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Anthropological Views on Magic

Studying magic and divination in the ancient world helps us understand how people thought about the sacred, the unknown, and how the gods might speak to them. These weren't just fringe beliefs—they were deeply woven into everyday life, shaping decisions in politics, religion, and personal matters throughout the ancient Mediterranean and Near East.

Anthropological theory—mainly as it developed from the late nineteenth through early twentieth centuries—has provided critical tools for understanding these systems, even as modern scholarship has questioned and revised many of their foundational assumptions.¹

In anthropological terms, *magic* generally refers to ritual acts aimed at manipulating supernatural forces to produce specific effects, while *divination* refers to techniques designed to access hidden knowledge, often about the future or divine will.^{2,3} Though these categories are distinct, they frequently overlap. A spell might contain a divinatory request; an omen might be interpreted through magical procedure. Ancient practitioners likely did not separate them rigidly, as Versnel notes, prayer and spell, religion and magic, often shared form, language, and cosmological logic.⁴

This paper asks: *What relevance do anthropological theories and observations have to studying magic and divination in the ancient world?* It considers how anthropological models

¹ Michael D. Bailey, 'The Meanings of Magic', *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, 1.1 (2006), pp. 2-4.

² Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. by Robert Brain (Routledge, 2001) [E-book] secs 2, 'A Definition of Magic'.

³ Barbara Tedlock, 'Toward a Theory of Divinatory Practice', *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 17.2 (2006), p. 65, doi:10.1525/ac.2006.17.2.62.

⁴ H. S. Versnel, 'Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic–Religion', in *Magic and the Ancient World*, ed. by Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer (Brill, 2002), pp. 177–95 (p. 185).

help explain the ritual logic, social role, and symbolic structure of practices like oracles, omens, and spells, without reducing them to superstition or human incompetence.

The paper presents case studies from three major cultural zones: Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Greco-Roman world to evaluate this relevance. These examples include officially sanctioned divination, popular magical practices, and liminal rites such as necromancy, as they serve as a window into how boundaries between magic, religion, and divination were drawn and transgressed.

This study argues that classical anthropological theory, while not without its limitations, offers important tools for understanding ancient magic and divination. Far from being irrational or random, these practices followed clear internal logics and often addressed deep anxieties about fate, illness, or divine will. Anthropology helps us look beyond the surface of ritual acts to ask how ancient people made sense of the forces around them, whether through dreams, omens, or spells, and how they used ritual to navigate a world full of uncertainty.

Classical Anthropological Theories of Magic and Divination

The foundational theories of magic and divination developed in classical anthropology laid the groundwork for scholarly interpretation of ancient ritual practices. Thinkers like James Frazer, Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and Bronislaw Malinowski each offered distinct frameworks for understanding non-scientific, ritualized interactions with the unseen. While these models emerged in the context of early ethnographic and comparative religious studies, their relevance continues to resonate when examining the structured, symbolic world of antiquity's magical and divinatory traditions.

A. James Frazer: Magic as Pseudoscience and Precursor to Religion

James Frazer's monumental work *The Golden Bough* represents one of the earliest systematic attempts to explain magical thinking. He proposed that human belief systems evolved in three stages: magic, religion, and science, each representing a mode of thought through which people attempt to control or understand the world. For Frazer, magic is based on the principles of *sympathetic association*: the law of similarity (homeopathic magic—like affects like) and the law of contact (contagious magic—things once in contact remain linked).⁵

Frazer's view reduces magic to a form of *primitive science*, rational in form, but erroneous in content. Though often classed under religion in his model, divination was treated inconsistently and rarely explored in depth. Nonetheless, his classifications remain influential. For instance, practices such as Egyptian spells using effigies or Mesopotamian rituals involving the entrails of sacrificed animals fit neatly within Frazer's framework of causative ritual logic.⁶

Yet Frazer's linear model has been widely critiqued for its Eurocentrism and oversimplification of belief systems^{7, 8}. The idea that magic is inherently irrational or destined to be replaced by science fails to account for its continued use in highly organized and religiously sanctioned settings, such as oracles at Delphi or Babylonian divinatory compendia.

B. Emile Durkheim: Religion as Social Solidarity, Magic as Individual Instrument

⁵ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (Macmillan, 1922), pp. 12–16.

⁶ Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, pp. 11–20.

⁷ Rodney Stark, 'Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic, and Science', *Review of Religious Research*, 43.2 (2001), pp. 101–20 (pp. 102–04), doi:10.2307/3512057.

⁸ Ann Jeffers, 'Interpreting Magic and Divination in the Ancient Near East', *Religion Compass*, 1.6 (2007), pp. 684–94 (p. 686), doi:10.1111/j.1749-8171.2007.00047.x.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim approached belief systems from a sociological perspective and their role in supporting social cohesion. He distinguished religion from magic primarily by examining how each functioned within the structure of society. Religion is collective, centered on shared rituals and sacred symbols that bind communities. Magic, in contrast, is individualistic, instrumental, and often secretive.⁹

This binary remains highly influential. In Durkheim's model, an Athenian state-sponsored consultation at Delphi is religious, while a Roman woman burying a lead curse tablet in a graveyard operates in the realm of magic. Divination may fall into either category depending on its social context: a temple dream oracle could be religious; a one-on-one consultation with a spirit medium, magical.¹⁰

Durkheim's theory helps explain why certain practices, such as Mesopotamian extispicy, were seen as legitimate when performed by temple-trained *baru* priests, but deemed suspect if done outside sanctioned channels.¹¹ However, this model risks overstating the dichotomy. As scholars like Versnel have shown, many ancient rites, including oracles, spells, and healing rituals, combined personal benefit with public religious form, resisting neat classification.¹²

C. Marcel Mauss: Magic as Marginal, Technical, and Emotionally Effective

Marcel Mauss, Durkheim's nephew and intellectual successor, deepened the analysis in *A General Theory of Magic*. He defined magic as a private, informal, and often socially deviant

⁹ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. by Karen E. Fields (Free Press, 1995), pp. 40–44.

¹⁰ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, pp. 42–45.

¹¹ JoAnn Surlock, 'Magic in History: A Theoretical Perspective, and Its Application to Ancient Mesopotamia', *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical and Interpretative Perspectives*, 2000, p. 3 (pp. 69–72).

¹² Versnel, 'Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic–Religion', pp. 187–89.

system of rites, conducted by ritual specialists rather than priests.¹³ These specialists, magicians, seers, and diviners were neither part of religious institutions nor state apparatuses, yet their power could be immense. For Mauss, magic was “public yet secret,” culturally potent yet often feared.¹⁴

Importantly, Mauss emphasized the emotional and psychological effects of magical rites. This perspective is crucial for interpreting ancient rituals such as curse tablets, love spells, or dream interpretation. These rites were not merely attempts at causation; they also provided emotional resolution, closure, and a sense of agency in times of uncertainty.¹⁵

Mauss also stressed the technical precision of magic. Whether consulting the stars in Mesopotamia or invoking protective gods in Egypt, success depended on correct performance, not moral supplication.¹⁶ His focus on ritual form and social context makes his work especially useful for interpreting the overlapping spaces of magic and religion in antiquity.

D. Bronislaw Malinowski: Magic as a Practical Response to Uncertainty

Working in the early 20th century, Bronislaw Malinowski shifted attention away from theory and toward fieldwork and function. Based on his observations in the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski argued that magic emerges where people face uncertainty and risk, such as fishing in dangerous waters or dealing with illness and misfortune.¹⁷

¹³ Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, secs 2, 'A Definition of Magic.'

¹⁴ Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, secs 3, 'The Magician'.

¹⁵ Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, secs 1, 'A Definition of Magic'.

¹⁶ Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, sec. 'The Action'.

¹⁷ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Waveland Press, 1992), pp. 13–14.

Unlike Frazer, Malinowski did not see magic as a failed science but as a pragmatic, adaptive tool. People knew when to use technical methods and when to turn to ritual: magic filled gaps in control, offered comfort, and gave meaning to ambiguous outcomes. This framework maps directly onto ancient practices. Dream interpretation in Egypt, or divining omens in Babylon, was not irrational; they were strategies for navigating uncertainty, embedded within larger systems of meaning.¹⁸

Moreover, Malinowski recognized the coexistence of magic, religion, and science within a single worldview. A Roman general might consult augurs before battle (divination), offer sacrifices to the gods (religion), and use military engineering (science), all without seeing these as conflicting approaches.¹⁹

Together, these anthropological theories speak to how ancient magic and divination operated. They were not merely beliefs, but as structured, socially situated, and emotionally significant actions. While their explanatory power is not unlimited, these models remain relevant for decoding the symbolic language, ritual form, and functional purpose of magical practices across the ancient world.

The following section applies these frameworks to concrete historical examples from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Greco-Roman world, demonstrating how anthropology helps us interpret what ancient peoples did and *why* and *how* they believed it would work.

¹⁸ Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, pp. 12–15.

¹⁹ Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, pp. 67–70.

Magic and Divination in Antiquity

People in the ancient world turned to magic and divination to understand the will of the gods, ward off danger, and influence the course of events. These practices weren't marginal or unofficial—they were often performed in temples, overseen by trained specialists, and closely tied to political and religious institutions. Looking at examples from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Greco-Roman world, we can see how anthropological theory helps explain why these rituals mattered, and how they reflected the values and anxieties of the societies that used them.²⁰

A. Egypt: Heka, Dreams, and Divine Speech

In Egypt, *heka*, commonly translated as “magic”, was not a marginal or subversive force but a foundational principle of the cosmos. Gods used *heka* to create and sustain the world, and humans, particularly priests and scribes, could wield it through speech, writing, and ritual performance. This contrasts with modern Western assumptions about magic as irrational or heretical. For the Egyptians, *heka* was part of divine order, not a deviation from it.²¹

Dream interpretation was one prominent method of divination. In state-sponsored or temple rituals, individuals would engage in incubation, the act of sleeping in a sacred space to receive divine messages. These dreams could reveal cures for illness, divine approval, or prophecies. Priests often recorded and interpreted them, indicating a close relationship between personal experience and institutional religion.²²

²⁰ Jeffers, ‘Interpreting Magic and Divination in the Ancient Near East’, pp. 684–89.

²¹ Jeffers, ‘Interpreting Magic and Divination in the Ancient Near East’, pp. 690–91.

²² Geraldine Pinch, *Magic In Ancient Egypt* (University of Texas Press, 1994), pp. 136–37, 158
<<http://archive.org/details/MagicInAncientEgyptGeraldinePinch1994>>.

Mauss's emphasis on the ritual specialist is evident here. Egyptian magic was highly technical and reliant on trained experts and precise formulae.²³ Malinowski's theory also applies: these rites served practical purposes during illness, uncertainty, or transition.²⁴ Blending divination, magic, and religious ritual complicates Durkheim's binary between individual and collective rites,²⁵ as even state rituals often addressed personal needs.

B. Mesopotamia: Divination as Divine Bureaucracy

Mesopotamian divination was among the most formalized systems of ritual knowledge in the ancient world.^{26, 27} The reading of animal entrails (*extispicy*), celestial omens, and dreams was codified in massive scholarly texts like the *Enuma Anu Enlil*.²⁸ These systems were not fringe practices; they were essential tools of statecraft. Kings employed official diviners (*bārû*) to determine divine favor before military campaigns or legal reforms.²⁹

These practices perfectly illustrate Durkheim's conception of religion as a collective framework for social cohesion. Divination in Mesopotamia was a public act, tied to the gods and the legitimacy of rulers.³⁰ At the same time, Frazer's and Mauss's theories help explain the ritual structure, that the signs were interpreted through codified systems, and outcomes were believed to follow based on analogical reasoning.^{31, 32}

²³ Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, secs.3 'The Magician'.

²⁴ Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, pp. 13–15.

²⁵ Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, pp. 39–44.

²⁶ Jeffers, 'Interpreting Magic and Divination in the Ancient Near East', pp. 691–92.

²⁷ Erica Reiner, 'Fortune Telling in Mesopotamia', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 19.1 (1960), pp. 23–35.

²⁸ Jeanette Fincke, 'The Oldest Mesopotamian Astronomical Treatise: *Enūma Anu e*', *Divination as Science*, 2016, p. 107.

²⁹ Reiner, 'Fortune Telling in Mesopotamia', pp. 30–31.

³⁰ Reiner, 'Fortune Telling in Mesopotamia', pp. 30–31.

³¹ Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, pp. 12–16.

Importantly, Malinowski's concepts of the functional role of magic apply here. He emphasized that magical rites often emerge where practical knowledge ends, filling gaps in control and providing psychological assurance in the face of uncertainty. In Mesopotamia, divinatory rituals such as extispicy or eclipse observation offered structured ways to interpret signs and make decisions when outcomes were unknown. These practices speak to not only a belief in divine communication but also a recognition of risk, ambiguity, and the limits of human knowledge.^{33, 34, 35}

C. Greece and Rome: Oracles, Spells, and Popular Rituals

In the Greco-Roman world, divination took both formal and informal forms. Oracular centers were publicly sanctioned sites where priests interpreted the ambiguous utterances of deities in response to political or personal inquiries. These were religious acts, embedded in temple economies and often recorded as part of civic decision-making.³⁶ At the same time, magic flourished in private life. Curse tablets, love spells, and protective amulets were shared among all social classes.³⁷ These artifacts, often inscribed on lead and buried in graves or wells, invoke gods or spirits to cause harm, influence affection, or secure advantage.³⁸ They exemplify

³² Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, secs.2, 'A Definition of Magic'.

³³ Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, pp. 12–15.

³⁴ Jeffers, 'Interpreting Magic and Divination in the Ancient Near East', pp. 686–88.

³⁵ Reiner, 'Fortune Telling in Mesopotamia', pp. 24–31.

³⁶ John Scheid and Janet Lloyd, *An Introduction to Roman Religion* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 121–24 <<http://archive.org/details/introductiontoro00sche>>.[accessed 4, April 2025]

³⁷ *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, ed. by John G. Gager (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 24.

³⁸ Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, p. 3.

what Mauss described as emotionally charged, private rites conducted by individuals for personal gain.³⁹

The line between magic and religion is especially blurred here. Many private spells mimic public liturgies, using similar invocations and ritual language. Versnel argues that the distinction was more ideological than practical. Magic was often labeled as such because of who performed it, not how it functioned.⁴⁰ The intentionality and ethical considerations in many Greco-Roman texts challenge Frazer's mechanistic understanding of magic. Malinowski's notion of magic as functional and context-driven explains the persistence of these rites: they filled emotional and spiritual gaps in the formal religious system.⁴¹

Magic and Divination as Ritual Technologies

Having examined various magical and divinatory practices across Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Greco-Roman world, we can now consider how classical anthropological theory helps interpret their structure, social positioning, and ritual logic. Despite vast cultural differences, ancient magical and divinatory practices share significant features: they operate as ritual technologies, structured actions designed to produce specific outcomes, manage uncertainty, and access hidden knowledge.

A. Ritual Structure and Symbolic Logic

³⁹ Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, secs. 2 'A Definition of Magic'

⁴⁰ Versnel, 'Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic-Religion', pp. 177-79.

⁴¹ Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, pp. 15-16.

Mauss emphasized that magical acts are not random but consist of highly structured, formulaic procedures performed with precision.⁴² This observation resonates across all case studies. Whether a Mesopotamian diviner inspecting a sheep's liver or a Roman woman burying a curse tablet, the efficacy of the act depended on correct form, often based on tradition or authoritative texts.

Similarly, Frazer's sympathetic magic model, based on analogical thinking (homeopathy and contagion), remains useful for explaining how many magical acts were believed to work.⁴³ In curse tablets, for instance, tying knots or piercing dolls functioned as symbolic attacks. This logic reflects the belief that one could influence reality by manipulating representations or personal remnants.⁴⁴

However, the complexity and fluidity of many ancient rites challenge Frazer's mechanistic model of ritual evolution. As Wax and Wax observe, the rigid separation of magic, religion, and science often collapses under ethnographic scrutiny, revealing a more entangled and context-dependent ritual logic.⁴⁵ As seen in dream incubation or necromantic invocations, rituals were often hybrid in form, blending symbolic manipulation, ethical appeals, and divine negotiation. Versnel rightly argues that prayer and spell frequently overlap, making it difficult to maintain strict categorical boundaries.⁴⁶

B. Social Function and Specialist Authority

⁴² Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, sec. 'The Actions'.

⁴³ Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, pp. 12–15.

⁴⁴ Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Murray Wax and Rosalie Wax, 'The Notion of Magic', *Current Anthropology*, 4.5, pp. 495–518 (pp. 496–97).

⁴⁶ Versnel, 'Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic–Religion', p. 192.

Durkheim's insight that religion is defined by its collective, community-binding function, while magic is individualistic, offers a useful but incomplete framework.⁴⁷ Many divinatory acts, like temple oracles in Greece or dream incubation in Egypt, served both personal and communal purposes. They were socially sanctioned, yet often addressed individual concerns.^{48, 49, 50} Private consultations could reinforce shared values or civic legitimacy by aligning personal needs with divine or institutional structures. In some cases, the individual experience of divination became a ritual reaffirmation of collective cosmology.

Mauss's model of magic as the domain of ritual specialists, operating on the fringes of religious authority, helps explain the ambivalent status of many ancient practitioners. The *bārû* of Mesopotamia or Egyptian scribes may have held elite status, while freelance necromancers or curse-writers were marginalized. However, even official figures could cross between domains, speaking to a flexible ecology of ritual expertise. Specialists might serve both temples and private clients, operating within formal institutions while invoking techniques perceived as magical.^{51, 52}

This ambiguity reveals how ancient societies managed competing notions of legitimacy. The distinction between "magic" and "religion" was often ideological, used to regulate who

⁴⁷ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, pp. 42–45.

⁴⁸ Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination* (John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2008), [eBook] pp. 4–13 <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=437516>.

⁴⁹ Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination*, chaps 2, 'Delphi and Dodona'.

⁵⁰ Pinch, *Magic In Ancient Egypt*, p. 160.

⁵¹ Daniel Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁵² Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, p. 24.

could access spiritual knowledge and through which means, structuring not only what was believed, but who was authorized to believe it.^{53, 54}

C. Coping with Uncertainty: Ritual as Response

Malinowski's functionalist theory is perhaps the most broadly applicable across all examples. His assertion that magic emerges where practical control ends, such as illness, war, or love, explains why magical and divinatory rites were prevalent across cultures. These rituals were not merely superstitions, but structured responses to existential insecurity. They provided psychological comfort, social explanation, and a sense of agency in each cultural context when ordinary mechanisms failed.⁵⁵

Divination, in particular, addressed uncertainty directly. By seeking knowledge of the future, divine will, or hidden causes, practitioners turned ritual into epistemology, a way of knowing through structured engagement with the sacred. Whether through omens, oracles, or dreams, the unknown was not left to chance; it was ritually approached and interpreted.⁵⁶

This is especially clear in the highly codified omen texts of Mesopotamia and the individualized dream rituals of Egypt.^{57, 58} In both cases, the practitioner- whether a *baru* priest or a temple sleeper- engaged with traditional yet adaptable systems, emotionally satisfying but intellectually coherent. They represent examples of what Malinowski saw as emotionally satisfying rituals, embedded in tradition, yet flexible in application.

⁵³ Bailey, 'The Meanings of Magic', pp. 1–23.

⁵⁴ Versnel, 'Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic–Religion', pp. 182–84.

⁵⁵ Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, pp. 12–15.

⁵⁶ Tedlock, 'Toward a Theory of Divinatory Practice', pp. 62–66, 69–71.

⁵⁷ Reiner, 'Fortune Telling in Mesopotamia'.

⁵⁸ Pinch, *Magic In Ancient Egypt*, p. 158.

D. Liminality and Boundary Crossing

While classical anthropology provides the primary theoretical framework for this study, certain practices, especially those involving symbolic inversion, benefit from later structuralist insights, such as those of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Some ritual practices, such as necromancy, erotic magic, and curse-writing, pushed the boundaries of what was socially sanctioned in antiquity. These rites were often performed in liminal spaces: at night, in graveyards, near city boundaries, or during transitional phases like illness, death, or sleep.⁵⁹ Their power lay not just in their secrecy, but in their symbolic location, operating between worlds, across categories of life and death, divine and human, personal and political.

Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's idea of ritual inversion offers a useful interpretive lens. In necromancy, for instance, death becomes generative: a source of truth and hidden knowledge. The speech of the dead reverses the usual flow of communication. Time itself bends, and rituals may revisit a past injustice to influence the future. As Lévi-Strauss notes, such inversions are not meaningless aberrations, but structurally significant: they help societies process contradiction and ambiguity.^{60, 61}

Ritual inversion also applies to erotic magic, where bodies, fluids, and desires are mobilized in symbolic acts of power and vulnerability. Erotic spells in the Greek Magical Papyri, for instance, often blend religious invocation with bodily coercion, calling upon

⁵⁹ Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, p. 27.

⁶⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York, Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 28, 88–92
<<http://archive.org/details/rawcooked00lvis>>.

⁶¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1966), [e-Book] pp. 95–96, 219–21.

divine figures while manipulating physical objects like hair, wax, or blood.^{62, 63} While socially marginal, these acts reflect a structured world view, where symbolic materials bridge the divide between inner desire and external action.

Such rituals reveal that ancient magic was not simply about control or manipulation but involved negotiation across ontological and social thresholds. The anthropological focus on structure, symbolism, and social function helps uncover the internal logic of these practices, showing that even the most transgressive acts had cultural coherence and meaning. Whether taboo or tolerated, they spoke to a worldview in which boundaries could be crossed, often through ritualized, often dangerous means.

E. Magic, Religion, and the Problem of Classification

A consistent lesson across these case studies is that the boundaries between magic, religion, and divination are not fixed, but socially constructed and contextually defined. Practices labeled “magic” in one context were revered in another. As Bailey notes, “magic” often functions as a negative label applied to deviant or unauthorized rituals, rather than describing inherent characteristics.⁶⁴

Anthropological theory allows us to see that what mattered most in antiquity was who performed the act, where, and with what legitimacy, not whether it fit a modern scholarly definition. As we have learned, a dream interpreted by a priest in a temple was divine revelation; the same dream, interpreted by a wandering seer, might be called magic.

⁶² Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, pp. 7–8, 203–04, 186–87.

⁶³ Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, pp. 97–103.

⁶⁴ Bailey, ‘The Meanings of Magic’, p. 4.

Anthropological theories give us a flexible toolkit for interpreting ancient magic and divination, not as irrational relics, but as ritual technologies embedded in social structures, emotional needs, and cosmological beliefs. From temple omens to graveyard spells, these acts reveal how ancient peoples sought to understand, influence, and survive their world. The following section critically reflects on these anthropological models' strengths and limitations and what we must still consider when applying them to ancient sources.

Theoretical Reflection: The Usefulness and Limits of Classical Anthropology

Classical anthropological theory offers enduring value for studying ancient magic and divination. The models developed by Frazer, Durkheim, Mauss, and Malinowski provide key aspects of ritual form, social role, and symbolic reasoning. However, when applied to antiquity's complex, overlapping, and context-dependent practices, these models also encounter significant limitations. Understanding their contributions and constraints is essential to building a more accurate and nuanced interpretation of ancient religious cultures.

Each of the classical theorists explored in this study contributes essential insights. Frazer's typology of sympathetic magic (homeopathic and contagious) remains a useful heuristic for understanding symbolic logic in ritual, particularly in object-based practices like curse tablets or amulets.⁶⁵ Mauss, likewise, deepened this by emphasizing that magic is not simply a belief but a ritualized action performed by a specialist for specific, often urgent needs.⁶⁶ His focus on the magician as a marginal, secretive, yet powerful social type helps contextualize figures like the Egyptian priest-magician or the Greek itinerant spell-writer.

⁶⁵ Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, pp. 12–15.

⁶⁶ Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*.

Durkheim's theory of religion as a social function explains why state-sponsored divination, such as Mesopotamian extispicy or Greek oracles, maintained institutional authority, while freelance or unauthorized magic was stigmatized.⁶⁷ Malinowski, finally, offers a critical bridge between theory and practice by framing magic as a functional response to uncertainty, particularly in domains such as illness, war, love, and fate.⁶⁸ Together, these perspectives enable scholars to identify why people turned to divination and magic: not simply out of ignorance, but to address deeply felt needs with culturally embedded methods.

B. Conceptual Rigidity and Cultural Oversimplification

Despite their lasting insights, classical theories also display conceptual rigidity. Frazer's evolutionist framework, which views magic as a primitive precursor to religion and science, no longer holds up under critical scrutiny. This model presumes a linear development from error to enlightenment and often reflects colonial biases about non-Western or ancient cultures.^{69, 70} In reality, ancient societies often blended what we would call magic, religion, and science in dynamic ways.

Durkheim's binary division between religion (public, communal) and magic (private, individual) is similarly challenging to maintain when examining rituals like dream incubation or temple-based healing oracles, which served both individual and collective purposes.⁷¹ Many rituals, like necromancy or love magic, defy these categorical boundaries: they may be

⁶⁷ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

⁶⁸ Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*.

⁶⁹ Stark, 'Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic, and Science', pp. 103–04.

⁷⁰ Bailey, 'The Meanings of Magic', pp. 2–3.

⁷¹ Jeffers, 'Interpreting Magic and Divination in the Ancient Near East', pp. 686–87.

performed alone, yet invoke public deities, use formal liturgical language, and engage with deeply religious themes.

Furthermore, the early theorists lacked access to the cultural specificity necessary to interpret ancient ritual systems on their own terms. As Versnel argues, these categories are modern analytical tools, not necessarily reflections of how ancient people understood their own actions.⁷² Using “magic” as a scholarly label risks imposing external values on internally coherent, socially accepted, and religiously meaningful practices.

C. Toward a Contextualized Application

To remain useful, anthropological models must be applied flexibly and critically. Rather than forcing ancient rituals into rigid taxonomies, we must recognize that social legitimacy, practitioner status, setting, and intent shaped how practices were classified and perceived. A spell cast in a graveyard and a prayer offered at an oracle might share ritual elements; their difference lies less in form than in cultural framing and social authorization. What appears as “magic” in one context may be “religion” in another, depending on who performs the act and for what audience.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes this complexity, viewing ancient magic and divination as part of a ritual continuum rather than sharply delineated categories.⁷³ Moreover, comparative anthropology now emphasizes not only structural function but also emic perspectives, how practitioners themselves understood the efficacy and meaning of their

⁷² Versnel, ‘Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic–Religion’, pp. 185–89.

⁷³ Bailey, ‘The Meanings of Magic’, pp. 1–23.

actions.⁷⁴ Classical anthropology remains a valuable entry point into these systems. However, only when adapted to account for historical nuance, local variation, and the plural ways ritual knowledge was codified and transmitted in antiquity.

Classical anthropology provides important conceptual tools for analyzing ancient ritual life. Yet, its value lies not in rigid application, but in its capacity to open interpretive space, allowing us to ask *how, why, and for whom* rituals mattered. When applied reflexively and contextually, these models can shed light on not only patterns of belief and practice but also the contested terrains of ritual authority, identity, and symbolic control. By combining these theoretical frameworks with attention to cultural specificity, we gain a deeper understanding of ancient magic and divination as dynamic, meaningful, and socially embedded practices.

Conclusion

The study of magic and divination in antiquity reveals a richly textured world in which ritual, belief, and symbolic action were central to how people understood and navigated their lives. These practices were neither irrational nor marginal, but highly structured, emotionally potent, and deeply integrated into ancient cosmologies and social systems. Through the lens of classical and modern anthropological theory, we gain access to the internal logic of these rituals and the social roles they fulfilled across diverse cultures.

This paper has examined how four major anthropological theorists—James Frazer, Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and Bronislaw Malinowski—offer distinct yet complementary frameworks for understanding the function and meaning of magic and divination. Though flawed in its evolutionary assumptions, Frazer's early model of sympathetic magic remains useful in

⁷⁴ Tedlock, 'Toward a Theory of Divinatory Practice', pp. 62–77.

interpreting the symbolic structure of rituals, particularly those involving physical analogies or object manipulation.⁷⁵ Durkheim's focus on social cohesion and ritual authority helps explain the divide between officially sanctioned divination and stigmatized magical acts.⁷⁶ Mauss's work on ritual specialists and the emotional efficacy of magic allows us to see how marginalized figures like necromancers or love-spell practitioners operated within ritual frameworks.⁷⁷ Malinowski's pragmatic approach speaks to the emotional and functional needs these practices address, especially in times of crisis, grief, or uncertainty.⁷⁸

Case studies from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Greco-Roman world illustrate how these theories can be meaningfully applied. Egyptian *heka* was not deviant but divinely sanctioned, blending prayer, magic, and healing into a unified cosmological force.⁷⁹ Mesopotamian divination was institutionalized and state-supported, demonstrating that knowledge of the future was a matter of public policy and sacred responsibility.⁸⁰ In Greece and Rome, popular magical acts like curse tablets and personal spells overlapped in language and form with official oracles and temple rites, revealing the blurry line between orthodoxy and innovation.⁸¹

As a form of divination and magic involving the dead, Necromancy challenges neat boundaries and reveals how ancient people negotiated fear, power, and desire through ritualized contact with the beyond. It is in these liminal spaces—where magic, religion, and divination meet—that anthropology proves most insightful.

⁷⁵ Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, pp. 12–16.

⁷⁶ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, pp. 43–45.

⁷⁷ Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, pp. 28–32.

⁷⁸ Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, pp. 13–15.

⁷⁹ Joachim Friedrich Quack, 'From Ritual to Magic: Ancient Egyptian Precursors of the Charitesion', in *Continuity and Innovation in the Magical Tradition*, ed. by Gideon Bohak, Yuval Harari, and Shaul Shaked (Brill, 2011), pp. 43–84 (pp. 46–48).

⁸⁰ Jeffers, 'Interpreting Magic and Divination in the Ancient Near East', pp. 688–90.

⁸¹ Versnel, 'Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic–Religion', pp. 189–93.

At the same time, this work acknowledges the limitations of classical anthropological frameworks. Their frigid conceptual framework and lack of attention to historical specificity can lead to oversimplification or distortion. Labels such as "magic" and "religion" are often imposed retroactively and may not reflect the viewpoint or understanding of ancient practitioners.⁸² As scholars, we must use these models with an open mind, applying them critically and contextually, and be open to revision and refinement, not as definitive explanations but as interpretive tools, open to revision and refinement.

In the end, the value of anthropological theory lies in its ability to bring to light what might otherwise appear strange or fragmented. By exploring ancient magic and divination through these lenses, we see not only ritual technique but also emotional need, social structure, and cultural cosmology. We see a peek into a worldview. These practices were ways of engaging with uncertainty, of accessing the divine, and of creating meaning in a world where human agency was limited but never absent.

Re-centering magic and divination as serious objects of study allows us to restore voice and value to ancient people's most intimate and ambitious attempts to know their gods, shape their fates, and confront the forces beyond their control. These rituals were not idle superstitions but active engagements with uncertainty, deeply rooted in emotional, social, and cosmological experience. The anthropology of antiquity is not merely an archaeology of lost belief but a method of understanding how ritual knowledge made life liveable in uncertain times, offering structure, meaning, and even healing in moments of existential vulnerability.

⁸² Bailey, 'The Meanings of Magic', pp. 3–5.

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