Material Culture of Magic (book project)

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Call For Chapters - The Material Culture of Magic
Book project, ed. by Dr Antje Bosselmann-Ruickbie and Dr Leo Ruickbie

Magic is a wide field of research comprising what we might call the occult, paranormal events, anomalous experience, spirituality and other phenomena throughout human history. However, research has often been focused more narrowly on the historical analysis of written sources, or the anthropology and occasionally sociology of practitioners and their communities, for example. What is often overlooked are the physical artefacts of magic themselves.

In all areas of research, 'material culture' is becoming increasingly important – the 'material turn' as it has been labelled. This is particularly the case for disciplines that traditionally have not focused on object studies but on theory such as historical or social sciences. However, it is self-evident that the objects emerging from a culture provide valuable information on societies and their history. This is also and particularly the case for magic and related phenomena. Magic, especially, became divorced from its concrete expressions as academic study focused on problems of rationality and functionalist explanation.

When studying magic it is crucial to look at the objects that have been produced and what purpose they had, who made them and in what period, whether they represent only a certain historical period or are a long-lasting phenomenon, etc. This volume hence aims to 're-materialise' magic, to re-anchor it in the physical things that constitute 'magic' and recover the social lives, even biographies, of these things.

The envisaged academic book aims to cover a wide range of subjects, periods, geographical areas, as well as methods: firstly, because an interdisciplinary approach is essential to adequately encompass the subject; secondly, to investigate whether similar objects were used in different cultures in parallel or over a long period; and thirdly, to serve as a starting point for future research. This will be the first book on the material culture of magic and consequently has the potential to become a foundational text.

Therefore, we invite contributors from different disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology, art history, ethnology, folklore, parapsychology, religious studies, sociology and others. Subjects could be, for example, case studies focusing on particular objects, museum collections, or mass market items labelled as magical; analysis of classes of embodied magical functions, such as charms, amulets, talismans, magical jewellery, icons, relics, poppets (Voodoo dolls), etc.; consideration of classes of materials, such as bone, wood, metal, precious and semi-precious stones, etc.

In addition, it is important to understand people-object relations, spatial-temporal aspects of magical objects, the dialectics of transference (projection and introjection), the role of narratives and social performance, cultural trajectories, and the processes of commodification and fetishisation (reification). These can be addressed in a variety of contexts from traditional religion to popular culture, and historically situated anywhere from prehistory to the present day.

Any physical representation of magical ideation or anything imbued with supernatural meanings by its creator, such as found objects, animal/human parts, and man-made artefacts, can be considered in this context. What matters is a central focus on the physicality of the magical object; its material existence.

The volume will present an overview of current research in this field. It will comprise approximately 20 of the best and most relevant contributions on this subject. Contributors will be asked to submit a finished chapter of around 6,000 words (inc. references) with publication planned for 2015. In the first instance, an abstract of no more than 300 words should be sent, together with a brief biography, to the editors before 1 August 2014 at Bosselmann-Ruickbie@uni-mainz.de. We are also happy to answer any questions.

In order to get the best possible response, we would appreciate your help in re-distributing this call for chapters. Email it to colleagues, other relevant mailing lists, or print it out and stick it up on the department noticeboard!

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Dr Leo Ruickbie is the published author of several books, as well as the editor of the Paranormal Review, the magazine of the Society for Psychical Research, and a Committee Member of the Gesellschaft für Anomalistik (Society for Anomalistics).

Reference:

CFP: Material Culture of Magic (book project). In: ArtHist.net, May 23, 2014 (accessed Nov 18, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/7800>.