

Prof. Scott B. Noegel
Chair, Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization
University of Washington

Book review:

Burnett, Charles. *Magic and Divination in the Middle Ages: Texts and Techniques in the Islamic and Christian Worlds.* Hampshire, UK: Variorum, 1996.

First Published in:

Digest of Middle Eastern Studies 6/4 (1997), 87-90.



In the context of the qur'anic Thamud story, however, where it occurs at the point of highest dramatic intensity and narrative urgency, and where there is obviously some higher degree of specificity, *tamattu* must be afforded its broader hermeneutically and literary-critically indispensable intertextuality, which ought to be, ultimately, that of Exodus and Numbers, in order for that qur'anic *tamattu* to be appreciated rather than hesitantly—and invariably with a touch of bemusement—accepted (pp. 26-27).

Nevertheless, speaking as a common reader unused to the jargon of current literary criticism, I can testify that it is possible, with disciplined concentration and a good dictionary, to penetrate this dense, sometimes turgid, prose and that the fascinating insights to be gained into the process of Arabian "mythopoeia" are well worth the effort.

In brief, the story of the finding of the golden bough turns out to be a drama played out on two stages: the raid against Tabuk and the tragedy that struck the Thamud at al-Hijr when they rejected the mission of the Prophet Salih, paralleling, of course, both the prophetic career of Muhammad, in general, and the reluctance of his companions to take part in the Tabuk campaign, specifically. But to reduce Stetkevych's reconstruction of the golden bough myth to such stark dimensions would be to misrepresent the substance and texture of his work. For the whole point of reconstructive and interpretative exercises such as Stetkevych's and Frazer's is to unearth the universal core meanings of a specific myth and to trace its roots and branches in its own culture and others. Without attempting to guide readers through Stetkevych's labyrinth of "poeticizing" and "demythologizing" the Thamud and invoking echoes of the bough in Western literature, suffice it to point to his conclusion that, in its Arabian manifestation, the golden bough may well have symbolized the scepter of "priestly kingship." Stetkevych says, "After all, Muhammad, the heir of Thamudic Arabia, is also history's most salient case of priestly-prophetic 'kingship'" (p. 112).

Well, this is certainly a novel way of looking at the Prophet, and we can undoubtedly expect other scholars to follow Stetkevych's pioneering path in pursuit of other mythological clues embedded in the vast and varied literature recorded about Muhammad. One might begin with the hint dropped inconspicuously by the author himself, namely a variant ring, rather than a bough, which, according to al-Waqidi, one of the Tabuk raiders found and Muhammad discarded in the ruins of al-Hijr.



Magic and Divination in the Middle Ages: Texts and Techniques in the Islamic and Christian Worlds

Charles Burnett

Hampshire, Great Britain: Variorum, 1996. 370 pages.
\$98.95 hardback (ISBN 0-86078-615-3).

Review by
Scott B. Noegel, Ph.D.
University of Washington

This work brings together twenty of Charles Burnett's most important contributions to the subject of magic and divination in the Middle Ages. Despite being an assortment of lectures and previously published articles, each retaining its original style and pagination, the book's organization enables each successive article to build topically and chronologically upon the previous one. The coherence of the book, its copious editions and translations of dozens of primary sources, and its indices of names, manuscripts, and incipits of magical and divinatory texts make this volume an accessible and invaluable resource to the scholar and interested nonspecialist.

Burnett opens the book with a discussion of the historical and textual evidence for necromancy and the making of talismans. Albert Magnus' mid-thirteenth-century work *Speculum astronomiae*, Dominicus Gundissalinus' *De divisione philosophiae*, Petrus Alfonsi's *Dialogue*, pseudo-Ptolemy's *De Imaginibus*, and Thabit b. Qurra's ninth-century talismantic text of the same name are examined for the justifications their authors give in support of the study of the magical arts. Burnett reveals the extent to which magic functioned as a "useful" science and demonstrates that some twelfth-century erudites, such as Adelard of Bath and John of Seville and Limia, even viewed



magic as a sub-discipline of philosophy.

This article sets the stage for the next in which Burnett examines Adelard of Bath's translations of astrological works. Adelard's sources, Burnett argues, were keenly aware of Arabic and Hebrew astrological and astronomical writings. Burnett's meticulous investigation suggests that "the earliest translations of Adelard of Bath could reveal in an interesting way the first stages of the emergence of astrology as a mathematical science in Europe in the Middle Ages." (II, p. 142).¹

The next few studies continue the investigation into medieval works on magic, albeit with different foci. For example, Burnett examines the inter-relationships among the various textual traditions that attribute the astrological arts to Aristotle. He then explores the translating activities of the twelfth-century Spanish Mozarabs (Arabized Christians) and their roles as transmitters of divinatory and magical knowledge. Throughout Burnett offers fascinating glimpses into the lives of Andalusian scholars who acquainted themselves equally with the magical arts and exact sciences. His insightful observation that the abacus was introduced into Europe during this period as a tool associated with the magical use of numerals is a case in point.

From here the book moves to Tudela, a hotbed of translational activity and the home of Abraham ibn Ezra (1086-1164) and Judah Halevi (1075-1141), among others. Of interest to Burnett, however, are Robert of Ketton, a later canon of the Church in Tudela, and Hermann of Carinthia, also working in the region, who translated and popularized several works of Arabic science and magic (IV, p. 1044). Burnett's impressive command of the textual sources sheds light on the extent to which magical traditions circulated among certain clergy members and how ecclesiastical justifications often gave this circulation longevity. Indeed, as Burnett shows, translations of magical texts were continued a couple of decades later in Toledo by Gerard of Cremona, with the help of Dominicus Gundissalinus, and in the fourteenth century during the reign of the Almohads. Nevertheless, as Burnett points out, renderings into Latin increasingly took the form of official translations created "to aggrandize the newly emerging Spanish nation, or to convert the Muslim" (IV, 1046). While surprisingly faithful to their originals, they usually cast Islam in a negative light.

Also discussed by Burnett is the popular legend of the transmission of esoteric sciences through a succession of three Hermes and its relationship to Abu Ma'ashar's *Kitab al-Uluf*. Specifically, Burnett studies two hitherto unrecognized references to the *Kitab al-Uluf* in a Latin work of the twelfth century "which could suggest a direct



knowledge of the work by at least one Latin writer, and might provide a clue to the diffusion of its doctrine in the West" (V, 231). The source, argues Burnett, is Hermann of Carinthia's *De Essentiis*.

Burnett expands his discussion of Hermann in the next chapter by focusing on the complexity of the textual and historical evidence for Hermann's transmission of Hermetic magic via Arabic sources. By tracing the source of a quotation in Hermann's *De Essentiis* from a book which Hermann refers to as Aristotle's *Data Neiringet*, Burnett discovers that while the quotation corresponds in some ways to the *Picatrix*, the best-known medieval compendium on magic, it is not the only "route by which the Hermetic tradition may have passed from Arabic into Latin" (VI, 169), for it also corresponds to a section of *Kitab al-Maditis*, a commentary on *Kitab al-Istamatis*, and to the Latin work *Liber Antimaquis*, which probably derives from a variant copy of *Kitab al-Istamatis*. Burnett concludes:

Hermann of Carinthia's citation of a work by 'Aristotle' on talismans gives evidence that Hermetic magical texts were known to Latin scholars at least a century before the Alphonsine translations (VI, 169).

Burnett then builds on these observations in the next two chapters, first by providing a useful edition and English translation of two Latin translations of the *Kitab al-Istamatis* and then by discussing an interesting facet of yet another Latin version of the work known as the *Antimaquis*, namely its scribal directions for writing cryptic letters or "runes." In addition to supplying a critical edition and translation of the segment *Ex Libris Antiquis* "from Ancient Books," the portion of the *Antimaquis* that contains the runes, Burnett gives philological evidence for the Scandinavian origin of the runes and illustrates how they were used in place of Latin names for the spiritual forces of the planets.

The volume's portion on magic also contains an edition of the Conte de Sarzana magical manuscript and a discussion of the fourteenth-century University of Parma professor and doctor Giorgio Anselmi's *Divinum opus de magia disciplina*, a work which in large portion is "taken up with the teaching of necromantic magic, including the texts of prayers for summoning demons, their myriad names, and the recipes for making potent drugs" (XVI, 64).

The remaining section of eleven articles examines several medieval divinatory instructional texts. Included are the disciplines of chiromancy (palm reading), onomancy (numerical values of names),



geomancy (stones and sand), and scapulimancy (reading the scapula of a sheep), with a great deal of discussion devoted to the latter. Burnett's treatment of these and other primary sources gives convincing evidence for an unbroken chain of copying, translating, and use of magical texts from the twelfth to the sixteenth century.

The book concludes with an insightful examination of the apocryphal letter *Epistola Prudenti viro* (it claims the Arabic philosopher al-Kindi as its author) which was sent to Theodore, court astrologer of Frederick II. Burnett illustrates how by echoing contemporary literary sources, the letter functioned as sophisticated propaganda for Frederick II "designed to give him credibility in his campaign against the Mongols" (XX, 156).

The sum of works in this volume demonstrates that a desire to acquire esoteric knowledge by studying magical and divinatory texts provided an impetus for other translating activity from Arabic into Latin during and well after the twelfth century, and that such translations often were undertaken with ecclesiastical support. It is to Burnett's credit that he also is able to glean from these seldom studied texts an informative look into the lives and preoccupations of everyday people. Moreover, Burnett's numerous editions and accessible English translations of so many primary sources on magic and divination make this book a welcome gold mine of information and a fascinating read.

Notes

1. I follow the book's method of pagination by citing the chapter and original page numbers of the article.



E *tudes sur le christianisme arabe au Moyen Age*

Gérard Troupeau

U.K. and Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Limited Gower House, *Variorum*, 1995. 301 pages. \$89.95 (ISBN 0-86078-560-2).

Review by

Caesar E. Farah, Ph.D.
University of Minnesota

This collection of essays, all in French, except for the texts accompanied by the Arabic original, which the author translated, is reproduced from a variety of scholarly and quasi-scholarly publications which Professor Troupeau authored during his writing career, many of which were first published in collective works honoring colleagues with similar specializations. As with all the publications in the *Variorum* series, it leaves much to be desired in terms of style and consistency, which makes it difficult for a reviewer to place in some order the essays embodied herein. The pagination is the same as appears in the original collections. Only by Roman numerals can we trace the pattern in the table of contents. Nevertheless, I shall follow the headings under which these twenty-two essays are listed, in three separate categories, commenting briefly on each in order to provide readers with an index of the subject matter discussed.

Under the first category treated in this book—History of Literature—there is only one essay, which traces Christian Arab literature from the tenth to the twelfth century.¹ It is a commendable study, in French, of authors, sources, and debates, and represents a definite contribution to our knowledge of this little-publicized area of scholarly endeavor. The only problem is that it is reproduced in its original form, characterized by very small print, but still readable.