Johannes Trithemius: Scholar and Cryptologist

Johannes Trithemius, the author of the first printed book on cryptology, was probably the most famous scholar of his day—as widely known as Albert Einstein in our time. He was born in Germany in 1462, became a monk, and eventually headed the Benedictine abbey at Wurzburg. Learned men and rulers from all over Europe corresponded with him and even made pilgrimages to visit him.

They did so primarily because of the round-faced abbot's reputation for occult power. Trithemius boasted that he could use angels to communicate rapidly over great distances, had taught a prince Latin in an hour, had magically obtained food and drink at an inn that had run out of supplies, and could conceal and reveal secrets. This latter involved cryptology, and in 1506 he wrote a book, *Polygraphia*, describing several systems of ciphers. He did not publish it in his lifetime because he feared that he would be accused of dealing with the devil. But in 1518, two years after his death, some of his admirers had *Polygraphia* printed. Its 540 pages appeared in a large elegant format appropriate to its status as the first in a long—and still growing—line of publications in the expanding field of cryptology.

It is interesting that, although spying has been called the second oldest profession, the printed literature of cryptology antedates that of espionage by more than a century and a half. And *Polygraphia* is not only the first published work on cryptology; it is also its first best seller: it was reprinted in 1550, 1571, 1600, and 1613. A French translation appeared in 1561, was reprinted in 1625, and was plagiarized in 1620.

[CCH Note: A later edition of Trithemius' book, dated 1567, is now on permanent display at the National Cryptologic Museum.]

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