

MAGIC

in the
ANCIENT
WORLD



FRITZ GRAF

Translated by Franklin Philip

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THE LAST DECADE has seen a steadily growing interest in the subject discussed in this book, not the least in the United States. Without the scholarly work of many people, this account would have been impossible. It started as a series of seminars at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (section des sciences religieuses) in Paris, developed into a book in French, transformed itself into a significantly changed German version, and now presents itself in English. During this series of metamorphoses, I have derived enormous benefits from friends and colleagues. John Scheid in Paris invited me to the École and helped with the French edition, as did Evelyne Scheid-Tissinier, Magali Tongas, and Didier Mertens. The participants in my seminars helped by clarifying several tricky issues. Jan Bremmer, Christopher Faraone, Sarah Iles Johnston, David Jordan, and Henk Versnel contributed by discussing and debating various points. I thank each of them. I especially thank Sarah Iles Johnston for the invaluable help she gave in the production of the book. Scholarship, unlike magic, is not the business of a solitary figure.

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INTRODUCTION

THE PRACTICE OF magic was omnipresent in classical antiquity. The contemporaries of Plato and Socrates placed voodoo dolls on graves and thresholds (some of these dolls can be found in modern museums), Cicero smiled upon a colleague who said that he had lost his memory under the influence of a spell, and the Elder Pliny declared that everybody was afraid to fall victim to binding spells. The citizens of classical Teos cursed with spells whoever attacked the city; the Twelve Tables legislated against magical transfers of crops from one field to another; and the imperial law books contain extensive sanctions against all sorts of magical procedures—with the sole exception of love spells and weather magic. The accusation of having worked magic was wielded against many a prominent Greek and Roman, from Republican senators to the philosopher Boethius in the sixth century of our era; had Socrates lived in a place other than Athens, he would certainly have incurred the same risk. Ancient magic lived on: Greek spells from Egyptian papyrus books reappear in Latin guise in astrological manuscripts at the time of

Christopher Columbus; the story of the sorcerer's apprentice, told in Lucian, is famous in European literature and music; and the image of the modern witch is unthinkable without Greek and Roman antecedents. Magic, in a certain sense, belongs to antiquity and its heritage, like temples, hexameters, and marble statues.

Ancient magic had more facets than just the harm done through spells and curses. Magical rites not only helped to harm enemies and rivals but also gave access to a higher spirituality. These rites could open the way to the supreme god, or at least to an intimate dinner with Helios or an encounter with Seth. Magicians had a direct link to the divine world, and magic was seen as a gift from the gods as early as Pindar's time. Anyone with a charismatic personality could be seen as a magician as well: Apollonius of Tyana, the philosopher Plotinus, and the orator Libanius, as well as Moses and Jesus, were thought to have powers well beyond those of ordinary people.

But magic is a bit like a black hole; to many people, it seems invisible. Contemporary social anthropologists doubt whether magic exists at all. The debate about the distinction between magic and religion has been long and bitter, and without a clear solution, scholarship, anyway, continued a discussion already begun by theology. For a long time the science of antiquity ignored the phenomenon. Despite the revival of interest in ancient religion, interest in ancient magic remains marginal—curse tablets, papyrus books, and voodoo dolls are much less appealing than are mythological scenes on Attic vases or the papyrus fragments of Sappho. This situation is understandable and, to a certain degree, perfectly justified; nevertheless, scholarly interest in ancient societies should not be fastidious. This book gives a general account of ancient magic, from the invention of the term in the last years of the sixth century B.C. to the end of antiquity.

THE SOURCES

The study of ancient magic, like the study of all religious problems in the civilizations of antiquity, must draw on all possible sources from literature to the texts on papyri and in inscriptions, as well as the (rarer) visual material. Besides these documents that are common to the whole history of ancient religions, there are those specific texts of magic papyri and curse tablets (primarily engraved on thin sheets of lead) found throughout the ancient world, from classical Greece to Greco-Roman Egypt. Among these sources, however, the texts preserved on papyrus are certainly the most surprising, and thanks to their highly detailed ritual scenarios, they constitute the most important source of information. Thus, it is with them that we shall begin.¹

Among these magic texts on papyrus gathered in the two volumes of Preisendanz's *Papyri Graecae Magicae*,² distinctions must be made. First we possess small pieces of papyrus—whose number, moreover, is still growing—comprising magic texts that are, so to speak, applied: charms against illnesses, formulas for sympathetic magic (spells), and especially binding spells or *defixiones*.³ Only the fact that these binding spells, which come from all of Greco-Roman Egypt, are written on papyrus distinguishes them from other similar and much more numerous texts that the epigraphers call *tabulae defixionum*. These texts, which are mostly inscribed on small metal sheets, have been found in almost every part of what was the ancient world. The great majority of them are on lead.⁴ It must be assumed that such magic texts also had existed on papyrus outside of Egypt; however, with rare exceptions, the ancient papyri have been preserved only in the extremely dry soil of the Nile Valley.

Besides the short texts, there are in Preisendanz's collection several long texts on papyrus. These long texts are of consider-

able interest, for they represent real magical books, collections of recipes and instructions for procedures of every kind from healing, exorcism, and divination to directions for calming the anger of masters and kings or for winning the heart of a woman, and including rites making it possible to enter into intimacy with the supreme god. Their discovery has an importance for Greco-Roman religion which not unjustly has been compared with the importance that the discovery of the Qumran texts has for Judaism or the Nag Hammadi texts for gnosticism.⁵ These books date from the High Empire.⁶ They are from the hands of learned scribes who sometimes had a real interest in textual scholarship.⁷ Five or six of these books come from the library of an Egyptian specialist who was also versed in the Coptic language, who lived in Upper Egypt, and who had a genuine passion for magic and secret theology; also in his library are preserved books on magic written in Coptic, as well as a book of alchemy.⁸ Although books like that were not secret, they were despised or feared. Greek and Roman authors sometimes mention them, but most of the time in a tone of disapproval and mistrust—we recall that the Ephesians, following the exhortations of Saint Paul, burned a great number of these books. Roman laws prohibited the possession of magical as well as of divinatory books (magic and divination, as we know, are related to each other).⁹ The burning of books has never prevented them from being transmitted; there were curious persons always to be found who collected the magical books, as was the case of Ioannes Phoulon, a law student in Beirut toward the end of the fifth century; the description of his books with their "images of certain demons" and the wording of their foreign and barbarous names recalls the books as we know them.¹⁰ Nevertheless, given the largely esoteric nature of ancient magic, to which most often one could have access only after undergoing initiatory rites, these books were no doubt transmitted in closed circles, from master to

disciple, from father to son.¹¹ It is evident that under such conditions, in a tradition without scholarly control, the texts went through considerable alterations—additions as well as reductions, according to the collector's whim—because it was not a matter of sacred books that were unmodifiable or unadaptable; these texts were simply designed for practice with its changing requirements. In the rare cases in which the original owner of the copy that has come down to us went to the trouble of combining different versions of the same text, it is possible both to establish the fluctuations of tradition and even, as we shall see, to reconstruct some of its stages;¹² in other and equally rare cases, we can observe how a particular prescription was implemented for an actual rite and how its text was changed in the process.¹³ Thus, these papyri constitute a gold mine of information on the thought and practice of Greco-Roman magic in the imperial era.

And not only in Egypt. Recently, Robert Ritner advocated a nearly exclusive derivation of the Greek Magical Papyri from Egyptian religion; even though this view confirms the (correct) thesis of G. W. Bowersock that Hellenization, in the Mediterranean East, means only to express indigenous concepts and traditions in Greek, not to transform traditions and concepts according a Greek mold, Ritner overstates his case.¹⁴ It is true that Egyptian elements pervade these texts; a first superficial reading reveals the importance of the Egyptian divinities and their myths, and the most searching analysis has shown details of ideology and ritual that can be understood only in light of the Egyptian context. And the demotic spells differ from the Greek ones virtually only in their language.¹⁵ However, one must insist on the wide distribution of these same magic rites outside of Egypt. There is a series of imprecations (*defixiones*) that allude to the god Seth, the primordial enemy of Isis, and that come from Rome as well as Cyprus or Athens;¹⁶ here, Egyptian religion

is part of the vaster fabric of Greco-Roman paganism. But the other, non-Egyptian elements of the papyri have a wider distribution as well; a formula from a spell in the papyri called "Sword of Dardanus" is attested in the German Rhine valley as well as in Beirut.¹⁷ Rather than to look for a single source, we should note the varied origin of the constituent elements of these texts—Greek, Jewish, Assyrian, Babylonian, and even Sumerian—that make them evidence as exciting as it is complex for what is still readily called "late pagan syncretism."¹⁸ In short, it would be much too narrow-minded and cautious to treat these books only as documents of Egyptian religion—nearly as narrow-minded as the pan-Hellenism of which our predecessors were largely guilty.¹⁹

The complexity of the tradition appears emblematically in the *Eighth Book of Moses*, reproduced by one of the Anastasi papyri, currently in Leyden (J 395), dating from the mid-fourth century A.D.²⁰ We know books I through V of Moses; however, we have no information about books VI or VII, and it is thought that these never existed. We are in a world in which the symbolism of numbers is important—after *Moses VIII*, only book X is attested, IX again is lacking. The significance of *Moses X* is obvious: according to the Pythagoreans, ten is the perfect number, for it is the sum of the elements of the "tetraktus."²¹ The same holds true for eight: even though there is no early Pythagorean explanation, the number becomes important in Hellenistic Pythagoreanism and especially in Jewish and Christian number symbolism of the Imperial epoch. This symbolism of course fits in very well with the figure of Moses.²²

The widespread opinion that Moses was a magician²³ we know from the *Acts of the Apostles*: "Thus was Moses instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was powerful in words and deeds,"²⁴ which amounts to saying that he practiced magic. The Hellenized Jewish circles from which the *Acts* come thus recog-

nized Moses as a magician, and they gave this recognition a rather banal explanation: after living for a long time in Egypt, Moses was bound to be versed in the magicians' art.

But the idea is even more widespread than is commonly believed. Pliny the Elder, in his chapter on the history of magic, associates Moses with one school of magic.²⁵ Joseph Bidez and Franz Cumont suggested that the Plinian catalog of magi (of whom Moses was a part) might go back to the Peripatetic philosopher Hermippus, a pupil of Callimachus. In the pagan world, Moses the magician would thus have been known during the Hellenistic epoch; he is, in any case, vouched for as such toward the beginning of the Christian era.²⁶ In the final analysis, the notion of a magician Moses comes from the chapter of *Exodus* in which the famous magic competition is recounted between Moses and Aaron on the one hand, and on the other, the magi of the pharaoh.²⁷ An apocryphal Jewish text from the Hellenistic era states that the pharaoh's magi, also two in number, answered to the names of Iannes and Iambres; in Pliny's catalogues, Iannes figures as one of the founders of Jewish magic.²⁸

Moses is thus described as a magician not only in the Jewish circles of Alexandria and Syria-Palestine but also in the Greco-Roman world.²⁹ There is consequently nothing surprising in what is found mentioned in the papyri where other Mosaic texts are represented, outside of *Moses VIII*; a magic formula is even known by which the magician claims to be Moses himself and to claim the privilege of having been the founder of Judaism.³⁰ *Moses VIII* contains only a single ritual that is treated at some length. However, the book is preserved in three versions to which the learned magician—the one who had had the book of Leyden written—added extracts drawn from other apocryphal books by Moses: an *Archangelike* (a rather enigmatic "archangelic" instruction manual), excerpts from the tenth book, and Moses's

secret prayer to the moon. He also refers to a certain *Key to Moses* (to wit, *Moses VIII*), a commentary that gives allegorical interpretations, additional rites, and secret names that our text often makes use of.³¹ This set suggests that we make a "genetic" analysis; it is clear that an original text, in the course of its transmission, was transformed, curtailed, and augmented to end up in these three distinct versions, but with an identical core. There are four fundamental stages in this transmission: (1) (a) the composition of the original book, followed, a short while later by (b) that of the commentary constituted by the *Key*; (2) the combination of the main text with the *Key* in such a way that this text alludes to some details contained in the *Key*; (3) the division of this unified tradition into three branches, A, B, and C, which are the basis of the texts of the papyrus of Leyden; (4) the bringing together of these three versions in the manuscript of Leyden. It is impossible to give a chronological approximation—even a hypothetical one—of this transmission; the only reasonably reliable date is the end of this chain given by the date of the Leyden manuscript, the middle of the fourth century.³² The independent evolution of the three branches could have taken decades and even centuries. The considerable differences between the branches in no way constitute useful indices; although secret, such texts were transmitted from one magician to another without ever being corrected or improved by scholars, and each user was free to modify the text as he or she saw fit, it being neither a literary work to be treated with care nor a sacred book whose tradition had to be respected to the letter.

THE STUDY OF ANCIENT MAGIC

For many years scholarship on the religious history of antiquity, employing paradigms established long ago, very often produced

sound but rarely exciting works. However, we now have been witnessing for a generation a growing revival of research in religion and mythology, the result of the change of paradigm brought about toward the end of the 1960s simultaneously by Angelo Brelich, Walter Burkert, and the team gathered around Jean-Pierre Vernant. Yet although, in this new context of research, rites aroused great interest, and, at least in theory, magic and religion ceased being opposed in the way that Frazer had done, ancient Greco-Roman magic has only very recently commanded attention in the world of scholarship. This astonishing lack of interest might have resulted from a distrust of all things magic as well as from the notorious difficulty of the magic texts themselves; and the growing interest in esoteric lore at the end of a millennium which has become tired of rationality helped to overcome this reluctance. Primary among the pioneers in this renewal of scholarly interest in magic are American scholars—first and foremost the authors of the English translation, valuable and judiciously annotated, of the Greek magic papyri, published by a team around Hans Dieter Betz in Chicago. Recently, John Gager translated and annotated important Greek and Latin defixiones, and Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith published the annotated translation of Coptic spells, making two more important corpora accessible to the nonspecialist.³³ In Europe, though, interest is much more limited. Although at the turn of the century Marcel Mauss had contributed decisively to the theory of magic, French scholarship remained reluctant; Jean-Pierre Vernant and his team had no interest whatsoever in magic; while outside Paris, Jean Annequin and Anne-Marie Tupet published valuable and sound books on magic that, however, still followed old theoretical paradigms, and the same is true for the recent book by André Bernard.³⁴ In Italy, Raffaella Garosi, a pupil of Angelo Brelich, developed the theoretical frameworks in a precocious study, which, however, could have no sequel because of

Garosi's tragic death.³⁵ It is the team around Reinhold Merkelbach in Cologne that does the most important work on magic on the continent, by publishing a series of translations and interpretations of magic texts,³⁶ whereas in other countries, individual scholars like Richard Gordon or Hendrik S. Versnel, following in the footsteps of Karl Preisendanz, produced some interesting papers.³⁷

This state of affairs provides hope, suggesting that our own era will probably see the slow growth of interest similar to that aroused by magic in the past, during what could be called the heroic era of religious studies at the turn of the century, the interest that it met with and continues to meet with in anthropological research, French, German, and English. Diachronically, the renewed interest in magic in Christian culture must be added, whether in that of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, or the contemporary era.³⁸

In the scientific study of antiquity, interest in magic hit a kind of scientific peak before World War I. Resulting from that peak are large collections of texts—whether the *Defixionum Tabellae* of Auguste Audollent (1904) and the several publications by Richard Wünsch, especially his appendix to the *Inscriptiones Atticae* of 1897, or the publication of the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* by a team gathered around Karl Preisendanz. Although the first volume appeared only in 1928 and the third one (with the indices) fell victim to the bombing of Leipzig during World War II, this publication was in fact only an extension of the fortunate initiative of Albrecht Dieterich, whose death in 1908 interrupted the project.³⁹

With the exception of the Frenchman Auguste Audollent, the German scholars were thus pioneers in the study of ancient magic; there were numerous reasons for this interest. It was first an interest in any ancient object, as modest as it might be, manifested by a philology that wished to be a science of antiq-

uity in all its aspects. The inscriptions on lead, inept as they were, the remains of papyrus, and the bronze coins aroused as much curiosity as the great texts of Homer, Sophocles, or Virgil, or the imperial decrees inscribed on Delian marble or Roman bronze, and they were not analyzed any less zealously. Inaugurated by August Boeckh, this attitude was exemplified by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff and by his colleagues and friends. Concerning the magic papyri, Wilamowitz formulated this attitude in these now classic terms: "One day I heard a great scholar deplore the discovery of these papyri, which robbed antiquity of the distinguished luster of classicism. That is undeniably the effect that they produce, but I am delighted with it. For what I want is not to admire but to understand my Hellenes, in order to be able to judge them fairly."⁴⁰ "To understand the Greeks" through all the documents concerning their life, that was the aim of these scholars.

But there were more specific reasons underlying their attitude. After all, despite these declarations of intent, studying the magic papyri was so suspect in the eyes of a traditionalistic philology (as Wilamowitz reveals in the passage just cited) that in Heidelberg, Albert Dieterich felt obliged to conceal the object of his Summer seminar in 1905 on the magical papyri under the less provocative title of "Selection of Greek papyri."⁴¹ Moreover, the position of Wilamowitz himself was not lacking in ambiguity with regard to the magic texts: in *Der Glaube der Hellenen*, he speaks in connection with the papyri of "savage and phantasmagorical superstition . . . that has nothing to do with religion." Albert Henrichs well brought to light the Christian, Protestant—and hence normative—sources of this conception of religion in Wilamowitz.⁴² It was not the "Wilamowitzian" school of Berlin, but rather the circle gathered around Hermann Usener, that advanced the study of magic papyri and curse tablets, consisting of Albert Dieterich, Usener's student and son-in-law, and

Richard Wünsch, another of Usener's disciples, coeditor with Dieterich of the *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* and the *Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten*, Karl Preisendanz, the editor of the *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, was a student of Wünsch.⁴³ Usener's interest in magic was derived from his interest in the origins of religion; magic was part of popular religion, the religion of the masses, especially of the rural populations, the one close to the origins, to the primitive roots of religion—a conception of romantic origin, obviously, but one that has not totally disappeared from our cultural and scientific heritage.⁴⁴

When still a student, Albrecht Dieterich published one of the great papyri of Leyden; he had noticed in the course of this work that the papyrus presented evidence not of primitive religion, but of religion of much later eras.⁴⁵ His interest also lay in the hope of discovering in the papyri the vestiges of an earlier state of religion: but it was not, in the manner of Usener, primitive religion, but rather elements of later Greek that he hoped could be reconstructed with the help of the magic texts. The most famous example of this salvage and reconstruction operation is the *Mithrasliturgie*, the text (according to Dieterich) of an initiatory ritual of the mysteries of Mithras, identified and isolated among the documents preserved by the great papyrus 574 of the Bibliothèque Nationale.⁴⁶ Thus, magic was not a source of interest for its own sake; the magic documents were simply sources concerning an earlier religion, of which they contained vestiges in a more or less disguised and degenerate form. Richard Reitzenstein, also a close associate of Usener, studied these texts for a different reason: he saw them primarily as evidence of syncretism, whose genesis and history he wished to reconstruct.⁴⁷

But the vital impetus lay elsewhere. It was the works of Tylor and Frazer that provided the real debut to the studies of ancient magic. Frazer in particular attempted to mark out the evolution