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**IN THE WINGS OF ASIRIEL: SOME REFLECTIONS OVER AN EXCERPT
OF TRITHEMIUS' STEGANOGRAPHIA**

Category: Essay

Introduction: The present paper intends to present a piece of the notable work wrote by Abbot Johannes Trithemius known as *Steganographia*, aiming to show how the secretaries' book of secrets had drunk from the renaissance magical book of secret, presenting the intercrossing between the ways of secretarium and the ways of magus.

Key words: *Steganographia*, Johannes Trithemius, secretarium.

In 1499, a letter has arrived in the German monastery of Guent. It was a missive from the Abbot de Sponhein, Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516), to his companion in the Fraternity of Joachim, Arnold Bostius. In this letter, Trithemius described his intentions of producing a wonderful book, in four volumes, in which he will teach forms of a secret writing in which one's could transmit secrets over long distances safely; a way to transmits secrets over long distances without using any kind of letter or even signals; a way to teach Latin to a completely ignorant in this language and even a form to transmits a secret thought right to addressee's mind. This amazing work in question was the *Steganographia* (BRANN, 1999: 86).

The *Steganographia* or "the art of sending messages over great distances by spirits" is the most famous work of the Abbot Trithemius, and the one in which his relations with the magical thought presents itself more clearly. The Abbot of Sponhein also wrote to exhort the monastic reformation, to praise the scribes and also to make the Emperor and the palatine princes to persecute witches, whose Trithemius saw as a great danger to the kingdom, once they could pervert and throw the princes into the error of idolatry (BRANN, 1999: 60). So, it could be said that Trithemius make some efforts to be the one, near the princes, who could deal with the occult mysteries. He tried to

defend a monopoly of the secrecy, once he thought that the *magi* were the most prepared to guide the *princeps* in the reigns of the magic.

His efforts in this sense had great repercussions in his works, and it could be well perceived in his *Steganographia*. Basically, it was a manual on how to use the *aerius spiritus* or angels, as he stated, to send and receive secret messages. The book's apparent plot is by itself very interesting, but that is a detail more intriguing: Trithemius devoted his *Steganographia* entirely to the secret of the *princeps*. All the uses for the "angels of secret" were right connected with affairs of State. So, Trithemius composed a magical method to protect the "secret of State". The production of *Steganographia* has a sharp connection with the rise of the *secretarium*, one of the most central actors in the ascension of the so-called Modern State. The secretary was the court agent capable of cipher and decipher the matters of the royal interest; he was the one able in dealing with the various forms of secret communication. At the beginning of their actuations, the secretaries just encrypted informations about the kingdom military strength and richness, but over some time, they passed to tell the princes how to act in public, showing which actions could be understood or not by the crowd. The appearing of a kind of special "mirrors of princes", called books of secrets, was a direct consequence of the transformation in the actuation of the *secretarium* (SENNELART, 2006).

The secretary's book of mysteries appeared in the same moment that Europe experienced a revival of some ancient magical traditions, as *kabbalah* and hermetism, which were deeply involved of the idea of secret. Both cabalists and hermeticists deal with a cosmogonic conception based on the idea of a construction of the world in levels, and between them rests the divine message of the Creator. The great journey proposed for these esoteric trends was to discover, decipher and instrumentalize this secret, to build a tool to access God Himself, and turn the simple man into some kind of "man-god". They usually made use of secret forms of writing and communication to guarantee that just the rightfully initiated could have access to their knowledge, what remit to Trithemius' efforts to ensure a monopoly of secret.

Sennelart points that many men involved with the arts of secret communication were also involved with the magical arts, as Giambattista della Porta (1535-1615), Blasé de Vigenère (1523-1596) and also Trithemius. What my research points is that

secretaries found the elements for their book of secrets in the *magi*'s books of secrets. So, the notion of secret that based the relations of the *secretarii* with the secret of State was obtained in the relations of the *magi* with the secret divine message that God should put in the natural world, His greatest creation. What we intend here is presents and comments a *Steganographia*'s chapter, trying to show the relations between the magical secret with the secret of State, in the Trithemius' book.

CHAPTER VII: Concerning the Supreme Prince Asiriël whose house is in the West (Africus), and who has under his power 20 leaders who are in charge of the day and the same number in command at night, whose duty is to announce the plans of princes to their friends.*

The first and Supreme Prince of the seventh house is called Asiriël and he dwells in that region of the world which we call the West (Africus). He has under him 20 princes who are in command of day and the same number in charge of night, all of whom have many helpers under them. If two spirits from those of the day are called to the service of the art by the operator, they always have twenty helpers serving them. The same happens with those of night. If, however, you were to call only one of the princes, particularly one of the night, it would be shown that he had only 10 helpers, not 20. Do not call the day spirits unless you call at least two, for they are not accustomed to come alone. You may, however, call one or two from the night spirits, just as you please. If you call two, you know that there should be 20 helpers added in the conjuration, as is the custom ; if one, ten should be added. Peruse this table, so that you will know which should be called alone and which with a companion.

* I choose to work with the English translation of this text, extracted from TRITHEMIUS, Johannes. *The steganographia of Johannes Trithemius*. Translated by Fiona Tait, Christopher Upton and J.W.H. Walden. Edited, with intro, by Adam McLean. Edinburgh: Magnum Opus Hermetic Sourcebook, 1982. The Latin version could be consulted at:
<http://www.esotericarchives.com/tritheim/stegano.htm#chap7>

		Rotb.	⊖.	⊗.	⊖.	⊗.	⊖.	⊗.
⊖.	{	Astor	Buniel		Arcifac		Cusiel	
		20.		20.		20.		20.
		Carga	Rabas		Adriel		Malqueel	
		Rotb.						
		20	20	20	20	20	20	20
		⊖.rv.						
		20	20	20	20	20	20	20
		⊖.rv.	⊗.	⊖.	⊗.	⊖.	⊗.	⊖.
⊗.	{	Amiel	Maroth.		Budar	10.	Fassua	10.
		20.		20.				
		Cusiel	Omiel		Aspiel	10.	Hamas	10.

The chief spirits among these 40, have the duty of announcing the secret plans of princes to their subjects and friends. You have here eight diurnal spirits and the same number of nocturnal ones together with their many servants and these will be enough for all tasks, there is no need to call others. Be careful to observe that, when you call one or two chiefs from those named, you recite the numbers of their servants in the spell. ; for they are proud, and take amazing pleasure in being said to command many servants. So when you wish to work in secret communication through them turn to face the West, perform with care what you know must be done and omit nothing which is relevant to the art. The conjuration is :-

Asiriel ap horsy Lamodyn to Carmephyn dru bal asutroy Sody baruchon , usefer palormy t hulmear asmeron chornemadusyn coleny busarethon duys marphelithubra nasaron venear fabelronty.

When this is finished, those you have called will appear there. If you wish to see them, know that the chiefs usually appear together in an airy form, that is, like blue sky, while their helpers are in white. Entrust your secret to these chiefs, for they are trustworthy. All the leaders have a habit among themselves of sending their helpers away just before the operator speaks to them. They withdraw to a great distance so that they do not hear the errand. When he ceases his speech to the chiefs, the helpers are seen to appear again.


Let the secret of the Prince be such a one that he can trust no one to carry it out.

The Prince has a great and most secret plan concerning very important and dangerous affairs. He wishes to inform another friendly prince who might consider his plan, but he is afraid to go in public because of the great danger to himself and his men. He also fears to entrust it to a messenger, in case it is betrayed, or to a letter, in case someone reads it. Therefore he calls a spirit who will not disclose the secret. He entrusts it to him, sends him away ; he fulfills the task, and the message is safe.

He sends a letter which is not suspicious in any way and which he does not fear to be made public.

(LATIN LETTER)

I therefore send this letter to the person to whom the spirit should also be sent, for none of the spirits, chiefs or servants, come either to the sender or the addressee unless called. Therefore, so that the person to whom it is sent may know which spirit should be called and from what zone of the house, a letter is sent, sealed with the sign of

the chief spirit (), and so written that it pleases the spirit and he desires to be restored to help them. But we shall speak of this in the final chapter. This is the conjuration for the recipient :-

Asiriel onear Camor Laveviel gamer sothin ianoz alnay bulumer palorson, irgiel lamedon, ludiel Casparosyn navy asparlon nadiel bulephor ianos pesonty tresloty Camon elyr, mearsu nosy thamerosyn.

When you have said this, turn with utmost secrecy to the West and add the other things required by the art. The spirit will become visible with its servants, yet neither seen nor heard by anyone else, and it will reveal the secret of the sender to your ear.

After presenting the chapter of *Steganographia* in which Trithemius wrote about Asiriel, the one responsible for the matters between the princes and his friends, it's opportune to discuss about some elements of this text. First of all, Trithemius has distributed his *spiritii aerii* over the entire world, taking by basis sixteen winds, as the Euro-aster and the *Africus*, which blows from West. By this stratagem, he could send information in secrecy in any direction that he wanted, and, more important, he was able to be aware of all the things that happens in world. Once, in possession of knowledge

about anything he could be able to defeat *Fortuna*, understood as the unpredictability. If someone knows everything, nothing is unpredictable. If *Steganographia* gave Trithemius this amazing knowledge is a question with no answer, but this intention goes with the well known Abbot's hunger for knowledge (BRANN, 1999).

The *aerii spiritii* or angels, linked with planets or hours, thought by Trithemius being organized in courts, in the same way that human kingdom. At the beginning of the chapter, he alerted to the fact that if you made the conjuration aiming one spirit, you will deal with his ten helpers, and this number will double if you want two spirits. So, to use the *Steganographia* the operator has to be able to deal with all this spirits, paying attention to their hierarchical relations. The Abbot even recommends that the number of servants be recited with reverence, in a way to flatter the angels needed to make the secret communication. This effort in adulate the *aerius spiritus* could be thought by Durkheim's lens: all the spirits were some kinds of consciences, so they have to be treated and conquered by psychological actions, aiming to convince or to thwart them, through words and prayers, by sacrifices and offerings. Trithemius relates himself with his angels guided by an idea similar to this one presented by Durkheim. He tries to gain the favors of the *aerius spiritus* using the adulation, emphasizing their hierarchical situation, as could be seen in this excerpt:

Be careful to observe that, when you call one or two chiefs from those named, you recite the numbers of their servants in the spell. ; for they are proud, and take amazing pleasure in being said to command many servants (TRITHEMIUS, 1982: 37).

The description gave by Trithemius of Asiriel show an intention that is diluted in the entire book: *have the duty of announcing the secret plans of princes to their subjects and friends* (TRITHEMIUS, 1982: 37). The *Steganographia* was designed for this purpose, to make possible that the affairs between the prince and his comrades could be conducted in the most adequate secrecy. Besides being constructed as a grimoire, the *Steganographia* had political goals. What Trithemius did was put magical elements at political usage, making an intercrossing between the secret of the *magi* and the secret of the *secretarii*. The *Steganographia* was a book that taught how to deal with angels through magic, but aiming political objectives.

One of the most frequent elements in the *Steganographia* was the advices about how this art could be dangerous. Just the pure and strong-minded could throw himself in the steganographic practices, without fearing the retaliation from the *aerii spiritii*. Trithemius said all over the book that the steganographical practices just could be tried with the aid of a well known master in this art, what could be interpreted as one more effort to ensure a monopoly of secrecy. The word chosen by the Abbot to name the magical formula used to evocate the spirits related to Asiriel give a good idea of it. He used *coniuratio* and not *carmine*: this last one gives an idea more linked with the poetry, it is a way to write and speak occupied with rhythm and metrics, just requiring attention with the style to guarantee the desired magical effect; the first one go far from this, the *coniuratio* (conjunction) could have this stylistic preoccupation, but it is an action of will, it involves the imposition of a will over another, and is this power of will that distinguish the *magus* from the normal men and sorcerers. What the text could let us think is that Trithemius was looking for this type of man to operate his *Steganographia*.

After expend some time thinking about the structure and purposes of the Abbot's work, the option for employing angels in this process of secret communication over long distances became one of the greatest question about Trithemius' book. It is intriguing why he chooses this way, besides all the risks that it implied. But, in this chapter, he gives us the response: *He also fears to entrust it to a messenger, in case it is betrayed, or to a letter, in case someone reads it. Therefore he calls a spirit who will not disclose the secret* (TRITHEMIUS, 1982: 38). The only way to protect the prince's secrets is avoiding everyone and everything that could be defeated by *Fortuna*. Since, the men could be tortured to reveal his secrets and the letters could be opened and decrypted, just the *aerii spiritii* could deal safely with secrets, once they just could be commanded by an operator of *Steganographia*. This was the reason that made Trithemius protect his method of "magical cryptology" by every means.

What this short reflection intended is to present a small part of the remarkable work of Abbot Trithemius, called *Steganographia*, and more precisely, show how this grimoire is linked with the rise of the *secretarium*, a personage very important to the rise of the so-called Modern State. Besides being a book of magic, the *Steganographia* was aimed for political goals, was designed to be a magical tool to deal with the secret

of the *princeps*. Reflecting about Trithemius and his works, it appears that in the dawn of Modern State, the ways of *Magi* and *Secretarii* crossed in the construction of secrecy.

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