

Thomas Karlsson. *Amongst Mystics and Magicians in Stockholm*. Gothenburg: Belzebez, 2014. 140 pp. £29.¹

The Dragon whispered my name. Not my usual name, but my true name, my eternal name. The Dragon slowly coiled in front of me, and the scales sparkled like millions of diamonds, in all colours of the universe. The Dragon whispered to me again. It whispered its own name. I fell over on the ground with surprise, and twisted from laughter. I cried from happiness. The Dragon. So close. And yet so far away. (135)

In *Amongst Mystics and Magicians in Stockholm*, Thomas Karlsson, a scholar of religion² and the founder of the magical order Dragon Rouge (Ordo Draconis et Atri Adamantis), relates occult experimentation and experiences he and his fellow travelers went through during the years 1989–1991. That is, experimentation and experiences which were part of, and eventually led to, the founding of Dragon Rouge. The order has since grown into one of the most prominent occult organizations in the West, and today has a number of active lodges both in Sweden and abroad.³

Amongst Mystics and Magicians was originally published in Swedish in 2012. The English language translation is relatively fluent, but there are quite a few minor errors in the text, which could have been corrected by more rigorous proof-reading. According to the publisher, *Amongst Mystics and Magicians* is the first release in a trilogy concerning the history and development of Dragon Rouge, so hopefully the publisher pays more attention to proof-reading with the following parts of the trilogy.

The author himself describes the work at hand as a “reading mystery” which

¹ This review was originally published as a blog post on the author’s blog, <http://angleso-vdisruption.blogspot.fi/2015/03/rest-in-arms-of-dragon.html>, but is published here in a revised form.

² Karlsson has a PhD in History of Religion from Stockholm University. He also has a teaching position in the mentioned university.

³ Dragon Rouge has also become subject of academic enquiry, e.g. Kennet Granholm’s dissertation, *Embracing the Dark: The Magic Order of Dragon Rouge – Its Practice in Dark Magic and Meaning Making* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2005) and his further study, *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological, and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014.)

should function as a key to the other side of reality (4). Thus the dedication to the demoness Lilith – the gate to the unknown (1.0°) in the initiatory scheme of Dragon Rouge.⁴ It is rather easy to agree with the author's perception of his work; *Amongst Mystics and Magicians* is not a matter-of-fact, well-balanced and dry academic presentation of Dragon Rouge and the factors that led to its formation. It is, on the contrary, much more like a travelogue spiced with a sinister and paranormal twist. Karlsson's academic background, keen intellect and obviously wide erudition shine through, but in *Amongst Mystics and Magicians* he is not writing as Dr. Karlsson – he is more like one of those shadowy figures in H. P. Lovecraft's Gothic horror stories; someone who, by the feverishly dancing campfire, tells wild and astounding stories which are both alluring and spine-chilling.

The story told in *Amongst Mystics and Magicians* is full of intrigue, interesting characters and paranormal happenings. The focus on those individuals who were there in the beginning of Dragon Rouge, their personal experiences with the occult and the transformations that followed, as recollected and narrated by Karlsson, make it a rather unique work. This is not to say that the occult world – and especially darker hues of it – has a shortage of subjective histories, but, in contrast to more well-known and readily available publications,⁵ the work at hand convinces with its down-to-earth sincerity. Accordingly, the characters – including Karlsson himself – are not polished to a point of being just billboards for Dragon Rouge's esoteric philosophy and practice, but are brought out in a way that makes them seem lively and credible. A fine example of this is one of the most colorful characters in the book, Varg:

At the same time he [Varg] was grounded, street smart, and completely disrespectful to all powers, both earthly and otherworldly. He happily provided old gods and demons with playful nicknames. After having invoked demon Beelzebub with grave seriousness, in a dark room only lit by black candles, and filled with heavy incense, he could suddenly round off the ritual by announcing that Bubbe, meaning Beelzebub, thought that we should go and have a beer at the pizzeria. (19)

Even though one could be forgiven for dismissing Varg as just another carefree

⁴ Thomas Karlsson, *Qabalab, Qlipboth and Goetic Magic* (Jacksonville: Ajna, 2012), 112.

⁵ Blanche Barton, *The Secret Life of a Satanist: The Authorized Biography of Anton LaVey* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 1990) and Stephen Flowers, *Lords of the Left-Hand Path: A History of Spiritual Dissent* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2012), to name just a few. One could also point to the rather voluminous literature focused on the Order of Nine Angles and its founder, Anton Long.

and easy-going psychonaut, he, in fact, points to a quite important feature in the early Dragon Rouge, that is free and open experimentation of the occult kind.

When reading through *Amongst Mystics and Magicians*, one is faced with a collection of household names in modern esotericism (e.g. Aleister Crowley, Kenneth Grant, Anton LaVey) as well as more surprising authors (e.g. Benoît Mandelbrot, Hannes Alfvén⁶), which, of course, provides an interesting view of the mystical and philosophical basis of the order. But more interesting still is how the sources are translated into lived and empirical experiences through practice and experimentation. The book is a treasure trove for someone interested in the practical side of Dragon Rouge, as there are vivid and detailed depictions of magical workings from simple meditations to ceremonial rituals. In most cases these workings are also accompanied by participants' personal reflections, providing yet another angle to the practical side of Dragon Rouge.

While Dragon Rouge underscores personal experience in its magical curriculum, its varied pursuits also have a very rigorous philosophical grounding. There is a strong opposition to the nihilistic tendencies characteristic of the time, and, conversely, a stout dedication to the ideals of a true Renaissance man (48, 58–59). Accordingly, it is rather easy to recognize the dividing lines and connecting ties between Dragon Rouge and other such organizations, e.g. the Church of Satan and Temple of Set.

While Anton LaVey's *The Satanic Bible* seems to have provided at least some inspiration, especially in terms of imagery, his carnal philosophy – not to mention his cynical tendencies – probably held very little interest for Karlsson and his circle of friends (21–22). The Temple of Set, on the other hand, comes out in a much more positive light. In a way it seems that the Temple of Set influenced Dragon Rouge to a rather significant extent, even though its role in the text is quite limited. The connection is there – e.g. through Varg and his American-based magical teacher – but Karlsson never gets into specifics (21, 37–38, 100–101). Also, at this point it is worth noting a certain resemblance between the founding myths of both organizations: i.e. Set dictating *The Book of Coming Forth by Night* to Michael A. Aquino and Thomas Karlsson receiving the prophecy to build a temple for the Red Dragon in Marrakech, Morocco. Both of these instances point, of course, to the shared influence of Aleister Crowley. Then again, *Amongst Mystics and Magicians* is just the first part of a trilogy; hopefully the following parts will shed more light also on Michael A. Aquino and his Temple of Set. There is no need to stretch the alleged

⁶ A mathematician and a plasma physicist, respectively.

connection between Dragon Rouge and Temple of Set too far, though, as the book at hand provides ample evidence for Dragon Rouge having had its own voice and course since the very beginning.

The qliphothic qabalah which has, since the early days, become one of the mainstays of Dragon Rouge, is not heavily present in *Amongst Mystics and Magicians*; Karlsson's interest in Jewish mysticism gets mentioned here and there, but it is not a very dominant feature in the text. Nevertheless, the other side of qabalistic occultism, *Sitra Abra*,⁷ shines forth from between the lines which depict the early magical experiences of Dragon Rouge. An important facet in this is a conscious *turning away* from a civilized and orderly urbane environment towards a dark and chaotic world represented by nature. It is here, beyond man's civilizing efforts, where a dedicated seeker may find his/her initiation to the other side of existence. The appreciation of wild and untameable nature as a place for initiation also marks Dragon Rouge as quite different from the American groups mentioned earlier, which, usually, tend to conduct their magical workings in an urbane manner. This appreciation of nature has a distinctly Scandinavian pagan element in it.

Its rather modest number of pages notwithstanding, *Amongst Mystics and Magicians* is a highly interesting and informative publication for the scholar of modern-day Western occultism and the interested layman alike. As a first-person narrative about the birth of one of the most prominent occult organizations in the West it is also quite unique, especially because of its down-to-earth sincerity and credibility. Accordingly, for someone interested in Dragon Rouge – or in the inner workings of a contemporary esoteric association in general – there is plenty of food for thought in this slim volume.

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⁷ *Sitra Abra* (“The Other Side”) is the opposite of *Sitra de-Kedusha* (“the holy side”) in qabalistic mysticism, see Karlsson, *Qabalah, Qlipboth and Goetic Magic*, 80–81.