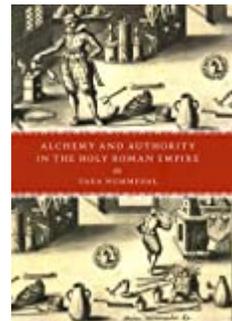




Tara E. Nummedal. *Alchemy and Authority in the Holy Roman Empire.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. xvii + 260 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-60856-3.



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Published on H-German (February, 2010)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Toward a Social History of Alchemy

The historiography of alchemy, following upon the groundbreaking work of Allen Debus, Walter Pagel, Francis Yates, and others, is moving into its third generation. With numerous studies now devoted to the subject, one can experience a feeling of déjà vu reading certain recent examples—the same alchemists, the same princes, the same arguments about craft knowledge. But this was not my experience with Tara Nummedal’s *Alchemy and Authority*. Nummedal, appealing to historians of early modern science and early modernists more broadly, proposes a social history of alchemy in sixteenth-century Germany, or alchemy “from below” (p. 10). Rather than focusing on the alchemical interests of major natural philosophers like Robert Boyle or Sir Isaac Newton, who pursued a learned or otherworldly practice, this book discusses an “entrepreneurial alchemy” more closely associated with the economic interests of patrons. The names of many familiar alchemists course through these pages, to be sure—Leonhard Thurneisser, Heinrich Khunrath, Michael Maier, Andreas Libavius—but Nummedal also discovers a handful of lesser known figures who pro-

posed projects of more immediate economic significance to their patrons.

Chapter 1 is a useful overview of the means through which an aspiring adept acquired knowledge of alchemy. This was no university or guild activity, so possibilities were limited: one scoured the texts, traveled to other experts, studied the crafts, and even sought divine illumination. Different alchemists claimed one or another route as the only true path. Chapter 2 draws on the work of Lorraine Daston and Otto Sibum, but also Pamela Smith’s *The Business of Alchemy* (1997), to argue that the early modern alchemist had several *personae*, or social masks, from which to choose.[1] Prior to the sixteenth century, he was “scholar,” “artisan,” or “prophet,” but the satire of humanists like Sebastian Brant and Desiderius Erasmus, who presented the alchemist as a *Betrüger*, or fraud, put practitioners further on the defensive. The most attractive persona then became “economic advisor.” Nummedal develops the idea of the entrepreneurial alchemist in chapter 3, where she argues that mining, metallurgy, and alchemy were overlapping interests to the

German princes, as they sought to diversify their state's incomes. Patrons like Duke Julius of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, Elector Augustus of Saxony, Emperor Rudolph II, Landgrave Moritz of Hesse-Kassel, and Duke Friedrich of Württemberg promoted metallurgical and alchemical projects simultaneously. Contemporaries did not distinguish easily between smelting techniques (*Scheidekunst*) and alchemy, and the language that a famous "metallurgist" like Lazarus Ercker used to promote a new process at the Dresden court was similar to that of contemporary entrepreneurial alchemists who also vied for patronage.

The next two chapters place alchemists at court. First, Nummedal studies a series of contracts between patrons and clients that exposes the business-like nature of the exchange, and similarity to mining and metallurgical projects. The author then dispels the notion that images of alchemical labs as produced by the author and alchemist, Andreas Libavius, or painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder, depicted the court-based lab accurately. Nummedal turns rather to archival sources such as inventories, supply orders, architectural details, and official reports to reconstruct the real space of alchemy. She argues that patrons and practitioners differentiated alchemical processes, and organized their labs according to the relative status of the workers—servants, *Laboranten*, or alchemists—and relative degree of secrecy required for each task. In the final chapter, Nummedal returns to legal cases of *Betrug* to prove that actors distinguished between fraud and legitimate alchemy. She has found some eleven cases of alchemical fraud between 1575 and 1606 for four German principalities.

Nummedal should be praised for expanding our conception of alchemy and suggesting a new methodological approach. In the end, the work points squarely in the right direction, though we still await the equivalent for alchemy of Wolfgang Behringer's or Manfred Wilde's studies of witchcraft. Future research might expand on Nummedal's work on fraud by considering *Münzfaßschung* (counterfeiting) cases conducted by town councils, among other *Münzsachen* that are well represented in the archives. Also, the tie between mining, metallurgy, and alchemy deserves more focused attention. Did mining administrations in the Harz Mountains or *Erzgebirge* of Saxony, like the princes Nummedal and others discuss, patronize alchemists? Which metallurgical processes resembled entrepreneurial alchemy, and, since not all metallurgy was alchemy, how did contemporaries distinguish the two? Finally, Nummedal hints on occasion that female alchemists were more common than the historiography would suggest, though she discusses only one case—that of Anna Maria Zieglerin. How women engaged in this activity, and how common female alchemists were in premodern Europe are questions Nummedal will certainly address in a forthcoming work on alchemy and gender.

The time for a social history of alchemy is now, and Nummedal's innovative work will number among the earliest contributions.

Note

[1]. Lorraine Daston and Otto H. Sibum, "Introduction: Scientific Personae and Their Histories," *Science in Context* 16 (2003): 1-8.

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Citation: Warren Alexander Dym. Review of Nummedal, Tara E., *Alchemy and Authority in the Holy Roman Empire*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2010.

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