

**Left:** Cover of the most recent translation of *The Book of Abramelin*, published by Ibis Press and translated by George Dehn. Photo Courtesy of Georg Dehn and Ibis Press. **Right:** Grave of Yaakov ben Moshe Levi Moelin, also known as MaHaRIL, Jewish cemetery Heiliger Sand in Worms, Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany. Photo by Dietrich Krieger and published under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported

# The Sacred Magic of Boleskine

## The Rite that Brought Aleister Crowley to Boleskine House – Part I

### INTRODUCTION

The curious activity of what twentieth-century esotericist Aleister Crowley engaged in at Boleskine House is now the story of legend and remains one of the main reasons for the house's fame. Popular sources ranging from mainstream media to independent Youtubers often repeat the tales of Crowley's alleged use of 'black magic' and 'the dark arts' at Boleskine House, perpetuating the estate's reputation as a haunted and ghastly 'house of sin.'

Some sources have even held that Crowley was responsible for opening a portal to hell and allowing strange creatures to be unleashed upon Inverness-shire, including the Loch Ness monster!<sup>1</sup>

By Keith Readdy

One only needs to consider the popularity of Hollywood blockbuster films or the fantastical television series such as *Outlander* or *Game of Thrones* to know that escaping reality and engaging in make-believe can be an enjoyable pastime for a large percentage of the populace.

Indeed, even embellished recountings of events surrounding Aleister Crowley's life have more recently hit prime time television with CBS' *Strange Angel*, giving the viewer a sensationalised depiction of Crowley's movement in 1940s California with the involvement of jet propulsion engineer Jack Parsons.

However, there are the hot stories that hit the press like pancakes on a Sunday brunch griddle, and then there is the sober history of events. The following article intends to explore the latter.

The following essay will take the reader on a journey less intense than the tales of 'black magic' and 'satanic rituals' so often associated with Boleskine House. Instead, I will examine the mystery that brought Crowley to Boleskine House: a dusty old, yet fascinating manuscript known as *The Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage*.

### MAGIC AND THE WESTERN RELIGIOUS TRADITION

Contrary to what is commonly known outside of niche scholarship on religion, 'magic' was a standard practice in the Western world up until at least the Reformation period (c. 1500 CE).

<sup>1</sup> See for example Nick Redfern, *Nessie: Exploring the Supernatural Origins of the Loch Ness Monster* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Worldwide, 2016).

Even within the Christian tradition, relics, amulets and talismans were believed to hold pervasive supernatural power. As Keith Thomas has noted in his *Religion and the Decline of Magic*:

*Nearly every primitive religion is regarded by its adherents as a medium for obtaining supernatural power. This does not prevent it from functioning as a system of explanation, a source of moral injunctions, a symbol of social order, or a route to immortality; but it does mean that it also offers the prospect of a supernatural means of control of man's earthly environment. The history of early Christianity offers no exception to this rule. Conversions to the new religion, whether in the time of the primitive Church or under the auspices of the missionaries of more recent times, have frequently been assisted by the view of converts that they are acquiring not just a means of other-worldly salvation, but a new and more powerful magic. Just as the Hebrew priests of the Old Testament endeavoured to confound the devotees of Baal by challenging them publicly to perform supernatural acts, so the Apostles of the early Church attracted followers by working miracles and performing supernatural cures.<sup>2</sup>*

Indeed, magical garments, trinkets, jewellery, words, gestures and inscriptions were entrenched within the Catholic Christian world.

In fact, it was one of the many explanations given by the supporters of the Protestant Reformation for the corruption of the Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup> In short, magic was part of the Western religious tradition all the way up to the early modern period. It was not at all reserved for 'devil-worshippers' and

practitioners of witchcraft, but it was rather a common method employed by much of the populace. The 'sacred magic of Abramelin' (hereafter referred to as the 'Abramelin work' or the 'Abramelin operation') of which Aleister Crowley came to Boleskine House to perform, is one of many examples of a magical grimoire that emerged out of the Judeo-Christian world.

The manuscript describing the Abramelin work, which we will explore very shortly can be understood to fit within this Judeo-Christian Western magical tradition.

Its instructions to summon and constrain lesser spirits in order to commune with God, for example fit well into late medieval and early Renaissance grimoires that preceded it. Such 'ceremonial magic' is typified in the books attributed to King Solomon such as the *Ars Notoria* ('Notary Art'), a fifteenth-century manuscript concerned with obtaining knowledge of God through a systematic method of invoking angels, mystical figures and using magical prayers.<sup>4</sup>

There are many other manuscripts from this period similarly associated with what was known as 'Solomonic magic,' attributed of course to the wisdom of King Solomon in the Bible. These works, particularly the *Ars Notoria* describes practices very similar to that of the Abramelin work. This is no surprise, as these manuscripts emerged during similar periods of history, and therefore should be considered within the same milieu of Renaissance theurgical literature.

## ABRAHAM OF WORMS

The manuscript that has come to be known as *The Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage* has its own uniquely mysterious story, and its origins and authorship have

been the subject of some debate in scholarship. A number of manuscripts exist, the two oldest known to be in German from the Library of Duke August in Wolfenbüttel, Germany and dated 1608.<sup>5</sup> The full title of the text in English is *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage as delivered by Abraham the Jew unto his son Lamech, A.D. 1458*.<sup>6</sup> The work appears to be written in a semi-epistolary fashion from a supposed learned Jew named Abraham to his son, Lamech in the year 1458, CE.

Consisting of four parts, the manuscript details Abraham's journeys through Egypt, where he was taught by a wise mage various methods of magic. For example, the book outlines an extensive collection of what may be considered folk tradition in Jewish culture during this time of the late-medieval period, with a number of recipes from the mixed Kabbalah for healing.

There are also the addition of word squares, in the form of 'magic squares' that give various names of spirits that, upon inspection were clearly derived from Hebrew names.

What makes this text the tale of legend is part three, or 'Book Three,' which outlines a detailed mystical methodology of self-initiation by which the practitioner comes to witness conversation with the guardian angel. It is this aspect of the text that has intrigued esotericists throughout the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries.

According to the contents of the manuscript itself, this work appears to originate from within a mystical Jewish current around the late-fourteenth – or early-fifteenth century. Scholars however have disputed this, arguing that the work is most likely *not* of Jewish provenance and was simply a Christian forgery authored in the sixteenth or

2 Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1973), 27.

3 See for example Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 77–152. Hanegraaff notes that one of many ways the anti-apologists removed Catholicism from rational discourse in the modern era was by connecting it with its pagan, "superstitious" roots.

4 A thorough discussion on *Ars Notoria* can be found in Julien Véronèse (trans. Claire Fanger), "Magic, Theurgy and Spirituality in the Medieval Ritual of the *Ars Notoria*," in Claire Fanger (ed.) *Invoking Angels: Theurgic Ideas and Practices, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 37–78

5 Georg Dehn (ed.), *The Book of Abramelin: A New Translation*, by Abraham von Worms, translated from German by Steven Guth (Lake Worth: Ibis Press, 2006), xxiii.

6 From the English translation from French in 1898 by Samuel Mathers and published by John M. Watkins, London.

seventeenth centuries.<sup>7</sup> However, Georg Dehn has recently noted that in his long quest in verifying the supposed historical person attributed to the work's authorship, 'Abraham of Worms,' that there is reason to believe that such an individual existed. Around the time the text was written, 'Europe was ravaged by the Great Plague, which was blamed on the Jews. The parents of Abraham were among the few who survived the plague and the subsequent pogrom against the Jews.'<sup>8</sup> Dehn has argued with fairly convincing evidence that Abraham of Worms did in fact exist around this time

period, and may have been none other than the Jewish intellectual of this period, Rabbi Jacob ben Moses ha Levi Möllin, also known as the MaHaRIL (c. 1365–1427).<sup>9</sup>

The manuscript itself was first made popular by Samuel 'MacGregor' Mathers, when in 1898 he translated it into English from an anonymous French version he found in the *Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal* in Paris.<sup>10</sup> The Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage was one of many esoteric texts that Mathers would translate and place into the repository of literature for the Hermetic Order of the Golden

Dawn. Although never officially placed within its curriculum of teaching, the Abramelin work became an important concept within the Golden Dawn. There will be more on this later, however we will first need to describe in further detail the fascinating subject in the work regarding the Holy Guardian Angel.

***The Sacred Magic of Boleskine continues in the next edition of 'Boleskine – The Journal of the Boleskine House Foundation', which will be out in December 2020.***

- 7 See for example §543 in Moritz Steinschneider, *Die Hebräischen Übersetzungen des mittelalters und die Juden als dolmetscher* (Berlin: Kommissions Verlag des Bibliographischen bureaus, 1893). More recently, Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, Joachim Neugroschel (trans.) (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 314, n. 24, originally published in German in 1962 by Rhein-Verlag AG, Zurich.
- 8 Dehn (2006), xxii.
- 9 Ibid., xxiii. Very little biographical research is available about Möllin, but Dehn provides an excellent outline on pages 221–228. The reader may also wish to consult Isidore Singer, Eduard Neumann, Gotthard Deutsch, Max Schloessinger, "Jacob ben Moses Möllin (MaHaRIL)," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia: A Descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, Volume 8 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1906), 652.
- 10 Its French title being, *La sacrée magie que Dieu donna à Moïse Aaron David Salomon et d'autres saints patriarches et prophètes, qui enseigne la vraie sapience divine, laissée par Abraham à son fils, traduite de l'hebreu.*

# Boleskine House Foundation receives positive coverage in local media

One of the aims of the Boleskine House Foundation – since the house and land were originally purchased by Kyra and Keith last year – was to gain positive feedback from the local community around Foyers and Inverness.

Whenever we've visited local businesses, we've put our point across to locals who want to know more about the house and the work we're doing. So far we've received very favourable feedback – especially when they find out that something positive is being done to restore the house and lands to their former glory.

Most people we've spoken to are aware of the house and former owners and they want to see the foundation being successful in its aims, as they know there'll be a positive effect on the local economy with people visiting the house and surrounding area.



Screenshots from *The Press and Journal* and *Inverness Courier* websites

All of this is greatly helped by the coverage the foundation's work has received in both the *Inverness Courier* and *The Press and Journal* (Highland Edition) newspapers.

The recent eBay sale of charred remains of the building received favourable coverage in the *Inverness Courier*, written by Alasdair Fraser

(which, considering the house's history is rather a nice coincidence).

Thankfully, the local coverage is a stark contrast to that received in the Tabloid press when Kyra and Keith bought the house and land last year, with tales of 'the lair of drug addled sex mad occultist, Aleister Crowley' and so on. Long may it continue. **JM**



Sir William Blake Richmond KCB, RA, PPRBSA: The Guardian Angel. Oil on canvas.

# The Sacred Magic of Boleskine

## The Rite that Brought Aleister Crowley to Boleskine House – Part 2

Esotericists and scholars of religious manuscripts have been intrigued for the last two centuries by *The Book of Abramelin* primarily for the central ceremonies outlined in Part III of the text. This part describes a very elaborate yet ascetic exercise that includes embellished medieval-style conjurations of angels and spirits for protective measures and meticulous instructions for daily chaste prayers and invocations. This practice, which lasts for six months, culminates in a peculiar mystical

By Keith Readdy

experience called the ‘conversation with the guardian angel.’

The phrase ‘guardian angel’ brings to the western mind images of a benevolent guardian angel wearing white garments with magnificent wings and whose purpose is to look after and protect the religiously pious.

However, the guardian angel as a topic of interest in *The Book of Abramelin* has a complex history in the

western religious tradition, particularly within esoteric literature.

More generally, Part III of *The Book of Abramelin* fits within a type of literature that stems from pre-Christian antiquity concerning what is typically referred to as ‘theurgy.’ In this next instalment of *The Sacred Magic of Boleskine* I will therefore provide some historical context from which the intellectual tradition of *The Book of Abramelin* is rooted by highlighting the tradition known as ‘theurgy.’

## NEOPLATONISM

A great deal of the religious literature from the medieval and Renaissance western world is, like *The Book of Abramelin*, situated within a Judeo-Christian construct, yet its roots can be found in earlier religious currents that flourished in antiquity, deriving for example from cultures in ancient Greece, Hellenistic Egypt, and the Roman Republic. One of these dominant intellectual trends of this pre-Christian (i.e., 'pagan') period of western civilization is known to historians as Neoplatonism.<sup>1</sup>

Although it preceded Christianity by a good century, Neoplatonism became so widespread amidst the intelligentsia and the learned scholarship of the period that its philosophy later became infused with Christian and Jewish discourse in the early centuries of the common era, persisting well into the medieval period. Many early Christian writers in fact drew from the mystical philosophies of Neoplatonism in order to support their arguments for Christian theology and the validity of Christian doctrine.<sup>2</sup>

Still, many church fathers that followed these early Christian thinkers also believed that Neoplatonism threatened Christian doctrines because it was heavily steeped in pagan religious beliefs, and so its pervasiveness and perceived influence on Christianity in the medieval and Renaissance periods brought them a great deal of alarmed concern.

## THEURGY

With regard to the practices outlined in *The Book of Abramelin*, it is relevant here to discuss one of the foundational precepts of Neoplatonic thought – theurgy.<sup>3</sup> Many various interpretations of theurgy have been offered by scholars, and it has proven to be a perplexing topic as Sarah Johnston has noted.

*Much of the uncertainty concerning theurgy centers on the following interrelated issues: how does theurgy compare with magic (i.e., γοητεία) and, on the other hand, with philosophical or intellectual means of obtaining salvation? Should it be thought of, on the one hand, as 'white' or beneficent magic, or, on the other hand, as a method of causing the soul's ascension and unification with the divine through ritual rather than through spiritual contemplation?<sup>4</sup>*

Is theurgy simply the ritual practices of 'magic,' operating on the things in the world of matter? Early Christian critics such as that of the Bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine, seemed to think so. Augustine condemned theurgy as the work of demons which led the soul away from the worship of God.<sup>5</sup>

Yet a near contemporary to Augustine, the early Christian writer Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite described theurgy as the 'consummation of theology.'<sup>6</sup>

The debate on whether theurgy was a 'low' magic or a ritual of spiritual contemplation aimed to ascend the soul towards God cannot be explored in depth here. What is important for this discussion is to note that it is within these late-antique and early medieval writings on the theories and practices of theurgy that we can trace the developments of the concept of the guardian angel.

## ARS NOTORIA

It would be amiss to exclude commenting on the *Ars notoria*, a text already earlier mentioned and which is a clear example of medieval theurgy. The earliest manuscripts of this text date from the thirteenth-century or quite possibly the middle of the twelfth-century and the text was reproduced throughout the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries. The *Ars notoria* clearly consist of the same theurgical content that is found in *The Book of Abramelin*. Both texts describe elaborate rituals and prayers and outline highly involved preparations that take several months to complete, all for the end goal of experiencing a unification (i.e., theurgy) with God.<sup>7</sup> Yet the *Ars notoria* was authored at least two centuries before *The Book of Abramelin*.

The *Ars notoria*, like similar texts that follow it such as *Ars Paulina*, *Ars Almadel* and *Lemegeton*, is attributed to the wisdom of the biblical King Solomon, and has therefore often been referred to as 'Solomonic magic.'<sup>8</sup> What is interesting

- 1 As its etymology suggests, Neoplatonism refers to a movement that derives originally from the works of Plato. Although Plato's works are considered today to be the ancient arbiter of the secular academic discipline we know as 'philosophy,' his work also fed into a prevalent religious trend around the turn of the common era that historians refer to as Neoplatonism.
- 2 Christianity was new to the world stage by the second-century C.E., and many early Christian works were dominated by apologetics attempting to assert the relevance of their newly established doctrines, especially amidst criticisms by intellectuals in the Greek and Hellenistic cultures whose philosophies and traditions were well-rooted. See Arthur Droge, *Homer or Moses? Early Christian Interpretations of the History of Culture* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1989), 9.
- 3 The most authoritative source on theurgy from the late-antique period is Iamblichus in his work, *De Mysteriis*, trans. Emma Clarke (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2003). A good contemporary introduction to the theurgy of Iamblichus is in Gregory Shaw, "Theurgy: Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus," in *Traditio*, Vol. 41 (1985), pp. 1-28.
- 4 Sarah Illes Johnston, *Hekate Soteira* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 77. This uncertainty prompted scholars to differentiate between 'lower' forms of theurgy (i.e., magic acting upon the things of the world) and 'higher' theurgy (concerned with the soul's ascent towards the divine). See for example L. Rosan, *The Philosophy of Proclus* (New York, 1949). In A. Smith, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague, 1974), these distinctions were redefined to include 'horizontal' theurgy and 'vertical' theurgy.
- 5 Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, X:10.
- 6 Ecclesiastical Hierarchy 436C. Cf. Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 101.
- 7 See Julien Véronèse, "Magic, Theurgy, and Spirituality in the Medieval Ritual of the *Ars notoria*," in *Invoking Angels: Theurgic Ideas and Practices Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries*, ed. Claire Fanger (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012).

about the *Ars notoria*, being written at a time when earlier neoplatonic movements and Jewish and Christian traditions had by then crossed many overlapping paths, is that its exact origins are elusive.

Julien Véronèse comments on its mixture of theurgic elements and Christian devotional practice:

*[What is] the real nature of the ars notoria: should it be thought of simply as a 'magical' art? Or might it still be possible to relate it [...] to late antique Hellenistic theurgic practices which were reintroduced to the west in the twelfth century via the Byzantine, Hebrew or Arab worlds? Or again, might it be related to the devotional practices more consistent with Christian orthodoxy evident among mystics? Just how far can we travel down each of these paths?*<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, it is this cosmopolitan theme

of the *Ars notoria* that may have ensured its persistence in the medieval period as its study attracted the literate elite. Over fifty manuscripts exist in various libraries spread across Western Europe and the United States. It is, as Claire Fanger has argued, a testament that magical grimoires from this period are not, as popularly understood, insignificant manuscripts of a deviant sub-culture existing at the peripheral edges of society.

Their study and practice was in fact not a marginal niche in Medieval Europe; rather ritual magic was in fact part of the learned scholarship of the day, a milieu of monks, doctors and clerics of learned society. It is in this similar vein of learned scholarship that *The Book of Abramelin* was also authored. The reader will recall that Abraham of Worms may have been the Talmudist scholar Yaakov ben Moshe

Levi Moelin.<sup>11</sup> In short, the *Ars notoria* as a magical, theurgical and mystical Christian text is a clear precept to the content we see in *The Book of Abramelin*.

Is *The Book of Abramelin* then a work of theurgy? Certainly it shares similar characteristics with its summoning of angels and spirits and its devotional exercises intended to ascend to the heavens. The theme of theurgy will return again once we trace in more detail the concept of the guardian angel. In the next part, I will look closer at this particularly through the writings of the Neoplatonist, Iamblichus and a not-so-distant contemporary to Abraham of Worms, the 'author-magician' sixteenth-century hermit of Majorca, Pelagius.

8 Lynn Thorndike, an early scholar on these manuscripts pointed out, "It was only natural that Solomon, regarded as the wisest Solomon man in the history of the world, should be represented [as a] magician in [the] oriental tradition as the worker of many marvels and that in the course of time books of magic should be attributed to him [...]" See Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, Vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923), 279.

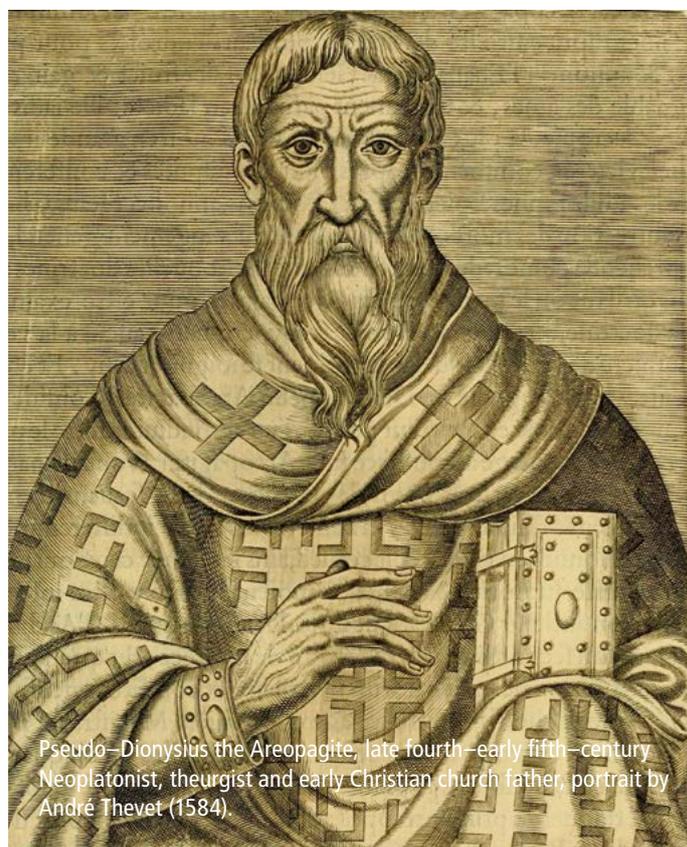
9 Véronèse (2012), 37.

10 See Claire Fanger, "Medieval Ritual Magic : What it is and why we need to know more about it," in *Conjuring Spirits: Texts and Traditions of Medieval Ritual Magic* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press , xi.

11 While the identity of Abraham von Worms with Moelin has been debated, Abraham as the author of *The Book of Abramelin* nonetheless describes himself as a learned Jewish scholar.



Illustration from the *Ars notoria*, The First Note of Grammar, Biblioteca Nazionale, Turin. MS E.V. 13, f. 1.



Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, late fourth-early fifth-century Neoplatonist, theurgist and early Christian church father, portrait by André Thevet (1584).