

Abraham von Worms. *The Book of Abramelin: A New Translation*. Compiled and edited by Georg Dehn. Translated by Steven Guth. Foreword by Lon Milo DuQuette. Lake Worth: Ibis Press, 2015.

An important but overlooked figure in contemporary scholarship on Western esotericism is Abraham von Worms, a 14th- to early 15th-century Jewish Kabbalist whose writings in translated form were extraordinarily instrumental to the formulation of the concept of the “Holy Guardian Angel” (HGA) in modern occultism. The compelling narrative that Abraham von Worms expounds in his writings, whether ultimately fiction or not, provides an unrivaled window into the magical “scene” of medieval Europe. It also takes the reader on a quest that extends to modern Turkey, Israel, and Palestine. It is in the Egyptian village of Araki, however, that Abraham von Worms meets a hermit named Abramelin who expounds to him a practical system of magical retirement for the purpose of invoking one’s “Angel” (*Dein Engel* in the original German, lit. “thine Angel”). Once the Angel is invoked, the magician is then instructed to evoke the four princes (*Oberfürsten*) of the “unredeemed spirits” (*böse Geister*) who are subjected to his or her will. These princes and their servitors are thus issued commands by means of a cognitively complex process of visual mnemonics — the famous “magic squares” of Abramelin.¹

The publishing quality of this edition rivals books published on the academic market (despite a handful of spelling and punctuation errors), and Steven Guth’s translations of the four books that together comprise the work are clear and concise. Helpful visual referents are scattered throughout the text, including historical illustrations of several of the characters that Abraham von Worms assists in his narrative (e.g. Kaiser Sigismund and Frederick I, Elector of Brandenburg). Period maps are also provided, as well as numerous scans of actual manuscript folios and even some original images of the magic squares. No less than four appendices written by the editor Georg Dehn have been added: a memoir of his own journeys in search of Araki, his argument as to the historical identity of Abraham von Worms as Jacob HaLevy (the MaHaRil), his attempt to determine the actual geographical location of Araki, and his

¹ For one possible method of disassembling this unique ritual technology with its associative correspondences, see Egil Asprem, “Reverse-Engineering ‘Esotericism’: How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion,” *Religion* 46.2 (2015): 173–75.

comparative tabulation of variants in the lists of the names of the spirits. These appendices have been substantially reorganized from the first Ibis Press edition so as to allow the material to integrate with Dehn's forthcoming book *The Gnosis of Abramelin*. Although Dehn convincingly argues that the frame story contains historical elements, there is still no conclusive evidence to prove whether or not Abraham von Worms actually existed, as it seems for instance equally plausible that he could have been a narrative mouthpiece for a magical community such as the 17th-century Rosicrucian authors of the *Fama Fraternitas*, with knowledge both of 15th-century political leaders in Europe and of Jewish Kabbalah.

This is what makes the philological history of the work equally as compelling as its narrative and historical religious content, and on this point Georg Dehn's editing and Steven Guth's translation are highly valuable to scholars and practitioners alike. This edition is an English translation of Dehn's original German publication, which is itself composed from several surviving manuscripts, none of which date later than the beginning of the 17th century.² In preparing the German publication Dehn utilized what he believed were the earliest two extant manuscripts, composed in German and bearing the date 1608 (Codex Guelfibus 10.1 and 47.13, held by the Library of Duke August in Wolfenbüttel). He also consulted two other German manuscripts in the Dresden library, as well as a later manuscript composed in Hebrew (MS.OPP.594 at Oxford's Bodleian Library). This later manuscript had also been examined by Gershom Scholem, who believed it to be a translation from German, and Dehn had the manuscript re-translated into German by Rabbi Salomon Siegl to help him prepare this edition. Dehn also consulted the rare first published version of this work, released under the pseudonym Peter Hammer in Cologne in 1725 and known to the members of *Fraternitas Saturni*, a German offshoot of the *Ordo Templi Orientis*.³ Although Dehn's edition does not contain an apparatus criticus, variants in the MS are cited often and it is clear there was much attention to detail in preparing the edition from multiple sources. By contrast, the occultist S.L. MacGregor Mathers (1854–1918) of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn used a late mid-

² Georg Dehn, *Büch Abramelin* (Leipzig: Edition Araki, 2001).

³ Peter Hammer, *Die ägyptischen grossen Offenbarungen, in sich begreifend die aufgefundenen Geheimnissbücher Mosis; oder des Juden Abraham von Worms Buch der wahren Praktik in der uralten göttlichen Magie und in Erstaunlichen Dingen, wie sie durch die heilige Kabbala und durch Elohyim mitgetheilt worden: Samt der Geister- und Wunder-Herrschaft, welches Moses in der Wüste aus dem feurigen Busch erlernet, alle Verborgenenheiten der Kabbala umfassend* (Köln am Rhein, 1725).

19th century French manuscript held by the Bibliothèque d’Arsenal in Paris to publish his influential English translation of the text.⁴ This version of the text has been in print ever since and is the most common English-language edition, causing the technical terms “Operation” and “Holy Guardian Angel” (whom Guth renders as “Guardian Angel” based off of the German *Engel*) to be forever inscribed in the history-books of Western occultism. The variety of sources posed several translation issues for Steven Guth as well, who felt compelled to translate the German *Herr* to “Adonai” rather than French *Seigneur* to “Lord” in Mathers’s edition. It is not said how the Hebrew translation of the German original rendered the word for God.

Despite Mathers’s zeal in translating, his French exemplar only included three out of the four books in the Codex Guelfibus and all other manuscripts (it omits a colorful book of “natural” spells and alchemical recipes that Dehn’s revised edition translates in full). It also reduced the length of Abramelin’s prescribed magical retirement from a year and a half to six months, and failed to correctly replicate all of the magic squares. Despite these idiosyncrasies, Mathers’s text was the standard edition for virtually an entire century until Georg Dehn’s *Büch Abramelin*. This meant that prior to Dehn’s published German edition and Guth’s English translations, earlier versions of the work were really only accessible to those who either possessed the rare Peter Hammer edition or who had access to early modern manuscript collections in several different libraries across Europe. Dehn’s new edition therefore demonstrates conclusively that Mathers’s English translation, while a true classic of Western esotericism that would go on to greatly inform the magical career of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) and numerous other 20th century occult authors, was ultimately based on an inferior textual exemplar.⁵

Despite this fact, Lon Milo DuQuette in his Foreword and Georg Dehn in his Editor’s Note to the Second Revised Edition encourage readers not be too hard on Mathers — or Crowley — given the limitations of their source materials. While this sympathy is a nice gesture towards modern practitioners, I felt that a deeper examination of the way that Crowley implemented Abramelin’s instructions would have strengthened their case. For example, the A.:A.: (the magical order that Crowley co-founded with George Cecil Jones following the schism of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn) assigns instructions for the attainment of the “Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian

⁴ *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage* (London: John M. Watkins, 1900).

⁵ Mathers’s French textual exemplar was later published with an introduction as *La magie sacrée d’Abramelin le mage*, ed. Robert Ambelain (Paris: Niclus, 1959).

Angel” to the Grade of Adeptus Minor.⁶ It is easy to miss the fact, however, that the official A.:A.: instruction for this task (the “Vision of the Eighth Æthyr,” also known as “Liber VIII”) was not pulled verbatim from Mathers’s faulty edition of the Abramelin text but was penned during Crowley’s scrying of the 8th (Enochian) Æthyr with Victor Neuberg while traveling across the Sahara Desert in 1909. This newer instruction was published as part of “The Vision & the Voice,” a supplement to *The Equinox* volume 1, no. 5, and prescribes a retirement period of ninety-one days instead of either the six months of Mathers’s edition or the eighteen months of Dehn’s exemplar.⁷ It also contains other significant variations on Abramelin’s instructions that appear to be specific to the A.:A.: system of initiation.⁸ In any event, Crowley’s (and also Mathers’s, but to a different degree) motivation was not always to “restore” an original ritual text, but to adapt it in such a way that it would fit the curriculum for his students. Modern magicians stand in a long tradition of innovation with regards to older ritual manuals — this was happening in the Middle Ages also. The noted discrepancies in Abramelin’s instructions are therefore not as problematic as would be the case if Crowley’s rendition was lifted directly from the Mathers edition.

Given the recent impetus for examining traditional magical texts more thoroughly through the lenses of cognitive science and Western esotericism, Dehn’s edition in any case will certainly not disappoint. All in all, much credit should be given to Dehn and Guth for a well-executed series of new editions on the Abramelin text that can potentially open up the world of Abraham von Worms to a wider audience of scholars and practitioners of esoteric traditions.

Keith Cantú

kecantu@umail.ucsb.edu

⁶ “Liber XIII,” in vol. 1, no. 3 of *The Equinox* (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1910).

⁷ For an edited version of this text, see *The Vision & the Voice, with Commentary and Other Papers* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1998).

⁸ See the works by author J. Daniel Gunther for the present way in which this initiatory framework, including the invocation of the Holy Guardian Angel, is applied in practice.