



Issue 28

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A Report on Current Magical and Esoteric Blogs

Laura Mitchell

The idea for writing an article for the *Societas Magica* newsletter on current academic blogs came out of my own participation in the Recipes Project blog. At present, this blog is the online presence for *Recipes: Food, Medicine, Magic and Science*, a collaborative project headed up by Elaine Leong of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Lisa Smith and Frank Klaassen of the University of Saskatchewan, and myself. The overall goal of the project is to create a database of recipe transcriptions online using crowdsourcing technology, although that aspect of the project is not quite ready to go live yet.¹ The Recipes Project blog is overseen by Lisa Smith and Elaine Leong primarily; each month they solicit contributors, old and new, to write an entry on any topic related to recipes from the Middle Ages to the present. Entries are uploaded to the website by the end of one month and are posted on a set schedule the next. My contributions to this blog have tended to focus on the charms and recipes that have caught my attention for one reason or another. The blog gives me the opportunity to work out some of my preliminary thoughts on particular recipes and share some of the more humorous aspects of my work.² From my work on the Recipes Project I became interested in the concept of academic blogs and their usefulness to other academics, especially in the study of magic and esotericism.

For those who are not already engaged with the genre, blogging has several advantages as a mode of exchange for scholars. Most importantly, academic blogging is much faster than traditional scholarly media, not only in terms of publishing speed (virtually instant), but also in terms of enabling quick feedback from the reading public. This can make it a good venue for advancing new theories and ideas as well as posting short pieces of the “notes and queries” type.³ Part and parcel of their greater speed,

Blogs cont'd

academic blogs tend to be informal in style, which makes them quick and easy to write, and can be more inviting for readers too. For me, blog posts have sometimes had unexpected professional benefits of various kinds. As a (fairly new) active participant in the academic blogging community, I have found that writing posts gives me a unique opportunity to test out new ideas or examine a subject that I might otherwise avoid because it falls outside of my area of expertise.⁴ And as a reader of blogs, I often find material that is useful in teaching. For example I ended up creating a portion of a class around the image of cat paw prints on the fourteenth-century manuscript that made the rounds earlier this year.⁵ The appearance of this image coincided with preparing a lecture I was about to give to my second year history class on the book trade in late medieval England; I used the image to start a discussion on conditions of book production and the fate of manuscripts once they were completed. Finally, and what is most essential from my point of view (as a recent PhD seeking to establish myself and my research), academic blogs can be effective at fostering online networks. The quick conversation speed of academic blogging serves as a ready source of inspiration for the blogger – indeed this active sense of an interested public is a large part of what drives me to continue participating in The Recipes Project.

There are basically two models for academic blogs. Some are individually run, like Got Medieval (www.gotmedieval.com/), one of my favourite sources of medieval

marginalia and monkeys, and Egil Asprem's Heterodoxology blog (discussed below). Blogs by individuals tend to offer a mix of personal and professional information, with the authors engaged in open discussion not just of their areas of research, but often also their experiences in academia. The other model for academic blogs, group blogs, tend to have a rotating set of contributors. Group blogs, like the Religious Studies Project listed below, can be a great way for an organization or large research project to tap the varied interests of its members. Other group blogs, like Whewell's Ghost (also noted below), are a more casual conglomeration of scholars with shared interests. Group blogs have the added advantage of rotating the work of posting entries so that one person does not feel pressured to produce content if other obligations keep them occupied.

The aim of this article is to present the objectives of some of the existing academic blogs on magic and esotericism, their objectives, and highlight some of their recent entries that might be of interest to members of the *Societas Magica* as a way to inspire the membership at large to start thinking about blogs and how we share ideas. The following blogs have been roughly divided into categories; however, it is natural that there will be overlap between categories so they are meant to serve as a rough guide only.

Esotericism and Religion

Egil Asprem, Heterodoxology: heterodoxology.com/ Egil Asprem describes his blog as “dedicated to exploring unconventional thought and behaviour across the board of Western culture” and an extension

of his (recently completed) PhD project at the University of Amsterdam “which looks at various interconnections, encounters and struggles between esoteric thought and modern science, into the blogosphere. Academically, I want to know more about the interplay between heterodoxy, orthodoxy, and popular “doxa” or unreflective knowledge. The idea is to share some of my thoughts on this issue here.”⁶

This is a wonderfully insightful blog in which Asprem offers readers book reviews, updates on esoteric work around the world, and personal reflections on subjects such as science,⁷ politics,⁸ religion,⁹ and more. Several times he has undertaken a series focusing on one topic for an extended period of time. Asprem's most recent series has been an examination of Rupert Sheldrake's book, *The Science Delusion*, and its broader place as a reaction against Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*.¹⁰ Asprem's thought-provoking discussion began with an examination of Sheldrake's presentation to the public and has been progressing through the ten dogmas of science that Sheldrake believes govern science today.

Asprem also includes a blog roll in the sidebar that contains links to blogs concerned not only with the history of magic and esotericism but more general history of science and general academic blogs (far more than could be covered here).

One of the blogs to which Heterodoxology supplies a link is **Invocatio**, invocatio.wordpress.com/, which styles itself as a blog (mostly) about western esotericism. Written by Sarah Veale, a student

Blogs cont'd

at York University in Toronto, it chronicles her experience as a student of religious studies. Her posts are entertaining and informative and provide an interesting insight into a wide range of topics. In addition to her personal reflections on subjects ranging from Plato¹¹ to Aleister Crowley,¹² Veale has a weekly feature called *Mysteria Misc. Maxima*, which provides links to interesting news articles and blog posts on religion and esotericism.

The Religious Studies Project:

www.religiousstudiesproject.com/

The Religious Studies Project does not necessarily fall under the umbrella of magic or esotericism. It is a group blog founded by David G. Robertson and Christopher R. Cotter in association with the British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR). It describes its purpose as “to help disseminate contemporary issues in RS to a wider audience and provide a resource for undergraduate students of RS, their teachers, and interested members of the public. It aims to provide engaging, concise and reliable accounts of the most important concepts, traditions, scholars and methodologies in the contemporary study of religion, without pushing a religious or nonreligious agenda or resorting to presenting ‘fact files’ about ‘World Religions’.”¹³

It has both traditional written blog posts and podcast interviews with leading scholars of religious studies and related fields. It offers a space for established professionals and up and coming students to present their research to a broad audience. Entries that will be of particular note to readers of the newsletter

are an interview with Wouter J. Hanegraaff on western esotericism¹⁴ and a written response by Damon Lycourinos.¹⁵ In addition to these articles, The Religious Studies Project has pages with links to other resources on religious studies, relevant journals, and listings of job opportunities, conference announcements, and calls for papers.

Hermeticism

The Hermetic Library Blog:

library.hrmtc.com/ The Hermetic Library describes itself as “one of the most comprehensive and popular resources on the Internet for the kind of information in its collection” and this is certainly borne out after only a brief inspection of the archive. Run by an anonymous practitioner (who refers to him or herself as “the librarian”) of the modern esoteric arts, this blog offers a wide range of sources from art to music to poetry to book reviews to translations of older material. Most of the material posted has been found around the internet or submitted to be made part of the collection; however, there are some original posts by the librarian on miscellaneous matters. The Hermetic Library is a combination of the more academic-minded and the experiences and thoughts of those engaged in esotericism as a living tradition. This blog is the least traditionally “academic” one in the list; nevertheless, I include it here for those who may be interested in modern practices, whether as a scholar, practitioner, or both.

The Ritman Library Blog:

www.ritmanlibrary.com/category/blog/

This is the blog for the Ritman Library, otherwise known as the *Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica*, located in Amsterdam. The library

was founded by Joost R. Ritman, an Amsterdam businessman, “to bring together under one roof manuscripts and printed works in the field of the Hermetic tradition, and to show the interrelatedness between the various collecting areas and their relevance for the present day.”¹⁶ The library’s blog generally covers events and exhibits in the library (such as a report on the opening of their most recent exhibit, “A Curious Tsar: Peter the Great and Discovering the Secrets of Nature in Amsterdam”¹⁷), as well as items of interest in the library. Entries are posted anonymously by members of the library staff. The blog hosts the Infinite Fire Webinar Series in conjunction with the Center for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam. This series, presented in turn by Peter J. Forshaw, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, and Marco Pasi, offers introductions to some of the texts and objects at the Ritman Library related to their respective interests and are sure to appeal to *Societas Magica* members.

History of Science

Whewell’s Ghost:

whewellsghost.wordpress.com/

This group blog was begun by Rebekah Higgitt, John M. Lynch, and John Wilkins in 2010 and now boasts a large list of contributors from around the globe. Whewell’s Ghost is named after William Whewell, one of the most important figures in the development of the history and philosophy of science in nineteenth-century Britain. This is more properly a collaborative blog on the history and philosophy of science than a blog on magic or esotericism. However,

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Sessions Sponsored by the Societas Magica at the Forty-eighth International Congress on Medieval Studies, May 9-12, 2013, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI

1. Session 222, Friday, 10:00 AM, Schneider 1355

WATER AS SYMBOL, SIGN, AND TRIAL: AQUATIC SEMANTICS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

(Co-Sponsor: Research Group on Manuscript Evidence)

Presider: Frank Klaassen, Univ. of Saskatchewan

Water as Medium of Fate in Assorted Icelandic Sagas

Thomas B. de Mayo, J. Sargeant Reynolds
Community College

Still Waters — Running Waters: The Topography of Evil in Medieval Art and Imagery

Mihai-D. Grigore

Response: Florin Curta, Univ. of Florida

2. Session 441, Saturday, 1:30 PM, Schneider 1245

ASTROLOGY AND MAGIC

Presider: Claire Fanger, Rice Univ.

Cosmogony, Astrology, and Power in the Late Antique Yotzer

Marla Segol, Univ. at Buffalo

High Times: Astral Magic and the Curious World of Psychoactive Substances in the Picatrix

Daniel Attrell, Univ. of Waterloo

What Motivated Magic? The Picatrix as a Sample of Social History

David Porreca, Univ. of Waterloo

3. Session 497, Saturday, 3:30 PM, Schneider 1245

EXORCISM AND OTHER MAGICAL PRACTICES IN MEDIEVAL CHINA

Presider: Vincci Chui, Univ. of Toronto

Chinese “Great Peace Symbols” from Talismanic Paraphernalia to Taoist Liturgy (Fourth to Fourteenth Centuries)

Grégoire Espeset, Centre de Recherche sur les Civilisations de l’Asie Orientale (Paris)

Magic or Religion? Ritual Power in Medieval China (and East Asia)

~~Gil Raz, Dartmouth College~~ PAPER CANCELLED

Witchcraft as a High-Tech Crime in Medieval Chinese Law

Yulia Mylnikova, St. Petersburg State Univ.

“The spirit gave the illness: sacrifice to it and all will be well”: Magical Pediatrics in a Ninth-Century Sino-Khotanese Fragment

Dimitri Drettas, Centre de Recherche sur les Civilisations de l’Asie Orientale (Paris)

4. Session 581, Sunday, 10:30 AM, Bernhard 213

THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF MAGIC

Presider: David Porreca, Univ. of Waterloo

Arma Christi Roll or Textual Amulet?: The Manuscript Evidence

Mary Agnes Edsall, Institute for Research in the Humanities, Univ. of Wisconsin–Madison

Down to Earth: The Archaeology of Medieval Magic

Mirko Gutjahr, Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte

Inscribed in Lead and Concealed in Stone: The History of a Hitherto Unknown Late Medieval Sigillum Dei

László Sándor Chardonnens

Societas Magica Business Meeting

Saturday, noon, Fetzer 1035

Proposed Agenda

1. Opening Remarks (President)
2. Reports on current projects in Magic in History Series and Sourcebooks (Series representative)
3. Report on upgrades in

website internal and external communications system (Secretary)

4. Financial Report (Treasurer or proxy)
5. Decisions to be made on new projects to benefit Societas Members (President to provide rough budget for below items)
 - a. Graduate student travel support?
 - b. Prize for best paper delivered at Kalamazoo?

- c. Support for invited speaker for Kalamazoo plenary and/or sponsored sessions at other conferences— every other year?
6. Motion to adopt new by-laws
7. Discussion of sessions for 2014
8. Newsletter – Discussion of whether we continue publishing, appoint managing editor, or replace with blog.

We already have a tight schedule for this meeting; however, if you have input on the current Agenda, or would like an additional item added, please send suggestions to Frank Klaassen (frank.klaassen@usask.ca).

Blogs cont'd

there are some entries on alchemy that may be of interest to readers of this newsletter. These include entries on alchemy in the nineteenth century,¹⁸ and a recent entry on the seventeenth-century accusation of witchcraft against Johannes Kepler's mother.¹⁹

Although this list of blogs is short, I hope that the preceding discussion has illuminated the depth and variety of magical, esoteric, religious, and scientific blogs available. Material can be found on almost any topic imaginable in text, audio, and video. There is a steady stream of scholarship and information being published on academic blogs, and whether you choose to write into them, or just read them, these forums have a lot to offer.

Endnotes

¹ The best example of crowdsourcing in an academic setting is Zooniverse (zooniverse.org), a website that oversees a collection of projects that use the public to help conduct its research. For example, the Ancient Lives project (www.zooniverse.org/project/ancientlives) enlists the public in transcribing Greek papyri from the Oxyrhynchus collection,

while users on the Moon Zoo project (www.moonzoo.org/) are helping to map out the surface of the moon using images from NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter.

² As in this post, recipes.hypotheses.org/357, looking at some of the lighter-hearted charms and recipes of the later medieval period.

³ Academic Twitter accounts could be included in here too, as they are appearing with increasing frequency. The book historian Erik Kwakkel gives an excellent explanation of the utility of Twitter in the academic world in two posts on his blog: medievalfragments.wordpress.com/2013/01/18/my-first-year-on-twitter-how-i-became-erik_kwakkel/ and medievalfragments.wordpress.com/2012/08/11/a-window-display-of-140-characters-why-and-how-twitter-works-for-me-as-an-academic/.

⁴ Such as my latest post on the Recipes Project where I look at a sixteenth-century charm and its later appearances, recipes.hypotheses.org/1033.

⁵ There have been numerous posts on this manuscript since Erik Kwakkel re-tweeted Emir O. Filipović's photo of the cat paw prints on a fourteenth-century manuscript in the Dubrovnik State Archives. I used the following article in class because it included a number of other examples of animals interacting with medieval manuscripts: medievalfragments.wordpress.com/2013/02/22/paws-pee-and-mice-cats-among-medieval-manuscripts/

⁶ heterodoxology.com/about/

⁷ heterodoxology.com/2013/01/12/faking-it/

⁸ heterodoxology.com/2012/04/15/circus-breivik/

⁹ heterodoxology.com/2012/11/09/whats-the-deal-with-glastonbury/

¹⁰ The fourth, and most recent, installment can be read here: heterodoxology.com/2013/03/03/scientific-delusions-or-delusions-about-science-part-four-on-natural-laws-and-resonating-habits/.

¹¹ invocatio.wordpress.com/2013/03/06/platonic-dualism-and-gender/

¹² invocatio.wordpress.com/2011/07/12/five-reasons-aleister-crowley-remains-relevant/

¹³ www.religiousstudiesproject.com/about-us/

¹⁴ www.religiousstudiesproject.com/2012/10/22/wouter-hanegraaff-on-western-esotericism/

¹⁵ www.religiousstudiesproject.com/2012/10/24/the-twilight-of-esoteric-wanders-and-academic-ponders-by-damon-lycourinos/

¹⁶ www.ritmanlibrary.com/about-us/founder/

¹⁷ www.ritmanlibrary.com/2013/02/exhibition-a-curious-tsar-peter-the-great/

¹⁸ whewellsghost.wordpress.com/2010/11/14/exploded-systems-views-of-alchemy-in-the-in-19th-century/

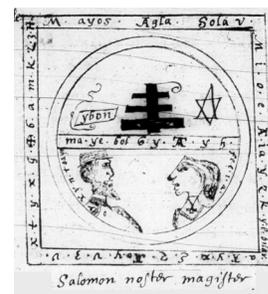
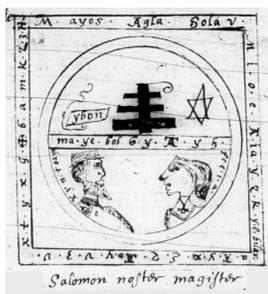
¹⁹ whewellsghost.wordpress.com/2012/12/27/christmas-trilogy-2012-part-iii-what-to-do-if-your-mothers-a-witch/ Note that this entry is only a teaser; the full entry is continued on the personal blog of one of the regular contributors to Whewell's Ghost.

The Societas Magica invites proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter.

We are looking for short essays (1500-2500 words) announcing new developments deriving from research in the study and teaching of magic and its related topics. We would be especially interested to see lead articles on modern magic, or periods other than medieval. We are also looking for smaller pieces for our notes and queries column. News about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries, or other such items are all welcomed.

Please contact David Porreca: dporreca@uwaterloo.ca

www.societasmagica.org



Notes and Queries

In progress: a new model for the Societas Magica blog

Claire Fanger

This timely presentation of the virtues and styles of the academic blog is a useful launching pad for discussion of potential uses of our own Societas Magica members' blog. In January 2011, when we opened the upgraded Societas Magica website, we included an internal blog, visible to members only. The blog has languished, largely ignored by the membership and invisible to everyone else. It has been clear to me for some time that we needed to put more thought into both our internal and external communications systems.

What I propose now is to turn the face of our blog outward and make it visible to all who visit the Societas Magica site. I hope this will make it more interesting to do, and it may help publicize our research and provide a forum for airing any interesting items of a scholarly or professional nature. You will no longer need to log in to see the blog, and it will be visible to internet searches. (You will still need to be logged in if you want to post a comment).

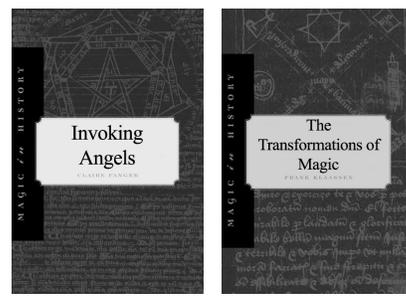
I suggest that a group blog seems the best way to disperse the workload, with a rotating schedule of shifts. Each shift might last two or three months, depending on the number of volunteers we get and what ends up being comfortable. The only requirement will be that each blogger undertake at least one post a month and that it have some scholarly

relevance to our interest area. I am happy to announce that Damon Lycourinos, a graduate student in Religious Studies at the University of Edinburgh, has already volunteered to take the first shift. If anyone else would like to take a shift during the upcoming year please write to front_desk@societasmagica.org and we can begin to set up a schedule.

Further, in the interest of enabling an internal communication system that is exclusive to the membership, we are currently designing an email discussion group that is linked directly to the member database. The Societas Magica group at yahoo will then be disbanded as we move to in-house forums that can be directly managed by members. The email group should be a suitable forum for posting quick questions or for sharing texts, images, or information that members do not (yet) wish to make public outside the group. We hope that these new features will be in place some time before mid June. Stay tuned.

20% Discount

Members of the Societas Magica are entitled to a 20% discount on all books in the Magic in History series put out by Pennsylvania State University Press. See your member home page for discount code to use when ordering books online, by phone (800-326-9180), or fax (877-778-2665).



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