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Choosing magic: contexts, objects, meanings. The archaeology of instrumental religion in the Latin West

Richard Gordon, Francisco Marco Simón, Marina Piranomonte, *Choosing magic: contexts, objects, meanings. The archaeology of instrumental religion in the Latin West*. Rome: De Luca Editori d'Arte, 2021. Pp. 192. ISBN 9788865572863 €48,00.

Review by

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[Authors and titles are listed below.]

The edited volume under review, which is largely based on a conference held at the University of Padova in 2014 under the aegis of the research program ‘Espacios de penumbra: cartografía de la actividad mágico-religiosa en el Occidente Imperio Romano’ (2012–2014; University of Zaragoza, Spain), focuses on *defixiones* – and, to a lesser extent, amulets – from the Latin West and thus contributes to an ever-expanding body of scholarly literature on the ancient rituals, objects, and concerns deemed magical. The title *Choosing Magic* hints at the notion of individual agency, which represents one of the volume’s principal overarching themes.

In addition to the ten essays that make up the main body of the collection, this beautiful volume includes a preface proper; another prefatory essay by Marina Piranomonte based on the book’s title (Scegliere il magico), which highlights the archaeological turn in the study of magic (with particular attention to the fountain of Anna Perenna); and an introduction, which underscores a few operative perspectives (e.g., the crisis situations that stand behind the objects; the emphasis on archaeological context over against social context) and generously summarizes the volume’s contents. These materials are supplemented by fantastic images integrated into the essays, helpful indices, and, most importantly, a useful appendix, which provides a synoptic list of the primary corpora of the *defixiones* from the Latin West.

The essays at the center of the book are divided unequally into three formal parts. The first part is devoted to the manifold relationships between spaces and *defixiones* from the Latin West. Francisco Marco Simón examines the relationship between magic and sanctuaries in the Latin West, with particular attention to texts involving stolen goods, a significant number of which come from Britannia. Simón highlights the presence of both “global” deities (e.g., Cybele and Attis) and “local” ones (e.g., Maonos, Niskae), the latter of which could be conceptually merged with global deities through *interpretatio*. He also situates the phenomena operative in these texts within their historical and institutional contexts (e.g., the importance of water; the dedication of a portion of the returned value to the temple treasury; the necessary role of temple priests in the ritual), simultaneously questioning the notion that magic served a secondary or marginal role in the western Roman Empire.

The following three essays are written by Silvia Alfayé and Celia Sánchez Natalías. In a co-authored essay, Alfayé and Sánchez Natalías examine the role of magic in Roman funerary spaces. They situate their analysis of funerary spaces within a larger discussion of Roman views of death, underscoring the concepts (e.g., respect and terror) and spaces residing at the interstices of worlds of the living and the dead (e.g., the liminal world of graves). The authors emphasize ritual practices that funerary spaces could engender, ranging from defensive measures (e.g., protecting the dead or protecting the living from a host of restless dead) to “instrumental” interventions (e.g., loci for *materia magica*), and note the types of magical artifacts well suited to such contexts (e.g., *defixiones* and poppets). Throughout this carefully written essay, Alfayé and Sánchez Natalías demonstrate the important role archaeology must play in the study of ancient magic and the need to recognize regional and temporal variations. This co-authored essay is followed by the individual essays of these two authors, which survey *defixiones* unearthed from homes, baths, and ruins (Alfayé) and analyze the use of *defixiones* in public contexts, such as law-courts, circuses, and amphitheaters (Sánchez Natalías).

Antón Alvar Nuño situates the study of Roman magic within scholarship on Roman religion, which has stressed as of late the role of individual agency. Focusing his attention on *defixiones* and amulets that touch on issues affecting households, workshops, and farmsteads, Alvar Nuño constructs a notion of Greco-Roman magic as a type of cultural resource – albeit socially constrained, largely routinized, and ever-shifting – that rationally addressed uncertainties, risks, and conflicts in quotidian life and which reproduced and supported dominant cultural values, such as the role and social power of the *pater familias*.

Richard Gordon closes the first section with an essay devoted to the presentation of the body in Latin *defixiones* from the late Republic until the early fifth century CE. Gordon usefully illuminates corporeal imagination in these materials, stressing how terminology for body parts (e.g., *medulla*, *membra*) cuts across our divisions between physical and mental/emotional domains. He also taxonomizes the ways bodies were viewed in these texts, which range from a “suffering totality” to a “somatic script,” which reveals guilt, to a body that is disarticulated into an array of physical/mental parts.

The three papers of the second part focus on the techniques of ritual specialists. In another essay, Sánchez Natalías examines the intentional inversion/manipulation of conventional scripts and framing techniques (“paragraphics”) and images in curse objects from the Latin West. She places these practices into comparative dialogue with materials from the Greco-Egyptian tradition, which, inter alia, illustrate “the lack of overlap between ‘vernacular’ cursing practices [in the Latin West] and those from this alien [Greco-Egyptian] tradition of learned ritual magic” (121). György Németh discusses the use of *charaktères* on *defixiones* from the western Roman Empire. He critically engages with various theories on the origins of *charaktères* and ring letters and taxonomizes the placement of these scripts within the ritual text (e.g., at the beginning [“invocatory signs”] and “framing sequences” that are inscribed around the text proper), simultaneously noting their overlapping ritual functions with *nomina barbara*. Attilio Mastrocinque provides an overview of the extant phylacteries on precious and semi-precious metal foil (*lamellae*) from the Latin West. Although he notes the provenances of the extant *lamellae* – a large portion of which come from tombs – Mastrocinque privileges ritual “objective” and “tradition” as the guiding themes in his analysis, stressing that, beginning in the second century CE, the *lamellae* betray a predilection to combine “extracts from Hebrew ritual texts with Egyptian or Graeco-Roman (i.e. pagan) elements” (147).

The final essay by Gonzalo Fontana Elboj is a bit of an outlier – as the editors note (18) – and constitutes the only essay in the final part (“From Pagan to Christian”). Fontana Elboj contends that practices (e.g., ecstatic trance and glossolalia), which would have been considered magical within the broader Mediterranean world, were fully incorporated into early “Gentile” Christianity. This impulse toward magic in the early church stands in tension, so argues Fontana Elboj, with certain New Testament writings (e.g., the Acts of the Apostles and 1 Cor.), whose decisively anti-magical authors attempted to christianize these practices and thus disassociate them from the taint of “pagan” magic, effectively breathing “new life into them” (166).

There is much to praise in this volume. For instance, the overlapping emphases on individual agency, provenance, archaeological analysis, and contextually specific readings of early Latin magical objects that run through most of the essays (see especially Piranomonte’s preface and the excellent contributions by Alfayé and Sánchez Natalías) build upon, yet contribute to important methodological trends in recent scholarship on ancient magic.^[1] This contextually oriented type of analysis alongside the persistent choice to frame ancient magical rituals in dialogue with everyday social and health crises, risks, and vulnerabilities (cf. the editors’ introduction and the essays by Alvar Nuño and Gordon) also usefully support – on methodological, theoretical, and evidentiary levels – the growing awareness among scholars that the various sources and concerns we identify with the term “magic” ought to be placed at the center of (late) ancient quotidian life.^[2]

Of course, readers will not find all essays in such a collection equally compelling. In my estimation, although Fontana Elboj usefully brings a wealth of evidence to bear on the social background of glossolalia, his arguments for clear condemnations of magic in Acts and 1 Corinthians rely to a large extent upon uncritical and outmoded notions of the formative Jesus movement(s), orthodoxy, canonicity, and ancient magic. For instance, Fontana Elboj conflates ancient and modern terminology (e.g., μαγεία = magic); aligns Simon with “gnosticism” (scare-quotes in the original); delineates a clear line between Gentile and Jewish Christianity in the first century CE; and peppers the essay with phrases such as “perfectly orthodox” and “impeccable orthodoxy,” to describe the authors of a definitive Christian “canon” (including the authors of the “Old Testament”).

Nevertheless, this volume represents an important step forward in the academic study of ancient *defixiones* and ancient magic more generally, especially from the perspective of archaeology. Accordingly, it makes a valuable contribution to the study of ancient religion and material culture.

Authors and titles

Marina Piranomonte, “Scegliere il magico”
 Richard Gordon and Francisco Marco Simón, “Introduction”
 Francisco Marco Simón, “Magical practice in sanctuary contexts”
 Silvia Alfayé and Celia Sánchez Natalías, “Magic in Roman funerary spaces”
 Silvia Alfayé, “Unexpected Contexts: Revisiting the ‘other’ locations of *defixiones* in the Roman West”
 Celia Sánchez Natalías, “Other public spaces as magical contexts”
 Antón Alvar Nuño, “Ritual power, routine and attributed responsibility: Magic in Roman households, workshops and farmsteads”
 Richard Gordon, “Diagnosing the signs: The body as subject in Latin *defixiones*”
 Celia Sánchez Natalías, “Paragraphics and Iconography”
 György Németh, “*Charaktères* on curse tablets in the western provinces of the Roman Empire”
 Attilio Mastrocinque, “Phylacteries in the Latin West: A survey”
 Gonzalo Fontana Elboj, “Traces of magic in Early Christianity: New contexts and the search for social sanctions”

Notes

^[1] E.g., Andrew T. Wilburn, *Materia Magica: The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus, and Spain* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2012); Dietrich Boschung and Jan N. Bremmer, eds., *The Materiality of Magic* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015); Christopher A. Faraone, *The Transformation of Greek Amulets in Roman Imperial Times* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

^[2] E.g., David Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

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