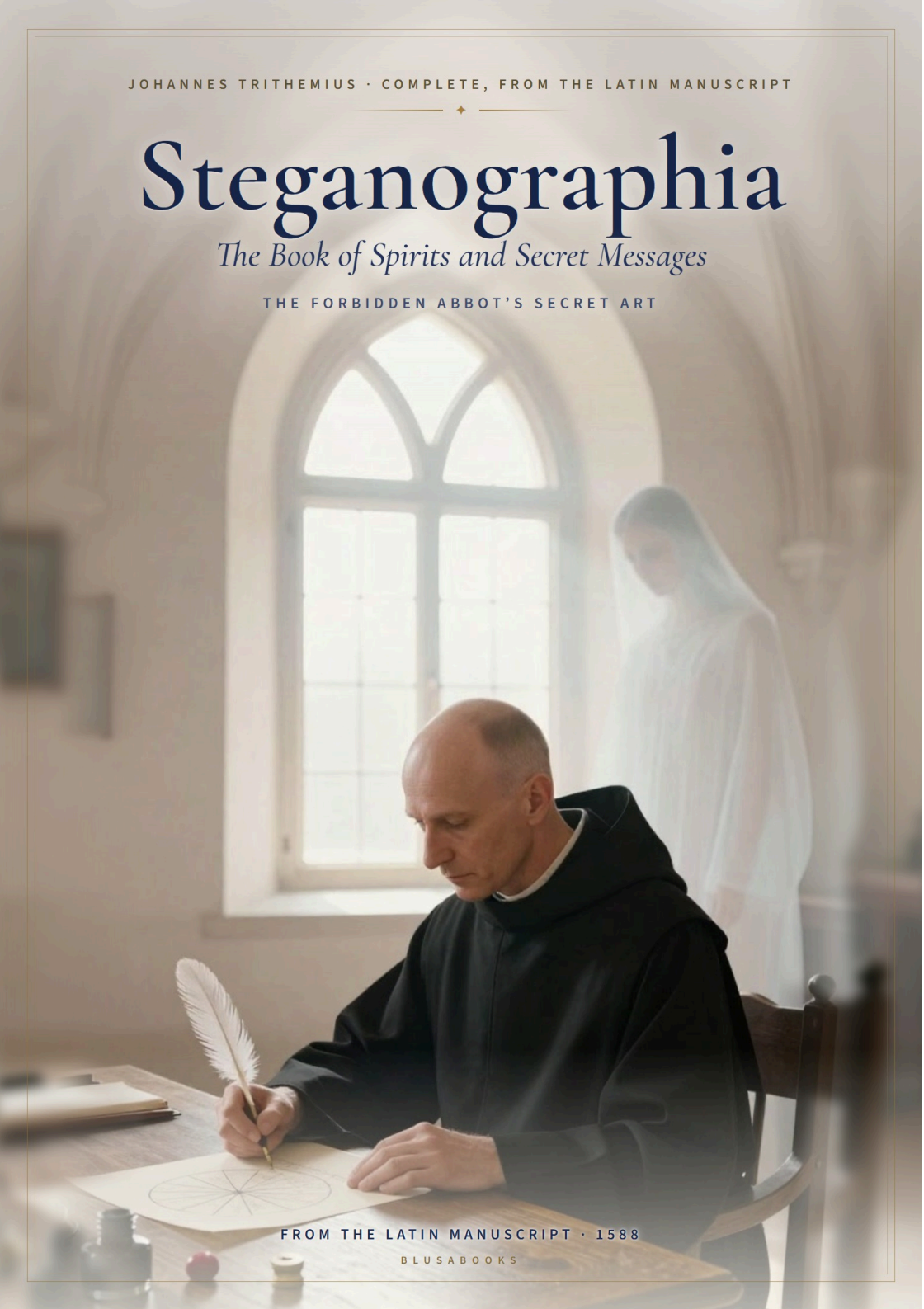
JOHANNES TRITHEMIUS · COMPLETE, FROM THE LATIN MANUSCRIPT

# Steganographia

## *The Book of Spirits and Secret Messages*

THE FORBIDDEN ABBOT'S SECRET ART



FROM THE LATIN MANUSCRIPT · 1588

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BOOKS OF WISDOM

# Steganographia

*The Book of Spirits and Secret Messages · 1588*

The three books of Johannes Trithemius, Abbot of Sponheim, on how to send a secret message to a distant friend with the help of spirits. Complete in modern English from the Latin manuscript of 1588

BlusaBooks · MMXXVI

Modern English text, notes, foreword and commentary © 2026 SIA "Blusa Entertainment".

Source: Johannes Trithemius, *Steganographia*, a manuscript copy begun on 16 February 1588 (Fulda). Rendered into modern English from the Latin, from images of the pages of this manuscript. Title page, circles of spirits and tables from the same manuscript.

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# FOREWORD

**A letter with two faces.** Imagine a letter that anyone may read: a pious prayer, a friendly greeting or a dull sermon. The messenger carries it through forests and across borders; guards open it, find nothing suspicious and seal it up again. But the person it was sent to turns towards the east, whispers a few strange words — and learns a quite different, secret message: about a campaign, a betrayal or a hidden treasure. So begins the *Steganographia*, the forbidden abbot's book on how spirits carry secret messages. For almost four hundred years it was taken for a handbook of demonic magic, until at the end of the twentieth century it turned out that its "magic words" are in fact a cipher.

**Who Trithemius was.** Johannes Trithemius was born in 1462 at Trittenheim on the river Moselle; he made his name from the name of his birthplace. At twenty he entered the Benedictine abbey of Sponheim near Kreuznach, and the very next year, in 1483, the brothers elected him abbot. He turned the poor monastery into one of the most famous places of learning in Germany: from a few dozen books his library grew to some two thousand volumes, and humanists, princes and learned men came to visit him. Trithemius wrote histories, catalogues of writers, sermons and instructions for monks, and corresponded with the leading minds of his age. In 1506, after long quarrels with his monks, he left Sponheim and became abbot of the monastery of St James in Würzburg, where he died in 1516.

**The book that caused a scandal.** Around 1499 Trithemius began a work to which he gave a Greek name — *Steganographia*, "covered writing". In the same year, in a letter to his friend the Carmelite monk Arnold Bostius, he proudly described what the new art could do: pass one's thoughts to a distant friend without words and without a messenger, and much else besides. Bostius died

before the letter arrived, and others read it. Word of an abbot who summoned spirits spread fast. After a visit to Sponheim, the French philosopher Charles de Bovelles, in a letter of 1509, called the manuscript demonic and superstitious. Trithemius never finished the book or published it; its third part remained a fragment.



*The abbot in his library: at Sponheim Trithemius gathered some two thousand volumes (illustration)*

**A century in manuscript.** The *Steganographia* passed from hand to hand in copies, a dangerous and eagerly sought book. In 1563 the English mathematician and astrologer John Dee found a manuscript of it in Antwerp and wrote with delight to Queen Elizabeth's adviser that he had found a book which many learned men had long sought in vain. It was printed only in 1606, almost a century after its author's death, and as early as 1609 it was placed on the Church's list of forbidden books. Yet the 1606 edition also included a "Key", which showed that the first two books teach secret writing. In 1676 the German scholar

Wolfgang Ernst Heidel published a book defending Trithemius and explaining the key to his formulas in still greater detail.

**Spirits as keys.** In the first book there are thirty-one spirits — princes, dukes and emperors, each with his own quarter of the sky, his own sign and his own servants: Pamersiel in the east, Malgaras in the west, the wandering Geradiel everywhere. In the second book the spirits rule the hours of the day and the night. Each has his own "conjuration" — a long, strange string of words, for example: "Padiel, aporsy, mesarpon, omeuas...". Today we know that the message is hidden in exactly these strings: if you take only certain letters from them according to a simple rule, ordinary Latin or German text appears. The spirit's name and quarter tell you which rule to use. Trithemius himself drops a hint at the end of the book: the master must translate the conjuration in front of his pupil, "so that he may not suspect there is anything diabolical" in them.

**The secret of the third book.** The third book is different. There are no more conjurations with hidden letters, but the seven planetary angels — Orifiel, Zachariel, Samael, Michael, Anael, Raphael and Gabriel — long tables of numbers and images by which a thought can supposedly be sent to a friend within twenty-four hours, without words and without writing. This book seemed genuine magic for longest of all. Only in 1996 did the German scholar Thomas Ernst, and independently in 1998 the American mathematician Jim Reeds, show that the tables too are a cipher: the numbers stand for letters, and sentences can be read from them. One of them, in German, says: "The bearer of this letter is a rogue and a thief." The forbidden book of magic turned out to be one of the first textbooks of cryptography in Europe.

**Trithemius and secret writing.** Secret writing held Trithemius all his life. In 1508 he finished the *Polygraphia*, a work on ciphers with no spirits at all; it was printed in 1518 and is the first printed book on cryptography. At about the same time he wrote a treatise *On the Seven Secondary Causes* about the planetary angels who rule the history of the world in turn — the same teaching that we read in the third part of this book. Around 1510 the young Cornelius Agrippa visited

Trithemius in Würzburg and sent him the first version of his *Occult Philosophy*; the abbot replied with advice: reveal high things only to a few who can be trusted. Agrippa's book later became the chief handbook of Renaissance magic, and much in it comes from Trithemius.

**Our source.** This translation is made not from the printed book but from a manuscript. A careful scribe began it on 16 February 1588 — eighteen years before the first edition — copying the circles of spirits and the tables as well and picking out the headings in red ink. Later the manuscript came to the library at Fulda. In places the copy differs from the printed text: some chapters lack their formulas, some spirits' names are spelled differently, and the third book ends with the angels of Saturn. We translate what is in this copy, and we have also included its pages with the circles of spirits and the tables.

**How to read this book.** Trithemius writes as a monk and abbot of 1500: seriously, piously, in a tone of secrecy and warning. We have softened or modernised nothing. The spirits' names are left as they are written in the manuscript, and the conjuration formulas — the cipher text — are not translated but copied letter for letter and set off, so that the reader can see where the "secret text" begins. The tables are copied with all their numbers, as they stand in the manuscript. Footnotes at the foot of the page explain persons, words and places; at the end of the book there is commentary in plain words, on the cipher behind the spirits and on Trithemius's time.

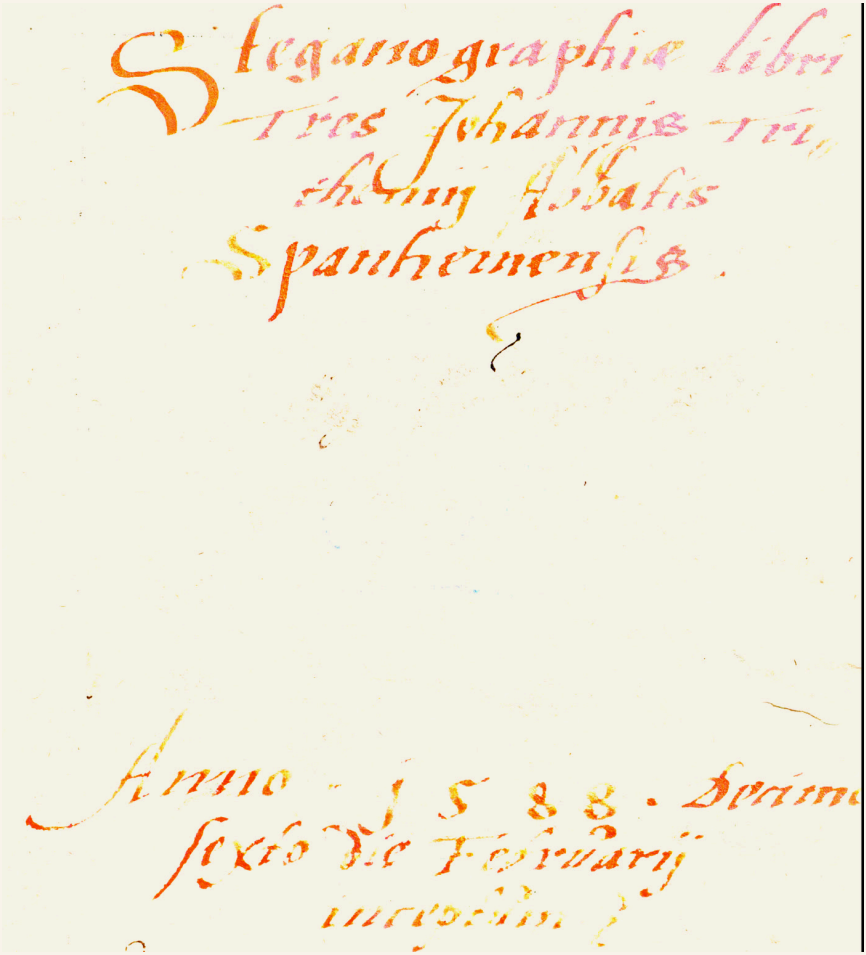
# TITLE PAGE

**Three Books of Steganography**
**by Johannes Trithemius[*],**
**Abbot of Sponheim.**

*Begun in the year 1588, on the sixteenth day of February.*[†]

[*] Johannes Trithemius (1462–1516) — Benedictine Abbot of Sponheim, historian and book collector; Cornelius Agrippa studied with him (see our Nos. 14–38, Agrippa's "Occult Philosophy").

[†] This is the date of this manuscript copy; at the time the book circulated only in copies — it was first printed in 1606.




*The title page of the manuscript: "Three Books of Steganography by Johannes Trithemius, Abbot of Sponheim. Begun in the year 1588, on the sixteenth day of February"*