By Natural Means

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By Natural Means – *Magia Naturalis* and Sorcery in Swedish Lutheran Discourse

Ericus Johannis Prytz and the *Magia incantatrix* (1632)

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In 1610s, the province of Östergötland would become the scene of the first large-scale witch-hunts in early modern Sweden. Traditionally, these persecutions and trials have been taken as examples of how magical practices were indiscriminately rejected by orthodox clergymen, who strived to root out not only the 'popish leaven' among their congregations, but all 'superstition' wherewith the devil strived to deceive humankind. In contemporary texts, it is also possible to see how the clergy regarded themselves as the soldiers of God, fighting against the demonic forces that lured Christian people into apostasy in the final age. Yet as is discussed in this paper, the 'orthodox' view on magic, exemplified by the writings of the clergyman Ericus Johannis Prytz (1587-1637), was far more complex, and with much more in common with the intellectual traditions of the Renaissance, than is usually assumed.

1. When studying the sources, it is possible to see a change in how magical practices and *maleficium* were judged early modern Sweden.

   During the sixteenth century, a theocratic view on legislation became dominant in accordance with general tendencies in the Christian world, emphasizing magical crimes as being offences against the very First Commandment of the Law of God. In late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Sweden, it was the act of sorcery that was punished, rather than the harm done by magical means, as had been the previous juridical custom.

   In this context, where the Old Testament was regularly given primacy at the expense of the New, the necessity to punish illicit magic was stressed in order to avoid divine retribution to fall upon the whole people.

   Partly this tendency may be regarded as a consequence of the Reformation process and the apocalyptic world view shared by most reformers of virtually all denominations. As the struggle to root out heresy and – in Protestant contexts – remaining Catholic practices, the persecution of
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witches and sorcerers was conceived as a crucial task in the eschatological struggle against the Antichrist in the final age.¹

As clergymen urged worldly authorities to do their duty and impose harsher legislation, penalties in accordance with the Pentateuch were imposed in juridical practice, eventually codified in an appendix to the Code of Laws in 1608. For sorcery, the statement of Exodus was normative: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”²

In practice, this meant that death sentences and executions for sorcery became more frequent after the turn of the seventeenth century. In the Swedish province of Östergötland, severe persecutions broke out as the autonomous ruler, Duke Johan (1589-1618), issued a decree in 1614 with harsh and rather arbitrary penalties stipulated for sorcery. A nervous atmosphere had spread among the clergy and interacted with the personal fears of the duke, whose health was failing. According to contemporary accounts it was Claudius Prytz (1585-1658), chaplain at the ducal court, who had instigated the trials when he uncovered a witch who had put a hex upon the duke and his wife. At least ten women were executed for witchcraft between 1616 and 1620.³

2.
In their ambition to purify the Christian society as well as Christian thought, some Lutheran clergymen even seem to reject worldly learning altogether.

As an introduction to a discussion on God’s Law in his monumental work *Ethica christiana*, from 1617, the Swedish bishop Laurentius Paulinus Gothus claimed that despite the clear commands on idolatry, blasphemy and sacrilege in the Scriptures, there were indeed “Some carnally minded” that “either of Misunderstanding or Presumptuousness”

… impose and maintain some wrongful Opinions and detrimental delusions concerning *Ethica gentili* and *Magia Astrologica & Incantatrice*, that is, on the ethics of the gentiles and especially of Aristotle, on Starry conjectures, and other arts of Divination, Sorcery and practices with magical adjuncts, through which many [people], as well in this day as in times of the world passed, will let themselves be

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³ Ankarloo pp. 70-71; Johan Alfred Westerlund & Johan Axel Setterdahl, *Linköpings stifts herdanimne. D. 3*, Linköping, 1917-1919 pp. 94-95; Duke Johan was half-brother to Sigismund and cousin to Gustavus Adolphus, hereditary prince and from 1606 autonomous ruler of a duchy with its heartlands in the province of Östergötland; cf. Folke Lindberg, “Hertig Johan av Östergötland och hans forstdöme”, *HT* 1941 p. 117.
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seduced from God, His Holy Word and Truth, and have converted the right service of God into Idolatry and vain deceit.  

The main target of this polemic is not primarily sorcery, but the pagan ethics that Paulinus wanted to replace with pure Christian thought. But in a later text, Paulinus even tried to replace the prevalent Aristotelian physics with a Christian natural philosophy, exclusively based upon the Holy Scriptures. Now this should partly be seen in context of a contemporary and rather hot-headed struggle between clerical and worldly authorities, both striving to control the institutions of education. Yet the impression is quite clear: in orthodox Lutheran discourse, all worldly learning – even the classics – is standing on a slippery slope. Worldly learning must be handled with care, or may else lead the curious mind to heresy, illicit knowledge and magical practices, and consequently to eternal damnation. As for the issue of magic and sorcery, there is no room for hesitation or nuances. Either you put your faith in God, or in the delusions of the Devil. And the tool to make the distinction is the Word of God, as interpreted by true and faithful preachers. Worldly learning would be of no use.

However, on a closer look, the Lutheran view may not have been so biblicistic as it first appears. When defining the concept of magic in the Ethica, Laurentius Paulinus Gothus stated that *Magia* was originally a Persian word, simply meaning ‘wisdom’ or ‘reason’, and as such it could refer to allowable knowledge “either in the H. Scriptures, or Philosophical arts”. However, he also states that the term was generally used to signify *magia illicita*, meaning ‘forbidden prudence’ or just plain superstition, a category that Paulinus divided into the subcategories divination and sorcery.

According to Paulinus, this illicit knowledge “has its origin among the Persians, who were descendents of the cursed Cham”. The point here being that illicit magic was first exercised, not just by strangers and foreigners in general, but by people outcast of the People of God from the earliest of times. Paulinus even traced the origin of the magical arts to Zoroaster, whom he designated “an excellent artist in the courses of the Heavens and other natural things”. The very introducer of magic into the world of man thus primarily appears as an astronomer and natural

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6 Laurentius Paulinus Gothus, *Ethica christianae I* p. 192; “… lofligit Förstånd/ anthen in Then H. ScriHt/ eller Philosophiske konster”
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philosopher. In this role he does not seem to differ from Paulinus himself, who in his earlier life had been professor of astronomy in Uppsala and even published astrological almanacs. But unlike Paulinus, Zoroaster had not acquired his erudition through long studies, but “through a secret Compact with the Devil”, and moreover he had “founded Schools, wherein he instructed many others about this devilish wiliness”.

Now this was was commonplace knowledge in Paulinus’ days, the main source for his discussion being Pliny the Elder and his Naturalis Historiæ. Even the distinction between allowable wisdom and illicit magic, practiced by suspicious, foreign people is classical. Seeing to the terminology, it is quite clear that μαγεία, when the word first appeared in Hippocratic tracts in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, originally referred to the cult and doctrines of the Persian Mages – practices that, while just being foreign, could be easily separated from traditional Greek philosophy and religion. Or, as put by Karen Jolly:

The Greek μαγεία and Latin magia contain within them the seeds of the paradigm for magic as developed in succeeding ages, primarily the sense of ‘otherness’. … Magic is most often a label used to identify ideas or persons who fall outside the norms of society and are thereby marked as special or non-normative, either for the purpose of exclusion or to heighten a sense of mysterious power inherent in their status.

Now, as reflected in Paulinus’ statement, the concept of magic gained new connotations as it was associated with spiritual intelligences or daemones, in a Christian context generally identified with unclean spirits, fallen angels and “spiritual wickedness in high places” to speak with the apostle. When used, the concept of magic was thus mainly discussed in terms of demonic intervention. Illicit magic was defined by the pact the practitioner had made with the devil.

But there are also more positive uses of the concept of magic, running from antiquity to the end of the seventeenth century. In the tradition of Pliny, natural magic was sometimes described as the ancient and venerable wisdom – prиса sapientia – of the mages. Thus the term magia naturalis was adopted by medieval scholastics as well as renaissance humanists, developing advanced theories of occult qualities and correspondences between various natural phenomena.

7 Ibid. p. 194; “Vthi synderhet skrifwa Plinius och Iustinius/ at widskepelse/ lefierij och troldom/ skoła haffua theres begynnelse … Vtaff en fôrennlîgh konstner utbi Himmels lopp och andra Naturliga ting/ benedm Zoroasters/ Hwilkén sådant lärde genom hemligit Compact med Diefwlen”.
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4.
The distinction between natural magic and unnatural sorcery would become an important theme in a tract on sorcery, completed in 1632 by Ericus Johannis Prytz (1587-1637), younger contemporary to Paulinus who was a vicar of Kuddby in Östergötland.

The tract, named *Magia incantatrix*, was never printed, and it is hard to tell what influence it may have had in its contemporary context. But according to the sermon held at his funeral, Master Erik had been known for having kept “a close eye on false teachings in his office”:

> With reprimand and exhortation he has, openly in the pulpit, contended against sin and aberration, and through Church discipline subdued as much as he could possibly do. And [he] often admitted that he, as he rebuked Sin, had to stand in danger from the [magical] shots of Warlocks and Sorceresses, just as a Warrior must face the enemy, when standing on the battlefield, Especially since he knew that such people had destroyed his predecessor, Reverend and well learned Master Anders, Dean and Vicar here, and several of the pastors here in this deanery through sorcery. Yet he did not fear this, as he fulfilled his duty while commending the issue to God.11

The rhetoric of this sermon places Prytz within a collective of like-minded orthodox clergymen, fighting the heresies and devilish superstitions, abundant and threatening the Christian congregation as the apocalypse approached – just as the Swedish army fought the war against the forces of the papal Antichrist across the Baltic Sea. Thus it is likely that the views and discussions expressed by Ericus Johannis in *Magia incantatrix* had been reflected in his sermons during his lifetime – at least his interests were known by his colleagues.

Ericus Johannis was the younger brother of the aforementioned Claudius Prytz who had been involved in the witchhunts in Östergötland in the 1610s and 1620s.12 As a student in Uppsala, Ericus had defended a dissertation with 54 theses against “the uncertain and vain forecasts of the astrologers”.13 Thus he is likely to have had some knowledge of the subject, when he in his tract tried to investigate the difference between natural and unnatural and demonic magic. Or rather between sorcery – that is unnatural in itself as it originates from the devil, although it often is practiced by natural means – and natural, secret forces that are often mistaken for magic by the simple and unlearned; “for there happen and are many strange things in the

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12 Laurentius Laurinus, funeral sermon for Ericus Johannis Prytz, cit. in Westerlund & Setterdahl 1917-1919 p. 442.

world, as well in corporal things as in spiritual, that man cannot understand or fathom, but only
God”.14

Thus you must make distinction between Magia naturalem that is natural wisdom, and may be called a
liberal art, and Magiam incantatricem, that is only the blindfold of sorcery and devilish superstition,
which depends on no Art or natural effect, but only on the deceit and force of that spirit.

As an example Prytz poured his scorn on contemporary practices:

For what force could there be in a yarn, when they untie a knot thereupon to make storm and
tempest? Or what Force can there be in a straw to shoot with, to kill a man or any other Creature?215

As the devil is a spirit, he is fully capable of doing magic without any means at all. Thus the use
of natural things in sorcery is just a delusion, wherewith the devil will fool his followers to serve
him – creating an illusion that sorcery is an art, with rules and traditions, just like arithmetics,
grammar, rhetorics – or magia naturalis.

But even though it was of vital importance to separate sorcery from magia naturalis, the
difference was not always easy to tell. To unlearned and non scholars, it was a distinction almost
impossible to make. Strange things and wonders occurred in the world, as Prytz noticed, and he
who did not understand the causes could easily believe natural phenomena to be the work of
“sorcery and devilish art, which it is not, but the secret operation of nature, and only they may
understand, who are the erudite and penetrating examiners of nature.”16

Yet even the scholar could be puzzled. In a passage of Magia incantatrix, Prytz relates a story
from Genesis, when the patriarch Jacob had been denied his well deserved reward by his uncle
and father-in-law, Laban. Thus Jacob made a deal with Laban, that he should “separate all
spotted and speckled sheep and all black sheep from the rest of the flock, and what would then
become spotted and speckled, that should be Jacob’s reward”.17 Then Jacob took sticks of hazel
and chestnut and cut white stripes upon them, put them in the the watering troughs when the
livestock was supposed to breed, “and were all the herds pregnant over the sticks, and gave birth

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14 Cit. Cod. Linc. N20 fol. 61v; “tij skeer och är miket vnderligit i werldenne, så väl i lekamligha saker, såsom
andeligha, ther som menniskian icke förstår eller uthrannsaka kan: vthan gudh allena...”
15 Cod. Linc. N20 fol. 14v-15r; “Therfore moste man göra en åthşkîlnadt emellan Magiam naturalem som är
naturligh wishet, och en fri konst kallas mà; och emellan Magiam incantatricem, som är allena truldoms
förblindningh och dieffuls widskepe, som ståår icke uthi nigon Konst eller naturligh werkande, vthan allenast
uthi thens andas göcklerij och kraft. Ty hwad krafft skal vara uthi en tråådh, når the en knut ther vppå uplösa til at
göra storm och owädher? eller hwadh Krafft skall vara uthi itt halm strå til at skiuata medh, någon mennskio eller
annat Creatur til dödz?”
16 Cod. Linc. N20 fol. 13v-14r; “Naturens werkande äro vål vppå monga handa set: ther igenom och myket
vnderligit i werlden skeer och hender: så at then som sådant intet weet, eller förstår orsaker ther til, han tencker
offta sådant naturligit werk ske medh truldom och dieffuls konst, ther doch intet är, uthan naturens hemligha
werkande, och the allena förstå kunna, som ther en lärde och skarpsinne naturens ransakare äro.”
17 Cod. Linc. N20 fol. 14r; “… at han skulle skilia all fleckiat och brokot fåår och all svart fåår ifrå then andra
hiorden, och hwadh ti sådan fleckiat och brokot bleffue, ther skulle vara Jacobs lön.”
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to spotted, speckled and coloured”. Now, according to Prytz, “this was no sorcery with the coloured sticks, but it had its natural causes.\textsuperscript{18}

The nature of these natural causes is not explained however, and to virtually anyone, Jacob’s trick must have appeared as at least very magic-like. Yet it may not be classified as sorcery. Why?

First of all we have to see how the distinction is based on the notion of religious, moral and intellectual authority. We have to see for which purpose a magic-like act is being performed, by whom, and whether the practitioner turns to God or the devil when doing it. That Jacob’s manipulation of the livestock cannot be rejected as sorcery, is more dependent to his authoritative status as a patriarch of God’s chosen people, than to his actual doings.

Imagine, for instance, the local ‘cunning’ man or woman of any village in Christendom performing the same trick, claiming the effect to be only ‘natural’. He or she would be disqualified, due to their lack of education and thus of intellectual as well as moral standard and reliability.

But learned magic could be problematic as well. “Is it sorcery”, Prytz asks, “to heal the iron wherewith the harm is done, and not the wound”, thus introducing a discussion on the so-called Waffensalbe, weapon salve or powder of sympathy.\textsuperscript{19} This was a medical treatment based upon the notion of hidden sympathies and correspondences between a weapon and the wound the same weapon had inflicted.

The origins of the weapon salve are rather unclear. Recipies appears in some Paracelsian and pseudo-Paracelsian tracts in the sixteenth century, and in 1608 Rudolph Goclenius the Younger presented his theory of a similar, “magnetic” method to cure wounds. But the fundamental notion of sympathies and correspondences were advocated by classical authorities such as Pliny the Elder.\textsuperscript{20} Yet it is quite clear that this kind of medical treatment was not some kind of “popular” or rural magic that had been gentrified and provided with a superficial layer of learning. It was obviously based on intellectual reasoning and scholarly traditions, coherent with contemporary theories of natural philosophy.

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\textsuperscript{18} Cod. Linc. N20 fol. 14v; “toogh jacob gröna aspekkepar Hasl och Castanee, och barkade huita render ther vpå, och ladhe käppanar som han barkt hade i drycke honor för hiordarnar som ther Komma moste och watnas, thå the skulle haftuande warda och the kommo til at dricka, och all wordo hiordarnar haffuandes öffuer keppanar och födde fleckiot, spreklott och brokott. … Thetta war ingen troldom medh the brokotta käpparn, vthan hade sina naturlighe orsaker.”

\textsuperscript{19} Cod. Linc. N20 fol. 61v; “Är thet truldom, at likia Jernet och icke såret ther mz skadan skedd är”.

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Ericus Johannis Prytz was well aware that many things in the world were unexplainable, and that only God had full knowledge of all things. Still the scholars could explain curative effects of various natural phenomena and remedies, just as one could observe how the sun “and the other celestial bodies operated upon the lower Creatures.” Thus, despite his 1611 defence of critical theses against the astrologers, Prytz was no stranger to the idea that astral forces were transferred “medite through the air and the weather to the earthly things.”

But in the case of the weapon salve, the effect achieved despite the distance between the weapon and the wound could not be as easily explained. “Should now this remedy be true and natural”, Prytz wrote, “it must depend on a secret and hidden force between the same salve and compress and the blood upon the iron.”

Now, although the worldly learned had not been able to find any obvious causes to these secret correspondenses, they had still separated them into two main categories of sympathies and antipathies. The attraction between magnets and iron was a clear example, but Prytz also mentions other instances, that may appear strange to the posterior world, but to a contemporary scholar they would be more or less self evident. Thus it was well known that an ox would be tamed when tied to a fig tree, just as an olive tree would prosper if planted by a virgin.

Likewise there is good friendship between the snake and the fox, between the carp and the swine: but between wolf and man, item wolf and sheep, lion and rooster … snakes and mice, eagles and dragons and many other things are great hatred and enmity. If this remedy of the iron, is not acquired through such secret sympathiam, [it is] not natural, but a work of the devil and an art of witchcraft.

It could be argued that the purpose of this discussion was to miscredit scholarly magic, and to reject this seemingly strange and potentially dangerous brand of medical practice, whose inner nature was hidden even to its practisers. Prytz’ conclusion seems to be the cautious one: we don’t know the nature of this phenomenon. It may be witchcraft, thus we better let it be. But he could not say so outright, as he here dealt with a scholarly kind of magic, with some degree of inherent authority.

Yet the conclusion is that Prytz, in his discussion on witchcraft and natural magic stands on a solid, scholarly ground, far from the Biblicist approach we may have expected. Some of the arguments, among them the discussion on Jacob and the sympathies and antipathies – may be
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found in a 1610 dissertation from Uppsala, probably written by the controversial scholar Johannes Messenius, concerning “Physio-Magical” theory.

It is tempting to suggest that Prytz had studied this text when compiling his *Magia incantatrix*, especially since a preserved copy of the dissertation had been owned by his father, Johannes Nicolai Prytz. However, Prytz was sparse with his references, and there is no trace of any dependence within the text of *Magia incantatrix*. Yet the point here is that whatever his sources were, and from wherever he actually got his arguments, Prytz argues as a scholar in his discussion on natural magic and sorcery, and not, as may have been expected, as a preacher.

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