

Tapping Other Powers. Magic in Greek and Roman Life

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INTRODUCTION

Proteus is not someone who was easy to deal with, as Greek heroes from Menelaus to Aristaios had to learn. He possessed immense knowledge, but he had to be forced to share this knowledge with others, and this was not easy: like the seals whose shepherd he was, he was slippery, and he was a shape shifter. “Suddenly, he turns into a wild boar, a frightful tiger, a scaly snake or a shaggy lion, or he shoots up in hissing flames or flows away in a pool of water”, as someone narrates who knows him well. “You have to catch him by deception and ruse and then steadfast you have to hold on and with mighty force, whatever happens.”¹

Somehow, we all seem to know someone as slippery and elusive as this. But this is not why I tell this story; nor is it because some people thought him a

1. Arethusa's instruction to Aristaeus, Vergil, *Georgics* 4.407-412. The model, Homer, *Odyssey* 4.417-420, is much less detailed.

sorcerer. Not only persons behave like Proteus, some concepts do the same: we somehow imagine that we know what they mean, but when we are to catch them with the fine net of a definition, they shift their shape, slip through our fingers, and leave us wondering; and we have to use force to keep them serviceable to a reasonable degree.

Magic is such an elusive concept. Created in the late sixth century BCE as a by-product of Persian imperialism, it has been with us for more than 2500 years, first as Greek *μαγεία*, then as Latin *magia*; it was eagerly adopted by the Christian bishops and, considerably later, by these other authoritative expounders of human life, the evolutionary anthropologists and historians of religion. One would have thought that over more than one century of debate, there would be some agreement about the contours of the term. But agreement there is only in popular culture (magic is dazzling and sexy and always a great selling point): as to scholars, over time they have come up with a number of often contradictory definitions.

I will not bother and bore you with definitions here.² Somehow, the ancients knew what they meant when they talked about magic, sorcery, or charms (*μαγεία, μαγγανεία, φαρμακεία, θέλησις*); and somehow, we seem to know it as well. Instead of talking about definitions, then, I shall confidently look at the phenomena Greeks and Romans subsumed under these terms, and keep in mind the contrast with what we in our culture mean when we talk about magic. The hermeneutical tension between these two sets of assumptions will generate enough meaning to help us along. And if this seems somewhat untidy, well, one has to keep in mind that one had to use force and trickery in order to deal with Proteus.

2. For a short overview, see my *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), chapter 1.

I.

I shall begin this narrative at the moment when some Greeks came up with the term *mavgo*~ and its derivative *mageiva*, “magic” and “magician”. This happened at the turn from the sixth to the fifth century BCE. The first author to have allegedly used this terminology was Heraclitus, the philosopher from Ephesos: he described some ecstatic rites that he rejected as those of *mavgoi*, “Persian priests” (that is at least what Clement of Alexandria makes him say³). He knew what he was talking about: during his lifetime, the Persians had conquered Western Asia Minor, and Heraclitus and his contemporaries could see Persian priests officiating for the Persian governor and his court and functionaries: to describe Greek rites as belonging to the religious apparatus of the imperialist oppressor was pretty tough stuff.⁴ It is not quite clear what those rites were; Clement does not give much context and has his own agenda, but it looks as if Heraclitus was censuring and rejecting the practitioners of private Dionysiac mystery rites and not of what we would call magic. But this semantic difference is exactly what we would expect; it warns us against projecting our definitions upon early Greece. More than a century later, Plato returned to the topic and wrote about itinerant priests (*ἀγύρται*) and seers, private religious entrepreneurs who “come to the doors of the rich” and sell their art – initiation rituals that look Dionysiac even in Plato’s hostile description, and potent binding spells whose powers have been granted by the gods.⁵

3. Heraclitus, *DK 12 B 14* = Clement, *Protrepticus 22*: “Against whom does Heraclitus of Ephesus utter this prophecy? Against ‘night-roamers, magicians, Bacchants, Lenaean revellers and devotees of the mysteries.’... ‘For in unholy fashion are they initiated into the mysteries that are customary among men.’”

4. Jan N. Bremmer, “The Birth of the Term ‘Magic,’” in *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, eds. Jan N. Bremmer and Jan R. Veenstra, Groningen Studies in Cultural Change 1 (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 1–11 combines my structural approach with actual ritual behavior of the Persian magi.

5. Plato, *Republic 2*, 364 BC “Beggars priests and seers come to the door of the rich and persuade them that they possess a power, given to them by the gods, to heal with sacrifices and incantations, in pleasure and celebrations, whenever either they or their ancestors committed an unholy deed; and if they wanted to damage an adversary, the same priests would with little expense hurt a just or an unjust man with spells and binding rites: they claim that they could the gods persuade to help them.”

Both products that these peddlers were selling served urgent needs, or at least so they said. The initiation rituals freed from the consequences of evil deeds that the client or one of his ancestors had performed (Plato does not expand on those consequences: they must have been either psychological troubles or punishments after death, or both); the binding spells damaged any enemy or rival (I shall come back to this). In a society where psychological troubles were not easily treated and even less often cured, and where rivalry and competition was a major form of existence (after all, we deal with Jacob Burckhardt's "agonistic Greeks"), these were no small gains to be had from private rituals.

Plato does not like these specialists and attitude underlying their rituals any more than Heraclitus did: their assumption – that powerful rituals are able even to sway the gods to help and condone unethical behavior (to forgive evil deeds and to damage a fellow human being) seemed repulsive to Plato the theologian of an ethically purified concept of divinity. And at least the binding spells had undesirable social consequences as well: they spread irrational fear among their victims, "whenever they see a magical doll made from wax or clay on the grave monument of the family or in front of the house-door".⁶ Instead of furthering social coherence and harmony (the ideal to the utopian social thinker Plato), these practices pitted citizens against each other and spread dissent and suspicion in the city.

At about the time of Plato's youth, yet another disapproving voice chimed in from a seemingly different quarter. "My own view, we hear that voice say, is that those who first attributed a sacred character to this malady were like the magicians (μάγοι), purifiers, begging priests (ἀγύραι) and quacks of our own day, men who claim great piety and superior knowledge." This is the voice of the cutting edge doctor who wrote a treatise on epilepsy, its etiology and is

6. Plato, *Laws* 11.933BE. See my "Theories of Magic in Antiquity," in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, eds. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 141 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 93–104.

therapy with the polemical title *The Sacred Disease*, *Περί ἱερῆς νόσου*, in which he debunked the then current view that epilepsy was caused by demoniac possession and therefore should be treated with ritual means, with purifications and prayers, to keep away the intruding divinity. The doctor's reason for his attack again is theological: in his cosmology, as in Plato's, gods are supremely good, at an absolute though benevolent distance to humans, and they are unable to invade human bodies or minds and thus cause mental illness. His opponents are the same as those of Plato and Heraclitus: itinerant religious professionals who, in this case, profess to heal serious disturbances by inadequate means.⁷

In classical Greece then, the *mavgoi* cover a much wider area of ritual action with their art, *mageiva*, than any modern notion would allow them. The components of this wide area (ecstatic rituals, private initiation rites, binding spells, cathartic rituals against mental disorders) all have in common that they are rejected by philosophers and doctors. This rejection has mostly theological reasons; Plato's social argument is unique but it fits the spirit of the work it comes from, the late *Laws* that show a much clearer awareness of social facts and realities than his earlier writings. These opponents of the *magoi* in their turn share not only a theology that is based on ethical standards, but they also share the social position in the Greek city: philosophers and doctors alike are almost as itinerant and marginal professionals in their cities as their opponents, the magicians and begging priests. Thus, it is in a discourse among marginals that the term magic for the first time appears – marginals with a very firm claim to higher and better knowledge about the divine than the average citizen of any Greek city. This origin of the term casts a long shadow on it, as we shall see.

7. [Hippocrates,] *On the Sacred Disease* 4.

II.

One of the ingredients of the mix which the itinerant professionals were selling (or peddling, if you prefer) was binding spells, *κατάδεσμοι* in Greek. They were put to use in many situations where individuals competed with each other and where one would desperately need means to block the competition – in business, in erotic pursuits, in sport, but also when suing or being sued in court.⁸ We have little knowledge of the ritual that was performed in classical Greece to make this act of ritual binding work, with one exception: one had to speak a spell or prayer, and one had to write the text of this spell or prayer on a lead tablet that then was deposited somewhere inside the earth; we know considerably more from late imperial Egypt through the mediation of several long magical books that were written in Egypt.⁹ In the archaeological record, these lead tablets appear for the first time in Sicily during the later part of the sixth century, and in Athens in the middle of the fifth century; about the same time our literary texts begin to mention such rituals. The lead tablets have a rather uniform appearance all over Greece, although the formula can show some local preferences and predilections: in Athens, the formula typically says: “I bind so-and-so to Hermes of the Underworld (and/or other underworldly powers such as Persephone or Hekate)”, *καταδῶ τινά*; in more clerically-minded Sicily, the texts have: “I register so-and-so with whatever underworldly divinity”, *ἀναγράφω τινά*. The scope of the ritual, in both cases, is clear: the texts remove an individual (or sometimes a group of individuals) from the care of the Olympian divinities into the realm of the underworldly powers, moving them to a status that is close to but not identical with being dead: like the dead, they will not be able to speak or walk, to witness in court, to make love or do successful business. The closeness to the dead expresses itself also in the most

8. The classification goes back to Augustus Audollent, *Defixionum Tabellae* (Paris: Albert Fontemoing, 1904), see also Christopher A. Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” *Magika Hiera. Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, eds Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink (New York; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 3–32.

9. See the material in *ThesCRA* 3.264-270.

widespread find spot of these *tabellae defixionis*, the grave. Sometimes, the tablet is pierced with a nail (more often, the iron nail did not survive: they were thus literally “nailed down”, as an Athenian text from the fourth century has it.¹⁰ Sometimes, these texts were accompanied by one or several small statuettes made of lead: they represented, more or less crudely, a man or women, naked and with their hands firmly tied behind their back. This iconography characterizes a captive, a prisoner of war or an arrested criminal: he or she has become the captive of the underworldly gods. Often, the name of the victim was inscribed on a thigh of the figure in order to prevent any misunderstanding – a ritual detail that goes all the way back to Bronze Age Mesopotamia, as do the figurines as such or their burial in graves or under the threshold of a house. Several lead figurines like this were found in the main cemetery of Athens, the Kerameikos: all date to the fifth and early fourth century BCE. Others come from many other places in the Greek world, Boeotia or Delos, or even from Italy; others again from Egypt where even statuettes made of bees was or clay could survive.¹¹ Their iconography – a naked prisoner – is identical all over the wider Greek world. In the last instance, it goes back to Pharaonic Egypt: there, it represents an outside enemy whom the pharaoh with reassuring regularity defeats and crushes; such statuettes were often buried along the borders of Egypt to keep these foreigners and enemies out.¹² Formulaic and iconographic homogeneity all over Greece and an Oriental pedigree is exactly what one would expect if the agents of these rites in Greece were itinerant professionals who easily transmitted their skill from place to place and sold their art for money, and who picked up ideas from religiously and culturally powerful neighbors.

These texts on their sheets of lead are more than the written remains of a ritual practice. They are the very recording of the spoken prayer or spell: the

10. Richard Wünsch, Appendix to *IG II/III*, no. 49

11. See *ThesCRA* 3,269 nos. 105-110.

12. Robert K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).

spell was recited when it was inscribed. As long as the tablet remained hidden and buried, the spell was supposed to work and the victim was supposed to suffer: but as soon as the written spell was found, taken out and possibly destroyed, it stopped working, and the victim was free. That is: as long as the voice recorded on the tablet remained intact, the infernal gods could listen and would grant the prayer; but once the voice stopped speaking, the spell ceased, and the victim was free again. (The same was true for the statuettes: as long as the images remained intact, they could communicate their visual message: once found and destroyed, the communication ceased and the spell was broken.)

Besides the leaden tablets with their message to the infernal gods, there were at about the same time other famous metal tablets in Greece that concerned the underworld and were found in graves, just like the lead tablets: the famous Orphic gold tablets, as their first Italian finders called them; by now, it has become clear that they belong to Dionysiac or Bacchic mysteries. We have much fewer of those (about 20 instead of several hundred), but they too reach from the fifth century BCE to the second century AD, and they too recorded a voice that conveyed a vital message.¹³ This time, the voice is a teacher's or guide's voice, and it gives instructions to a deceased person on how to act and what to say and to do in the Underworld: "When dead and arriving in the underworld, you should not drink from the first fountain lest you will forget everything, but drink from the Lake of Memory; and since access to this lake is heavily guarded, this is the password you have to say." Or: "When you arrive in the underworld, you will face the Infernal Queen and her tribunal: tell them 'I am a child of Earth and Starry Heaven' (that is: 'of divine origin')", or, on another tablet, "Say 'Dionysos personally has freed me'" – password-like information that in all cases had the same result: the dead could then

13. All the texts in Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife. Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets* (London: Routledge, 2007); see also Yannis Tzifopoulos, *Paradise Earned. The Bacchic-Orphic Gold Lamellae of Crete* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007) for the documents from Crete.

proceed to Paradise. This information – where to go in the Underworld and what to say there – is information which the bearer of the gold tablet must have received during life already, in an initiation ritual that freed him or her from the consequences of evil doing and guaranteed the entry into Paradise; but in order to make sure that this information was not forgotten once the body was dead, the initiator's voice was recorded on the tablet and carried its message along with the body. Thus, gold tablets and lead tablets are closely related, and again this should not surprise us: it is exactly these two things which the itinerant beggar-priests and seers in Plato promise, to bind an enemy and to free from evil deeds through initiation rituals. The same itinerant priest sold both types of tablets and performed both types of rituals, the binding rites that lead to lead tablets, and the Bacchic initiation rites that produced the Orphic gold tablets. Thus, the *magoi* of Heraclitus and Plato catered both for the needs of the living and those, less numerous, of the dead; the philosophers disapproved of both types of rituals.

III.

Gold tablets and lead tablets alike assist humans in the difficult business of making a success of one's existence as a human being; being dead, in this perspective, is another aspect of being-in-existence. Ritual means for helping with both were readily available in ancient societies: the Eleusinian mysteries promised wealth in this world and bliss in the other world to the initiates already according to the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*.¹⁴ The itinerant practitioners followed this attitude, and their clients took what they offered, presumably without any qualm or bad feeling: the opposing metal values in which the ritual texts were engraved, gold and lead, did not correspond to an opposition of moral values, good and bad. In fifth century Greece, ordinary people made use of both magic and initiatory cults, provided they could afford them. Plato's

14. *Hymn to Demeter* 480-489.

itinerant priests, typically, turned to the doors of the rich only, and the graves from which we have gold tablets look solidly middle-class at least.

Binding spells helped to master difficult situations, situations in which an individual saw himself or herself subject to conditions and forces that were difficult or impossible to control. At the origin of these rites were the gods: it was no lesser divinity than Aphrodite herself who gave love spells to the humans. At least this is what the poet Pindar narrates in his version of the Argonaut story in the Fourth *Pythian Ode*. When Jason, the leader of the Argonauts, arrived in Colchis, he desperately needed help, and he hoped to find it with Medea, the young and powerful daughter of the local king. Whereas other authors tell us that Aphrodite and Hera made Medea fall in love with Jason by sending Eros to do their bidding, Pindar offers a much more elaborate story. It was Jason who used an erotic spell against the unsuspecting virgin, and it was Aphrodite herself who taught Jason the art of love spells, both the words and the rituals, and she gave him the instrument used in love magic, the *inyx*.¹⁵ In Pindar's description, the *inyx* was a wheel on which the bird *inyx* was bound; when turned, the tormented bird must have given a high-pitched sound. In ritual reality, the *inyx* was a wheel that one would turn with the help of two strings: when spinning, it must have made the same high-pitched sound as the bird. The *inyx* was firmly associated with love magic. On vases, it is often Eros, the god of love, who manipulates an *inyx*, and from a pair of splendid gold earrings in the British Museum, there dangle two *erotes*, each with a *inyx* in his hands: a beautiful expression for erotic seduction female jewelry was supposed to produce, in the hope of the rich owner or, perhaps as likely, the mind of the rich donor of the jewelry.¹⁶

Jason's love-spell worked and produced not only the help he had expected, but also a marriage; it was seriously flawed, however, and after she had lost

15. Pindar, *Pythian Ode* 4.213-220.

16. British Museum, GR 1877. 9-10. 16-17, said to be from Kyme, 330-300 BC. Photograph in Dyfri Williams and Jack Ogden, *Greek Gold. Jewelry of the Classical World* (London: The British Museum, 1994), 96f. nos. 49 and 50.

some glamour, Jason dumped his barbarian princess. In the reality of Greek life, love spells regularly aim for stable marriages and are used by both genders: the material is quite impressive and ranges from the fifth century BCE to the fifth century CE. This does not mean that they were harmless, as an impressively long spell from fourth century BC Thessaly demonstrates.¹⁷ There might, after all, exist an obvious and good reason why one's own confessions of love met with deaf ears:

Of Thetima and Dionysophon I register the marriage with the underworld, as well as the marriage of all other women with him, both widows and maidens, but above all Thetima: and I entrust this spell to Makron [the dead in whose grave it was deposited] and to the *daimones*. And were I ever to dig up, unfold and read these words, only then should Dionysophon marry, not before; may he indeed not take any other woman than myself, and let me alone grow old by the side of Dionysophon, and no one else. I implore you, have pity with me, dear *daimones* [...]. Please protect this for me so that this does not happen and that Thetima miserably perishes, [...] I however become happy and blessed.

The erotic triangle is obvious, and the situation somewhat desperate: Dionysophon is about to marry Thetima, and our writer, deep in love with him, faces a bleak future. Thus, the coming wedding is dedicated to the gods of the dead which should prevent it from taking place, and the speaker then hopes all will turn well and she will get her Dionysophon. But since the spell dooms every wedding of Dionysophon, she needs a clause to make it stop again (it is no good not to know how to end magic, as any apprentice of magic knows): uncovering and unfolding the text will do the trick. One wonders whether it worked, and I also wonder whether I wish it would have worked: erotic spells have a subversive quality. Pindar did not at all approve of Jason's spell: he made Medea "forget her respect for her parents", which is bad behavior for

17. Emmanuel Voutiras, *Διονυσοφῶντος Γάμοι. Marital life and magic in fourth century Pella* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1998).

any girl. Much later, the Christian writer Arnobius clearly states that erotic spell break up marriages or seduce innocent minors.¹⁸

In a way that is similar to the vagaries of one's love life, the outcome of a trial is often difficult to foresee; court room dramas are, after all, a source of suspense and entertainment as inexhaustible as are love dramas. This is even truer when the jury has 500 members, as it did in classical Athens, or when it had the entire city as an audience, as happened in many ancient cities. Defendants had good reasons to be nervous and afraid. Again, the magician's art would become useful: a binding spell would efficiently disable the plaintiff's side (and the plaintiff could resort to a binding-spell himself, if he suspected the defendants of using it).¹⁹ Many lead tablets contain such texts, such as one of our earliest curse tablets from an early fifth-century grave in Selinus in Sicily. It belongs to a group of very early trial spells from Sicily: with the rise of democracy, some cities in the rich Greek West had an active and flourishing judicial system already at the end of the archaic age. This judicial system furthered the development both of binding spells and of rhetorics. Not only the earliest trial spells are Sicilian: the men who at about 450 BCE invented formalized rhetoric and its teaching, Teisias and Korax, came from Sicilian Syracuse, and their pupil was Gorgias from the neighboring Leontinoi who travelled widely to teach the art of persuasion – and who was fully aware of the close relationship between rhetorical language and magical language. He defended the mythical Helen against the accusation of being an adulterous woman by equaling the persuasive words of Paris to erotic magic:

18. Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes* 1.43 - a long list of the things magicians intend to do: "to foretell the future that arrive anyway, wether they want it or not; to send lethal illness to whomever they like; to break the bonds between close friends; to unlock without a key what is locked; to bind a mouth with silence; to weaken, make faster or slow down the horses of race chariots; the send the fire and raving desire of forbidden love to the wives and children of others, be they male or female".

19. See, again, Arnobius l.c. (*ora silentia vincire*, "to bind a mouth with silence").

The divinely inspired spells of speech create joy and kill grief: when the power of a spell enters into our phantasy, it charms, persuades and changes our soul in artful sorcery.²⁰

Far from accusing Paris of unlawful practices, the skilled theoretician of the powerful word explains his success by the psychology of persuasion.

The text I wanted to cite, however, is far from being rhetorically polished and charming: it works, if anything, by the power of repetition and imagery.²¹

SIDE A: I inscribe Selinontios and the tongue of Selinontios, twisted to the point of uselessness for them. And I inscribe, twisted to the point of uselessness, the tongues of the foreign witnesses of the plaintiffs.

SIDE B: I inscribe Timasoi and the tongue of Timasoi, twisted to the point of uselessness. I inscribe Turana and the tongue of Turana, twisted to the point of uselessness to all of them.

The formula is straightforward, although no divinities are invoked: the location in the cemetery, however, makes the addressee clear. And the wish could not be clearer: a person with a not in her tongue is of no great use as an advocate or a witness.

A rare inscription shows us not the spell itself but the public side of its working, and the way such spells could work in secret only.²² The text comes from the island of Delos and was inscribed in about 260 BCE. Its hero is the priest of the Egyptian god Sarapis, Apollonios – the grandson of the Egyptian priest, Apollonios the Elder, who had brought the cult to the island. This first Apollonios was yet another of these itinerant religious entrepreneurs with an international

20. Gorgias, *Helen* 10.

21. Maria del Amor López Jimeno, *Las tabellae defixionum de la Sicilia griega*. *Classical und Byzantine Monographs* 22 (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1991), 72-79 and 228, no. 10; John G. Gager, ed., *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), 141 no. 51.

22. Text and commentary: Helmut Engelmann, *The Delian Aretalogy of Sarapis*. *Études Préliminaires aux Religions Orientales dans l'Empire Romain* 44 (Leiden: Brill, 1975).

radius of action: although he had grown up in Memphis in Egypt, he chose Delos as the place for his activities because the island was the hub of sea traffic in the Eastern Mediterranean and had therefore an international community of merchants and ship owners from all over the Mediterranean to cater for. Such an ambulatory crowd promised to be especially interested in religious offers that were not firmly rooted in the tradition of one city only. His grandson, the younger Apollonios, expanded the cult that he had inherited through his father: he decided to buy land in order to build a proper temple (before, the cult took place in a room of the priest's house), and he found a vacant lot in an excellent location of the town, for a very reasonable price. So he made his plans public – and this started his troubles: the neighbors did not want a foreign sanctuary in what must have been a mix of residential and quiet commercial area. They sued Apollonios, and he had to stand trial. He was nervous and afraid: but in the night before the trial, the god appeared to him in a dream and comforted him. The trial itself attracted a huge crowd. When Apollonios' accusers were to bring forward their accusation, lo and behold! they could not speak anymore: the god had taken away their voices. Without spoken accusation, however, there could be no trial: the god had shown his power, and his priest got his way.

To the Delian public, Apollonios' opponents must have appeared as victims of a binding spell. We can assume that they suspected that Apollonios or one of his friends had cast this spell; but this was not necessarily a bad thing. The worshipers of Sarapis, on the other hand, expected their god to intervene in the way he did. Egyptian gods were famous for their magical power, and Isis in particular, the consort of Sarapis in many temples throughout the Greek and Roman world, was the most powerful sorceress in the Egyptian pantheon. What matters for the modern interpreter is the insight that in this religious system divine intervention could express itself in the very same form that the result of a binding spell would take. Both the worshipers and the victims regarded this as proving the power of Sarapis: it enhanced his' fame, but did not shed a bad light on him. The Greek word for such a miraculous intervention, after all, is *ajrethv*, 'virtue': something attributed to the most outstanding beings only.

An athletic or literary contest is as stressful as a trial, at least for the performers. As in the cases of erotic spells and trial spells, agonistic spells are well attested throughout antiquity, as long as there were contests. They too were the work of religious entrepreneurs. One of them becomes visible to us at the moment when his commercial offer is rejected by a scrupulous man, none other than the later Christian bishop Augustine. When, in the 370s, young Augustine was teaching rhetoric (either in Thagaste or in Carthage), he also participated in literary contests (*theatrici carminis certamen*) that were held in the theater: he was ambitious and, we assume, very good. Before such a performance a *haruspex* (a seer and sorcerer, Augustine's equivalent of Plato's 'seers and begging priests') accosted him and asked how much he would be willing to pay for a victory. Augustine rejected the offer because it involved an animal sacrifice and he abhorred the idea that a living creature would have to die for his sake.²³

In Augustine's age, the most exciting contests were not recitations, but the horse races: they were drawing huge crowds and often enough provoked as many riots as modern soccer games. Since successful charioteers could rise from lowly beginnings to impressive social standing (not unlike modern pop singers and soccer stars), the masses identified with them and vicariously projected their social hopes on them: the prestige of the star charioteer was their prestige. And often enough, supporters were willing to support their champion not only by cheering but also by charming: scores of lengthy binding spell were found in the substructions of circus buildings and hippodromes, from Beirut to Carthage and Rome. They could be extremely elaborate and detailed, such as this text from third century CE Carthage:²⁴

23. Aug. *Conf.* 4.2.3; *theatrici carminis certamen* means the composition and recitation of a piece of dramatic verse. Place and date are unclear, since book IV does not follow a strict chronological order.

24. Audollent (above note 9) no. 237; Gager (above note 22) 60 no. 9 (whose translation I follow with minor changes).

I invoke you, spirit of the untimely dead, whoever you are, by the mighty names SALBATHAL AUTHGEROTABAL BASUTHATEO ALEO SAMABETHOR. Bind the horses whose names and image on this piece I entrust to you: of the Reds Silvanus, Servator, Lues, Zephyrus, Blandus, Imbraius, Dives, Mariscus, Rapidus, Oriens, Arbustus; of the Blues Imminens, Dignus, Linon, Paezon, Chryspaspis, Argutus, Diresor, Frugifer, Euphrates, Sanctus, Aethiops, Praeclarus. Bind their running, their power, their soul, their onrush, their speed. Take away their victory, entangle their feet, hinder them, hobble them, so that tomorrow in the hippodrome they are unable to run or walk or win or go out of the starter gates or advance on the racecourse and track: may they fall with their drivers, Euprepes son of Thelesphorus, Gentius, Felix, Dionysios and Lamuros. [...] Bind their hands, take away their victory, their exit, their sight, so that they are unable to see their rivals, and snatch them up from their chariots and twist them to the ground, so that they alone fall, dragged along all over the hippodrome, especially at the turning points, with damage to their body, with the horses whom they drive. Now, quickly!

This long text invokes a demon with all his secret names: you had to know the names as proof of your power and knowledge, otherwise the demon might not obey). The text describes in all unpleasant detail what the client of the sorcerer expects; and it does not come as a surprise when we learn that these texts are our best source for ancient horse names (our text addresses five teams with five times four horses, with three more on the red side presumably being held in reserve). Often enough, the client must have felt that his money was well spent: accidents were common, and not the least at the narrow turning point where the crowded field was likely to crash into each other.

IV.

Texts like these make the point of view of the magician's client amply clear: any opponent – in love, in the court, in the hippodrome – had to be crushed, at least temporarily; if this involved bodily damage as in the race spells, that was the charioteer's occupational risk. Still, one has to keep in mind that these

spells only rarely wish for the death of an opponent: if anything, spells that contain death wishes appear only during the Imperial Age.

If mishap and accidents are the result of binding spells, there is a flip side to it: a spell could also be used to explain and excuse mishap and failure. If young Augustine had lost the recitation contest, would not even he have accused his winning opponent of using the services that he himself had refused? Such a mechanism is well-known from many societies, not the least from the Ancient Near East; Greece and Rome are by no means immune to it.

Not everybody took this seriously, however. In order to work, such an excuse presupposes a firm belief in the working of spells, and should not have a convincing alternative explanation. Cicero tells the story of an older contemporary of his, the orator C. Scribonius Curio. In a trial where he represented the plaintiff against a woman whom Cicero defended, Curio was scheduled to give the final speech. But when his turn came, he had forgotten everything and could only mutter rather incoherent sentences, and one has to assume that he lost his case. He blamed the defendant for this: she had used a binding spell against him. The problem with this excuse was that his bad memory was proverbial all over town: not many people believed his story, and at least Cicero still laughed thirty years later.²⁵

In other cases, an accusation of magic really must have helped to save face. In the middle of a prosperous career as an orator and professor, the fourth century rhetor Libanios suddenly lost his voice and suffered from terrible headaches; he had to cancel public appearances and send his students home. His friends immediately suspected sorcery at work: the famous orator had enough envious colleagues who might have wished to put him out of action through a nice binding spell. They had his lecture room thoroughly searched, and they found what they were looking for: in one of the walls, they detected a dried out chameleon whose one leg was broken off and shoved into

25. Cicero, *Brutus* 217.

its mouth – an incontrovertible sign of a binding spell. They showed the animal to the professor (and then presumably burned it): and he found his voice, his head-ache cleared, and he taught again.²⁶ The accusation of sorcery not only explained what we would have termed a mid-life crisis and saved Libanios' face, it also helped him self recover: once the transmitter of the evil power was found and destroyed, he had a handle on his problems and could recover from them.

Late antique Christians accepted this same mechanism with about the same result. In his life of saint Hilarion, Jerome – the Christian contemporary of Libanios – tells the following story that took place in Gaza.²⁷ A well-to-do family destined her adolescent daughter to the service of God, made her, as the term was, a 'Virgin of God'. For a while, all was well; but then, the scandal happened. One day, the girl threw off her veil and rushed through the streets of Gaza, disheveled and shouting the name of a particular young man who was living close by – a rather embarrassing way of conduct for a well-bread girl destined to the service of the Lord. Saint Hilarion was called in, and he could explain what had happened: the girl was possessed, and possession was the result of a love spell. The saint talked to the Egyptian demon who possessed the girl: the demon gave the story away. The young neighbor had fallen in love with the girl; but when his courtship did not succeed (for obvious reasons), he resorted to other means: he went to Egypt and sought training as a magician in the temple of Asclepius of Memphis. Well-trained, he came back and cast a love spell on the girl, with the result everyone could see and hear. The saint had her parents dig up the front door of their house: under the threshold, they found a copper tablet with an incised spell. It was removed (and presumably destroyed); the saint talked the demon into returning to Egypt and healed the girl, saving her reputation and that of her family.

26. Libanios, *Oration 1 (Autobiography)*, 247f.

27. Jerome, *Life of Hilarion* 10.

Both Libanios and Jerome believed what had happened: maybe Cicero's contemporaries were more skeptical than most people in the ancient world. Whereas the legal status of magic and sorcery is hazy in ancient Greece,²⁸ in Rome, accusations of magic were no laughing matter, although their legal status is something of a problem to modern scholars. Greek states usually did not care overmuch about spells if they did not involve actual killing: the term *farmakeiva* that was used in some legal documents covered both poisoning and sorcery. The Roman Twelve Tablets forbade to transfer one's neighbor's harvest unto one's own fields which obviously could unobtrusively be done only with magical spells – but here too, the law did not punish sorcery as such but the forbidden and sneaky transfer of material goods: to transfer one's neighbors harvest unto one's own field was regarded as theft, with or without the use of spells. A later law sponsored by the dictator L. Cornelius Sulla in 78 BCE punished murder in its two manifestations: open violence that left visible wounds, or sneaky attack the left none; as with Greek *farmakeiva*, one of the sneaky ways was the use of poison, the other one of sorcery. Again, it is not sorcery as such that provoked legislation, but murder as the result of sorcery. Under the emperors, finally, the accusation of using binding spells could result in a trial of lese-majesty if directed against the emperor or his family: but even then, such an accusation was usually an accessory to other accusations that were better covered by an existing law. Only the Christian emperors of the fourth century turned sorcery – not only its actual performance but even the mere possession of magical books – into a crime that could result in banishment or execution. Sorcery, to them, was closely related with divination, the foretelling of the future: both involved tapping a superhuman source of knowledge and raised the claim that humans could share information with the gods.²⁹

28. On a famous trial in 4th cent. BCE Athens, see Derek Collins, "Theoris of Lemnos and the Criminalization of Magic in Fourth-Century Athens," *Classical Quarterly* 51 (2001), 477-493; in the legal treatment in general Collins (above note 1) 132-165.

29. On the legal treatment of magic and witchcraft in Rome see especially James B. Rives, "Magic in the XII Tables Revisited," *The Classical Journal* 52 (2002), 270-290; Detlef

A famous case of sorcery accusations in the early empire is the death of the young prince Germanicus; many regarded him as the natural successor of Tiberius. On Oct. 10, 19 CE Germanicus died in Antioch in Syria under rather suspicious circumstances at the age of 34. He had been sent to Syria as a special envoy of the emperor and was immediately involved in an interminable turf war with the governor as to the exact nature of his powers, and some whispered that the popular prince had provoked the emperor's ire and fears: Tiberius was notoriously nervous about potential rivals. When Germanicus suddenly fell ill and died after a few days, suspicion foul play was quickly suspected: some said the governor and his wife had poisoned him, others even suspected that they had used sorcery or both. The accusation of poisoning was disproved by the public exposition of the naked corpse that showed no discoloration; as to sorcery, the family had his bedroom dug up. And they found their suspicions justified: between the walls and under the floor, there were lead tablets with Germanicus' name and the remains of unspeakable sacrifices. This latter information comes from the Memoirs of his wife Agrippina which she published many years later. The emperor put the governor and his wife on trial before the senate. The wife was freed (some said by intercession of Livia, Tiberius' mother), the husband committed suicide before the end of the trial; it is unclear whether he did so on imperial advice, as often happened. The published minutes of the senate hearings have been recently found in Spain: they make clear that neither the governor nor his wife were accused of sorcery, but that he was accused of high treason: it was the acrimonious turf war that doomed the governor since the senate regarded his resistance as resistance to

Liebs, "Strafprozesse Wegen Zauberei. Magie und Politisches Kalkül in der Römischen Geschichte," *Grosse Prozesse der Römischen Antike*, eds. Ulrich Manthe and Jürgen von Ungern-Sternberg (München: Beck, 1997), 146–158; Marie Theres Fögen, "Balsamon on Magic. From Roman Secular Law to Byzantine Canon Law," in: *Byzantine Magic*, ed. Henry Maguire (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1995), 99–115; C. Castello, "Cenni sulla repressione del reato di magia dagli inizi del principato fino a Costanzo II," in: *Villò Convegno Internazionale dell'Accademia Romanistica Costantiniana*, eds. G. Crifó and S. Giglio (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Internazionali, 1991), 665–692.

imperial orders. An accusation of magic, again, was not thought legally helpful in such a trial.³⁰

But this case and the other cases show how an accusation of magic would start. The sudden failure of a professional is a typical trigger situation * an attorney who forgets his peroration, a professor who cancels all his classes, a religious virgin who screams for sex are all highly embarrassing; the accusation of magic puts the blame away from the person who acts in an embarrassing way, unto someone else who used a superior but evil power. An accusation of magic thus saves one's face. Another typical trigger situation is the one we meet in the case of Germanicus' death: a young prince died unexpectedly, amidst political and personal tensions. An accusation of magic explained the otherwise unexplainable and thus helped the bereft survivors to cope and to focus on the source of evil: not by chance the Senate minutes do not talk about magic, but Tacitus' account, and this account might go back to the Memoirs of Agrippina, Germanicus' daughter. A small but significant number of grave inscriptions from Greece and Rome deal with the same situation in the same way.³¹ A sudden death – of a child, of a young and freshly wed woman, of a vigorous young man – is seen as the result of an evil spell: this gives a reason to death, and allows people even to seek out the sorcerer to take revenge. The same mechanism worked on the larger level of a city to explain a catastrophe. When, in the early fourth century CE, the annual winds did not come and with it the fleet that was supposed to bring grain to Constantinople, the hungry population grew restive and riotous; food riots, after all, were a reality of ancient city life. In order to diffuse the situation, an advisor close to the

30. The story in Tacitus, *Annals* 2.69; the trial minutes Werner Eck, Antonio Caballos, and Fernando Fernández, *Das Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre*. Vestigia 48 (Munich: Beck, 1996); see also the special issue of *American Journal of Philology* 120 (1999) in this text, and Christopher S. Mackay, "Questiones Pisonianae. Procedural and Chronological Notes on the S.C. de Cn. Pisone Patre," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 101 (2003), 311-370.

31. The inscriptions are collected in Fritz Graf, "Untimely Death, Witchcraft, and Divine Vengeance. A Reasoned Epigraphical Catalog," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 162 (2007), 139-150.

emperor Constantine accused Sopater, a philosopher who had won the emperor's favors: his spells, the accuser claimed, had bound the winds. Sopater fell from grace and was executed.³² The accusation had successfully channeled popular unrest and satisfied it with a victim; the accuser, Ablabios, had also efficiently removed a competitor for the emperor's favors. When, 200 years earlier, an epidemic struck a city in Asia Minor, the population again suspected a sorcerer at work. They sent a delegation to Apollo's oracle, and the god confirmed the suspicion. At the same time, he prevented a witch-hunt. He prescribed to celebrate an elaborate festival in order to annihilate the magic: a statue of Ephesian Artemis was to be asked for in her town; it should be consecrated in a local temple. The golden image had burning torches in her hand; the flames together with the real torches used during the nocturnal rites would miraculously melt the hidden wax figurines that had caused the epidemics. There was no need to seek out a sorcerer: the entire energy of the city was channeled upon performing the new festival.³³

CONCLUSION

The special brand of rituals labeled as magical in Greece and Rome thus served many purposes in Greek and Roman life. As binding spells, these rites helped to channel and combat anxiety and frustration in situations of uncertainty and heightened competition. As accusations of magic, they gave a handle on unexpected and calamitous events that otherwise would unsettle too

32. Eunapius, *Lives of the Sophists* 6.2.9-11.

33. The oracle in Reinhold Merkelbach and Joseph Stauber, "Die Orakel des Apollon von Klaros," *Epigraphica Anatolica* 27 (1996), 25 no.11, again in: Reinhold Merkelbach, *Philologica. Ausgewählte Kleine Schriften* (Stuttgart and Leipzig: Teubner, 1997), 184-186. On the series of Clarian oracles connected with such an epidemic, see Zsuzsanna Várhelyi, "Magic, Religion, and Syncretism at the Oracle of Claros," *Between Magic and Religion. Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and Society*, eds. Sulochana R. Asirvathan, Corinne Ondine Pache, and John Watrous (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001) 13-31.

much, they helped to save face in social failures, and sometimes an accusation of magic proved to be an efficient weapon when dealing with a political enemy. Although these functions were present throughout antiquity, the rituals involved remained very fluid and ever-changing; its performers, the itinerant religious specialists known already to Plato, adapted their offers to a changing market. When the term magic was first used by its detractors, the philosophical theologians and doctors of classical Greece, it meant binding spells as well as private initiatory rites and cathartic healing rites; over time, healing rites and initiation rites disappeared while binding spells became central. Greek and Roman law did not prosecute magic as such, which must have contributed to the vagueness of the concept: usually, the law prosecuted theft, murder and lese-majesty regardless whether they did result from spells or from any other criminal action. Things changed only with the Christian emperors: from Constantine onwards, magic was prosecuted – not because it had become more frequent, but because in a Christian world the manipulation of the divine power and the access to divine wisdom had become the monopoly of the clerics on whom the rulers since Constantine heavily relied; private religious entrepreneurs had no place anymore in this society, and magic often meant no less than the performance of non-Christian rituals. This explains why the very same imperial laws also prohibit divination, the art of foretelling the future through tapping into divine knowledge.³⁴ In this new understanding, even healing rites became suspicious; before the Christian era, nobody ever had objected to them, with the exception of the learned doctor of the Hippocratic *On the Sacred Disease*. From Homer onwards, incantations and spells were used to staunch blood, to heal headaches, toothaches and chronic fevers on which ancient medicine had a tenuous hold at best, and nobody was to detract this as evil magic; authors such as Cato or Pliny described and recommended what we would call magical cures.³⁵ But Augustine and his fellow bishops

34. See the texts collected in chapter 19.16 of the Theodosian Code.

35. E.g. Cato, *On Agriculture* 160; Pliny, *Natural History* bk. 30.

began to speak out against calling in a ritual healer in cases like this: a doctor should be called, and in extreme cases an ascetic or priest who could perform an exorcism or call upon God to perform a miracle: again, the private religious entrepreneur had to yield to Church and State. The only exception seem to weather rituals: in about 460 BCE, the doctor, philosopher and healer Empedocles claimed to be able to teach how to call down rain or the stop a flood or a storm, and his student Gorgias saw him even perform such acts – this was not magic but a useful competence of a sought-after professional.³⁶ Almost eight centuries later, the emperor Constantine explicitly excepted weather spells for the protection of the crops from his prohibition of magic: presumably his bishops objected to them as much as they objected to divination and healing rites.³⁷ This legal finessing laid the groundwork for the later differentiation between black and white magic and, in the long run, for our concept of what magic is and that differs in so many respects from what the Greeks thought it was when they coined the term in the time of Heraclitus.

ABBREVIATIONS

ThesCRA

Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum

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36. Empedocles, DK 31 F 111; Gorgias in Diog. Laert. 8.59.

37. *Codex Theodosianus* 9.16.3.

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