

WRESTLING WITH THE SUPERNATURAL:
THE CULTURAL CAPITAL OF
DEFINING REALITY

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I. The Supernatural and the Study of (Cultural) History

Historians have a difficult relationship with the supernatural. Many often consider such ideas as the domain of mythologists, folklorists, and theologians, while history itself is regarded as the study of the causal mechanisms and events of human interaction.¹ Yet modern historians cannot escape the effects of ideas about the supernatural, particularly given that so many of their historical subjects believed in and were motivated by supernatural conceptions of varying sorts. Accordingly, there is a tension that runs throughout much of modern historiography, a quality that often leads to the role of these ideas being overlooked or at least minimized. We have, on one side, the (professionally) disbelieving historian who, as a feature of their discipline, lays aside any personal beliefs about the supernatural for their research. On the other side are their historical subjects, who may themselves be disbelievers in such, but also widely ranging in belief systems and degrees of devotion to such ideas. This secular stance of historians was not always the case, of course, as we need only look through the pages of the earliest extant ancient Greek historian, Herodotus, for many examples to the contrary. He does so, for instance, with the famous tale of Croesus' fall, which is intertwined with the role of an oracular prophecy and fate.² By contrast, modern historians, though many of us have personal religious and spiritual beliefs, do not, as an ironclad rule of the

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¹ A similar assessment regarding historians' treatment of the supernatural occurs at Harold A. Drake *A Century of Miracles: Christians, Pagans, Jews, and the Supernatural, 312-410* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7–9.

² Herodotus, *Histories* 1.53. This is not unrelated to Herodotus' notion of volatile fortune, explored in Vasiliki Zali-Schiel's chapter in this volume.

discipline, appeal to divine or otherwise supernatural elements to explain historical events.

We, of course, need not abandon modern secularized historiography and return to Herodotus' methods of historical inquiry. But we can do more to take the influence of these ideas seriously and to avoid slipping into presentism by showing a greater awareness of the unintended consequences that our modern disciplinary weariness of the supernatural has had on our assessments of historical subjects. Regardless of one's personal beliefs on the (un)reality of this or that supernatural phenomena, what cannot be denied is that these beliefs and ideas have impacted the thoughts, lives, and decisions made by people of all historical time periods. Yet many modern historians have traditionally felt a sense of unease, even outright embarrassment, when dealing with their subjects' belief in the supernatural. This is due partially to the fact that we have a tendency to think that the majority are somehow fundamentally the same as us (often appealing to abstract notions of "human nature"), and, though they have vastly different beliefs and ways of living, still maintain a similar connection to reality, as we understand it.

The unintended presentist effect of such an overbearing outlook occurs, for instance, in some of the ways in which we assess the credibility of sources for ancient historiography. This has been the case, for example, within some previous scholarly assessments around Procopius of Caesarea. His *Wars* is one of the best sources we have for Justinian's reign and the early sixth century CE.³ Yet that is complicated by his *Secret History*, particularly the demonological sections which claim that Justinian himself was, in fact, a demonic agent and Antichrist-like figure that was sabotaging the Roman Empire and spearheading the end of the world itself.⁴ How, then, can we reconcile Procopius as a reliable historical source with the fact that one of his texts is steeped in apocalyptic and supernatural claims? Modern scholars once did so by postulating that the demonological sections were a later medieval interpolation, as theorized by Franz Rühl in 1914.⁵ This, in effect, dispelled such alarming supernatural elements and preserved the reliability of Procopius as a historian. Such an argument, however, has long since fallen out of favor as the language of the demonological sections of the *Secret History* is thoroughly Procopian, and there is no

³ This volume uses, for consistency, the "newer" convention of BCE/CE, though we acknowledge that this merely obscures the Eurocentric and colonialist nature of the BC/AD dating. However, given that contributions involve material spanning both sides of the BCE/CE divide, making use of a uniform dating style which easily allows for the reader to gage the chronological relationships between events, works, and authors is important. Furthermore, to make use of either BC/AD and BCE/CE is to make use of an artificial dating system and the editors feel that the use of BCE/CE make this artificiality clearer.

⁴ Yet the criticism of Justinian in the *Secret History* is also not disconnected from statements in *Wars*, a matter explored more in Vasiliki Zali-Schiel's chapter here.

⁵ Franz Rühl, "Die Interpolationen in Prokops Anekdoten," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 69 (1914): 284–298.

evidence in the manuscript tradition to suggest that those portions were a later insertion. Yet the impetus to disarm such supernatural elements has, nonetheless, persisted, as with the attempts to rationalize these demonological portions as pure literary rhetoric for slandering Justinian through symbology rather than any actual beliefs, as Anthony Kaldellis has theorized.⁶ Thus, we see another way that scholars have sought to combat the supernatural: confinement to the pages of literature and symbology alone.⁷ In doing so, the effect is the same as having considered such to be non-Procopian interpolations: they hope to preserve the sense that writers like Procopius still maintain a fair grasp of reality as we know it to exist, and so can remain reliable sources.

Such attempts to preserve the credibility of an ancient author through the presentist dismissal of incredible ideas in their texts are bound up with how we in the modern world conceive of reality itself. As Jeffery Kripal, in his book *How to Think Impossibly* (2024), has recently emphasized, the humanities have been severely impacted by the fact that we have ceded any discussion of reality over to the sciences.⁸ In doing so, disciplines like history adhere primarily to empiricist notions of reality alone. It is that conception that such assessments hope to safeguard, and so anachronistically distort assessments of historical subjects. Kripal, though, is among the recent scholars who have sought to emphasize, in a radical break from this traditional weariness, the need to appreciate spirituality and alternate conceptions of reality in the humanities in a more nuanced way. Contextualizing this against the backdrop of historical effects of the Enlightenment-era emphasis on empiricist rationality, he remarks:

It seems more than obvious that today, most professional intellectuals are working with half the picture, the secular horizontal half (which was hard won and is *a lot*). The human being variously conceived and theorized in that academy is mostly an embodied social, racial, sexual, and gender identity, a constructed and historically conditioned psychological ego, or a dying social animal dethroned from any spiritual exception and entirely embedded in an ecological, physical, and political environment.⁹

⁶ Anthony Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 156.

⁷ Against these arguments on the demonological sections, see Ryan Denson, "Procopius and the Lord of the Demons: The Synthesis of the Demonic Justinian," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 15 (2022): 497–499.

⁸ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *How to Think Impossibly. About Souls, UFOs, Time, Belief, and Everything Else* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024), 16–17. We thank Rick Last (Trent University) for drawing our attention to this work.

⁹ Kripal, *How to Think Impossibly*, 26.

Crucially, it is not that religion and spirituality have been ignored by modern academia, which is obviously not the case, given the plethora of departments, journals, and books dedicated to such subjects. Religious belief is, however, often downplayed, with its believers all too often taken as passive objects of their historical eras. Many of their beliefs are, from this secularized and empiricist perspective, plainly untrue and so, especially with regard to the field of history, have not traditionally been given the same equal footing that other dimensions of human experience (i.e. racial, sexual, and gender identity) have been granted in recent years.

Historians and academics in the humanities do, of course, still acknowledge the existence of different religious beliefs in the eras they study, but this all too often occurs at a surface level, seeming to cast such as not having meaningfully impacted the way they perceive and move through reality. These are the downstream effects of such latent presentism and the way that we, then, consider such ideas about the supernatural. Kripal's own work is a sharp turn away from the traditional unease with notions of the supernatural by conceptualizing such phenomena as being one manifestation of our ontological reality,¹⁰ offering one means to take such ideas more seriously and to avoid slipping into presentism. Kripal's work is larger in scope than the present volume, to be sure, especially as it intends to highlight (and dismantle) the artificial boundary between the humanities and the sciences, arguing for the establishment of what he terms the "superhumanities."¹¹

By contrast, our ambitions with this volume are more limited in scope. We do not, here, take a stance on the existence of any phenomena that appear in the chapters that follow. Rather, it is our intention with this volume to at least allow such ideas the attention that they deserve, respecting the supernatural in its cultural conceptions, specifically in terms of the interactions between conceptions of the supernatural within and against the Christian faith in Late Antiquity. Our focus here is not merely to examine cultural conceptions of the supernatural, but also to understand how such ideas interacted with, influenced, and shaped the lives of late antique Christians.

II. Varying Senses of the Supernatural and Magic

In order to do so, we should also say a few words on what the "supernatural" actually denotes because the treatment of this term in the humanities has been impacted by these larger trends that Kripal is reacting against. The term

¹⁰ Kripal, *How to Think Impossibly*, 23–24.

¹¹ Kripal, *How to Think Impossibly*, 18 further explaining this as "... the already existent humanities with their prophetic social spirit and a heavy accent on the altered states of consciousness and knowledge that produced so many of the central ideas of the humanities and their historical figures and continue to do so to this very day."

“supernatural” poses several challenges. It is plainly derived from the medieval Latin adjective *supernaturalis* (“above nature”), with the earliest extant usage being that of Irish theologian John Scotus Eriugena in the ninth century CE, to whom we will return below. Variants now exist in most modern European languages: “surnaturel” in French, “sobrenatural” in Spanish, “übernatürlich” in German, “nadnaturalny” in Polish, and “υπερφυσικός” in modern Greek. In each case, the basic compound denotes something that is “above” the natural. Terms like “preternatural” and “paranormal” have also been coined, and are sometimes preferred as a means to express that the “above” part of supernatural need not always be conceptualized as targeting “higher” forces than humanity, such as divinity.¹² Those related terms, though, still denote what is “outside” or “beyond” the natural or normal, expressing a fundamentally similar relation to nature. Thus, there is a clear dimension of the supernatural as always being something “from without” with respect to the natural world, however one considers that to be. All discussions of the supernatural thus inherently involve grappling with ideas about nature. Yet the term “nature” is itself highly relative and most often defined in contrast to whatever is meant by the “artificial” world of human-made constructs (buildings, roads, automobiles, writing, etc.). Thus, in the most superficial sense, the supernatural can be thought of as whatever is both beyond the natural world and beyond the human world. But the shifting and subjective element of where the natural ends and the more-than-natural begins is precisely where we encounter the definitional issues.

As a result, we have not imposed a hard and fast definition on the contributors to this volume. Given that the contributions deal with varied source materials, it is unsurprising that there are variations in how the supernatural can be understood in these contexts. For instance, in Douglas C. Whalin’s chapter, he follows this idea of the supernatural as being outside of what was considered natural, and there is an emphasis on how these things appeared, given the focus of his piece on the visual nature of statues. Tiana Blazevic’s chapter, meanwhile, deals with ancient conceptions of *pneuma*, an ancient concept that seems to evade neat categorization as either natural or supernatural. What we offer in this Introduction is merely a starting point for thinking about this category of the “supernatural” (and the related “magic”) by outlining the generalizing senses in which these terms have conventionally been deployed. In doing so, we neither intend to excavate the precise origin of humanity’s interest in the supernatural, nor do we hope to coin a universally applicable definition of the term. Rather, we seek here the more limited task of illustrating two broad senses of the supernatural that are relevant to the

¹² E.R. Dodds, in a similar fashion, defined and categorized various phenomena reported in ancient texts under the heading of the “supernormal.” See, for instance, E. R. Dodds, “Supernormal Phenomena in Classical Antiquity,” *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 55 (171): 189–237.

academic study of Late Antique Christians, and which also seem to seem relevant to later Christian periods. Other cultures, religions, and time periods may have radically different conceptualizations of such phenomena. If there is a specifically Wiccan or Buddhist conception of the supernatural, for instance, we leave those senses to other scholars more well versed in those areas to theorize. Related to the present topics of this volume, however, we may say that there are two senses of the supernatural that are relevant: the academic sense and the Christian sense.

This academic sense is habitually used for a grouping of figures and phenomena considered to be wholly impossible. In this framing, “beyond nature” connotes being beyond the realm of possibility entirely. It is this type of usage that pervades the humanities in particular, given our ceding of reality to the sciences. Such an empiricist conception of reality, then, is the predominant outlook from which academics group what is considered to be supernatural. A basic definition for the supernatural in such a modern science-oriented perspective would, then, be something like “anything that exceeds the laws of nature, as we understand them.” This utilizes what Morton Klass has rightly termed as an “ethnocentric judgement” to deploy such a term as one half of a common binary construction between the natural and supernatural.¹³ In this construction, the natural is thought to cohere with one’s own world view (and hence is the “real”), but the supernatural is beyond that in some form (and hence dismissed as the “unreal”). Vampires, revenants, and zombies are creatures that violate the natural laws of death, and so would be deemed, from this empiricist perspective, to fall into the category of the supernatural, simultaneously being lumped into the category of the unreal. The same would be the case for phenomena like telepathy, miracles, divination, and remote viewing. The real in this construction is that, as defined by the modern empiricist science, it privileges that conception of secularized reality in how it groups otherwise diverse phenomena together.

Yet this empiricist conception is far from objective and still has gaps and areas of contestation of its own. As is commonly observed in astronomy, the laws of physics do break down at the space-time singularity that lies at the heart of a black hole. Would most astrophysicists, therefore, consider that to be a supernatural phenomenon? Probably not. This is, of course, where the all-important “as we understand the laws of nature” qualifier comes in.¹⁴ In this sense, the ethnocentric element is always something of an ever-shifting target between where the bounds of natural and supernatural meet, but adheres to these modern empiricist conceptions of reality.

¹³ Morton Klass, *Ordered Universes: Approaches to the Anthropology of Religion* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 25. On which see also, Robert Anderson, “Defining the supernatural in Iceland,” *Anthropological Forum* 13 (2003): 125–126.

¹⁴ Saler Benson, “Supernatural as a Western Category,” *Ethos* 5 (1977): 35–36.

In contrast to this academic sense, is the Christian sense, though much of it derives from earlier trends in Second Temple Judaism and also links in with Neoplatonist views. For the present work, though our focus need only be on how it exists among Christian thought. This Christian conception of the supernatural can be said to operate, not to dismiss ideas outside of the realm of plausibility, but to express the special quality of a phenomenon or event as something that exceeds the natural and derives directly from God's power. It fundamentally constitutes a conscious acceptance of the reality of otherwise impossible breaking of natural laws, rather than regarding such as unreal. Thus, this Christian sense of the supernatural is similar to Kripal's own embrace of the impossible for his superhumanities.

One need not look far for this embracement of the otherwise impossible in Christianity. The Gospels focalize a myriad of Christ's well-known miracles, such as turning water into wine and healing the blind, events that plainly would not have happened otherwise according to the laws of natural causation and so may be regarded as supernatural. These function as expressions of Christ's divine legitimacy by being able to exceed the natural order. At the center of the religion is Christ's Resurrection, an event that can plainly be construed as an overcoming of the natural order of death itself. We see a clear example of this emphasis with Tertullian's words on the matter:

The Son of God died; it is plainly believable since it is absurd [*prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est*]. And he rose from his tomb; it is certain because it is impossible [*certum est, quia impossibile*].¹⁵

The ability to do the impossible, exceeding beyond the natural, was a key feature of the central event of the Christian faith, which was expressed as well with other miraculous circumstances. Carson Bay's chapter in this volume illustrates many useful examples of this quality in the fourth-century *De excidio Hierosolymitano*, wherein the author describes various extraordinary phenomena as real. Elsewhere, examples of God's supernatural power over the natural world would also be expressed in narrative forms throughout Christian hagiographical sources, as with the example of divine alteration of animals. The basic model comes from the well-known tale of Daniel in the lions' den, where God alters the ferocious nature of the lions to become docile animals.¹⁶ But the most radical (and charming) narrative of such divine "editing" of animal nature comes from a Late Antique Sahdic fragment of the travelogue of Abba John, describing a crocodile attack upon another man in a river, upon which John calmly prays for help. An angel descends from heaven to save the man by setting him upon the crocodile, which conveys the man to shore and, then, dies. Thereafter, John immediately prays to God to save the soul of the

¹⁵ Tertullian, *De Carni Christi* 5.4. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are our own.

¹⁶ Daniel 6:16-28.

animal and make it gentle. The wish is duly granted as the crocodile is resurrected and becomes John's loyal companion, peacefully accompanying the monk for the rest of his days, and, having abandoned his carnivorous nature, ate only loaves of bread.¹⁷ This is, then, a clear example of supernatural force overriding and changing at will the nature of a single animal.

We see, then, such terminology around the supernatural used in a positive sense and applied to God. This is clear with John Scotus Eriugena's use of *supernaturalis*, the first extant usage of this word. In a discussion of the divine will (*divina voluntas*), he expresses that it is omnipotent and "it inserts hidden and unsearchable natural reasons [*naturales rationes*] into all, since it is supernatural reason of all [*quia omnium supernaturalis ratio est*]."¹⁸ To put it another way, God's will is that *ratio* which is above the nature of all, and it is that quality that allows for the enactment of the impossible in the natural world. Much has been made of this first use of the word *supernaturalis*, which has been noted to coincide with the translation of Neoplatonic texts into Latin, and thus also seems to connote a renewed Neoplatonic valence as denoting a "superior substance."¹⁹ Elsewhere, Eriugena's usage has been argued as being an aberrant exception by Robert Bartlett.²⁰ He advances the argument for his *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (2008) that the natural/supernatural distinction had only become prominent (hence *supernaturalis* became more frequently used), following Thomas Aquinas' usage of the term in the thirteenth century.²¹ Thus, while not making the case that the supernatural was created in the Middle Ages, Bartlett does place the age of high scholasticism and its theological debates as the high point in which the distinction with the natural came to even greater importance.

Yet we would argue that this is a misleading characterization and still draws too heavily on the emergence of *supernaturalis* as a term. This emphasis on the supernatural in the Christian thought was certainly already circulating in Late Antiquity, even if such an adjective had yet to be coined. In the context of the cultures of the Greco-Roman Mediterranean, this Christian conception of the supernatural should also be understood as having emerged out of earlier Greco-Roman thought, and so tends to repurpose the same vocabulary for new uses. Saler Benson has already highlighted this in his investigation of Western conceptions of

¹⁷ For an English translation of this fragment, see S. A. Mikhail Maged and Tim Vivian, *The Holy Workshop of Virtue: The Life of John the Little by Zacharias of Sakhā*, trans. from Bohairic Coptic, Sahidic Coptic and Syriac with newly edited Coptic texts (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), 276–278.

¹⁸ John Scotus Eriugena, *De Divisione Naturae* 3.16.

¹⁹ Benson, "Supernatural," 46.

²⁰ Robert Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 13, n. 24, further theorized that he had taken such a term up as a Latin equivalent for Pseudo-Dionysius' usage of ὑπερφύσης.

²¹ Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 12–15.

the supernatural.²² Terms and phrases like ὑπερφύσης (“above the natural”), δαιμόνιος (“daimonic”), θεῖος (“god-like”), and ὑπὲρ τὴν φύσιν (“above nature”) did exist already in ancient Greek, and likewise for classical Latin, there are examples like *divus* (“divine”) and *supra naturam* (“above nature”). Such terms, though, tended to be used as more meaning “extraordinary” or “marvelous.”²³ They do harbor a certain sense of the supernatural, but it is not the same as the Christian sense in that they do not constitute a complete break from nature as expressed by Christian theology. That is, they often denote things that are considered *above* the natural/normal, but not necessarily *beyond* it. It is evident that there were pre-Christian conceptions of phenomena that were considered in such a sense, such as the paradoxographical wonders of the distant monsters held to exist in supposedly remote and exotic environments like India. These were certainly abnormal and strange forms of what natural environments could produce, but they were not considered as being beyond nature as such. Even in the cases of Olympian deities like Zeus, they may certainly be regarded as having exceeded human nature, but not nature itself.²⁴

It is, however, out of this classical Greco-Roman sense of the supernatural that the Christian sense developed. In line with a type of one-upmanship that elevates the Christian God far beyond what earlier terms like θεός and *theus* signified, there was an accompanying elevation of power associated with divinity. Benson’s framing sums up the point well: “. . . a natural-supernatural opposition took root and flourished in the soil of Christianity.”²⁵ A key element of this that Benson has emphasized is that there was a greater desire among many ancient Christians to draw a clear distinction between creator (God) and creation (nature) than had been the case for their pagan counterparts.²⁶ We see this particularly emphasized in the importance of the hexaemeral genre, the Christian texts commenting on the Genesis creation narrative. Basil of Caesarea, in his hexaemeral homilies, deploys lofty terms like ὁ δημιουργὸς τῶν ὅλων (“the craftsman of all things”) and ποιητὴς τῆς φύσεως (“the poet of nature”) to describe God when discussing the creation of the luminous bodies.²⁷ Such phrasing is formulated in response to the widespread astrological thought and the solar monotheism of Basil’s day, belief systems he considers as placing undue importance on the luminous bodies, instead of the

²² Benson, “Supernatural,” 38–49.

²³ Benson “Supernatural,” 42–43.

²⁴ Benson “Supernatural,” 42. A similar divide between the what is marvelous and what exceeds the laws of nature is observed between the genres of classical paradoxography and (Christian) hagiography at Christian Høgel, “Telling a *thauma* in Hagiography and Paradoxography,” in *Storyworlds in Short Narratives: Approaches to Late Antique and Early Byzantine Tales*, eds. Stravroula Constantinou and Andria Andreou (Leiden: Brill, 2025), 41–43.

²⁵ Benson “Supernatural,” 38.

²⁶ Benson “Supernatural,” 45.

²⁷ Basil of Caesarea, *Hexaameron* 6.2–3.

creator—effectivity (and, to Basil, errantly) attributing the supernatural to creation itself.

Just as the term δημιουργός to denote a benevolent creator was already well established since Plato, the uses of phrases like ὑπὲρ τὴν φύσιν were common long before the advent of Christianity, though often in vastly different senses. That phrase occurs, for instance, in highly philosophical and theoretical contexts, as with Aristotle using it to refer to the notion of some considering love and other emotions to be beyond one's inborn nature.²⁸ More revealing instances come in non-philosophical contexts and allow for a more representative examination of how terminology was used in wider Greco-Roman culture. Thus, Philostratus deploys it in a story wherein someone expresses the godlike (θεῖος) nature of Alexander the Great as being ὑπὲρ τὴν φύσιν τὴν ἀνθρωπείαν – “above human nature.”²⁹ Crucially, Philostratus equates being godlike to being above human nature, but *not* beyond nature itself. It is, however, Christians who will take up the language of the extraordinary and stress it as deriving from a force that is itself outside of nature entirely.

Any fixation on the rise to prominence of a single term, like *supernaturalis*, is highly misleading, and it was certainly not the case that such a distinction emerged in the ninth century or only gained prominence in the period of high scholasticism. Late Antique Christians were already participating in the thought of the supernatural as a metaphysical break from the natural. This Christian concept of the supernatural itself, after all, should precede the later theological coinage. Thus, we see in the same century as Philostratus' expression, Origen's picking up of the phrase, ὑπὲρ τὴν φύσιν, in a different manner to express God's power specifically. In his rebuttal to Celsus, Origen expressly states that there “are things beyond nature [τινα ὑπὲρ τὴν φύσιν] that God may do at any time, such as raising the human beyond human nature [ὑπὲρ τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην φύσιν].”³⁰ Such vocabulary is, to be sure, astonishingly close to the existing language used by authors like Philostratus. But Origen's different intent against Celsus is clear in conceiving his God as a supernatural force above *and* beyond nature, his creation. Origen's phrasing here already comes close to what will be explicitly stated by Eriugena as the divine will being the *supernaturalis ratio* that has such a capacity over the natural world and its human inhabitants.

Another notable example showcasing the Late Antique Christian concern with this distinction is Augustine's argument that God exists outside of time. His language summing up the argument and rebuffing those that would ask questions

²⁸ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 1225a.

²⁹ Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 2.21.2.

³⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.23. For further discussion, see also Brain Dunkle, “‘The twofold affection’: the background to John Chrysostom's use of φύσις and χάρις,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 75 (2021): 366–367.

about God as if he were himself bound to temporal laws is particularly interesting in this regard:

So let them, therefore, see that no time can exist without creation [*sine creatura*] . . . and understand that before all time existed you are the creator of all time, and that no periods of time are coeternal with you, nor is any creation, even if it takes place beyond any time [*nec ullam creaturam, etiamsi est aliqua supra tempora*].³¹

For Augustine, time is itself part of the natural world that is God's creation. Thus, even without him saying so explicitly, it logically follows from his thought that God, as a force acting *supra tempora*, would also necessarily be *supra naturam*. The supernatural in Christian thought is fomented within this continual desire to differentiate creation and creator. God is *the* supernatural force that is above and beyond natural laws like time in a more radical way than was the case for classical Greco-Roman conceptions of divinity. The same cannot be said even for Zeus, who was, at some point in time, born from the union of Rhea and Chronus; thus, a time prior to his existence did exist, one indication of his enmeshment within the natural world. Even if such Late Antique Christians do not use a distinctly new term for "supernatural" to refer to God's divine will and divine power as a force outside of his creation, it is clear that there is a sense of a break with pagan considerations of divinity.

Aspects of this Christian sense of the supernatural also reveal distinctions that do not align with the modern academic sense of the supernatural that privileges the modern empiricist worldview. A Christian could consider angels as a real and active part of the natural world as created by God, while atheistic empiricists consider them as unreal and hence to be categorized as supernatural. But it is far from the case that Christians of any period would consider all ideas that the academic sense of the supernatural as also belonging within this category. Demons are a particularly illustrative example to highlight such divergence in these senses of the supernatural. Though inimical to God and Christians, demons were, nonetheless, conceptualized as part of the created world and do not possess the same power as the creator. Many stories in circulation, though, represented demons as possessing supernatural powers, which led Christians to develop means of dispelling such notions. Thus, Athanasius inserted an explanation for how demons operate by trickery into his *Life of Antony* to falsely convince people that they possess the ability to perceive the future. One may, for instance, tell a human that they possess the power to see the

³¹ Augustine, *Confessions* 11.30. The final clause here may refer to the creation of angels, often theorized to have occurred prior to the six-day creation narrative in Genesis, and thus before time itself. See also the discussion of Christianized conceptions of time in Frederick Kimpton's chapter in this volume.

future by predicting that a traveler will visit them in a few days. But the demon, in fact, possesses no such supernatural power, and only knows this due to being able to fly ahead and having seen the traveler departing days in advance.³² Tertullian applies the same logic to explain how the Oracle of Delphi was able to report to Croesus' messenger what he was doing back in Lydia. The demon Apollo, possessing wings, was able to swiftly fly through the air to spy on Croesus.³³ Though the academic sense of the supernatural would clearly regard the power of flight, and demons themselves as supernatural, in such Christian conceptions, these creatures are merely natural beings, but ones that employ deceptive trickery to appear as if they possess the same supernatural power as the creator.

In framing the supernatural as the power of God, the creator, to shape at will the created world, Christian authorities did occasionally run into problems, as with the Late Antique attempts to explain the Witch of Endor story as seeming to prove the existence of ghosts, figures that some Christians (though not all) deemed as incompatible with their vision of the afterlife.³⁴ Such problematic cases that seemed to disprove this Christian sense of the supernatural were never really resolved and continued to be a source of debate and exegeses well into the medieval world. Albertus Magnus, for instance, struggled to explain how the Pharaoh's magicians were able to turn their staffs into serpents in the Book of Exodus (7: 8-13) in response to Aaron and Moses doing the same, presumably through the power of God. Such a detail seems to indicate that these magicians themselves also possess the supernatural power to bend the laws of nature, just as God does, acting here through Aaron and Moses. Albertus, in response, claimed that it was, in fact, a natural property for wood to turn into serpents. Therefore, the magicians accomplished such through the aid of demons, speeding up such a natural process, and deceptively making it appear like a true instance of supernatural transformation. As Albertus remarks, "they make nothing that exists above the order of nature [*nihil faciunt super ordinem naturae existens*],"³⁵ reserving such a capacity for God himself. Of course, this seems a tortured explanation from the modern empiricist perspective, wherein the apparent acceleration of growth (and the demons themselves) would be obviously considered supernatural phenomena. But it is, nonetheless, indicative of the Christian imperative to try to preserve the supernatural as the domain of God alone. Just as with the empiricist appealing to the laws of physics "as we understand them," so too can we detect such

³² Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 31.

³³ Tertullian, *Apology* 22.8–11. For discussion, see Daniel Ogden, *The Dragon in the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 113–116.

³⁴ Ryan Denson, "Erasing the Ethereal: Christian Attempts at Delegitimising Ghosts," in *Erasure in Late Antiquity*, eds. Kay Boers, Becca Grose, Rebecca Usherwood, and Guy Walker (Budapest: Trivent, 2024), 227–229.

³⁵ Albertus Magnus, *Summa Theologica* 2.8.30.1. For discussion, see Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 25–26.

sidestepping of problematic cases to affirm the pre-conceived notions among Christians against cases that would seemingly dispute their conception of the supernatural.

There is, then, much flexibility in how the supernatural is conceptualized and represented; there is simply no avoiding that quality. Both the academic and the Christian senses harbor built-in mechanisms to permit such flexibility, and safeguard their respective established conceptions of the opposition between natural and supernatural. In this regard, it must be admitted that the supernatural is unavoidably a highly relative term. These two senses of the supernatural might also be thought to represent etic and emic perspectives. Yet such a binary opposition is hardly feasible in this case. Although some scholars might pretend otherwise, our modern academic sense of the supernatural is far from a dispassionate and objective etic perspective. It is, in fact, no less of a culturally influenced viewpoint than the Christian sense of the supernatural that has been the main subject of the foregoing analysis.

A related corollary to these considerations of the supernatural is also how we may consider the term “magic.”³⁶ Just as one cannot have a sense of the natural without the supernatural, since Christians were often concerned with issues of correct religious practice, one needed a contrast which could be drawn with incorrect religious practice. Thus, our Christian understanding of magic was born. Scholars who work on pre-Christian ritual materials bump up against the difficulty of the term magic frequently, and there are broadly three schools of thought. Firstly, those who believe we should avoid using the term magic as there is no ancient equivalent in either ancient Greek or Latin.³⁷ For instance, Martin Riesebrodt theorizes that there is no sociological value to distinguishing between magic and religion.³⁸ For these scholars, the work of Julia Kindt on personal religion is more useful.³⁹ Given that many of the acts which are deemed by a modern audience to be magical still engage with the same figures and make use of similar ritual practices, it seems foolish to draw divisions between rituals which should be considered religious and therefore legitimate and those which should be considered magical and therefore illegitimate or magical. It seems more reasonable that different types

³⁶ Unlike magic there is good analysis of what religion should be considered to be in the ancient world by Jörg Rüpke, “Religious agency, identity, and communication: Reflecting on history and theory of religion,” *Religion* 45 (2010): 344–66.

³⁷ Richard Gordon, “Magic as a Form of Personal Religion,” in *Personal Religion in the Ancient Greek World: A Cultural History*, ed. Julia Kindt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 83–85.

³⁸ Martin Riesebrodt, *Cultus und Heilsversprechen: Eine Theorie der Religionen* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2007), 117.

³⁹ Julia Kindt, *Rethinking Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Julia Kindt, “Personal religion: A productive Category for the Study of Ancient Greek Religion?,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 135 (2015): 35–50; *Personal Religion in the Ancient Greek World: A Cultural History*, ed. Julia Kindt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025).

of ritual should be dealt with individually rather than trying to create two clearly separable categories.

Secondly, there are scholars who defend the use of the term magic, often with the understanding that this is an etic or heuristic term.⁴⁰ In this view, magic is used to describe the group of rituals which are clearly not for the betterment of society, such as necromancy or the creation of a curse tablet, which are both, at times, considered to be selfish and socially (or even morally) wrong.⁴¹ At its core, the issue is one of social transgression. This issue of actions fitting into the broader scheme of what power it was acceptable for an individual to call upon seems more important than the actual conceptions of the powers behind the rituals or the actions of the rituals themselves. For instance, a prayer to a supernatural figure which is perceived as socially innocent would not have been considered magical. However, a prayer to a supernatural figure asking for the destruction of a person of importance would have been considered socially transgressive, and therefore, the act becomes one of magic, not religion.

The key issue with this approach is that different individuals and groups will have different ideas about what is socially acceptable or not. This, in turn, leads to different ideas as to what is magic and what is not. This difficulty is what has led to the creation of this very volume. The Late Antique period is one where there are changing ideas about correct ritual practice and a move from orthopraxy to orthodoxy, which is what makes it so interesting for this kind of study. Throughout the various chapters, many instances are presented where ideas from the ancient world are still being used alongside new ideas from evolving Christian thoughts, as with Ryan Denson's chapter examining John Chrysostom's attitude towards amuletic practices as inappropriate, despite it seeming to be a rather banal and uncontroversial practice for many of his congregants. As Eric Rebillard highlights, individuals in this period could not be forced into binary positions which our modern terminology tries to impose: "... Christianness was only one of the many affiliations that mattered in everyday life."⁴² It is clear that individuals almost certainly did not fall into categories of completely Christian versus completely

⁴⁰ Joseph Sanzo, "Deconstructing the deconstructionists: A response to recent criticisms of the rubric 'ancient magic'," in *Ancient Magic: Then and Now*, eds. Attilio Mastrocinque, Joseph Sanzo, Marianna Scapini, (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2020), 25–46. And Radcliffe G. Edmonds, *Drawing Down the Moon: Magic in the Ancient Greco-Roman World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 5–34.

⁴¹ See Fritz Graf, "How to Cope with a Difficult Life: A View of Ancient Magic," in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, eds. Peter Schäfer and Hans Kippenberg, (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 93–114, who suggests that religion is an act which integrates the individual into their community which is in contrast to the use of magic which separates the individual.

⁴² Eric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 6.

pagan.⁴³ There are various descriptions of “types” of Christians which have been put forward by scholars, such as semi-Christian.⁴⁴ We believe we can take this thinking further and consider actions as semi-magical.

Thirdly, our final group of scholars consider this agonizing over the difference between magic and religion as a distraction from the interesting analysis which can be conducted on specific examples. For instance, there survives an instance where Theoris, a woman from Lemnos, was condemned to death for ἀσέβεια, as she allegedly made use of drugs (φάρμακα) and incantations (ἐπωδαί). The earliest recording of this incident is in an oration spuriously attributed to Demosthenes, dating to c. 330 BCE:

You put to death the accursed Theoris, the Lemnian, the witch [*pharmakis*], Theoman herself, and all her family. The reason for this was her drugs [*pharmaka*]. This man got these drugs of hers and her incantations from her maid, the woman who gave all the information about her at the time of her trial. For she was the mother of this evil-eye-er [*baskanos*]. Now he plays magical tricks [*manganeuei*] and cheats and claims that he cures epileptics [*epilēptoi*], while he himself is caught [*epilēptos*] in wickedness of every kind. So, this is the man, this scapegoat, this pestilence, who is to save the defendant. One would be more inclined to shun him on sight as an evil omen than to wish to speak to him.⁴⁵

Collins highlights that these elements “cannot all be reconciled with actual Athenian criminal procedure” and therefore we should consider that their inclusion is a form of “rhetorical embellishment.”⁴⁶ The use of φάρμακα was of concern to Athenian law when it led to death. Their inclusion does illustrate that there was a moralizing judgment which could be passed on the actions. A similar instance is the condemning to death of a priestess, Ninos, described by Demosthenes,⁴⁷ who was also said to make use of φάρμακα. It has been argued that in both cases, these individuals were most likely punished for the risk of death or serious harm through these actions rather than because the actions themselves were considered

⁴³ Rebillard, *Christians*, 37, 60, 92

⁴⁴ Gerald Bonner, “The Extinction of Paganism and the Church Historian,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 35 (1984): 339–357, for a discussion of these terms see Rebillard, *Christians*, 95.

⁴⁵ [Demosthenes] *Against Aristogeiton* 25.79–80. Translation: Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Source Book*. Second Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), no. 85.

⁴⁶ Derek Collins, “Theoris of Lemnos and the Criminalization of Magic in Fourth Century Athens,” *The Classical Quarterly* 51 (2001): 447–493, 477.

⁴⁷ Demosthenes, *Orationes* 19.281.

subversive.⁴⁸ However, these instances did not lead to a concrete idea of what actions count as magic rather than religious in the ancient Greek world. The focus of the accusations was upon the harm done rather than the methods through which harm was achieved.

Similarly, in the Roman Republic and Empire, there is very little evidence for curse tablets as illegal or morally condemned. Pliny the Elder reports that in the Twelve Tables there is the prohibition of *mala carmina*, often translated as oral incantations, or spells, rather than inscribed or written curses (other ancient authors, such as Augustine, mention a law dealing with *carmina* but interpret the law as concerning slander.⁴⁹ It is also worth highlighting that by the first century CE, the Twelve Tables had largely been replaced by the Praetorian Edict, which should lead us to question how much of a cultural memory there was of these laws at later points.⁵⁰ However, as Rives highlights, writers such as Servius understood the Twelve Tables as laws against magic “insofar as they criminalized certain actions that were later reconceptualized as instances of magic.”⁵¹

It is correct to say that in the modern world, we have an understanding of magic as an act which is in some way harmful or wrong. However, a glance at entries for magic in the *Oxford English Dictionary* will show that most definitions are self-referential. In that regard, we seem to have an understanding of magic which we are unable to define. Much like pornography, it seems that we believe we will know magic when we see it.

In the Late Antique period, the issue of what was magic and what was not started to come to the fore. This period is marked by the growth of Christianity and concerns with the purity of religious practices, which impacted upon the lived realities of individuals to some extent. Gordan has described the changes in attitudes towards, and conceptualization of, magic during the first centuries BCE/CE as the development of a “strong view.”⁵² This development, in turn, had an impact on Roman law.⁵³ As Rives notes: “the criminalization of certain activities

⁴⁸ Derek Collins, “The Trial of Theoris of Lemnos: A 4th Century Witch or Folk Healer?,” *Western Folklore* 59 (2000): 251; Hans G. Kippenberg, “Magic in Roman civil discourse: why rituals could be illegal,” in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Hans G. Kippenberg (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 157.

⁴⁹ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 28.10; Augustine, *The City of God*, 2.9. James B. Rives, “Magic in the XII Tables Revisited,” *Classical Quarterly* 52 (2002): 279–282 for discussion.

⁵⁰ Cicero, *De Legibus* 1.17.

⁵¹ James B. Rives, “Magic in Roman Law: The Reconstruction of a Crime,” *Classical Antiquity* 22 (2003): 316 and Rives, “Magic in the XII Tables.”

⁵² Richard Gordon, “Imagining Greek and Roman Magic,” in *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Valarie Flint, Richard Gordon, and Georg Luck (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), 164–165, 207, 229–231.

⁵³ This introduction is not the place for a systematic analysis of magic in ancient laws; this work has been executed well elsewhere (such as Carlo Castello, “Cenni sulla repressione del reato di magia dagli inizi del principato fino a Costanzo II,” in *Atti dell’Accademia Romanistica*

shifted over time, as these activities came to be perceived in new ways,⁵⁴ issues of religious deviance or variation become of greater import. Unsurprisingly, it is in Late Antiquity that the hardening of attitudes towards magic and specific ritual actions, such as curse tablet production, arises.

According to an early edict, under the emperor Constantine, there was a prosecution of professional magicians, but the use of popular remedies by ordinary people was allowed to continue.⁵⁵ However, there had been an understanding in the Roman world that rituals would not be carried out in secretive ways. Since the repression of the Bacchanalia in 186 BCE, secret meetings had been outlawed in Rome: an edict from Augustus in 11 CE forbade seers (μάντις) from prophesying to anyone alone.⁵⁶ A similar edict was issued by Tiberius in 19 CE forbidding anyone to consult diviners secretly.⁵⁷

As we come into the third century CE, we encounter more explicit condemnations of magical acts. In Julius Paulus' *Sententiae*, which aimed to summarize the legal developments of the classical period, we find the following:

Those who perform, or arrange for the performance of, impious or nocturnal rites, in order to enchant [*obcantare*], magically bind [*defigere*], or restrain [*obligare*] someone, shall be crucified or thrown to the beasts . . . It is agreed that those guilty of the magic art [*magicae artis*] be inflicted with the supreme punishment, that is, thrown to the beasts or crucified. Actual magicians [*magi*], however, shall be burned alive. No one is permitted to have in their possession books of the magic art; and if anyone is found to have them in their possession, the books shall be publicly burnt, and their property confiscated...⁵⁸

It is worth highlighting that it is now widely accepted that this work was not actually that of Julius Paulus himself, but rather a compilation of works from the end of the third century CE, and it is impossible to know what documents

Constantiniana: VIII convegno internazionale, 665–693 (Naples: Università degli studi di Perugia, 1990); Rives, “Magic in the XII Tables”; Kippenberg, “Magic in Roman civil discourse”; Detlef Liebs, “Strafprozesse wegen Zauberei: Magie und politisches Kalkül in der römischen Geschichte,” in *Große Prozesse der römischen Antike*, ed. Ulrich Manthe and Jürgen von Ungern-Sternberg (Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 1997), 146–158; Michaela Rücker, “Pharmakeía und Crimen magiae,” *Frauen und Magie in der griechisch-römischen Antike*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014).

⁵⁴ Rives, “Magic in Roman Law,” 315.

⁵⁵ *Codex Theodosianus* 9.16.3.

⁵⁶ Dio Cassius, *Histories* 56.25.5.

⁵⁷ Gordon, “Imagining,” 235–255; Hans G. Kippenberg, *Die vorderasiatischen Erlösungsreligionen in ihrem Zusammenhang mit der antiken Stadtherrschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991), 396–398.

⁵⁸ Julius Paulus, *Sententiae* 5.23.15–18. Translation is Derek Collins, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World* (Oxford: Wiley–Blackwell, 2008), 160 a modification of Rives, “Magic in Roman Law,” 329.

contributed to this assembly.⁵⁹ Given that this text is a commentary on the earlier *Lex Cornelia* (72 BCE) it may indicate the way in which the tricky phrase *veneficus* had been interpreted beforehand, something which is also indicated by the description of the death of Germanicus and the trial of Libo Drusus.⁶⁰

The dating of this piece illustrates the changes in legal thinking from generally harmful and potentially magical crimes, designated by the use of *veneficium*, to issues of religious deviance noted by the use of terms such as *maleficium*.⁶¹ The impact of the growing cult of Christianity,⁶² as well as the changes of the political landscape with the succession of Septimius Severus, just in the years before lead to a hardening of opinions and laws on subversive activities. There develops a discourse on “what religion is” or should be.⁶³ However, in Augustine’s account of an encounter with a “diviner,” we sense the tension of the period. There are clearly concerns about the theological and legal issues of certain rituals. Yet there are still those out in the open actively undertaking and promoting potentially illicit acts:

I recall that once, when I had decided to enter a competition for producing a poem for the theatre, some diviner [*haruspex*] sent to ask how much I would be willing to pay him for victory. But I despised, abominated those disgusting rites, and replied that I would not permit even a fly to be killed, even if the victory crown were to be made of everlasting gold. For he was planning to kill animals in his sacrificial rites and seemed to intend to petition for the aid of demons with these offerings.⁶⁴

To try and draw some of these threads together into a sensible knot, Stephen Ricks is correct when they assert:

... where religion ends and magic begins on the religion-magic continuum depends upon the stance of the person speaking or writing, since it is not possible to divide religion and magic on the basis of any objective set of criteria.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ See Rives, “Magic in Roman Law”, 328 and Kippenberg, “Magic in Roman civil discourse,” 148–150.

⁶⁰ Collins, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World*, 143, 146.

⁶¹ Rives, “Magic in Roman Law,” 334.

⁶² Gordon, “Imagining,” 166.

⁶³ Greg Woolf, “The Religious History of the Northwest Provinces,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 13 (2000): 617–621.

⁶⁴ Augustine *Confessions* 4.2; translation: Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts*, no. 175.

⁶⁵ Stephen Ricks, “The Magician as Outsider in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament,” in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, eds. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 143.

The aim of this volume is to examine how different individuals engaged with both the Christian and the supernatural in their lives in Late Antiquity, not to present a definitive definition of magic. The tension between different ideas of what magic means, whether it is a useful category, and what we should consider magic, are all ideas which are teased out in several contributions in this volume. The different sources used by the contributors demonstrate a lack of certainty in the period itself and how this level of certainty changed over time. By confronting the difficulty of magic (and the supernatural) head-on, we hope that this volume will further the analysis of interesting case studies and will draw out the fact that magic at its core can only be defined by an individual for an individual. And when we start to police what is acceptable or unacceptable behaviors, we are unable to make any kind of concrete judgements.

III. The Weight of the Classical Conceptions on Late Antique Christians and the Supernatural

A fundamental feature of Christianity in the Late Antique world, specifically, is the indebtedness to the non-Christian world of Greco-Roman antiquity. This expresses itself in many ways, and with many Christians having struggled with the lingering associations of their society's thoroughly un-Christian past. There is, for instance, Jerome's famous consternation at having enjoyed reading Cicero so much.⁶⁶ The cover image of this volume is a version of Gustave Dore's engraving of Jacob's wrestling contest with an angel.⁶⁷ We chose this image to represent the Late Antique Christian's struggle with the supernatural in various cultural senses that circulated around them. While such a theme of wrestling specifically with the classical past, as Jerome had, is more foregrounded in the chapters of Part Three, elements of this wrestling contest with the supernatural exist through every chapter in some form or another. For many Late Antique Christians, the supernatural was similarly a force to be wrestled with, whether that force be one from their God, or, in the broader academic sense, a force from a more cosmologically evil force. In many ways, this image is also emblematic of the struggle of individuals living at a time of profound religious and cultural transition that Late Antiquity represents as the era between pagan Greco-Roman antiquity and the more fully Christianized worlds of the medieval and Byzantine cultures. As the oft-quoted line from Karl Marx goes, "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare upon the brains of the living."⁶⁸ For those living within these transitional and transformative centuries, the

⁶⁶ Jerome, *Letters* 22.

⁶⁷ Genesis 32:22-31.

⁶⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 8 (Dietz Verlag: Berlin, 1960), 111: "Die Tradition aller toten Geschlechter lastet wie ein Alp auf dem Gehirne der Lebenden." Text from the third edition of *Der 18te Brumaire des Louis Napoleon* (originally published in 1869).

traditions of the past were perhaps especially haunting at a time when their contemporary world was becoming something starkly different. Whether as a Christian preacher in Antioch berating his congregants for their demonic use of traditional apotropaic objects, or as a Christian paying for a traditional curse tablet to be produced against an embittered enemy, these individuals exemplified varying means of wrestling with those cultural legacies and transitions of ideas about the natural and supernatural.

The four parts of this volume, then, each deal with aspects of Late Antique Christians' engagement with the supernatural and the magic. Part One concerns a subject of central importance for Late Antique Christianity: demons and the Devil. These two chapters examine the significance of these figures in different ways. Joshua Littell's "'The First-Born of Satan': Demonic Influence and Christian Identity in the Writings of the Church Fathers," examines the importance of such figures within the writings of three patristic authors, highlighting, not so much the Christian conceptions of the demonic *per se*, but the how such elements were deployed rhetorically in relation to affirming Christian identity, functioning to police the boundaries of the faith. Then, Tiana Blazeovic's "Galen's Demons? An Alternative Reading of Demonic Bodies in Medical and Philosophical Discourse of Late Antiquity" makes use of Social Reality Theory to explore the role of the demonic in the medical contexts of the Galenic corpus as well as that of three Christian apologists. As she argues, such contexts highlight the artificiality of many modern academic divisions between natural and supernatural. Both Galen and many Christian writers drew upon fundamentally similar conceptions of *pneuma* ("spirit" or "breath") and represent a "trans-corporeal bridge between humans and supernatural entities." In both chapters, we see hold-over traditions of demons from earlier Jewish and pagan conceptions playing a substantial role in how these entities were featured in such varying contexts.

The four chapters of Part Two, then, grapple with the supernatural in works of Late Antique historiography and hagiography. These two genres have much in common, yet the traditional scholarly assessments of these genres with regard to the supernatural could not be more disparate. Hagiography seems in many ways a genre wherein the supernatural is "at home," yet as discussed above, it is historiography as a genre where such ideas are often passed over by modern scholars. Thus, to highlight the possibilities for the latter genre, we begin with a chapter on historiography. While still involving ideas about demons, though, transitioning into larger conceptions within the historiographical works of Procopius of Caesarea, Vasiliki Zali-Schiel's "Supernatural Envy, Volatile Fortune, and Demons in Procopius" examines ideas connected to supernatural jealousy. As she argues, Procopius' distinct fusion of the pagan and Christian ideas around this concept highlights how his self-presentation as an author is constantly one of being an open-minded individual. Following this, Carson Bay's "Magic and Miracles, Zombies and Demons: *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* and the 'Supernatural'

Landscape of the Late Antique Christian Historiographical Imagination” examines an understudied fourth-century CE Latin work of historiography, entitled *De excidio Hierosolymitano* (*On the Destruction of Jerusalem*), which contains scattered references to supernatural phenomena such as magic, miracles, zombies, and demons. As Bay demonstrates, although the text’s mentions of these topics are fleetingly rare, they can be understood as containing signs of the author’s worldview wherein such supernatural phenomena were considered real, and thus accorded a place within a historiographic work. Transitioning into hagiographic works, Filippo Gerace’s “The Supernatural Revelations in Manichean and Judeo-Christian contexts between Cross-cultural Interactions and the Charisma of the Holy Man,” examines another understudied but significant work, that of the *Cologne Mani Codex* (CMC), a fourth-fifth-century CE codex that, despite its biographical focus on the founder of Manichaeism, nonetheless, contains demonstrable influences of Christianity. As Gerace argues, the various supernatural events within episodes of the CMC are emblematic of literary *topoi* around such holy figures within the wider patterns of Judeo-Christian thought, a significant quality in this context, given the blurry nature of the boundaries between ancient Christianity and Manichaeism. Finally, William Colman’s “Serpents and their Slayers in Lucian’s *Philopseudes* and *The Acts of Saint Philip*” undertakes a comparative examination of Lucian’s *Philopseudes* and the *Acts of Saint Philip*. He highlights the degree to which the portions of Lucian’s satirical work, involving serpents and their slayers, also intersect with these Christian stories of such in this more hagiographical context.

Such a theme of the hold-over associations of earlier classical antiquity, of course, occurred in a variety of other contexts elsewhere. Part Three, then, turns to more direct encounters with another four chapters concerning the issue of “wrestling” within these earlier cultural conceptions, particularly in more direct, often confrontational, manners. Frederick Kimpton’s “Dreams and the Supernatural in Late Antiquity” examines such transitioning cultural conceptions with regard to dreams, arguing that Christians were forced to confront the nature of dreams from earlier pagan contexts. This is, as he demonstrates, also bound up with many larger philosophical issues hotly debated in antiquity, such as the nature of the soul and its relationship with the body. Douglas C. Whalin, then, follows this up with his chapter “Talisman or conduit? Beliefs about Statuary and Miracles” that explores the relationship of Late Antique Christian ideas about the supernatural and (statuary) art, primarily through the eighth-century CE text, *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*, a compilation of episodic entries about statuary of Constantinople. Through contextualizing this against other archaeological and written sources, Whalin argues that this understudied text serves as a vital window into the (sometimes contradictory) cultural ideas about (statuary) art, particularly its associations with miracles and the long-standing notions that demonic forces dwell within physical statues. Discussion of material contexts continues, then, with Charlotte Spence’s “*Seu gen(tili)s seu Ch(r)istianus*: The Bath Curse Tablets and the

Christian in Pagan Spaces”, which examines a single curse tablet found in third-century CE Roman Bath, and which she argues shows signs of Christians and non-Christian communities together at the time in the region. Finally, Ryan Denson’s “Sorcerers, Amulets, and Spiritual Harm: (In)appropriate Relationships with the Supernatural in the Thought of John Chrysostom” turns to the other side of the Mediterranean world, chiefly Antioch and Constantinople, to explore the ways that one Late Antique preacher, John Chrysostom conceptualized and portrayed amuletic magic being used by his congregation. As he examines, Chrysostom used various rhetorical strategies to delegitimize traditional practices of medical amulets, considering them to be essentially inappropriate and misleading relationships to the supernatural, which he considers as being akin to Jewish and pagan ideas as religious paths that are clearly delineated from the (to him) more righteous path of Christianity and its relationship to the supernatural.

While John Chrysostom may have conceptualized there being a clear distinction between Christian and non-Christian ideas of the supernatural, this was far from the actual reality of the situation on the ground, with many Late Antique individuals having believed a mixture of such ideas from various traditions. This we have indirectly indicated with Chrysostom’s dim understanding of the beliefs of his congregants, but many other Late Antique texts serve to highlight this intermixture in more direct and clear terms. Thus, the two chapters of Part Four conclude with a topic relevant to highlighting this theme, though not often associated with Late Antiquity, and instead seem to be more “medieval.” This is, then, the subject of alchemy. It is alchemical writings that are an especially likely context for these types of mixtures of cultural thought. Accordingly, Joshua Werrett’s “*Daimones* in Late Antique Astrology and Alchemy: The Practices of Firmicus Maternus, Zosimos of Panopolis, and Olympiodorus of Alexandria” explores the notions of daimonic influences in alchemical and astrological contexts. As he argues, these three authors illustrate radically different conceptions of the engagement of *daimones* with such thought. Finally, Fabiana Lopes da Silveira’s “Christian Alchemy or Magical Christianity? Zosimos’ *On the Letter Omega* and the ‘Eighth Book of Moses’” examines alchemical notions in this text of Zosimos, comparing it with the work in the PGM XIII’s “Eighth Book of Moses.” Zosimos further serves as an especially intriguing author to conclude this volume with, given the scholarly debates over his religious identity as to whether he was a Christian or some variety of pagan. As Lopes da Silveira argues, he should be considered to have been a Christian, and these two texts are significant for highlighting the Christian valences within which alchemical ideas circulated. Her comparative reading of these two texts demonstrates that similarities between them indicate that they may have circulated within the eclectic milieu, one that, far from being “frictionless,” was characterized by competing claims about the supernatural. Here, then, we also circle back to the diversity of Christian thought that we began with in Littell’s chapter.

Many of us are initially drawn to this period of Late Antiquity because of the varied and unusual nature of the issues and tales which have survived from the time. We should not lose sight of this as we attempt to share analysis in academic discourse. Sometimes the messy is necessary. These contributions, which concern a diverse assessment of topics from between the second century CE and the eighth century CE, all highlight the diverse means that the supernatural was conceptualized, portrayed, and impacted the thoughts and actions of people of Late Antiquity. We hope this volume will contribute to the study of such varied lives in the transitional period of Late Antiquity.

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