

## «MAGIC» IN ROME: TOWARDS A NEW TAXONOMY

«Much of what people claim as “ancient magic” is modern imaginings of ancient Greco-Roman religion».  
Janowitz 2001, p. 3

The aim of this article is to re-open the debate on the concept of «magic» from the heuristic point of view. Building on previous critics, I will raise a few methodological issues also in response to the suggestions recently put forth by Rives<sup>1</sup>. I will then briefly turn to the specific case of «magic» in ancient Rome to suggest a new taxonomy: the scope of the present paper is therefore essentially theoretical. The subject of «magic» is both vast and complex, and although any attempt at thoroughness is admittedly daunting, to stir further reflections seems to this author still a profitable endeavour.

In the last decades, and particularly after the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Greek Magical Papyri (1973-74), the subject of «magic» has received much attention<sup>2</sup>, and most twentieth-century scholars of antiquity used the term as a self-evident, scientifically unquestioned category, while some anthropologists and historians of religions began to raise the question of whether it is legitimate to use the category of «magic» and whether it is proper to speak of «magic» as opposed to religion<sup>3</sup>. Some classicists followed suit, and most of the scholars joining the debate today set out by recognizing the controversial character of the term «magic»<sup>4</sup>. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, very few have clearly and purportedly refrained from using «magic» as a scientific category. Most enquiries into «magic» use the term as general heading to classify a whole range of different phenomena, from funerary inscriptions containing curses to amulets, from dreams and divination to binding spells<sup>5</sup>. In an important contribution, Versnel highlights the tendency of obscuring the distinctive character of different religious phenomena under the label of «magic», but he somehow fails his own premise looking for the specificity of magic in the compulsory attitude of magic spells as opposed to the supplicatory attitude of prayer<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> RIVES 2003. Among the thought-provoking contributions on the subject see particularly the ground-breaking SMITH M. 1978 (part. for magic pp. 68-93), SMITH J. Z. 1978 and 1995, and below, n. 3.

<sup>2</sup> PREISENDANZ - HENRICHS 1973-1974<sup>2</sup>, and the English translation of BETZ 1986. LUCK 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See esp. WAX 1963; HAMMOND 1970; ROSENGREN 1976; TAMBIAH 1990 and SMITH J. Z. 1978, part. pp. 190-207, and 1995; NEUSNER ET AL. 1989.

<sup>4</sup> See for ex. GAROSI 1976, pp. 33-73; PHILLIPS 1986, pp. 2711-32, and 1991, GORDON 1987 and 1999; GAGER 1992: pp. 24-25, BREMMER 1999.

<sup>5</sup> See for example GRAF 1997; DICKIE 2001; OGDEN 2002.

<sup>6</sup> VERSNEL 1991.

In this trend, Rives' contribution on the Twelve Tables, Janowitz' monograph on the first Christian centuries, and Carastro's volume on ancient Greek phenomena, are outstanding exceptions<sup>7</sup>. Famously put forward by James Frazer in opposition to both science and religion, the category of «magic» is one that dies hard<sup>8</sup>. A revealing, however far-fetched, example is the collection of ancient texts of *Arcana Mundi*, where Luck presents us with an astounding and multifarious conflation of subjects, where demonology and alchemy are grouped together with miracles and amulets, and texts of Homer and Apollodorus are listed side by side with Vettius Valens and Firmicus Maternus. Unconcerned with – or oblivious to – historical categories, Luck's alluring volume stands as an interesting collection of etic assumptions about what it is commonsensically defined as «magic» by a Western, contemporary perspective.

When, however, a span of thirteen centuries and cultural areas as distinct as Greece, Rome and Egypt are treated as a single and coherent cultural unity, one is entitled to ask what is there to be gained from a wholesale reduction of distinct cultural phenomena into a single subject, and, what these texts have possibly in common. Probable answers are the usual suspects: irrationality, primitive thinking, superstition and religious marginality. None of these terms, however, can be considered a native – emic – category, as they all betray an implicit etic perspective, complete with overtones of morality and superiority. Assuredly, many studies on «magic» show a far greater degree of historical accuracy, and my critique does not touch on the value of the many important and specific contributions on the various issues assembled under this umbrella. Still, the tendency to treat subjects pertaining to «magic» with broad brushstrokes, as far historical and geographical distinctions are concerned, is, however, fairly common.

On the thriving debate on the issue, the present contribution wishes to argue that the question at stake is of methodological rather than political correctness. What sort of explanatory power or taxonomical correctness does the model of «magic» bear? Can we apply it as a descriptive category of general and cross-cultural validity like «religion» or «science»? Secondly, when we turn to the study of a specific culture we should examine the historical accuracy that the term «magic» bears in explaining *in its own terms* that particular society.

#### I. «MAGIC»: A HEURISTIC CATEGORY OR A BLACK BOX?

The term «magic» has been used as a negative concept, a veritable black box where it has been convenient, for various reasons, to put all sorts of phenomena that cannot be included under the headings of religion or science<sup>9</sup>. In other terms, magic does not define «what is» but rather «what is *not*». In particular, magic is *not* religion and is *not* science (including especially medicine)<sup>10</sup>. In arguing that many accounts of magic adopt a privative definition of their subject matter, J. Z. Smith points out that «magic» resembles «religion» or «science» lacking only some of the latter's traits. In such formulations, a promised difference in kind turns out to

<sup>7</sup> JANOWITZ 2001; CARASTRO 2006; see also GIORDANO 2011.

<sup>8</sup> FRAZER 1922, pp. 56-60.

<sup>9</sup> Such a use of the term is first attested in Pliny, *NH*, 29-30, *passim*, on which see JANOWITZ 2001, pp. 13-17.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, LUCK 2006, p. 1, who treats these terms as universal categories of human culture.

be a postulated difference of degree – or, more pointedly, of development – and one is entitled to ask what sort of difference that sort of difference makes?<sup>11</sup>. From the heuristic point of view, therefore, magic, being a negative definition, has little or no power to help us understand the distinctive features of the cluster of phenomena defined as «magical».

As for the opposition between «magic» and «religion», a few points should be additionally made. The opposition first emerged in the charges alleged by Romans against the Christians, particularly from the fourth century on, and, with the changing in power relations, by Christians against the Pagans and Jews in particular: «Jews have been vulnerable to all that comes with being thought to have special, secret knowledge, and charges of engaging in «magic» haunted Jews for centuries»<sup>12</sup>. As such, «magic» was employed as a social and political weapon for excluding or including members of the society within the accepted frame of religious behaviour. As Janowitz points out: «Moses and Jesus were both considered magicians by outsiders, much to the horror of Jews and Christians. (...) Entire religions were defined as “magic” and the consequences linger today, especially in the case of modern attitudes towards Greco-Roman and Egyptian religious practices»<sup>13</sup>. We may detect a resonance of such a usage, as we will see, in some part of the contemporary debate on the division of magic vs. religion. Such a division in fact stands out as a substantial cleavage, in the terms used by a contemporary scholar of Socrates, who, commenting on the allegedly superior Socratic conception of piety as a selfless service to the gods asserts:

How radical, how subversive of traditional Greek belief and practice this conception of piety would be, we can see if we reflect that what had passed for religion to-date had been thick with magic. By «magic» I understand *the belief, and all of the practices predicated on it, that by means of ritualistic acts man can induce supernatural powers to give effect to his own wishes. In black magic one exorcises supernatural to do evil to one's enemy. In white magic one seeks to prevail on them through prayer and sacrifice to do good to oneself and to those for whom one cares* – (...). As practiced all around Socrates, religion was saturated with just that sort of magic (...). In the practice of Socratic piety man would not pray to god, «My will be done through thee», but «Thy will be done through me»<sup>14</sup>.

If we spell out the implication of this passage, Socrates represents a *figura Christi* – as he often did in Christian authors – whereas the Athenians stand as the equivalent to either Pagans or Jews. On the one hand, both Jesus and Socrates are said to sustain a superior religiosity to the one current in their times, on the other, both Athenian and Jewish people did not recognize the spiritual value of the purported message, being attached to their bad religion – in fact their «magic»<sup>15</sup>. The terms at stake are a legacy of the Christian opposition between good religion

<sup>11</sup> SMITH J. Z. 1995, p. 13 and f.

<sup>12</sup> JANOWITZ 2001, p. 99; see also pp. 1, 25, 45. See BARB 1963. On the confrontation of Roman and Christian religiosity see LINDER - SCHEID 1993, BURRUS 1995, GIORDANO 2005, p. 346 f.

<sup>13</sup> JANOWITZ 2001, p. 3. For Jesus as «magician» see M. Smith 1978.

<sup>14</sup> VLASTOS 1996, p. 155 f. See on this point GIORDANO 2005, p. 348 and ff.

<sup>15</sup> See also BURNYEAT 1997a, p. 10: «what the Athenians, from within that religion, inevitably saw as his wrongdoing the city was the true god's gift to them of a mission to improve their souls, to educate them into a better

(Christianity) and bad religion (Paganism), whereby the practices ascribed to the latter are labelled as «magic» and thus rejected and condemned.

Another way of using the term as an evaluative rather than an interpretative category is in its analogy with «primitive»; a good example is Scullard's analysis regarding the Roman festival of the *Lemuria*: «some *primitive* ideas obviously *survive* into later times, but on the whole the Romans freed themselves from the cruder manifestations of magic and taboo»; in this case not only is the ritual associated with an undeveloped form of human culture, but the author also does so by adopting a clearly positivist pattern, laden with a contemptuous superiority, thereby producing a secular alternative to the Christian oppositional devaluation of the category<sup>16</sup>.

Leaving aside the evaluative and instrumental function of control and censoring, the term «magic» used either in the sense of a «bad» or «primitive» religion says little or nothing about the specificity of the phenomena it allegedly describes, apart from its being acceptable, legitimate, or not, and tells far more about those who apply it. As Smith has pointed out, within the range of phenomena classified as «religion» there are just as many differences as the ones that exist between phenomena classified as magical as opposed to religious ones. The disparity between those phenomena that scholars label «magical» cannot sufficiently justify the model's employment.

Despite his excellent inquiry on the *Lex Cornelia* where emic perspectives are aptly reconstructed, Rives has argued that we should continue to use the term «magic» as a heuristic category, that is, not in the «old realist approach», but as a convenient «overarching category to encompass various issues» and that «to restrict ourselves to an emic level of analysis is to make it virtually impossible to trace lines of continuity between shifting emic categories»<sup>17</sup>. The question, however, is exactly what kind of continuity is the one Rives invokes: where does continuity lie if not in a devaluation of the phenomena at stake? Moreover, should we not be concerned with discontinuity and change no less than with supposed continuities?

To be sure, over the centuries the same cultural phenomena underwent different labelling and evaluations, as in the case of the *Lex Cornelia*, which was originally devised to sanction harmful actions, and by the fourth century CE it became an instrument to repress what was perceived as religious deviance, and thus was labeled as «magic»<sup>18</sup>. If, however, we take the latter approach as a yardstick, thereby employing an evaluative and repressive term as a heuristic category, we would end up with a confusing rather than an encompassing model.

Once more, besides questions of moral relevance, this type of labelling seems simply to deprive us of the possibility of understanding the cultural specificity and the *proprium* inherent in each ritual by using a general and generalizing category of evaluation. The use of

---

religion (...) For they had the wrong religion, and he was the first martyr for the true religion». On Socrates as prefiguration of Jesus in Christian authors see GIANNANTONI 1971, p. 499 and ff. On the use of the term «magic» in the first centuries CE, see the very informative and fine study of Janowitz 2001.

<sup>16</sup> SCULLARD 1985, p. 15, my italics.

<sup>17</sup> RIVES 2003, p. 316.

<sup>18</sup> See RIVES 2003.

the term «magic», therefore, not only lacks usefulness, but it is also misleading insofar as it blurs rather than elucidates the specificity of the phenomena it attempts to describe.

Deconstructing the category of «magic», however, leaves us with an empty space rather than a new structure, and the appeal for heuristic classifications pointed out by Rives, which may reveal lines of continuity as well as change, is still a *desideratum*. To this end, I will offer some preliminary suggestions to construct a different taxonomy for the phenomena classified as «Roman magic», by means of a method of differentiation and assimilation based on emic assumptions; the classification will be suggestive rather than exhaustive and outlined in broad brushstrokes<sup>19</sup>.

## II. TOWARDS A NEW TAXONOMY: THE CASE OF ROME

In what follows I will take advantage of previous valuable contributions on the subject, which, on various accounts, have noted that until the first century CE «the Romans produced no precise definition of what magic was and what was not»<sup>20</sup>. On this trail, I will list three major categories to differentiate and better understand phenomena that show too little in common to be put under the same framework. The first century CE stands as a watershed, since, with the rise of Christianity in particular, the question of diversification of perspectives on «magic» – and its relationship to religion – comes to the fore<sup>21</sup>. As Graf states, «à Rome, la magie n'est dans un premier temps pas envisagée comme phénomène à part : les termes traditionnels (*carmen, excantare, veneficium*) inscrivent des comportements *que nous appellerions magiques* dans la religion acceptée en ne les interdisant que quand ils violent les intérêts de la communauté ou des particuliers»<sup>22</sup>. Graf makes clear that the application of the term «magical» is an entirely modern gesture, which runs counter of a Roman native perspective; it is my contention that by lifting such an unnecessary denomination we will gain a clearer and distinctive picture of the phenomena at stake.

### 1. EFFICACIOUS SONGS AND UTTERANCES

Terms such as *carmen* (*malum carmen, carmen auxiliare*), *cantio, incantare, excantare* hint at the use of what we may better define as efficacious words<sup>23</sup>. Under this category we understand diverse practices based on the use of powerful words and (or) songs in order to bring about the action they describe. This category can be termed efficacious songs, in the sense that the words uttered or sung by the action of *cantare* are thought as having the power of *efficere*, to realize and accomplish. These words are not uttered after or about the reality, but are

<sup>19</sup> FARAONE - OBBINK 1991 encompasses several contributions that help understanding the phenomena at stake in their own terms, although some of them keep using «magic» as an unquestioned scientific category.

<sup>20</sup> MASTROCINQUE 2005, p. 387. See along these lines BEARD ET AL. 1998, pp.154-56; JANOWITZ 2001, pp. 9-26, RIVES 2002 and 2003. On Roman magic see, for example, MASSONEAU 1934; TUPET 1976; BELAYCHE 2007, p. 275; HORSTER 2007.

<sup>21</sup> In general, see JANOWITZ 2001. For a sensible historical differentiation see GRAF 1997, pp. 54-7. Contra, DICKIE 2001, pp. 124-141.

<sup>22</sup> GRAF 1990, p. 280, my italics.

<sup>23</sup> On which see GIORDANO 1999.

pronounced together and before reality, efficacious utterances in this sense are to be seen more as real actions than mere words. The linguistic theory of speech acts, provides us with a powerful heuristic model to access the inner structure of our category. In terms of the so-called School of Oxford, as elaborated particularly by Austin, the actions defined as *cantare* can be defined as «performative utterances», endowed with particular illocutionary values. The performative utterance, or simply «performatives» (a neologism created by Austin), «indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action»<sup>24</sup>. To utter a sentence in the appropriate circumstances is not to *describe* one's doing or to state that one is doing it: it is to *do* it. None of the utterances are either true or false; they rather prove to be either efficacious or inane.

The law of the Twelve Tables provides an excellent instance of the power of words<sup>25</sup>. Pliny the Elder (*N.H.* 28.10) explicitly asks: *polleantne aliquid verba et incantamenta carminum?*, and quotes: *Quid? Non et legum ipsarum in XII tabulis verba sunt: QUI FRUGES EXCANTASSIT et alibi: QUI MALUM CARMEN INCANTASSIT...*; «What? Do we not read these words in the very law of the Twelve Tables “Person who has by spells taken off the harvests of a neighbour” and elsewhere “person who has uttered an incantation” (Plin. *H.N.* 28.17)»<sup>26</sup>. Cicero quotes the provision against the practice of *occantare* and *carmen condere*, both aiming at damaging someone's social position: *Si quis occantavisset sive carmen condidisset, quod infamiam faceret flagitiumve alteri*, «If any person had sung or composed against another person a *carmen* such as was to cause slander or insult to another» (Cic. *Rep.* 4.12)<sup>27</sup>. In these passages we can see the truly performative power of the *carmen* insofar as it is described as the objective agent of *facere*.

These provisions have been connected to «magic», but, as it is put in Beard, North and Price «it is much less clear that, in contemporary Roman terms, we are dealing here with the specific category of “magic” or with prohibitions directed at “magical” practices as such»<sup>28</sup>. To be sure, *incantare*, *malum carmen* and *excantare (fruges)*, causing harm to the harvest and transferring the harvest by uttering or singing particular words constitute, from an etic perspective, acts of «magic», and as such they have contributed to a «strong view» thereof, but, as Rives has demonstrated, «by dispensing with the problematic notion “magic” we can analyze more clearly and effectively the evidence for and significance of these laws»<sup>29</sup>. Moreover, as Scheid has pointed out, from a native point of view, these laws dealt with the legal category of violation of the right to property<sup>30</sup>. The law in other terms aimed at

<sup>24</sup> AUSTIN 1962, p. 27

<sup>25</sup> For a thorough investigation of the Twelve Tables see notably RIVES 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Seneca uses the same verb to indicate the means of harming a neighbour's harvest or of attracting it by spells: *Et apud nos in XII tabulis cavetur NE QUIS ALIENOS FRUCTUS EXCANTASSIT*, «In Rome also, the law of the Twelve Tables gives a warning: “Nobody shall, by spells, take away the harvest of a neighbour” » (Sen. *QNat.* 4.7.2). Cfr. *Apul.* 47. 3; and *traducere messes*, in Verg., *Ecl.* 8. 99. On the relationship between these texts see RIVES 2002, pp. 272-276.

<sup>27</sup> See RIVES 2002, pp. 279-288.

<sup>28</sup> BEARD ET AL. 1998, p. 155.

<sup>29</sup> RIVES 2002, p. 288. See GAROSI 1976; GORDON 1999 for the idea of a «strong view» of magic, that is for the re-interpretation of the phenomena through a modern lens.

<sup>30</sup> SCHEID 1981.

punishing the *result* of the action rather than the *method* by which that action was brought about. In this respect, these incantations were considered as yet another effective way of harming someone, comparable – if not equal – to fire or theft, where the efficacious aspect of words and songs are singled out as legally relevant in a rubric *per se*, as harmful as fire, even if not as manifest<sup>31</sup>.

In a recent contribution, Bettini has analysed the power of songs defined as *cantio* and generally *cantare* as those found in Cato's treatise *On Agriculture*, 41 where we find a lengthy description of the way to heal a dislocation through an incantation<sup>32</sup>. Bettini describes the specific character of singing (*cantare*) as «a delivery of repetitive character. This is, in the first place, repetition of an “internal” type, through the iterative structure of the phonic material used in the formula, but the repetition surely also operated from the “external” point of view, in the sense that the formulae would have been repeated many times»<sup>33</sup>. The use of healing incantations of this sort, whose efficacy lied in that kind of repetition was very wide spread in the ancient world. We might recall the parallel of Greek *epoidai*, healing songs mentioned in Homer, when the young Odysseus was wounded in the leg by a wild boar and his uncles stop the hemorrhage by singing *epoidai* (*Od.* 19. 455 and ff.)<sup>34</sup>. In ancient medicine, the use of spells was viewed as one among the various means of healing: songs were considered efficacious because of the power of the right words – or the right way to utter or sing them – to produce actual effects, often in conjunction with gestures and ritual means.

The practices denoted by *carmen* and *cantare* and their cognates, therefore, may be considered as belonging to a definite category of powerful words: most revealingly, the very law of the Twelve Tables is referred to as a *carmen* (*Cic. Leg.*, 2.23.59), seemingly because of the binding power of its wording, written in a style which kept the dimension of orality in formulaic, peremptory expressions, which gave to these laws the character of ritual rules intended to be repeated and memorized<sup>35</sup>.

## 2. EFFICACIOUS REMEDIES: *VENENA*

This category refers to the so-called pharmacology of sacred plants, herbs and roots. The term *venenum* is comparable to the corresponding Greek *pharmakon*, which, like *venenum*, is a *vox media* that bears no particular connotation of beneficial or malicious intention<sup>36</sup>. They are powerful substances that can be very harmful, sometimes lethal, or very beneficent; as a

<sup>31</sup> See above, n. 25.

<sup>32</sup> «If a dislocation occurs, it will be healed by this incantation: take a green reed four or five feet long, split it in two through the middle and let two men hold it against their hips: begin the incantation *moetas... petes* up to where the halves meet. Wave a piece of iron over it. After the two halves meet and are in contact, take the reed in hand and cut the end to the right and to the left, fasten it by a ligature over the dislocation or fracture, it will heal. Nevertheless, do the incantation every day and for the dislocation or in this way *huat...dannaustra*».

<sup>33</sup> BETTINI 2016, p. 162. In this valuable contribution, however, the scholar ascribes these practices to «magic», which seems to me an unnecessary category for the reasons exposed above.

<sup>34</sup> See on this CARASTRO 2006.

<sup>35</sup> It would be interesting to investigate in this light the ritual songs of the *Fratres Arvales*, called *carmina arvalia*, performed with dances in honour of the goddess Dia in May, during the purification of the fields, or the songs, *carmina saliarum* of the *Salii*.

<sup>36</sup> Cfr. Gaius, D. 50. 16. 236 qui venenum dicit adicere debet utrum malum vel bonum

matter of fact, in Homer the use of these *pharmaka* is particularly connected to gods and demigods. Hermes gives Odysseus the herb *moly* to counteract the powerful *pharmaka* of Circe; Helen mixes into the wine of Menelaus and Telemachus a *pharmakon* of oblivion that «quiets all pain and strife, and brings forgetfulness of every ill» (*Od.* 4. 220)<sup>37</sup>. *Veneficium* refers to the preparation of a *venenum*. The term *venenum* is similar to *carmen* or *cantio* in being a *vox media*. As we have seen, the term designates a powerful, efficacious drug without any further connotation. There were *venena ad sanandum*, «drugs for healing», *venena amatoria*, «drugs for love» and *venena mala*, «poisons», that are the ones condemned by the famous *lex Cornelia*.

In 81 BCE, the *Lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficis* reveals the felt urgency of reducing and punishing murders in a time of civic tension. Later commentators report that this law distinguished death provoked by violence (*factum*) and nonviolent death caused by poison (*dolus*). Death by *veneficium* is equated to death by sword (by the action of *sicarii*), as two different methods of killing. Just as in the case of the Twelve Tables, from the native point of view there was no otherizing «magic» behind these practices, they were simply understood as effective means of harming people, and were therefore categorized as such<sup>38</sup>.

Despite these clear Roman categorizations, most scholars have considered this law as a sanction «against magic»<sup>39</sup>. In this case too, the supposedly presence of «magic» as the hidden target of this law comes exclusively from the cultural background and categories of the modern commentator. Since the mention of «magic» as connected to this law dates to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, it does not seem methodologically correct to project interpretations belonging to Late Antiquity back onto the late Republic. The assertion that «by the late Republic, magic was brought under an earlier general law on murder and poisoning», rests entirely on later analogies and on contemporary assumptions about damaging «magical» practices, and not on ancient sources, that distinguish between efficacious and non-efficacious remedies, and not between «magic» and science or «magic» and religion<sup>40</sup>.

### 3. TABELLAE DEFIXIONIS

These tablets, known also simply as *defixiones* and in Greek as *katadesmoi*, represent another category by their own right. They are a very peculiar type of document, discovered in the area

<sup>37</sup> See on this respects SCARBOROUGH 1991. Egypt was the land of *pharmaka* par excellence; as Homer says, in Egypt «The earth, the giver of grain, bears greatest store of drugs (*pharmaka*),/ many that are healing when mixed, and many that are baneful:/ there every man is a physician (*ietros*) learned above the rest of mankind» (*Od.* 4. 229-232). In ancient Greece the knowledge of plants was the expertise of particular figures who were thought of as healers and were often itinerant craftsmen, the Homeric *demiourgoi*, often specified as *rhizotomoi*, rootcutters. Such was Epimenides of Crete, who, according to Plutarch, was a traveling purifier, renowned for his great wisdom, summoned by Solon to remove the pollution of the Alcmeonids from Athens. The association between purification and drug lore in this charismatic figure is revealing of the cohesion of fields touching upon healing practices, purification rituals and wisdom.

<sup>38</sup> See RIVES 2003.

<sup>39</sup> MASSONNEAU 1934, pp. 159-96; GRAF 1997, p. 47; BEARD ET AL. 1998, pp. 233 f.

<sup>40</sup> BEARD ET AL. 1998, p. 233. Ancient drug lore should be understood within an interconnected cosmology, which encompassed what we could call the psychological as well as the physical spheres. Remedies might heal a physical illness as much as they might make somebody fall in love. This is a central point for our purpose, as ancient scientific thinking, unlike the modern one, was in no position to render judgments on what was «physical» and what was «psychological», nor what was «magical» (that is, non-demonstrable) from what was «scientific».

of the Mediterranean basin and in Romanized areas of Europe, especially in Britain<sup>41</sup>. They were inscribed pieces of lead, usually in the form of thin sheets or other materials, deposited most commonly in tombs, in the vicinity of a cemetery, sometimes also in wells. The first and foremost distinctive feature of this category is that they were a *written* ritual, that is, they were part of *graphomena*, a category envisaged by Graf – although in a different perspective – alongside *legomena* and *dromena*<sup>42</sup>. One of their usual denominations is «curse tablets», but this does not seem to be correct in so far as the distinctiveness of this document is not the report or the writing down of an utterance, as it might seem from this definition, but the very act of writing. Unlike curses and other similar utterances, the distinctive propositional content of the efficacious action is the writing itself rather than the oral pronouncement. This does not exclude, to be sure, the value of the oral delivery, since, as it is well-known, writing and reading in antiquity were oral/aural practices – however foreign this may seem to us – since, unlike modern practice, every reading was done aloud<sup>43</sup>.

Following Gager's typology, these tablets can be divided between: competition in theatre and circus, sex, love and marriage, legal and political disputes, business, pleas for justice and revenge<sup>44</sup>: a variety of subjects corresponding to a variety of addresses to the divinities. We find curses, prayers (with different tones), direct binding formulae (such as I bind X!). Some of these documents display graphical arrangements such as drawings, nonstandard forms of speech, *voces mysticae*, palindromes, *charakteres*, vowel series, names ending in -el or -oth<sup>45</sup>.

The use of *defixiones* in Rome deserves, therefore, more scrutiny than the simple definition of «magical means» affords: this labeling has amounted to a devaluation of these documents for reconstructing the religions of Rome. It is interesting, for example, that in the textbook of Beard, North and Price, the category of *defixiones* is mentioned only in passing and under the treatment of «magic»: «so, for example, the surviving Latin curses (often scratched on lead tablets, and so preserved) increase greatly in number under the empire, and the Greek magical papyri from Egypt are most common in the third and fourth centuries A.D. »<sup>46</sup>. This remarkably elliptic sentence shows the neglecting attitude of the scholars of Roman religion towards their subject as not worth investigating in its own terms, a neglect that seem to inadvertently perpetuate an age-old prejudice against these practices. It is worthwhile to mention the fact that the use of tablets was perceived as one of the distinguishing features of pagan identity in the eyes of Christians, as late as the eighth century C. E., at least judging from a Christian sermon of that epoch, where we read: «Whoever, during the time of the moon's increase, thinks that it is possible to avert (harm) through the use of inscribed lead tablets (*per laminas plumbeas scriptas*)... they are not Christians but Pagans» (pseudo-August., *Homily on Sacrilegious Practices*, 5-6). The passage reveals its author's conviction that the

---

<sup>41</sup> See CARASTRO 2010.

<sup>42</sup> GRAF 2015, p. 236.

<sup>43</sup> See for example BURNEYAT 1997b; GAVRILOV 1997; see now DAY 2015.

<sup>44</sup> GAGER 1992, p. 5 and ff.

<sup>45</sup> On this «essential usage of writing» see GRAF 2015, p. 229 ff.

<sup>46</sup> BEARD ET AL. 1998, p. 220.

practice of writing on a leaden support (*lamina plumbea*) amounts to a belief in coercive, binding powers, condemned in the milieu of Christianity.

*Tabellae defixionis*, on the contrary, constitute a very precious document of Roman religiosity, and are able to illuminate unprecedented popular perceptions of divine presence in the everyday life<sup>47</sup>.

By way of conclusion, I would like to mention four other categories of phenomena that should be studied in their own right, emancipated from the box of «magic»: necromancy, astrology, divination and homeopathic rituals, to which we might add tentatively the *Papyri Graecae magicae*. Last but not least, the semantic field surrounding the word *magia*, as it appears in Vergil, and in Roman elegy (where, as it has already been shown, there is more an adaptation of Greek models than a reference to Roman realities). Instead of viewing radically diverse phenomena such as *defixiones*, *cantio*, necromancy as substantially related, we would do better to base our examination on more accurate distinctive features. The question of if and how the use of the category of «magic» in native terms might hold some power of explanation remains, to be sure, both open and complex<sup>48</sup>.

The proposed classification is certainly neither exhaustive nor final, to be sure, and each category may constitute a field of research in its own right, but it is my persuasion that such a diversification may not only provide us with a fresh look and a useful reassessment of the phenomena under discussion, but may also open new and more fruitful avenues of inquiry that can enrich our picture of «Roman religions» and to account for some of the complexities of Roman culture.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

AUSTIN 1962. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford 1962.

BEARD ET AL 1998. M. Beard, J. North and S. Price, *Religions of Rome*, vol. I, Cambridge 1998.

BARB 1963: A.A. Barb, *The Survival of the Magic Arts*, in A. Momigliano (ed.) *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, Oxford 1963, pp. 100-125.

BELAYCHE 2007: N. Belayche, *Religious Actors in Daily Life: Practices and Related Beliefs* in RÜPKE 2007, pp. 275-291.

---

<sup>47</sup> See for example the text of the following tablet: Side A *Deo Mercurio Cenacus queritur de Vitalino et Anatalino filio ipsius de iumento quod eraptum est. Eroga deum Mercurium ut nec ante sanitatem Side B haneant nisi repraesentaverin mihi iumentum quod rapuerunt et deo devotionem quam ipse ab his expostulaverit.* «Cenacus complains to the god Mercury about Vitalinus and Natalinus, his son, concerning the draught animal that was stolen. He begs the god Mercury that they will not have good health until they repay me promptly the animal they have stolen and (until they pay) the god the “devotion” that he himself will demand from them» (*Britannia* 10, 1979, 342. 2). For our concern, the most striking feature of this tablet is certainly the presence of the petitioner’s supplicatory attitude (*erogat*), the mentioning of the *devotio* to the god, which as VERSNEL 1991 points out, would hardly mean «a curse», but would rather mean a devotional act or gift by which penance is done. This tablet illustrates *a fortiori* the fallacy implicit in the opposition between a coercive attitude and a supplicatory attitude to the gods as a way to distinguish magic from religion, as it has been repeated since Frazer.

<sup>48</sup> See Janowitz 2001 for a remarkable treatment of the emic use of the term.

- BETA 2004: S. Beta (a cura di), *La potenza della parola. Destinatari, funzioni, bersagli*. Atti del convegno di Siena, 7-8 Maggio 2002 (*Quaderni del ramo d'oro*, n. 6), Firenze 2004.
- BETTINI 2016: M. Bettini, *Cantare cantilena*, in A. Ercolani and M. Giordano (eds.), *Submerged Literature in Ancient Greek Culture. Vol. 3: The Comparative Perspective*, Berlin-Boston 2016, pp. 155-168.
- BETZ 1986: H.D. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 1986.
- BREMMER 1999: J. N. Bremmer, *The Birth of the Term "magic"*, in «Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik» 126 (1999), pp. 1-12.
- BURNEYAT 1997a: M. F. Burneyat, *The Impiety of Socrates*, in «Ancient Philosophy» 17 (1997), pp. 1-12.
- Burneyat 1997b: M. F. Burneyat, *Postscript on Silent Reading*, in «Classical Quarterly» 47 (1997), pp. 74-76.
- BURRUS 1995: V. Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority, and Priscillian Controversy*, Berkeley 1995.
- CARASTRO 2006: M. Carastro: *La cité des mages. Penser la magie en Grèce ancienne*, Grenoble 2006.
- CARASTRO 2010 : M. Carastro, *Les liens de l'écriture. Katadesmoi et instances de l'enchaînement en Grèce ancienne*, in M. Cartry et al. (eds.), *Architecturer l'invisible*, Turhout 2010, pp. 263-292.
- DICKIE 2001: M. W. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, London - New York 2001.
- FARAONE - OBBINK 1991: C. Faraone - D. Obbink, *Magika Hierà. Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, New York - Oxford 1991.
- FRAZER 1922: J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, (Abridged ed.), New York 1922.
- GAGER 1992: J. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, Oxford 1992.
- GAROSI 1976: R. Garosi, *Indagine sulla formazione del concetto di magia nella cultura romana*, in *Magia: Studi di storia delle religioni in memoria di Raffaella Garosi*, Roma 1976, pp. 13-93.
- GAVRILOV 1997: A. K. Gavrilov, *Techniques of Reading in Classical Antiquity*, in «Classical Quarterly» 47 (1997), pp. 56-73.
- GIANNANTONI 1971: G. Giannantoni, *Socrate: tutte le testimonianze da Aristofane a Senofonte ai Padri cristiani*, Roma-Bari 1971.
- GIORDANO 1999: M. Giordano, *La parola efficace. Maledizioni, giuramenti e benedizioni nella Grecia arcaica*, Pisa - Roma 1999.
- GIORDANO 2005: M. Giordano, *As Socrates Shows, the Athenians Did not Believe in Gods*, in «Numen» 52 (2005), pp. 325-55.
- GIORDANO 2011: M. Giordano, *Riflessioni sulla "magia" greca*, in «AION» (sezione filologico - letteraria) (2011), pp. 191-202.
- GORDON 1987: R. Gordon, *'Aelian's peony: the location of magic Graeco-Roman tradition*, in E. Shaffer (ed.), *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 59-95.

- GORDON 1999: R. Gordon, *Imagining Greek and Roman Magic*, in B. Ankarloo and S. Clark (eds.), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, Philadelphia, pp. 161-269.
- GRAF 1990: F. Graf, *La magie gréco-romaine, idéologie et pratique*, «Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études» 99 (1990), pp. 279-284.
- GRAF 1997: F. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, Harvard 1997 (Paris 1994).
- GRAF 2015: F. Graf, *Magie et écriture: quelques réflexions*, in M. De Haro Sanchez (ed.), *Écrire la magie dans l'antiquité*, Liège 2015, pp. 227-37
- HAMMOND 1970: D. Hammond, *Magic: a Problem in Semantics*, in «American Anthropologist» 72 (1970), pp. 1349-56.
- HORSTER 2007: M. Horster, *Living on Religion: Professionals and Personnel*, in RÜPKE 2007, pp. 331-342.
- JANOWITZ 2001: N. JANOWITZ *Magic in the Roman World. Pagan, Jews, and Christians*, London - New York 2001.
- LINDER - SCHEID 1993: M. Linder, J. Scheid, *Quand croire c'est faire, le problème de la croyance dans la Rome ancienne*, «Archives de sciences sociales des religions» 81 (1993), pp. 47-62.
- LUCK 2006: G. Luck, *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Collection of Ancient Texts*, Baltimore 2006<sup>2</sup>.
- MASSONNEAU 1934: E. Massoneau, *La Magie dans l'antiquité romaine*, Paris, 1934.
- MASTROCINQUE 2007: A. Mastrocinque, *Creating One's Own Religion: Intellectual Choices*, in RÜPKE 2007, pp. 378 - 391.
- NEUSNER ET AL. 1989: J. Neusner, E. S. Frerichs and P. V. M. Flesher (eds.), *Religion, Science and Magic: in Concert and in Conflict*, New York 1989.
- PHILLIPS 1986: C. R. Phillips, *The Sociology of Religious Knowledge in the Roman Empire to A. 284*, in «ANRW» 11.16.3 (1986), pp. 2677-773.
- PHILLIPS 1991: C. R. Phillips, *Nullum crimen sine lege: Socioreligious Sanctions on Magic*, in FARAONE - OBBINK 1991, pp. 260-76.
- PREISENDANZ - HENRICHS 1973-74: K. Preisendanz, A. Henrichs (Hgg.), *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, 2 voll., Stuttgart 1973-1974.
- RIVES 2002: J. B. Rives, *Magic in the XII Tables Revisited*, in «The Classical Quarterly» 52. 1 (2002), pp. 270-290.
- RIVES 2003: J. B. Rives, *Magic in Roman Law: The Reconstruction of a Crime*, in «Classical Antiquity» 22.2 (2003), pp. 313-339.
- ROSENGREN 1976: K. E. Rosengren, *Malinowski's Magic: The Riddle of the Empty Cell*, in «Current Anthropology» 17 (1976), pp. 667-85.
- RÜPKE 2007: J. Rüpke (ed.), *A Companion to Roman Religion*, Blackwell, Oxford 2007.
- SCARBOROUGH 1991: J. Scarborough, *The Pharmacology of Sacred Plants, Herbs, and Roots*, in FARAONE -

OBINK 1991, pp. 138-174.

SCHEID 1981: J. Scheid, *Le délit religieux dans la Rome tardo-republicaine*, in *Le délit religieux dans la cité antique*, Actes de la table ronde de Rome (6-7 avril 1978), Rome 1981, pp. 117-171.

SCULLARD 1981: H.H. Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic*, London 1981.

SMITH, J. Z. 1978: *Good News is No News: Aretalogy and Gospel*, in *Map is Not Territory*, Leiden 1978, pp. 190-207 (first published in J. Neusner, *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, vol. 1, Leiden 1975, pp. 21-38).

SMITH 1995: J. Z. Smith, *Trading Places*, in M. Meyer and P. Mirecki (eds.), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, Leiden-New York 1995, pp. 13-28.

SMITH 1978: M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician*. San Francisco 1978.

TAMBIAH 1990: S. J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*, Cambridge, 1990.

TUPET 1976: A. M. Tupet, *La magie dans la poésie latine*, Paris 1976.

VERSNEL 1991: H. S. Versnel, *Some Reflexions on the Relationship Magic-Religion*, in «Numen» 38 (1991), pp. 177-197.

VLASTOS 1996: G. Vlastos, *Socratic Piety*, in W.J. Prior, (ed.) *Socrates. Critical Assessments*, London-New York, 1996, pp. 92-166.

WAX 1963: M. and R. Wax, *The Notion of Magic*, in «Current Anthropology» 4 (1963), pp. 495-518.