



The Architecture of Magic

Toward a Canon of Scandinavian *svartebøker*?

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Abstract

In the historical and cultural study of the impact of magical practices on everyday life in the Nordic region, a significant role is played by the examination of the composition, distribution, and use of black magic books commonly known as *svartebøker*. The widespread practice of composing, using, and transmitting these books is well-documented throughout the North as early as the 15th century. These are composite manuscripts that blend Latin formulas, invocations to saints and demons, remedies for improving one's fortune or the health of livestock, spells to harm someone. However, comparisons across various manuscripts suggest that *svartebøker* generally followed a predetermined pattern based on local legends and beliefs, incorporating motifs of European scope. This pattern is reflected in the textual architecture of *svartebøker* across the Scandinavian region, likely creating a veritable canon of magical book composition. By analyzing some manuscripts from the Scandinavian area, this article seeks to highlight indispensable recurring patterns, widely diffused and reiterated over time, points that not only legitimize the remedies and formulas contained in the books but that also canonize a magical narrative structure. In addition, through folklore research, an attempt will be made to trace the origins of these patterns.

Keywords: Magic, witchcraft, Black books, spells, folklore



1. INTRODUCTION

The type of magic found in Scandinavian *svartebooks* can be defined as ‘low’ or ‘popular’. It is primarily used to resolve everyday situations (Espeland 1974:26), such as healing sprains, curing livestock, winning the love of a reluctant woman, uncovering thieves, finding lost objects, calming toothaches, or stopping blood flow. However, a small portion is dedicated to a kind of magic that could be defined as ‘black’, hence the designation of *svartebooks* as “books of black [magic]” (cf. Mitchell 2015:58; Espeland 2009:22f.). These manuscripts contain a wealth of knowledge on various occult practices, including divination, spellcraft, and necromancy. Despite their dark reputation, *svartebooks* are integral to the spiritual and cultural fabric of modern Scandinavia.

The majority of preserved *svartebooks* date back to the 19th century and are written in a simple, fairly standardized style. In many cases, they were used by peasants and, consequently, their content reflects the needs of these individuals (cf. Espeland 1974:27ff.). However, the older *svartebooks*, mainly dating from the mid-1700s, reveal a style of writing and composition that is undoubtedly the work of individuals with a certain level of education, well-versed in various literary genres and styles (cf. Ohrvik 2012:22f.; Amundsen 1987:10f.), most likely clergy or administrative officials, especially military personnel (cf. Davies 2009:126). Indeed, it is not uncommon to find formulas for advancing in one’s career, becoming a skilled swordsman, protecting oneself from bullets, or winning at cards (cf. Amundsen 1987:9f.).

2. STATE OF THE ART

The Scandinavian books of magic are a prime example of the use of remedies and magical formulas in the North as early as the 15th century.¹ Their widespread dissemination and popularity are demonstrated by the enormous quantity of manuscripts that have been preserved and stored in the archives of Scandinavian folklore material.²

Research on Scandinavian Black books of magic has undergone a complex and fascinating evolution, with growing interest from historians, anthropologists, and folklore scholars. The first systematic studies of these texts date back to the 19th century, when researchers began collecting and cataloguing manuscripts containing magical formulas, spells, and rituals. These texts, often referred to as GRIMOIRES, were generally attributed to sorcerers, folk sages, priests, or legendary figures, as we shall see further on, and were transmitted both orally and in writing.

One of the earliest and most well-known examples of magical literature in the Nordic area is the *Galdrabók*,³ a 17th-century Icelandic manuscript containing a collection of spells and magical symbols (*galdrastafir*). This text, along with others such as the *Kreddur Manuscript* and the *Huld Manuscript*, has attracted the attention of scholars of Nordic esoteric traditions due to its use of runes and magical seals.

During the 20th century, academic research began to examine these texts not only as folkloric curiosities but also as testimonies of Scandinavian culture and popular beliefs. Anthropologists and historians of religion analyzed the social role of black magic, often linked to witchcraft practices and persecutions in the 16th and 17th centuries. Significant contributions

¹ The oldest *svartebok* is the *Vinjebooka* (named after the city of Vinje, in Telemark, Norway, where it was found). It dates back to the late 15th century (cf. Garstein 1993:21ff). Two formulas in Danish, probably dating from 1491, are found in a seventy-two-page Latin manuscript compiled by the Archbishop of Lund, Jens Brostrup (1473–1496), Oslo, Nasjonalbiblioteket, Ms. 8° 3002 (Ohrvik 2018:47). For a recent introduction to *svartebooks*, see Espeland (2014).

² Norway alone has over a hundred preserved copies stored in the Norsk Folkeminnesamling, cf. Ohrvik (2014:208); Amundsen (1987:10).

³ On this book, see Sæmundsson (1992).

were made by Bengt Ankarloo (1971) and Hans Eyvind Næss (1982) in their doctoral theses investigating the witch hunts in Scandinavia and highlighting the political and social motivations behind accusations of magical practices.

From the 1970s and 1980s onwards, research on Scandinavian grimoires benefitted from a new interdisciplinary approach combining historical, philological, and anthropological studies. Some scholars have analyzed the content of the manuscripts in the context of Christian and pagan influences, shedding light on the interactions between local traditions and European esoteric currents (cf. Edsman 1996). Notably, parallels between Scandinavian magic and Western Renaissance magic have been drawn, highlighting influences from Kabbalah, alchemy, and the occult sciences (cf. Davies 2009:46).

In recent decades, interest in Scandinavian black magic has also spread to popular culture and academic dissemination. Texts such as the *Black Books of Elverum*, with their extraordinary journey from a small town in eastern Norway, to ‘an old dusty attic’ in the United States (Rustad 1999:xxiff.), have sparked the curiosity of enthusiasts and scholars alike, while some researchers have begun digitizing and translating these manuscripts to make them more accessible to a wider audience.

A fundamental aspect of research on Scandinavian black magic books concerns their geographical distribution and the regional diversity of magical practices. While *galdrastafir* and magical sigils prevailed in Iceland, magical traditions in the regions of Norway, Denmark, and Sweden were often associated with rituals, spells, and invocations rather than graphical symbols or drawings. The naming of pagan deities, which is present in some Icelandic manuscripts, is almost absent from Scandinavian tradition, where the presence of saints, angels, and biblical figures is more prevalent.

The social role of those who possessed these grimoires is also of great interest. In Scandinavian tradition, figures such as the *klok gubbe* (‘wise old man’) or the *signekjerring* (‘old woman healer’) were individuals with magical and healing knowledge, often consulted for help with curses, protection against evil spirits, or to gain special powers (cf. Stokker 2007). However, during periods of strong religious control, ecclesiastical authorities often persecuted their activities, leading to the confiscation of many magical manuscripts.

Another important research trend concerns the connection between Scandinavian grimoires and modern magical practices. Many elements of these ancient manuscripts have been adopted by neopagan movements and contemporary practitioners of magic. The resurgence of interest in Norse mythology has led to the rediscovery of runes as tools for divination and magic, while some esoteric groups have sought to recreate the rituals described in historical texts.⁴

The advent of the digital age has brought about a significant change in the research on Scandinavian black magic books. Numerous manuscripts have been made available online, thus enabling scholars worldwide, without physical access to Scandinavian libraries, to analyze them. This has led to a greater understanding of the structure and function of these texts, as well as to new theories about their origin and use. This article aims to contribute to this body of knowledge.

The state of the art indicates that the study of Scandinavian black magic books represents a continuously expanding field that intertwines history, folklore, anthropology, and religious studies. Despite the challenges related to the scarcity of original sources and their interpretation, academic and public interest in these texts demonstrates their persistent relevance in understanding the beliefs and magical practices of the Nordic past. With the progress of research and the integration of new technologies, we can expect further discoveries and insights that will shed new light on a still largely unexplored aspect of Scandinavian culture.

⁴ Among which the Icelandic Ásatrúarfélagið is probably the most famous organization.

3. SELECTION CRITERIA

When conducting my research on Scandinavian black magic books, it was essential to establish a rigorous criterion for selecting the texts that best exemplify recurring patterns and elements within the tradition. As mentioned above, the corpus of available grimoires and magical manuscripts is vast and highly heterogeneous, comprising works from different periods, regions, and cultural contexts. Therefore, a careful selection process was necessary to ensure that the chosen texts were representative of broader trends rather than isolated anomalies.

The primary selection criterion was the recurrence of specific magical motifs, formulas, and symbols across multiple manuscripts. Although many black magic books exhibit significant variations, certain structural and thematic elements appear consistently, suggesting the possible existence of an implicit canon within Scandinavian magical literature. Identifying these recurring elements enabled a more systematic analysis of how magical knowledge was compiled, transmitted, and adapted over time.

A fundamental aspect of this research was acknowledging the role of copying and reproduction in the dissemination of black magic texts. Unlike literary works authored by individuals with a clear sense of originality, many of these grimoires were compiled through a process of transcription, adaptation, and expansion. Scribes and practitioners often copied pre-existing texts, occasionally modifying them slightly to reflect regional beliefs or personal preferences. This tradition of copying played a crucial role in the widespread proliferation of certain magical formulas and symbols, particularly in the 19th century when such texts became more accessible due to increased literacy and the development of printing technologies.

Selecting texts for analysis also involved assessing their historical significance and impact on the broader discourse on magic. Examining well-known and lesser-known texts alongside each other allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the standardization and diversification of magical knowledge in Scandinavia.

This study aims to provide an insight into the methods of compilation and distribution of magical books. The presence of recurring features across different manuscripts suggests that Scandinavian black magic books were part of a larger, interconnected tradition, rather than individual creations. This perspective helps to clarify how magical knowledge was structured and maintained over generations.

Another key aspect of the selection was to ensure that the corpus reflected both regional and chronological diversity. The findings of this research shed new light on the ways in which magical texts functioned as both practical guides for practitioners and repositories of esoteric knowledge. The repeated use of specific figures, symbols, and spells across different manuscripts suggests that these texts served as a reference system rather than as mere collections of individual practices. This pattern indicates a degree of standardization in magical knowledge similar to what can be observed in European esoteric traditions.

This investigation demonstrates the dynamic nature of black magic books as cultural artefacts evolving in response to social, religious, and political influences. Rather than being transmitted passively, magical texts were actively engaged with and adapted to suit the needs and beliefs of different communities. Understanding this process provides valuable insights into the broader history of magic and the ways in which esoteric knowledge has been preserved and transformed over time.

Thus, the criteria employed in selecting black magic books for this research have allowed for a deeper exploration of the fundamental characteristics of Scandinavian magical traditions. By identifying recurring elements in a variety of diverse texts, this study considers whether a canonical structure existed in the tradition of these texts.

4. THE PRACTICE OF *AUCTORITAS*: THE CASE OF SAINT CYPRIAN

One of the methods used by compilers to authenticate the validity of a *svartebok* was to attribute it to a supposed author. For this purpose, they invoked Saint Cyprian of Antioch.⁵ According to *The Lives of the Byzantine Saints* by Symeon Metaphrastes, Cyprian was a skilled pagan magician, with expertise in the domain of demons and spells. Using magical arts, he attempted to seduce Justina, a Christian virgin, on behalf of Aglaide. When he failed, he acknowledged the power of the sign of the cross over his sorcery and converted to Christianity. Legend has it that he consigned all his magical writings to the fire, but one was saved: the Cyprian we find mentioned on the title page of various manuscripts. Clearly, while it is highly unlikely that one of his books has survived, this story lends a kernel of truth to the efficacy of grimoires. Due to Saint Cyprian's reputation as a powerful magician, books began to circulate in Europe claiming that the author was none other than the magician of Antioch.⁶

Scandinavia was no exception. According to a legend by Müllenhoff from Holstein

In alter Zeit lebte auf einer dänischen Insel ein Mann Namens Cyprianus; der war schlechter als der Teufel. Deshalb ward er, als er gestorben und zur Hölle gefahren war, vom Teufel wieder hinausgeworfen und auf seine Insel zurück verseßt. Hier schrieb er neun Bücher in altdänischer Sprache mit Herereien und Zaubersprüchen. Wer diese Bücher alle neun durchliest, ist dem Teufel verfallen. Von diesem Original sollen drei (oder neun) Exemplare von einem Mönche abgeschrieben und dann zerstückelt über die ganze Welt verbreitet worden sein.⁷ (Müllenhoff 1845:192)

A Norwegian *svartebok* (Oslo, Nasjonalbiblioteket, Ms. 4° 832) from the middle of the 18th century, which belonged to Jens Glad – a man employed in the construction of the fortress trench on the island of Akerøya at Hvaler, who purchased the book at a public auction – bears the following inscription on its title page: “Cyprianus, den over ald Verden viit berømte Sorte Konstner Trykt udi Stavanger i Norge Anno 1699”.⁸ The compiler was probably an educated military man who was fluent in German (as evidenced by the two German formulas) and able to use Latin correctly, as demonstrated by the accurate quotations.

Another fascinating 19th-century Swedish manuscript preserved at Lund University states that “Doct: Juliani Cypriani Practica eller Andars twång, hvarigenom han uti egna rön kallade och twång andarna at de uti all ting har måst efterkomma och utföra hans wilia, skrefven i hans biskopssäte i Carthago i Africa, sedan tryckt i octav i Passau 1410”.⁹

A Norwegian *svartebok* (Oslo, Nasjonalbiblioteket, Ms. 4° 1819) from the 19th century, belonging to the book collector Johan Elias Schweigaard, lists, besides the author and the place of finding, the sources of its content:

⁵ Doctor Faust and King Solomon are also contemplated, but not so widespread. On Cyprian's life and deeds cf. Skinner & Rankine (2009).

⁶ Some books feature a preface by Cyprian as well, see NB Ms. 8° 640: b.

⁷ “In ancient times, on a Danish island, there lived a man named Cyprianus, who was more wicked than the Devil himself. Therefore, when he died and went to Hell, the Devil cast him out again and sent him back to his island. There, he wrote nine books in Old Danish filled with heresies and spells. Whoever reads all nine of these books is doomed to the Devil. From this original, three (or nine) copies are said to have been transcribed by a monk and then scattered in pieces across the entire world”. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

⁸ “Cyprianus, the world famous practitioner of black arts, printed in Stavanger in the year 1699”. Ferdinand Ohrt believed that the origin of the book was Danish, but indicating Stavanger as the place of printing would have added an exotic touch to the work. On the other hand, Anton Christian Bang (the famous theologian among the first to collect and publish Norwegian magic book manuscripts) believed that the city had an aura of mystery because in that area, in the late 17th century, there had been witch trials (Munthe 1926:86).

⁹ “Dr. Juliani Cypriani Practica, or the Constraining of Spirits, through which, based on his own experiences, he summoned and compelled spirits to obey and fulfil his will in all things, written in his episcopal seat in Carthage, Africa, and later printed in octavo in Passau 1410”.

Et Udtog af Cypherianus og Jødiske Cabal samt Nec Cromantien, Demonlogien og Gøetien. Indeholdende Matematiske, Cymeï, Experimentalphysiske Konster og Videnskaber. Et Udtog Af den Ceremonialske Magie og Theurgien; og indeholder det som nu er her at finde: Sortbogen Blev først funden paa Wittenbergs Ackademie Aar 1529. i En Marmorsteens Kiste skrewen paa Pergament.¹⁰

In Denmark, similarly, we have the “Compendium og Magie eller de forborgene Konster af Siprianus”,¹¹ and the “Cyprianus, den over ald Verden vidtberømte Sorte Konstner, paa nye igiennemseet og forbedret af højlærde og kunstererfarne Doctoribus, trykt udie Stavanger i Norge Anno 1699”.¹²

As mentioned earlier, legends about Cyprian spread quickly across Europe, leading to some bizarre experiments also in Scandinavia. The most famous of these is the *Oldtidens Sortebog* from the 1400s, “Funden ved Udgravningen i en Ruin af en gammel Borg”.¹³ This book reveals that Cyprian was actually a beautiful Mexican nun imprisoned in the dungeons of a castle for rejecting the advances of a perverse priest. This motif foreshadows the Gothic fashion for stories of beautiful women persecuted by wicked ecclesiastics and confined in underground cells, as seen in *The Monk* by Matthew G. Lewis or *The Italian* by Ann Radcliffe. Fearing she would never escape her captivity, she decided to inscribe the magical secrets she knew onto the shreds of her clothing with her own blood. These were collected and preserved by a monk. Years later, a knight from Jutland, nicknamed Sorte Georg (Black George), found the book and became a great wizard. After his death, a peasant ploughing his field found the manuscript among the ruins of a collapsed wall, where the knight had hidden it in a golden chest.¹⁴ Empowered by the spells in the book, he decided to share its magical knowledge, although he was the only one capable of interpreting the formulas and signs it contained. John Anderson, the major supplier of Scandinavian books in America, saw an opportunity to profit on this book. Indeed, in 1892, he published an edition in Chicago that immediately became a bestseller for the publishing house (cf. Stokker 2001:411).

5. THE ORIGINS OF GRIMOIRES AT WITTENBERG BLACK SCHOOL

We have seen how attributing authorship to a famous magician served to lend a degree of authenticity to the book and its contents. A related strategy, as previously mentioned, was to name a real historical place of origin, usually a location of printing or writing. In the case of *svarte bøker*, the most frequently cited city is Wittenberg, where the Lutheran Reformation originated and where the Norwegian clergy was formed before embarking on their ecclesiastical careers at home. According to popular tradition, it was in fact the devil himself who taught future priests the magic arts in Wittenberg.

There are many examples of books that were supposedly written or printed in Wittenberg. A manuscript (NB Ms. 8° 640:c:1, mid-1800s) from Norway tells us that the “Sorte eller Svarte-Bogen Syphrianus Konstbog, blev først funden paa Wittenbergs Accademie det Aar 1529, i en Marmor Steenkiste skreven paa Pergament”. This book belonged to Anders Olsen Liverud, a teacher from Eiker, who copied the formulas contained in it from another book,

¹⁰ “A summary of Cypherianus and the Jewish Cabal, as well as Necromancy, Demonology, and Goetia. Containing mathematical, chemical, experimental physical art and sciences. A summary of ceremonial magic and theurgy; and it includes what is now found here: the Black Book was first discovered at the Academy of Wittenberg in the year 1529, in a marble chest, written on parchment”.

¹¹ “Compendium and magic or the hidden art of Siprianus”.

¹² “Cyprianus, the world famous practitioner of black arts once again revised and improved by highly learned and art-skilled doctoribus printed in Stavanger in Norway in the year 1699”.

¹³ “Found during the excavation of the ruins of an ancient castle”.

¹⁴ The chest (*kiste*) as the place where manuscripts were hidden by their owners is also a *topos* of the black book narration.

and supplemented them with excerpts from other manuscripts, reworking and modernizing the originals.

Another manuscript (NB Ms. 8° 640:e, 19th century) titled “Cyprianus Rette Fri Kounster ud Given og Trokt udi Witten Bergh Anno 1509”,¹⁵ belonged to the vicar Fredrik Carl Mülertz. It is said that the original owner of the manuscript was a powerful local figure who used the book to perform wicked deeds. One day the pastor, with the help of two others, managed to steal the book from him. Subsequently, after his death, the pastor’s daughter sent the manuscript to the University of Oslo.

From Copenhagen we have a manuscript known as “Cyprianus Trekandt Ret forcklaring holdende inde formaninger og frie Konster Iligemaade Konste bog og Charactererne Datum von Wittenberg 1707”.¹⁶ This book (NB Ms. 8° 3136) dates to 1760, but neither the compiler nor the owner are known.

Lastly, a “Siprianus Kunste Bog Skreven paa Wittenbergske Accademie Anno 1345 og siden funden paa Kiøbenhavns Slott Anno 1665 Udi en Marmorstens Kiiste Skreven paa pergamenta”¹⁷ (Oslo, Norsk Folkeminnesamling manuscripts, Moltke Moe 106 I), was discovered in 1893. It was purchased and donated to the university by the *lensmann* Olsen of Rygge. It originally belonged to a certain Anders Nielsen Aas, who had inherited it from his father.

It goes without saying that the use of an early date also helped imbue these books with an aura of ancestral wisdom, as seen in the aforementioned cases.

In his catalogue of migratory legends, *Escape from the Black School at Wittenberg*, Reidar Christiansen (1958:18ff.) lists a series of traditions according to which many ministers would stay an additional five years in Germany after their period of study to learn the magic arts from the devil. Wittenberg was often identified as the site of the school of black magic, and it was said that the devil himself served as its rector and would ask for the soul of the last person to leave the school as a reward after the five-year apprenticeship with the black book (cf. Kvideland & Sehmsdorf 1988:287). This notion is reflected in many legends and folk tales from Scandinavia. In Norway it was said that “For at en prest skulde faa svartboka, maatte han studere i Wittenberg”¹⁸ (Østberg 1925:128) and Ibsen (Edvardsen 1997:159) reports that “Paa Præsteskolen i Wittenberg var der engang en Mand, som kaldtes Mester Jon. Da han havde gaaet i Lære i fem Aar, var han færdig som Præst, men nu blev han endnu fem Aar til ved Skolen for at lære Svarteboken”.¹⁹ In Sweden (Johnson 2010:47), too, it is said that “Det var en präst på Millesvik, som skulle ha gått genom ‘Wittenbergsskolan’. Han skrev, så inte vanligt folk kunde läsa det, han hade skrivit. Han såg mer än vanligt folk, för om han gav nattvarden, så kunde han se, om de var värdiga eller inte”,²⁰ and in Denmark similarly

En Bondekarl fra Egnen ved Helsingborg fortæller, at alle Præster i gamle Dage skulde gjenngaa “den sorte Skole” og vare derfor ogsaa meget klogere end Nutidens Præster. Denne Skole var

¹⁵ “Cyprian’s correct Free Arts published and printed in Wittenberg Anno 1509”.

¹⁶ “Cyprian’s triangle correct explanation containing conjurations and free arts together with Art book and characters, published in Wittenberg 1707”.

¹⁷ “Siprianus Book of Arts, written at the Academy of Wittenberg in the year 1345 and later found at Copenhagen Castle in the year 1665, in a marble stone chest, written on parchment”.

¹⁸ “In order for a priest to obtain the Black Book, he had to study in Wittenberg”.

¹⁹ “At the priest school in Wittenberg, there was once a man called Master Jon. After five years of training, he was ready to become a priest, but he stayed at the school for another five years to learn the Black Book”.

²⁰ “There was a priest in Millesvik who was said to have studied at the ‘Wittenberg School’. He wrote in a way that ordinary people could not read what he had written. He saw more than common folk, for when he gave the sacrament, he could tell whether they were worthy or not”.

i Wittenberg, hvor de lærte at binde og magte alt det Onde. Fra denne By stammer ogsaa alle Troldbøger og “Cyprianus’er”.²¹ (Kamp 1877:359)

An anthology of Icelandic legends provides a unique description of the German school of black magic, as legends rarely mention the setting or describe life during the apprenticeship years

Sá skóli var í fyrndinni til út í heimi, sem hét Svarti-skóli. Þar lærðu menn galdur og ýmsan fornan fróðleik. Svo var til háttað í skóla þessum, að hann var í jarðhúsi rammgjörvu mjög; á því var einginn gluggi, og var þar því alt af niðamyrkur inni. Einginn var þar kennari, og námu menn alt af bókum, sem voru skrifaðar með eldrauðu lettri, sem lesa mátti í myrkrinu. Aldrei máttu þeir, sem þar lærðu, koma undir bert lopt, eða sjá dagsljósið, á meðan þeir voru þar, en það voru 5 eða 7 vetur, sem þeir urðu að vera í skólanum til að verða fullnuma.²² (Árnason 1862:490)

6. SVARTEBØKER AND THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

From these and other descriptions, it becomes clear why the idea that priests were the real possessors of *svarteboeker* spread so widely in popular tradition. This notion was probably not far from reality, given that the clergy were among the few who possessed the education necessary to consult these texts, which contained both vernacular and Latin formulas, or transcribe and add new spells. It should also be noted that many *svarteboeker* have been found hidden in churches, suggesting that they either belonged to local priests (cf. Stokker 1989:357), or had been put there according to the belief that hiding a *svartebok* in a church and writing one’s name inside it with blood would save one’s soul from eternal damnation (even burning the book would have been in vain, as it would have reappeared in the possession of its owner).

Priests who possessed and knew how to use the *svartebok* were called *svartebokprester*. Tradition has produced many legends about the proverbial abilities of these priests to invoke or exorcise the devil, or simply to subjugate him to their will. It is enough to recall the famous Norwegian theologian and writer Petter Dass, or the pastor of Røyken, Christian Holst, Sæmundur the Wise, Hálfðán Einarsson, or Coldvin, the pastor of Torup, all subjects of many a folk tale.²³ To indicate their knowledge of the magical arts, it was often said that these priests “kunne mer enn sitt fader vår”.²⁴ For this reason, the *svartebok* was often also referred to as “6te og 7te Mosebog”, in addition to being attributed to Cyprianus.²⁵ It seems that the priests thus possessed two additional books (besides the five canonical books of the Pentateuch, which are traditionally attributed to Moses), kept hidden from most people and addressing themes related to magic and the supernatural world.²⁶ Faye confirms this tradition in his anthology

²¹ “A farmer from the region near Helsingborg tells that in the old days, all priests had to study at ‘the Black School’ and were therefore much wiser than today’s priests. This school was in Wittenberg, where they learned to bind and control all evil. From this city also originate all books of magic and ‘Cyprianus’ manuscripts”.

²² “There once existed a school out in the world called the Black School. There, people learned magic and various forms of ancient knowledge. This school was situated in a heavily fortified underground chamber with no windows, so complete darkness reigned inside. There was no teacher, and students learned solely from books written in fiery red letters, which could be read in the dark. Those who studied there were never allowed to go under the open sky or see daylight while they were there, and they had to remain in the school for five or seven years to complete their training”.

²³ For Norway see, e.g., Christiansen (1958:18ff.).

²⁴ “Knew more than just the Lord’s Prayer”.

²⁵ “The sixth and seventh books of Moses”. Cf. Steen (1964).

²⁶ “The reason why Moses was connected with such books is connected with the idea that the church had chosen to hide part of the Bible from public view because it contained dangerous information. The first five books of the Bible were thought to be written by Moses himself, who was known to be a powerful magician who outwitted the Egyptian wizards in his struggle to free the Israelites from their captivity in Egypt” (Kristiansen 2013:2f.).

of Norwegian legends (1833:23): “Han har læst det i 6te Mosebog, der rigtignok ei staaer i Bibelen, men som Presterne have for sig selv”.²⁷ In Sweden the books should be ten in number:

Det berättas att det skall finnas tio Mose-Böcker. Sjette, sjunde och åttonde mose-böckerna handlade om sjukdomar, medicin och trolleri. Under 1600 talet översattes dessa tre mose-böcker från Tyska till Svenska språket. Och den sålunda översatta boken kallades ”Svartkonstboken”. Men så togs den i beslag, och de exemplar som voro sålda indrogos. Ty, det ansågs icke rådligt att allmänheten fick läsa denna bok. Men en del här i Jämtland och Lapparna smugglade undan sina exemplar.²⁸ (Campbell et al. 1928:8–9)

In Denmark, attempts have been made to trace the origin of the composition of these additional books, following a Satanic temptation:

På Sinai bjærg gav Vorherre den forjættelse til Moses, at alt, hvad han sagde eller skrev, skulde være sandhed og ske som han vilde, og alt hvad han selv bad om og lærte menneskene at bede om, skulde blive opfyldt; men da fristede djævelen Moses, så han foruden de fem Mosebøger skrev en sjette Mosebog, og det er den, som siden er bleven kaldt Cyprianus; hvad der står i denne bog har kraft, fordi det er skrevet af Moses efter herrens forjættelser.²⁹ (Feilberg 1886:166)

7. MAGIC SYMBOLS AND SEALS: A SCHEMATIZATION

All complete grimoires have one final feature in common: the presence of magical formulas that fall under a separate section. Usually, Scandinavian magic books are divided into two parts. As previously mentioned, the first part presents remedies and rituals that may be effective for so-called ‘everyday’ problems, healing farm animals, gaining economic advantage over others, winning the love of a woman, etc. The second part usually contains symbols, so-called magical seals, that typically have a protective significance. Christian prayers or invocations to demons and Norse deities are also present. Below is a rough classification of the various formulas found in the second part of a grimoire, organized by category.

(1) Religious:

Prayers: usually the Our Father, the Hail Mary or prayers to Holy Mary (*Maria-bønner*, cf. Garstein 1993:101ff.).

Bible quotations: episodes from the Bible or the Gospel, often with the formula “as [religious episode], so also you [remedy]”, (cf. Bang 2005:552–555).

Invocations of Saints or Archangels: usually seeking the support and strength of the archangels Gabriel, Michael, or Raphael (cf. NB Ms. 8° 3186).

Sequences: long sequences of names referring to God or Jesus.³⁰

(2) Profane:

Meaningless formulas but with a similar sound (abracadabra-formulas, cf. NB Ms. 8° 10).

²⁷ “He has read it in the Sixth Book of Moses, which admittedly is not in the Bible, but which the priests keep for themselves”.

²⁸ “It is said that there are ten Books of Moses. The sixth, seventh, and eighth Books of Moses dealt with diseases, medicine, and sorcery. During the 17th century, these three books were translated from German into Swedish. The translated book was then called ‘The Book of Black Magic’. However, it was confiscated, and the copies that had been sold were withdrawn. It was considered unwise to allow the public to read this book. But some people here in Jämtland and among the Sami managed to smuggle away their copies”.

²⁹ “On Mount Sinai, the Lord gave Moses the promise that everything he said or wrote would be truth and would happen as he willed, and that everything he himself prayed for and taught people to pray for would be fulfilled. But then the Devil tempted Moses, so that in addition to the five Books of Moses, he wrote a sixth Book of Moses, which later came to be called Cyprianus. What is written in this book has power because it was written by Moses according to the Lord’s promises”.

³⁰ See Diplomatarium Norvegicum vol. VII. Retrieved from https://www.dokpro.uio.no/dipl_norv/diplom_field_eng.html (accessed 23 March 2024).

Formulas and symbols from the Kabbalistic tradition, of which the most common is the Seal of Solomon (cf. Sigmarsdóttir et al. 2004:161).

Magic formulas: of which the most famous is the Sator Square (cf. Ohrt 1921:125).

Invocations of pagan deities: often mentioning Odin, Baldr, or Thor seen as demonic deities and therefore equated with Satan (cf. Rafnsson 2008:35).

Altered Latin verses: i.e., real Latin sentences but written incorrectly, often from the Passion of Christ.

Pseudo-Latin formulas: i.e., words put together that do not have a meaning, but only a sound similar to Latin.

Grammatically incorrect Latin phrases: i.e., simply poorly written sentences in Latin.³¹

Any distortions stem from compilers who lacked formal knowledge of Latin and were therefore oblivious to their mistakes when copying manuscripts. Clearly, the intention behind such insertions was to lend an air of antiquity and mysticism to the magical formulas, and the use of Latin, either on its own or inscribed on various seals, served this purpose very well.³²

8. CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, the multifaceted and mutable nature of Scandinavian *svartebøker* implies that no fixed compositional canon is followed by all compilers. Instead, a panorama of variations influenced by a range of contextual and individual factors emerges. For instance, the cultural and historical context in which a particular grimoire was compiled, together with the compiler's personal motivations, can significantly shape the content and structure of the text. Additionally, oral transmission and reinterpretation of local magical traditions can further contribute to the diversity of manuscripts.

However, despite this diversity, some common elements can be identified in many *svartebøker*, including magical formulas, rituals, and protective symbols. These fundamental elements suggest the existence of a sort of shared tradition or guideline among compilers, albeit one that is flexible and subject to individual interpretations and adaptations.

Future investigations will have to take into account the role of physical structure and visual design in shaping the function and meaning of *svartebøker*. Rather than treating these texts solely as repositories of occult knowledge, it is important to examine them as complex material artefacts whose architectural composition plays an active role in the performance and transmission of magical practices. One of the central objectives of this study was to understand how the spatial organization of these books – their non-linear layouts, symbolic diagrams, hidden compartments, and ritual instructions – constructs a particular kind of readerly engagement that is both affective and operative.

In conclusion, the study of *svartebøker* requires careful and thorough analysis of each individual manuscript, taking into account its peculiarities and the influences that have shaped its composition. Only in this way a more comprehensive understanding of the rich Nordic magical tradition can be achieved.

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³¹ These last three categories are present in almost all the Scandinavian *svartebøker*.

³² As pointed out by Mitchell (2015:66), “with Latin appearing to be more of a decorative, affective or mystifying device than a vehicle for communication”.

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