

INTRODUCTION

The present volume, titled *Nemo non metuit: Magic in the Roman World*, aims to reconstruct the development of some essential themes in the history of magic and witchcraft within the Roman ecumene and an extended timeframe stretching between the beginning of Rome and its fall (eighth century BCE – fifth century CE). This collection of fifteen studies, written by both accomplished professors and young scholars, comes as the second volume in the book series *Advances in the History of Magic Witchcraft and Religion* published by Trivent. The book fits perfectly within the scope of the series, at least for two reasons. First of all, it focuses on traditions and developments proper of the Roman times, within a series that aims at advancing the understanding of official religious practices as well as magic and witchcraft-related beliefs, ritual traditions and tools covering the entire period from the ancient to the Early modern times; second, because of the centrality of the Ancient and Classical culture in relation to the development of magic, superstition, and witchcraft which created stereotypes, approaches, and accusations that became traditional and a constitutive part of the beliefs which emerged in the following period. We know how fundamental it is to understand how the Roman world dealt with – and contributed to creating – not just the traditions and the instruments of magic but the same categories that shaped the boundaries of what was considered licit or not, starting with concepts such as *religio* and *superstitio*. It is by now clear to historians the role played by Classical traditions and Roman culture – whether literary or legal – in creating a basis for shaping witch-beliefs and the creation of accusations of the later periods. This was, in fact, already clear, although not always explicitly, to the preachers who popularized many of the witchcraft stereotypes at the end of the Middle Ages. The work of the historian is now to trace those stereotypes back to some of their possible cultural

roots. This volume on Roman magic aims to provide the reader of the books in this series with a possibility to identify roots, trajectories, and – so to say – landing spots of beliefs, traditions, and literary motives, from the ancient times to the early modern period, therefore within broad chronological boundaries. Such a voyage towards a general reconstruction of the world of magic and witchcraft, as a voyage of *longue dur e*, trespassing historical periodization, is well represented by the first volume in this series, *Civilization of the Supernatural*, in which, as explained in the introduction, the authors try to reconstruct “the boundaries of the unfathomable,” through the period between the Late Antiquity and the Renaissance.¹ The present volume completes the first one by particularly focusing on the Roman world as a cultural base of foundational magical traditions of the western world.

On 13 and 20 March 2021, a conference-like event was held in relation to the volume. Titled “Researching and Publishing Roman Magic: How an Academic Peer-Reviewed Volume Takes Shape” was organized online by the volume’s editors and the publisher with the sponsorship of the Department of History and Humanities at John Cabot University in Rome. During the two days, the contributors to the volume had the opportunity to present their papers, and this resulted in a fruitful discussion that connected the authors, the editors, and the publisher around a frontier topic such as magic in the Roman world.

The studies collected in this volume cover the entire period of the Roman civilization, that is, the civilization resting on the developmental stages of Rome from becoming a city to turning into a Republic and then into an empire. The first chapter, Ronaldo G. Gurgel Pereira’s “Magical Gems. A Roman development of Etruscan, Greek and Phoenician scarab amulets (8th – 5th c. BCE)” studies Roman magical gems as a development of Etruscan, Greek, and Phoenician scarab amulets (“aegyptiaca”), thus reconstructing the spread of a veritable Mediterranean magical item through several centuries. In her “Change and Continuity in Curse Tablets from the Roman World,” Charlotte Spence analyses the variations within the theme of *defixiones* across the Roman world, relating those variations to geographical and cultural

¹ Fabrizio Conti, “Tracing the Boundaries of the Unfathomable: An Introduction to *Civilization of the Supernatural*,” in *Civilization of the Supernatural: Witchcraft, Ritual, and Religion Experience in Late Antique, Medieval, and Renaissance Traditions*, ed. Fabrizio Conti (Budapest: Trivent, 2020), 5-11.

factors, as well as exchanges. Further innovations were brought about by the spread of magical ideas, such as a goddess like Isis being invoked very far from Egypt, in the north-western provinces of the Roman Empire. Yvette Hunt writes on “Pursuing Health by Pursuing Disease. The Use of Spells and Amulets to Address Malaria in Roman Antiquity”. In her chapter, Hunt studies the creation of amulets against malaria through the anonymous third-century Latin text *Medicina Plinii*, highlighting how Greek incantations to treat diseases were becoming part of western Roman Latin magical tools, after being adapted to contrast their specific supernatural purpose related to fever. In her chapter “‘Erotic’ Spells, Stalking, and the *Exclusus Amator* in Ancient Rome,” Elizabeth Ann Pollard studies the connotations of the desire expressed in the erotic spells within stalking-like behavior in Roman legal texts and the motif of the *exclusus amator* in Latin poetry, by comparing Roman-period stalking behaviors with their modern-day counterparts according to specific behavioral categories. Alfredo Viscomi writes about “Magic to Steal, Magic to love, Magic to Heal: *Veneficia*, *Defixiones*, *Devotiones* in the *Naturalis Historia* by Plinius the Elder.” In his chapter, the author shows how magic was deeply rooted in Roman culture, and he does so by especially relying on Pliny the Elder’s *Historia naturalis*, with all the attention that the text dedicates to specific magical practices. In her chapter “Cursing Patterns and Religious Belief. Studying the Prevalence of ‘Judicial Prayers’ in Roman Britain,” Madeline Line notices how, in Britain, judicial prayers were much more widespread than *defixiones*. She categorizes judicial prayers as something inherently different from *defixiones* and contextualizes the choice and use of the former over the latter in Britain, explaining it with the lack of knowledge of supernatural entities that can be found within the culture of the island. Caolán Mac An Aircinn writes the chapter “How Lucan Kills Magic: Magic and the *vates* in Book Six of Lucan’s *Bellum Civile*.” Through the lens of the concept of *vates*, the author studies some inconsistencies in Lucan’s epic poem and shows how *vates*, in the poem, are unable to perform their function, such as in the case of Erichtho providing Sextus with a prophecy that is not at all effective. Nicole Kimball’s “Abjection and Anxiety: The Metamorphosis of the Roman Literary Witch” explores the changing figure of the witch in the late Republican and Early Imperial Roman literature, following rising anxieties around magic that led to a transformation of that figure with the shift from Circe to

Erictho. Angelica Flandoli offers a study on the relationship between magic and divination in the late Republican period in her “Foreseeing the Future: The Role of Women between Magic and Divination.” Such an analysis is centered on the role and the nature of women as magicians in Latin literature, one that seemed to be intimately irrational. Britta Ager’s “Orpheus and the Evolution of the Roman Witch” focuses on the parallels and influences between the figure of Orpheus and the development of the trope of the Orphic witch in the Roman literature of the Augustan age, with Apollonius’ *Argonautica* as a starting point. Semiramis Corsi Silva discusses the “Memories of Apollonius of Tyana: Sorcerer, Holy Man and Rival of Jesus Christ,” a chapter in which she traces the image of Apollonius of Tyana and how it varies from that of a charlatan to that of a competitor of Jesus in the period between the Roman Principate and Late Antiquity. In her “*Si Crimina Demas*: Necromancy in Roman Literature and Statius’ Transgressive Manto,” A. Everett Beek studies the figure of Manto, tracing the transformation of her nature from the one depicted in Greek tradition as a harmless seeress and priestess aiding her father, the Theban seer Tiresias, to her necromantic and transgressive characterization emerging in Statius’ *Thebaid*, which the author compares to other figures of witches in Classical literature. Ashli Baker argues in her “The Magic of Isis-Fortuna in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*,” that Fortuna and Isis should be seen in Apuleius’ text as a single deity playing different roles and controlling the magic that operates the transformations of the protagonist of the novel, Lucius. Fabrizio Conti’s “Pagan and Christian Identities in the Later Roman Empire: Maximus of Turin and His Sermons on Magic and Superstition” deals with the formation of categories such as *pagan* and *Christian* and discusses the clash between beliefs and rituals of diverse origin within the Christianization process brought about by clergymen such as Maximus of Turin through his sermons. The last chapter of the collection, Andrea Maraschi’s “A World Imbued with Sorcery? The Fight between Christian and non-Christian Powers in Fourth- and Fifth-Century Christendom” delineates how and why magic was perceived as a threat by the Church during the war on “magic” and idolatry which took place between the fourth and fifth centuries within the process of evangelization.

This collection of studies is therefore rich in scope, the material covered, and its arguments. Moreover, the authors deal with diverse

topics, thus enriching how one can look at the Roman world as a complex of magico-religious traditions, topoi, motives, and tendencies that develop and intersect from the archaic times to the fall of the Roman Empire. The value of this volume is therefore, at least, twofold. On the one hand, the great thematic and chronological breadth of the contributions through which this collection provides an overview of magic and witchcraft studies and their relationship to classical and Roman civilization that is rarely found in a single volume. On the other hand, this work brings together, side by side, scholars with extensive experience and many publications to their credit and young researchers at the beginning of their careers, who are passionately following in the steps of their masters.

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