

ESOTERIC BOOKS

Twenty influential works of magic, witchcraft and esoteric tradition

Books of magic and witchcraft – often called ‘grimoires’ or spell books - go back far further than medieval witches. Their roots stretch into the ancient Near East more than 2,000 years before Christ. The earliest known magical texts were written on Mesopotamian clay tablets containing incantations, curses, protective rituals and spirit-invocations. Egyptian magical texts followed, then Greek, Jewish, Roman, medieval Christian, Arabic and Renaissance traditions.

The word ‘grimoire’ comes from an Old French word related to ‘grammar’, because magical books were mysterious learned texts understood only by educated people. Medieval and Renaissance Europe saw an explosion of grimoires dealing with angels, demons, astrology, talismans, treasure finding, healing, necromancy, and ceremonial magic.

Below is a chronological list of twenty influential magical or witchcraft books:

◇ 1. Egyptian Book of the Dead ◇

Date: c. 1550 BC **Author:** Multiple Egyptian priestly writers. **Theme:** Funerary magic and safe passage through the afterlife. Included spells, passwords and invocations for the dead.

The Egyptian Book of the Dead was not a single book but a collection of funerary texts assembled over many centuries in ancient Egypt. Written on papyrus scrolls and placed in tombs, it contained spells, prayers and magical formulas intended to guide the dead safely through the dangers of the afterlife. The texts instructed souls how to pass monstrous guardians, avoid spiritual destruction and successfully face judgement before Osiris. Some passages acted almost like passwords for the next world. Rich Egyptians often commissioned personalised copies decorated with elaborate illustrations. Modern historians see it as one of humanity’s earliest systematic attempts to overcome death through ritual knowledge and sacred magic.

◇ 2. Mesopotamian Maqlû Tablets ◇

Date: c. 700 BC **Author:** Assyrian priest-magicians. **Theme:** Anti-witchcraft rituals. Designed to break curses and destroy hostile sorcery.

The Maqlû tablets formed one of the ancient world’s most important anti-witchcraft ritual collections. Produced in Assyria around the seventh century BC, they contained elaborate ceremonies designed to break curses, destroy evil magic and protect victims from hostile sorcerers. Priests performed all-night rituals involving fire, figurines, chants and symbolic destruction of magical representations of witches. The texts reveal how deeply Mesopotamian societies feared unseen supernatural attack. Illness, crop failure and bad luck could all be blamed upon magical enemies. Unlike later European witch trials, the Maqlû tradition focused more on defensive ritual protection than public execution, although the fear of harmful magic clearly permeated everyday life.

◇ 3. Greek Magical Papyri ◇

Date: 2nd century BC – 5th century AD **Author:** Various Greco-Egyptian magicians. **Theme:** Love spells, spirit summoning, healing, curses and astrology.

The Greek Magical Papyri are among the strangest surviving texts from the ancient Mediterranean world. Compiled between roughly the second century BC and fifth century AD, they preserve hundreds of spells involving love charms, curses, spirit summoning, healing, dream manipulation and astrology. Written in a mixture of Greek, Egyptian and mystical invented words, the texts demonstrate a blending of religions and magical traditions across the ancient world. Some spells attempted to compel lovers or destroy rivals, while others invoked powerful deities and daemons through secret names. Historians regard the papyri as evidence that practical magic was widespread even among educated people in the Greco-Roman world.

◇ 4. Sefer Raziel HaMalakh ◇

Date: Probably 12th–13th century **Author:** Anonymous Jewish mystical writers. **Theme:** Kabbalah, angel magic, divine names and cosmology.

Sefer Raziel HaMalakh (‘The Book of Raziel the Angel’) emerged within medieval Jewish mysticism and became one of the most influential magical texts associated with Kabbalah. Tradition claimed the angel Raziel gave the book to Adam after humanity’s expulsion from Eden, revealing hidden divine knowledge. The text contains material concerning angelic hierarchies, sacred names of God, cosmology, astrology and mystical protection rituals. Medieval readers often treated it as both a spiritual and magical manual. Copies circulated widely in Jewish and later Christian occult circles. Although deeply mystical in tone, some authorities feared the text because it encouraged attempts to access hidden supernatural powers through divine secrets.

◇ 5. Testament of Solomon ◇

Date: c. 1st–5th century AD **Author:** Anonymous Greek-Jewish writer. **Theme:** King Solomon controlling demons using a magical ring. Early demonology text.

The Testament of Solomon is an early demonological text probably written between the first and fifth centuries AD. It presents the Biblical King Solomon as a master magician capable of controlling demons using a divinely empowered ring. In the narrative, Solomon interrogates demons one by one, forcing them to reveal their names, powers and weaknesses before compelling them to help construct the Temple in Jerusalem. The text blends Jewish, Christian and magical traditions into one of the earliest surviving catalogues of demons and spirit lore. Later grimoires and occult traditions drew heavily upon its themes. Historians view it as a major foundation for medieval and Renaissance ceremonial magic.

◇ 6. Picatrix (Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm) ◇

Date: c. 1000 AD **Author:** Maslama al-Majriti (traditionally attributed). **Theme:** Arabic astrology, talismans, planetary magic and occult philosophy.

The Picatrix originated in the Islamic world around the eleventh century and later became one of the most influential occult books in medieval Europe. Originally written in Arabic, it combined astrology, philosophy, talismanic magic and mystical cosmology into a vast handbook of esoteric knowledge. The book taught that celestial forces flowing from planets and stars could influence earthly events if properly understood and manipulated through rituals, images and invocations. Medieval scholars regarded it with both fascination and fear because it blurred the boundary between science, religion and forbidden magic. Renaissance occultists later considered the Picatrix one of the supreme manuals of astral and ceremonial magic.

◇ 7. The Sworn Book of Honorius ◇

Date: 13th century **Author:** Attributed to Honorius of Thebes. **Theme:** Angel invocation and ceremonial magic. One of the oldest medieval grimoires.

The Sworn Book of Honorius was one of the earliest major medieval grimoires and deeply influenced later ceremonial magic traditions. Probably written during the thirteenth century, it claimed to preserve secret teachings transmitted by a legendary magician named Honorius of Thebes. The text focused heavily upon angelic invocation, sacred visions and elaborate purification rituals intended to allow practitioners to contact divine or celestial beings safely. Unlike darker grimoires centred on demons, the book often presented itself as a holy magical system seeking wisdom from God and the heavens. Church authorities nevertheless regarded such practices with suspicion because they bypassed orthodox religious authority and risked accusations of necromancy.

◇ 8. The Key of Solomon ◇

Date: 14th–15th century manuscripts **Author:** Pseudonymously attributed to King Solomon. **Theme:** Ritual magic, protective circles, talismans and spirit control.

The Key of Solomon became one of the most famous magical manuals in European history. Although falsely attributed to the Biblical King Solomon, the surviving manuscripts mostly date from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The book provided detailed instructions for ceremonial magic including magical circles, talismans, planetary timing, purification rites and spirit control. Great emphasis was placed upon correct ritual preparation because practitioners believed errors could expose them to dangerous supernatural forces. The work profoundly shaped Renaissance occultism and later Western esoteric traditions. Many modern magical systems still borrow its symbols and ritual structures. Because it dealt openly with spirit manipulation, religious authorities frequently condemned it as dangerous occult literature.

◇ 9. The Lesser Key of Solomon (Ars Goetia) ◇

Date: 17th century compilation **Author:** Anonymous. **Theme:** Summoning and commanding 72 demons. One of the most famous grimoires ever written.

The Lesser Key of Solomon, especially its famous section known as the Ars Goetia, became perhaps the best-known demonological grimoire ever written. Compiled during the seventeenth century from older magical traditions, it catalogued seventy-two demons supposedly summoned and controlled by King Solomon. Each demon was given a name, rank, appearance and specific powers ranging from discovering treasure to influencing love or revealing hidden knowledge. The book also described protective magical circles and ceremonial procedures intended to prevent demons from harming the magician. Its vivid demon imagery strongly influenced later occultism, literature and popular culture. Many religious groups condemned the text as spiritually dangerous because of its explicit demon invocation.

◇ 10. Malleus Maleficarum ◇

Date: 1487 **Author:** Heinrich Kramer. **Theme:** Witch-hunting manual. Claimed witches made pacts with the Devil. Hugely influential in European witch trials.

The Malleus Maleficarum ('Hammer of Witches') was one of the most infamous books in European history. Published in 1487 by the Dominican inquisitor Heinrich Kramer, it argued that witches existed as servants of Satan and posed a deadly threat to Christian society. The book described alleged witchcraft practices, methods of interrogation and procedures for prosecution. It particularly targeted women, claiming they were more susceptible to demonic temptation. Although not universally accepted by all church authorities, the work became enormously influential during the European witch trials. Historians regard it as a key text in spreading fear, misogyny and judicial cruelty during the early modern persecution of alleged witches.

◇ 11. Three Books of Occult Philosophy ◇

Date: 1531 **Author:** Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. **Theme:** Renaissance occult philosophy combining magic, astrology, Kabbalah and classical learning.

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's Three Books of Occult Philosophy, published in 1531, became one of the foundational texts of Renaissance occultism. Agrippa attempted to unite classical philosophy, astrology, Kabbalah, natural magic and Christian mysticism into one grand intellectual system. Rather than presenting magic merely as superstition, he argued that hidden forces and correspondences existed throughout the universe linking stars, plants, numbers, angels and human souls. The work deeply influenced later ceremonial magicians and occult philosophers. Although admired by some scholars, many religious authorities regarded Agrippa with suspicion and accused him of dangerous magical practices. His reputation later inspired legends portraying him as a sorcerer who trafficked with demonic powers.

◇ 12. Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy ◇

Date: 1559 **Author:** Pseudo-Agrippa. **Theme:** Ceremonial rituals, spirit invocation and magical correspondences.

The Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy appeared after Agrippa's death and was almost certainly written by other occult authors, which is why historians usually refer to it as 'Pseudo-Agrippa'. Published in 1559, the text focused more directly upon practical ceremonial magic than Agrippa's earlier philosophical work. It included instructions for spirit invocation, magical seals, planetary rituals and methods of contacting supernatural beings. Because the book offered explicit magical procedures rather than abstract theory, it became especially influential among later grimoires and occult practitioners. Religious authorities frequently condemned such texts because they appeared to encourage direct interaction with hidden spiritual powers outside orthodox Christian worship.

◇ 13. Arbatel of Magic ◇

Date: 1575 **Author:** Anonymous Swiss/German writer. **Theme:** Christian ceremonial magic focused on planetary spirits and moral conduct.

The Arbatel of Magic, published in 1575, differed from many darker grimoires because it presented ceremonial magic within an overtly Christian moral framework. Probably written by an anonymous Swiss or German author, the text emphasised wisdom, piety and disciplined spiritual conduct rather than demonic summoning. It described planetary spirits known as Olympic spirits who governed aspects of nature and human knowledge. The book encouraged moderation and warned against greed or reckless magical ambition. Renaissance readers often considered it more respectable than openly necromantic grimoires. Even so, critics feared that any attempt to contact supernatural beings risked spiritual deception or heresy.

◇ 14. Discoverie of Witchcraft ◇

Date: 1584 **Author:** Reginald Scot. **Theme:** Sceptical attack on witch persecutions. Also preserved many folk spells and conjuring tricks.

Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, published in 1584, was one of the earliest sceptical attacks upon witch persecutions in England. Scot argued that many accusations against witches arose from ignorance, superstition, fraud or fear rather than genuine supernatural activity. He criticised torture, unreliable testimony and the persecution of elderly vulnerable women. Ironically, while attempting to expose magical deception, Scot also preserved descriptions of folk charms, conjuring tricks and magical beliefs that might otherwise have been lost. King James VI of Scotland disliked the book intensely because it undermined belief in witchcraft prosecutions. Some copies were allegedly burned after James became king of England.

◇ 15. Daemonologie ◇

Date: 1597 **Author:** King James VI & I. **Theme:** Royal defence of witch-hunting and demonology. Influenced later English witch trials.

King James VI of Scotland — later James I of England — wrote *Daemonologie* in 1597 as a passionate defence of witch-hunting and belief in demonic activity. The book argued that witches genuinely served Satan and posed a threat to Christian society. James discussed necromancy, spirit summoning, possession and supernatural deception in dialogue form, presenting himself as both scholar and defender of religious order. His views were influenced partly by the North Berwick witch trials in Scotland, during which he became convinced witches had attempted to destroy his ship through magical storms. *Daemonologie* later influenced English witchcraft fears and contributed to the climate that allowed later persecutions under figures such as Matthew Hopkins.

◇ 16. The Grand Grimoire ◇

Date: 18th century **Author:** Anonymous French occult tradition. **Theme:** Demon summoning, especially Lucifuge Rofocale; infamous 'black magic' reputation.

The *Grand Grimoire* emerged from eighteenth-century French occult traditions and gained notoriety as one of the darkest magical books ever circulated in Europe. Unlike many earlier grimoires that focused partly upon divine or angelic powers, this work became infamous for its explicit instructions concerning demon summoning and infernal pacts. Central to the text was the spirit *Lucifuge Rofocale*, described as a powerful servant of Hell associated with wealth and secret knowledge. The book claimed practitioners could obtain power, treasure or influence through carefully performed rituals. Religious authorities and later occult critics regarded it as profoundly dangerous because it appeared to encourage deliberate alliance with demonic forces.

◇ 17. The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses ◇

Date: 18th–19th century publication **Author:** Anonymous occult editors. **Theme:** Jewish-Christian magical seals, talismans and spirit commands.

Despite their title, *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* were not ancient Biblical writings, but occult compilations published mainly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The books claimed to preserve hidden magical teachings supposedly given to Moses beyond the traditional Old Testament. They included magical seals, talismans, spirit commands and ritual formulas blending Jewish mysticism, Christian symbolism and folk magic. The texts became especially popular in parts of Europe and later among immigrant communities in America and the Caribbean. Many readers viewed them as practical manuals of protection and supernatural power. Critics, however, regarded them as fraudulent or spiritually dangerous because they encouraged ritual magic outside orthodox religion.

◇ 18. Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie ◇

Date: 1854–1856 **Author:** Éliphas Lévi. **Theme:** Ceremonial magic revival, tarot symbolism and occult philosophy.

Éliphas Lévi's *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* ('Dogma and Ritual of High Magic'), published between 1854 and 1856, helped revive modern Western occultism during the nineteenth century. Lévi combined ceremonial magic, Kabbalah, tarot symbolism, alchemy and mystical philosophy into an ambitious spiritual system that deeply influenced later occult organisations. He popularised the famous image of Baphomet — the horned goat-headed figure later associated with occultism and Satanism, though Lévi himself intended it as a symbolic representation of cosmic balance rather than literal devil worship. His writings shaped the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and strongly influenced Aleister Crowley and twentieth-century esoteric traditions.

◇ 19. The Book of the Law ◇

Date: 1904 **Author:** Aleister Crowley. **Theme:** Foundation text of Thelema; ritual magic and spiritual will.

Aleister Crowley's *The Book of the Law*, written in 1904, became the foundation text of the religious and magical philosophy known as Thelema. Crowley claimed the work was dictated to him in Cairo by a supernatural entity named Aiwass. The book proclaimed a new spiritual age governed by the principle: 'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.' Its mixture of mysticism, ritual magic, symbolism and radical individualism made it both influential and controversial. Critics portrayed Crowley as dangerous, immoral or satanic, although he rejected conventional Satanism. The book later inspired numerous occult movements and contributed greatly to Crowley's enduring reputation as 'the wickedest man in the world'.

◇ 20. The Gardnerian Book of Shadows ◇

Date: 1940s–1950s **Author:** Gerald Gardner and early Wiccans. **Theme:** Modern Wicca, seasonal rituals, initiation ceremonies and pagan witchcraft traditions.

The Gardnerian *Book of Shadows* formed the ritual foundation of modern Wicca during the mid-twentieth century. Developed by Gerald Gardner and early practitioners of modern pagan witchcraft, the text contained initiation ceremonies, seasonal festivals, magical practices and invocations connected with nature-based spirituality. Gardner claimed parts of the material descended from surviving ancient witch cult traditions, although historians now believe much was assembled from ceremonial magic, folklore and personal invention. The *Book of Shadows* helped transform witchcraft from a feared criminal accusation into a modern spiritual movement focused upon nature, ritual and personal belief. Nevertheless, conservative religious critics continued to associate Wicca with occultism and alleged devil worship.