

EVENT: Kabbalah, Natural Sciences, and Practical Expertise in the How-To Books of Premodern Ashkenaz

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Online lecture by Agata Paluch.

This lecture focuses on largely unexplored handwritten Jewish how-to and recipe books produced in premodern Eastern and Central Europe. These manuscripts embodied textual and material format in which Jewish practical knowledge circulated between cultural (Jewish and Christian) and linguistic (Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, and Ruthenian) milieus. They record practices that extend beyond the boundaries of now distinct disciplines of knowing, such as medicine, natural sciences, kabbalah (Jewish mystical traditions), or magic. In this talk, the speaker will explore these books as material and cultural objects and critically assess the transformations of learned forms of kabbalistic textuality and practice within non-expert, at times lowbrow, contexts. She will showcase the translation of complex kabbalistic ideas into a functional mix of languages and a discourse of easily reproducible practices that became a marker of their popular success among a variety of peoples in the premodern Ashkenaz. In so doing, she will also reconsider the largely unstable categories of “elite” and “popular” forms of knowledge in the context of kabbalistic traditions in circulation in Eastern and Central Europe up to the early eighteenth century.

Agata Paluch is head of the Emmy Noether Research Group “Patterns of Knowledge Circulation: The Transmission and Reception of Jewish Esoteric Knowledge in Manuscript and Print in Early Modern East-Central Europe”, funded by the DFG and based at Free University of Berlin. She received her PhD in Hebrew and Jewish studies from University College London in 2013. Her work has focused on the interplay between Jewish and non-Jewish esoteric traditions in East-Central Europe, the histories and literatures of Jewish mysticism, and Jewish manuscript cultures in early modern Europe.

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