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## MAGIC IN THE COSMOPOLIS OF ROME

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*Abstract:* Using examples from anthropological studies of radical shifts in the *imaginaire* of magic in modern African and Asian societies, this paper outlines the consequences both for small time ritual practitioners themselves and for the stereotypes of a specifically urban magic that followed the decision to move to the megacity of Rome, taken as emblematic of the case with other large cities in the ancient Mediterranean world. Given the highly dispersed nature of religious authority in the Greek and Roman political formations, and the attraction of religious entrepreneurship in hierarchically-organised societies with very limited social mobility, the religious field of larger conurbations was characterised by competition for social and religious capital between official and unofficial ritual practitioners, whereby the former were in a position to dominate the relevant discourse in their own interests. This domination produced new accusations of misuse of religious symbols associated with specifically urban magic, focused on the manipulation of emotions, child-snatching, and the use of human body-parts for nefarious ends. Historically, however, the major significance of the transition from the rural to the complex urban world was increased competition between practitioners, leading to innovation in methods and media, above all in the production of new types of protective amulet, and recourse to textuality.

*Keywords:* Impact of urbanity, discourse of ‘magic’, competition, innovation in magic, urban herbalists, Pliny the Elder, curse tablets, amulets

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Under the umbrella term ‘Lived Ancient Religion’, it has become fairly common to draw a relatively sharp distinction between a traditional account by historians of religion in ancient cities, which with Walter Burkert we can term ‘polis religion’,<sup>2</sup> and a reformed conception that might be termed ‘neo-civic religion’.<sup>3</sup> Whereas ‘polis-religion’, applied both to Greece and to Rome/Italy, takes the self-representation of ancient sources, i.e. historical writings, surviving official inscriptions, and the reconstructions – sometimes re-inventions – by intellectuals (which usually survive only in fragments),<sup>4</sup> as an adequate representation of historical reality,<sup>5</sup> what we may call ‘neo-civic religion’ is conceptualised as a field of action with many different loci of religious authority and symbolic power, and many different religious groups, grouplets, and individual agents, in permanent fluctuation and tension, drawing upon a wide range of materialisation and medial strategies employed to impose or lay claim to an urban place.<sup>6</sup> Such strategies ranged from permanent monumental structures to ephemeral processions, from over-life-sized images to virtually invisible designs on finger- or ear-rings, from the roasting of dozens of oxen to *Stoßgebete*, from body-centred practices to spiritual exercises, from cosmogonic epics to wall-graffiti. “Attention to linkages en-

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1 Although our honorand has worked mainly on Archaic and Classical Greek politics, a guest professorship at Clermont-Ferrand in 2009 alerted him to Auguste Audollent’s *Nachlass* in the Musée Bargoin and the Archives Départementales in Puy-de-Dôme/ Auvergne, which gave rise to his important contribution published in 2013 (Németh 2013). This publication underlined the need to go back to the original materials, or archives, where they exist, rather than blindly trust printed versions, especially in the case of curse tablets, whose *mise-en-page* often bears little relationship to what is actually visible on the *Textträger*. This achievement duly led to his fruitful association with the Zaragoza project ‘Espacios de penumbra’, directed by Francisco Marco Simón, from 2013. Although the present contribution is not primarily epigraphical, it does thematise the activities of literate urban ritual practitioners like those who composed Audollent’s tablets from Carthage and Hadrumetum in Africa Proconsularis. It is a much revised version of a colloquium paper for the KFG ‘Urbanity and Religion’ at the Max-Weber-Kolleg, Erfurt.

2 Burkert 2011, 331–412: ‘Polis und Polytheismus’; 385: ‘Die Stadt ihrerseits ist eine Opfergemeinschaft’. In the Hellenistic period: Deshours 2011. At Rome: Scheid 1990; 2005; 2013; Champion 2017.

3 See e.g. Gasparini et al. 2020.

4 Cf. the list of themes treated by Greek authors drawn up by Tresp 1914, 27–29; on the range of ‘theologies’, implicit and explicit, attested for the Greek world, see Eidinow – Kindt – Osborne 2016. On Roman ‘civil theology’, wonderfully idealised at Cicero, *Dom.* 1, see esp. MacRae 2016, 13–75. On archaisms in Roman religion as an example of the ‘Italic cultural koine’: Norden 1995.

5 But note e.g. de Cazenove 2020, 163–189, esp. 163: ‘En réalité, on le sait bien, l’image est elle aussi un discours orienté et sélectif, possédant ses propres codes, dans laquelle il serait naïf de voir la simple photographie d’on ne sait quelle réalité objective. Et de même, les protocoles rituels opèrent des choix, disent certaines choses et en taisent d’autres. Surtout, ils ne décrivent qu’une toute petite partie des actes du culte célébrés à Rome même et dans sa banlieue proche’.

6 On the heterogeneity of religious ideas and discourses in large ancient cities, cf. Rüpke 2019, 184.

ables us to better understand why gods and spirits were made present ... in particular times and places, by individuals and groups with distinct needs, desires and emotions.”<sup>7</sup> ‘Neo-civic religion’ is thus a heuristic perspective that proposes a) the existence of a constant reciprocal dialectic between the urban and religion, and b) the fundamentally spatial character of religious practices. It is thus a virtual synonym of ‘ancient urban religion’.<sup>8</sup>

One advantage of this heuristic construct is that it posits the existence of a constant tension between institutions and influences making for stability within the religious field, and a variety of pressures from individuals and groups to innovate at various levels, and with varying degrees of authority and success, within the field.<sup>9</sup> Stability is represented for example by the establishment in each city, Greek and Roman/Italian, of an ordered régime of public festivals celebrated at stated intervals over a fixed time-period (which might be annual, biennial, quadrennial, centennial etc.) in honour of an explicit selection of deities, and an institutionalised mechanism for the formal introduction of cults of ‘new’ deities into that historically cumulative set of public festivals.<sup>10</sup> The highly dispersed nature of religious authority in Classical antiquity – resulting from the absence of an institutionalised and coherent body of trained scribe-priests on the model of the Near-Eastern kingdom/empires, an absence facilitated by (but not due to) the alphabetic system of writing – combined with the multiplicity of divine entities of many different conceptual and medial statuses, meant not only that what we might call specifically theological enterprises remained at a low level of sophistication and complexity by comparison, say, with Pharaonic Egypt or Babylonia, at any rate until the second or third centuries CE, but also that role-development by those claiming insight or special knowledge of a loosely religious kind, such as divination or prophecy, as well as small-group formation, was extremely easy, compensating in sheer diversity for the restricted ambition and scope of the claims made by individual agents.<sup>11</sup>

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7 Keddie 2024, 19; for the Greek world, see also Bonnet 2024.

8 “Taken together, this ‘urban religion’ is neither the invention of locals or immigrants in the megacities of a globalised modernity nor the creation of some central agency or the political authorities of ancient cities. Instead, the phenomena are a composite of different ... agents in competition for social and religious prestige, or simply for the appropriate means by which to make a living” (Rüpke 2020b, 188–189).

9 An ancient version of this recognition, elaborated on the basis of earlier discussions by the Stoic Panaetius (c.185–109 BCE), and picked up by the Roman polymath M. Terentius Varro (116–27 BCE), is the theory of the so-called ‘tripartite theology’, which represented the religious field as consisting of (traditional) mythology and its literary reworkings, reflective/critical philosophical enquiry, and ‘polis religion’: Lieberg 1982; Rüpke 2014.

10 On the re-phrasing of Roman religion in the Roman provinces, see Ando 2007; Woolf 2009.

11 An older standard collection of different types of low-level ‘artificial’ divination in antiquity (i.e based on chance outcomes of a specific test, aligned with a prior index of significances) lists c.130 named types and many others that had no name (Bouché-Leclercq 1879).

This is not a question of Weberian religious *virtuosi*, whose implication in spiritual privilege is completely irrelevant here, but rather of the structural attractions within a steeply hierarchical social order, with very restricted avenues of social mobility, of providing small-time religious services mainly directed at the inhabitants of tenements ('those who paid their rent on a daily basis') in the dense living quarters of larger and middle-sized cities and in the context of centres of mass entertainment, such as the amphitheatre and the chariot-racing track.<sup>12</sup> Granted that different cities offered differentially favourable conditions, the opportunities offered by the city in general surely encouraged an intensified division of labour among such providers, greater individualisation of techniques and skills, sometimes extending to the acquisition of literacy.<sup>13</sup> "Thinkings, believings and inferrings about the gods are themselves to be understood as human activities that make sense in the context of the locally specific unfolding practices of which they are a part."<sup>14</sup> At this level, within the urban context, we can thus speak of a market in such services served by individuals with innate talent, acquired ritual skills and sufficient perseverance, and thus of competition and pressures towards innovation and *Selbstdarstellung*.<sup>15</sup>

Such low-level religious services could be framed in different ways, positive, neutral and negative. Here the specifically urban context, with its population density, multiple inter-personal interactions, crowded tenements, alleyways, and anonymity, lent itself to particular anxieties concerning 'what the city is hiding'.<sup>16</sup> As far as the Roman case is concerned, the model incident, whose discursive framing resonates throughout the later *imaginaire* of deviance, is that of the Bacchanalia 'conspiracy' of 186 BCE, which is represented in the brilliant and dramatic representation by Livy in terms of secret nocturnal rituals by a foreign priest, debauchery, obscene mysteries, corruption of the young, human sacrifice, frenzy, shamelessness, creeping evil, deception, poisoning, fear of arson, a tangled network of accusations, thousands of persons named and implicated.<sup>17</sup> Of most relevance here, however, is the centrality of the city of Rome in the story: one of the supposed ringleaders, the (former) sex-worker Fecennia Hispala, whose confession revealed all, lived near the

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12 For 'religious services' see e.g. Rüpke 2020b, 188.

13 On pressures towards division of labour and religious individualisation as a response to the urban environment, see e.g. Rüpke 2020b, 53–57; 149–152.

14 Stowers 2011, 37.

15 See e.g. Horster 2007, 338–341; and esp. Wendt (2016), who is, however, mainly interested in individuals driven by more ambitious aims than my anonymous characters here, since she takes Paul of Tarsus as her *Leitfigur*.

16 "Density is the main principle by reference to which urban social relations are explained, with the complexity of the relations being increased further by the impact of social and cultural diversity": Rüpke 2020b, 97.

17 Liv. XXXIX.8–18 (written in the final quarter of the first cent. BCE, c. 30–10 BCE); on the tropes and rhetorical techniques, see esp. Walsh 1996.

Aventine Hill, in the very centre of the urban space;<sup>18</sup> while the cult attracted ‘an immense multitude, almost equal to the population of Rome, including some men and women from noble families’.<sup>19</sup>

### The discourse of misuse/misappropriation of religious symbols

Of the rather broad range of ancient terms denoting the misuse or misappropriation of religious symbols, which include cozenage (Gk. μαγγανεία, φενακισμός), trickery (Gk. μαγγανάνευμα, also pl. ‘tricks/cheats’; Lat. *ludibrium*), speciousness (Gk. γοητεία), wonder-working (Gk. τερατοποιία, τερατουργία), emptiness (Gk. ματαιότης; Lat. *vanitas*), excessive scrupulosity (Gk. (ὕπερ)ακρίβεια; Lat. *religiones*), frenzy (Gk. φρενισμός; ἀλλοφροσύνη; Lat. *furor, insania*), I propose just briefly to discuss superstition (Gk. δεισιδαιμονία [in some contexts]; Lat. *superstitio*, also *religio(nes)*) and, at somewhat greater length, magic.<sup>20</sup> As usual now, I take ‘superstition’ and ‘magic’ as two fuzzy emic labels on a lengthy continuum of supposed misuse, misapplication or perversion of religious symbols, a continuum that has few or even no correlate in etic terms.<sup>21</sup>

At the discursive level, the invocation of ‘superstition’ always implied a speaker claiming to occupy a privileged position vis-à-vis the object or behaviour of the valuation, one who knew that the religious behaviour in question failed to live up to some standard of proper respect or usage in relation to the divine – mostly on the grounds of (selective) criteria claiming to be based on ‘the’ usage of one’s own ethnos or city, such as the usefully vague ‘ancestral custom’ (τὰ περὶ τοὺς θεοὺς νόμιμα [Xen., *Mem.* IV.6.4] at Athens; *mos maiorum* at Rome), the implied consensus of disapproval operationalised by satirists, or – a speciality of philosophers – claiming to know, or possess insight into, the behaviour or attitudes that god or gods, conceived in the main as beneficent, wise and virtuous, ‘truly’ want or desire from their worshippers.<sup>22</sup> An example is the younger Seneca’s mockery in his fragmentary dialogue *De superstitione* (perhaps 55–65 CE) of the intimate behaviour of ordinary people in

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18 The eastern slope of the Aventine looks out over the Circus Maximus and the Capitol Hill, while the western descended to the much humbler port-area of the Emporium on the River Tiber. Hispala was probably more familiar with that area, though her lover Aebutius was a person of some substance.

19 Resp. Liv. XXXIX.12 (Hispala); 13.14: *multitudinem ingentem, alterum iam prope populum esse; in his nobiles quosdam viros feminasque*.

20 Cf. Superstition: Gordon 2008, Rüpke 2016; introductions to magic in Antiquity: Galopin 2020; 2025b; Eidinow – Gordon 2025; specifically in the Roman world: Gordon 2020.

21 Cf. Otto 2011; Bremmer 2023, 120–125; Denzey Lewis 2025.

22 This latter option, the different varieties of philosophical theology, is what Martin 2004 termed the ‘Grand Optimal Illusion’.

relation to statues and images in temples: people chatting to the gods, detailing their complaints and worries, telling Jupiter the time of day, or recounting to him the details of their court-cases, women standing outside the Capitoline temple miming their longing to enact their devotion by fixing Juno's or Minerva's hair (ap. August., *C.D.* VI.10).<sup>23</sup>

Much more problematic, however, were phenomena that could be ascribed to magical action, occult aggression, which by definition could never be directly observed, and whose identification was thus always a matter of inference on the basis of what were taken to be adequate or even determinative signs.<sup>24</sup> Witchcraft has often been taken primarily as an explanatory system for understanding the world, and in particular as a strategy for explaining misfortune, but more recently significant doubts have been aired by anthropologists in this regard, suggesting that it may be more appropriate to think of it in terms of quasi-Derridean aporia, not, obviously, as a point at which a text undermines its own rhetorical structure, but as a realm of undecidability, of confusing and obfuscating spirit forces that people know they have no hope of comprehending and against which they are largely helpless.<sup>25</sup> That sort of point might have been approached already in Roman times: almost immediately after the Bacchanalian affair, in the years 184, 180–179 and 153 BCE, we hear of a number of cases of Roman magistrates and pro-magistrates ordering mass executions, both in the immediate vicinity of Rome and further afield in Italy, of persons accused of using *veneficia*, 'poison' but also 'magic'. In one case, some 2,000 persons were executed, in another, 3,000.<sup>26</sup> The scale of these investigations and condemnations, which equal any known from the early modern period in Europe, was made possible by the effectively unlimited police power of Roman magistrates operating under the authority of a *senatus consultum*. Here we have an example of the fatal conjuncture, familiar from the early modern period, between 'pollution' anxieties and state power.<sup>27</sup> Thanks to denunciation and the routine employment of torture and intimidation, the crimes awaiting exposure by the magistrate grew almost exponentially: after his 3,000 executions, the Roman praetor Caius Maenius complained in 180 that his 'investigation was assuming ever larger proportions by reason of the evidence received' (Liv. XL.43.3), and that unless he called an arbitrary halt he would not be able to proceed to his praetorian province of Sardinia. In these incidents we have the makings of a true witchcraze, but Livy, having dwelt long enough on religious

23 Frag. 36 Haase = 69 Vottero; cf. Lausberg 1970, 197–227; Rüpke 2016, 45–64.

24 Both in Greek and Latin, the ordinary term for magical action was a hendiadys: 'drugs and incantations' (φαρμακὰ καὶ ἐπώδαι; *veneficia et carmina*). On the negative view of magic and magicians in astrological handbooks, see Pérez Jiménez 2020.

25 Cf. Bubandt 2014, 33–62; 236–246.

26 Executions: Liv. 39.41.5; 40.43.2f.; cf. Plb. VI.13.4. See too Niedermayer 2017, 61.

27 Cf. e.g. Bailey 2007, 141–177; Goodare 2025.

folly in relation to the worshippers of Liber Bacchus, and eager to get on with the more grateful themes of conquest and booty, devotes just a line or two to them and we know literally nothing more.

### Making place for witchcraft in the urban world

In the Roman case, we can trace a clear transition of anxieties and *imaginaire* from the agrarian sector to the city.<sup>28</sup> The earliest legislation against any type of witchcraft dates from the Archaic period at Rome (supposedly mid-fifth cent. BCE), and specifically criminalises ‘lifting’ crops from farmers’ land by incantation: ‘if anyone shall have cast a spell (*si excantass<i>t*) on the produce of (someone else’s) fields (*fruges*) . . .’, and ‘[if anyone] has enticed over (to himself) (*pellexerit*) someone else’s grain-harvest (*alienam segetem*)’ (VIII.8a,b Bruns = VIII.4 Crawford).<sup>29</sup> Archaic Roman law thus recognised an action for destroying *fruges* (generally non-grain field-crops) ‘by incantation’, and for ‘seducing’ or ‘ inveigling’ neighbours’ grain-crops away, a fear still evoked in Vergil’s *Eclogues* (39–38 BCE).<sup>30</sup> In evaluating such attempts as grounds for a criminal action-at-law, this ruling turned the idea of spiriting away crops by incantation into a paradigmatic form of witchcraft, with a long historical reach. Although in the intervening period Roman society had changed beyond all recognition, above all through the influx of wealth and Greek cultural influence, the complex synthesis of witches’ powers that established itself as a literary trope by the last third of the first century BCE often still focused almost exclusively on the witch’s power over natural phenomena. (Medea addresses Hekate, the power of magic, and her minions:)

*quorum ope, cum volui, ripis mirantibus amnes  
in fontes rediere suos, concussaue sisto,*

28 On the lack of clear-cut differences between urban and non-urban practices, but rather a two-way appropriation and adaptation, see briefly Urciuoli and Rüpke 2018, 122. Changes in conception: Gordon 2020.

29 See Plin. *Nat.* XXVIII.17; Verg., *Ecl.* VIII.99 with Serv. *ad loc.*; Tib. I.8.19; for discussion, see Crawford 1996, 2: 682–684; Rives 2002; Niedermayer 2017, 43–48. This title occurs in the context of a series of provisions concerning harm of different kinds, from insult to honour through offensive songs or rhymes to causing significant loss by arson and unauthorized felling of trees. It is not quite certain that two different words for crops were used in the two phrases: the earliest evidence for VIII.8b Bruns, the historian L. Calpurnius Piso Frugi (cos. 133 BCE), almost certainly had *fruges* not *segetem* (frg. 33 Peter).

30 VIII.99: *atque satas alio vidi traducere messis*. See also e.g. Ov., *Amores* III.7. 34–37: *Carmine laesa Ceres sterilem vanescit in herbam, | deficiunt laesi carmine fontis aquae, | ilicibus glandes cantatque vitibus uva | decidit, et nullo poma movente fluunt*, ‘Magic can turn a wheat-field into weed, drain well-springs dry, make grapes and chestnuts drop, strip fruit trees bare’ (tr. G. Lee).

*stantia concutio cantu freta, nubila pello  
 nubilaque induco, ventos abigoque uocoque,  
 uipereas rumpo verbis et carmine fauces,  
 uiuaque saxa conuulsaque robora terra  
 et siluas moueo iubeoque tremescere montes  
 et mugire solum manesque exire sepulcris.  
 te quoque, Luna, traho, quamuis Termesaea labores  
 aera tuos minuant...*<sup>31</sup>  
 Ov., *Met.* VII. 199–208

Alongside this focus, based on the figure of the old female herbalist, urban experience created three different scenarios of magical action, which are to some extent linked with one another.<sup>32</sup> All, however, focus on facilities and fears that were particularly acute in the city: the brothel, or at any rate groups of professional female sex-workers, child-snatching, and trade in body parts.

1) Although the ability to manipulate others' emotions was an elementary aspect of the claims of low-grade ritual specialists from early times, such practices are represented in one branch of the ancient literary equivalent of Dutch genre-painting, *Letters of Courtesans*, as especially intense in the urban world of explicitly or implicitly purchased sex. This literature purports in a light-hearted, though ironic, manner to illustrate the life of independent professional female sex-workers (i.e. freedwomen), while eliding all the harsh realities of the common slave-brothel.<sup>33</sup> In this context, magic is ever-present as a cover for the institutionalised fabrication of intense emotion.<sup>34</sup>

At this level, women are represented as depending on attaching relatively wealthy, preferably young, men to them in order to provide them both with status within the circle and with valuable 'gifts'. Conflicts over such men must therefore have been common, and magical arts, active and passive, no doubt often in play; the literary genre insists mainly, however, on their use in thought, as a rationalisation of the carousel of luck and loss:

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31 By your aid (Earth, winds etc., gods of sacred groves, gods of night), | As if a miracle had drained their banks and courses, | I've driven back rivers to springs and fountains. | I shake the seas or calm them at my will; | I whip the clouds or make them rise again; | At my command winds vanish or return, | My very spells (*verbis et carmine*) have torn the throats of serpents, | Live rocks and oaks are overturned and felled, | The forests tremble and the mountains split. | Though crashing brass and bronze relieve your labours, | Even you, O Moon, I drag (*traho*) from angry skies (tr. Gregory, adapted). 'Drawing down the moon' is attested Syria in neo-Assyrian sources of the 7<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE as a practice of 'barbarian women': Reiner 1995, 100–101.

32 On literary magic (mainly) in Latin, see Fauth 1999; Stratton 2007, 71–105; Reif 2016; Lichtblau 2017, 46–59; Watson 2019a, 167–202. On different types and qualifications of of practitioners: Fraser 2025.

33 On which (for Rome) see the excellent study by McGinn 1998, esp. 248–319.

34 Cf. *AP* V. 205 (204) = Gow – Page 1965, 1:207, Anon. XXXV; Antiphanes of Macedonia ap. *AP* VI.88 = Gow – Page 1968, 1: 84 no.1, with Gordon 2017.

καὶ μετ' οὐ πολὺ Φανίας, ἅμα καὶ τῶν συνεφήβων ἐπιτιμησάντων αὐτῷ καὶ τῆς  
φοιβίδος, ἣ συνῆν, πολλὰ αἰτούσης, ἤκε μοι τὸ πλεον ὑπὸ τῆς ἐπωδῆς ἀγόμενος.<sup>35</sup>  
Luc., *Dial*, meret. IV. 5

Elsewhere Lucian stages a courtesan named Glykera whose best customer, a soldier, has just gone off with her friend Gorgona. Now Gorgona's charms are not plentiful: she is practically bald, her lips corpse-pale, her neck so scrawny you can count the veins. All becomes clear when it turns out that her mother, Chrysarion, is a witch:

Θεττάλας τινὰς ῥῖδας ἐπισταμένη καὶ τὴν σελήνην κατάγουσα. φασὶ δὲ αὐτὴν καὶ  
πέτεσθαι τῆς νυκτός· ἐκείνη ἐξέμηνε τὸν ἄνθρωπον πιεῖν τῶν φαρμάκων ἐγγέασα,  
καὶ νῦν τρυγῶσιν αὐτόν.<sup>36</sup>  
Dial. meret. 1.

The allegation of witchcraft satisfyingly explains Glykera's misfortune, and helps to salve her dented pride and fill her purse. But philtres might do more than merely cause a man to return, they might even improve his behaviour:

δεινὸν γάρ οὐ τοῦτο μόνον εἰ τῶν παρ' αὐτοῦ μισθωμάτων στερησόμεθα, ἀλλ' εἰ  
Θεττάλῃ γέλωτα παρέξομεν. ἔστι σοι πειρασθέν, ὥς φῆς, πολλάκις ἐφ' ἡλικίας φίλτρον.  
τοιούτου τινὸς βοηθήματος δεόμεθα, ὁ τὸν πολὺν αὐτοῦ τῦφον, ἀλλ' οὐν καὶ τὴν  
κραιπάλην ἐκκορήσειεν.<sup>37</sup>  
Alciph., *Epist. meretr.* IV.10.3–4.

Inversely, men could use the motif of witchcraft attack to excuse erectile dysfunction in such situations, as in the parallel case of Caribbean and Mexican 'coconut water'.<sup>38</sup>

35 '... and shortly afterwards, though his friends told him not to, and Phoebeis, the girl he was with then, pleaded and pleaded, he came back to me; and it was mainly the spell (*epôdê*) which brought him back' (tr. MacLeod, adapted).

36 'She has learned some sort of Thessalian incantations and can bring the moon down; she's even supposed to go flying at night. At any rate, she got him to drink a love-potion, and now they're picking him clean' (tr. MacLeod).

37 'It would be dreadful for me not only to be deprived of [Diphilus'] payments but to become a laughing-stock for Thettalê [Diphilus' current flame] into the bargain. Now you have a philtre, you say, that you often tried when you were young. Some such help as that is what I need, something that would make a clean sweep of his thinking he can do whatever he likes and of his drunken bad temper too' (tr. It would be dreadful for me not only to be deprived of [Diphilus'] payments but to become a laughing-stock for Thettalê [Diphilus' current flame] into the bargain. Now you have a philtre, you say, that you often tried when you were young. Some such help as that is what I need, something that would make a clean sweep of his thinking he can do whatever he likes and of his drunken bad temper too' (tr. Benner and Fobes, adapted).

38 Amusingly parodied by Ov., *Am.* III.7.27–38 (say 20–10 BCE or even later, what we have is the second 'edition'). 'Coconut water': Lewis 1961, 141; in Chiapas, 208.

Yet another player on this stage, however, is the ‘witch-bawd’, a harridan whose main overt value in Roman poetry is precisely as foil to the lover, who whispers temptation into his or her ear, and thus taints pure love with the breath of decay: the most fully-imagined are Acanthis in Propertius 4.5 and Dipsas in Ovid *Amor.* 1.8, both of whom, to enhance their own financial security, are made to persuade the girl that her best interests lie elsewhere than the speaker. Dipsas, true to her name, is a wrinkled lush, with emigrant hair. Acanthis is more perfectly imagined:

*per tenuem ossa <a me> sunt numerata cutem  
 uidi ego rugoso tussim con crescere collo,  
 sputaque per dentis ire cruenta cauos,  
 atque animam integete putrem exspirare paternas:  
 horruit argenti pergula curua foco.*<sup>39</sup>  
 Prop. IV.5.64; 67–70

The malice of the bawd-procuress is figured in her appearance.<sup>40</sup> But at the same time such images serve both to suggest the negative side of the speakers’ passion and to provide a convenient account of its transience, an account in which the fault never lies with the speaker. Magic in the form of a philtre (φίλτρον, ποτήριον; *veneficium*, ‘poison’; *amatorium*, ‘love potion’), that secretly, invaded the victim’s vitals and ‘turned his/her mind’, could equally be made responsible for excessive or untoward desire on the part of (free) women, turning them from the submissive objects of male desire, or, even more important, from the dutiful (idealised) role of obedient daughter or wife (or slave),<sup>41</sup> into sexual agents on their own account uncontrolled by father, brother, husband (or master), the patriarchal nightmare.<sup>42</sup>

2) Child-snatching. Although the motif of child-killing demons/ghosts, such as the Lamia or Gello, was a staple component of the Greek world of malign spirits, whose counterpart in the Roman was the were-owl (*strix*),<sup>43</sup> child-snatching for magical purposes is a feature of the urban Roman witchcraft *ima-*

39 Through her tight-drawn skin you could count her bones. | I saw how her cough closed up her wrinkled throat, | And how through the gaps of her teeth oozed blood-flecked spittle, | On her worn-out rug she was breathing her last rank breaths; | Her tumbledown hovel was fireless and shivering cold (tr. Musker).

40 Dickie 2001, 183–187.

41 On the variety of procedures for erotic magic, mainly in the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri, see Suárez de la Torre 2021.

42 The nightmare is embodied in the figure of the Empousa, a demon who, in the form of an attractive woman, preys on young bodies, a fantasy located in a third-century CE philosophical novel at Corinth: ‘She was fattening up Menippus with pleasures before devouring his body, for it was her habit to feed on young and beautiful bodies, because their blood is pure and strong’ (Philostr., *VA* IV.25, p.145 Kayser = p. 406.25–408.3 Mumprecht [tr. Conybeare]).

43 Johnston 1995; 1999, 161–200.

*ginaire*, one closely connected both to the previous theme, manipulating emotions, and the next, trade in body-parts. For the imagined aim of such kidnapping was the murder of the child in order to make use of its parts, either as a perverted sacrifice to the infernal powers in necromantic rituals, or in order to make a philtre to retain or renew erotic or marital affection.<sup>44</sup> In the case of necromancy, the supposed aim was to extract the victim's liver for predictive purposes, an obvious perversion of the institutionalised practice of using the liver of a ritually-killed animal as a gauge of divine mood. During the late Republic, Caius Vatinius – a 'Pythagorean' – was alleged in the 50s BCE to have regularly offered perverted sacrifice, boys' livers and hearts, to the Manes, the gods of the Underworld, for the purpose.<sup>45</sup> About the same time, polymathic Varro, who had an elaborate theory of his own about the classification of divinatory techniques, reported matter-of-factly that 'if blood is used (in lecanomancy [bowl-divination]) one may also consult the powers in the Underworld, and the Greek term for this is necromancy'.<sup>46</sup> Needless to say, several 'bad' emperors are alleged to have had children killed for this purpose.<sup>47</sup> The erotic motif is best represented by a tragicomic poem by Horace, in which he imagines four old witches involved in a discussion with a small boy they are planning to murder so one of them can use his parts to 'catch' her faithless lover's affections again.<sup>48</sup> An inscription from Rome relates how a four-year-old slave belonging to Iulia Livia, the sister of the future emperor Claudius (reigned 41–54 CE), was carried off by 'the cruel hands of a witch (*saga*)' and killed by her arts – presumably for necromantic purposes.<sup>49</sup>

3) Trade in body parts. As far as I know, the first mention of literary (Greek) witches deliberately looking out for bits of corpses dates from the period 270–245 BCE.<sup>50</sup> In an early poem, the poet Horace imagines two witches stealing into a former cemetery on the Esquiline Hill in Rome, now the site of a building-boom, but where slaves were once buried in mass-graves: 'I can't stop

44 On the close connection between child-snatching and body-parts, see Watson 2019a, 203–225.

45 Cic., *Vat.* 14: *cum inaudita ac nefaria sacra susceperis, cum inferorum animas elicere, cum puerorum extis deos manes mactare soleas ...*;

46 Varro, *de rer. divin.* 1 frg. IV Cardauns = August., *C.D.* 7.35 (tr. Knowles).

47 E.g. Nero: Plin. *Nat.* XXX.30.14–15; Suet., *Nero* 34.4; Caracalla: Hdn. 4.12.3–4; Hist. Aug. *Did. Iul.* 7.9–10;

48 *Epode* 5 (say 30s BCE).

49 *CIL* VI 19747 [= *ILS* 8522]. Only persons of high status would have had the financial resources to cause a funerary marker to be inscribed with such a story. There may have been many cases in which the disappearance of a child was suspected to have been the work of witches – a typical urban nightmare: the main source of body-parts must always have been rifled tombs and crucifixions.

50 Medea in AR, *Arg.* IV. 51–53: θαμὰ καὶ πρὶν ἀλωμένη ἀμφὶ τε νεκροῦς | ἀμφὶ τε δυσπαλέας ρίζας χθονός, οἷα γυναῖκες | φαρμακίδες. On animal parts in magic, see Watson 2019b, 127–149. On the sheer variety of animals, real and fantastic, in the magical literature, see Galoppin 2025a.

them', says the old wooden statue of ithyphallic Priapus which functions as the narrator, 'from collecting bones and harmful plants here when the wandering moon shows her radiant face'.<sup>51</sup> Body parts, and blood, from human corpses produced by public executions, or that somehow escaped burial, were traded as cures not only for epilepsy and rabies but also for much less serious medical problems, such as gingivitis.<sup>52</sup> The most perfectly imagined literary witch is Erictho, who, apart from everything else, murders children and haunts cemeteries, 'kissing' corpses and opening sarcophagi (i.e. of rich people) in order to tear the rotten flesh and extract the eyes from the bodies within.<sup>53</sup> The theme of robbing graves to obtain body parts for necromantic and other purposes evidently evokes a world in which the vast cemeteries that spread out along every major road leaving Rome, along the via Appia in the south, or the via Latina in the north-east, the symbolic means of putting the dead safely in their place outside the city, may at any time be threatened by the activities of lurking witches in bringing bits of human Other physically back into the world of the living, thus effecting a reinvention of the old trope of agrarian reversal in properly urban terms.

It is obvious that all these activities and their urban 'places' are literary constructs, whose family resemblances and dynamic development are largely due to the incorporation of such themes into the programmes of the rhetorical schools and their practice-declamations.<sup>54</sup> They nevertheless represent a set of heterotopias of disorder, imagined or placeless spaces in action, whose content threatens to intrude at unforeseen points into the everyday world of habitus. Moreover, the actual strategies employed by writers with regard to these heterotopias altered quite sharply over time: whereas the elegiac and lyric Roman poets of the end of the Republic and early Empire (say 50 BCE – 10 CE) repeatedly, but by no means invariably (especially in the decade of the civil wars, 44–32 BCE), undercut their witch-scenarios with humour (Horace, for example, makes his Esquiline witches run off, in their fright losing their wigs and false teeth, when the statue of Priapus breaks wind) and the reflection that, after all, true passion can outdo all the efforts of love-magic, in the mid-first century CE the tone is consistently darker and more uncompromisingly threatening, and the earlier elite conception of magic as specious, empty ritualisation gives way, under the monarchy and its fears of occult knowledge, to a mood of anxiety –

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51 *Non prohibere modo, simul ac vaga luna decorum | protulit os, quin ossa legant herbasque nocentis: Sat. 1.8.21/22* (written in the 30s BCE). The witches, one might say, were well aware of the anomaly of the remains of corpses still to be found *inside* the city.

52 Plin., *Nat. XXVIII.7–8* (somewhat before 79 CE).

53 Luc. VI, 554–560; 564–567; 538–543 (written c.62–65 CE).

54 E.g. [Quint.] *Declam. maior. 10: sepulcrum incantatum*; 14–15: *Odii potio* I–II, with Bernstein2013, 74–77; Some of Ovid's practice declamations (*suasoriae*) became famous and were still being studied in the mid-first century CE: Sen., *Con. II.2.12*.

magical claims and magical action no longer safely *down there* but potentially here, among us. Such a mood was certainly furthered by awareness of the practice of writing curse-tablets and secreting them in tombs and houses,<sup>55</sup> and surely too by the lurid reports that circulated at Rome at the time of the death of Iulius Caesar Germanicus, the adopted nephew, and intended successor, of the second emperor Tiberius (14–37 CE), and brother of the later emperor Claudius, at Syrian Antioch-on-the Orontes in October 19 CE:

*Et reperiabantur solo et parietibus erutae humanorum corporum reliquiae, carmina et devotiones et nomen Germanici plumbeis tabulis insculptum, semusti cineres ac tabo obliti aliaque malefica, quis creditur animas numinibus infernis sacrari.*<sup>56</sup> Tac., *Ann.* II.69.5.

Germanicus himself died believing he had been poisoned – but not bewitched – by the current governor of Syria, the elder Calpurnius Piso, who was later put on trial. It was reported that Germanicus’ heart alone had failed to be consumed in the flames of the pyre, which was taken as by many as a sign of the truth of his claims, and his wife Agrippina staged a triumphant *Leichenbegleichung* from Syria to Rome that was everywhere greeted by crowds of mourners. The scenario of the involvement of witchcraft in Germanicus’ death is undoubtedly a lurid ex-post-facto fiction, prompted by the easy slide from *veneficium*/poison to *veneficium*/witchcraft.<sup>57</sup> It is impossible to date its emergence; but it certainly fits with the Grand-Guignol manner of the mid-century literary representations and their continuation in ghost-stories and other narratives of the paranormal into the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian in the first third of the second century CE.<sup>58</sup> Moreover the sheer surfeit of fabricated details in relation to the death of Germanicus betrays the familiarity of such themes in the exercises of

55 On curse tablets in general, see e.g. Ogden 1998; Bailliot 2010; Gordon 2015; 2019; choice of sites for deposition: Sánchez Natalias 2022, I: 37–52;

56 ‘There were discovered in the floor and the walls (of the room) bits and pieces of human bodies, spells and curses (*carmina et devotiones*) and Germanicus’ name inscribed on sheets of lead (*plumbeis tabulis*), half-burned ashes smeared with poison, and other witcheries (*malefica*) by means of which it is thought that people’s lives are ritually turned over to the powers of the Underworld’ (tr. M. Grant). The early books of Tacitus’ *Annals* seem to date from the mid-110s CE, almost a century after the events he reports, but he certainly used earlier historical (and parahistorical) writings, including those from the reign of Tiberius itself. In my view, the ‘witchcraft scenario’ is a fictional elaboration in the context of the widespread mourning for the youthful prince (whose was only 33 when he died), which Tacitus included in his text in order to hint at the mood of the time. A hint of distance is provided by *creditur*, ‘people believe’, but the discovery of the witchcraft items is reported as a fact (*reperiabantur*, ‘were found (over a period of time)’).

57 The fundamental law against magic throughout the imperial period, flanked by short-term senatorial decrees (*senatus consulta*), was the late Republican *lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficiis*, ‘On assassination and poisoning’ – deemed to include what we call ‘witchcraft’. See Rives 2006; for a discussion of all the known prosecutions under this title, see Niedermayer 2017, 68–145.

rhetorical schools, even if it also implies ample speculation about the modalities of witchcraft and the possible causes of sudden death within the urban population. At any rate, this seems to have been a very Roman rumour, proving the general familiarity the thematic malign magic, *devotiones*, and the sorrowful death of ἄωποι.<sup>59</sup>

The reflection of witchcraft anxieties in the high Latin literature that has survived to us are best seen as a response to urban rumours filtered by the authors' social distance from the swarming urban population among whom these fears were a response to the uncertainties and contingencies that beset them in the course of scratching a living in a pre-industrial megacity with high death rates.<sup>60</sup> These rumours, of the manipulation of intense emotions, of child-snatching, and trade in body-parts, were products of the city environment and had no counterpart in the rural context. They are the headline signals of social disorder. In that environment, the uncertainty attending any suspicion of witchcraft was indefinitely multiplied, so that the only possible 'proof' that could be offered was yet another suspicion, as in the unsettled years after the Hannibalic War in Italy. Literary accounts, such as those relating to the brothel, or to child-snatching, or the search for body parts, are unrealistic precisely because the culprits bear names, are supposed to be known and identifiable, and as often as not made to appear either ridiculous or monstrous – but there are no consequences, no denunciations to the authorities.<sup>61</sup> Roman literary witchcraft supplied not so much 'descriptions' of actual beliefs as stereotypes instrumentalised for ideological ends, positive and negative. In social reality, the only means of escaping such disorder and (temporarily) restoring order was to take the road of denunciation<sup>62</sup> – or group murder of a suspect.<sup>63</sup>

Social anthropologists, who have the advantage of face-to-face contact with living interlocutors but only limited time-horizons, have long recognised that witchcraft beliefs are flexible and often internally inconsistent, a looseness or fuzziness which enables them to be rapidly grafted onto shifting historical situ-

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58 Fauth 1975; 1999, 81–102: 'Im Hintergrund steht aber als Impuls die negative Weltkonzeption einer in mannigfacher Hinsicht von den deprimierenden Erscheinungen eines politischen, sozialen und moralischen Niedergangs, einer zunehmenden inneren und äußeren Unfreiheit, eine unauflösbaren Widerspruchs von materiellem Luxus und seelischer Verarmung gekennzeichneten Epoche' (81). On the need to differentiate and historicise witchcraft beliefs: Otto 2013.

59 Cf. Graf 2014.

60 Death-rates at Rome: Scheidel 1994; 2009; Shaw 1996.

61 On attempts, official and domestic, to control 'magic', see e.g. Rives 2003; Alvar Nuño 2025.

62 E.g. Apul. *Met.* 3.16: *Quod scelus* (pilfering hair from a barber's shop to be used as οὐσία) *nisi tandem desies, magistratibus te constanter obiciam.*

63 E.g. Apul. *Met.* 1.9–10: a woman named Meroë, accused of having prevent neighbour from giving birth for 8 years, stoned to death.

ations.<sup>64</sup> In the case of the Forest Region of S. Cameroon, for example, Peter Geschiere has shown that an older model of healer-witches having to acquire their powers (*djanga*) by ‘giving up’ (i.e. causing the death of) someone in their own household has given way to a modern version that attributes individuals’ rapid accumulation of relatively great wealth in the context of globalisation to their ability to ‘take’ members of their family (and others) and make them work as zombies for spirit forces. The originary site of this exchange is the major port town of Douala, the focal point for imported goods entering Cameroon from the rest of the world, whereas the zombies work on Mt. Kupa, a traditional hot-spot for witches.<sup>65</sup> Another good example of the translation of modern urban anxieties into the terms of witchcraft, are the human-animal hybrids, such as ‘vulture men’, and the campus cults and teenage witches, of southern Nigeria.<sup>66</sup> In the modern world, such rumours are concretised by media such as novels, video and film;<sup>67</sup> at Rome and in other ancient mega-cities, however, it was urban Rumour, itself a huge feathered monster, covered in darting eyes, and furnished with innumerable tongues, mouths and ears, that fulfilled the role of these media, and duly acquired its own monument in the paradigmatic Latin epic, Vergil’s *Aeneid*:<sup>68</sup>

[*Fama*...]  
*nocte vola caeli medio terraeque per umbram*  
*stridens, nec dulci declinat lumina somno;*  
*luce sedet custos aut summi culmine tecti*  
*turribus aut altis, et magnas territat urbes,*  
*tam ficti praeiisque tenax quam nuntia veri.*  
*haec tum multiplici populos sermone replebat*  
*gaudens, et pariter facta atque infecta canebat.*<sup>69</sup>  
 Verg., *Aen.* IV 184–190.

### Recontextualising low-level ritual specialists in the megacity

<sup>64</sup> Stewart – Strathern 2004.

<sup>65</sup> Geschiere 2019; for modern capitalism in Cameroon as a bazaar to which many are drawn but few rewarded, see Nyamnjoh 2001.

<sup>66</sup> Bastian 2001.

<sup>67</sup> E.g. Watson 1993; Meyer 2015.

<sup>68</sup> See the excellent commentary by Hardie 2012, 78–125. The other *locus classicus* is Ov., *Met.* XII 39–63: *mixtaque cum ueris passim commenta uagantur | milia rumorum confusaque uerba uolitant | ... Illic Credulitas, illic temerarius Error | uanaque Laetitia est consternatique Timores | Seditioque repens dubioque auctore Susurri* (54–55, 59–61).

<sup>69</sup> ‘By night she flits shrieking through the gloom between sky and earth, and never closes her eyes in sweet repose; when it’s light, she’s on watch either from a roof-top or on lofty towers, and terrorises great cities – giving incessant voice both to crooked inventions and the truth. This was the creature who took delight in feeding the inhabitants with prattle, trumpeting fact and fiction alike’.

A late-antique source, the so-called *Chronicle of the City of Rome*, a section of the ‘Chronicle of Filocalus’, claims that it was under Tiberius that *venenarii et malefici* were for the first time arrested and executed – 45 men and 85 women.<sup>70</sup> While some of the men were apparently practising astrologers, the mention of so many women must alert our curiosity.<sup>71</sup> Who might they, and the remaining men, have been? In my view, they were wise-folk, experts in herbal medicine but also a range of other ritual skills, traditionally active among the rural population, but who had decided that their talents justified their joining the stream of immigrants into towns and cities, in this case the ‘cosmopolis’ of Rome. At any rate in the stereotype, many of these people were women.<sup>72</sup>

Both male and female folk-practitioners might be consulted on all manner of issues, illness (diagnosis and cure), male impotence, infertility in women, interpersonal relations, especially marital and extra-marital, protection against attack by witchcraft, provision of protective amulets e.g. against the evil eye, forecasting future events, warding off storms, hail and frosts, protection against malicious gossip, identifying thieves, and many other problems of ordinary village life, including attacking clients’ enemies by witchcraft or by knowing the right ritual to cause them to be generally hated. Thanks to the inherent moral ambiguity of at least some of these services, and the anxiety attending any consultation of a person who claims such powers, the female version of these roles served as the primary basis for the witch-stereotype of the rhetorical schools. It was this stereotype that led to a particular concentration by the Roman authorities on women earning a living through their skill in these areas.

Although women are the stereotypical folk-practitioners in literary texts, prescriptively in the village-context but in the late Republican and Imperial periods increasingly to be found in urban contexts, it seems likely that in fact most professional or semi-professional herbalists/folk healers were actually male (though we do know the names of one or two *obstetrices* (female specialists in gynaecology and obstetrics), including those who wrote manuals.<sup>73</sup> At any rate, the coinage of masculine agentives such as ῥιζοτόμος (*rhizotomos*, ‘root-cutter’) in Greek and *herbarius* and *medicamentarius* in Latin suggests as much, as do the numerous

70 Mommsen 1892, 144: *hoc imp. primum venenarii et malefici comprehensi sunt; homines XLV, mulieres LXXXV ad supplicium ducti sunt.*

71 The literary sources for the *senatus consultum* of 16 or 17 CE view this event as no more than another routine repression of ‘astrologers and magicians’ (D.C. 57.15.8) – Tacitus indeed mentions only *mathematici*, diviners, especially astrologers (*Ann.* 2.32.5; cf. *Coll. Mos. et Rom.* 15.2.1 [?Ulpian]) – following on the case of the unfortunate Libo Drusus, who, rumoured to have consulted astrologers and indeed a necromancer, was induced to commit suicide in 16 CE (*Ann.* 2.27–32). On the imbrication under the Empire of divination and magic, see e.g. Rives 2011; Niedermayer 2017, 27–29; decrees and expulsions from Rome or Italy: 185–196.

72 Blanco Cesteros 2025.

73 For Lais and Elephantis on abortifacients: Plin. *Nat.* XXXVIII.81–82; Soteira: *ibid.* 28.83; Salpe, *ibid.* 82; XXXII.135.

references to such practitioners throughout the sixteen books of Pliny's *Natural History* devoted to the healing and other properties of plants of all kinds, animal-parts and minerals (Bks. 17–32), both for direct application and for the manufacture of curative and protective amulets.<sup>74</sup> Yet Pliny's information was all derived from written sources, partly indeed from works purporting to have been written by famous Greek masters, from 'Pythagoras' through 'Democritus' to 'Plato', to say nothing of the 'Persian', Babylonian, 'Jewish' and Greek pseudepigrapha ascribed to 'Zoroaster', Ostanes, Damigeron, Moses, Orpheus and the rest. The availability of textual sources of magical knowledge at Rome from the time of Cicero's contemporary Nigidius Figulus, obvious in Pliny and Apuleius, merely adumbrated in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, raised the implicit authority of such knowledge immeasurably.<sup>75</sup>

Once again, we must imagine a wide range of claims to authority, all the way from those typical of wise folk (e.g. *incantatores*) to individuals who defined themselves exclusively as *medici*, 'doctors'. Once they reached the urban environment, they must have taken care to adapt their range of skills, dropping their claims regarding storms and frost and adding to their repertoire in areas more relevant to the urban environment. Yet, as competitors in the urban context, they were suspect. Pliny misses few opportunities of dismissing 'root-cutters' as a group, an attitude that hardened as cities began to appoint increasing numbers of public doctors, so that it became necessary to try to distinguish 'proper' doctors (*medici*) from 'quacks'.<sup>76</sup> In the second decade of the third century CE, the jurisconsult Ulpian opined that:

*Medicos fortassis quis accipet etiam eos, qui alicuius partis corporis vel certi doloris sanitatem pollicentur: ut puta si auricularius, si fistulae vel dentium. Non tamen si incantavit, si imprecatus est, si, ut vulgari verbo impostorum utar, si exorcizavit: non sunt ista medicinae genera, tametsi sint, qui sibi profuisse cum praedicatione adfirmant.*<sup>77</sup>

Ulpian Bk 8 of *de omnibus tribunalibus* ap. *Dig.* L.13.1.3.

Not, we may think, a particularly helpful distinction, in view of the multitude of competing healers in antiquity, but evidently one that made sense in practice, once one took into account what Ulpian avoids alluding to, namely social status

<sup>74</sup> Ducourthial 2003; Bonet 2014; Lichtblau 2017, 85–132; Watson 2019a, 99–126; Gordon 2025, 164–175.

<sup>75</sup> Plin. *Nat.* XXX 3–15; Apul. *Met.* 90.6; Luc. VI 492–499. Compare the list of magical books in *PGM* XIII 947–980. Introduction to the written procedures of the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri: Nowitzki 2021.

<sup>76</sup> Lichtblau 2017, 128–133.

<sup>77</sup> 'We may acknowledge as *medici* those who undertake to cure any part of the body or a specific problem, such as earache, fistulas or toothache, but not if they use incantations (*imprecatus est*) or, if I may use the expression these quacks employ, they 'exorcise' – these are not types of *medicina*.' This reproduces a common tactic among *medici*: Gaillard-Seux 2015.

and rhetorical competence in public debate between adherents of different medical schools, of which Galen was evidently such a master.<sup>78</sup>

On the other hand, the mass of the population of ancient cities had no access to ‘proper’ doctors, and such experts were notoriously expensive, just like spending periods of time in temples of the healing god Asclepius, and journeying to healing springs, far away from centres of population.<sup>79</sup> They were thus forced to have recourse to low-level wise-folk and the remedies they offered, which included amulets and protection against the spirits that might well be thought to cause illness, quite apart from witchcraft attacks. Indeed, not only the masses must have done so: the implied reader of the thousands of recommendations in Pliny’s *Natural History* Bks 17–32 must have been assumed to be prepared, as *paterfamilias*, to use at least some of the treatments for every conceivable type of complaint and lesion he collected from earlier books, all of it ultimately derived from the knowledge of such practitioners – and not merely the items that had been purged of their ‘magical trappings’ (i.e. the rituals employed by folk-practitioners to empower their ingredients) and rendered respectable by being admitted into literate compilations, but also, on occasion, the many items Pliny labels as ‘listed by the Magi’ i.e. the Magian pseudepigrapha (which he also found in books).<sup>80</sup>

I am inclined to suggest that when the security forces were told to pick up ‘*venenarii et malefici*’ including diviners, all they did, especially as far as the women were concerned, was to go round the quarters and neighbourhoods of the city looking for stalls, permanent or at daily or weekly markets, run by urban herbalists, where the women sold the usual array of herbs, animal parts, minerals and other requirements of their trade (just as in many countries today), and simply labelled them as required ‘poisoners and witches’ – since selling curative herbs and animal parts was anyway only part of their livelihood. The police knew, after all, what they ‘really’ were. And since there was a decree by the Senate, there may have been no shortage of neighbours ready to accuse such women of precisely such ‘crimes’.

### Other media: The lithic tradition

Amulets are another very ancient form of magical protection against a variety of threats that underwent in the urban context, and especially in the Roman imperial period, an enormous diversification of medial forms. Earlier amulets

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<sup>78</sup> Lloyd 2008, 34–48.

<sup>79</sup> Expense: Ecce 2016; cf. Plin.Nat. XXIX 17–28; on the elite social status and pretensions of visitors to the Asklepieion of Pergamon as transmitted by the *Hieroi Logoi* of Aristeides, see Petridou 2017, 194–206.

<sup>80</sup> Gaillard-Seux 1998; Gordon 2025, 164–175.

were often made of vegetal and animal substances,<sup>81</sup> and these certainly continued to be widely used, as is clear from many of Pliny's recommendations. In the Roman period, however, a whole variety of new forms and materials appear, produced and traded by specialists.<sup>82</sup> More expensive amulets in a variety of semi-precious stones, of which tens of thousands survive in modern museums and private collections, were cut by specially-trained gem-cutters.<sup>83</sup> Major production sites include Alexandria in Egypt and Aquileia at the head of the Adriatic Sea, but there were many other provincial urban centres in different Roman provinces.<sup>84</sup>

Semi-precious stones were used in rings either as identity-markers, i.e. as seals (intaglios), or as amulets (in which case the positive image appears directly). Although seal-stones might implicitly act as allusions to divine protection, amulets did so overtly. Many different designs are known, some of them drawing upon widespread shared ideas and motifs connoting hope and prosperity, such as the stork, or Tyche-Fortuna shown with a steering-oar and a cornucopia, intimating *good* fortune. Such motifs, covering images of major conventional deities, including Egyptian Isis and Serapis, are usually 'unlettered' but became the subject not only of a handbook literature known by the Greek term *Lithika*, but also of didactic poems, such as one ascribed to Orpheus, for a leisured urban readership.<sup>85</sup> These handbooks set out instructions for the images to be cut and their significance.<sup>86</sup> The allusions of many others, however, are more esoteric, often drawing on Egyptian mythology, such as the birth of Harpokrates. More specialised amulets, termed in modern archaeology 'magical amulets', sought to increase the communicative value of the image not only by means of enigmatic images but also by adding names of power, recognised names of exotic gods such as Yahweh, words in 'sunken' Egyptian, or vowel sequences that might be vocalised as music, and/or occult sigla, deemed to form a direct communication channel to the Other World.<sup>87</sup>

The commonest type of all, however, is the so-called 'cock-headed anguipede', which has been argued to be a rebus-image based on the Hebrew root *gbr* (giant, warrior, cockerel ...), but at all events depicts a cosmic deity ana-

81 Watson 2019b, 149–150.

82 Faraone 2018.

83 Michel 2004; Zwierlein-Diehl 2007, 210–231.

84 Zwierlein-Diehl 2007, 195–197.

85 See Halleux – Schamp 1985; Orpheus: Martín Hernández 2010, 107–126. They are based largely, if often indirectly, on Babylonian sources and in part on alphabetically-ordered handbooks.

86 Canzobre Martínez 2017; Monaca 2017. The most ambitious of surviving handbooks is the Greek *Cyranides* Bk 1, which provides an explanatory list of 24 magical and curative amulets composed of different substances (plant, animal(-parts), and stone), each group of which has to begin with the same letter of the alphabet.

87 Dasen – Nagy 2019.

logous to, or inspired by, the Jewish god Yahweh, understood as capable of commanding all others and intervening for a wide range of protective aims. As a kind of ‘bazooka’ type, it was used with a very wide variety of different ‘names of power’.<sup>88</sup> Other types of amulet rely not so much on images as on text, from the briefest form of invocation, the single word or name (also ineffable names), through acclamations, explicit entreaties for protection and cure/health, to brief incantations, and, on the related mode of the phylactery on strips of gold, silver or copper foil, entire protective prayers, which would be rolled up tightly and inserted into an amulet case to be worn of the person.

Although the images of amulets on semi-precious stone are in a sense unique, in that they were made individually, the existence of closely similar types attests to the constant exchange of templates and designs between centres and a degree of mass-production, quite apart from the implied infrastructure of mining of and trade in suitable stones, of which the most precious was lapis lazuli, imported from modern Afghanistan; training the cutters, who were presumably slaves and thus in themselves a costly investment; and finding markets and buyers – buyers who were, by implication, capable of understanding at least some of the intentionality of such types which they were to wear on their figures or secrete on their persons. Moreover the designs of ‘occult’ magical gems required specialist advisers, mostly it seems in Roman Egypt, with the theological training required to create new types.

It is obvious that the production and consumption of amulets only make sense as a social practice on the assumption that, as objects, they possess power. In other traditions, such as in South-East Asia, such power may accrue through the asceticism of specialists (i.e. monks), but in Classical Antiquity prior to the Empire, lacking any highly-regarded ritual specialists of a comparable kind, the power attributed to amulets, ‘unlettered’ and ‘semi-lettered’, was purely consensual. Their status as objects, and thus their imputed agency, was low and there was no institution or group with an interest in altering the situation.<sup>89</sup> One of the advantages of thinking of the production of amulets as an urban knowledge-practice, is that we can appreciate the different moves here – towards figuration of the imputed addressees – attempting to imagine what a proper addressee for this context looks like –, towards individualisation, as expressed in prayer, injunctions and directives, towards linguistic code-breakage – as so many claims to power by relatively low-level urban ritual specialists drawing upon cultural traditions, mainly Egyptian and Judean, that only became readily available with the establishment of administrative empires, first in

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<sup>88</sup> For the cock-headed anguipede, see Michel 2004: 239–249, and Nagy 2019.

<sup>89</sup> For the distinction between ‘unlettered’ and ‘semi-lettered’ see Kotansky 2019, 508–509; cf. Faraone 2018, 27–101.

the Hellenistic kingdoms and then in the Roman Empire and the cultural exchanges they facilitated and encouraged.<sup>90</sup>

Access to new sources of information, some of it in textual form, permitted a dynamic process of search for new or alternative images, which needed in turn to be legitimated as forms of power through language and supra-linguistic resources but also through choice of material, above all, precious metals and semi-precious stones.<sup>91</sup> Increased cost implies increased value; so gold or silver lamellae and intaglios with ‘strange’ devices became interesting for the urban social groups who could afford to buy them as indices, among many others, of their own sense of ‘distinction’. Even relatively expensive amulets could thus become commoditised, encouraging routinisation, loss of imputed agency, and so the search for new forms.

## Conclusion

In a word, re-contextualising small-time ritual specialists in the frame of the urban encourages one to emphasise three features which the frame of individualisation rather concealed. The first is the recognition that the discourse of a deviant heterotopia, while it retains elements of the old ‘village-witch’ image, is in fact an urban fantasy figuring the spectral Other in the city – ‘what the city hides’. Although brutal police action was an occasional feature of the Republic, there can be little doubt that the immediate stimulus to the fantasy was the moral disillusion resulting from the protracted civil wars that accompanied the fall of the Republic and the massive social upheavals that accompanied the establishment of monarchy, but its perpetuation owed much to the explicit endorsement of successive emperors of ‘hidden threats’. Secondly, the growth of towns and cities in the later Republic and the Empire due to immigration from the agrarian sector, as well as the evidently considerable demographic effects of freeing educated and economically-active slaves, also encouraged low-level specialists of the ‘folk-healer’ type to try their fortune in the urban environment and there create their own networks of neighbourhood clients who wanted access to the only type of medical and broadly ‘social’ help that they could afford. Thirdly, the opening of the Hellenistic world and, as its heir, the Roman Empire, to hitherto unknown or inaccessible cultural goods in the religious field, together with the trade and other infrastructures it made possible or extended, enabled provincial specialists with the requisite knowledge – including rare knowledge – to create new and dynamic media for protective amulets manufac-

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<sup>90</sup> Fraser 2015; de Haro 2017; Dosoo 2025.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Dasen 2015; 2021; Faraone 2021.

tured in towns and cities, whose main market was other inhabitants of those same urban spaces.

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