



Magic in the Middle Ages

Richard Kieckhefer

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) ➔

Magic in the Middle Ages

Richard Kieckhefer

Magic in the Middle Ages Richard Kieckhefer

How was magic practiced in medieval times? How did it relate to the diverse beliefs and practices that characterized this fascinating period? Richard Kieckhefer surveys the growth and development of magic in medieval times. He examines its relation to religion, science, philosophy, art, literature and politics before introducing us to the different types of magic, the kinds of people who practiced magic, and the reasoning behind their beliefs. This book places magic at the crossroads of medieval culture, shedding light on many other aspects of life in the Middle Ages.

Magic in the Middle Ages Details

Date : Published May 1st 2000 by Cambridge University Press (first published 1989)

ISBN : 9780521785761

Author : Richard Kieckhefer

Format : Paperback 240 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Historical, Medieval, Religion, Fantasy, Magic, Medieval History

 [Download Magic in the Middle Ages ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Magic in the Middle Ages ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Magic in the Middle Ages Richard Kieckhefer

From Reader Review Magic in the Middle Ages for online ebook

Gaz says

Richard Kieckhefer has written a broad, detailed and objective examination of magic in the Middle Ages. The reader is presented with various perspectives, and over the course of the book a vivid picture is built up showing how these various perspectives interconnect, allowing the reader to come away with a lucid understanding of the Medieval conception of magic.

The start of the book is broadly concerned with defining magic and also exploring how magic has been perceived since Antiquity. The key point in defining magic is that there existed both natural magic and demonic magic in Medieval thought. The former was believed to make use of natural but occult (hidden) powers within nature and was essentially a branch of science, whilst the latter involved demons, whether implicitly or explicitly, and was heavily connected with religion. It is nonetheless shown that these definitions were not fixed and often the line between them blurred.

Another important point raised in these early chapters is that the usual definition of magic as being coercive and religion as being supplicatory completely falls apart when we consider how magic was actually practiced. Often, it is impossible to separate the two because magic often had a heavy Christian component, both in practice and conception. And this is one of the things I love about the book; it dispels many misconceptions and forces the reader to consider the mind-set of these people. For instance, while it would be easy to assume that it was a purely magical act when people used relics or the Eucharist to bless or to heal, these objects in fact had power because they were connected to God in some way, and so to strip away this religious element and call it a magical act only, would be to misunderstand the intent and belief of the people who did such acts. The same can be said about charms, blessings and adjurations which were often heavily Christian, drawing upon the power of biblical figures, passages and allegories. Having said this, many charms did also contain pre-Christian elements and their evolution is described.

It is commonly thought that opposition to magic is a Christian concept, but the book shows that magic and its practitioners have always been looked upon with high suspicion. We find evidence of this from as far back as antiquity with fictional literature as well as non-fictional writings. The Medieval Church did elaborate on these themes, and certainly in the Late Middle Ages took them to a whole new level, but the pool they drew from was pretty well established.

The book then begins to explore what types of people practiced magic. First explored is the common tradition of magic, which was a diverse range of magical practices, practiced by a wide range of people. These people include monks, leeches, parish priests, lay healers, diviners, physicians, surgeons, barber surgeons, midwives and friars. The magic of the common tradition was accessible to anyone in society and was perhaps what is termed 'low-magic'. Healing was a big component of this genre and we find various people using what we might call healing magic, though it is unlikely that we would hear the practitioners use this term. First described are leech books, which although had a natural magic element to them, also contained a religious component. The chapter progresses through various topics such as charms, amulets and talismans, sorcery, divination and popular astrology, and trickery. It is a pretty long chapter and contains a plethora of examples which I enjoyed. I find the Medieval conception of sorcery interesting, it being defined as magic that infringed upon a person's freewill and magic that deliberately caused harm. This definition proved to be problematic because it was pretty subjective, but love magic was widely considered sorcery, as were cases of impotence. The actual magic used in Sorcery was on the whole simply healing magic inverted and the use of biblical allegories was interesting.

Next the romance of magic in courtly culture is examined, and it is here that a different perception and

understanding of magic begins to emerge. While the romances do acknowledge the danger of magic, it becomes more synonymous with “enchantment” and other such terms. Magicians were common at court, as was divination, love magic and poisoning, and magic or the accusation of magic often acted as a type of barometer for the tension within court. We also see a different type of magic emerge, with automations and magical gems. In the Norse Sagas, words were the main source of magic, but in the romances gems play a much more prominent role, as do potions, herbs and artefacts with marvellous properties. We see further difference in the role played by magic in the Arthurian Legends because it becomes much more symbolic and is often portrayed as a catalyst for psychological change or betterment.

Next we come to quite an in-depth chapter about the importation of Arabic learning in the 12th Century and how this led to major changes in the West. With the flow of new translations of Arabic texts came many new ideas regarding Alchemy and Astrology, which also had Greek influences too. Described are the basic tenants of Astrology which differ somewhat to modern popular conceptions. A major dilemma was whether the ability to predict the future impinged on God’s prerogative, so there was much discussion about how Medieval thinkers tackled the idea of determinism. Astral magic was given a short exploration, before going on to Alchemy, a particularly interesting subject. The reader is shown how alchemy led to many advances in science and medicine, and although this chapter was long, I felt the subject could take up an entire book. The chapter closes with a discussion on the Cult of Secrecy and Renaissance Magus, the latter again highlighting the importance of religion. So too does this chapter chart the journey away from the common tradition into a much more learned type of magic, only available to a section of society who are fully literate. This separation is shown to have major consequences as we head into the penultimate chapter.

Necromancy is the subject of this chapter. A brief introduction explains how the term was changed during the Middle Ages to denote explicitly demonic magic. Originally the term meant divination using the dead, but medieval theology saw this as trickery by demons. The people who engaged in this practice were clerics, who were of course literate and books were essential to this practice. A clerical underground is described as a mixture of young clerics, chantry priests, monks and Friars, and what connected them was broadly a combination of free time and partial or incomplete training. The reader is then provided with examples of rituals and formulas for conjuring spirits. The practice of necromancy was explicitly demonic magic in medieval terms, and practitioners not only inverted the practices of the common tradition, but showed the demons reverence. Often, the aims of practitioners included the control of minds and wills of other people or animals, the creation of various illusions or the divination of things normally unknowable, all with the help of demons. While this may seem fanciful, we find corroboration not only in the writings of those who opposed the practice, but also in the books and manuals of the practitioners. The chapter is really good and contains lots of information about how it was practiced, the mentality of the necromancer, and also how it was portrayed in the exemplars. An interesting point of difference between the exemplars and practice is the use of the circle; in the former, it is seen as protective, whereas in practice it was actually used to contain inscriptions and other paraphernalia rather than acting as a protective boundary. There is shown to be an important connection between necromancy and exorcisms, with the aim to command rather than expel demons, and also with astral magic. The mentality of the necromancer is complex because he often seeks God’s help in his work, and although many would openly admit to working with malign entities, in some cases the morality of the being invoked and of the necromancer himself is much more ambiguous. In a sense the necromancer is shown to have a perverse sense of piety.

The final chapter deals with the reaction to all of these diverse practices and is focused on the closing years of the middle ages. The concerns were both legal and moral; legalisation was concerned with the harm caused by magic, whereas the moralists were concerned with diabolic implications of all magic and also with the superstitious (unsanctioned) use of holy objects and ceremony. However, the line between the two was often faint and it was common for theological concerns to taint secular legislation, and records show that cases in which harm was caused by natural means (poison) were charged under the same law codes as harmful magic. Punishment was often severe if it was dealt by the secular authorities, while the punishment handed out by the church was generally less lethal and consisted of penance in various kinds, which was self-

imposed, as well as excommunication for varying lengths of time. The increase in law education meant that expert opinion was increasingly sought, causing a more nuanced approach to who was prosecuted and for what. The chapter then goes on to discuss the moralist concerns and the sequence of events start to head steadily downhill from here. The preachers conflated many aspects of magic in their sermons, and while it has to be said that there were some thinkers who were willing to explain a wide variety of phenomena in terms of natural magic – incantations for example were said to work via auto-suggestion – the broad trend was towards the stance that all magic was demonic, whether you knew it or not. Towards the end of the Middle Ages much effort was put towards reforming the Catholic Church and to rid it from superstitious practices, and it was during this time that a misogynistic view began to fully emerge of magic and its practitioners. The in-house reform coincided with the actual 16th Century Reformation and is seen as a broad effort at reform, and the notion of superstition is a key cog in this movement.

The closing pages of the book further elucidate upon this crucial conflation between natural magic and demonic magic, charting the rise of persecution, from its humble accusatory beginnings all the way through to the inquisitions. Along the way the evolution of the Witch stereotype is tracked, with its explicit anti-Christian connotations. Undoubtedly the implications of church doctrine underpin this stereotype, and yet equally it is shown that the structure of society plays an important role too. The thinkers who conflated the natural magic of the common tradition with demonic magic were within the same corner of society as the necromancers, and so when they peered out of their offices on high, they merely saw their own image reflected back at them and thus their perception was ill informed. In short, here existed a huge chasm between the perception of judges, theologians and inquisitors, and the actual practices and beliefs of those condemned and persecuted. The chapter closes by detailing the specific components of the witch stereotype and also lays out the conditions that gave rise to the witch hunts in the mid-fifteenth century including the spark that ignited them. The spark was the Catholic reform within its church, while the conditions were a mixture of the use of torture and inquisitorial investigations, the suspicion that natural magic might turn out to be demonic, the idea of an anti-Christian sect and the witch stereotype itself.

To sum up, this is a fantastic read. It is in depth, extremely objective and enjoyable. It teaches you the importance of context and it encourages you to appreciate the nuances of history. It is sufficiently focused, and yet you are able to appreciate the many diverse perspectives that create the history of magic in the middle ages. It is well written and easy to understand, and there is no agenda. Facts are presented with no bias, and the reader is always given exceptions so as to avoid generalisations. If you are a historian, you will enjoy the objectivity with which the author handles the sources. There are adequate notes, but they are kept to a minimum, with a good bibliography at the end. If you are interested in magical practices, many examples are given, and you will learn how to appreciate the context in which they were practiced. The physical book is deceptively thin because the font is small, but inside is a wealth of information.

Highly recommended.

Alessandra says

Manuale molto interessante, che tratta la storia della magia medievale in modo dettagliato. Consigliato, se vi interessa l'argomento, soprattutto come introduzione generale alla tematica.

Sabine says

I didn't quite make it all the way through this one before I had to take it back to the library, and I was not

about to expand the energy to renew it. The book was fine, I am however a fiction reader who is trying my hardest to read at least one non fiction a month. The material in this book was good and very interesting, but it was written too academic for my taste. I think you would enjoy this material if you enjoy more if you enjoy that style of writing. That being said, the material was well planned out and the book did give me a lot of insight into magic and the middle ages.

Aleksandra says

A really thorough introduction to the topic. Entertaining and easy to read.

Christopher Plaisance says

In this volume Kieckhefer presents a clear and concise description of Medieval magic which, by means of illustrations throughout from exemplars of period texts manages to effect a presentation of magic's history as it was present in various sectors of Medieval society. Of particular interest to me was his exploration of the so-called "clerical underworld" as the fountainhead of Medieval necromancy. This fascinated me both in that it was this group who was at once responsible for the semantic alteration of the term "necromancy" to mean demonic evocation *and* for the adaption of clerical exorcisms into the evocative rites of the Medieval grimoire tradition. Overall, as an introduction to the phenomenon of Medieval magic, Kieckhefer's text provides a sound overview which can, perhaps, only be seriously faulted for relying a bit too much on secondary sources—something which makes the investigation of the magicians themselves more difficult for researchers.

Clayton Brannon says

Well written and researched book on magic and its origins and the effects it had on the middle ages. Thoroughly enjoyable read.

Sesra says

Büyü hakkında çok detaylı olmasa bile Orta Çağ'a ait ele geçen kaynaklardan bahsederek genel bir anlatım sunuyor kitap. Konuyla ilgilenenler ve merak edenler için bir nevi başlangıç noktası sayılabilecek, yola çökmelerine yardımcı edebilecek bir kitap niteliğinde. O yüzden çok da sürükleyici, ohoo neler de varmış dedirtici bir anlatım beklemeyin, çoğu yerde biraz kafa bulandırıcı ve sıkıcı da olabiliyor.

Hilary (A Wytch's Book Review) says

An excellent textbook showing how in the Middle Ages Magic was dealt with, who did it and how was it seen in society. Also how attitudes towards it changed over time - well worth a read!

Sonya says

A good but dense, scholarly read. I highly recommend this for those who want to understand the popular beliefs of the Middle Ages and why/how the Inquisition starts. It connects natural forces, science, the stars, etc. with religion. It shows how fine a line it is between "magic" and "religion." Moreover it shows the importance of Arabic culture in the development of beliefs. It is also surprising to see who is doing the magic (and it was not always mean old hags!). However, it does lead to more questions if you are really interested in the subject, and his "books for further reading" lacks a source for Thomas Aquinas, who he refers to a couple of times throughout the book.

Richard says

A nice primer.

Lauren Albert says

For a text meant for undergraduate courses, I thought this was very good and not dumbed-down at all. Kieckhefer discusses different kinds of magic (black and white, occult and natural, etc.) and the different attitudes towards them. The subjects of class and gender were covered but without them dominating the book (which they shouldn't for a general course on the topic). Even though I've read a lot about witchcraft, magic and the occult in early modern times, I found the book interesting.

frogfairie says

3 1/2 stars

Owlseyes says

(Christ and Mary blessing the herbs; 14th century)

(the mandrake root had a sort of personality...)

(...and powerful magical effects...)

(...but you had to be careful while extracting it; solution: stuff your ears with earth)

Defining Magic in the Middle Ages isn't that easy, so suggests the author, as the notion took on several meanings through the years. Yet, by the 12th century the definition by Isidore of Seville (560-636) was a good one; it implied magic as a source of "divination" and encompassed several "disciplines": geomancy,

hydromancy, aeromancy, and pyromancy (divination by earth, water, air and fire) but also the "divinatory observation of the flight and cries of birds, the entrails of sacrificial animals, and the positions of stars and planets (i.e. astrology)". Then Isidore included : enchantment (magical use of words), ligatures (medical use of magical objects bound to the patient), and various "other phenomena". Quite a broad definition. One author, Alexander of Hales, included in the word 'divination' several species of occult art, sorcery and illusion. William of Auvergne (a theologian and bishop of Paris) acknowledged the distinction between natural and demonic magic.

Through the ages, the book shows that the Egyptians and the Greeks used "magical gems" and the pronunciation of "magical words". Homer's Odysseus had to face the enchantments cast by Circe on his companions (transformed into pigs) in her island; to which Odysseus countered with a protecting magical herb provided by Hermes. Circe performed necromancy.

Saint Patrick had to fight the power of the druids (even in contests). The Norse legends refer magic and magic amulets. Likewise, the sagas mention sorcery.

But one question remains throughout: where does the power of magic issue from? from God? or from the demons?

Kieckhefer approaches also several instances of Middle Age literature ('romances') and, still, the question lingers on: "is the magic of the romances natural or demonic?". He finds cases where "even when magic was most explicitly demonic, then it held a kind of romantic fascination".

(Morgan Le Fey studied Magic)

But then we have the Islam factor. As the Crusades happened, many works in Arabic got translated (especially about astrology and astral magic) into Latin, namely. And that turned important both for Medicine and Magic; even for Philosophy.

"A surgeon or a barber surgeon was supposed to know which signs of the zodiac governed which parts of the body, because it was dangerous to operate or bleed a patient when the wrong constellation was dominant"

"If the stars make a man a murderer or a thief, then all the more it is the first cause, God, who does this, which it is shameful to suggest".

Gerard de Feltre (13th century), in Summa on the Stars

J.M. Hushour says

This is a perfectly fine look at what the heck magic meant to people, lay or otherwise, especially otherwise. In fact, one of the more interesting things one could take away from this book is how much magic and the mystical arts were largely the preserve of churchmen and elites who wanted to preserve its status as a special thing that only they got to do! Sounds familiar, right?

Other fun bits include K's discussion of how Islamic science filtered up into the European backwater and were the sources of not only the "scientific" knowledge of the time, but also the sources of a lot of the magic stuff.

It is an enjoyable book, perhaps too curt, actually, since the discussion of how magic quickly became utterly

diabolical instead of semi-diabolical (in fashionable church circles) is too brief.

Freyja Vanadis says

This book wasn't quite what I expected. The author writes in a very dry, scholarly way, and it wasn't really the material I was hoping for.
