

History of the Necronomicon

H.P. Lovecraft

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By H.P. Lovecraft (1927)

(There has been some difficulty over the date of this essay. Most give the date as 1936, following the Laney-Evans (1943) bibliography entry for the pamphlet version produced by the Rebel Press. This date, as can easily be ascertained from the fact that this was a "Limited Memorial Edition", is spurious (Lovecraft died in 1937); in fact, it dates to 1938. The correct date of 1927 comes from the final draft of the essay, which appears on a letter addressed to Clark Ashton Smith ("To the Curator of the Vaults of Yoh-Vombis, with the Concoctor's [?] Comments"). The letter is dated April 27, 1927 and was apparently kept by Lovecraft to circulate as needed.)

Original title Al Azif—azif being the word used by Arabs to designate that nocturnal sound (made by insects) supposed to be the howling of daemons. Composed by Abdul Alhazred, a mad poet of Sanaá, in Yemen, who is said to have flourished during the period of the Omniade caliphs, circa 700 A.D. He visited the ruins of Babylon and the subterranean secrets of Memphis and spent ten years alone in the great southern desert of Arabia—the Roba el Khaliyeh or “Empty Space” of the ancients—and “Dahna” or “Crimson” desert of the modern Arabs, which is held to be inhabited by protective evil spirits and monsters of death. Of this desert many strange and unbelievable marvels are told by those who pretend to have penetrated it. In his last years Alhazred dwelt in Damascus, where the Necronomicon (Al Azif) was written, and of his final death or disappearance (738 A.D.) many terrible and conflicting things are told. He is said by Ebn Khallikan (12th cent. biographer) to have been seized by an invisible monster in broad daylight and devoured horribly before a large number of fright-frozen witnesses. Of his madness many things are told. He claimed to have seen fabulous Irem, or City of Pillars, and to have found beneath the ruins of a certain nameless desert town the shocking annals and secrets of a race older than mankind. [The Rebel Press edition adds this editor’s note: “A full description of the nameless city, and the annals and secrets of its one time inhabitants will be found in the story THE NAMELESS CITY, published in the first issue of Fanciful Tales, and written by the author of this outline.”] He was only an indifferent Moslem, worshipping unknown entities whom he called Yog-Sothoth and Cthulhu. In A.D. 950 the Azif, which had gained a considerable tho’ surreptitious circulation amongst the philosophers of the age, was secretly translated into Greek by Theodorus Philetas of Constantinople under the title Necronomicon. For a century it impelled certain experimenters to terrible attempts, when it was suppressed and burnt by the patriarch Michael. After this it is only heard of furtively, but (1228) Olaus Wormius made a Latin translation later in the Middle Ages, and the Latin text was printed twice—once in the fifteenth century in black-letter (evidently in Germany) and once in the seventeenth (prob. Spanish) -- both editions being without identifying marks, and located as to time and place by internal typographical evidence only. The work both Latin and Greek was banned by Pope Gregory IX in 1232, shortly after its Latin translation, which called attention to it. The Arabic original was lost as early as Wormius’ time, as indicated by his prefatory note; [the Rebel Press edition adds paranthetically: “there is, however, a vague account of a secret copy appearing in San Francisco during the present century, but later perished in fire”—a transparent reference to Clark Ashton Smith’s tale “The Return of the Sorcerer”. Indeed, Lovecraft says in a letter to Richard F. Searight (1935) “This ‘history’ must be modified in one respect—since Klarkash-Ton’s ‘Return of the Sorcerer’ (pub in Strange Tales 3 yrs. ago) tells of the survival of an Arabic text until modern times.”] and no sight of the Greek copy—which was printed in Italy between 1500 and 1550 -- has been reported since the burning of a certain Salem man’s library in 1692. An English translation made by Dr. Dee was never printed, and exists only in fragments recovered from the original manuscript. [This sentence does not occur in the first draft of the essay. It was added later, after Frank Belknap Long had quoted from “John Dee’s Necronomicon” in his tale “The Space Eaters” (1928).] Of the Latin texts now existing one (15th cent.) is known to be in the British Museum under lock and key, while another (17th cent.) is in the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris. A seventeenth-century edition is in the Widener Library at Harvard, and in the library of Miskatonic University at Arkham. Also in the library of the University of Buenos Ayres. Numerous other copies probably exist in secret, and a fifteenth-century one is persistently rumoured to form part of the collection of a celebrated American millionaire. A still vaguer rumour credits the preservation of a sixteenth-century Greek text in the Salem family of Pickman; but if it was so preserved, it vanished with the artist R.U. Pickman, who disappeared early in 1926. The book is rigidly suppressed by the authorities of most countries, and by all branches of organised ecclesiasticism. Reading leads to terrible consequences. It was from rumours of this book (of which relatively few of the general public know) that R.W. Chambers is said to have derived the idea of his early novel The King in Yellow.

Chronology

Al Azif written circa 730 A.D. at Damascus by Abdul Alhazred Tr. to Greek 950 A.D. as Necronomicon by Theodorus Philetas Burnt by Patriarch Michael 1050 (i.e., Greek text). Arabic text now lost.

Olaus translates Gr. to Latin 1228

1232 Latin ed. (and Gr.) suppr. by Pope Gregory IX 14... Black-letter printed edition (Germany)

15... Gr. text printed in Italy

16... Spanish reprint of Latin text

This should be supplemented with a letter written to Clark Ashton Smith for November 27, 1927:

I have had no chance to produce new material this autumn, but have been classifying notes & synopses in preparation for some monstrous tales later on. In particular I have drawn up some data on the celebrated & unmentionable Necronomicon of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred! It seems that this shocking blasphemy was produced by a native of Sanaá, in Yemen, who flourished about 700 A.D. & made many mysterious pilgrimages to Babylon's ruins, Memphis's catacombs, & the devil-haunted & untrodden wastes of the great southern deserts of Arabia—the Roba el Khaliyeh, where he claimed to have found records of things older than mankind, & to have learnt the worship of Yog-Sothoth & Cthulhu. The book was a product of Abdul's old age, which was spent in Damascus, & the original title was Al Azif—azif (cf. Henley's notes to Vathek) being the name applied to those strange night noises (of insects) which the Arabs attribute to the howling of daemons. Alhazred died—or disappeared—under terrible circumstances in the year 738. In 950 Al Azif was translated into Greek by the Byzantine Theodorus Philetas under the title Necronomicon, & a century later it was burnt at the order of Michael, Patriarch of Constantinople. It was translated into Latin by Olaus in 1228, but placed on the Index Expurgatorius by Pope Gregory IX in 1232. [Note that this does not appear in the final version of the essay. The explanation is that the Index did not exist at this time, as further research must have revealed to Lovecraft.] The original Arabic was lost before Olaus' time, & the last known Greek copy perished in Salem in 1692. The work was printed in the 15th, 16th, & 17th centuries, but few copies are extant. Wherever existing, it is carefully guarded for the sake of the world's welfare & sanity. Once a man read through the copy in the library of Miskatonic University at Arkham—read it through & fled wild-eyed into the hills but that is another story!

In yet another letter (to James Blish and William Miller, 1936), Lovecraft says:

You are fortunate in securing copies of the hellish and abhorred Necronomicon. Are they the Latin texts printed in Germany in the fifteenth century, or the Greek version printed in Italy in 1567, or the Spanish translation of 1623? Or do these copies represent different texts?

Note that this is not entirely consistent with the accounts given earlier.

Annotated Version

From Kendrick Kerwin Chua's Necronomicon FAQ

With further annotation by Dan Clore

(Note: I have substituted the corrected text for the older, corrupt text used in the FAQ.—D.C.)

"History of the Necronomicon", by H.P. Lovecraft, written in 1937 with footnotes and references by Kendrick Kerwin Chua, 1993.

See above for the date of this essay.

Original title Al Azif—azif being the word used by Arabs to designate that nocturnal sound (made by insects) supposed to be the howling of demons. Composed by Abdul Alhazred, a mad poet of Sana'a, in Yemen, who is said to have flourished during the period of the Omniade caliphs, circa 700 A.D. He visited the ruins of Babylon and the subterranean secrets of Memphis and spent ten years alone in the great southern desert of Arabia—the Roba el Khaliyah or "Empty Space" of the ancients—and "Dahna" or "Crimson" desert of the modern Arabs, which is held to be inhabited by protective evil spirits and monsters of death. Of this desert many strange and unbelievable marvels are told by those who pretend to have penetrated it. In his last years Alhazred dwelt in Damascus, where the Necronomicon (Al Azif) was written, and of his final death or disappearance (738 A.D.) many terrible and conflicting things are told. He is said by Ebn Khallikan (12th cent. biographer) to have been seized by an invisible monster in broad daylight and devoured horribly before a large number of fright-frozen witnesses. Of his madness many things are told. He claimed to have seen fabulous Irem, or City of Pillars, and to have found beneath the ruins of a certain nameless desert town the shocking annals and secrets of a race older than mankind. [The Rebel Press edition adds this editor's note: "A full description of the nameless city, and the annals and secrets of its one time inhabitants will be found in the story THE NAMELESS CITY, published in the first issue of Fanciful Tales, and written by the author of this outline."] He was only an indifferent Moslem, worshipping unknown entities whom he called Yog-Sothoth and Cthulhu.

(9) Note already how Lovecraft skirts the fine line between campy parody and seriousness. In Lovecraft at Last, Conover writes that Lovecraft wrote the history in order to allow people with any understanding of Arab studies to see through the mock scholarship. Note also the inconsistencies here with the description of Al-Hazred in the Simon Necronomicon. Al-Hazred there supposedly witnessed the horrible rituals at Masshu, a mythical island at the mouth of the Euphrates upon which Utnapishtim, the Babylonian Noah, supposedly still resides today. Whereas Lovecraft describes the Crimson Desert as the place where Al-Hazred witnessed much of what he wrote down.

Note also that in the Simon version, Al-Hazred warns against worshipping "Iak-Sakkak" and "Kutulu", whereas Lovecraft's claims he did just that. Note also the improper use of the A.D. prefix until the next paragraph. KKC

In A.D. 950 the Azif, which had gained a considerable tho' surreptitious circulation amongst the philosophers of the age, was secretly translated into Greek by Theodorus Philetas of Constantinople under the title Necronomicon.

(10) Another inconsistency. Simon claims that Al-Hazred rendered the Necronomicon in Greek first, rather than Arabic. KKC

I haven't been able to find this claim in Simon's text, but he does claim that the manuscript he translated is a Greek version. As noted below, Lovecraft states that the Greek version was lost.

For a century it impelled certain experimenters to terrible attempts, when it was suppressed and burnt by the patriarch Michael. After this it is only heard of furtively, but (1228) Olaus Wormius made a Latin translation later in the Middle Ages, and the Latin text was printed twice—once in the fifteenth century in black-letter (evidently in Germany) and once in the seventeenth (prob. Spanish) -- both editions being without identifying marks, and located as to time and place by internal typographical evidence only.

(11) Interesting to note that Lovecraft does not say outright that someone in our time had apparently found and identified these renditions of the book. KKC

The work both Latin and Greek was banned by Pope Gregory IX in 1232, shortly after its Latin translation, which called attention to it.

(12) The archivist has thusfar been unable to find Al Azif, Necronomicon, or anything even remotely similar on any of the forbidden book lists of the era. But do consider that paper records from the 13th century are incomplete and unpreserved, to say the least. KKC

The Arabic original was lost as early as Wormius' time, as indicated by his prefatory note; [the Rebel Press edition adds parenthetically: "there is, however, a vague account of a secret copy appearing in San Francisco during the present century, but later perished in fire"—a transparent reference to

Clark Ashton Smith's tale "The Return of the Sorcerer".] and no sight of the Greek copy—which was printed in Italy between 1500 and 1550 -- has been reported since the burning of a certain Salem man's library in 1692.

(13) Again, Simon claims to have translated a Greek edition. KKC An English translation made by Dr. Dee was never printed, and exists only in fragments recovered from the original manuscript.

(14) An internal Lovecraft inconsistency. In his short story "The Dunwich Horror", the old wizard called Whately utilizes a Dee translation of the Necronomicon in order to produce children for Yog-Sothoth. A complete listing of John Dee's books reveals none titled Necronomicon. KKC

This is not an inconsistency, as old Wizard Whateley uses an incomplete manuscript of the Dee translation. Wilbur Whateley, Yog-Sothoth's son, requires the complete edition housed in the Miskatonic University Library to fill in the gaps in the fragmentary Dee version.

Of the Latin texts now existing one (15th cent.) is known to be in the British Museum under lock and key, while another (17th cent.) is in the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris. A seventeenth-century edition is in the Widener Library at Harvard, and in the library of Miskatonic University at Arkham. Also in the library of the University of Buenos Ayres.

(15) Other than the Harvard copy, which the archivist knows for sure does not exist, and the fact that Miskatonic University is totally fictional, I cannot say with absolute certainty that the other locations Lovecraft lists do not have some copy of a book they may call the Necronomicon. Interested parties may contact the archivist to confirm or deny possession of the book, if they wish. KKC

They don't.

Numerous other copies probably exist in secret, and a fifteenth-century one is persistently rumoured to form part of the collection of a celebrated American millionaire. A still vaguer rumour credits the preservation of a sixteenth-century Greek text in the Salem family of Pickman; but if it was so preserved, it vanished with the artist R.U. Pickman, who disappeared early in 1926. The book is rigidly suppressed by the authorities of most countries, and by all branches of organised ecclesiasticism. Reading leads to terrible consequences. It was from rumours of this book (of which relatively few of the general public know) that R.W. Chambers is said to have derived the idea of his early novel *The King in Yellow*.

(16) Much of the latter part of this paragraph is in fact derived from Lovecraft's own short stories, most notably "The Picture in the House", which featured the sadistic Robert Pickman character. Also, Lovecraft repeatedly cites Chambers' book as his main inspiration, although he created the Necronomicon before he first read Chambers. KKC

The story featuring Robert Upton Pickman is, of course, "Pickman's Model", not "The Picture in the House". See above on Chambers. I am unaware of any serious statement by Lovecraft attesting to any significant influence from Chambers' work.