The Western Magical Tradition

Professor Ronald Hutton

24 April 2024

Introduction

This lecture is concerned with learned systems of magic, defined as the manipulation of written texts, formal conjurations and special equipment, to bring about material change at the will of the performer. Such systems are historically a feature of Europe and the Middle East in particular. Sufficient manuscripts of them survive from all periods to allow the identification of key works and genres and their transmission between cultures. Many have now been edited and published, and enough research conducted into them, for an overall narrative of their development to be constructed. Such an enterprise, however, still awaits an author.

In 1997 Richard Kieckhefer, the foremost scholar of medieval magic, wrote that 'there is a history of the uses of magic and reactions to magic, but not of magic itself'. He himself declined the challenge of providing one, turning away from the need to 'wander endlessly through the thickets of the history of magic, from the Greek magical papyri of antiquity through Arabic and Byzantine sources on to the grimoires of the early modern era.' What is proposed here is to cut a path through those 'thickets' along precisely that route.

In making this journey it is necessary to reckon with two traditional contentions. The first is that ancient Egypt was a land where the inhabitants were especially given to the use of magic. The second is that learned ritual magic has descended directly from it to modern times. Scholars immediately recognise the former as an apparent classic case of the construction of a cultural and ethnic Other. It was the Greeks and Romans who articulated it, as one signifier of their own difference from Egyptians. The second claim also fits a familiar trope, the dislike of esoteric traditions to appear novel and innovative. They have tended instead, and especially in modern times, to claim a secret and unbroken preservation of ancient wisdom. We should therefore be in an excellent position to suspect both contentions at first sight of falsehood. The really interesting thing is that both are actually substantially correct.

The Ancient World

Egypt

Ancient Egyptian culture was united by the belief that the cosmos was animated and controlled by morally neutral spiritual power. This was used by the deities to sustain the natural order but could also be employed by human beings for their own ends. This employment was effected through ritual, uniting the necessary words and materials by acts. The deities sanctioned it in humans who paid them the necessary respect, but those humans were also capable of using the same power to coerce the deities. This was regarded as perfectly respectable, and the Egyptians morever lacked any distinction between religious and magical acts. They mingled praise and threats, prayers and demands, to divine beings. The usual performers of magical acts, on behalf of others, were functionaries of the official religion, attached to temples, known as lector priests. The practice of these acts was therefore quite legal, even when performed against enemies. The category of behaviour known in English pejoratively as witchcraft was therefore both absent and meaningless.

The Fertile Crescent

By contrast, the evidence from Mesopotamia – the ancient civilisations of Babylonia and Assyria – shows no sign that human beings were believed to be capable of coercing deities, or evenof commanding lesser

spirits without divine help. It also identifies deities much more with heavenly bodies, and makes a practice of timing important actions in harmony with the latter. That is why Mesopotamia was the birthplace of the practice of astrology. The texts from there also show an acute fear of witchcraft. This is proved both by the number of spells designed to thwart it and the legal penalties prescribed for it. The later notorious test for a witch, of throwing the suspect into water and attributing guilt to the results, is first recorded in the Babylonian law code of Hammurabi, around 1800 BC. The Mesopotamian tradition seems to have obtained throughout the Fertile Crescent from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea, including the increasingly distinctive culture of the Hebrews. Their emphasis on a single, jealous, tribal god led to a prohibition of the use of arcane powers other than by priests of that god. In other respects, however, their attitudes matched those of Mesiopotamia.

The Greeks and Romans

The situation in the classical Mediterranean world was different again. Both Greeks and Romans made a clear distinction between religion and magic. It has been implicitly used from the start of this lecture, and has indeed remained the standard Western tool for defining the two phenomena. It regards religion as a set of respectful relationships made by human with superhuman beings. If humans want something from those deities, then they have to ask, and the superhumans then decide whether to oblige. Magic, by contrast, represents a range of processes and techniques by which humans can tap into supernatural or preternatural power themselves. They therefore have some degree of personal power in effecting the results. The two categories are not in fact clearly separated, and overlap considerably at times, but they can also be entirely distinct.

It is vital for an understanding of classical culture, and of subsequent history, to emphasise that official Graeco-Roman attitudes, ever since they are clearly recorded in the fifth century BCE, stigmatized magic as a suspicious and dangerous activity. Athenian playwrights treated magicians as shabby and disreputable, and by the end of the fifth century a medical text. *On the Sacred Disease*, made the distinction between religion and magic summarized above. So did Plato, a generation later, and from then on it became standard. It may have developed in the fifth century, but sources are so much rarer before then that this seems impossible to prove.

There is not a single text from ancient Greece or Rome which argues that to try to control or manipulate deities is anything other than a very bad idea. The horror attached to it runs through legal cases from the imperial Roman period. Both the holy man Apollonius of Tyana and the author Apuleius allegedly escaped conviction on charges of working magic by claiming that they only offered prayers to deities. Pliny and Seneca both condemned magicians as people who tried to coerce the gods. Philosophers like Plotinus and Iamblichus attacked opponents by making this charge against them and defended themselves by claiming only to use practices prescribed and sanctioned by mainstream deities.

This hostility to magic burgeoned and was systematized under the Roman Empire, and was transplanted directly into Christianity, Moreover the Romans, unlike the Greeks, seem to have been large-scale witch hunters. In the second century BCE they launched trials of people accused of harmful magic which claimed thousands of victims. By the last century BCE they were generating literary images of evil and predatory female witches. These were remarkably enduring. Most who hear this lecture will know the most famous witches in English literature, those in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Fewer may realise that their chant echoes one performed by witches in the work of the ancient Roman poet Horace.

Egypt and Rome

An obvious question to pose now is what happened when Egypt became Roman and these starkly contrasted cultural attitudes ran into each other. The answer was extremely creative. Roman rule eroded both the financial basis of the temple system and the privileges of its priests. This forced the lector priests who handled magic out into wider society, and the process produced a notable development in their practices, recorded in the texts known as the Greek and Demotic Magical Papyri. While the attitudes, techniques and contents of magical operations continued previous Egyptian tradition, the scope them became more elaborate and ambitious.They were more eclectic, importing figures and rites from Greek, Hebrew and Mesopotamian tradition.They showed a new interest in gratiying the clients on whose fees they now depended, and training pupils, and sometimes appropriated the language and atmosphere of the late Roman mystery religions. Some rites were indeed designed to enable religious revelation, but almost always to fulfil individual and earthly ambitions. In other words, just as attitudes across the Roman Empire were hardening further against magic, as a means of manipulating superhuman power for selfish ends,

Egypt was producing an unprecedentedly sophisticated tradition dedicated to doing exactly that.

The unanswerable question is whether it did so alone, and then exported that tradition to the rest of the Roman world, or whether the same development was occurring elsewhere in that world. There are references to books of magic in other parts of the empire, usually getting buned by the authorities. None however have survived to show whether they contained complex ritual magic and whether this showed Egyptian influence. However, there are reasons for suspecting that Egypt really was making the pace. It possessed, uniquely in the Roman empire, an ideology which favoured the employment of magic. It had become a crossroads of cultures which provided an eclectic mix of materials and possessed just the right social context, in the privatization of the lector priests. The parallel case of astrology, which can be documented, is suggestive. As said, the practice of it commenced in Mesopotamia, but it was in late antique Egypt that it took its enduring form, with the invention of the zodiac and the horoscope.

Moreover all the essential features of the magic in the papyri had long been present in Egyptian culture: an emphasis that magicians must be physically and morally purified before working; a willingness both to command and to personify deities; the importation of foreign deities and spirits; the use of animal, vegetable and mineral substances in rites; the use of images, especially animated statues; a belief in the power of the spoken word and of a being's true name; the use of conjurations in unknown and often meaningless languages; the importance of choosing a correct day and time, and proper colours and objects; the use of human mediums to speak for deities; and the gathering of rites in books. It is true that many of the same traditions could be found in other ancient cultures: but Egypt had the lot.

It is not surprising that even as the magical papyri were being compiled, Roman literature made the skilled Egyptian magician, using books, a stock disreputable character. He always ranged from the merely shady to the downright evil. Portraits of magicians are also found in Egyptian texts, back to the early second millennium BCE, but are always shown there as admirable. Furthermore, one of the few kinds of source material for magical practices in the European lands of the Roman Empire consists of metal amulets bearing texts in Greek. Many call on gods or spirits, but there are almost never those of mainstream Greek and Roman culture. Instead they name those of the magical papyri.

The Later Influence of the Egyptian Tradition

By the end of the ancient world, the kind of magic found in the papyri was getting, full-blown, into other cultures. At the end of the third century a branch of pagan Greek philosophy appeared, Neoplatonism, which explicitly drew on Egyptian magical techniques to provide direct contact with deities. Jewish and Christian magical books were compiled which employed the Egyptian techniques, the most famous in each religion being *Sepher ha-Razim*, the Book of the Mysteries, and the *Testament of Solomon*. Both may actually have been composed in Egypt. Occasionally, texts can be traced directly from there across millennia. The *Kyranides*, a textbook on magical amulets, first appeared in fourth-century Egypt. It then passed through an Arabic and next a Byzantine Greek translation before reaching medieval Western Europe.

Sometimes living fossils can be found in medieval and early modern texts, which signal a transmission from Egypt. An invocation of the god Bes found in one of the Egyptian papyri appears in a sixteenth-century English grimoire. European magical handbooks of the period between 1300 and 1700 often contain the garbled names of other Egyptian deities. They also prescribe reed pens for rituals, objects ill suited to medieval parchment and vellum but ideal for Egyptian papyrus. Other Mediterreanan relics can be found in northern texts, such as the use of an olive oil lamp in a spell copied in England in 1622 or the prominence of the hoopoe in other English texts. This is one of the most striking Mediterranean birds, and features in the Egyptian papyri where its heart was used in spells. The Arabs then inflated it into the most important bird to feature in magical rites. In England, however, it is at best a rare visitor, so the presence of hoopoe hearts as vital ingredients in spells copied there between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries represents another living fossil of ancient Eastern Mediterranean magical tradition.

All this, however, is detail. It is more important to establish the surviving techniques for Western ritual magic which first appear as a group in the Egyptian papyri. First and most obvious are complex magical rites which unite actions, materials and words.Second is an emphasis on words in foreign or unknown languages. Third is one on the purification of the magician before the rite, including fasting, chastity and clean garments. Fourth is an emphasis on the making of special equipment for the rite. Fifth is one on the selection of an appropriate time for the operation. Sixth are measures to protect the magician against the forces raised. The seventh is a quest for a servitor spirit to carry out the magician's will. The eighth is an

eclectic and multi-cultural range of source material.

It should be made clear that all these characteristics are by no means present in all works of ceremonial magic compiled between the fourth and nineteenth centuries: rather, they are a list of actions and artefacts from which magicians could choose according to will and tradition. Nor is there an equal provision of such material across that long period: the survival of texts becomes much greater from the later middle ages onward. Nor is there any steady progression towards greater sophistication over time. For example, the operations in Christian magical papyri from Egypt are generally less elaborate and cosmopolitan than those in their pagan predecessors. The handbooks of Renaissance magicians were only as ornate and ambitious as those in late antique Egypt. Nonetheless, they all drew on the collection of techniques listed above, which appear in the magical papyri of the pagan Roman Empire.

Medieval Magic

A Counter-Culture

It is striking that, just as the complex magic in the papyri developed in clear opposition to the values and laws of the Roman state, so it often survived as a self-conscious and explicit counter-culture. One of the most notorious magical handbooks of the later middle ages, the *Sworn Book of Honorius*, was written as a direct response to a papal campaign to suppress ceremonial magic. It claimed that the Pope and his cardinals were possessed by demons, and that the magicians were the true servants of God. Other grimoires insisted that they had been dictated by an angel sent by the Almighty to instruct humanity, or that magic was not in itself inherently bad, but a neutral force which could be used for human benefit. This was a position directly counter to Christian orthodoxy, as maintained throughout the medieval period, but echoed that taken in ancient Egypt. Moreover, just as some of the Egyptian papyri had offered readers a chance to make a direct relationship with a deity, and the Neoplatonists had used Egyptian-style rites for the same objective, medieval Christians followed suit. Some promised the beatific vision, of God in his glory, to readers who not only enacted the prescribed rites but used in them some of the established litrugy of the Church while leading lives of monastic austerity and piety.

The Contributions of the Three Abrahamic Religions

If these are the fundamentals of the Western magical tradition, from the fourth century to the twenty-first, it is worth asking again what particular ethnic and religious forms have contributed to it. I would suggest that each of the three great Abrahamic religions have made distinctive contributions.

The Jewish addition was a stress on the invocation of angels as magical helpers and the power of the name or names of God. Both were rooted in ancient magic, the magical papyri having already embodied a full sense of the importance of enlisting spiritual assistants and of knowing the true names of spirits and deities. Both were also, however, associated with major features of Judaism- its interest in angelic beings; its preoccupation with the sanctity of language rather than of visual imagery; and its intense monotheism. Neither was acceptable to medieval Christianity, which condemned the invocation of angels and thought that the idea of special names which compelled attention from the one true deity detracted from his majesty. None the less, medieval Christian magic readily assimilated both.

The distinctive Muslim contribution consisted of astral magic: rites designed to harness the powers of heavenly bodies by drawing them into magical objects, known as talismans. This tradition seems to have developed in Mesopotamia in the ninth century. That region was the heart of the Arab Empire, with its capital at Baghdad, but also of course had an ancient preoccupation with the powers of heavenly bodies. Arabic astral magic may also, however, have drawn on ideas from Egypt, where the magical papyri contained several recipes for charging magical objects, especially rings, with occult virtue. The Egyptian Hermetic texts, from the same period as the papyri, made the sun, moon and planets immediate agents of an all-powerful divine creator. Whatever its origin, there is no doubt that the tradition of astral magic was conveyed to Europe by a mass translation of Arabic texts there in the twelfth century.

The distinctive Christian European tradition has been geometric. It has comprised the use of a consecrated circle as the normal venue for a magical operation, with special significance given to the four cardinal directions, and the identification of the pentagram as the most potent symbol of magic. All these figures had ancient roots. Magic circles appear in Assyrian and Babylonian rites of exorcism, and Egyptians processed around a sacred space. Nevertheless such circles only occasionally feature in actual ancient rites, or in the magic of the early middle ages. Likewise, significance had been attached to the cardinal points of the compass since ancient Sumerian times, but they only feature in a small minority of actual

magical recipes in the ancient and early medieval worlds. As for the pentagram, its figure is found in art across the ancient world and into the medieval one, but had no single tradition of significance and was generally merely decorative. There is no evidence of any special connection of it with magic.By contrast, as soon as Western Europeans acquired complex ceremonial magic, from translated Greek Arabic and Hebrew texts from the twelfth century onward, thet showed a preference for the quartered circle and the pentagram. The circle with cardinal points became the classic setting for magical workings, and the five-pointed star the most potent symbol used by magicians. It was credited with the power to control spirits, and in particular to banish demons. As such it entered popular culture in the later middle ages as a widespread protective device. It reflected the belief that that the human body was constructed on the basis of the number five, and that the human form was also that of the Judaeo-Christian God. The Christian interest in circles may have stemmed from the medieval concept of the universe as a series of spheres. The quartered circle and pentagram may be regarded as central to a distinctively Western European, Latin Christian, form of magic, because they do not seem to have had the same importance in the Byzantine east. What may emerge from this sequence of suggestions is how small the European contribution to ritual magic was, even though Europeans took it up with enthusiasm from the twelfth century onward.

Conclusion

Complex ceremonial magic was essentially a product of the Near East, which has made three huge contributions to European views of the supernatural, in successive waves. The first affected European paganism, teaching it to treat its deities as a squabbling family, with stories attached to its members. The second was the delivery of Christianity as the dominant religious system. The third was the provision of complex ritual magic, as an ideology and practice that was compatible with most religions. At the same time it represented an attitude to the cosmos which was at variance with ancient European tradition, and so Christian orthodoxy.

Nonetheless, it also seems that across Europe and the Near East religion and magic have been bound up with each other. Whenever spiritualty in general has gone through a period of intense creativity, development and renewal, magic has entered another dynamic phase of its history. In that sense, though the European tradition of a distinction between the two may well still have utility, the accompanying tradition of an inherent polarity between them has not. The history of religion is bound up with magic, and to study the one is to make a contribution to the other. That is why my final suggestion of this talk is that the history of magic, so long avoided by mainstream scholarship, and even now often neglected as a totality, really matters.

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References and Further Reading

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