



Mirator 2/25 (2025)

eISSN 1457-2362

Glossary - Keskiajan tutkimuksen seura / Sällskapet för medeltidsforskning /

Society for Medieval studies in Finland

<https://journal.fi/mirator>

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## Between Science and Magic: Foreword

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To cite this article: Ida Meerto, Sara Norja & Karolina Kouvola, 'Between Science and Magic: Foreword', *Mirator* 2/25 (2025), 1–3.

# Between Science and Magic: Foreword

IDA MEERTO, SARA NORJA & KAROLINA KOUVOLA

This thematic issue has its origins in October 2024, when the TiTaRa project, funded by the Kone Foundation, and the Finnish network of magic studies organized a two-day symposium at the University of Turku, Finland: *Between Science and Magic*. The event brought together scholars from various countries and diverse fields to explore the fine line between historical science and magic, with keynotes from Professor Egil Asprem (University of Stockholm) and Dr. Carla Suhr (University of Helsinki, Title of Docent and University Lecturer). The issues presented at the symposium covered a broad range from sixteenth-century esotericism to celebrated female magicians of the late nineteenth century. After the symposium, members of the TiTaRa project, MA Ida Meerto (University of Turku) and PhD Sara Norja (University of Turku), and a member of the Finnish network of magic studies, PhD Karolina Kouvola (University of Oulu, Finnish Literature Society), published an open call for papers for this special issue, which sprang from the discussions and ideas presented at the symposium.

Today, magic and science are popularly seen as separate, but the two have been intertwined throughout much of European history. Research on key figures of the ‘scientific revolution’ in Europe suggests that the borders were murky up to the eighteenth century. For instance, Isaac Newton practised alchemy,<sup>1</sup> which had developed esoteric features in the early modern period. Medieval alchemy, on the other hand, was frequently viewed as a science, although it has later been often classified into the field of magic.<sup>2</sup> The history of science thus needs to take into account the nuances inherent in the interplay of magic and science, and the different meanings these terms have had in different historical periods.

One of the challenges in exploring this interplay is that magic is difficult to define, as it varies according to the study question, scholar, and field of interest. Attempts have been made to define magic since the nineteenth century. At first, magic was seen as something ‘other’, a superstition that so-called less-enlightened people practiced. The first theories developed by James Frazer and his contemporaries exhibited an outsider’s view on the cultural practices of other regions. Gradually, the shift changed towards a more nuanced and understanding study of magic and its various phenomena, and the study of magic today is multidisciplinary and non-judgmental.<sup>3</sup> Historically,

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. William R. Newman, *Newton the Alchemist: Science, Enigma, and the Quest for Nature’s “Secret Fire”*, Princeton University Press: Princeton 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Athanasios Rintotas, ‘The philosophical background of medieval magic and alchemy’, *Pulse* 3 (2015), 79–98.

<sup>3</sup> Sonja Hukantaival, Karolina Kouvola, Tiina Mahlamäki and Alekski Moine, ‘Johdatus magian moniin ulottuvuuksiin’, in Sonja Hukantaival, Karolina Kouvola, Tiina Mahlamäki ed. *Magiaa ennen ja nyt*, SKS: Helsinki 2024, 7–41.

in the Middle Ages magic was often considered to involve demons, and whether an action was religious or magical was determined based on the source of the power of the action.<sup>4</sup> Thus a charm invoking the four evangelists or using holy water was not considered magic, but rather a prayer or a religious ritual. Present scholarship distinguishes between folk and learned magic. In medieval learned magic, a distinction was sometimes made between demonic and natural magic, where demonic magic relied on demons and natural magic stemmed from natural, albeit occult, powers of the natural world, such as the planets or plants.<sup>5</sup> A third category, image magic (imbuing talismans with astral influences), falls somewhere between these two: it was sometimes seen as natural and sometimes as demonic.<sup>6</sup> But as Kieckhefer points out, this distinction was not universally agreed upon, and to some medieval authorities, all magic was inherently demonic.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, magic as such still interests and inspires people both within academia and outside of it. Magic is ever-present in popular culture, such as video games and television shows, in the popular understanding of the past, as well as in personal spiritual growth and the pursuit of answers beyond the modern way of life.

The modern study of magic is interdisciplinary in its nature. As magic itself defines its definition, its study has more to do with careful research design, the selection of source material, and the audience to which it conveys ideas and research results, than with drawing broad conclusions or all-encompassing explanations. Interdisciplinarity is evident in the way scholars apply methods and theories from various fields to new or previously discussed material. This is similar to the study of the history of science, which also involves interdisciplinary work.

This special issue comprises two articles, both of which explore the boundaries and intermingling of science and magic in their own ways. First, Antti Ijäs tracks down astrological sources used by Konrad Kyeser of Eichstätt in *Bellifortis*, a work on military technology from the turn of the fifteenth century. *Bellifortis* describes the technology of warfare, but also includes magical and alchemical recipes together with astrological expositions. The treatise is therefore a prime example of the medieval intermingling of science, magic, and practices that exist somewhere in between, namely alchemy and astrology.

The second article moves away from military technology and astrology and into the realms of medicine and witchcraft, continuing with the intersection of science and magic. In her article, Carla Suhr examines English witchcraft pamphlets to determine how the common people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries understood certain symptoms to be caused by bewitching, rather than a medical condition. Suhr's investigation suggests that the general population readily ascribed certain physical and mental ailments to bewitchment and were reluctant to accept medical explanations for them.

The TiTaRa project (*Tieteen ja taikuuden rajamailla; Between Science and Magic*) explores how people in medieval and early modern England wrote about those who operated between the boundaries of science and magic, notably alchemists, astrologers, and witches. In addition to exploring these people's societal roles through historical linguistics and book history, the project

<sup>4</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2021, at 9.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Rider, *Magic and Religion in Medieval England*, Reaktion Books: London 2012, at 15.

<sup>6</sup> Frank F. Klaassen, *The Transformations of Magic: Illicit Learned Magic in the Later Middle Ages and Renaissance*, The Pennsylvania State University Press: Pennsylvania 2013, at 3-29.

<sup>7</sup> Kieckhefer 2021, 10.

will produce a tabletop roleplaying game, to be published in spring 2026. The game will enable players to familiarize themselves with the themes of the project in an easily accessible manner. The Finnish network of magic studies comprises Finnish scholars who focus on questions of magic, witchcraft, and witches from a broad perspective, spanning from medieval times to the present day. The network has been involved in the article collection *Magiaa ennen ja nyt (Magic Then and Now)*, edited by Sonja Hukantaival, Karolina Kouvola, Tiina Mahlamäki, and Alekski Moine, and published by the Finnish Literature Society in 2024.