. Senses and perceptions weren't different in nature, but tuned and calibrated towards a different experience of the world. Equally, foundational aspects of the 21st Western World - such as personal security through human rights and a stable national legislature - were either absent or highly circumstantial depending on the ruler of the territory one happened to reside in. The only pan-European power-base at the time was the self-righteous jurisdiction of the Catholic

Church which had turned into a cruel antagonist of scientific advancement and free scholarship. Thus it doesn't come as a surprise that the 16th century created a broad array of restless biographies of constantly traveling scholars - such as Agrippa, Paracelsus, John Dee or, later on, Johan Amos Comenius. Their travels just as much as their works can only be understood in light of the above reality they formed a part of. Each day spent at the court of a baron was reverence paid in the costly currency of physical presence. And every printed work published in their honour was another link in the chain that one day might save one's life. Every act of philosophic or scientific revolt needed to be counter-balanced with an act of submission to a potentate who was likely to offer protection from the Church's merciless prosecution. Much more so than today, life as a scholar was a constant balancing act, a path walked with great care, where considering one's current and coming affiliations formed the only foundation to one's income, security and family's wellbeing.

In returning to our subject we then have to ask:

'How did all of this then affect the magic of the 16th century as we know it today?'

Well, the small keyhole through which we are forced to look back in time, are the actual manuscripts of magic that have survived until our present day. They are the only authentic testament of the practices of our forefather - or at least created to evoke such impression.

We shall therefore take a closer look at how these manuscripts actually came into existence, for which reasons and maybe most importantly through whose hands?

IN SEARCH OF A HOLY MAGIC

AN OLD WORLD ALIVE

4. THE SCRIBE - A MAGICAL CURATOR

Throughout antiquity people used to distinguish between two mediums of the written tradition, the scroll and the codex. The way a scroll worked is pretty obvious. Most of us know it from the way the Jewish Torah and Pentateuch are still preserved today or from the original scrolls of the Egyptian *'Book of the Dead'* as displayed in many Egyptian museums across the globe.

The scribe(s) of a scroll would write on the parchment for as much space as it offered, either from left to right or right to left in the Latin and Hebrew traditions respectively. Over time special glues were invented that allowed to glue several parchments together and thus create longer and more expansive scrolls. The codex, on the other hand, (from Latin, *caudex*, 'trunk of tree' or 'block of wood') originally signified text written on separate, single parchments. The individual parchments were then stacked up and bound into a thicker front and back panel to protect the actual pages. By the sixth century the codex had replaced the use of scrolls almost entirely. Today the term is used to refer to hand-written manuscripts from antiquity to late Medieval times specifically.

What is important to point out for our subject, is that the production process of such codices in the Middle Ages was nowhere near the way books are written and produced today. Obviously, I am not referring to the differences in the technical process of book printing and publishing, but rather

to the conditions of production themselves as well as the accepted standards of passing on knowledge in written form. Before the advent of the mechanical letter press the idea of a 'copyright' did not exist. Moreover, even the idea of calling out the actual author's name was rather unusual; instead it was common to leverage names of ancient authorities as part of whose tradition-of-thought the author wanted his contribution to be understood. The output of one's creative thought process or research thus was not centred around the individual who performed the research, but the tradition they aimed to form a part of. The individual was but a link in a living chain that reached back in time to a mythical founder, philosopher or spiritual adept who provided mentorship for and authority over every link that followed in their name. Thus for centuries the purpose of each link (i.e. author) wasn't to stand out - through use of their individual names, claiming authorship for their unique contribution or advancement to a tradition - but rather to blend in. This 'creative disguise' had at least two significant effects:

- At first glance it created a familiar set of hugely stable and long-living traditions that every scholar could be familiar with. In a world where lexicons, research standards and in many cases even universities had not been invented yet and where every hand-written codex was a costly rarity, such stability of knowledge and tradition was a critical factor in the eyes of their authorities.
- However, equally the concept of 'creative disguise' allowed for each of these traditions to be kept current and alive by their anonymous authors constantly refreshing, slightly adjusting, expanding or simply localising its central ideas and concepts. Most importantly for the concept of magic in Medieval times before the 16th century, the above wasn't limited to the role of the original author of a text, but included the role of the scribe as well.

As Klaassen explains, copying a manuscript often turned out to be a rather creative process. In short, here is how we might want to think about it: A 'codex' was the work of a scribe or a whole series of scribes who copied various manuscripts and then deliberately bound them together in a new collection of parchments. As such a codex represents as much the writings of

the authors united in it, as it highlights the conscious choices the scribe(s) made to represent available knowledge on a specific range of subjects. In light of this we should think of the role of the scribe neither as an author, nor as a pure copyist, but as a curator.

The following comparison might help to illustrate this: Let's think of someone organising a museum exhibition for a particular sovereign about to visit their city... Which choices will they make on which works to display and which ones not? Where will their judgement be guided by true expertise, where by chance, availability of material, current zeitgeist, political interest or even intrigue? Thus were the factors influencing a scribe when consolidating material into a new codex or copying an existing one. Of course, the aspect where their role transcended our modern day curators was that often times they weren't shy of altering the actual material they presented. Whole sections could be left out if parchment was scarce, if particular passages were considered displeasing or illicit or if the predetermined amount of folios in a book simply didn't allow for the whole text to be included. Thus the role of a scribe turned curator / editor bore much more creative potential than it might seem at first sight. If this was true for any subject they worked on, it was particularly true for the infamous and highly ambiguous subject of magic.

So in many cases the medieval scribe was not a passive copyist, but an active agent of forming and evolving a particular tradition of thought or practice. Let's take a closer look then at how their work began to shape and represent the Western tradition of magic.

Before the 16th century, i.e. the Renaissance works on magic mostly traveled in either of two categories: *image magic* or *illicit magic*.

That is to say: magic that worked through certain, often astrologically charged images and then everything else. The former category of magical treatises often was extremely short, pragmatic in its descriptions and can be found traveling as part of larger codices on medicine, herbal healing or e.g. agriculture. The magical image was perceived to be a 'carrier substance' for influences of a variety of natural substances such as minerals, herbs, plants or

alternatively alchemical elements, planets or even fixed stars. This form of magic was widely spread throughout antiquity as well as in all later centuries. Strongly influenced by Arabic authors the genre's legal status from the viewpoint of the Catholic Church was tolerated at best. Even where condemned, however, we can still find related material continually copied and spread by orthodox scribes from Catholic monasteries across Europe - not rarely as additional appendices to larger existing codices.

To better understand this ambiguity of medieval magical writings - being officially condemned by the church and yet continually copied and spread by its own scribes - we need to take a closer look at how during the Middle ages academic knowledge was organised as a whole.

5. MAGIC - A TOOL OF SOCIAL POWER

Magic as such didn't hold its own category but rather presented a particular view of the world - including a broad array of spiritual practices that could be applied to any subject. Thus treatises on e.g. precious stones could be written from a magical point of view as could be treatises on certain diseases, agricultural rhythms or even astrology itself. Broadly speaking, magic was not a matter of subject but of perspective. It was precisely this fluid nature that made it incredible hard to confine for medieval authorities - and still makes it incredible hard to track down for modern day researchers. A treatise providing instructions on certain 'magical practices' could be bound into literally any sort of codex.

Towards the end of the Middle ages the general structure of faculties was organised according to the seven classical liberal arts: The trivium, i.e. the verbal arts of logic, grammar, and rhetoric, as well as the quadrivium, the numerical arts of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. At the time magic therefore didn't constitute an eighth art but - depending on the author's understanding - either a subdivision of one of the existing strands of knowledge or a category of forbidden tools that could be applied to any one of them.

"Dominic Gundissalinus (fl. mid-12th century) composed a work, De divisione scienciarum, where the subdivision of physics (drawn from Alfarabi [?-950], whose works he translated) includes judicial astrology, medicine, natural necromancy, image magic, agri-culture, navigation, alchemy, and optics. This attempt to include magical arts among legitimate sciences hardly went unopposed; in the same time period, Hugh of St. Victor (?-1142) wrote about magic only to exclude it vehemently from the domain of legitimate knowledge as a type of false knowledge." (Wouter, p.726)

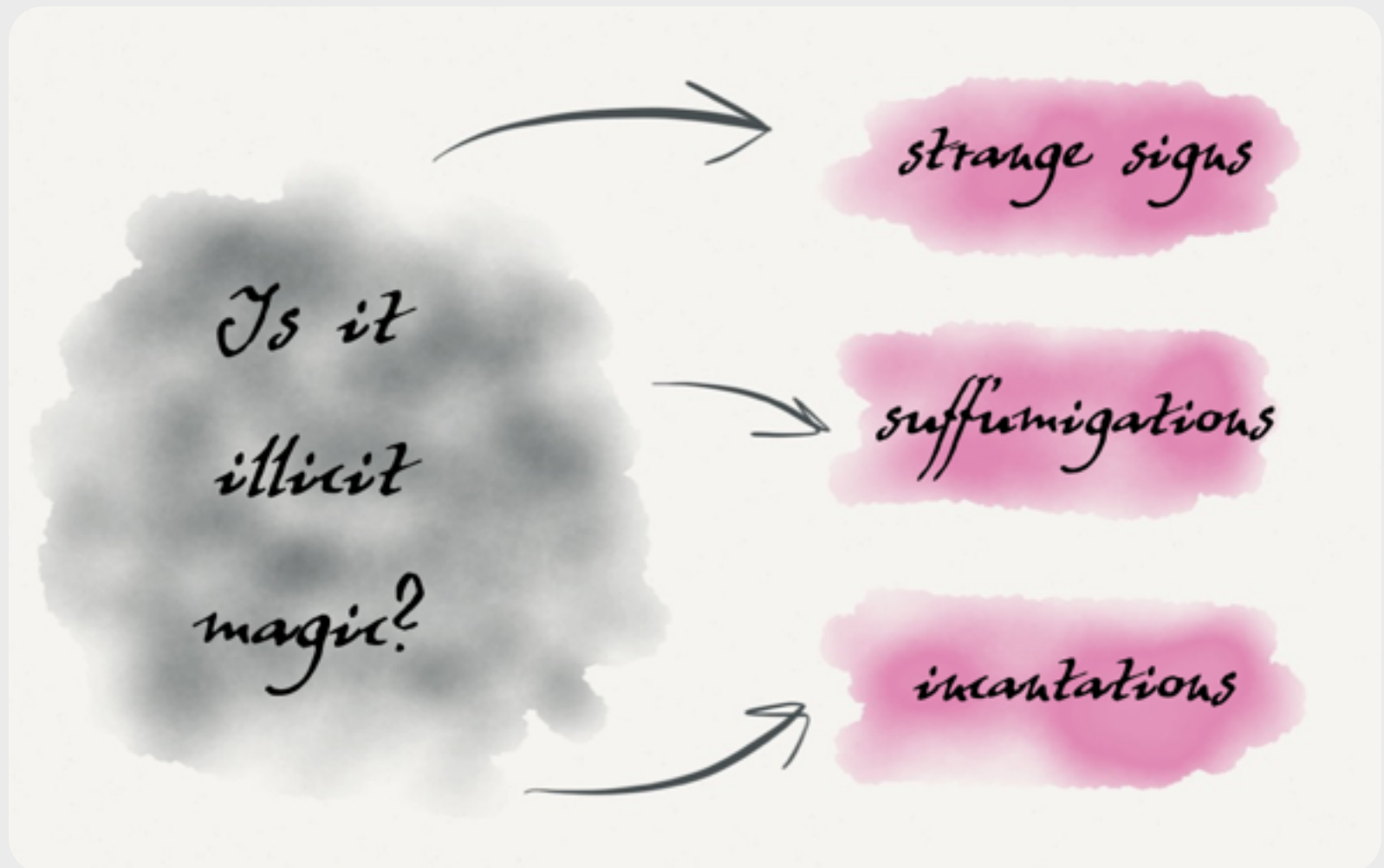
"Magic was a complex sin. Authors vary widely in how they classify magic, and the great variation in treatment testifies not only to the imagination of the authors but also to the variety of potentially sinful behaviour that magic might involve. The diversity of practices that magic included, and the variety of human impulses that drove it, made magic difficult to categorize." (Klaassen, p.18)

Instead of searching for a definite body of work that was considered to compile and define the subject of 'magic' in medieval times, we might rather want to explore which factors defined the practices that were widely considered to be of magical nature.

It turns out these factors were surprisingly straight forward as well as relatively stable throughout medieval and renaissance times. Besides obviously heretic factors such as pagan idolatry, food offerings or sacrifices, there were three main aspects which each on their own or certainly if found together would indicate a highly suspicious if not illicit form of spiritual practice. These characteristics - we can call them: *medieval magic alarm triggers* - were (1) the usage of strange signs or letters, (2) suffumigations and / or (3) ritual incantations (Klaassen, p.27).

Wherever image magic thus was presented without including any of these factors it was tolerated at best. Of course the actual choice was depending on the particular scribe's assessment of how sensitive it would be to present such knowledge in their codex. On the other hand, wherever the same image

would be shown and yet the text would provide instructions to ritually charge or activate the image by use of incense, carving additional sigils on it or



singing certain inscrutable names over it, the threshold into the category of 'illicit magic' had been crossed.

"One way or another, twelfth and thirteen century writers acknowledged that good magic, if there were such a thing, depended solely upon power derived from the natural world, in particular the stars. Bad magic, which probably meant all magic, derived its powers from demons. While it is not always clear how the writers would distinguish good from bad images, many assumed that it was possible to do so, given sufficient skill in astrology and other occult sciences." (Klaassen, p.32)

Now, remember what we learned about the significant threat the Catholic Church was faced with at the beginning of the 16th century - and its deliberate 'PR campaign' to re-establish relevance for its 'services' and 'brand'?

The three categories identified above and leveraged to differentiate illicit magic from tolerated forms, are of significant relevance in light of this. Just look at them in their most general sense: they categorise any act that even in the remotest sense could resemble any sacred ritual as we know it. Since the beginning of mankind tribes would burn certain herbs, resins or dry leaves in offering to their gods, they would sing and ritually raise their voice to them and of course they would look for ways to speak to them in writing - often leading to highly cryptical and ciphered forms of code, i.e. symbols, signs or sigils. By establishing these three categories as '*key markers*' to identify the forbidden acts of pagans, witches and magicians the Catholic Church essentially created it a hugely powerful USP (*unique selling proposition*) for itself: Anybody who felt the desire to contact the divine through the ancient form of ritual was forced to attend the Catholic mass.

In a world marked by incredible levels of ongoing change and personal insecurity, no other save option existed. And here precisely these three categories would be brought to life in its only orthodox, i.e. officially approved form and manner: The priest would speak and sing in a language no one understood and raise his voice directly to God, thick clouds of frankincense would elevate the minds of the people bound together in service and the sacred space in which this rite took place as well as all of its many paraphernalia were covered in strange sigils, cryptic writings and holy symbols attempting to embody direct expressions of the divine.

Even if Catholic mass might have failed terribly in delivering spiritual experiences in any of these three categories, by banning any other form of expression of it outside of its own service, it became the only available option. Establishing a monopoly on contact to the divine was smart enough; monopolising the foundational expressions of human service to the divine, however, was a truly diabolical plan. Still, the Catholic Church executed it flawlessly, destroying almost any remains of a European pagan tradition and re-uniting its scared and spiritually-deprived flock by use of a fine balance of spreading the poison and offering the only available antidote.

But let's be careful in judging the Catholic Church any harsher than we would judge anybody else: What corrupted the church was the same influence that still today corrupts governments, corporations and institutional religions: the nature of the human being. The only reason why pagans didn't lid pyres to burn Catholic potentates wasn't because our ancestors were morally superior to their Catholic neighbours, but because they didn't have the social means or power to do so. Suppression of minorities, polemics against a mythical common enemy as well as the deliberate engagement in armed conflicts at the frontier of one's nation are all means that support stability and continuity of power in its centre. While modern governments may utilise these tactics in significantly more subtle ways, they clearly aren't their invention.

This ambiguity of judgement is even heightened, when we consider the fact that it were precisely members of the Catholic Church who also ensured the continuation of our tradition of ritual magic.

"Over this many-coloured garment (of Jewish and Arabic influences on Western magic, ed. Frater Acher) was invariably spread the sacerdotal cope of Christianity, which may have been adopted at first as a disguise, but which in the majority of cases came eventually to be beyond suspicion the official religious belief of most European adepts. The voice of esoteric literature is positively unanimous on this point. Whatever the secret teachings which entered into the traditional science of the Magi, they were not of a nature to interfere with the sincere profession of Christianity among their later initiates, or they were modified into harmony with orthodox Christian teaching." (A.E. Waite, 1888, xxii)

In monopolising the domain of the spiritual and divine during the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church naturally turned itself into the only place where people were able to officially study any related subjects. While its external control and persecution of heretic tendencies was draconian and merciless - all in the service of reuniting its flock under its power-base - the same cannot be said of its internal control. In fact, almost all surviving codices including instructions on illicit or ritual magic from before the 16th century had actually

been copied or produced under the Church's own roof. In essence before the advent of the Renaissance it was as simple as this: If one wanted to study the ancient art of theurgy and ritual magic, one needed to become a Catholic monk. In return this meant that originally pagan magical operations and techniques passed on over centuries, would become more and more Christian over time. Divine names, prayers and invocations would become substituted with aspects and terms of Christian liturgy, while often maintaining the actual ancient ritual structure and techniques as such.

"Although the precise origins of much of this literature remain unclear, certain elements can be identified. The structure of rituals for exacting service from an otherworldly being (i.e., preparation, prayer, invocation, constraint, manifestation, petition, and dismissal) was fixed in custom in ancient times. The Hebraic tradition offered complex hierarchies of angels and their names as well as elements from kabbalism. The Arabic writers offered a tradition of "astral magic," which often involved a high degree of ritual performance that frequently involved astrological images and planetary deities or spirits. The Christian tradition provided the crucial elements that made the magical practices at once powerful, convincing, titillating, and dangerous for Christian practitioners: namely, the liturgy and various other programmed practices of the church, exorcism in particular. For this reason the terms exorcizatio and coniuratio are used interchangeably in necromantic treatises. The Christian tradition holds that an upright Christian could invoke the power of God to cast out a demon. One had only to refer to the liturgy to find out whether one could cast out a demon and how to do so; it was only a short logical step to the idea that one could command a demon to do other things as well. A few minor elaborations upon this tradition, a few selective borrowings from Greek, Arabic, and Hebraic magic, and a certain lack of judgment or caution were the only elements necessary for the birth of necromancy." (Klaassen, p.116)

I guess that's the dilemma any modern ritual magician finds themselves in? The same people who destroyed any remains of their living theurgic tradition in public, were responsible for its continuation in secrecy. Without our flawed Catholic ancestors, without the same people that tolerated or even supported the burning of so-called 'witches' by the thousands, much of our modern

library of grimoires would not exist: the Almandal, the Ars notoria, the Sworn Book of Honorius, the Thesaurus spirituum or even the Arbatel to name but a few. Of course we have to assume that a lot of living magical currents survived outside of monastery walls during the Middle Ages and beyond. However, by holding tightly onto its monopoly over education and scholarship, very few of these traditions found their ways into a written form and even fewer of such written testaments survived in Christian libraries. Thus the shape of ‘learned’ Western ritual magic as we know it today assumed strong clerical aspects over time. Links to cultures and times before the Christian domain were consciously cut and replaced with orthodox terminology and context.

"The practices of necromantic magic certainly suggest clerical sensibilities. The texts often demand an extensive and wearying program of fasts, purgations, sexual abstinence, prayers, confession, communication, and attendance at Mass. A clerical calling thus may well have helped not only in practical ways, such as the time it afforded, but because of the clergy's direct, regular involvement in religious matters. The demands for the participation of a priest in the rituals, the required familiarity with the liturgy, not to mention the prerequisite ability in Latin all suggest this group.¹⁰ The regular clergy strove for generally similar ideals and would have had intimate familiarity with the liturgy as well. Examples of monastic necromancers, fictional and real, are common." (Klaassen, p.117)

And yet, despite all this ‘bastardisation of magic’ we have to assume that even these newly adjusted rituals yielded satisfying results in practice. Why else would we have evidence for a living tradition of continued practice over many centuries before the ‘dawn’ of the Renaissance? How we have to assume that these medieval books on magic were brought to life, passed on and continually evolved is what we shall explore in the next chapter.

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- Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century*, Sutton Publishing 1997
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- Will-Erich Peuckert, *Theophrastus Paracelsus*, Kohlhammer Verlag 1941
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IN SEARCH OF A HOLY MAGIC

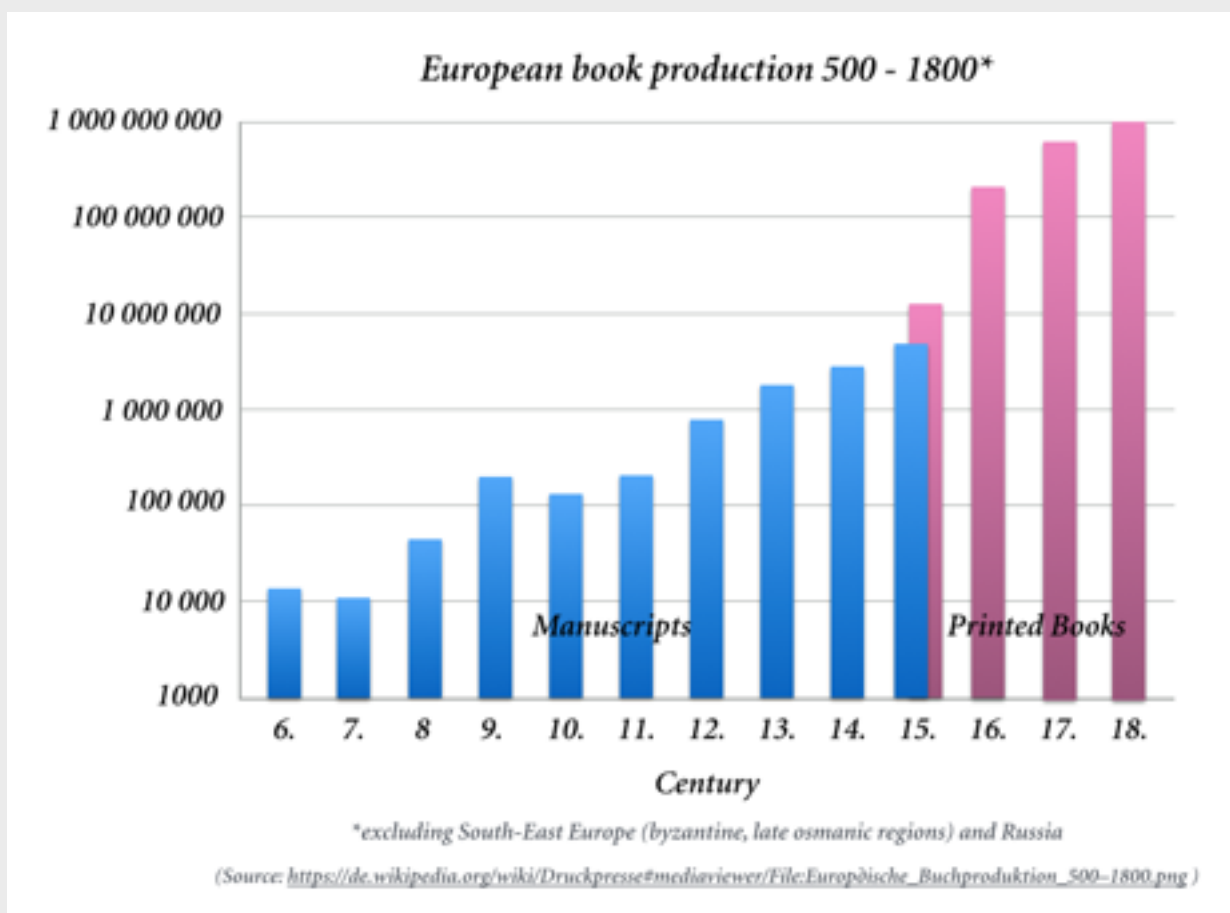
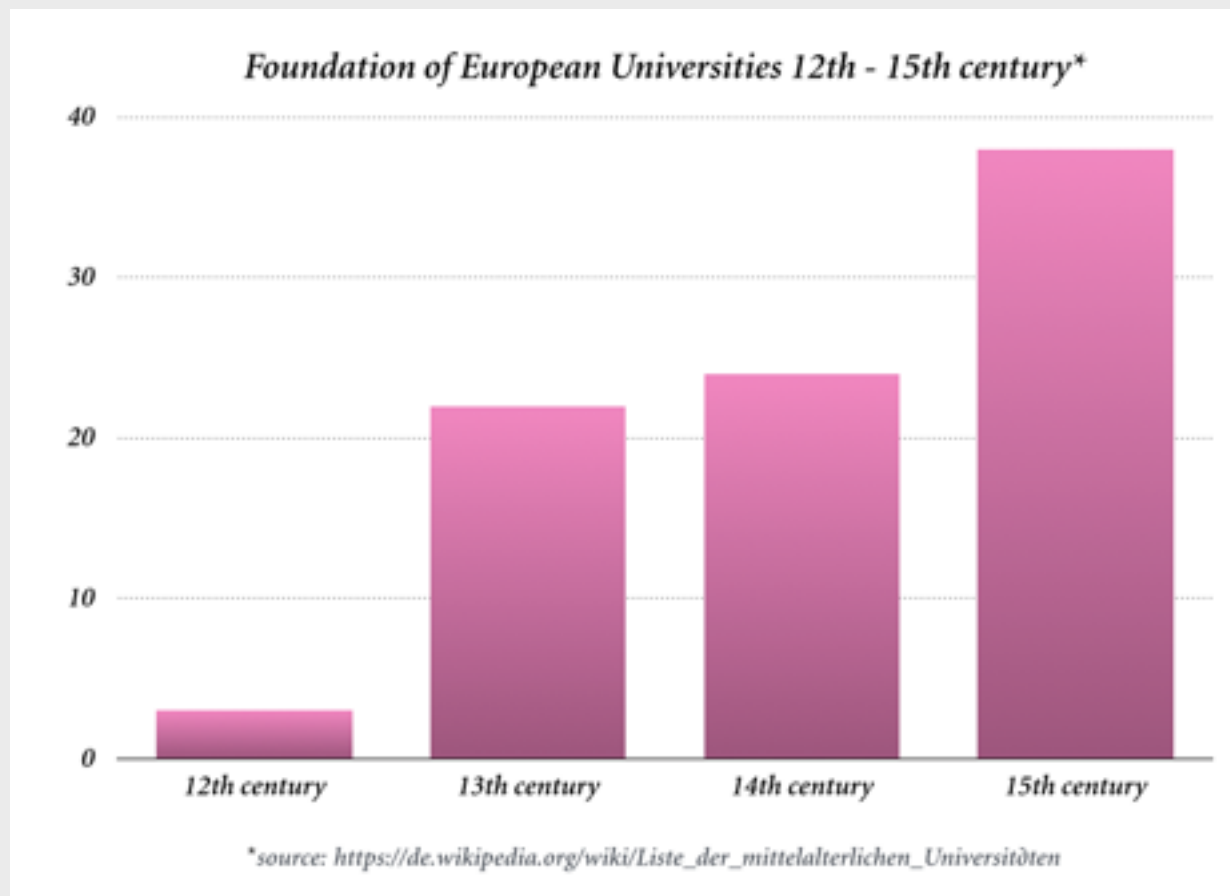
AN OLD WORLD
DESTROYED

6. THE BLACK ART - THE IMPACT OF THE LETTERPRESS

Having examined the role of the medieval scribe in the previous chapter, let's take a look at the invention that would kill its profession entirely within a few decades. The first manual letterpress was invented in 1440 in nowadays Germany by one Johan Gutenberg. Its advent is of significant importance for the tradition of Western magic. More importantly, however, the Renaissance as we imagine it today would not have been possible without its invention. Let me try to explain why.

The daily output of a medieval scribe is estimated to have been less than fifty pages. By the year 1600 European letterpress companies had developed an average performance of roughly 3.600 pages per day. Now, for a moment let's not look at the art of writing through the eyes of a scholar, priest or magician. Let's switch perspective and look at it through the lens of the early capitalists in the 16th century: the production of costly codices was a monopolised business owned, administered and distributed by the Roman Catholic Church. This monopolisation dictated not only the maximum production output of its scriptoria and thus the availability of knowledge, but also its immense costs. Even if one had the financial means, still the general availability of knowledge at the time was dictated by the Church. In stark contrast to these limitations of codices production through copying, the early capitalists found themselves surrounded by an ever increasing amount of

universities that bread an ever increasing amount of scholars all across Europe. In short: the thirst for knowledge and education exploded during the late Middle Ages. And as medieval scribes struggled to keep up their production with its demand - an the Church tried to maintain its monopoly and maximise its revenue - the new technology gave rise to an unprecedented business opportunity.



The quick ascent of the book-printing industry had a massive impact on the Medieval world. In Germany alone during the short timespan from 1518 to 1524 the book production septupled. The new technique quickly began to fulfil its promise of enabling education at much lower costs and accelerating scholarship and science to completely new heights. And of course it single-handedly pushed the paper-production industry into its own revolution. With the new printing techniques not only the written word in all its forms became available broadly, but also accompanying tables, graphs and explanatory drawings that could now be placed alongside the text. This eradicated the century-old problem of manual copying errors by scribes and enabled scholars across the European world to compare research results in much more reliable terms and almost in real-time.

Now let's return to the perspective of the Catholic Church. Yet, this time, let's also include the view of university deans of the Middle Ages. Since the 12th century these institutions had created the perfect pact and come up with a unique and compelling way of protecting orthodoxy and stability of power: The Church 'owned' access to the literacy world by tightly managing its huge fleet of European scriptoria. It kept its access locked not only through control over which manuscripts were copied and made available for larger distribution, but also by ensuring all codices continued to be written in Latin rather than the vernacular language of each region. Before the advent of the universities, however, the actual problem to conserve orthodoxy sat with the scholars themselves. The generally acknowledged way of how a scholar transitioned from student to teacher since the times of the ancient Greeks was quite simple: they rebelled against their teacher, came up with more compelling ideas and stole away their teacher's students. As no such thing as official titles, degrees or institutions which held a public mandate to manage recognised knowledge existed, the real currency of power was the amount of students any teacher could gather around themselves. Equally there was no publicly controlled or supervised space of teaching. The ancient Greeks had met and debated on their market places; unfortunately during many months of the year that proved to be a place too cold for long hours of scholarly

debate in most central European countries. Thus people gathered in privacy at their homes.

See, the real difficult problem before the advent of the printing press was how to control the spoken word, not the written one. The latter problem had been addressed by the Church already and was relatively easy to control due to its slow and laborious production methods: Manuscripts before the times of the Renaissance were so rare that they were objects of public interest. They would be read out aloud during scholarly gatherings and often times studied over and over again. What was much harder to control were the ideas and assumptions people derived from them. If manuscripts were seeds the Church did everything to control the plants that grew from it; and yet they struggled to control the public debate. And that's where the newly invented universities came in.

The main problem that the invention of universities solved was *to lend protection to its teachers and to the canon of knowledge they aimed to preserve.*

The invention of academic titles and degrees - without which one didn't hold sufficient authority to participate in and effectively shape the public debate - was the true masterpiece of its creators. Suddenly even the smartest students could be forced to stay within the boundaries of 'accepted' knowledge at least until they finished their studies and received their degrees. A curriculum was designed that shaped the minds of young people to comply with commonly acknowledged truths. And by withholding the necessary academic title all of the unruly could be sorted out. The universities were a safe-haven for teachers and in alliance with the Catholic Church the two institutions began to control and synchronise large parts of the European intellectual world. This alliance proved to work perfectly for several centuries throughout the Middle Ages - until the invention of the letterpress.

In case you happen to work in a commercial business: Just think of any product-category that is growing at a rate of 700% over a few years only? Now, imagine this growth doesn't take place in a globalised world with international standards, corresponding legal frameworks and global

authorities to coordinate revenue streams and transactions. Do you see it: *What a mess! Or what an opportunity?*

It really depends upon the viewpoint - whether one wanted to uphold orthodoxy or get rich quickly. The early capitalists banking in on the opportunity had a hugely disruptive impact on the scholarly world of the 16th century. In particular they disrupted the fine balance established between the Catholic Church, its scriptoria as well as Medieval university authorities. '*The black art*' - as the printing industry quickly was labelled - became a breakthrough milestone on the journey towards the democratisation of knowledge.

7. CIRCULATION OF MANUSCRIPTS - THE BLOODSTREAM OF KNOWLEDGE

Of course this revolution didn't go unnoticed by the authors and publishers of interest for our study - the magicians, witches and heretics amongst the world of Renaissance scholars.

“Because of the printing press, authorship became more meaningful and profitable. It was suddenly important who had said or written what, and what the precise formulation and time of composition was. This allowed the exact citing of references, producing the rule, ‘One Author, one work, one piece of information’ (Giesecke, 1989). Before, the author was less important, since a copy of Aristotle made in Paris would not be exactly identical to one made in Bologna. For many works prior to the printing press, the name of the author has been entirely lost.” (wikipedia)

‘Creative disguise’ - as explored in the 3rd part of this series - suddenly became much harder. Public interest in identifying the author of any new publication had significantly increased and equally had the risk of printed works being caught in the net of the Catholic inquisition. Now, to truly appreciate the impact of the ‘black art’ on the dissemination of magical

knowledge we have to understand how this process had worked before the advent of the letterpress.

For centuries manuscripts of explicit magical content had been traveling well over hidden pathways. The circulation of these manuscripts amongst initiated communities of scholars had been a long-standing tradition. (Note: for more information refer to Paola Zambelli, *White Magic Black, Magic in the European Renaissance*, 2007, Chapter 3, §1. 'To publish or not to publish?') Even Agrippa of Nettesheim, seventy years after the invention of the letterpress, decided to circulate his 'De occulta philosophia' for more than twenty years amongst European adepts in manuscript form only. His teacher the German 'black abbot' Johannes Trithemius had done exactly the same with his most explicit magical works. (Zambelli, 2007, p.75) Not allowing for a manuscript to be printed, did not mean it wouldn't find its audience. Quite the opposite: it meant the circle of readers could be chosen much more deliberately by the author. This in return allowed the author a significantly higher degree of openness and detail when it came to dealing with heretical subjects.

"It has been noted that in the early sixteenth century, under the Catholic kings of Spain, the new figure of the censor came into being: 'a faithful scholar of good conscience', whose task it was 'to prohibit apocryphal, superstitious and condemned works as well as vain and useless things.'" (Zambelli, 2007, p.73)

Publishing a work under one's own name, on the other hand, suddenly had turned into a new way of engaging with a broad public audience. With that, many new concepts emerged at the same time: the idea of a personal 'copyright', of a singular definite version of one's work, of a public persona as perceived through the corpus of one's complete writings as well as publicised reputation that over the course of one's lifetime one had to uphold and protect.

The scholars of interest for our study therefore were faced with a severe inner conflict: Should they continue to write in manuscript form - optimised

for circulation in closed communities of adepts, allowing them at least a certain level of control over the dissemination of their work as well as a significantly higher degree of freedom when it came to expressing their ideas and describing their actual heretic practices? Or should they aim to publish their works in print, ideally in honour of a potentate who might offer protection and even gratuity in return, contributing to the public debate, increasing their own scholarly prestige and further defining their public persona - yet needing to alter and tune their tone, convictions and even content according to the preferences of the Catholic Church and Renaissance zeitgeist? At least for the ones we remember until today, this wasn't an either-or decision. We can still find their public persona preserved in their printed works, as well as traces of their initiated self in posthumous publications or rare copies of their manuscripts.

Most importantly, however, we can now see the lay of the magical land towards the end of the Middle Ages: By no means was the '*renaissance of magic*' a rebirth of magic, i.e. the revival of a tradition interrupted since classical times and only preserved in Greek or Arabic source texts.

The magical tradition towards the end of the 15th century was well and alive. Yet, its blood pulsed through veins hidden from the public eye. All that was visible from the outside - if discovered at all by outsiders - were cryptic sigils in manuscripts, instructions on 'shew-stones', circles from ashes and long list of recipes and barbaric incantations. What was visible from the outside were the bare bones of a tradition that was but an "instrument to bring on prophetic states" (Klaassen, p.212) and to create communion with the sacred. The essential problem our Renaissance forefathers encountered, was not that a magical tradition had once been alive and flourishing and now had ceased to exist and needed to be rebuilt from its ashes. The essential problem they encountered was how to interpret and create meaning from a initiatory tradition that had maintained and evolved itself over centuries in silence and secrecy only (Klaassen, p.211).

How they solved this riddle - or at least how they made the readers of their public works believe they had done so - we will examine in our next chapter.

IN SEARCH OF A HOLY MAGIC

OVERCOMING THE
DEBRIS

8. MAGIC - A TOOL OF SOCIAL REVOLT

Looking from the outside in one could come to the conclusion that by the late 15th century ritual magic had degraded into a mummified, fractured and fallen version of a once golden past. Sigils, circles, recipes and barbaric names were copied from manuscript to manuscript and seemed to lose more and more of their original and integral meaning each time a scribe put their hand to them. Ultimately the genre was perceived to degenerate to a cryptic extravaganza, a marginal phenomenon within a dark and largely uncharted ecclesiastic subculture.

“Eventually, a set of texts regarded as standard appeared, having passed through a process in which they were edited, supplemented, and/ or reorganized. Although some of these texts settled into a relatively stable textual tradition, they often traveled in the form of extracts or fragments, as a result of which the integrity of the original text was lost.” (Klaassen, p.83)

In this atmosphere the new Latin translations of the classical Greek texts of Platon, Plotin as well as the Hermetic Codex by Marsilio Ficino created major furore amongst scholars and clerics. Quickly they turned into a clarion call to rediscover the long lost philosophy behind the fractured texts and fragments that magic had become.

The central ideas of Platonism, Neoplatonism as well as the living spiritual world of the Corpus Hermeticum opened an exciting new vista into the golden age of antiquity - beyond dry repetitions of the teachings of Aristotle. Most importantly, they challenged the encrusted medieval worldview, scholastic philosophy, and early scientific teachings - as well as all the authorities that upheld these. With the newly-gained authority of the old Classics a legitimate study of pagan source texts and thus a radical transformation of the medieval knowledge society suddenly seemed possible.

The most significant philosophical renewal the classical Greek texts offered was a way to overcome the medieval dogma of a world dominated by duality. By the early 15th century the Roman Catholic paradigm of an eternal fight between the forces of good and evil had permeated every fabric of life. The physical world had turned into a theatre of war where this raging fight took place day after day - with no end in sight and no escape possible except for salvation in the afterlife. For many potentates as well as the Roman Catholic Church maintaining such a negative worldview towards the material world wasn't a matter of comfort but of (financial) survival.

How else could one force whole European peoples into accepting miserable life circumstances, constant exploitation by the powers and not a spark of hope for betterment except through physical and financial service?

The ideas of Neoplatonism in particular challenged this worldview in the most radical way. From a place of eternal antagonistic duality this philosophy turned the world into a place of divine interconnectedness of all living creatures and substances. If the motto of medieval times had been *'protection through service'* it now turned into *'harmony through understanding'*. Evil, illness and suffering no longer were expressions of the world's natural state after the fall - from which only Christ the saviour could protect his defenseless flock - but of man's failing attempt of restoring harmony amongst all its living beings and forces.

With such a shift in world-views can you see how the role of a ruler had to change as well? In the former his role was to supervise a world naturally torn

by flaws. The best he could do was to offer protection against the constant onslaught of the forces of evil; yet no one expected him ever *to win* such eternal battle. If large parts of society suffered this didn't form a threat to authorities in principle, but could be regarded as a feature of God's own world. Ideals, blessings and bliss were all reserved for the afterlife. Being the boss in medieval times had been a blast!

Now, according to the new worldview the potentate's role was radically different: Here the manifest world was meant to directly reflect divine principles. Within a few decades at least in spirit the stonewall between the garden of Eden and the material world had collapsed. The ruler's role, thus, was to rise as an expression of a spiritual principle that eradicated evil through re-establishing divine harmony in all spheres of human influence. What quickly turned into a nightmare for orthodoxy, for scholars held the promise *of finally mending a torn world back into one.*

Examples of the Medieval Perspective

"Man, the masterpiece of creation also forms the highest end of creation. Because of him the world was created, for him the sun, the moon and the stars are shining and around him all of the spiritual world revolves.

However, by himself man can not do anything; he is dependent upon demonic forces, which from the outside, without his realisation guide all his doings. Constantly he wavers between God and the devil who fight for his soul. (...)

According to the faith of the time spirit and body are not united by nature, yet connected solely by chance which is why the spirit can exist without its body or within any other body."

— HEINRICH BRUNO SCHINDLER, DER ABERGLAUBE DES MITTELALTERS, 1858, P.7/21, TRANSLATION BY FRATER ACHER

Examples of the Hermetic Perspective

"God, being minded to unite in intimate and loving fellowship the beginning and end of created things, made heaven the beginning and man the end, the one the most perfect of imperishable objects of sense, the other the noblest of things earthborn and perishable, being, in very truth, a miniature heaven. He bears about within himself, like holy images, endowments of nature that correspond to the constellations (of the stars)."

— JOHANNES PHILOPONOS, 6TH CENTURY, AN INFLUENTIAL SOURCE ON THE HERMETIC TRADITION, QUOTED AFTER HERMANN STOCKINGER, DIE HERMETISCH-ESOTERISCHE TRADITION, 2004, P.31

"For in truth there is as much virtue in us as there is God in us, as much wickedness as there is the devil; as much reason as there is the angels; as much motion and sense of choice as there is in us the brutes; as much growth as there is of plants; and there is as much salt, sulphur and mercury as there is of mineral matter."

— THOMAS MOFFETT, 1584, QUOTED AFTER HERMANN STOCKINGER, DIE HERMETISCH-ESOTERISCHE TRADITION, 2004, P.31

What scholars were in need of, however, to prove their point and actively begin this transformation was a principle that could bridge the spiritual and physical world. What was needed was a proving point. The sacred gate had stayed locked for centuries, the bridge that had been crossed by the saviour and the saints alone needed to be re-opened to the masses. What was needed was a set of techniques that promised to merge the future blessings of the afterlife with the grim reality of the Medieval physical world. Whatever this principle was, from the viewpoint of the Medieval scholar it needed to make the impossible possible. Quickly it turned out only one word fit such daring exploit, *and that was magic*.

9. THE EMERGENCE OF NATURAL MAGIC

Now, at the advent of the 16th century the problem with research into magic was that it could still land you quickly in prison or on the pyre. Writing under patronage of royal families wasn't an option if you wanted to dig into the actual subject matter rather than skimming the surface. Hell, even premising your grimoire with a public statement that you denounced all magic and only published this book as a deterrent didn't help a lot. Inquisitors and city authorities really tried to keep a stable boat - and were prepared to throw out anyone who rocked it. What was needed was a much more radical transformation, a complete re-branding of the term magic as well as of all the ideas behind it. And within a few decades this is exactly what late Medieval and early Renaissance scholars attempted to do.

Let's return to what we had found about the state of magic at the beginning of the 16th century: On the one hand people on the outside perceived magic to be in a highly fractured and disfigured state, a shadow at best of its once glorious past. People on the inside, at whom we will look later on and who still knew the living philosophy and principles of magic from their own practice, on the other hand, had retreated even further into silence and closed circles. So in the absence of their living voices, the early

Renaissance scholars had an easy game plundering the carcass of Medieval magic.

In their attempt to make magic legit - or at least sub-sections of it - our Renaissance forefathers leveraged the lack of expert voices on the matter as well as the huge amount of ambiguity that had marked this topic for centuries in the public eye. As radical philosophical reformers they set out to reinvent the notion of magic - and make it fit their bill of overcoming the intellectual stalemate the Medieval worldview had brought upon the academic world.

Now, we should assume Ficino, Pico and many others at the time did everything they did with the most positive intent, trying to be true to the spirit of magic while making it relevant to the climate of their own times. The same happened again in the late 19th century when self-proclaimed spiritual scholars mixed up Buddhist concepts with the accelerating Western sciences and claimed that magic could be explained through the newly discovered electro-magnetic forces. They too did everything they did with positive intent.

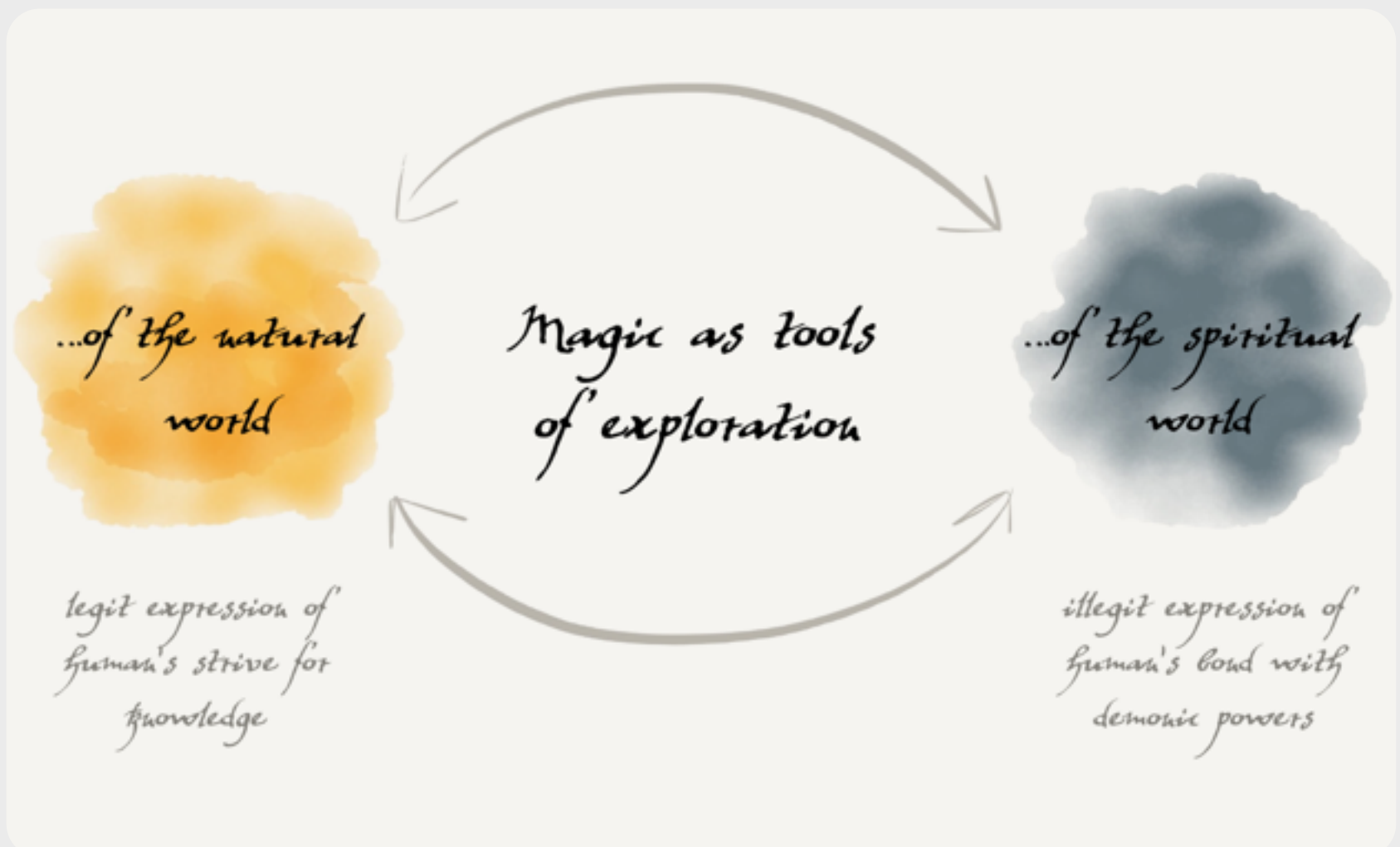
Ruining a tradition doesn't mean anybody has to act with malicious intent, lacking integrity or playing for their own gain alone. In most cases it simply means people involved weren't *sufficiently grounded in the actual practices of a craft*. Instead they approached things from a theoretic perspective predominantly: While we know Ficino read the Picatrix and 'squeezed out all of its juice' for his own works (Zambelli, p.9), we don't know how much of it he actually practiced?

"Ficino and Pico brought to light a number of ideas that were already to be found in patristic and scholastic times, but had received limited attention from professional philosophers. From the end of the fifteenth century these had become dominant among the elites and soon spread abroad among academic and literary circles. The Neoplatonic and Hermetic theories of the two Florentines on the cosmos, the 'spirit' and the forces of nature had given rise to a new idea of magic." (Zambelli, p.2)

So what exactly did this new idea of magic consist of?

“Thus the universe is a machine ruled by imagination in the general picture of sympathy between astral bodies and elementary bodies with the boundless automatism of the astral movers. But these must not be considered either anthropomorphic or modified by human agency. They are pure intelligences, neither demons nor angels. (...) The magic which Ficino defined as natural promised to make men capable of working many wonders, but it claimed to exclude the invocation of demons.” (Zambelli, p.6/7)

Let's step back and simplify. Then we'll see the genius trick our Renaissance forefathers applied to magic: To them magic was nothing but a forgotten set of tools for exploration. What these tools were applied to, was a matter of each practitioner's choice and ultimately would decide whether one's magic was 'black' or 'white'. The path they attempted to establish as a legitimate and safe one was to apply these tools on the exploration of the natural world - on stones, herbs, plants, animals, or even on humans for healing. The opposite path led into self-guided exploration of the spiritual world - and that was where the smell of a burning pyre remained just around the corner.



Maybe think of our modern day research into genetics - and how easy it seems for all of us to intuitively distinguish ‘good’ genetic research (e.g. overcoming genetically caused diseases) from ‘bad’ research within the same field (e.g. genetic modification of stem cells or forbidden cloning). Then mix in the emotions of a largely fundamentalistic religion that held such a strong powerbase in society it could wipe out large sections of researchers by publicly burning them on the pyre if they were perceived to be engaged in the ‘wrong’ type of research. Our modern day public debate about where precisely the line should be drawn between legit and illegit types of genetic research, might be a good comparison to the ambiguities and sensitivities our Renaissance forefathers were confronted with. With the exception that in their case what was at stake for them personally was not only their reputation as a researchers, but their actual lives.

Pico della
Mirandola

spiritual magic

vs.

natural magic

Marsilio
Ficino

profane magic

vs.

natural magic

Pico della
Mirandola

sovereignty

vs.

natural magic

Roger Bacon

magic

vs.

'the art'

Johannes
Butzbach
et. al.

goetia

vs.

magic

In light of this context it doesn't surprise that many authors picked up on the artificial dichotomy introduced to magic and established their own terms and versions of it. Here is a brief selection of 'good' versus 'bad' types of magic that we find in early Renaissance literature (see previous page image).

As we can see '*natural magic*' overall emerged as the accepted term of the type of magic that hopefully wouldn't land one in prison immediately. Applying these 'tools of exploration' on the elements of the physical realm at first glance seemed a safe bet to avoid involvement of demons. Yet, a careful balance needed to be maintained. Denying the existence of demons altogether - in favour of a purely scientific worldview - was just as risky as trying to engage with these powers (Zambelli, p.7). After all for the Catholic Church to maintain its social stronghold in late Medieval society it was still dependent on the constant threat of evil powers. Without demons the need for orthodox spiritual protection would have radically diminished. Thus our 'natural magicians' were slightly hard pressed to explain how precisely they believed magic would work if it didn't involve any sort of spiritual being besides the actual magician themselves.

"(...) by analogy with the farmer, he is a cultivator of the world. Nor does he on that account worship the world, just as the farmer does not worship the earth; but just as a farmer tempers his field to the airs for the sake of human welfare, so that wise man, that priest, for the sake of human welfare tempers the lower parts of the world to the upper parts; and just as a farmer sets the hen [to brood upon] eggs, so the wise man fittingly subjects earthly things to heaven that they may be fostered. God himself always brings this about and by so doing, teaches and urges us to do it in order that the lower things be produced, moved and ruled by the higher." (Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, quoted after Zambelli, p.25)

The goal of re-branding the term 'magic' thus was to establish its followers as "humble and honest interpreter and husbandman of nature, not as a pagan worshipper of earth" (Zambelli, p.25). In order to achieve this their practice needed to:

- (1) focus on establishing harmony and alignment between the ruling influences of the planets and stars and the substances and dynamics governed by them within the sublunar realm as well as
- (2) ensure to exclude any dealings with living spiritual beings in the process.

The key to this trick lay hidden in the power of words: Our forefathers revived the Neoplatonic idea of a cosmos full of celestial chains that stretched all the way from the creator down to the smallest element of creation. Thus the microcosm was directly linked to the macrocosm, the foundation of astrology remained intact and a niche for the performance of a legit form a ‘natural magic’ was established. What they stripped away though was the essential Neoplatonic idea that every link in this chain indeed was constituted by a living being. In the most significant paradigm shift our Western tradition experienced over the last millennium our Renaissance forefathers wiped out the spirits from the spiritual map of the West and replaced them with the idea of abstract intelligences and astrally governed, yet essentially mechanically working influences and forces. The role of the magician thus turned into an operator, a machinist whose job it was to keep the celestial part of the world-engine connected with its physical counterpart.

Here you have the foundations to the Industrialisation of the Western magic and to the most significant loss our occult tradition ever experienced. Most of the deformities, distortions and aberrations of modern Western magic can be traced back to this turning point: the over-stylised central role of the mage and the space taken by immature male fantasies of omnipotence, the loss of a living connection to the beings around us and the ongoing retreat of fairies and elemental beings from human settlements. In short: the inability of most modern day magicians to understand they are but one tiny link in a huge chain of living beings and not the mean or end of where this chain emerges from or leads to. Our role is not to rule, but to connect.

With the switch from a pantheistic worldview where the mage was surrounded by living beings, to a mechanistic world-clock that needed us as its

flawed engineers to constantly stay on time, we lost our greatest good: The ability to blend in. The ability to become a part of something so much larger than ourselves. By putting ourselves into the centre of the world we needed subdue all things to our desire for control. And that turned the world into a tiny, shabby place, because our limited human grasp of power doesn't allow for anything more meaningful.