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Editorial

Aries at Twenty

1 Looking Back, Looking Forward

When the first issue of *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* appeared in 2001, it represented both a continuation and a rupture in the study of esotericism. In name as well as in subject matter it was a continuation of the journal *ARIES*, which had been founded in 1985 by Roland Edighoffer and Antoine Faivre as the official organ of the Association pour la Recherche et l'Information sur l'Ésotérisme. But the new journal also represented a marked shift in approach. While the old series had retained space for religionist and insider attitudes on its pages, often tinged with perennialism and the spirit of the Eranos circle, the new series reflected a trend towards professionalization that had been underway since the mid-1990s. Moving the journal from a small publisher of esoteric literature (Archè-Edidit) to a major academic publisher (Brill) signalled the editors' ambition

to make *Aries* into the internationally recognized podium for academic investigation and intellectual discussion regarding a field of study which has been seriously neglected by earlier generations of researchers—to the detriment of our understanding of western religion and culture.¹

With the current issue, the new *Aries* stands at twenty. It also stands at a new crossroad, as the field is diversifying in terms of approaches, materials, and the demographics of its scholars. Like twenty years ago, this new situation justifies a rethink of the journal's direction.

In 2001, the field was dominated by Antoine Faivre's classic definition of esotericism as a "form of thought".² Its biggest merit was to provide a clearly formulated positive definition that scholars could rally around. By the 2010s, a definition debate that partially took place on the pages of *Aries* had revealed flaws in that definition and brought new understandings to the table, notably seeing

1 The editors [Edighoffer, Hanegraaff, Faivre], 'Preface', 3.

2 Faivre, *Access*, 10–15.

the esoteric as discourses of concealment and revelation,³ as a by-product of processes of exclusion (i.e., rejected knowledge),⁴ and even as an “empty signifier” in the tradition of Laclau and Mouffe.⁵ While the definition debate has resided in recent years, we now see a much broader range of approaches to the field’s key term that span sociology, anthropology, cognitive science, and cultural studies. Yet, this has also resulted in a sense of fragmentation that can only be resolved by encouraging an open and transparent scholarly exchange.

In 2001, the scope of esotericism was strictly delimited in two ways: historically it covered ‘the late 15th century to the present day’; civilizationally it covered ‘western religion and culture’.⁶ Over the last decade, we have seen many studies and even entire research networks dedicated to esotericism in antiquity,⁷ contemporary society,⁸ and in a globally entangled world.⁹ Esotericism in South Asia, the Islamic world, and South America have become hot topics. This is particularly clear with a new generation of scholars, many of whom have backgrounds in other disciplines, ranging from biblical literature and classics to South Asian studies and global history. This outpouring of boundary-shattering research has revived a discussion about the term “Western” as a designation for the field as such.¹⁰ The transition from old *ARIES* to the new series in 2001 involved the insertion of “Western” into the journal’s title (the old journal had been dedicated to “ésotérisme”, plain and simple); now, an increasing number of voices are calling for the term to be abandoned once again.

In 2001, scholars were preoccupied with the existential task of proving that the study of esotericism is worth its salt in the academy. The field was often characterized as academically homeless, which was even a key justification for founding the new *Aries*, as we saw in the quotation above. In 2020, a new generation of scholars is producing research on esoteric subjects with confidence and impunity: it is now largely self-evident that these topics are worth

3 von Stuckrad, ‘Western Esotericism’.

4 Hanegraaff, ‘Forbidden Knowledge’.

5 Bergunder, ‘What Is Esotericism?’

6 The editors [Edighoffer, Hanegraaff, Faivre], ‘Preface’, 3.

7 E.g. the ESSWE Network for the Study of Esotericism in Antiquity (NSEA); see also Burns, Special Issue on Antiquity.

8 E.g. the ESSWE network Contemporary Esotericism Research Network (ContERN); see also Asprem and Granholm (eds.), *Contemporary Esotericism*.

9 See e.g. Strube, ‘Transgressing Boundaries’; Krämer and Strube (eds.), *Theosophy across Boundaries*.

10 See e.g. Granholm, ‘Locating the West’; Asprem, ‘Beyond the West’; Hanegraaff, ‘The Globalization of Esotericism’; Roukema and Kilner-Johnson, ‘Time to Drop the Western’; Saif, ‘What Is Islamic Esotericism?’; Strube, ‘Towards the Study of Esotericism without the “Western”’.

pursuing in the academy. This is above all the case in the study of religion, where esotericism is featured on panels at all major international conferences, in research articles in the top journals, and in some countries is even becoming more common in university courses. That so much relevant scholarship on esoteric subjects is produced and published outside of journals such as *Aries*, also in fields such as cultural studies, literature, biblical studies, art history, and the history of science, shows that there is little need to insist that esotericism is marginalized in the world of academia.

2 New Initiatives for a New Decade

As I take up my tenure as editor-in-chief of *Aries* I intend to steer the journal on a course that responds to these current developments. The first step has been to assemble a brand-new editorial board, the composition of which ensures continuity and experience as well as greater diversity in expertise, demography, geography, and career stages. Notably, we now strengthen our expertise in antiquity, the middle ages, and Islam, with more additions to follow in the future.

The most important implication of recent developments, however, is that the journal's rationale can no longer be simply to secure a safe island where the study of esotericism can be pursued in relative isolation. Instead it must seek to actively build bridges to the wider academic world. In practical terms, that means participating in debates of wider significance, adopting and contributing to theoretical perspectives across the humanities and social sciences, and actively making space for contributions from scholars that may not see their work as belonging to the study of esotericism but who nevertheless work on materials and questions pertinent to it.

Some of this the journal has already been doing for years. Since 2012, *Aries* has published annual special issues, some focused on particular currents or individuals, others on broadening the field's perspectives. Special issues on occulture and modern art (Tessel Bauduin and Nina Kokkinen, 2013), esotericism in antiquity (Dylan Burns, 2015), esotericism in entangled global history (Julian Strube, 2016), and esotericism and the cognitive science of religion (Egil Asprem and Markus Altena Davidsen, 2017) have brought in specialists who would not otherwise publish in *Aries*. Citation data suggest that these special issues also generated more citations to the journal from outside the field than usual.

In an initiative to strengthen this trend, *Aries* will now introduce a new article format: the target article with open peer commentary. Less common in the

humanities than the social and behavioural sciences, the target article offers an ideal platform for discussing new trends and “big ideas”. *Aries* particularly invites target articles that explore broader theoretical arguments, important new findings or interpretations that may imply revisions to standard historical narratives, discussions of key concepts, or arguments that would push the boundaries of the field in terms of geography, culture, historical periods, disciplines, or research questions. After the standard double-blind peer review process, target articles will be sent out to a number of specialists who are invited to write short commentaries on the text. These will be published together with the article and a response by the author(s). It is my hope that the target article format can be a powerful instrument not only for creating engagements with the rest of academia, but also for stimulating open and dynamic theorization of the field itself.

That said, *Aries* will of course retain its main focus on publishing solid, empirically-grounded research articles on esoteric subjects that do not so easily fit in other journals. Improving our basic knowledge of neglected figures and currents remains central to the journal's mission. However, in line with the trends discussed above it is particularly important to consider material that may not only have been neglected by the broader academy, but also by our own field. This does not only concern questions about geographical and cultural boundaries, but historical periods as well. While the field has started to move past the focus on Renaissance humanist forms as the prototype of what esotericism is all about, there is still a noticeable bias on the pages of *Aries* in favour of the modern and early modern periods.

To get a better overview of the situation, I present a simple analysis of articles published over the past ten years (Table 1). While this should be taken only as a rough indication of the distribution of articles in the journal,¹¹ it unsurprisingly reveals that the largest share of articles (46%) concerned modern esotericism, with the early modern period in second place (32%). The medieval period is worst off, signalling a huge potential for improvement. Contemporary esotericism also remains underrepresented, as do articles of a primarily generalist, theoretical, or transhistorical bent. While antiquity appears fairly well represented, this is solely the result of the special issue edited by Dylan Burns in 2015. Consequently, I would especially welcome the submis-

11 In preparing this data I have coded each article published between 2010 and 2019 with one and only one category, with a view to its main focus. While the cut-off point for antiquity and the middle ages was not a problem in the data seeing that so few articles belonged to either, I have defined early modernity as approximately 1400–1800, modernity as 1800–1990, and contemporary as 1990s to the present.

TABLE 1 Percentage of research articles in
 Aries by historical period, 2010-2019

Period	Percent
Modern	46 %
Early Modern	32 %
Antiquity	11 %
Transhistorical/Theoretical	6 %
Contemporary	4 %
Medieval	1 %

sion of manuscripts dealing with esotericism in antiquity, the middle ages, and contemporary society. Incidentally, these are also the three periods in which the potential for refining our concept of esotericism, which has to such a large extent been shaped by narratives about the advent of modernity, is the strongest.

3 *Aries’* Position in a New Publishing Ecosystem

It is not only the field of esotericism that has developed in recent decades; its wider publishing ecosystem has also changed. The move to open-access publishing is increasing the availability of scholarly work, giving a strong competitive advantage in terms of visibility and impact to those journals allowing such access. When *Aries* first appeared in 2001, the field in fact already had an online journal. Published between 1999 and 2007 under the editorship of Arthur Versluis, the journal *Esoterica* published reviews, digitized archival sources, and research articles, many of which continue to be cited today. In 2013, the field got a new online open-access journal when Aren Roukema and Jimmy Elwing launched *Correspondences*. Since then, two other online journals have appeared: *Melancholia* in 2016 (publishing in Spanish and English), and *La Rosa di Paracelso* in 2017 (publishing in Italian and English).

Of these three journals it is safe to say that *Correspondences*, having completed its first seven years, has proved a particularly valuable addition to the field. Not only has it provided a platform for emerging scholars and made research available to anyone with an internet connection; it has also been a dynamic impulse on new discussions, notably the study of esotericism and popular culture, the issue with “the West”, new methods and approaches, and,

most recently, Islamic esotericism. As we enter a new decade, the field is no longer dominated by a single journal. Instead, *Aries* and *Correspondences* take the lead in a more diverse publishing ecosystem, which has the potential to bring both healthy competition and strategic cooperation, for the betterment of the field as a whole.

As the senior of the two journals, *Aries* still has a slight advantage over *Correspondences* in terms of impact as measured by citations. According to citation data collected through Google Scholar in April 2020, the h5 index¹² of the two journals over the period 2015–2019 shows *Aries* at 6 with an h5 median of 12, and *Correspondences* at 4 with an h5 median of 5.5. It also shows that articles in *Aries* on average get more citations, and that a smaller share of articles goes completely uncited.¹³

The impact gap is, however, closing. To begin with, small differences in h5 tell us very little about the impact of small journals in small fields. If we look instead at the most impactful articles, and expand the scope back to 2013 when *Correspondences* was founded, we see that the three most cited articles in *Correspondences* all rank higher than the top article in *Aries* (Tables 2 and 3). This latter finding can probably not be explained by the accessibility of *Correspondences*' open-access model alone; instead, it may indicate that *Correspondences* has succeeded at contributing to wider debates and setting the agenda for further research. This is positive news for the field as a whole; for *Aries* it should be seen as a welcome, and perhaps needed, challenge to lift its gaze to the bigger picture.

With a growing number of online journals in the field, I am happy to announce that our publisher, Brill, has taken two small new steps towards free open access that will benefit *Aries*. First of all, editorials are from now on available online for free. I therefore encourage future guest editors to take advantage by furnishing their special issues with rich editorials that make the research more accessible. Second, in 2020 and 2021, Brill is making all review and research articles published by scholars at Dutch universities open access without a fee. We can only hope that this initiative will be prolonged and expanded in future. Meanwhile, to maximize the visibility and reach of our research, I will remind prospective authors that Brill does allow the posting of

12 The h5 index is a commonly used indicator of a journal's current impact on academic publishing. The score represents the largest number h that had at least h citations over the past five-year period. The h5 median is the median number of citation among the articles that made up the h5 index score.

13 Over the seven-year period that *Correspondences* has existed, 41 % of *Correspondences* articles have no citations, while the corresponding figure for *Aries* is 25 %.

TABLE 2 Top five most cited articles in *Aries*, 2013–2019

Author	Title	Year	Citations
Asprem, E.	Explaining the Esoteric Imagination	2017	21
Otto, B.-C.	Historicizing “Western Learned Magic”	2016	16
Hanegraaff, W.J.	How Hermetic Was Renaissance Hermeticism?	2015	13
Azize, J.	The Four Ideals	2013	13
Bergunder, M.	“Religion” and “Science” within a Global Religious History	2016	11

TABLE 3 Top five most cited articles in *Correspondences*, 2013–2019

Author	Title	Year	Citations
Asprem, E.	Beyond the West	2014	36
Granholm, K.	Ritual Black Metal	2013	27
Hanegraaff, W.J.	The Globalization of Esotericism	2015	25
Strube, J.	The “Baphomet” of Eliphas Lévi	2016	7
Doyle White, E.	An Elusive Roebuck	2013	7

pre-peer-review versions of articles (pre-prints) in online repositories and open archives at any time, and the posting of peer-reviewed versions (post-prints) after an embargo period of 12 months.

One final announcement about the publishing model: *Aries* will from now on offer an “online first” option. This will avoid publication queues and ensure that research articles can make it from acceptance to publication as quickly as possible. Articles that are published online first will get a digital object identifier (DOI) and hence count as officially published on the date that they appear online, and will later be assigned to a specific print issue. This takes away a significant bottleneck in our production chain, allowing us to publish high-quality articles at a higher pace than what the physical page limit of the journal would otherwise dictate.

4 The Present Issue

With this I welcome you to a new decade of *Aries*. The present issue contains three research articles that demonstrate some of the variety in approaches and emphasis that characterizes the field at the moment. Robert J. Wilkinson's article, 'The Poetic Transformation of Christian Cabbala', explores little-known primary sources that demonstrate how gematric speculations have been put to use variously in divination, prophecy, and as a device for poetic invention in the early modern period. Niklas Nenzén's 'Epistemology of the Great Invisibles' analyses the myth of *les grands transparents* in André Breton's surrealism, contextualizes it in light of prevalent esoteric ideas about great invisible beings with a comparative focus on Rudolf Steiner and the Lectorium Rosicrucianum. Finally, Maximillian Herford's article, "Mit diesem Hinweis wird auch ein Licht geworfen auf alles weitere Fragen nach einem 'Woher'", investigates the poetics of German fin-de-siècle cosmogonic discourses, with a focus on Hanns Hörbiger's "world ice theory" and Steiner's cosmogonic writings in the *Akasha-Chronik*.

I trust that readers of *Aries* will find inspiration in these insightful and creative articles, and stay tuned for further developments.

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