

BLACKWELL ✦ ANCIENT ✦ RELIGIONS



MAGIC IN THE ANCIENT GREEK WORLD

DEREK COLLINS

 Blackwell
Publishing

Magic in the Ancient Greek World

Blackwell Ancient Religions

Ancient religious practice and belief are at once fascinating and alien for twenty-first-century readers. There was no Bible, no creed, no fixed set of beliefs. Rather, ancient religion was characterized by extraordinary diversity in belief and ritual.

This distance means that modern readers need a guide to ancient religious experience. Written by experts, the books in this series provide accessible introductions to this central aspect of the ancient world.

Published

Magic in the Ancient Greek World
Derek Collins

Religion in the Roman Empire
James B. Rives

Ancient Greek Religion
Jon D. Mikalson

Forthcoming

Religion of the Roman Republic
Christopher McDonough and Lora Holland

Death, Burial and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt
Steven Snape

Ancient Greek Divination
Sarah Iles Johnston

Magic in the Ancient Greek World

Derek Collins

 **Blackwell**
Publishing

© 2008 by Derek Collins

BLACKWELL PUBLISHING

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK

550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

The right of Derek Collins to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book are trade names, service marks, trademarks, or registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publisher is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold on the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering professional services. If professional advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

First published 2008 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2008

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Collins, Derek.

Magic in the ancient Greek world / Derek Collins.

p. cm. — (Blackwell ancient religions)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-3238-1 (hardcover: alk. paper)—ISBN 978-1-4051-3239-8 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Magic, Greek. I. Title.

BF1591.C57 2008

133.4'30938—dc22

2007027073

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 9.75/12.5pt Utopia

by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Printed and bound in Singapore

by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

For further information on

Blackwell Publishing, visit our website at

www.blackwellpublishing.com

Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Abbreviations	ix
Introduction	xi
1 Magic: What Is It and How Does It Work?	1
Frazer and Tylor	3
Malinowski	5
Magic as Communication	5
Lévy-Bruhl	7
Evans-Pritchard	11
Sympathetic Magic	14
Magic and the Extended Person	16
Magic and Analogy	17
Beyond Frazer	20
Tambiah and Persuasive Magic	21
Conclusion	24
2 A Framework for Greek Magic	27
Magic and the Gods	27
Divinity and Nature	31
The Hippocratics: Magic, Divination, and Epilepsy	33
Plato and Greek Psychology	42
Magic and Causality	44
Greek Magicians	49
<i>Magoi</i>	54
Gorgias, <i>Mageia</i> and <i>Goēteia</i>	58
Other Magical Terms	60
Conclusion	62

3	Binding Magic and Erotic Figurines	64
	Binding the Gods	67
	Divine Agents	69
	'Characters'	73
	Body Parts and Health	78
	Erotic Magic	88
	Figurines	92
	<i>Erôtes</i>	97
4	Homeric Incantations	104
	Pythagoras and Empedocles	105
	The Mechanics of Homeric Incantations	108
	Obstetrics and Gynecology	109
	Verse Combinations and the Power of Metaphor	114
	Intoxication, Choking, and Gout	118
	Incantations and Divination	122
	Neoplatonic Theurgy and Homer	125
	Conclusion	131
5	Magic in Greek and Roman Law	132
	Magic in Greek Law and Legal Imagination	133
	Trials for Erotic Magic	135
	Theoris, the Lemnian Witch	136
	Plato's Laws Against Magic	139
	Magic in Roman Law and Legal History	141
	The Twelve Tables	142
	The <i>Lex Cornelia</i>	145
	<i>Magia</i> and <i>Maleficium</i> : Magic and Witchcraft	148
	Apuleius the Magus	150
	The <i>Opinions</i> of Paulus and Later Law Codes	159
	<i>Interpretationes Christianae</i>	162
	The Medieval Inheritance	164
6	Conclusion	166
	Notes	170
	Select Bibliography	191
	Index	198

Acknowledgments

It is a pleasure to thank those who have contributed in large and small ways to the development of this book. I will never remember everyone, for which I apologize in advance. But in particular I would like to thank Jan Bremmer, Radcliffe Edmonds III, Christopher Faraone, Michael Gagarin, Fritz Graf, Albert Henrichs, Richard Janko, Sarah Iles Johnston, Gregory Nagy, C. Robert Phillips III, William Race, and James Rives. Several of these scholars were not involved directly in the preparation of this book, but over the years have been involved either in helping me to publish my earlier research on Greek magic, or have in other ways generously lent their time and knowledge. In no way should any of these colleagues be held responsible for any errors or imperfections in this book.

Various portions of the research presented here began their life as lectures. I cannot name here all of the participants in those lectures whose stimulating comments helped me to sharpen my views, and correct my errors, so I will content myself by thanking their institutions. They include: Bryn Mawr College, the University of Chicago, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the University of Michigan and its Institute for the Humanities, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ohio State University, and Yale University. In 2003–4, I was a Junior Fellow at the Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, DC, during which time I completed a substantial part of the research for this book. I would like to thank the Director and Staff for their tireless support, and the University of Michigan for granting me a leave during that academic year.

I owe a separate acknowledgment to the two anonymous readers of the original manuscript provided by Blackwell Publishing. They furnished me with astute and penetrating criticism, which has only helped to strengthen the final version. I am also especially indebted to Al Bertrand at Blackwell. The impetus for this book began with Al, over a cup of

coffee at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 2003. Were it not for his suggestion, and his patience over the intervening years, the book would not have seen the light of day.

Finally, I dedicate this book to my parents and my sons, Adam and Bryan Collins, who still cannot quite believe that their father *studies* magic as opposed to practicing it. Boys, may you never lose that sense of wonder.

Abbreviations

<i>AJP</i>	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i> (Berlin, 1972–)
<i>ARW</i>	<i>Archiv für Religionswissenschaft</i>
<i>CA</i>	<i>Classical Antiquity</i>
<i>CML</i>	<i>Corpus Medicorum Latinorum</i>
<i>CQ</i>	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
<i>DT</i>	A. Audollent, <i>Defixionum tabellae</i> (Paris, 1904)
<i>DTA</i>	R. Wünsch, <i>Defixionum tabellae atticae, Inscriptiones Graecae</i> 3.3 (Berlin, 1897)
<i>FGrH</i>	F. Jacoby, <i>Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i> (Berlin, 1923–)
<i>GRBS</i>	<i>Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies</i>
<i>HThR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>IG</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i> (Berlin, 1873–present)
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
<i>LSJ</i>	Liddell, Scott, Jones et al., eds., <i>A Greek–English Lexicon</i> (9th edition, with revised Supplement, Oxford, 1996)
<i>MD</i>	<i>Materiali e Discussioni</i>
<i>MDAI</i>	<i>Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts</i> (Athenische Abteilung)
<i>OLD</i>	P. G. W. Glare, ed., <i>Oxford Latin Dictionary</i> (Oxford, 1996)
<i>PG</i>	J. P. Migne, <i>Patrologia Graeca</i> (Paris, 1857–89)
<i>PGM</i>	K. Preisendanz and A. Henrichs, eds., <i>Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri</i> (2nd edition, Stuttgart, 1973–74)
<i>RE</i>	A. Pauly and G. Wissowa, eds., <i>Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> (Stuttgart, 1894–)
<i>REG</i>	<i>Revue des Études Grecques</i>

<i>RhM</i>	<i>Rheinisches Museum für Philologie</i>
<i>SGD</i>	D. Jordan, "A Survey of Greek Defixiones not Included in the Special Corpora," <i>GRBS</i> 26 (1985): 151–97
<i>TAPA</i>	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association</i>
<i>ThesCRA</i>	<i>Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum</i>
<i>ZPE</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>

Introduction

Something of the vitality and vibrancy in the study of ancient Greek magic can be found in the works that have appeared over the last two decades, and there is no end to the enthusiasm in sight.¹ As might be expected from a burgeoning field, excellent books and articles have been written on everything from the history of the term ‘magic’ to the range of Greek magical practices attested from Homer down to late antiquity. The present study seeks to contribute to the discussion in a way that is both accessible to non-specialists and challenging to specialists. Thus my aim in writing this book is twofold: first, it seeks to introduce non-specialists to areas of Greek magic with which they may not be familiar, and to convey an appreciation for its conceptual and practical complexity; second, each chapter aims to cover both the high points of scholarly consensus and to offer new interpretive frameworks for understanding select Greek magical practices. Not every type of Greek magic is treated – notably, amulets, although the study of amulets could be assimilated easily to one or another of the interpretive frameworks offered here. Nor are literary depictions of magical activity treated here in any great depth. Be that as it may, each chapter is meant to be readable and engaging – hence I have minimized the use of Greek and Latin and either translated or provided translations of all texts – and at the same time each chapter ventilates a definite argument for interpretation.

One of the longest-running debates in anthropology and the history of magic concerns the definition of ‘magic’ itself. Despite the lively and at times brilliant contributions to this debate, it will become evident already in the first chapter of this book that I think that debate is largely irrelevant, at least to the extent that it focuses on defining the meaning of the modern term ‘magic’, whether it be in opposition to science, technology, religion, or some other term. Ancient Greek terms for ‘magic’, including

Greek μάγος and the Latin terms *magus*, *magicus*, from which our modern term ‘magic’ itself derives, do have an interesting and culturally diverse history, which we will examine in some depth. But as I hope to establish early on, a focus on particular historically attested practices is a more productive way to explore ancient behavior, and doing so often draws into question what to earlier generations of scholars had seemed clearly to be, for instance, either magic or religion. From the point of view of this book, such a distinction is largely effete.

The heart of this book contains five chapters that consider the methodological approaches to magic in anthropology; the development of Greek magic in the classical period; binding magic, curse tablets, and erotic spells, including the use of figurines; incantations derived from Homeric poetry in late antiquity; and the long history of Greek and Roman legislation against magic reaching into the early Middle Ages. A treatment of Roman laws on magic may seem out of place in a book on Greek magic, except that the Romans inherited most forms of Greek magic and in their laws continued to seek Greek precedents to refine Roman magical terms. On more than one occasion in this book we will extend our study into the medieval period – naturally, because Roman law served as the basis for prosecuting magic in the Middle Ages, and the practices that were prohibited more often than not were essentially Greek in character. More rarely, we shall make excursions into the early modern period, if only to highlight the commanding place which Greek, and subsequently Roman, magical concepts and practices held for later Europeans.

In chapter 1, I offer a history of anthropological theories of magical behavior, from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, which derive for the most part from studies of non-Greek cultures. This chapter is required reading in order to make sense of my interpretations of the Greek material. Rather than a mere survey of anthropological approaches to magic, instead I outline key concepts of sympathy, analogy, agency, causality, and participation which inform my analyses of particular Greek magical practices. At the same time, by tracing the main approaches to magic in anthropology, I show where false steps were made and where underlying assumptions misled scholars to ask the wrong kinds of questions about magic. Every reader of this book will bring assumptions to the table about what magic means – and many of these I hope to explode in chapter 1 with the help of anthropology, starting with the nature of belief in magic itself.

In chapter 2, I outline a framework for understanding ancient Greek magic. Here we explore the development of Greek concepts of magic in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, and their underlying basis in causal relationships between the mortal and divine worlds. Next I briefly survey the

individuals most associated with magical practice, from Persian priests to itinerant ritual specialists for hire, and finally review the most common magical practices associated with these individuals. New arguments are advanced that Gorgias, who is the first to use the Greek term *mageia*, understood ‘magic’ to be essentially purificatory in character, in line with Empedocles and the Hippocratic physicians. Moreover, I argue that the Hippocratic author of *On the Sacred Disease*, who offers the most strident attack against ‘magicians’, misunderstood the relationship between his own subject matter, epilepsy, and magic. Instead, I demonstrate that epilepsy could be caused by magical binding, making the remedies offered by the notorious itinerant specialists peculiarly apt.

In chapter 3, I survey the varieties of binding magic, with a particular eye toward its development in curse tablets or *defixiones*, and erotic magic and figurines. Binding the gods in Greek myth is offered as a parallel to human binding, and the argument is made that binding produces a disability in its victim which inverts Greek notions of physical health. The accumulation of body parts in curse tablets is contrasted with the singling out of body parts in the Greek and Roman practice of manufacturing terracotta votives, which were deposited in temples and other sacred sites. Both practices incorporate an extensible notion of the body, which can be collapsed or distributed in time and space as needed. Examples of binding magic used in erotic spells are then discussed, which leads to a treatment of figurines in Greek magic generally, and in erotic magic in particular. I argue that magical figurines have to be situated within a broader understanding of Greek attitudes toward statuary – since figurines are tiny statues – that view them as social agents which exhibit some, but not all, human attributes. A discussion of Greek and Greco-Egyptian examples of animating Eros figurines to attract a beloved, with some attention paid to the theurgic animation of figurines within Neoplatonism, serves as a model of social agency and concludes the chapter.

In chapter 4, I explore the late antique phenomenon of using Homeric verses as incantations. Incantations (*epōidai*) have a long history in Greek magic, starting with references to their use within Homeric poetry itself. But between the first and fourth centuries CE in Greco-Roman Egypt we find that individual verses are used, sometimes by themselves, sometimes with accompanying rituals, to heal specific ailments or to engender specific changes in their users. The principles by which verses were selected and why are exposed, and attention is given to both prevailing medical and popularly understood theories of ailment to illustrate why certain verses were chosen over others. The practice of using Homeric verses for incantations is then situated within late antique Neoplatonism and theurgy, which I argue provides the most cogent rationale for why

Homeric poetry, and not the poetry of other prominent Greek (or Roman) poets, became the exemplary source for incantations.

In chapter 5, I explore the history of Greek and Roman legislation against magic. This chapter is the most extensive chronologically, beginning with Greek and especially Athenian laws against poisoning and magic as we can reconstruct them from real and hypothetical cases, and as they were envisioned in Plato's ideal republic. From here we move to a consideration of the Roman Twelve Tables and especially to the *Cornelian law on assassins and poisoners* as enacted by Sulla in 81 BCE. This law casts a disconcertingly long shadow over later Roman legislation against magic well into the sixth century CE. I examine several criminal cases for magic that were tried under the Cornelian law, with an in-depth examination of the trial of Apuleius of Madaura in 158/9 CE – a case that continued to puzzle commentators well into the sixteenth century, as it does to this day. We end with a review of fifth- and sixth-century legal positions taken with regard to magic in the *Theodosian Code* and Justinian's *Digest*, respectively, with a view toward the impact of the *Digest* on continental European legislation against magic in the Middle Ages.

Long introductions bore me to tears, and continuing further would tend to spoil the pleasure of discovery that I hope this book holds. A short conclusion at the end of each chapter summarizes the main points, and the book concludes with a brief, overarching summary in chapter 6 that offers some methodological considerations for future research.

Magic: What Is It and How Does It Work?



The two questions in the chapter title above are perhaps the most common ones asked by students of the history of magic. They are also arguably the two most difficult questions to answer, although I would venture to suggest that the first is easier to answer than the second. This is the case because in any given culture at any given time there is often a loose, notional consensus about what magic is, as well as who practices it. In the history of magic from Greek and Roman antiquity to the early Middle Ages, there were crucial shifts in the understanding of how magic worked, which ultimately resulted in the bifurcation of magic into a natural and demonic counterpart.¹ These were the only two available theories of magical operation from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, according to which magical properties were either inherent in natural objects, such as gems and plants, or magic was accomplished through the intercession of demons.² But these theories were formulated by Church Fathers and theologians, as well as the occasional late antique dabbler, who were largely outside the mainstream practice of magic. If one were in the position to query magical practitioners themselves about how their magic worked, on the evidence of Greek antiquity alone I doubt there would have been much consensus. In fact, I am certain that all but a few magical practitioners would have been dumbfounded by such a question. Such things were understood, and the written record with rare exceptions leaves virtually no trace of any discussion by magical practitioners themselves of how magic worked. What was discussed openly were the claims made by certain magical practitioners about what problems they were capable of solving. What was not open to question, and therefore prompted no discussion, was a world view in which magic, even if disproved in the case of a particular individual, remained possible.

To understand what magic is and how it worked in Greece therefore requires us to extend our inquiry beyond the ancient written and material record and to incorporate other models of behavior, derived principally from perhaps the most productive academic field in magic, anthropology, because the material record is insufficient in itself. It is important to recognize that our understanding of ancient magic begins, but does not end, with the close examination of texts and objects. Yet magic also incorporated ritual behavior, which is all too often not directly described for us. However, it would severely understate the fullness of a magical event if no attempt were made to situate a magical object in its performative context, or a plausible ritual context derived from comparative evidence. I propose to approach these problems in an unorthodox way. Rather than rehearsing every theory of magic available in antiquity and those offered by anthropologists, instead I want to emphasize those approaches that help us to understand magic in particular instances. Some general characterizations are inevitable. But simply put, there is no one way to understand all magic across all instances even for one culture at one historical moment. Magic is a busy intersection, to borrow from a classic anthropological statement about ritual, and as such there are always different religious, social, cultural, and performative routes that have to be pursued in explaining it. We shall have many opportunities in what follows to observe cross-currents of ancient culture converging in the practice of magic.

Before we can define ancient Greek magic, let us begin the discussion by assuming that one does not believe it exists or that it has ever existed. Why any person with a nasty fishbone stuck in his throat, possibly gasping for air, would believe that by virtue of saying a verse of poetry the bone would come out makes no sense. Why anyone would mold a figurine out of clay or wax and stick needles into its eyes, mouth, and breast – as a means to attract, but not permanently harm, a beloved – should, one would think, be consigned to the trash bin of superstition. Everyone curses and some curse with art, but why anyone would take the time to write out a curse formula invoking underworld deities on a thin sheet of lead, roll it up and pierce it with a nail, then bury it in the tomb of an unknown dead person reaches the height of absurdity. Illness, disease, and bodily injury from accidents are common enough features of life. But why someone would fashion an amulet from haematite or bronze, etch it with a rider on horseback spearing creatures like lions and scorpions or a prostrate demon, then wear this around his neck seems at best only indirectly to treat the ailment. It might be artfully crafted, but how could such an object possibly prevent harm? It takes no imagination to suppose that headaches were as frequent in antiquity as they are today, yet why someone would invest their time

acquiring a charm written on papyrus that quite literally commands the headache to leave, as if the headache could hear, defies rational explanation. All of these examples were easily recognized in antiquity as magic. Different explanations would certainly have been given as to whether any of these procedures was effective – indeed some would have been dismissed out of hand as superstition – and questions would have been asked about the ultimate purveyor of each magical aid. But there would have been general agreement that each procedure fell outside the realm of officially sanctioned cult activity, possibly had the taint of being illicit, and was certainly less than dignified, which were several criteria by which ancient commentators formulated a definition of magic. Yet if this was magic, one reasons, then something must have been gravely wrong, or the ancients let their imaginations run too freely. There seems to have been no understanding in the magical operation of how the world ‘really’ worked. Even the ancients had to have some rudimentary understanding of causality, we might suggest. After all, they built magnificent temples, ships, and weapons, and the Greeks in particular developed the early rudiments of science, mathematics, and medicine. How could magic coexist with these other domains of cultural achievement which would simply not have been possible if everyone thought magically?

Frazer and Tylor

One theoretical approach that has been advanced is to think that magic is false science, in the sense that a magical practitioner reasons wrongly from cause to effect. This view, which is attributed to Sir James George Frazer (1854–1938), allows us to introduce human error into the equation. Here magic is a vehicle cultures use to discover fundamental laws of cause and effect; magic ‘works’ only because the real relationship between causes and their effects has been distorted or misrecognized. Another approach derived from Sir Edward Tylor (1832–1917) and embraced by Frazer is to regard the connection a magical practitioner makes between an object he or she manipulates here, and the person over there who is the target of that operation, as based on a fallacious association of ideas. The clay image and the person it represents share outward similarities but have no actual relationship to one another in the real world. In this view, magic is an erroneous association of ideas based on analogy or, as Tylor famously put it, a mistaking of “ideal connexions for real connexions.” Moreover, in order for there to be an actual, tangential relationship between a magical object or action and its target, there would have to exist some medium through which the effects on the object here

could be transferred to the person over there. A third approach regards practitioners of magic as a whole as delusional – assuming they are not outright charlatans – since they apparently believe that they exercise some control over the behavior of others when in fact they do not. Magic exists, according to this view, because everyone believes it exists. Powerful support for this approach can already be found in antiquity among such authors as Plato (*Laws* 933a–b), who was on the whole not particularly interested in magic. These are just a few of many approaches, outside of the specifically medieval explanations mentioned earlier, that have been offered since antiquity to explain magic, and each offers a valid perspective. While they allow us to say that magic “exists,” in the sense that people do magical things, nevertheless they prevent us from concluding that there is any real effect behind it. Accordingly, none of these views allows magic to “exist” in the sense that it has any impact upon the world.

One alternative then is to conclude that magic is fundamentally a psychological phenomenon, whether collective or individual. There are many strands to this approach; however, its basic premise is that magical operations satisfy the practitioner’s need to accomplish something practical in the face of otherwise insuperable or uncertain events. Illness presents a good example here. A family member has been struck with a debilitating illness for some inexplicable reason, by which I mean the available avenues of explanation have either been found wanting or are unknown. A magical operation performed on behalf of the ailing family member may not be thought directly to resolve the problem, but it allows those involved to feel as if some action has been taken. Magical action is practical action, and however misguided it may be, it nonetheless gives concrete expression to the concern of the family members involved in caring for their ailing relative. Note, however, that in viewing magic this way, we have not asked whose psychology underlies the perceived magical efficacy. It seems that both collective and individual psychology are at work here: society governs the conventions and expectations of magic, and individuals respond to and operate within those conventions. But the problem grows more difficult when we try to isolate exactly what an “individual” response is in this context. What we may take to be an “individual” emotional response – for example, mere satisfaction or relief on the part of the sick person that a healing amulet has been made and placed around his or her neck – at bottom has already been “collectively” defined by the society that takes the efficacy of such healing amulets for granted. It seems that we cannot escape the way in which individual responses reflect collective representations.

Malinowski

Other psychological approaches to magic have more effectively made that break or, rather, emphasized the “individual” quality of magic in terms of it being a means to an end, in contrast with religion as a collective organization that functions as an end in itself. In Bronislaw Malinowski’s (1884–1942) famous essay, *Magic, Science, Religion and Other Essays* (1948), based on his research among the Trobriand islanders, he draws an important distinction between “sacred” activities like religion and magic, which partake of symbolic forms and behaviors, and “profane” or pragmatic activity like science and technological accomplishments. Thus in one sense Malinowski avoids the Frazerian puzzle of whether magic was actually science in its infancy because these two activities are separate for him. On the other hand, he understood that magic was practical activity that was simultaneously interwoven with symbolism, not to mention what he memorably called its “coefficient of weirdness.” There is no simple way to disconnect the two, even if we recognize a continuum with pure technical activity at one end unencumbered by prohibitions and, at the other end, technical activity hedged round by a series of metaphysical concerns and given a ritual stage for its enactment. What is often taken to be Malinowski’s most important contribution to the study of magic – that magic begins where technology is insufficient – has been easily refuted,³ but what endures is his stress on the instrumental quality of magical activity and its anticipatory nature. As a means to an end, magical activity reaffirms the expectation of achievement and success in a given endeavor. It is psychologically satisfying to the individual participants for that reason. But that is not all. Malinowski also asserted that individual memory played a role in the perceived success of magic. Thus for every magical operation that “succeeded,” this was remembered by the community more readily and vividly than those that did not.⁴ Together the anticipation of success and its outsize memory cannot be overestimated as factors that help to reinforce magical behavior.

Magic as Communication

There is another, perhaps more personal, illustration of the problem of what magic is that does not directly involve any prevailing theory, which I present in the form of a thought experiment. Imagine that you are coming home after work or school, just as you typically would. It has been an ordinary day and nothing particularly unusual has happened. When you get

to your door, you find a small package sitting on the doorstep. You assume the package was delivered for you, so you open it and inside you find a bloody chicken heart with a nail stabbed through it. Sickening as that is, you realize the heart has been cut and inside the incision there is a sliver of paper, folded in half. You carefully pull the paper out, unfold it, and find it has your name written on it. Tucked in the paper's fold there are some fingernails and hair – *your* fingernails and hair.

Since you are not superstitious, or are but would never admit it, the rational side of your brain takes over. The whole thing, you say, is ridiculous – some stupid trick. Who would have done this? And then you start thinking: if it isn't a gag, does someone really hate me? Why didn't they just tell me they hated me rather than doing this? Even if it is a gag, what exactly are they trying to say? Did they think I would believe it or that it would have some effect on me? Did *they* think it would work, even if I don't? Who do I know that would believe in such nonsense, or go through such elaborate measures even as a joke? And where in the world did they get my fingernails and hair, let alone a bloody chicken heart?

This example, albeit contrived, is not meant to suggest that magic is “real” in the sense that its operation has a physical impact on the world. It is meant to suggest that magic is fundamentally a form of communication – and that communication, whatever shape it takes, can indeed impact the behavior of others. Note that this is not the same thing as saying that magic exists because everyone believes it exists. Rather, as in the example above, even if one does not believe in magic, one can nevertheless believe that a magical act was meant to convey a message. The weirdness of the action itself prompts a series of thoughts about what it might mean, and therein lies the rub. Even before deciding whether there is anything to magic, one is diverted into thinking about *who* might be behind it.⁵ We can therefore separate the question of whether magic is real from the question of whether it can have an impact on others' behavior. Most critiques of magic in antiquity and even more recently miss this distinction entirely, focusing as they do on mechanical causal relationships in the magical operation itself that should be explicable in terms of observable natural laws, not invisible forces. But magic is always effective only within a social context whose network of relationships defines it and gives it meaning. Indeed, magic is quite unthinkable outside a social context. And it is within such a social context that we can say magic is “causal.” If a magical act changes someone's behavior, then it has exerted a causal effect.

But we can be much more specific here, even without yet worrying about particular cultural milieux or historical forms of magic. Magical acts imply intention, which means that behind the individual act someone intends to convey a message. The message can be harmful or helpful,

depending on the circumstances, but the magical act itself registers and publicizes someone's desire.⁶ Who is capable of publicizing their desires in this way and how exactly they do it will depend on the culture being examined. But the important point to take away is that such intentionality, realized as magic, is fully structured as a social phenomenon. If magic is an act of communication, then the parameters for who can communicate and how they do so will be defined by the society in question. To give a clear example, if I am a late Roman Greek and wish to compose a curse tablet calling upon a *nekydaimon* 'spirit of a dead man', I write that tablet in Greek, not in Latin or Syriac. I take for granted not only that the underworld spirit will understand Greek, but that it has any understanding at all. Since I am effectively using the spirit of a dead man as a go-between to harm my enemy – say a prosecutor I wish to strike silent as he testifies against me in an upcoming trial – then I am also assuming this spirit understands how to operate in my world. In this sense the dead man's spirit is indistinguishable from a living person. Thus the entire chain of magical communication, from its interlocutors to the medium of communication to the anticipated action itself, is constituted in manifold ways by social convention.

Lévy-Bruhl

In order to better grasp the significance of this point, and to accord the last example with modes of ancient Greek thinking, we need to come to terms with a fundamental anthropological notion set forth by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1959), who was originally trained as a moral philosopher. In contrast to the evolutionary trend of Victorian scholarship on non-Western societies – of the type, for example, typified by Frazer's model for the development of religion out of science, which in turn developed out of magic – Lévy-Bruhl instead argued that such societies were not "irrational," in the sense of misunderstanding the laws of cause and effect, but were organized according to their own coherent principles. Foremost among these was what he called the *law of participation*. In *How Natives Think* (*Les Fonctions*, 1910), Lévy-Bruhl writes that:⁷

Primitive man, therefore, lives and acts in an environment of beings and objects, all of which, in addition to the properties that we recognize them to possess, are endowed with mystic attributes. He perceives their objective reality mingled with another reality. He feels himself surrounded by an infinity of imperceptible entities, nearly always invisible to sight, and always redoubtable: oftentimes the souls of the dead are about him, and always he is encompassed by myriads of spirits of more or less defined personality.

There are two important strands to disentangle here. The first refers to the notion of living within two orders of reality. This is what Lévy-Bruhl means by “mystic,” namely a belief in forces and influences that are invisible, and often imperceptible, but nevertheless real. Ancient magic operates within such a world, whereby the forces called upon, even when not explicitly defined by a personality, are invisible and imperceptible and can only be felt after they have taken effect. The implications of a mingled reality can be drawn out further, however, especially with regard to objects. Throughout the whole of Greek antiquity physical objects such as cult statues were treated as though they had human attributes: they were bathed and cleaned, dressed and worshipped, presented with food offerings and prayers, and were thought capable of movement. The counterparts of cult statues, figurines fashioned out of clay or wax, were treated with similar care and used in ancient magic. Lévy-Bruhl helps us to understand why statues and figurines were treated in this way, without resorting to a notion of irrationality defined (in our Western manner) by a failure to draw the proper dividing line between animate and inanimate objects. In Greece in particular, matter itself could have an ambiguous status. To give a specific example, for some highly educated thinkers such as the late seventh/early sixth-century BCE philosopher Thales of Miletus, stones that had magnetic properties were thought to contain souls (11 A 22 D-K = Arist. *de An.* 1.2.405a19–21). It is not hard to see how magnetic stones that attracted iron filings, in the absence of an available electromagnetic theory, could be thought to be animate – in other words to contain a soul. Reality as we know it in the mechanical, causal Western view, with its sharp dividing line between organic and inorganic matter, is collapsed in Thales’ view of the magnet. Nor should it come as a surprise at this point to know that magnets also figured in various ways in ancient magic. As outsiders to cultures that think this way, it simply will not do to superimpose a rational/irrational distinction on their actions, as if by characterizing them this way we are implying that with further understanding of mechanical causality their magical behavior would change. Such a view neglects to observe that magic is “causal” within a social framework whose effects are real. The problem then is that an incomplete grasp of physical causes is embedded within a broader social framework for the understanding of cause – and the key is that the social framework is the more salient of the two.

Along these lines we can turn to the second dimension of Lévy-Bruhl’s concept of participation, which is the notion that the mingled reality of the primitive world is peopled with divine beings, particularly spirits of the dead. The Greeks, as so many other cultures, took elaborate pains with burying their dead, largely as a way to ensure that the dead person’s soul

rested peacefully. The Greeks harbored many different beliefs about dead souls, and scaled them in different ways, from heroes who rested at their leisure in the Elysium fields and the Isles of the Blessed, to an altogether different sort of underworld community whose anger was beyond human appeasement. It is this community that interests us in particular, and it comprised three sets of dead: those who died without funeral rites (*ataphoi*), those who died in an untimely or premature way (*aōroi*), and those who died violent deaths, such as, in later times, gladiators and other murdered victims (*biaiothanatoi*).⁸ A practitioner of magic who wished to curse his adversary had to pay court to these angry denizens and address them with his request for aid, especially the *aōroi* and *biaiothanatoi*. The curse tablet itself was laid in their tombs, and sometimes in the skeletal hand of the deceased. For the moment, the crucial point to grasp is that the Greeks, as so many of the cultures under study by Lévy-Bruhl, inhabited an extended society in which the dead participated as much as the living. Lévy-Bruhl emphasizes the social dimension of this kind of world this way:⁹

In short, without insisting on well-known facts, the primitive lives with his dead as he does with the living who surround him. They are members, and very important members, of a society with manifold participations, a social symbiosis in which the collective representations of his group give him his place.

It is quite natural for us to think of ourselves as members of a living community, with responsibilities and obligations to variously tiered groups and subgroups, and to define ourselves in different ways with respect to each of these groups. It is quite another thing entirely to include the dead among those with whom we interact *as if they were living presences*, moreover to regard our obligations to them as equally important as those to the living. When I speak of a social context for the practice of Greek magic, it is this more expansive community that must be borne in mind.

There are many examples from Greek literature that illustrate that the dead were a vital part of the living community. The plots of whole Greek dramas turn on that relationship, but it is not primarily the literary exploitation of the dead that interests us. Rather, we are interested in the received wisdom that certain of the dead are engaged in an ongoing scrutiny of the activity of the living, and more importantly that the angry dead continue to drive the living to distraction. Hesiod tells us, for example, in the *Works and Days* (109–26) that after the immortals brought the Golden Race of mortals into being and they had lived for a time, at death they were dispersed by Zeus throughout the world of mortal men as

sample content of Magic in the Ancient Greek World

- [read online Hawke's Special Forces Survival Handbook: The Portable Guide to Getting Out Alive](#)
- [download online Amor and Psycho: Stories](#)
- [L'amant de Patagonie pdf, azw \(kindle\)](#)
- [download online Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred & Other Contemporary Sources](#)

- <http://damianfoster.com/books/Hawke-s-Special-Forces-Survival-Handbook--The-Portable-Guide-to-Getting-Out-Alive.pdf>
- <http://econtact.webschaefer.com/?books/Amor-and-Psycho--Stories.pdf>
- <http://musor.ruspb.info/?library/Red-Army-Tank-Commander--At-War-in-a-T-34-on-the-Eastern-Front.pdf>
- <http://berttrotman.com/library/Alfred-the-Great--Asser-s-Life-of-King-Alfred---Other-Contemporary-Sources.pdf>