**Magic and Witchcraft in the Greek and Roman Worlds**

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**I. The following is an extract from a Roman encyclopaedia, the *Natural History,* written in the first century CE by a Roman statesman, general, and scholar, Pliny the Elder. In it he gives a history of magic mentioning both legendary and real figures, and a *lot* of philosophers.**

**BOOK XXX: on Magic, and Medicines for certain parts of the Body**

**I**. In the previous part of my work I have often indeed refuted the fraudulent lies of the Magi, whenever the subject and the occasion required it, and I shall continue to expose them. In a few respects, however, the theme deserves to be enlarged upon, even if only because the most fraudulent of arts has ruled completely throughout the world for many ages. Nobody should be surprised at the greatness of its influence, since alone of the arts it has embraced three others that hold supreme dominion over the human mind, and made them subject to itself alone. Nobody will doubt that it first arose from medicine, and that professing to promote health it insidiously advanced under the disguise of a higher and holier system; that to the most seductive and welcome promises it added the powers of religion, about which even today the human race is quite in the dark; that again meeting with success it made a further addition of astrology, because there is nobody who is not eager to learn his destiny, or who does not believe that the truest account of it is that gained by watching the skies. Accordingly, holding men's emotions in a threefold bond, magic rose to such a height that even today it has sway over a great part of mankind, and in the East commands the Kings of Kings.

**II**. Without doubt magic arose in Persia with Zoroaster. On this our authorities are agreed, but whether he was the only one of that name, or whether there was also another afterwards, is not clear. Eudoxus,[[1]](#footnote-1) who wished magic to be acknowledged as the noblest and most useful of the schools of philosophy, declared that this Zoroaster lived six thousand years before Plato's death, and Aristotle agrees with him. Hermippus, a most studious writer about every aspect of magic, and an exponent of two million verses composed by Zoroaster, added summaries too to his rolls, and said Agonaces was the teacher by whom he had been instructed, assigning to the man himself a date five thousand years before the Trojan War. What especially is surprising is the survival, through so long a period, of the craft and its tradition; treatises are wanting, and besides there is no line of distinguished or continuous successors to keep alive their memory. For how few know anything, even by hearsay, of those who alone have left their names but without other memorial—Apusorus and Zaratus of Media, Marmarus and Arabantiphocus of Babylon, or Tarmoendas of Assyria? The most surprising thing, however, is the complete silence of Homer about magic in his poem on the Trojan War [the *Iliad*], and yet so much of his work in the wanderings of Ulysses [the *Odyssey*] is so occupied with it that it alone forms the backbone of the whole work, if indeed they put a magical interpretation upon the Proteus episode in Homer and the songs of the Sirens, and especially upon the episode of Circe and of the calling up of the dead from Hades, of which magic is the sole theme. And in later times nobody has explained how ever it reached Telmesus,[[2]](#footnote-2) a city given up to superstition, or when it passed over to the Thessalian matrons,[[3]](#footnote-3) whose surname a was long proverbial in our part of the world, although magic was a craft repugnant to the Thessalian people, who were content, at any rate in the Trojan period, with the medicines of Chiron, and with the War God as the only wielder of the thunderbolt? I am indeed surprised that the people over whom Achilles once ruled had a reputation for magic so lasting that Menander, a man with an unrivalled gift for sound literary taste, gave the name *Thessala[[4]](#footnote-4)* to his comedy, which deals fully with the tricks of the women for calling down the moon. I would believe that Orpheus[[5]](#footnote-5) was the first to carry the craft to his near neighbours, and that his superstition grew from medicine, if the whole of Thrace, the home of Orpheus, had not been untainted by magic. The first man, so far as I can discover, to write a still-extant treatise on magic was Osthanes, who accompanied the Persian King Xerxes in his invasion of Greece, and sowed what I may call the seeds of this monstrous craft, infecting the whole world by the way at every stage of their travels. A little before Osthanes, the more careful inquirers place another Zoroaster, a native of Proconnesus. One thing is certain; it was this Osthanes who chiefly roused among the Greek peoples not so much an eager appetite for his science as a sheer mania. And yet I notice that of old, in fact almost always, the highest literary distinction and renown have been sought from that science. Certainly Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus and Plato went overseas to learn it, going into exile rather than on a journey, taught it openly on their return, and considered it one of their most treasured secrets. Democritus taught Apollobex the Copt and Dardanus the Phoenician, entering the latter's tomb to obtain his works and basing his own on their doctrines. That these were accepted by any human beings and transmitted by memory is the most extraordinary phenomenon in history; so utterly are they lacking in credibility and decency that those who like the other works of Democritus deny that the magical books are his. But it is all to no purpose, for it is certain that Democritus especially instilled into men's minds the sweets of magic. Another extraordinary thing is that both these arts, medicine I mean and magic, flourished together, Democritus expounding magic in the same age as Hippocrates expounded medicine, about the time of the Peloponnesian War, which was waged in Greece from the three-hundredth year of our city. There is yet another branch of magic, derived from Moses, Jannes [an Egyptian magician], Lotapes [Iotape = Yahweh], and the Jews, but living many thousand years after Zoroaster. So much more recent is the branch in Cyprus. In the time too of Alexander the Great, no slight addition was made to the influence of the profession by a second Osthanes, who, honoured by his attendance on Alexander, travelled certainly without the slightest doubt all over the world.

**III**. Among Italian tribes also there still certainly exist traces of magic in the Twelve Tables, as is proved by my own and the other evidence set forth in an earlier Book? It was not until the 657th year of the City [97 BCE] that in the consulship of Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus and Publius Licinius Crassus there was passed a resolution of the Senate forbidding human sacrifice; so that down to that date it is manifest that such abominable rites were practised.

**IV**. Magic certainly found a home in the two Gallic provinces, and that down to living memory. For the principate of Tiberius Caesar did away with their Druids and this tribe of seers and medicine men. But why should I speak of these things when the craft has even crossed the Ocean and reached the empty voids of Nature? Even today Britain practises magic in awe, with such grand ritual that it might seem that she gave it to the Persians. So universal is the cult of magic throughout the world. although its nations disagree or are unknown to each other. It is beyond calculation how great is the debt owed to the Romans, who swept away the mon­strous rites, in which to kill a man was the highest religious duty and for him to be eaten a passport to health.

**V**. As Osthanes said, there are several forms of magic; he professes to divine from water, globes, air, stars, lamps, basins and axes, and by many other methods, and besides to converse with ghosts and those in the underworld. All of these in our generation the Emperor Nero discovered to be lies and frauds. In fact his passion for the lyre and tragic song was no greater than his passion for magic; his elevation to the greatest height of human fortune aroused desire in the vicious depths of his mind; his greatest wish was to give commands to the gods, and he could rise to no nobler ambition. No other of the arts ever had a more enthusiastic patron. Every means were his to gratify his desire—wealth, strength, aptitude for learning—and what else did the world not allow! That the craft is a fraud there could be no greater or more indisputable proof than that Nero abandoned it; but would that he had consulted about his suspicions the powers of Hell and any other gods whatsoever, instead of entrusting these researches to pimps and harlots. Of a surety no ceremony, outlandish and savage though the rites may be, would not have been gentler than Nero's thoughts; more cruelly behaving than any did Nero thus fill our Rome with ghosts.

**VI**. The Magi have certain means of evasion; for example that the gods neither obey those with freckles nor are seen by them. Was this perhaps their objection to Nero? But his body was without blemish; he was free to choose the fixed days, could easily obtain perfectly black sheep, and as for human sacrifice, he took the greatest delight in it. Mithridates the Magus had come to him bringing a retinue for the Annenian triumph over himself, thereby laying a heavy burden on the provinces. He had refused to travel by sea, for the Magi hold it sin to spit into the sea or wrong that element by other necessary functions of mortal creatures. He had brought Magi with him, had initiated Nero into their banquets; yet the man giving him a kingdom was unable to acquire from him the magic art. Therefore let us be convinced by this that magic is detestable, vain, and idle; and though it has what I might call shadows of truth, their power comes from the art of the poisoner, not of the Magi. One might well ask what were the lies of the old Magi, when as a youth I saw Apion the grammarian, who told me that the herb cynocephalia, called in Egypt *osiritis*, was an instrument of divina­tion and a protection from all kinds of sorcery, but if it were uprooted altogether the digger would die at once, and that he had called up ghosts to inquire from Homer his native country and the name of his parents, but did not dare to repeat the answers which he said were given.

**VII**. It should be unique evidence of fraud that they look upon the mole of all living creatures with the greatest awe, although it is cursed by Nature with so many defects, being permanently blind, sunk in other darkness also, and resembling the buried dead. In no entrails is placed such faith; to no creature do they attribute more supernatural properties; so that if anyone eats its heart, fresh and still beating, they promise powers of divination and of foretelling the issue of matters in hand. They declare that a tooth, extracted from a living mole and attached as an amulet, cures toothache. The rest of their beliefs about this animal I will relate in the appropriate places. But of all they say nothing will be found more likely than that the mole is an antidote for the bite of the shrewmouse, seeing that an antidote for it, as I have said, is even earth that has been depressed by cart wheels.

[There is a lot more of this sort of thing but you get the picture]

**II. There is a great deal of difference between the above and this, which was written by 2nd century CE the orator and philosopher Apuleius. It comes from his *Apology,* his defence speech against a charge of magic, so that might explain why he takes a difference perspective on the Magi.**

If what I read in a large number of authors is true, namely, that magician is the Persian word for priest, what is there criminal in being a priest and having due knowledge, science, and skill in all ceremonial law, sacrificial duties, and the binding rules of religion, at least if magic consists in that which Plato sets forth in his description of the methods employed by the Persians in the education of their young princes? I remember the very words of that divine philosopher. Let me recall them to your memory, Maximus:[[6]](#footnote-6) “When the boy has reached the age of fourteen he is handed over to the care of men known as the Royal Masters. They are four in number, and are chosen as being the best of the elders of Persia, one the wisest, another the justest, a third the most temperate, a fourth the bravest. And one of these teaches the boy the magic of Zoroaster the son of Oromazes; and this magic is no other than the worship of the gods. He also teaches him the arts of kingship.”

Do you hear, you who so rashly attack the art of magic? It is an art acceptable to the immortal gods, full of all knowledge of worship and of prayer, full of piety and wisdom in things divine, full of honour and glory since the day when Zoroaster and Oromazes established it, high-priestess of the powers of heaven. In fact, it is one of the first elements of princely instruction, nor do they lightly admit any random person to be a magician, any more than they would admit him to be a king. Plato -- if I may quote him again -- in another passage dealing with a certain Zalmoxis, a Thracian and also a master of this art has written that magical charms are merely beautiful words. If that is so, why should I be forbidden to learn the fair words of Zalmoxis or the priestly lore of Zoroaster?

1. An ancient Greek astronomer who lived in the 300s BCE. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A city in Caria (now part of Turkey). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thessaly, a region in Greece, was heavily associated with magic for the Greeks and the Romans, and especially Thessalian women. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Thessalian woman. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The same as the mythical Orpheus, whom the Greeks and Romans often thought of as a real figure, and one associated with magic via the Orphic religion and texts. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The name of the Roman governor in charge of the trial. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)