

Anthropological Study of Magic and Witchcraft in the Roman World

Michaela Brough, 2027

This project explores the concept of magic and witchcraft in the Roman World, as well as the role those who practiced it served in society. Specifically, I wanted to gain insight into the understanding of magic and those who performed it in the Imperial period, from the 1st century BCE to the 5th century CE, and how these ideas played into larger societal views.

My research utilized both primary and secondary sources to explore Roman views on magic and sorcerers before the Imperial period, comparing these perspectives with those of neighbouring societies like Greece and Egypt. I then shifted my focus to the Roman Imperial period, analyzing portrayals of magic in primary magical sources, like curse tablets and spellbooks, as well as legal texts, literature and art. By using this approach, I aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of how beliefs about magic evolved over time and how they were influenced by sociopolitical factors. Additionally, I organized my research so that I read secondary sources chronologically to assess how the scholarly understanding of these topics has adapted over time.

Analyzing my findings alongside Professor Boyd, I concluded that Rome's understanding of magic was fundamentally rooted in the concept of "Otherness", drawing the line between religion and magic at the identity of the practitioner, rather than having a concrete definition of 'magic' (Edmonds 2019). Societal perceptions of magic were heavily influenced by political rhetoric, which often vilified the practices of marginalized groups, such as women and foreigners, branding their actions as 'witchcraft' while Roman elites who engaged in similar practices were largely overlooked. For example, divination—using signs to infer the will of the supernatural—was a widespread practice across all societal levels. However, its acceptance by the State fluctuated based on who they considered to be the main practitioners. While Roman officials frequently employed Roman and foreign religious authorities to perform divination as political for military counsel, multiple notable statesmen including Pliny and Plautus, condemned professional (non-official) magicians who offered such services as frauds or dangers to society (Dickie 2001; Ogden 2002). Such criticisms led to multiple mass expulsions and executions of diviners, magicians, and astrologers throughout the Roman Imperial period (Ogden 2002). Similarly, magical objects including amulets, curse tablets, and dolls, were prevalent throughout the Empire, but their perceived legitimacy depended on their use and origin. For example, we have 1,600 examples of curse tablets, thin metal sheets inscribed with symbolic writing and drawings to petition supernatural beings to act on someone's behalf. When used for personal gain, be it sexually, legally, or economically, these tablets were deemed as magical; however, similar tablets employed for communal purposes or to right a legal injustice were seen as legitimate religious practices (Edmonds 2019). Likewise, in literature, heroes like Odysseus and Aeneas utilized magical rituals, such as divination and necromancy, which were portrayed as necessary and pious for their quests (Homer; Virgil). Conversely, powerful women in the same stories, like Circe and Dido, were often vilified for their magical practices, reflecting the consistent theme of evil female witches in Roman literature based on stereotypes, as seen in other literary figures like Medea and Canidida. While men used such practices for heroic feats, these women used their magical knowledge for malevolent purposes, like poisoning people or turning them into animals, kidnap children for love spells, and curse Rome itself (Ogden 2002).

In summary, in a society where science, religion, and daily life intertwined, the term 'magic' (for which Latin had various terms with nuanced differences) encompassed anything that deviated from established social or religious norms, whether it involved women asserting agency or foreigners practicing their beliefs within the city of Rome. When Roman elites used these foreign magical practices, even if they traveled to places like Egypt to do so, they were seen as eccentrics rather than dangerous and their talents were seen as party tricks rather than magic (Dickie 2001). This shows that, ultimately, the distinction between magic and religion hinged on the identity of the practitioner. Marginalized groups like women and foreigners were labeled as sorcerers, and were stereotyped and ridiculed, either as potential threats or frauds, while the Roman elite and political state itself could employ the same practices by those they deemed priests or oracles, and deemed them legitimate religious rituals.

I intend to incorporate this research, alongside the research I completed in the summer of 2024 with Professor Boyd titled "Anthropological Study of Religious Syncretism in Romano-Britain", toward a larger project in the future, in which I will further explore the role of women in religion and folk superstitions in Rome and across the Roman Empire.

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