

Introduction¹

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Properly paying tribute to a scholar of Richard Gordon's stature is no easy task. In his case, this is made all the more difficult by his numerous and diverse scholarly contributions, which have established him as a leading expert in various subfields of Classics and the importance of which has been publicly recognized on several occasions². To this chorus of voices, we now add this volume, with which we intend to celebrate the influential work of a dear friend and colleague. During Richard's extraordinary scientific career – and extraordinary is certainly the *mot juste*³ –, he has established himself as a prominent voice on the social history of Graeco-Roman religion and magic, as evidenced by his nearly 200 publications in the field. But, within his prolific body of work, special mention should be made of his contributions related to ancient magic, with which I am particularly familiar and because of which our academic paths happily crossed almost two decades ago.

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- 2 Recognized since 2007 as an Honorary Professor in the Department of Religious Studies (Religionsgeschichte der Antike) and since 2009 as an Associate Fellow of the Max-Weber-Kolleg at the University of Erfurt, Germany, he was appointed István Hahn Lecturer in 2015, and received a tribute during the congress “Blessing and Cursing in Antiquity”, held in Lonato di Garda in June of 2018.
- 3 As our honorand explains in the delightful interview published as an epilogue to this volume (pp. 311–23) and also in his academia.edu profile, ‘after a brief period as Research Fellow of Downing College (1969–70), he became an Interdisciplinary Lecturer, later Senior Lecturer, in the former School of European Studies at the University of East Anglia, Norwich (1970–1987). In 1987 he removed to Germany as a private scholar’. There, he continued researching on his own before being recognized as Honorary Professor at the University of Erfurt (see previous note) 20 years later.

At that time, both Richard and I were members of the first of what would become three projects focused on magic in the Roman West led by Francisco Marco Simón. I was just starting to write my doctoral dissertation and quickly came to admire Richard's quasi-encyclopedic knowledge, which he would effortlessly wield to provide thorough, insightful and sometimes spiky feedback. Over the years, there have been many occasions in which Richard has helped me by providing advice and giving me his support. I am immensely grateful for all his time, dedication and effort. As chance would have it, we not only share academic interests and friendship, but have the same birthday (although several decades apart). When originally planning this volume, I had hoped to offer it to Richard as a sign of gratitude on his 80th birthday in late 2023. However, due to several reasons (including, perhaps, a certain Spaniard's stereotypical unpunctuality), this has not been possible. Even so, I hope that, by virtue of our friendship, both the honorand and the participants in this tribute will forgive me.

While it is true that Richard's scientific career began with the study of Mithraism in his doctoral dissertation under the aegis of the legendary Moses I. Finley⁴, it is also true that, from very early on – and to allude to the title of one of his most recent volumes – he was already 'Choosing Magic'⁵. Thus, in 1987 he set out to delimit the contours of this elusive discipline, defining magic as an ambiguous and problematic social activity, a permanent paradox and meeting point between opposites⁶. The use of magic, understood as an individual, conscious and pragmatic choice made by those who found themselves in situations of personal crisis and risk, has led him to contrast and lucidly explore the differences between imagined and real magic⁷, correctly and repeatedly emphasizing the need to differentiate between magic practiced by professionals and that exercised by individuals who possessed a rudimentary knowledge about magic⁸. The identification of these professionals, generally highly trained in the Graeco-Egyptian tradition, has led him to analyze certain techniques⁹, studying with mastery and creativity not only the preserved formularies and prescriptions¹⁰ but also the testimonies of applied magic¹¹ and its materiality¹². And all this without forgetting

4 Gordon 1973.

5 Gordon, Marco Simón and Piranomonte 2020.

6 Gordon 1987a, 61 and 84.

7 Gordon 1987b, 1999a, 2008 (on the relationship between *superstitio* and magic), 2009, among others.

8 E.g. Gordon 2002a, 2012a, 2013a, 2021a.

9 Such as Gordon 1999b, 2011a, 2014a, 2015, 2018 and 2021b.

10 E.g., Gordon 2019a, 2019b, 2021c, Gordon and Yuen-Collingridge 2021 and Gordon and Martín Hernández 2021.

11 Mostly *defixiones* (e.g., Gordon 2005, 2012b, 2012c, 2013b, 2016b, 2019c, 2019d, 2020b), but also amulets and gems (2011b, 2016a, 2017, 2020a, 2022, among others), together with other magical artifacts (such as the Pergamon kit, cf. Gordon 2002b, the *turibulum* from Chartres, cf. Gordon, Joly and van Andringa 2010 or a magical disk of uncertain purpose, cf. Gordon 2016b).

12 Gordon 2014b.

the importance of the historical and cultural contexts in which these types of practices took place, thus constituting a clear example of ‘lived ancient religion’¹³.

The world of ancient magic owes much to Richard Gordon, who has demonstrated an especially keen ability to unravel, understand and transmit such an arcane and complicated knowledge. Hoping that he will continue to inspire and enlighten us with his work for many more years to come, let this book serve as a small tribute to one of the great names of the discipline of magic and religion in antiquity.

This volume, which no doubt would have benefited from Richard’s feedback (and his feared red pen)¹⁴, largely consists of a selection of revised papers that were originally presented at the conference “From Theory to Practice: The Transmission of Magical Knowledge in the Graeco-Roman World”, which was held in Zaragoza in June of 2021¹⁵. Subsequently, four additional contributions were added in a later stage of volume’s editing process. The book begins with a paper by Francisco Marco Simón, who engages with a range of literary and epigraphical sources in order to explore the *longue durée* of certain components of the rituals for silencing opponents in the Hittite and the Roman worlds. Next, Jessica Lamont discusses the transmission of the technologies of cursing during the fifth century BCE from Sicily to the Attic Mainland. In her paper, she investigates the linguistic, formal, and material features of the first Attic curse tablets, compellingly demonstrating how many of their characteristics were already present in the Sicilian corpus of curses, all the while paying special attention to the historical context in which the transmission of this practice took place. In a similar vein, Camilla Campedelli’s chapter explores the arrival of the technology of engraving curses on lead to Carthage, which appears to have reached North Africa through contact with Sicily. Her essay provides an in-depth discussion of the only known fully-edited Punic *defixio* in lead, DT 213, a curse tablet against thieves in which Persephone is invoked and which, according to Campedelli, should be dated to the third century BCE.

As is well known, curses were not required to be flat hammered out sheets, but could also take other forms, including a three-dimensional anthropomorphic shape. The next two chapters are dedicated to such magical figurines. In the first one, Paula Arbeloa Borbón offers an overview of these artefacts in the Graeco-Roman worlds, comparing their material characteristics (in terms of media), their ritual manipulation

13 Gordon and Marco Simón 2010; Gordon, Marco Simón and Piranomonte 2020; Eidinow and Gordon 2019; Gordon and Faraone 2019 and 2021.

14 And in the end it did! The honorand helped with the proofreading of this volume during the fall of 2025. Not one but two red pens were consecrated to the task of showing me how to be an Editor.

15 The conference, in which several speakers participated online, took place under the umbrella of the Project Retos-JIN “DeLAR” (RTI2018-098339-J-I00, funded by MICIU/AEI/FEDER, UE) and was generously supported not only by the aforementioned project, but also by Grupo Hiberus and the Vice-Rectorate for Research of the University of Zaragoza. The event was held at the University of Zaragoza and the Pablo Gargallo Museum. We are missing 5 of the 18 papers presented in the conference, among which the one by the honorand.

and their archaeological contexts. Next, Riccardo Massarelli's essay focusses on the only known example of magical figurines from the Etruscan world, a couple that was discovered in the necropolis of Sovana and dated to the fifth century BCE. Massarelli's contribution, based in a recent re-examination of this male-female pair, analyzes this artefact in connection to a wider array of literary and archaeological comparanda from the Greek and Egyptian worlds, paying special attention to the ritual mutilation of the victims, whose left feet are detached. Although we do not know with certainty, it is likely that these figurines were made by or commissioned from professional practitioners, individuals who sold their magical knowledge and expertise, and also produced other sorts of magical wares. But at what price? It is this question that the contribution of Diego Meseguer González tries to answer. To do so, he analyzes both literary and epigraphical sources from the Graeco-Roman world dealing with the wages of dream interpreters, soothsayers and magical practitioners in general.

Obviously, the preparation of malign spells and curse tablets for clients was one of the many services offered by these professional practitioners. And it is to curse tablets that the next five chapters turn. The first two deal with the formulaic language of these texts. Celia Sánchez Natalías' paper focusses in the use of maternal lineage within the corpus of *defixiones* from the Roman West, arguing that the cultural background of the writer and his/her degree of magical knowledge helps explain the reasons why and the ways in which such formulae were used. In her view, while individuals without a specific training in cursing could have used maternal lineage as a reflection of the *mater certa* argument or as an inversion of established onomastic conventions, professional practitioners could have used these formulae (and specially the well attested *quem peperit*) as another telltale feature of their proficiency in Graeco-Egyptian magic. Next, Roger Tomlin analyzes the expressions and formulae used against theft in the corpus of curse tablets from the sanctuary of Mercury at Uley. Not only does he highlight their formulaic nature but also reflects on the reasons behind this frequent feature of Uley tablets. In his opinion, there are three different possibilities: (1) these curses were composed by professional scribes; (2) they were written by individuals who used handbooks; or (3) formulae were transmitted orally probably by the personnel in charge of the temple, who shared this information with the individuals writing these curses. Given the state of the evidence, Tomlin judges the third option the most likely.

Andrea Barta, for her part, presents the preliminary study of a new Latin *defixio* from Aquincum that was discovered in a tomb dated to the second or third century CE. In this curse tablet, the *Dii Manes* are invoked and asked to silence *Verissimus* and *Inventus*. Through various persuasive analogy formulae, these two victims are compared to the human remains found in the necropolis itself (charred bodies, scattered bones, rotting and foul-smelling flesh of the crucified) so that they cannot speak against their opponents. According to Barta, both this and the rest of the Aquincum curses could have been written by ritual experts with access to formularies and handbooks such as those surely employed by the authors of the *defixiones* discussed in the last two chapters

of this section. In the first of these, Sara Chiarini compares six lead tablets, which have been dated between the first and third centuries CE, where we can find a semicircular design featuring an *aedicula* (among other motifs). According to Chiarini's suggestive analysis, this iconographical motif should be identified as a simplified representation of a map of the Netherworld: the semicircular shape represents the underworld, which is separated from the world of the living by a horizontal line, and the *aedicula* is meant to depict the entrance to the palace-sanctuary of the chthonic gods. In favor of this hypothesis, Chiarini relies on various cartographic, literary and iconographic sources. This section of the volume concludes with an essay by Christopher Faraone, in which he analyzes sixteen *defixiones*, which mostly come from the Roman West and are datable between the second and fourth – fifth centuries CE. All of these tablets were written in a mixture of Latin and Greek and include an iconographical representation of the invoked power, magical words and signs. According to Faraone, these tablets constitute a series whose upper section reproduces the recipes from magical formularies; in a subsequent phase of composition, a curse would have been added (generally in Latin), where the victim is explicitly mentioned, whose name (and sometimes representation) lay at the feet of the invoked power.

Defixiones written by professional practitioners often betray the use of formularies and handbooks in their composition, both graphically and in terms of content. Irene Salvo's contribution focuses on the latter aspect and on the invocation of demons in the attestations of Greek magic between the Hellenistic and Late Antique periods in particular. Through an analysis of various epigraphic and papyrological sources, the author suggestively traces a landscape of demonic action, analyzing both the geographical contexts inhabited by these beings and the ways in which these are portrayed. The different spheres of demonic action (land, sea or air) also offer valuable information for understanding the ontology of these beings and their functions. This contribution serves as a bridge between the section devoted to *defixiones* and the one focused on the handbooks of ancient magic, which are dealt with in the next two chapters. In the first of these, Raquel Martín Hernández dwells on the lexicon used in rubrics and titles of magical procedures in the corpus of Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri to examine the different mechanisms for the creation of technical words. The author focuses on those appearing in GEMF 74/PGM VII, especially *hapax legomena*, concluding that the compilers and scribes of magical handbooks coined a special technical language to designate their procedures in the most accurate way possible. Sofia Torallas Tovar's study, on the other hand, deals with the composition of two Graeco-Egyptian magical handbooks, namely PGM VIII and IX (GEMF 72–73), which date to the fourth century CE. By analyzing the textual and linguistic contents together with the paratextual marks, the Torallas Tovar is able to distinguish the different sources employed by the scribes (or compilers) in the composition of these manuals.

As is well known, these handbooks contained all kinds of recipes and prescriptions related to medicine, divination and, of course, magic, in its twofold aspect: malign and

apotropaic. One of the best examples of the latter were amulets and gems, to which the contributions of Paolo Vitellozzi and Attilio Mastrocine are dedicated. In his chapter, Vitellozzi pays particular attention to the correspondence between the recipes collected in literary sources (especially the *PGM* and lapidaries) and magical gems. Far from being a linear or unidirectional transmission of magical knowledge, his thought-provoking analysis suggests that this transmission should be understood as an organic and dynamic relationship that, in some way, mutually feeds each other. Even if the most prestigious and authoritative recipes were first transmitted orally, in a later stage they were compiled in handbooks that not only circulated, but were also modified and enriched by means of new agents, media and contexts for use of these artifacts. For his part, Mastrocine's contribution meticulously examines the iconography of a magical gem now preserved in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples. It depicts Shiva, described as a 'hermaphrodite' by the inscription on the gem itself, in which some details can be interpreted in light of Indian iconography and doctrines from different periods.

The volume closes with two contributions related to late-antique and Byzantine magical objects and texts. Thus, György Németh analyzes the iconography that accompanies a curse against thieves written on a clay flask dated to the sixth century CE. It depicts a supernatural power that grabs its victim by the hair and threatens him with a mallet. In addition to connecting this scene to analogous examples (i.e., a *defixio* from Kos and one of the recipes from *PGM* XXXVI), Németh analyzes the possible Egyptian origin of this iconography. Michael Zellmann-Rohrer's essay focuses on the conceptualization and treatment of the 'wandering womb' in Late Antiquity and its afterlife. Zellmann-Rohrer takes us on a fascinating journey through different literary testimonies, demonstrating how this ancient magical-medical knowledge would later be absorbed and reworked by Byzantine authors, even if they were not themselves aware that they were reworking motifs from ancient magical and medical discourses. Last but not least, the book's epilogue contains an interview with Richard carried out by Dániel Banjok in the spring of 2011 during a workshop in Budapest. The interview not only contains more than one gem about Richard's life and interests, but also provides an accurate reflection of our honorand's temperament and character.

To conclude, I would like to thank the people and institutions that collaborated both in the celebration of the 2021 conference and in the publication of this volume. First of all, I would like to thank the authors who contributed to this overdue and deserved tribute to Richard Gordon. Special thanks are due to those who presented papers at the 2021 conference and have had the patience to wait until now to see them published. I am also grateful to Diego Meseguer González, who not only helped with the conference but also contributed as author and editorial assistant. My gratitude must also be extended to the University of Zaragoza, the Vice-Rectorate for Research and the Grupo Hiberus. The Faculty of Law, together with the Pablo Gargallo Museum, provided the venues for the congress. Special thanks are also due to Romana Erice

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