

SECOND EDITION

Arcana Mundi

MAGIC AND THE OCCULT
IN THE GREEK
AND ROMAN WORLDS

A Collection of Ancient Texts

Translated, Annotated, and Introduced by

Georg Luck



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Contents

List of Texts ix

Preface xiii

List of Abbreviations xvii

General Introduction:
Exploring Ancient Magic i

I. MAGIC

Introduction 33

Texts 93

II. MIRACLES

Introduction 177

Texts 185

III. DAEMONOLOGY

Introduction 207

Texts 223

IV. DIVINATION

Introduction 285

Texts 321

V. ASTROLOGY

Introduction 371

Texts 389

Contents

VI. ALCHEMY

Introduction 435

Texts 443

Epilogue:

The Survival of Pagan Magic 457

Appendix: Psychoactive Substances
in Religion and Magic 479

Vocabula Magica 493

Select Bibliography 519

Index of Ancient Sources 529

General Index 535

occurred more frequently in one particular year, rumors of an impending crisis began to circulate.

The interpretation of lightning was also part of the “Etruscan science.” It was important to note from which of sixteen sections of the sky the lightning came and what spot or object on earth it hit.

Other Methods of Divination

There are so many other methods of divination that it is almost impossible to list them, except, perhaps, a few that are labeled with a specific name. Most of them did not require any apparatus or technical expertise and could be practiced almost anywhere. The catalogues compiled by scholars are rather tedious to read, but since this is a chapter of cultural history—and one that provides some curious insights into human psychology—a brief survey seems appropriate. The information we have comes from various sources, many of them late and not very explicit, but it seems that much of the material was originally compiled by Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 B.C.) in Book 41 of his monumental work, *Antiquitates Rerum Humanarum et Divinarum* (*The History of Rome and Its Religion*). Varro was one of the greatest scholars of his time and an authority on Roman religion, and later writers—the Church fathers, for example—used him extensively, but the work as a whole is lost.

The body movements of human beings, especially their involuntary behavior (twitching, sneezing, etc.), provided omens. A visible part of someone’s body might suddenly move spasmodically and give, to the observer, some indication of the future.

The various methods of divining from inanimate objects were divided by Varro into four classes that corresponded to the four elements: geomancy, aeromancy, pyromancy, and hydromancy (*Schol. Dan. Virg. Aen.* 3.359; *Isid., Etym.* 8.9.13). Actually, the phrase *inanimate objects* is misleading, because to the ancient Greeks and Romans, especially to Platonists and Stoics, nothing was wholly inanimate. Divination was possible because there was part of the cosmic soul in everything.

Geomancy was the art of divining by means of lines formed by throwing earth on a surface. *Aeromancy* consisted in casting sand or dirt into the wind and studying the shape of the resulting dust cloud; or in throwing seeds into the wind, allowing them to settle on the ground, and interpreting their pattern (though this is also considered a form of *aleuromancy*).⁶³ The modern method of teacup reading might be compared, even though the element is water rather than air. *Pyromancy* (or *empyromancy*) is divination by fire or signs derived from fire: if incense is placed on fire, we speak of *libanomancy*; if flour is thrown on the flames, this is a form of *aleuro-*

mancy; if an egg is broken over the fire, the term is *oöscopy*.⁶⁴ When the shoulder blade of a sheep is heated over the coals, one uses the term *omoplatoscopy* or *scapulomancy*.

All these methods were practiced at one time in one or more parts of the ancient world. The fire and the preferred materials strongly suggest a sacrifice offered to a god—Apollo, for example—because incense and grain were used as offerings, either along with a slaughtered animal or instead of it, from time immemorial. Since the deity was thought to be present at such a ceremony, it was he or she who conveyed the omen, but it may have been the duty of a priest to interpret it. Any sacrifice of this kind could be performed in private, but the more solemn the occasion, the greater the likelihood that more people were present.

The various subdivisions of *hydromancy*, or divination by water, are not always clearly defined.⁶⁵ The term *scrying* is used for “crystal gazing,” but, strictly speaking, water or any other translucent or shiny surface could have been substituted for the crystal, which is not attested before Byzantine times.⁶⁶ This technique allows the “medium” to see a series of hallucinatory moving pictures “within” the shining object.⁶⁷ Not everyone, at least not in modern times, can be a “medium”: F. W. H. Myers, who was a classical scholar and a psychic, estimated that perhaps one man or woman in twenty can experience hallucinations of this kind.⁶⁸

At least two methods of scrying were used in antiquity. In one the translucent object was a mirror—not necessarily in the modern sense of the word, but a highly polished metal surface, a soldier’s shield for instance. This method is called *catoptromancy*. In the other a glass or bowl of water was used, and for this the terms *lecanomancy* (divination by bowl) and *hydromancy* are attested.

Hydromancy,⁶⁹ like many other methods of divination, seems to have originated in Babylonia and reached the Greco-Roman world via Egypt, in the first century B.C. or earlier.⁷⁰ It was fairly popular throughout antiquity and in Byzantine times. In Europe, during the Middle Ages and later, it was associated with witchcraft, and in some countries severe penalties prohibited this seemingly harmless practice.

One ancient method is described by M. P. Nilsson: “Scrying was done by gazing at the surface of water, a method . . . which reminds us of modern crystal-gazing. A medium, an innocent boy, was chosen after he had been tested and found suitable. . . . The medium, with his eyes shut or bandaged, lay on his belly, with his face over a vessel containing water. Thereupon certain ceremonies were gone through which led up to the trance into which the medium passed by staring at the surface of the water, wherein he saw the beings summoned up by the magician, and then gave answers to the questions asked.”⁷¹

The methods varied according to the nature of the shiny object used and the medium employed; sometimes a pregnant woman was substituted for the “innocent” boy (*innocent* here meaning “lacking sexual experience”). Sometimes the term *gastromancy* (divination by the belly) was used, because the vessel filled with water was called *gastrea* ‘belly-shaped vessel’.⁷²

Other requisites mentioned are a small altar, a statue of a god, and a lantern (Apul., *Apol.*, ch. 42). A magical papyrus in London (*PGM V*) describes how to obtain an oracle from Serapis. One needs a bowl, a lamp, a bench, and a young boy. The prescribed ritual involves the invocation of Serapis, pouring the water into the bowl, lighting the lamp (at this point the boy probably stretches out on the bench so that he can look down into the bowl), waiting for visions in the water, a prayer to dismiss the god, and a charm to protect the boy.

We would call the boy a medium. When he sees certain things in the water (a throne carried by four men crowned with olive branches, preceded by a censer bearer, is mentioned), the priest knows that the medium is now in trance. These images can vary from cult to cult, from age to age. In this case we are probably getting a glimpse of a ritual procession in honor of the god Serapis in the late Hellenistic period. In theory, other images could be substituted, but this particular vision has survived for centuries, for we have a remarkably similar account of the same kind of ceremony from an English traveler, E. W. Lane, who visited Egypt in the nineteenth century.⁷³ The images that the boy-medium sees at the beginning of his trance are also certainly scenes of temple life in Egypt two thousand or more years ago. One possible explanation is that this technique was taught by one generation of magicians to the next for centuries, and that along with the technique a certain way of “programming” the medium was inherited. This programming could have been done when the boy was hypnotized. The long survival of these ancient practices, at least under certain circumstances, is truly astonishing.

Crystal gazing, or *crystallomancy*, is not referred to by this name before Byzantine times, but the practice itself seems to be older.⁷⁴ The favorite mineral used by the ancient diviners was the beryl, a transparent stone pale green in color and passing into light blue, yellow, and white; the green variety of the transparent beryl is the emerald, while the pale bluish-green variety is the aquamarine. All these stones were used in antiquity, but in modern times “crystal balls” made of clear glass have been substituted.⁷⁵

No doubt many other techniques of divination were known to the ancients but no detailed descriptions have survived. The term *rhabdomancy* appears in a gloss without further explanation. Translated as “divi-

nation by means of a rod or wand,” it is connected with a passage from Herodotus (4.67) in which we are told that the Medes, the Persians, and the Scythians used a stick or rod for divining. How they used it is not known, but it is reasonable to assume that Herodotus was speaking of the “divining rod” used for dowsing or “water witching” to this day.⁷⁶ No clear reference is found in any ancient author, though on the strength of Numbers 20:7–11 Moses is sometimes called the first dowser, that is, if the staff with which he struck the rock twice, after speaking to it, was a divining rod, not a magic wand.

According to the historian Ammianus Marcellinus (29.1.25ff.), participants in magical operations involving a kind of Ouija board were brought to trial for high treason.⁷⁷ Their instrument, produced as evidence, was a tripod of olive wood that supported a circular metal dish. On the rim of the dish were engraved the twenty-four letters of the Greek alphabet. A ring hanging from a thin linen thread began to swing from letter to letter, spelling out words and arranging the words into hexameters. Then someone asked the crucial question: “Who will be our next emperor?” Slowly the ring began to spell: first a *theta*, then an *epsilon*, then an *omikron*—it could only mean Theodorus, or so they thought. Unfortunately, they were wrong. One of them informed a so-called friend, and soon afterward they were all arrested, tried, and put to death, and Theodorus, though he insisted to the end that he knew nothing of the whole experiment, was put to death also. Had they only been a little more patient, the divination board would have told them the truth. Seven years later the reigning emperor, Valens, was killed, and his successor was—Theodosius.

A board similar to the one described above was excavated at Pergamon,⁷⁸ but it is not really a member of the Ouija board family; it is more like a roulette table, for the answers it provides seem to be determined by chance alone.

Chiromancy, or palmistry, is mentioned in the second century A.D. by Pollux (2.152), but apparently it was practiced in the Far East at least two thousand years before that. Originally it was based on intuition combined with symbolism, and some of the symbolism was derived from astrology. Lines in the hand forming a triangle (trine, 120° in astrology) were considered a good sign, whereas lines resembling a square (90° in astrology) were interpreted as a bad omen.

Tarot cards, as popular today as they were in the Middle Ages, were possibly created in Egypt as part of the Cabalistic tradition. When they were brought to Spain by Jewish scholars, they were adapted to medieval society; for example, the medieval clergy was symbolized by cups or chalices, the nobility by swords, merchants by pentacles, and peasants by

wands. In subsequent centuries these class distinctions lost their meaning, and the cards were filled with new magical significance as practitioners interpreted the changing social scene. Basically, tarot is a variation of the sortilege technique, for each card represents the elaboration of one symbol.

The preceding survey of the methods used in ancient divination, incomplete as it is, shows that almost anything could be used to predict the future—the human body, the organs of an animal, minerals, artifacts, the four elements, even the stars. Almost anything that could be experienced or observed, anything that attracted attention, anything that could be manipulated—in a simple way or in an elaborate ritual—had some meaning for the individual or the community. Certain techniques were confined to certain places. Some required highly skilled practitioners, but many were devised for the use of the ordinary person. In a universe where supernatural powers were thought to influence every act and thought, ancient divination was essentially a form of psychotherapy. It helped people cope with their worries about the future, and it forced them to reach decisions after all the rational angles had been explored.

The divination techniques described in the following texts are different, but the principle is the same: the participants in these rituals assumed that the future was somehow present, either visible in trance or written in the sky (astrology is treated in chapter 5) or understandable through dreams. Some of these techniques were more elaborate than others. The professional dream interpreter needed his dream books; the professional astrologer, his astrolabe, his ephemerids, and other tools. The Pythia in Delphi prophesied in trance, a state of consciousness that could be induced naturally, by a form of self-hypnosis, or artificially, by psychoactive substances, most likely a kind of incense. Divination often worked because the person who asked the questions already, in the subconscious, knew the answers. This may sound paradoxical, but the evidence of the texts, if read carefully, confirms it.

Essentially, ancient divination was a form of communication between gods and men. The oracles were sanctuaries where gods were thought to reside and be willing to talk to men and women under certain conditions, sometimes through an intermediary (the prophet), sometimes directly (in a dream).

NOTES

1. See Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 70.
2. See H. Gunkel, *Die Propheten* (Tübingen, 1917).