



SECRETS OF ANCIENT MAGIC

THE POWER OF SPELLS, CURSES, & OMENS

By Kate Murphy & Cynthia Susalla

In ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome, practitioners of magic exploited symbolic words, images, and rituals to achieve desired outcomes through supernatural means. Using magical acts, they attempted to control supernatural powers—gods, demons, spirits, or ghosts—to accomplish something beyond the scope of human capabilities. The exhibition *Magic in the Ancient World*, now at the Penn Museum, illuminates how different cultures used magic as a way of managing or understanding the present, controlling supernatural agencies, and seeing the future. This exhibition features objects from the Museum's rich collections of the Near East, Babylonian, Egyptian, and Mediterranean sections.

*—Professors Robert Ousterhout and Grant Frame,
curators of Magic in the Ancient World*

To the modern mind, the word “magic” likely conjures up images of Hogwarts and other fantastical and exclusive realms. Yet in the ancient world, magic was not only a perceived reality, but was also accessible to many people. Surviving literature and archaeological remains from ancient societies surrounding the Mediterranean, including those of Egypt, the Near East, Greece, and Rome, reveal the extent to which magic pervaded most aspects of life in antiquity.

Magic, often overlapping with what today might be considered science or religion, was a resource for mediating one’s interaction with society and the world. It was a source of protection; a means for healing; a method for ensuring success in business, love, and reproduction; and a platform for predicting the uncertain future. It even lay at the root of many funerary practices. Thus, from birth until death, magic touched all stages of human life.

PROTECTION

Ancient practitioners employed both helpful, defensive magic and harmful, offensive magic, which might be thought of in modern terms as “white” or “black” magic. The former includes *apotropaic*, or protective, magic. Apotropaic magic was predicated upon a belief that certain depictions, texts, or practices shielded the user from harm. For example, thousands of phallic-shaped amulets, which warded off evil and misfortune for the wearer, survive from antiquity.



LEFT: Protective figurine of Humbaba or Pazuzu. The striations around the face of this demon are either the entrails of an enemy, worn by Humbaba, or the whiskers of Pazuzu’s lion-like face. Both demons were among a number of apotropaic images that warded off evil. H. 3.9”, UPM object #33-35-252.

Male sexual imagery symbolized power and violent force, whereas female sexual imagery symbolized reproduction and fertility, in accordance with ancient gender roles. Additionally, the powers of demons, monsters, and gods, who were harmful by nature, could be harnessed through their depictions on amulets, armor, and buildings. These images would then provide protection against natural and supernatural threats.

Apotropaic demons included the Near Eastern Pazuzu and Humbaba, who fought off other malevolent forces such as Lamashtu, a demon harmful to pregnant women and children. In ancient Greece and Rome, a Gorgon’s head, placed on armor and above entryways, provided the user with luck and protection. The head of the Gorgon Medusa also adorned the shield of the Greek warrior goddess Athena. In Egyptian culture, images of the goddesses Sekhmet and Taweret played apotropaic roles. Both goddesses had violent or savage forms: Sekhmet, who protected against disease, was part lion; Taweret, who watched over mothers and children, was part hippopotamus.

The Penn Museum houses a substantial collection of another form of ancient protective magic, the incantation bowl or “demon bowl.” Decorated with a spiraling incantation and, typically, an illustration of a chained demon, these bowls were buried upside down around the boundaries of a property or the thresholds of a room. Used well into late antiquity (ca. 2nd to 8th or 9th century CE) and found throughout the ancient Middle East, such bowls trapped evil spirits and denied them access into one’s home, constituting an ancient magical security system.



HEALING

Another form of defensive magic in the ancient Mediterranean pertains to healing. In the realm of ancient medicine, magic was difficult to distinguish from religion and science. Because diseases, particularly those that were long-lasting or difficult to cure, were frequently attributed to divine origin or causation, medical practitioners often employed magical rituals to appease angry gods, expel demons, and produce a cure. For example, Mesopotamian clay tablets dating from ca. 1800 BCE list prescriptions and omen texts for use in diagnosis and prognosis. An *āšipu*, or incantation priest, would have consulted these omens after examining his patient in order to prescribe a magical remedy. These measures would have been taken in conjunction with the use of herbs, potions, poultices, and bandages. Moreover, many medical papyri from ancient Egypt include spells and incantations to cure diseases caused by angry deities.

ABOVE: Known as “the one who keeps enemies at a distance,” Tutu was a sphinx-like protective god with a human head, lion body, bird wings, and a snake for a tail. He appears surrounded by knives and scorpions, possibly as protection for a tomb or temple. Egypt, ca. 30 BCE–624 CE. H. 10”, UPM object #65-34-1.

RIGHT: Terracotta rider with gorgon shield. This votive was found at a Sanctuary of Apollo on Cyprus (late 4th century BCE). A gorgon’s head was an apotropaic symbol thought to ward off other evils by terrifying them. H. 6.7”, UPM object #54-28-69.



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ABOVE: Aramaic incantation bowl from Nippur dating to before the 7th century CE. A similar bowl (B2963A) contains a charm against a murderous spirit. Part of the inscription reads: "Designated is this spell...for the sealing of the household of this Ardôî bar Hormizdûch, that from him may depart and remove the evil Demon and the evil Satan." Diam. approx. 6.9", UPM object #B2965A.



ABOVE: Wedjat eye amulet. The wedjat, or Eye of Horus, was a popular amulet worn for health and protection. It encompassed ratios that dictated drug measurement and from its form we derive our modern symbol for prescription, "Rx." W. 1.7", UPM object #E5078.

Magic was often employed for healing diseases and other internal injuries whose causes were not understood. One way of harnessing the power of the Egyptian healing god Horus was with a Horus Cippus, a small stone slab that could imbue water with healing powers. Even in the case of external wounds treated with poultices and bandages, a physician-priest might recite a spell over the bandage to promote healing. Similarly, he might use the fractions or proportions contained in the *wedjat* (eye of Horus), a magical symbol for healing, to determine what quantities of herbs should be used in a poultice.

In ancient Greece, the close relationship between medicine and ritual is evident in the popular cult of Asklepios, the great healing god, who cured patients by appearing to them in their dreams. Sick and ailing supplicants would see visions of Asklepios while spending the night in his temple and awake to find themselves

magically healed. To ensure the continuation of their good health, patients cured by Asklepios dedicated votive statues of their healed body parts in his temples, the most famous of which was in Epidauros on the Greek Peloponnese. These votives were often produced en masse and, subsequently, each was inscribed with the name of the person dedicating it, before being given to the temple.



ABOVE: Horus Cippus. Decorated with the image of the Egyptian healing god Horus and inscribed with healing spells, this stone instilled curative powers in water that was poured over it. H. 4.5", UPM object #E15270.

RIGHT: Terracotta foot votive. Anatomical votives or offerings, such as this foot from Italy, were dedicated to Asklepios from the 5th century BCE well into the Roman period to ensure the good health of the depicted body part. H. 5.4", UPM object #MS5753.





ABOVE: Boundary stone from Nippur, Iraq. From the Nebuchadnezzar I period (1146–1123 BCE), this stone contains a drawing of the field that was marked, along with curses that forbid anyone from interfering with the land owner, appropriating the land, or removing the boundary stone. H. 18.8", UPM object #29-20-1.



ABOVE: Door socket. By depicting the enemies of Egypt at the base of the threshold where they would be repeatedly trampled, this door socket would have magically ensured their continued submission to Egypt. W. 21", UPM object #E3959.

CURSES

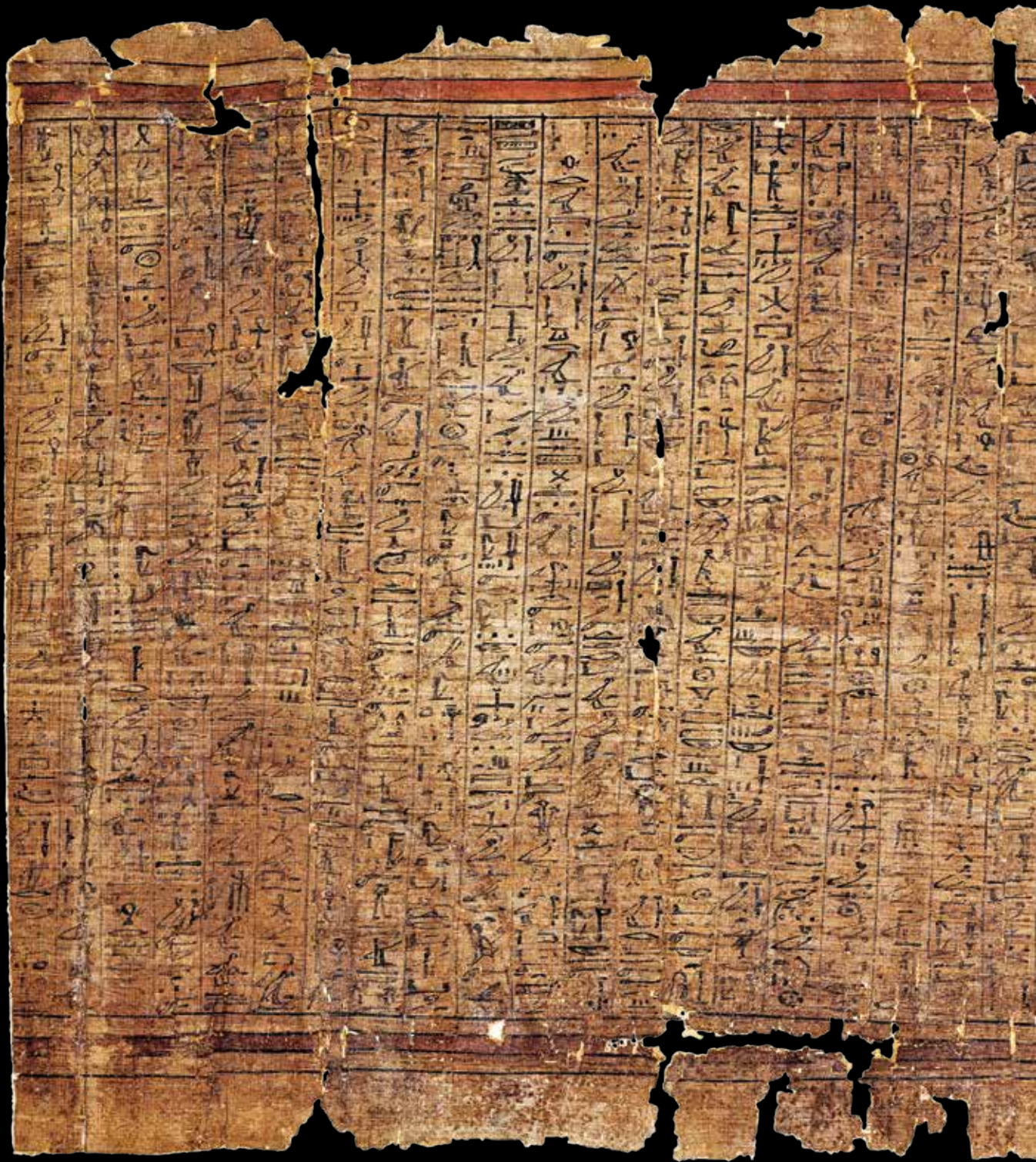
Just as magic supplemented ancient medicinal practices, it also provided an alternative means of enacting justice. Curses—a form of offensive magic—enabled individuals to harness superhuman powers against their enemies, rivals, or lovers. More than 1,600 curse tablets have been recovered from all around the ancient Mediterranean, dated from ca. 500 BCE onwards. These tablets vary in content and intent, from bewitching a lover to avenging a debt to quashing a social rival. Curses, inscribed on thin sheets of lead called *lamellae*, were rolled, pierced with a nail, and deposited in the ground. Typical features of these curses included nonsense language, known as *voces magicae*, and magical symbols, called *charakteres*. Curses were thought to “bind” various body parts of their victims, preventing them from being able to function properly. Those placing the curse would list body parts, personality traits, and even skills of the victim that he or she wanted to impede, from hands and tongues to minds and business acumen.

Curses were used to ensure one’s success in business to the detriment of someone else, as demonstrated in this excerpt of a 4th-century BCE curse from Attica (*DTA*, no. 87a): “I bind Cittos, my neighbour, the hemp-worker, the Craft of Cittos, his work, his soul, his mind, and the tongue of Cittos.” Other curses bound one’s lover or the object of one’s desire, such as the following example from a 5th-century CE Egyptian papyrus (*Suppl. Mag.* 45): “Awaken, demons who lie here, and seek Euphemia...through the whole night, may she not be able to get sleep, but lead her on, until she comes to his feet, lusting after him with mad lust, affection and sex. For I have bound her brain, her hands, her abdomen, her genitals, and her heart to loving me, Theon.” This attraction curse was found sealed in a clay pot accompanied by two dolls, perpetually locked in an embrace.

Some of the earliest known curses hailed from ancient Egypt and consisted of broken pottery sherds.



Detail of jackal-headed canopic jar. UPM object #29-87-510.



Chapter 180 from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. A vignette shows a man, Pashed, supplicating Osiris and two other gods. The text contains spells and instructions for the reanimation of the soul: "Open

the way to my soul, set me on your pedestals; grant that I may rest in the good *Amenta* (Land of the Dead), show me my dwelling in the midst of you, open for me your ways, unfasten the bolts."



H. 13.8", UPM object #E2775E. Courtesy Dorling Kindersley: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.



LEFT AND BELOW: Canopic Jars for the preservation of organs during mummification. Each of the four sons of Horus was associated with a specific organ: Hapy (baboon-headed) with the lungs; Duamutef (jackal-headed) with the stomach; Imsety (human-headed) with the liver; Qebehsenuef (falcon-headed) with the intestines. H. approx. 10.8", UPM object #29-87-(509-512).

These so-called execration texts were clay figurines or bowls inscribed with the names of threatening persons, then broken into pieces and buried. The destruction of the names of one's enemies resulted in the destruction of the threat they posed. This is an example of "sympathetic magic," a term that refers to a wide variety of magical practices, offensive and defensive, that imitate the effect one wishes to produce. Other forms of sympathetic magic found in Egypt include the representation of enemies on sandals and door sockets. The repeated action of stepping on one's enemy or hitting an enemy with a door was efficacious in ensuring his defeat and subjugation. By means of such curses and sympathetic magic, individuals gained a degree of control over their enemies and their future.

DIVINATION

Just as today, the future was a source of concern in antiquity. This anxiety was mitigated by the use of a number of divinatory practices, including consultation with seers, oracles, and other specialists in predicting the future and interpreting signs and omens. In ancient Rome, astrologers, who read the movements of stars and constellations to determine the destiny of individuals, were commonly grouped with magicians as magical practitioners. Their power, derived from knowledge of the future, rendered them dangerous, with the result that they were frequently expelled from Rome throughout antiquity. In most societies from the ancient Mediterranean whose laws survive, offensive magic such as placing a curse was regarded

as a crime. However, the legality of various divinatory practices changed according to time and culture.

The stars were not the only elements of nature that possessed divinatory power, however. Another form of divination involved the reading of animal entrails, called *extispicy* or *haruspicy*. The Babylonians (as early as the 19th century BCE), the Etruscans (ca. 8th to 3rd century BCE) and the Romans (who inherited the practice from the Etruscans) performed these examinations. According to this practice, spots and deformities on the organs, particularly those found on the liver, portended either fortune or misfortune.

Augury, a form of divination based upon the behavior of birds, was yet another ancient tool for predicting the future and determining the best course of action. We find many examples of bird omens across ancient cultures. In ancient Mesopotamia, as explained in Tablet 79 of the series *Šumma Ālu* (a collection of texts detailing thousands of omens), if a falcon flapped its wings in front of the king and screeched twice, this meant that the king would attain his desire, but if the falcon screeched five times instead, this meant that the king would be approached by a messenger bearing bad news. In Roman mythology, a famous use of augury by Romulus and Remus decided the location and name for Rome. According to Livy, Remus wanted to found their city on the Aventine Hill and Romulus on the Palatine Hill. Looking to the skies from their respective hills, Remus claimed the kingship on the basis of having seen vultures fly overhead *first*, while Romulus claimed kingship

having seen *more* vultures. In the ensuing disagreement, Romulus killed Remus, founded Rome, and became its ruler. As this Roman foundation myth makes clear, ancient omens were subject to interpretation. Later in Roman history, priests kept sacred chickens and would observe the manner in which they approached their feed: if they ate with gusto, the omen was favorable, but if they refused to eat, the omen was ill-favored.

Moreover, divination could serve private interests as well as public and political ones. In ancient Greece, the use of oracles was a popular means of communing with the divine to access predictions of future events. The most important oracle was the Pythia, the priestess of Apollo at Delphi, through whom the god spoke mystical and puzzling responses to questions concerning the future. It was common practice to consult the oracle before embarking on a political expedition. Collections of oracular responses, such as the *Sibylline Books of Rome*, were also consulted during political crisis.

AFTERLIFE

Magic was a resource frequently used not just during life, but also after death. Many funerary practices incorporated magical elements. This was particularly the case in Egypt, where the intricate rituals of mummification ensured preservation of the body and soul for the afterlife. The placement of amulets over certain body parts during mummification and the preservation of organs

in canopic jars protected the body for new life after death. The Egyptian *Book of the Dead* details these rituals, compiling spells that were painted or inscribed in the tomb and aided in achieving the ultimate restoration of life to the soul of the deceased.

Similarly, *mystery cults* in ancient Greece and Rome had their own secret rituals that ensured an afterlife for their practitioners. Because of the mandated secrecy of these cults, few details of their practices are known, although their existence is attested in

numerous Greek and Latin literary sources. Gold tablets recovered by archaeologists indicate that Greco-Roman mystery cults provided their own special instructions for the deceased, as did the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. Associated with the Orphic cult (named for the mythic musician Orpheus) and buried with initiates of the cult, such tablets provided incantations and directions to the dead for navigating their way through the underworld to a privileged afterlife.

From birth to death, magic permeated the lives of those who lived in the ancient Mediterranean. As such, ancient magic remains difficult for scholars to isolate and define. We know that magic included a plethora of diverse practices and was perceived variously within different cultures. In ancient Greece and Rome, for example, religious practices other than one's own were liable to be considered superstitious and magical; Egypt, in particular, possessed a magical aura in the minds of the Greeks and Romans. In the same way, today, scholars who study Greece and Rome often construct narrower definitions of what might be considered magic than do those who study ancient Egypt and the Near East. If we look closely, however, we see a common belief across these ancient cultures that superhuman powers could affect one's daily life for the better or for the worse. •

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FOR FURTHER READING

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The site of Kani Shaie during excavation. In the distance are the Bazyan Mountains that separate this part of the Zagros region from the Mesopotamian plains behind it.