

BOOK REVIEWS:

WITCHCRAFT AND MAGIC IN EUROPE: ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME

by Bengt Ankarloo & Stuart Clark, eds.
Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania Press, 1999

Reviewed by Dana Kramer-Rolls, PhD

The University of Pennsylvania Press has taken a place alongside Pennsylvania State University Press, noted for the *History of Magic* Series, with its own *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe* series, edited by Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark. The thrust of the series of compiled essays by leading scholars is to integrate the accumulated knowledge about the practices of witchcraft and magic, and to contextualize them both in society at large and in the landscape of religious belief and practice. As with any monumental task, credit must be given for the work done, rather than the work left undone. One of the great difficulties in approaching wide-ranging historical research is that each period and place calls to itself scholars who form a cohesive community, each of which develops somewhat idiosyncratic methodologies, thus establishing places of intranequine conflict, academic life and death concerns somewhat incomprehensible to any out-group. Perhaps the greatest contribution of this series is the opportunity for the student of witchcraft and magic to examine the field globally, drawing from the work of folklorists, classicists, Medievalists and Early Modernists in an attempt to integrate and define patterns of practice and public perception.

With the first volume on *Biblical and Pagan Societies* still forthcoming, the series begins with *Ancient Greece and Rome*. In "Binding Spells: Curse Tablets and Voodoo Dolls," the first contributor, Daniel Ogden, University of Wales, Swansea, reviews the over 1,600 clay, wood and lead tablet and "voodoo dolls" (an unfortunate term left over from a less enlightened age) which were made to curse, petition and protect. Found at gravesites, crossroads and deposited in rivers and sacred wells at least from the 4th century BCE to the 1st century CE, these items describe, often quite colorfully, the intent of the supplicant, and appeal to a wide range of names and unnamed deities, including a range of chthonic gods (Hermes, Hecate, Kore, Demeter), their Latin equivalents, Egyptian gods of the underworld, Hebraic Adoni, Iao (= Yahweh), the Babylonian Erischigal, local deities (Bath's Sulis), angels, and a variety of syncretic hybrids (44ff.). These objects were used to guarantee legal decisions in favor of the supplicants, find lost property or curse the thief, obtain satisfaction in erotic and romantic exploits, and generally bind another to the supplicants purpose sympathetically though the treatment of the tablet or doll (twisting, smashing, use of particular materials such as lead) and by petition to the addressed deity.

While the issue of professional *vs* amateur manufacture of these tablets is still open to academic debate, we know manuals of magical instruction existed, indicating at least some standard or guide for the production of spell objects. The pre-Christian world was not immune to book burning, and much has been lost by these periodic frenzies of suppression, such as the 2,000 magical manuscripts reputed to have been burned by order of Augustus in 13 BCE (56).

Ogden suggests that these tablets and dolls may be useful in cracking open the hidden world of the marginalized, particularly women and slaves. Except of the fragments of Sappho's works and a few letters by Roman women to soldier



sons or merchant husbands, the unfiltered voice of women is virtually absent from the historical record except in many of these tablets (60-67). A particularly poignant one is a petition by a prostitute not to be relegated to a workhouse, the human equivalent of the glue factory (67-68). Likewise trade and judicial petitions often come from the working poor. This is a dense and well-constructed survey, although I would have appreciated the inclusion of curse bowls as well, which like the poppets (a much better term than Voodoo dolls) have polyvalent utility, holding the words of a spell, but also being used ritually in the spell.

The second essay by George Luck, Johns Hopkins University, titled "Witches and Sorcerers in Classical Literature" is a compellation of antique witches, sorcerers and magicians. Something of an abstract of his *Arcana Mundi* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) the major question asked, although not definitively answered, is that of the differences between "religion" and "magic", and between "philosophy" and "magic". The antiquity of magic as a technology, the question of folk *vs* academic practice and belief, the introduction of Mystery religions, and the competition between variant schools of philosophy makes this question almost unanswerable. Theurgists, mediums and healers were variously categorized as practicing religion, philosophy, licit science, although natural magic used by the rural population could be considered superstition, witchcraft or healing magic. Luck notes that what was a state religion for the Persians might well be considered theurgy or even an illicit cultic practice in the Hellenic or Roman world. Apollonius of Tyana was called a magician by his enemies and a scientist/philosopher by his supporters. The degree of the confusion can be seen in the case of Anaxagoras, whose defense that he was a scientist rather than a magician fell on deaf ears, as both were judged atheists.

Nor were invented or new practices of magic and religion unknown. One Alexander of Abon-

tuteichos, as satirized by Lucian based on an historical reality, founded the cult of Glycon, the sacred snake, anointed himself chief priest, and managed to con the local inhabitants into building him a temple. To Alexander's credit, he not only played on the naiveté of his flock, but he offered them the promise of salvation and supported their need for religious comfort. But we must note that the winners write history, and although Alexander's memory is linked with the sobriquet "False Prophet", we don't know how sincere or wise he might have been.

Here, too, gender issues complicate the matter. Early Greek sources claim "witchcraft" not to be religion as it takes place at night, is unlawful, and has no established temples (97). Many of the female magic workers Luck cites are called witches, such as Medea and Circe, whom he identifies as demoted goddesses. By including Moses as magician (remembering the healing serpent staff and the magical competition leading up to the Exodus), Jesus, and the Peter *vs* Simon Magnus literature (more about which below), Luck reintegrates the classical pagan world with the Judeo-Christian one, thus drawing the Middle and Near Eastern magical world closer to the Hellenic and post-Hellenic one. While this essay lacks the extensive passages from primary sources, which the book length study affords, it provides a useful compilation of historical and mythological sorcerers and sorceries. Of particular utility is the glossary of magical terms (98-101).

Perhaps the most important of the essays in this volume is Richard Gordon's "Imaging Greek and Roman Magic." In a methodology reminiscent of the Annales school search for *mentalités* in medieval studies, Gordon proposes to disclose contemporary Graeco-Roman attitudes toward magic and witchcraft. Because of the loss of period documents the author rejects historical narrative as a methodology, thus avoiding the critique of the post-modernists regarding the relativistic meaning generated by the reader/text



conversation. By applying a more systematic approach, Gordon is able to describe a political-social landscape in which the problem of magic can be placed in a contextualized foreground.

Conflicting factors were simultaneously at work throughout the late Classical through the Late Antique periods. For one, both in the Greek states and in Rome, civic religion took precedent over theological debate, and moral-political issues over salvific promises. That is to say, the line between what was legitimate intercourse with the Otherworld and what was suspect or downright illegal was fuzzy, crooked and often moving.

He identifies four categories of magic workers: wise men and women, who practiced various rustic arts such as herbalism or smithcraft, with or without charms or blessings; root-cutters, who had a more extensive knowledge of poisons and probably some astrological and philosophical knowledge as well (the equivalent of the British nineteenth century cunning folk); learned ritual magicians; and finally priests or priestesses of cults other than those prevalent in the local society. All of these could work for good or ill. All of these delved into the Marvelous, had some intercourse with the Otherworld, including the dead and ghosts, and all of these faced a sliding scale of licitness or illicitness at any time and place. Over time in the Greek societies, the gods themselves were made more moral in order that they might serve with greater utility in a stable and rational civic religion. As this happened, the line between “good” and “bad” magical practitioners shifted to the right. The *daemones* which served the more highly educated magic workers were now subject to legal scrutiny themselves.


The licitness of any magical activity, therefore, depended on both its social and political location. Love magic, for example, was just fine, if it gave a man some extramarital success, but if it led to a wife’s infidelity or a subsequent abortion or poisoning of a husband, the state took notice. And throughout the classical world, poison and spells were far more available to a woman who wished

to redress a wrong than was a civil trial against some wrongdoer.

What separated Greek from Roman attitudes toward magic was the difference in their respective legal systems. Hellenistic Greeks fancied themselves historians, and magic based on the occult sciences of other cultures was cut some slack. Also, the code of law was far more situationally structured than that of Roman law. The guilt or innocence of a Socrates or a local witch depended on how well his or her accusers could be convinced of the benign or efficacious nature of the magical act or notion. Without doubt, the fate of an accused under Roman law depended to a large extent on the skill of a hired orator to sway a jury, and the rich were acquitted of greater crimes than those which brought on the summary execution of some poor prostitute or slave, however codified a legal system was in place.

It is important to note that the “witch craze” was not unique to Christian Early Modern Europe. In the years 184, 180-79, and 153 BCE Roman magistrates ordered the execution of thousands of magic workers accused of *veneficia* or malign magic. In one case 2,000 were killed and in another 3,000 (254). The critical point of law was the malign nature of the magic, and the critical question, “Was some innocent injured by another by magical means?” Local magistrates held most of the trials and many of the accused were brought to trial by the denouncement of their neighbors, often magical practitioners themselves. Confession and supporting testimony was secured through the use of torture and intimidation. The parallels to the Reformation trials are more than clear.

The final essay in the collection is Valerie Flint’s “The Demonization of Magic and Sorcery in Late Antiquity: Christian Redefinition of Pagan Religions”. Taken on face, this essay appears to merely acknowledge the demotion of *daemones* to evil spirits in league with magicians, and the proper use of magic in the hands of the



Christians (to promote proper fear and to demonstrate their superiority, and therefore the superiority of their god). It is only in comparison to the book *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) that this essay furthers the matter of magic across the bridge from the Pagan to the Christian West. Her thesis at that time, and to some extent in her essay, was that magic was a tool used by the early Church to maintain a sense of wonder, a potent tool against the logic of the philosophers and an emotional substrate upon which to accomplish wide-scale and lasting conversion. She argues for a symbiosis among the notions of folk magic, the logical or natural magic of such arts as astrology and medicine, and the miraculous acts of the godly.

Miracle *vs* marvelous is the key. In the tales of Peter and Simon the Magician, Peter's acts are miracle, while the defeated Simon's parallel acts are merely marvels, for which read something between stage tricks and the action of those evil demons. The line between licit and illicit magic again is socially and politically determined, in this case by a clerical body rather than a civic one. The flaw I find in the essay is the top-down methodology. Popular religion no longer seems to exist here. She depends heavily on the writings of the Early Church patriarchs, which expose more of the internal squabbles of the hierarchy of the Early Church than they do the practices of magic of either the un- or semi-converted or the popular notions of the clerical community itself. There is much more in the legendary literature, over and above the Peter-Simon corpus, which might flesh out and test her thesis. Moreover, to take an anthropological or sociological stance, are we to assume that country *stregae* ceased their herb collecting, or that literate Roman Empire Christians rejected astrological charts for their newborn children? Perhaps the days of civic auguries over a dead chicken were over. However, it seems unlikely that the notions of the Church fathers shut down traditional magic, especially in the light of their sympathy toward it as a public relations tool and its rapid "re-emer-

gence" in the form of folk magic and clerical magic alike.

Taken as a whole, the series of essays provides the modern scholar of magic with a sense of the continuity of the magical arts, not perhaps the Holy Grail of "survivals" but as a method by the marginalized and literate alike to deal with the unknown. The names of the gods may change, but spells and rituals went on. The state religion may periodically change, but in times of social stress a flash point of persecution may be sparked by the accusations of soured milk or unchurned butter, the appearance of a comet or a dangerous notion.

These essays are valuable not only to the scholar of magic and witchcraft, but also to the practicing modern witchcraft and pagan communities. In the classical period, as in the modern one, what one was called rather depended on who was doing the name-calling. The Greeks were just as able to call Persian and Egyptian practitioners "primitive" and "superstitious" as were the Protestants apt to apply those same names to Catholics in the Early Modern period. Rather than the textbook notion of *The World's Great Religions* (and *Sanctioned Philosophers*), new religions rose and fell. In point of fact, all religions were at one time "new", as witnessed by Christianity, Islam, and Wicca, not to mention Scientology, Bahai and a host of others. The dividing line between "religion" and "cult" is still fuzzy, and the point at which service yields to exploitation is still a matter of ethical dilemma, as witnessed by the phenomenon of televangelists. Finally, the collection points out that the popular sport of witch burning was not a post-Christian invention, but rather a human activity based on greed, fear, local authoritarian excess, and a tendency to prey on one's neighbors.

In a future review, I will look at the two volumes which cover the 18th and 19th centuries and the 20th century, and I look forward to the publication of the three volumes to come, which will include the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period.