

Richard Gordon – Francisco Marco Simón –
Marina Piranomonte (eds.)
with the assistance of Celia Sánchez Natalías:

*Choosing Magic. Contexts, Objects, Meanings:
The Archaeology of Instrumental Religion in the Latin West.*

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Choosing ancient magic for a topic of academic research has reached unparalleled popularity in the last couple of decades.¹ It is not easy to keep up with the multitude of articles, monographs, and collective volumes recently published on the subject. Due to the growing corpus of archaeological evidence from year to year, our perspective of ancient ritual practices is changing rapidly. This volume, produced as the final publication of a long-term research-programme titled 'Espacios de penumbra' directed by Francisco Marco Simón at the University of Zaragoza, contains ten chapters, most of which are revised versions of papers read at the closing conference of the project at the University of Padua in 2014. The design of the volume fits in with the one previously published (2012) in the framework of this research project,² although it lags somewhat behind in scope and number of authors. Five of the contributors are scholars from Spanish universities, complemented by two renowned academics from Italy, and one from Britain and from Hungary, respectively.

Choosing magic was a frequently used option in various layers of the ancient society. Certain individuals, "in concrete situations of crisis or adversity, saw magical practice as one of a range of possible pragmatic solutions to life-challenges." (15) Of course, the level of personal investment and the concern for being morally condemned by others varied enormously from wearing protective amulets to uttering spoken or even producing written curses against groups or individuals. In the introductory chapter, two editors of the volume (R. Gordon and F. M. Simón) wisely avoided the trap of getting entangled in the notorious problem of defining magic, and claimed that contributors (and even readers) have their own different views on that matter. Their primary concern, instead, was to highlight the contexts of magical activities interpreted in archaeological terms in the Latin West, assigning the salient

¹ This review article was supported by the project K134319 ('Corpus of the curse tables of Clermont-Ferrand') of the Hungarian National Research Office (NKFI).

² Marina Piranomonte and Francisco Marco Simón (eds.): *Contesti Magici / Contextos Mágicos. Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Roma, Palazzo Massimo, 4-6 novembre 2009*. Rome, 2012.

types (e.g. sanctuaries, cemeteries, etc.) to individuals or small teams to treat them in independent chapters.

It is rather unfortunate, however, that an otherwise intriguing pair of tables (that were meant to offer a typology of various rituals on the basis of Aims and Techniques [17]) seems unedited and flawed in many respects, as e.g. “Intaglios with inscription” and “Intaglios without inscription” are surely misplaced, because the former should be listed among the Literate means, and not the latter. I also doubt that *veneficia* would be an appropriate term for tools applied in curative-medical rituals, since this word is mostly used for describing aggressive practices.³ Moreover, the following sentence does not appear to be perfectly formed: “The shape of this (*i.e.*, the notion of context in the volume – DB) can be indicated by constructing some simple tables to represent the types of magical practice can be profitably be examined on the basis of this choice and which not.” (17)

Individual chapters are organized into three parts. Part 1 (Contexts: Sites, Aims and Power) contains six chapters that focus on sanctuary contexts (F. M. Simón), funerary contexts (S. Alfayé and C. Sánchez), ‘other’ unexpected locations like victims’ homes, bath-houses, ruins (S. Alfayé), and public spaces like law-courts, circus or amphitheatre (C. Sánchez). These four chapters are perfectly in line with the principles of contexts set out by the editors in the introductory chapter. The last two chapters of the first part interpret locations as conceptual spaces and the social relations within them. A. Alvar aims to demonstrate that individual ritual practice was not only shaped by individual decisions, but it is also “constrained by the social matrix” (78), as e.g. curses around the Roman *domus* were applied to control leakage of knowledge by either the *pater familias* or by other members of the *familia*. The chapter of R. Gordon takes the corporeal representations of the targets of curse-tablets to show different views of the body as a suffering totality, as a somatic script revealing guilt, or as a disarticulated array of body-parts.

The second part of the volume is devoted to “Specialised Techniques” that were believed to be efficient in enhancing the performance of *defixiones*. The third contribution of C. Sánchez presents paragraphics and iconography. *Paragraphia* here means the deliberate breaking of orthographic conventions, either as direct textual perversion (which is a common technique even in ‘vernacular’ curses), or as framing of texts (which is always an indication of professionalism). Images, on the other hand, are almost entirely absent from vernacular tablets, revealing the growing influence of the Graeco-Egyptian tradition on the Latin West. The chapter of Gy. Németh attempts to outline the origin and use of magic signs (so-called *characteres*) that are foreign to human phonetic and semantic systems. After dismissing a number of hardly credible explanations of origin, he argues that the invention of

³ Fritz Graf: *Magic in the Ancient World* (tr. Franklin Philip). Cambridge – London: 1997, 46.

ring-letter *characteres* may have been inspired by inscriptions on bronze allotment plates used to choose Athenian judges. Unlike the previous contributions, the last chapter in Part 2, by A. Mastrocinque, has nothing to do with curse-tablets, as it surveys the various types of phylacteries discovered in the western provinces. Part 3 (From Pagan to Christian), however, is even more loosely connected to the topic of the research project or to instrumental religion in the Latin West. It contains a single chapter authored by G. Fontana on traces of magic in early Christianity. According to one of its major points, glossolalia attested in the early Christian communities may have had its origin in pagan *voces magicae*, though ‘confessional’ historians tend to link it to the Jewish tradition.

In general, there are several advantageous aspects of the volume. The chapters are well-written and they mostly fit organically into the theme of the volume. The footnotes and the bibliography at the end of each chapter provide the reader with ample up-to-date academic information, including references to important forthcoming collections like GEMF⁴ and SD.⁵ The bulky table of correspondences between SD and other corpora (169–181) is appetizing, since it will contain 535 *defixiones* with commentaries, which is significantly more than what is found in other collections. Because of all these considerations, this work will be unavoidable for professionals.

The only serious setback to the volume is that it contains an astonishing amount of typographical errors. In this area, as it has already been noted, the introductory chapter makes a remarkably bad impression, but in addition to dozens of missing spaces and dashes all over the volume, an attentive reader will find flaws like this (and more): “Cathage” (19), “Matrocinque” (20), “Salus Minerva” (55), “Hadrumentum” (105), “Latin West this is...,” read “Latin West that is...” (28), “or children,” read “or have children” (34), “However, three decades we can,” read “However, three decades later we can” (126), “mentioned in n. 89 above,” read “mentioned in n. 88 above” (145).

Dániel Bajnok

⁴ C. A. Faraone – S. Torallas Tovar (eds.): *Greco-Egyptian Magical Formularies*. Chicago, forthcoming.

⁵ C. Sánchez Natalias: *Sylloge of Defixiones from the Roman West*. Oxford, forthcoming.