

Searching for a sorceress

A Material Analysis of Domestical Magical Practice in Pompeii



Figure 1: The Sorceress' Kit¹

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Dissertation submitted to the University of Wales Trinity St David for the
degree of MA in Ancient Religions

31st January 2026

¹ The Sorceress' Kit, Cesare Abbate (photographer), 'Treasure of Amulets'
<<https://pompeiicommitment.org/en/inventario/the-so-called-sorcerers-treasure-trove/>> [accessed
01/11/2025]

Abstract

This dissertation re-examines the assemblage known as the ‘sorceress’ kit’, discovered in 2019 newly excavated House with the Garden (Regio V) in Pompeii. The initial interpretation of the collection of amulets, jewellery and other household items was presented as evidence for a female magical practitioner, an interpretation which was widely repeated in press coverage and via online platforms. This reading of the collection received little scholarly critique, reflecting perhaps the turmoil of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic.

Using Andrew Wilburn’s object-centred methodology for identifying magical material in the archaeological record, this study undertakes a systematic analysis of the assemblage’s material composition and archaeological context. The collection is assessed against established markers of magical practice, including ritual action, engagement with religious traditions and evidence of private or personal use. Throughout the study, the analysis carefully considers both literary sources such as the Greek Magical Papyri and Pliny the Elder, and the archaeological record, to assist in the interpretation of individual objects and the collection as a whole.

The analysis demonstrates that while the assemblage contains a significant number of amuletic and symbolically significant objects consistent with Roman magical beliefs, there is insufficient evidence to confidently support claims of professional sorcery or ritual manufacture. Instead, this study argues that this collection is best understood as a concentrated assemblage of apotropaic objects reflecting widespread domestic practices rather than specialised magical expertise.

Finally, this study highlights the need for rigorous methodological approaches in the presentation of archaeological finds to avoid gendered or sensationalist interpretations. Furthermore, it demonstrates the value of Wilburn’s approach for both the assessment of new potentially magical material, and to reassess previous assemblages which may contain ambiguous evidence of magic. In this way, the study aims to contribute to broader discussions of Roman domestic magical and religious practices, gender, and archaeological methodology.

Signed declaration



Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

Declaration Form

1. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Name Jessica Harvey-Grayson

Date 30/01/2026

2. This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Ancient Religions MA

Name Jessica Harvey-Grayson

Date 31/01/2026

3. This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references.

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Supervisor's Declaration.

I am satisfied that this work is the result of the student's own efforts.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Mary Beard, whose work has been an ever-present inspiration for me to study the ancient world, and who continues to challenge stereotypes, both ancient and modern of those women who would be labelled '*witch*'.

Additionally, I would like to thank Andrew Wilburn, not only for producing some of the most influential recent scholarship on the materiality of magic, but also for being so gracious in answering my questions and encouraging of this project. To Matthew Cobb, the supervisor for this research, thank you so much for your guidance, wisdom and patience!

Lastly, I would like to thank my family - my son Felix, whose arrival encouraged me to return to academic study, and to my husband Andy, whose support throughout this project has been invaluable.

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Chapter 1 – A Sorceress is found – opportunities and difficulties

In the summer of 2019, a remarkable archaeological discovery from a newly excavated area of Pompeii, captured public attention and went viral on social media. Unearthed from the remains of a wooden chest within the House with a Garden, the collection of over one hundred small objects, had been restored and was carefully presented in a kaleidoscopic arrangement for the press. While the visual impact of the colourful display was immediately compelling, it was the interpretation of the find that ensured its rapid circulation in the press and online. Headlines proclaimed the discovery of – ‘*The Miraculous Treasure of a Pompeii Sorceress*’², ‘*A Sorceress’ kit*’³, a ‘*Sorcerer’s Treasure Trove*’⁴, and ‘*A Stash of Mystical Charms and Amulets*’⁵, encouraged by the statements made by the then General Director of Pompeii’s Archaeological Park, Massimo Osanna.

In the official press release announcing the discovery, Osanna described the assemblage as a ‘sorcerer’s treasure trove’, adding “There are dozens of good luck charms next to other objects that were attributed with the power of crushing bad luck”⁶. He also implied a magical use by suggesting the beads within the collection “could have been necklaces that were worn during rituals rather [sic] being used to look elegant”⁷. Osanna further advanced claims regarding the identity of the owner, stating that these were “objects of everyday life in the female world”⁸ and proposing that they were more likely to have been owned by a servant or slave than by the house owner, citing the absence of any gold as indicative of low status⁹.

Taken together, the interpretation presented at the time of the discovery led to three main claims: that the assemblage has been a magical toolkit; that it belonged to a woman; and that

² Freize, *In Pictures: The Miraculous Treasure of a Pompeii Sorceress* (2019)

<<https://www.frieze.com/article/pictures-miraculous-treasure-pompeii-sorceress>> [accessed 01/11/2025]

³ Jason Daley, Smithsonian Magazine, *A Sorceress Kit Was Discovered in the Ash of Pompeii*, (2019), <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/sorceress-kit-was-discovered-ashes-pompeii-180972907/>> [accessed 01/11/2025]

⁴ ANSA, ‘*Sorcerer’s treasure trove*’ uncovered at Pompeii (2019) https://www.ansa.it/english/news/lifestyle/arts/2019/08/12/sorcerers-treasure-uncovered-at-pompeii_8cb5d8a3-c8be-4269-8fb0-9e486cf8f911.html [accessed 01/11/2025]

⁵ Isaac Schultz, Atlas Obscura, *Found: A Stash of Mystical Charms and Amulets in Pompeii* (2019) <<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/found-pompeii-magic-treasure>> [accessed 01/11/2025]

⁶ ANSA, ‘*Sorcerer’s treasure trove*’ (2019)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Archaeological Park of Pompeii, *The Luck and Protection Against The Bad Fate In The Jewellery of Regio V*, (2019), <http://pompeiiisites.org/en/press-releases/the-luck-and-the-protection-against-the-bad-fate-in-the-jewellery-of-regio-v/> [accessed 01/11/2025]

⁹ Ibid.

this woman was a slave. These assertions, however, rest on assumptions that warrant closer scrutiny. Pompeii's victims have created a fascination with the public since the site's rediscovery in 1748, aided by the site's exceptional preservation and the ease in which one can imagine daily life. Against this backdrop, it is easy to see why the figure of a powerful, female magician would engage the public's imagination. Material evidence for specifically 'magical' practices (rather than simply religious) is rare and notoriously difficult to identify. While Andrew Wilburn has described the find as "really a remarkable discovery"¹⁰ and noted the rarity of the find, Mary Beard urged for caution. She argued that the objects "may indeed have been "magical" (whatever exactly "magical" means) but they may also have been cheap exotic jewellery", suggesting that the assemblage might sit "somewhere between street magic and a slightly gothic jewellery box".¹¹

Such reservations raise fundamental questions. Can this collection be securely identified as a magical toolkit, or might it instead represent an assortment of amulets, jewellery, and household items stored together for reasons unrelated to magical practices? Similarly, the suggestion that this kit was used by a female is questionable. Osanna's interpretation, echoed by Wilburn¹², draws in part on objects sometimes associated with fertility, such as shells and amber, yet ancient literary sources attest to a wide range of uses for these materials that extends well beyond female uses. Beard points to Pliny's extensive use of amber, including its use to treat throat and neck ailments, concluding that, amber in Pliny's view, is "not just a woman's product".¹³ Likewise, the inference that the absence of gold implies ownership by a slave is problematic, particularly in the context of magical practice, where efficacy is typically associated with symbolic or perceived properties rather than monetary value. Indeed, the official press materials themselves acknowledge the high quality of several objects, noting that "The high quality of the amber and glass pastes and the engraving of the figures confirm the importance of the domus owner."¹⁴ These objects therefore make it difficult to support a notion of a low-status owner.

¹⁰ Schultz, 2019.

¹¹ Mary Beard, Time Literary Supplement, *A sorceress at Pompeii?* (2019), <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/a-sorceress-at-pompeii/> [accessed 01/11/2025].

¹² Schultz, 2019.

¹³ Beard, 2019.

¹⁴ Archaeological Park of Pompeii, *Luck and Protection*, 2019.

The aim of this dissertation is therefore to reassess these claims through a systematic analysis of the assemblage, asking three central questions: whether the collection can reasonably be understood as evidence of magical practice, and in particular at level associated with a professional practitioner; whether its ownership can be confidently gendered; and whether conclusions about the owner's social status are supported by the material evidence. Addressing these questions presents a number of methodological challenges. As Chapter 2 will explore in greater detail, scholarly attempts to define 'magic' – and to define it from religion or superstition – have produced no consensus. Earlier evolutionary models that cast magic as a primitive precursor to religion are now widely rejected,¹⁵ while more recent approaches have emphasised the overlapping of religious, superstitious and magical practices. Indeed, it is difficult to know if the Romans themselves would have made a clear distinction, and what may seem 'magical' to a modern observer, may have constituted an entirely normal aspect of daily life, akin to modern-day superstitions such as throwing salt over one's shoulder. This ambiguity further complicates our ability to label an object as having a purely 'magical' purpose.

Further difficulties arise from the nature of the archaeological record itself. Material evidence for magic is often elusive, not only because many ritual practices relied on organic materials that rarely survive, but also because magical items often overlap with everyday items. As Wilburn observes "the same broom may have been used for both mundane and ritual sweeping"¹⁶. Much of the physical evidence of magical practice we do have is in the form of curse tables and *defixio* figurines, both associated with binding spells. These are often accompanied with text making their purpose clear, but the Pompeii assemblage does not have any such inscriptions, nor do we have any other amuletic finds on a similar scale that we can draw reasonable comparisons with. Whilst Pompeii has been the source of many remarkable finds, its discovery at the start of archaeological practices means that many earlier artefacts have been recorded in a way which limits our understanding of their context.¹⁷ It may be that

¹⁵ Stuart McKie and Adam Parker, 'Introduction: Materials, Approaches, Substances, and Objects', in *Material Approaches to Roman Magic Occult Objects Supernatural Substances*, ed. by Stuart McKie & Adam Parker (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2018) pp.1-8, p. 3.

¹⁶ Andrew Wilburn, 'The Archaeology of Ritual in the Domestic Sphere: Case Studies from Karanis and Pompeii', in *Material Approaches to Roman Magic Occult Objects Supernatural Substances*, ed. by Stuart McKie & Adam Parker (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2018) pp. 103-114, p105.

¹⁷ See Andrew T. Wilburn, *Materia Magica: The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus and Spain*, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. 7.

we hold evidence of magical practices, but without detailed records of find spots and accompanying items, we may be missing comparable data.

A further complication is that whilst Pompeii's unique status as a 'city preserved in time', normally allows us a snapshot into Roman activities, in this case, the find's context limits our understanding of it. The collection was stored in a box and is not indicative of intentional, ritualistic deposition, which may have otherwise enlightened our understanding of the collection's intended use.

McKie and Parker highlight the further issue of scholars being overly reliant on literary evidence, "with artefactual studies often given only a cursory or secondary role in the interpretation of Roman magic"¹⁸. This imbalance is exacerbated by the nature of the surviving texts, which were overwhelmingly produced by elite, educated men who often use depictions of magic as a rhetorical tool or to exact revenge on a lover.¹⁹ Such sources offer little insight into the domestic magical acts completed by other members of society. Legal texts are similarly limited, as they can only tell us about the types of magic that were socially unacceptable (cursing and poisoning in particular), but offer little on the beneficial uses of magic such as healing, help in pregnancy and childbirth, or apotropaic practices.

In response to these challenges, this study adopts a methodology grounded in an analysis of the materiality and context of the find. This draws primarily on Andrew Wilburn's object-centred approach as outlined in 'Materia Magica – The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus and Spain' of which further explanation is given in chapter 3. Rather than seeking definitive proof of magical activity, this framework evaluates probability through the mixture of material characteristics, assemblage composition, and depositional context. By applying this methodology to the Pompeian assemblage, this dissertation aims not only to reassess the validity of the 'sorceress' label, but also to contribute to wider debates surrounding domestic magical practices, gendered interpretation, and the archaeological visibility of magic in the Roman world.

¹⁸ McKie and Parker, p. 1.

¹⁹ For example, Cicero's rebuttal of superstitious beliefs in *De Divinatione* and Horace's gruesome portrayal of Canidia.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Approaches to Roman magic

Roman religion has been the subject of extensive scholarly attention, supported by a substantial body of archaeological, epigraphic and literary evidence. Temples, cult spaces, inscriptions, and public ritual practices have allowed scholars to reconstruct state-sanctioned religious activity with a relatively high degree of confidence.²⁰ In contrast, the study of Roman magic has emerged more slowly as a discrete field of enquiry and had received less sustained academic attention. This is due in part to the nature of the evidence, which is often fragmentary, ambiguous, and may have been inaccurately recorded when found, so that interpretations made from contextual knowledge cannot be made. Additionally, literary references from ancient writers may portray magical practices in a negative or sensationalised manner meaning the conclusions we can draw from them are limited.

Serious academic engagement with ancient magic increased notably from the late twentieth century onwards.²¹ In 1986 the Greek magical papyri was translated by Hans-Dieter Betz and David Jordan's survey of Greek *defixiones* in 1985 extended previous examples by highlighting newly published or previously overlooked examples into the view of scholars.²² However, as several scholars have observed, much of this renewed focus has been directed towards Greek or Graeco-Egyptian material, resulting in a relative underrepresentation of Roman magic in broader theoretical discussions. McKie and Parker note that "the focus of most of these works has predominantly been on the more abundant Greek and Graeco-Egyptian material"²³ and Jan Bremmer states that "the Greek world is clearly overrepresented in the best general studies of ancient magic".²⁴

This imbalance has important implications for the present study, which focuses on a Roman collection, although there are aspects of Egyptian influence (the scarab amulets for example),

²⁰ See for example Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome Volume I – A History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome Volume II – A Sourcebook*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Jörg Rüpke, *A Companion to Roman Religion*, (Chichester, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), Valerie M. Warrior, *Roman Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²¹ McKie and Parker, p. 1.

²² Hans Dieter Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, including the Demotic Spells*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992, repr. 1996) and D. R. Jordan, 'A Survey of Greek Defixiones Not Included in the Special Corpora', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 26 (1985), pp. 151-197.

²³ McKie and Parker, p. 1.

²⁴ Jan N. Bremmer, 'Preface: The Materiality of Magic', in *The Materiality of Magic*, ed. by Dietrich Boschung and Jan N. Bremmer (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015), pp. 7-20, p. 8.

for which consideration of previous work is useful. Whilst there has been a growing trend for studying Roman magic, much of what has been written has been limited to considering conceptual ideas around magic²⁵, attempting to effectively distinguish between magic and religion, with much of this focusing on state organised practices rather than those found in domestic settings. Therefore, to assess whether the 'sorceress' kit' can be meaningfully interpreted as evidence of domestic magic, it is necessary to examine how magic has been defined, studied and methodologically approached within Roman scholarship, and where significant gaps remain.

Defining magic and religion – a complicated problem

Any attempt to identify magical practices or artefacts in the Roman world must first engage with the longstanding scholarly debate surrounding the definition of 'magic' itself. Since the late nineteenth century, scholars have attempted to distinguish between magic from religion, with much of the early scholarship often framing magic as a primitive or irrational precursor to organised religious systems. Despite the significant amount of work written on this, religion remains "a phenomenon which... has never been defined in a manner wholly and universally acceptable to scholars concerned with it"²⁶ and "The definition of "magic" is famously problematic".²⁷

The first attempt to define religion and magic was by Sir Edward B. Tylor in 1871. M and R. Wax summarise that "He suggested *magic* was an "elaborate and systematic pseudo-science," by which man attempts "to discover, foretell, and to cause certain events".²⁸ This is potentially applicable to the 'sorceress' kit' as it contains mirrors which could be used as tools for divination. Building on Tylor's work on creating specific definitions for 'magic' and 'religion' was Sir James Frazer's work in *The Golden Bough*²⁹ where he argued that magic was a "false

²⁵ Georg Luck, *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

²⁶ Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 3.

²⁷ Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 2nd edn., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 4.

²⁸ Murray Wax and Rosalie Wax, 'The Notion of Magic', *Current Anthology*, Vol 4., No. 5, 1963, pp.495-518, p. 495.

²⁹ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study In Magic And Religion*, 7th ed., (Ware: Wordsworth, 1993).

science”³⁰ used by primitive societies to try and control supernatural and natural forces. Fraser argues that magicians did not need to rely on supplicating the gods, instead achieving their aims through compelling, coercing or binding gods, spirits or daimons to do their bidding. He argued that this was undertaken with two mistaken principles, the law of similarity (like produces like, such as acting out a successful hunt in advance or inflicting harm to someone by harming a voodoo doll) and the law of contagion (things which have been in contact with each other are always in contact, leading to the use of someone’s personal objects such as hair or nails in spells to create an effect on them).³¹ He goes on to argue that once magic fails, people will turn to religion before eventually finding science. These arguments are now widely criticised for being reductive and culturally biased due to the comparisons he makes between civilised Western civilisations with ‘ethnocentric’ examples.³²

The anthropologist E. Evan’s Pritchard challenged Frazer’s view of magic as irrational in his study of the Azande tribe, by suggesting that witchcraft, magic and oracles are rational within their own cultural system. This relates to a key question when thinking about how Romans themselves distinguished between types of religious and magical practice. We must consider if many acts that we might deem as ‘magical’ or superstitious may have been part of everyday life. Wilburn for example looks at some of the discussion around a Pompeiian mosaic at the entrance to a house, featuring a fearsome dog and the words ‘Cave Canem’ – beware of the dog. He summarises that whilst many scholars agree it had an apotropaic function, there has been disagreement about how this may have been viewed. Clarke suggests that the image worked by causing laughter, whilst Ling believes the image serves as a practical warning about a dog inside. Wilburn notes that “Beard is sceptical of both assessments for their reliance on the idea of apotropaia, suggesting both scholars rely on the concept to explain the unusual.”³³ However, there is evidence that some Romans made such distinctions. Cicero distinguishes between those who undertook religious acts and those who were simply superstitious: “Persons who spent whole days in prayer and sacrifice to ensure that their children should outlive them were termed ‘superstitious’... Those on the other hand who carefully reviewed

³⁰ James George Frazer, *The Illustrated Golden Bough: A Study In Magic And Religion*, Abridged by Robert K. G. Temple, (Simon & Shuster Editions, New York, 1996), p. 21.

³¹ Ibid, p. 21 and p. 23.

³² See Wax and Wax, ‘The Notion of Magic’, p. 495.

³³ Wilburn, ‘The Archaeology of Ritual in the Domestic Sphere: Case Studies from Karanis and Pompeii’, pp.108-109.

and so to speak retraced all the lore of ritual were called 'religious' from *relegere* (to re-trace or re-read)".³⁴ Similarly, in *On Divination*, he lays out the arguments for and against divination as a valid practice, with his brother arguing in favour and himself acting as a sceptic, despite holding a position as official state augur. He says "superstition, which is widespread among the nations, has taken advantage of human weakness to cast its spell over the mind of almost every man".³⁵

Bronislaw Malinowski's study of the Trobriand Islands tribes developed Frazer's argument that magic was a pseudo-science arguing that, like science, it has "a definite practical aim ... is governed by a theory of system of principles... and possesses a special technique."³⁶ This can be applied to Roman magical evidence, as there is often a clear aim. For example, within curse tablets found in 1850 on the Via Appia, charioteers and their horses are the targets of a binding spell, intended no doubt to benefit someone who stood to gain from another team winning.³⁷ He also outlined methods for identifying magical practice, including using a "coefficient of weirdness" which can be applied to magical speech.³⁸ This is often evident through the irregularity of both words and rhythm, combining both normal language with special words. Whilst this has a limited application for the 'sorceress' kit' as we are left with no written language and have no evidence of what words or actions may have been said, Wilburn suggests that a similar approach can be taken when considering material finds³⁹ which is relevant for this study.

Durkheim's 1912 work suggested a new method for distinguishing between religion and magic.⁴⁰ In this he argued that religion unites people into a community and their acts encompass accepted beliefs. Magic, in contrast to this was "individualistic, divisive, and opposed to religion",⁴¹ often secret and a potential threat to society. Whilst there are some strengths to this argument (public temples to state approved gods followed set rituals and

³⁴ Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods (De Natura Deorum)*, H. Rackham (trs.), Loeb Classical Library 268, vol. XIX, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 193.

³⁵ ³⁵ Cicero, *On Divination (De Divinatione)*, W. A. Falconer (ed. and trs.), LCL vol.154 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, vol. XX, 1923 [1996]), II.LXXI.149, p. 149.

³⁶ Wax and Wax, 'The Notion of Magic', p. 498.

³⁷ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, pp. 1-9.

³⁸ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral gardens and their magic: A study of the methods of tilling the soil and of agricultural rites in the Trobriand Islands*, 2 vols. (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1935), II. pp. 218-25.

³⁹ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p.13.

⁴⁰ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms Of The Religious Life (Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse)*, trs. by John Joseph Ward, (New York: Macmillan, 1915).

⁴¹ Wax and Wax, 'The Notion of Magic', p. 497.

including sacrifices held in public, and communal involvement is evident in public festivals for example), it fails to consider religious worship undertaken in domestic settings, evident in part the large quantity of *larariums* found in private dwellings. Furthermore, many religious mystery cults were held in private, as we see in the Isaeum of Julia Felix. Some of these cults were state approved, whilst others fell foul of the law. The initiatory cult of Mithras for example was popular amongst soldiers of the Roman army and yet Livy tells us in his *History of Rome* that the Bacchanalia of 186BC was seen as highly impious. However, he claimed that more than 7000 men and women took part⁴² and explains that whilst this cult was started by “a celebrant of secret, nocturnal ceremonies”, the mysteries were “widely disseminated among men and women”.⁴³ Whilst there was clearly a significant community around the cult, it did not fall under state approval, with a large number of imprisonments, executions or forced suicides of those who took part. Similarly problematic is the idea that magic was purely a private affair and opposed to religion, as we see divination in the form of augury as a state approved method and communal as it was often conducted in public.

That being said, Durkheim’s suggestion that magic was conducted in secret does have some grounding. Wilburn notes that “The house is named more often than any other location, and sometimes, the ritual recipes even stipulate a space in the home such as ‘a room where you reside’ (*PGM* 1.83), ‘your bedchamber (*PGM* 2.148) or ‘your housetop’ (*PGM* 4.2711)⁴⁴. This is certainly an argument we will consider when analysing the find location of the ‘sorceress’ kit’. Similarly convincing is the notion that magic was conducted in secret. This is likely to have been necessary given the multiple known laws passed against magic which may have forced people to practice at home and not advertise their activities. Pliny cites the Twelve Tables of c.450BC as including “‘Whoever shall have bewitched the crops’, and elsewhere, ‘Whoever shall have cast an evil spell’. Cicero also references the Cornelian law of 81BC saying “punishment is prescribed for the person who has made, sold or kept poisons/drugs for killing” and “The punishment of exile has been ordained by a decree of the senate for a woman who gives a drug to aid conception that causes the death of the woman that consumes it”. He goes on to note that “The penalty of the Cornelian laws assassins and poisoners /

⁴² Livy, *History of Rome*, 39.17.6, in Dillon, M. and Garland, L., *Ancient Rome from the early Republic to the assassination of Julius Caesar*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 158-160.

⁴³ Livy, *History of Rome*, 39.8.4-5, p. 159.

⁴⁴ Wilburn, *The Archaeology of Ritual in the Domestic Sphere: Case Studies from Karanis and Pompeii*, p. 103.

sorcerers is deportation to an island and confiscation of all property. But today people are usually given capital punishment, unless they belong to too high a class to be subject to the punishment prescribed by the law. The lower classes are usually either crucified or thrown to the beasts".⁴⁵ Wilburn also outlines further reasons for secrecy, noting examples of binding spells in the literary record which call for "low voices to maintain secrecy and to avoid angering the infernal powers that were necessary for magic" as well as stating "Knowledge of how to perform spells was specialized and closely guarded".⁴⁶ This then, creates a problem for those who wish to study Roman magical practices, as those who undertook them were likely to record any practice of it.

Roman magic in literature: Bias and its limitations

A great deal of the scholarship that has been done has traditionally relied on literary and legal sources, including authors such as Pliny the Elder, Cicero, Horace, Apuleius, and legal texts such as the Lex Cornelia. As has been mentioned above, these records can provide a useful insight into elite attitudes towards magic, particularly in relation to baneful or harmful practices. However, they also present significant limitations. The authors of Roman literature are overwhelmingly male, wealthy, and socially powerful, and their accounts are often shaped by rhetorical, moralising, or entertainment-driven aims. For example, Cicero's fictional discussion of the authenticity of divination in 'On Divination', between himself and his brother, may be an example of him experimenting with rhetorical questioning. We particularly may question some of his statements against state augury when he himself had held this role. Similarly, Apuleius' portrayal of the witches in 'The Golden Ass' adds dramatic effect, as does his climatic finale revealing (some of) the mysteries of the cult of Isis. This means we not only have to be careful in surmising their views, but also

McKie and Parker observe that "The study of Roman magical theory and thought has become entrenched in the study of Classics and literature ... with artefactual studies often given only a cursory or secondary role in the interpretation of Roman magic".⁴⁷ This emphasis on texts has arguably led to an understanding of Roman magic this is disproportionately shaped by discourse and orthodoxy rather than by orthopraxy. Legal sources for example, tend to focus

⁴⁵ Ogden, p. 80.

⁴⁶ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 21.

⁴⁷ McKie and Parker, p.1

on acts deemed socially threatening, such as curse magic or poisoning as highlighted in the examples from Cicero above. They do not however, provide much insight into beneficial magical practices such as apotropaic acts, domestic rituals, practices to ensure successful childbirth or a ripe harvest, all of which may have been widespread, but not deemed controversial.

Similarly, literary portrayals of witches and magical practitioners, both ancient and modern, often draw on established stereotypes. Figures such as Horace's Canidia is portrayed as a wild, unhinged hag, tearing a lamb apart with her teeth, summoning the dead, starving a child to death to use his organs in a spell, all in efforts to thwart Horace. Maxwell Teitel Paule points out that "Canidia" was a pseudonym for one of Horace's ex-lovers. "Horace vented his anger through his poetry, thus creating the vile, over-sexed, elderly hag that is Canidia as a stand in for his former lover".⁴⁸ Similarly exaggerated are Apuleius' Thessalian witches who "are in the habit of gnawing bits of flesh off dead man's faces for use in their magical concoctions".⁴⁹ Many of the portrayals we find in Roman literature are similarly extravagant, hostile and misogynistic. While they may be valuable for understanding cultural perceptions of magic, they cannot be taken as straightforward evidence for how magic was practiced in domestic settings.

Material Culture and New Methodological Approaches

In response to the limitations of text-based studies, recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised the importance of material culture in the study of Roman magic. This shift is highlighted in the work of Stuart McKie and Adam Parker, particularly in *Material Approaches to Roman Magic – Occult Objects & supernatural Substances* and through organising the *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference* in 2015, entitled *Charmed I'm Sure: roman Magic – Old Theory, New Approaches*. Within the introduction of *Material Approaches*, they identify two central problems within the scholarship of Roman magic: the lack of attention paid to material evidence and the insufficient integration of theoretical approaches relating to materiality and embodied experience.⁵⁰ Similarly, Bremmer notes that "earlier studies concentrated much more on the edition of texts and their categorisations, on the person of

⁴⁸ Maxwell Teitel Paule, *Canidia, Rome's First Witch*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 2.

⁴⁹ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trs. by Robert Graves (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1964), p. 64.

⁵⁰ McKie and Parker, p. 1.

the magician himself and on the social practices connected with magic than on the material side of magic”.⁵¹ Thus, when considering the questions raised by the sorceress’ kit in Pompeii, we are somewhat limited by a lack of discussion of material evidence for magic.

Andrew Wilburn’s work has been particularly influential in addressing these issues, both in his chapter in McKie and Parker’s *Material Approaches* and in his earlier work in *Materia Magica: The archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus, and Spain* and it is the latter which has been incredibly influential in my approach to this research. Wilburn criticises the emic approach of using literature and textual evidence to study ancient magic, stating that “its preference for identifying the mental constructions that give meaning to a term within society, cannot provide the necessary tools to explore the archaeology of magic”.⁵² Instead, he proposes that an etic approach is needed – that is in order to identify magical objects, the researcher creates a working definition for magic to discuss finds. He outlines the following three points for his definition of magic as: Magic was firmly grounded in ritual actions, may draw on religious traditions for both efficacy and exoticism and finally that it is frequently a private or personal activity, although some aspects may be undertaken in public.⁵³

Wilburn also outlines the need for a materialistic approach for identifying magical objects given the difficulty in locating them within the archaeological record. He rightly points out that many of the spells we have in documents such as the Greek Magical Papyri, call for organic material which is not likely to have survived. Similarly, evidence of ritual practice, such as the smoke marks from ritual burning could have been cleaned, leaving no trace for archaeologists.⁵⁴ Some spells call for the material aspects of the spell to be hidden, buried or destroyed, which may not only make them difficult to find, but also to place them in a context which can allow an accurate interpretation. Furthermore, he notes, that “magic may be difficult to find because practitioners wanted it to be that way”⁵⁵ either because spells called for secrecy, the knowledge was guarded or due to fear or prosecution. Wilburn’s discussion of the problems of locating and interpreting magic objects is valid, and his methodology (discussed more in chapter 3) for identifying and interpreting magical artefacts is particularly relevant for the ‘sorceress’ kit’.

⁵¹ Bremmer, p. 8.

⁵² Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 15.

⁵³ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 15.

⁵⁴ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 20.

⁵⁵ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 21.

Gender, Sensationalism and the ‘Sorceress’ Narrative

A further critical issue in the interpretation of the Pompeii assemblage concerns the gendered assumptions that underpin both its public and scholarly reception. Osanna’s identification of the collection belonging to a woman may reflect a long-standing tendency to associate women with magic. Mary Beard’s criticism of this not only linked to an overly generous focus on “fertility-like things” being made of amber, but also that “once again the only places we think of women are absolutely stereotypically ‘female’ areas”.⁵⁶ We have already considered the fact that ancient literary sources frequently portray women as stereotypes of witches, and yet this is a stereotype that has firmly stood the test of time. You only need to look at Shakespeare’s witches in *Macbeth* or the Wicked Witch of the West or go out on a Halloween evening to see how utterly ingrained this idea is in modern culture. However, gender stereotyping has also had its impact on archaeology too.

There are numerous examples of archaeologists misgendering human remains and thus misinterpreting the finds and context of an archaeological discovery. One of the most widely discussed in recent times was the Birka Warrior grave discovered in 1878. Its occupant was presumed to be male based purely on the rich array of finds within the burial: a horse, weapons, a shield among others. Yet in 2017, following extensive DNA analysis, it was revealed that the male warrior, was in fact a female.⁵⁷ In the weeks that followed this revelation, the article which published the findings was covered by over 130 news agencies and debated online extensively.⁵⁸ Both the public and scholars wrestled with the idea that a woman may have been a warrior, with arguments that it was a woman who was buried as a man to reflect her contributions as a woman, or that this was a question of gender identity being put forward.

A similar case also appeared in 2013 when an “Etruscan Prince” was discovered near Tarquinia. The grave in this case contained a cremation and a separate skeleton laid out in a

⁵⁶ Beard, *A Sorceress in Pompeii?*, 2019

⁵⁷ Anders Götherström, Torsten Günther, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, Mattias Jakobsson, Anna Kjellström, Maja Krzewińska, Neil Price, Verónica Sobrado, Jan Storå, Torun Zachrisson, ‘Viking Warrior Women? Reassessing Birka Chamber Grave B.J. 581’, in *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 164. 4, (2017), pp. 853-860.

⁵⁸ Anders Götherström, Torsten Günther, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, Mattias Jakobsson, Anna Kjellström, Maja Krzewińska, Neil Price, Verónica Sobrado, Jan Storå, Torun Zachrisson, ‘Viking Warrior women? Reassessing Birka chamber grave B.J.581’, *Antiquity*, 93.367 (2019), p.p.181-198
<<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/antiquity/article/viking-warrior-women-reassessing-birka-chamber-grave-bj581/7CC691F69FAE51DDE905D27E049FADCD>> [accessed 18/01/2026]

supine position. The skeletal body was misgendered based on grave goods laid near it and news reports quickly repeated this: “a spear lay along the body, while fibular, or brooches, along the chest indicated that the individual, a man, was probably once dressed in a mantle”.⁵⁹ The cremation meanwhile was presumed to be a female. Shortly after the initial press release, the osteoarchaeological analysis revealed that the cremation was in fact male, whilst the skeleton was female. This may have been a forgivable mistake, but what was interesting is the response given to the error by the lead archaeologist, Mandolesi:

*“It is not usual to find the body of a woman with a spear, and for this reason, we thought that we had discovered a warrior. After receiving the results of the anthropological analysis of the skeleton and having found the grave of a man, we have a clearer idea of what we have uncovered. The spear, most probably, was placed [in the grave] as a symbol of union between the two deceased”.*⁶⁰

Lucy Shipley, goes on to point out the issues here about the original and second interpretation, saying “The statements made by a leading scholar in the field, one of the most respected individuals in Italophone Etruscan archaeology, exposed the lack of engagement and deliberate avoidance of archaeological theory in the sub-discipline. The large body of work by many, largely female, scholars on the complexities of gender in pre-Roman Italy... was entirely ignored”.⁶¹ She goes on to note numerous other examples including a female grave burial in northern France, where, owing to interpretations of high-status of grave goods, Spindler (1983) surmised that the woman was a transvestite male priest.

All the above cases have serious implications for the sorceress’ kit. We must question if Osanna’s initial presumption that the material belonged to a female were made more on cultural bias rather than theoretical or archaeological grounding. As a result, part of my analysis of the ‘sorceress’ kit’ will focus on the context of the find, including the bodies found in a nearby room, to try and establish the validity of this argument.

⁵⁹ Lucy Shipley, ‘Leaping to conclusions: archaeology, gender and digital news media’, *Antiquity*, 89. 344 (2015), pp. 472-477 <<https://www.cambridge.org/uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/S0003598X14000465?pdf>>, [accessed 18/01/2026], (pp. 472-473)

⁶⁰ Originally printed by Pinna, Alessandra, Viterbo News 24, *E’ di una donna lo scheletro Trovato alla Doganaccia*, (2013), <<https://www.viterbonews24.it/news/e-di-una-donna-lo-scheletro-trovato-tomba-etrusca-nviolata-30573.htm>> [accessed 18/01/2026], Lucy Shipley’s translation in, *Leaping to conclusions: archaeology, gender and digital news media*, p. 474.

⁶¹ Shipley, ‘Leaping to conclusions: archaeology, gender and digital news media’, p. 474.

Shipley's article has a further point which raises question for this case study. After the Etruscan burial's gender revelation, the press was quick to print follow up stories. The 'Etruscan Prince' became the 'Etruscan Princess'. However, many of these articles were not from the more respected press, but online articles, linked from a *LiveScience* post,⁶² and reprinted amongst others, in the *Huffington Post*⁶³. Shipley highlights that print newspapers either entirely ignored the update, or made no amendments to original articles. Furthermore, she notes" of the media that chose to take up the osteological report, not one was critical of the archaeologists' original assumptions about the gender of the body."⁶⁴ She rightly goes on to conclude that greater questions should be about the organisation of press conferences on archaeological discoveries, asking if delaying publication might lead to a more accurate representation once all analytical studies and peer-reviewed publications have taken place. ⁶⁵She also questions if it is an archaeologist's responsibility to contact journalists and campaign for a retraction or at least update. This she argues is even more important where online articles can go viral and gain millions of hits, which raises them to the top of search engines, further skewing any potential later research. These are valid questions to consider in relation to not only the press release surrounding the 'sorceress' kit', but of the Pompeii Archaeological Park in general.

Situating the present study

The existing scholarship on Roman magic highlights several key challenges relevant to the interpretation of Pompeii's "sorceress' kit". Definitions of magic remain contested, textual sources are heavily biased, and material evidence has been underutilised, limiting our ability for comparison. However, recent methodological moves towards materialist approaches which also consider context, offer a productive framework for studying this collection and similar magical artefacts. This is of particular importance given the lack of any in-depth peer-reviewed analysis of this specific find. Beard's article remains the only published critique of

⁶² Tia Ghose, *Live Science*, *Oops! Etruscan warrior prince really a princess!* (2013) <<https://www.livescience.com/40530-etruscan-warrior-prince-is-a-princess.html>> [accessed 18/01/2026].

⁶³ *Huffington Post*, *Etruscan prince is actually a princess, bone analysis reveals* (2013) <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/etruscan-prince-princess-bone-analysis_n_4131828> [accessed 18/01/2026].

⁶⁴ Shipley, 'Leaping to conclusions: archaeology, gender and digital news media', p. 474.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 476.

the original press conference and no further detailed analysis has been published either by the Pompeii Archaeological Park or other scholars to my knowledge.

By applying Wilburn's object-centred methodology to the "sorceress' kit", this study seeks to question the sensationalist and gendered narratives put forward at the time of its initial discovery and examine whether the collection can be reasonably understood as evidence of domestic magical practice. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a growing body of scholarship that focuses on the materiality of everyday Roman magic as opposed to the limited conclusions which can be drawn from an emic approach.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

Why a new approach is needed

The primary purpose of this research is to identify whether the 'sorceress' kit' can be accurately described as such. However, identifying magical practices in the Roman world presents significant methodological challenges. The previous chapter demonstrated that scholarship on Roman magic has often been shaped largely by elite literary and legal sources, which are often hostile, rhetorical and gendered in their portrayal of magical practitioners. Material evidence for magic, particularly in domestic contexts, is comparatively scarce, ambiguous and difficult to interpret.⁶⁶ Many objects potentially associated with magic are archaeologically elusive, wither due to preservation, deliberate concealment or in the case of many earlier excavations, a loss of contextual knowledge due to poor recording methodology. Furthermore, as the *PGM* highlights, many elements used in magic or ritual may appear mundane, with many examples including repurposed household objects, which could be easily missed by investigators.⁶⁷

Given these challenges, this study adopts an object-centred, materialist methodology based primarily on the work of Andrew Wilburn, particularly as outlined in *Materia Magica: The archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus and Spain*. Whilst Wilburn's case studies focus on geographical areas from outside of Italy and focuses on individual items the methodology is particularly suited for an analysis of the 'sorceress' kit'. In Wilburn's study he is attempting

⁶⁶ Wilburn notes for example that whilst there are 1600 published *defixiones* whose origin cover around a thousand years and the whole geographic region of the Roman empire, over one thousand ostraca have been published from the University of Michigan's excavations at Karanis alone.⁶⁶ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 20

⁶⁷ Wilburn points to the example of a needle used to pierce the eyes of a clay dog in PGM IV., Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, pp. 92-93.

to use his methodology to find evidence of magical practice in the archaeological record. In the case of the 'sorceress' kit', this assumption has already been made by the Pompeii Archaeological Park, and this study is attempting to critically analyse the authenticity of this belief. Whilst the collection of objects is significant in number, notably it lacks any textual explanation that we might find with other magical objects such as curse tablets. As such, this methodology assesses the likelihood of magical practice through a contextual and assemblage-based analysis.

Emic and Etic approaches to magic

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, Wilburn's work identifies a fundamental problem in earlier studies of ancient medicine: the dominance of the etic approaches, which prioritise textual definitions and examples from literature whose origin from male elitists makes them questionable. As Wilburn puts it, "In short, magic referred to ritual that the speaker did not approve of, including the religious practices of other cultures".⁶⁸ Whilst these emic perspectives are valuable for understanding how ancient authors conceptualised magic, they are limited in their ability to identify magical practices archaeologically, particularly when considering those which were practised by the lower classes of society or in private dwellings. Textual sources tend to focus on exceptional, illicit, or sensational forms of magic and often reflect elite anxieties rather than everyday behaviour. Moreover, whilst we have literary documents such as the PGM which document the processes, ingredients and rituals related to magical practices, as an artefact in themselves they are incomplete, and may reflect more of Egyptian and Greek practices than the behaviour or attitudes of smaller Roman communities. We must therefore be wary of becoming too reliant on these to determine what is magical. As Wilburn says, "The study of local forms of magic in antiquity must struggle constantly with the tension between our expectations of what magic should look like and in the reality of magical practice in a specific community or village, which could be vastly different."⁶⁹

To address these limitations, Wilburn advocates for an etic approach, whereby the modern investigator constructs a working analytical definition of magic for the purposes of identifying

⁶⁸ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 14-15.

⁶⁹ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 256.

and interpretation of magical objects. Wilburn notes that the goal for his methodology “is neither to determine a universal definition for magic no even to find one that is always applicable to phenomena in the Classical world” but to “isolate the sorts of practices that fit into the category of magic and to determine whether and by what means, they may be detectable within the archaeological record”.⁷⁰ This etic approach is particularly necessary when dealing for evidence of magic where no textual artefacts accompany the objects to clearly define their purpose, as is the case with the ‘sorceress’ kit’. This study therefore approaches a study of the collection with Wilburn’s etic framework as its main methodological tool, allowing the material evidence to be analysed without the biases of literary stereotypes or sensationalist narratives.

Wilburn’s Markers of Magic

In Chapter 2 of *Materia Magica*, Wilburn proposes a new working definition of magic, where three markers can be used to indicate its presence. The first of these markers is that magic is firmly grounded in ritual actions.⁷¹ This could include the spoken or written word, perhaps through incantations or inscribing objects. It can also include the manipulation of objects for a magical purpose. This indicates that magical practice requires deliberate, structured behaviours intended to produce a specific outcome. These outcomes may be amorous, baneful, beneficial, divinatory, amongst others in nature, but the Wilburn’s suggests that they are likely to include the manipulation of specific materials. This links in with earlier theories put forward by Tylor. Tylor argued that part of a magician’s belief in as to why their actions worked was because people had observed them impact one thing could have on another. For example, as the sun comes up rooster’s crow, so forcing a rooster to crow would make the sun come up.

The second marker is that magic may draw upon religious traditions for both efficacy and exoticism. As has been noted, the line between religion and magic in the ancient world is a difficult one to draw. Prayer and sacrifices, a central part of both public and state Roman religion, play an equally important role in Roman magic, with spells in the PGM often calling for these. Wilburn points to Einar Thomas’ belief that “Magic depends on normal ritual and

⁷⁰ Ibid, pp. 15-16.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 16-17.

relates dialectically to it, by combining features which are the same as the ones performed in normal rituals – hymns, prayers, invocations, sacrifices, etc. – with features that are deliberately different from it.”⁷² Similar to Malinowski’s ‘coefficient of weirdness’, Wilburn also believes that the inclusion of foreign religious elements or language can also be an indicator, utilising the power of “wild and undomesticated forces” to provide power to the practitioner. The Romans were certainly fascinated by foreign religions, adopting many both with and without state approval. For instance the cult of Isis became hugely popular across the empire, and we see many examples of Egyptomania in the form of buildings (take the Pyramid of Cestius), art work (found in villas and temples), in literature (such as Pancrates, the Egyptian magician in Lucian’s *Philopseudes*), and in artefacts such as the scarab beetle amulets found both within the sorceress’ kit and across the empire. The PGM too is an example of borrowed Egyptian spells. Wilburn argues that despite the majority of these being written in Greek or Demotic, the presence of some in the Egyptian languages suggest they were compiled by Egyptian priests in temple libraries in places such as Thebes.⁷³ He also argues that there is strong evidence that Egyptian magic itself changed to meet the needs of Greeks and Romans. This is demonstrated firstly by the introduction of spells for necromancy once the Hellenistic period began.⁷⁴ Secondly, Wilburn argues that whilst Greek magic relied less on written words, thinking the spoken word superior, the Egyptian’s recognised the power of text itself, and so the use of hieroglyphics in Roman spells could indicate a recognition of the power of the exotic.⁷⁵ This borrowing in terms of magic may have enhanced the perceived legitimacy or power within spells.

The final marker Wilburn puts forward is that magic is frequently a private or personal activity. He does however note that although private, the magical practice may take place in a public place, often because a spell calls for it. Wilburn accurately notes that several scholars have put forward arguments that suggest magic can be distinguished from religious practices because of its private nature. Émile Durkheim argued that religion united people into a community, with their acts reflecting socially accepted beliefs. Magic on the other hand was “individualistic, divisive, and opposed to religion”,⁷⁶ often secret and a potential threat to

⁷² Wilburn, *Materia Magic*, p. 18.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 59.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 64.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p.70.

⁷⁶ Wax and Wax, ‘The Notion of Magic’, p. 497.

society. Marcel Mauss similarly emphasised the choice of place as an indicator of magic, which he argued are “not generally inside a temple or at some domestic shrine”.⁷⁷ Instead “Magical rites are commonly performed in woods, far away from dwelling places, at night or in shadowy corners, in the secret recesses of a house or at any rate in some out-of-the-way place. Where religious rites are performed openly, in full public view, magical rites are carried out in secret.”⁷⁸

These arguments are supported by literary texts, with spells from the Greek Magical Papyri frequently calling for spells to be performed in a domestic setting (*PGM* 1.83, 2.150 and 4.2711)⁷⁹ and Wilburn notes that “The house is named more often than any other location”.⁸⁰ This is certainly a useful argument when considering the sorceress’ kit given that it was found in a domestic setting. However, there are questions to be asked of Durkheim and Mauss’ arguments. Firstly, that not all religious actions were public, notably private worship in the many *lararium* altars in private dwellings, but also in religious cult worships which often involved initiation and mystery rites as found in the cults of Mithras, Isis and the Eleusinian Mysteries.⁸¹ Secondly not all religious rites were socially accepted as Durkheim argues. Livy for example tells us that whilst seven thousand people took part in the Bacchanalia of 186BC, the state very much disapproved resulting in the imprisonment, execution or forced suicide of those who took part.⁸²

Wilburn suggests a more useful approach with the arguments put forward by Durkheim and Mauss may be to consider the divide between public and private more in terms of the aim of the act, rather than by location.⁸³ In this sense, any religious acts can be viewed for the purpose of communal benefits, either for the state or a family unit, whereas magical goals are likely to have a more personal focus. Whilst this is not perfect, (for example we see personal appeals to gods for healing relating to individuals as Asclepians), it does provide a model which can be applied for identifying magic in the archaeological record.

⁷⁷ Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, trs. by D. F. Pocock, (Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2001), p. 28.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 28-29.

⁷⁹ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p. 5, p. 17, p.88.

⁸⁰ Wilburn, *The Archaeology of Ritual in the Domestic Sphere: Case Studies from Karanis and Pompeii*, p. 103.

⁸¹ Hugh Bowder, *Mystery Cults in the Ancient World*, (Thames & Hudson Ltd, London, 2023)

⁸² Livy, *A History of Rome*, 39.8.4-5, p. 159.

⁸³ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 19.

Crucially, Wilburn stresses that magic may not be defined by specific objects, but by the ways in which the objects are used within ritual practices. No artefact is inherently magical; rather objects become magical through their manipulation and their participation in meaningful private actions.

The problems of archaeological visibility and the importance of context

A central argument to Wilburn's methodology is that magical artefacts are inherently difficult for investigators to identify because they often include mundane objects. Many magical recipes call for common materials to be used, for example, shells (PGM VII. 300a-310), eggs (PGM XII.96-106), jewellery (PGM V. 304-69), leaves (PGM V. 370-446), and lamps (PGM II. 250-54). These can easily be missed as indicators of magical practices by investigators creating a problem. This is further complicated by the fact that many spells call for organic matter, either as part of a sacrifice or as part of the magical recipe itself. These organic components rarely survive due to decomposition, whilst evidence of magical rites such as burning or residue may be removed through cleaning or decay.⁸⁴ Furthermore, some magical practices explicitly require the concealment, burial or destruction of ritual materials, further limiting archaeological visibility.⁸⁵

As a result, the absence of overtly 'magical' features cannot be taken as evidence that an object or assemblage was not used ritually. This insight is particularly important when analysing Pompeii's 'sorceress' kit', whose objects are largely everyday items that could easily be dismissed as personal possessions or jewellery without careful contextual analysis.

In order to help identify those objects that are likely to be magical, Wilburn points to the work of Fry, Leone and Ruppel.⁸⁶ Their work looked at magical practices as described in documentary sources, predominantly the autobiographies of formerly enslaved Africans and African Americans. From this they were able to catalogue magical materials, thus providing a guide for investigators of what to look out for. Wilburn suggests this can be done for ancient magic, where consultation of literary documents from antiquity can be used to collate a list of

⁸⁴ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 20.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 21.

⁸⁶ Mark P. Leone and Gladys-Marie Fry, 'Conjuring in the big house kitchen: An interpretation of African American belief systems based on the uses of archaeological and folklore sources', *Journal of American Folklore* 112, no.445 (1999), pp. 372-403, and Mark. P. Leone, Gladys-Marie Fry, and Timothy Ruppel, 'Spirit management among Americans of African descent', in *Race and the archaeology of identity*, ed Charles E. Osofsky Jr. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2001).

categories of magical material.⁸⁷ He proposes the following four categories: “(1) written or inscribed objects, (2) figurines and representations, (3) naturally occurring plants and animals, including parts of bodies, often employed to establish a connection to the victim, and (4) household objects which have been repurposed for a magical use”.⁸⁸ As common objects described within the *PGM* and *PDM*, finding such objects may indicate magical practice and certainly provides a useful starting point for considering an assemblage as large as the sorceress’ kit which does include three of the four of the above categories. As a result, each category will be considered in relation to the objects within the ‘sorceress’ kit’ in Chapter 4. Whilst this provides a useful framework for identifying magical material, there are further considerations to be made. Firstly, the magical sources we have from antiquity should not always be taken as an exact blueprint for all magical practices. The *PGM* and *PDM* are often fragmentary and were open to personal interpretation and local variations. As Wilburn puts it “the papyri can provide us with a rough outline of what practice should look like, but the documents are best at showing us the sorts of rituals we might expect to find rather than the precise form and appearance of the material residue of those rites”.⁸⁹ Secondly, finding one of the above listed categories within the archaeological record, is not enough to indicate magical working on its own, they may have been in used in purely mundane tasks. As a result, Wilburn’s methodology also stresses the need to build a wider contextual understanding which can through an analysis of an object’s life history. This has the potential to reveal whether objects had a prior use, if and how they have been manipulated to be part of a ritual act, and how they came to be discarded and enter the archaeological record. Wilburn’s methodology particularly emphasises this last point, suggesting that a ritual or magical object’s deposition may be a strong indicator of its intended use. He notes “Magical artifacts offer a specialized form of consumption, as a ritual might require that an object be burned, shattered, buried, or otherwise disposed of in a specific way. Removing an object from the active world was often necessary for the item to have an effect”.⁹⁰ He points to the *PGM* as often giving clear instructions on where items should be deposited, which often included liminal spaces such as wells, graves, and doorways.⁹¹ As such, it follows that finding

⁸⁷ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 26.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 26.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 33.

⁹⁰ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 39.

⁹¹ Ibid, pp. 41-48.

an object in such spaces may indicate a magical use. However, this is not applicable for all magical objects and Wilburn does warn we must guard against assuming “an object is magical because it is found within a significant space”.⁹² An amulet (*intaglio*) for example, was not meant to be ritually deposited, but stayed with the practitioner. Found outside of graves we may conclude that such an artefact may have been lost. This may be the case in the cache of seventy amulets found in a Roman bathhouse in Carlisle. Here it is likely that these were not deposited for any ritual purpose but due to the glue holding a gemstone in a ring melting in the warm waters. Indeed, Ovid talks of a gemstone in a ring, saying “Lest the dry gum and wax should sticking prove”.⁹³ In the case of the sorceress kit, it seems likely that the objects were not ritually deposited but were being stored, with their preservation being purely down to eruption of Vesuvius. Whilst this may limit our understanding of how these objects may have been used in magical practices, the location does serve to tell us about their potential owner. Indeed, part of the analysis of the find will consider what we can learn from the whole excavation of the House with the Garden. This will include considering the bodies which were found within the house, other finds, and the structure and decoration of the house. Such an analysis may help answer questions about the owner of the ‘kit’ and what its purpose may have been.

Despite this, we may be able to draw inferences about the objects’ life history by considering how these objects were formed and from what material. This has the potential to be hugely significant when considering magical objects where sympathetic magic may have been considered. As Wilburn stresses, “In the case of a magical artifact, the raw materials required for the production may be related to the task that an object was intended to perform.”⁹⁴ Whilst the phrases ‘sympathetic magic’ and the ‘doctrine of signatures’ came much later (Frazer, *The Golden Bough* in the 19th century for the former and Jakob Böhme in the sixteenth century for the latter) Pliny records numerous examples of the concept of using ‘like for like’, for example in his description of walnuts’ effect on the brain.⁹⁵ Similarly he highlights the use

⁹² Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 48.

⁹³ Uncovering Roman Carlisle, *The Carlisle Intaglios*,
<https://www.uncoveringromancarlisle.co.uk/blogs/blog-post-title-one-9dp74#:~:text=Speaking%20about%20the%20intaglios%20discovered,made%20locally%2C%20probably%20in%20Carlisle.>> [accessed 20/01/2026]

⁹⁴ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 37.

⁹⁵ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: A Selection*, trs. by John F. Healy, (London: Penguin Books, 2004), XXIII, 147, p. 233.

of the stone aëtites (a stone within a stone) which “preserves the foetus against all insidious attempts at producing abortion”.⁹⁶ In this sense, the material used in magical items lends itself to the magical purpose. Thus, an analysis of the materials used in potentially magical items may indicate the role they played.

This study applies the principles outlined above to the ‘sorceress’ kit’ by examining not only the individual objects form, materiality, and manipulation but also their collective presence within a wooden chest and their find location within a domestic setting. The analysis considers whether the assemblage reflects deliberate selection and ritual potential, rather than the storage of mundane or simply religious items.

Probability, Ambiguity and Interpretation

Wilburn’s methodology does not seek definitive proof that an assemblage is magical. Instead, it operates on a principle of probability, assessing the likelihood that material evidence reflects ritualised practice based on converging lines of contextual and material data. This probabilistic approach acknowledges the inherent ambiguity of the archaeological record and avoids overconfident or sensationalist conclusions. This cautionary approach is particularly relevant to the ‘sorceress’ kit’ when considering the comments around the purpose of the assemblage, along with the gender and social status of its owner, made in the press release and in its public reception. By adopting a methodology that foregrounds material evidence and context, this study aims to evaluate these claims critically rather than reproducing them uncritically.

Application to the ‘Sorceress’ Kit’

In applying Wilburn’s methodology, this study seeks to answer three core questions: whether the assemblage reflects use in magical practices, whether we can conclude the objects belonged to a female, and what the social status of the owner may have been. By grounding the analysis in materiality and context, rather than texts which may be subject to stereotypes, this methodological framework allows for a grounded assessment of the ‘sorceress’ kit’.

⁹⁶ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trs. John Bostock and H. T. Riley, (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1857), XXX. 44. 2873, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/60688/pg60688-images.html#BOOK_XXX_CHAP_43> [accessed 28/01/2026].

While it may not provide absolute certainty, it provides a structured and theoretically informed approach to evaluating whether the collection can be reasonably be understood as evidence of domestic magical practice, and the extent to which this may be deemed beyond the normal practices of everyday life.

Chapter 4 - Reassessing the ‘Sorceress’ kit’

The excavations and later restoration

The collection now commonly referred to as ‘the sorceress’ kit’, was discovered in the 2019 excavations of Regio V within Pompeii’s Archaeological Park in the House with the Garden. This area of Pompeii, sometimes known as ‘the wedge’ remains one of the only areas on unexcavated parts of the park, and the work was carried out to stabilise the area and prevent damage to already uncovered structures.⁹⁷ Regio V is currently thought to be one of the less wealthy areas of the town, populated by the lower and middle classes.⁹⁸ That being said the House of the Garden’s footprint, large garden, frescos in the fourth Pompeian style and remodelling at the time of the eruption, suggests a relatively wealthy owner with Massimo Osanna suggesting it is typical of a small but well decorated, middle class house.⁹⁹

Its position on the Via del Nola, one of Pompeii’s busiest streets, and its location next to a *fullonica*, also indicate that this house was in a bustling commercial part of the town. The main entrance to the house was up a side alley, now known as the Via del Balconi, and the layout of the house does not suggest its use as a shop or commercial business. However, Massimo Osanna has suggested the house may have been used to house prostitutes, based on some of the lude graffiti on the walls near the entrance and in one of the *cubiculum*s (room 8 in Figure 4).¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Archaeological Park of Pompeii, *Regio V Excavations* (2019) <<https://pompeiiisites.org/wp-content/uploads/REGIO-V-EXCAVATIONS-ENG.pdf>>, [accessed 26/01/2026].

⁹⁸ Lucy Davidson, *Regio V, Pompeii* (2022), <<https://www.historyhit.com/locations/regio-v-pompeii/>> [accessed 26/01/2026].

⁹⁹ Archaeological Park of Pompeii – Official Channel, *The New Excavations of Pompeii in Regio V revealed in an exclusive tour with Massimo Osanna* [video] (2020) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abspZyhQDm0>> [accessed 26/01/2026].

¹⁰⁰ Massimo Osanna, *Les Nouvelles Heurs De Pompéï*, French Edition, (Milan: Flammarion, 2020), pp. 100-101.

Figure 3 shows the somewhat irregular layout of the house and indicates some of the key find areas. During excavation evidence of previous looting was found, with several tunnels

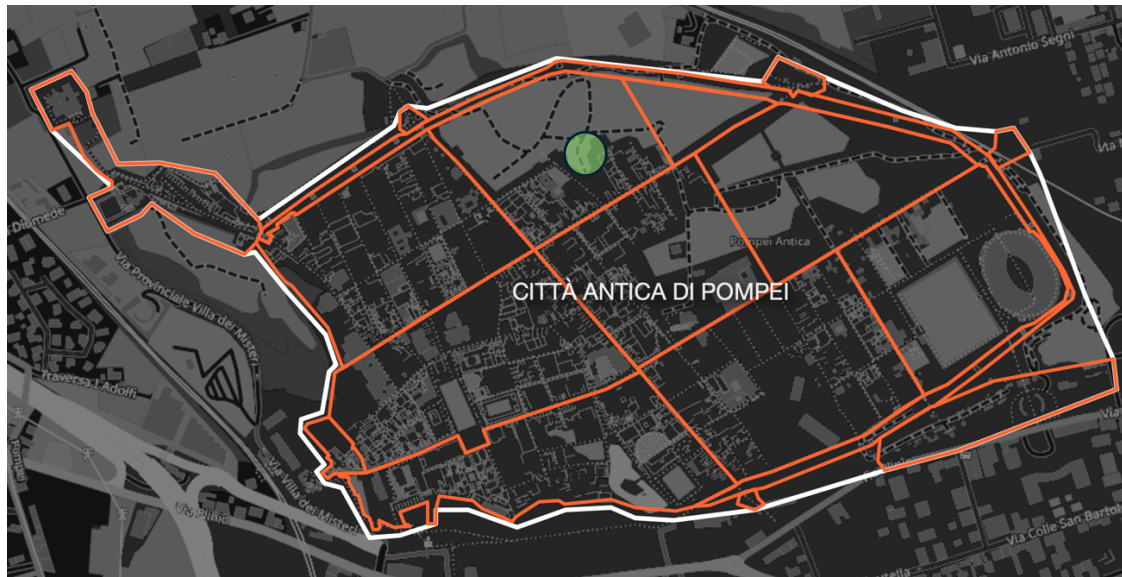


Figure 2: The green area indicated the area of the ‘wedge’ excavated by in the 2019 excavations¹⁰¹

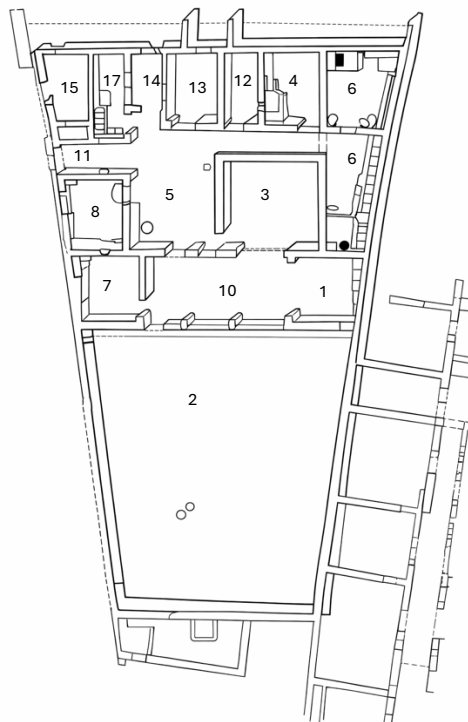


Figure 3: Plan of the House with the Garden (Regio V), schematic redraw by the author based on Osanna’s plan. The ‘sorceress’ kit’ was found in room 6, described by Massimo Osanna as a “functional room”¹⁰². The entranceway into the house is unusually from the side (11)

¹⁰¹ Map (without highlighted circle taken from <https://open.pompeiiisites.org> [accessed 26/01/2026]

¹⁰² Massimo Osanna, *Les Nouvelles Heurs De Pompéi*, p. 100.

dug through the walls and evidence of disturbance of several bodies.¹⁰³ This does however not seem to have disturbed the 'sorceress' kit' which was in one of the smaller rear rooms. It was found in the remains of a wooden chest, now decomposed but evident due to the bronze hinges and indentation left behind (figure 4.)



Figure 4: The remains of the wooden chest with the bronze hinges visible¹⁰⁴

Other key finds from the house included a bedroom (8) containing the remains of eleven women and children. These seem to have been sheltering from the lapis but were likely killed by the pyroclastic flow when Vesuvius erupted. One of the grander *tricliniums* (room 3 in

¹⁰³ Archaeological Park of Pompeii, *The room of the skeletons and sacking by ancient grave robbers* (2018) <<https://pompeiiisites.org/en/comunicati/the-room-of-the-skeletons-and-sacking-by-ancient-grave-robbers/>> [accessed 26/01/26] and in visible in pictures here: Pompeii in Pictures, V3 Pompeii. Casa del Giardino. House with the garden. Originally referred to as Casa con Giardino. Excavated 2018 (2021) <<https://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R5/5%2003%20giardino%20p4.htm>> [accessed 26/01/2026].

¹⁰⁴ Photograph © Parco Archeologico di Pompei <<https://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R5/5%2003%20giardino%20p5.htm>> [accessed 26/01/2026]

figure 4) featured the portrait of woman (figure 5), thought to be the domina of the house.¹⁰⁵ Room 5 also featured a charcoal inscription that has made archaeologists question the date of the eruption, seemingly written on the 17th of October (after the generally accepted date of Vesuvius' eruption on the 24th of August as recorded by Pliny the Younger).¹⁰⁶

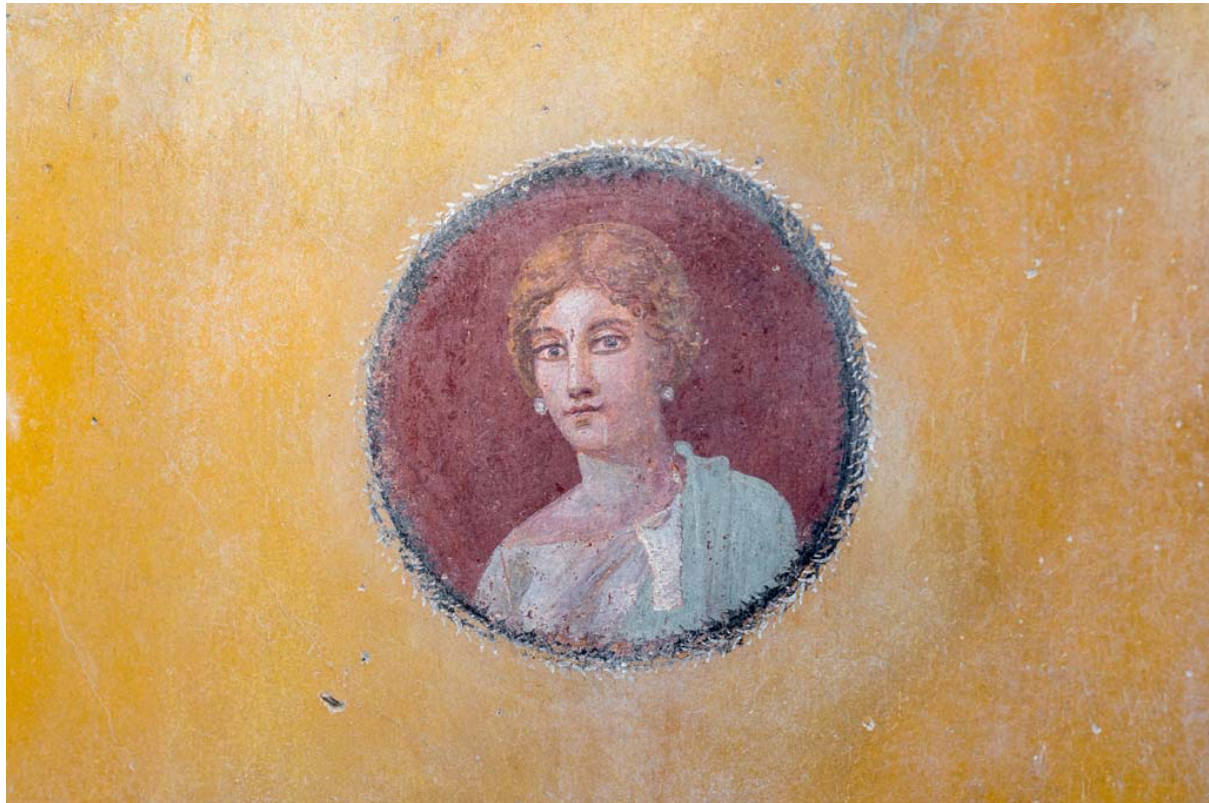


*Figure 5: The domina of the house? Room 3, medallion portrait from east end of north wall.
Photo courtesy of Johannes Eber.¹⁰⁷*

Despite some of the more remarkable discoveries within the house, very little has been published, with Osanna's two books covering some of the layout of the house, but not mentioning the 'sorceress' kit'. The lack of academic publication may be attributed to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic which led to the park's closure and the pausing of the publication of the park's academic journal.

¹⁰⁵ Archaeological Park of Pompeii, *House with the Garden*, < <https://pompeisites.org/en/archaeological-site/casa-del-giardino/> > [accessed 26/01/2026]

¹⁰⁶ Archaeological Park of Pompeii, *La Data Della Distruzione di Pompei: Premesse per un Dibattito Aperto* (2024) <https://pompeisites.org/e-journal-degli-scavi-di-pompei/la-data-della-distruzione-di-pompei-premesse-per-un-dibattito-aperto/> [accessed 26/01/2026]

¹⁰⁷ Pompeii in Pictures, V3. *Pompeii. Casa del Giardino. House with the garden. Originally referred to as Casa con Giardino. Excavated 2018, 'Room 3, medallion portrait from east end of north wall.'* Photo courtesy of Johannes Eber (photographer) <https://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R5/5%2003%20giardino%20p2.htm> [accessed 26/01/2026]

After the 'sorceress' kit' was restored, it was housed in the Antiquarium in Pompeii and is currently displayed as part of the park's exhibition *Being a Woman in Pompeii*. Here the find has once again been displayed as a 'sorceress' kit' with the press release explaining "The sections explore the various roles women played in society, ranging from activities of great social, economic and religious significance in which high-ranking matrons and nouveau riche freedwomen were involved, to trades of all kinds practised by freedwomen and slaves (spinners and weavers, vendors, innkeepers, bakers, doctors, sorceresses and prostitutes etc.)."¹⁰⁸ This again reflects a lack of critiquing of the earlier statements made on the find's discovery, and is perhaps a reflection of trying to increase public engagement through fantastical story telling.

The Sorceress' Kit - artefacts

The collection of objects found at the rear of the House with the Garden is made up of over one hundred objects. In the excavation write ups these were described as follows:

"Numerous precious objects have been found at the bottom of the imprint, including two mirrors, several necklace pendants, faience decorations, bronze, bone and amber, a vitreous ointment, phallic amulets, two roughly 8cm fragments of an ear of wheat and a human figure, both in amber and probably with apotropaic value and various gems (including an amethyst with a female figure and a carnelian piece with the figure of a craftsmen). Several pieces are characterised by the high quality of the material, as well as the craftsmanship. Among the examples of glass paste, those engraved on one side with the head of Dionysus and on the other with a dancing satyr are extraordinary."¹⁰⁹

This provides a useful starting point for identifying the various objects and pertaining the likelihood of their use as part of a magical 'kit'. Unfortunately, given the lack of peer-reviewed publications on this piece it has not been possible to compile an official list of each object but

¹⁰⁸ Archaeological Park of Pompeii, "*Being A Woman In Pompeii*" – *The Exhibition in Palaestra Grande in Pompeii From 16 April 2025 to 31 January 2026* (2025) <<https://pompeiiisites.org/en/comunicati/being-a-woman-in-pompeii-the-exhibition-in-palestra-grande-in-pompeii-from-16-april-2025-to-31-january-2026/>> [accessed 26/01/2026]

¹⁰⁹ Pompeii Archaeological Park, *The Regio V Excavations*.

below is my attempt to identify and categorise the objects using published images. The final two columns include an attempt to use Wilburn's 'markers of magic' and categorisations of 'Materia Magica' on the following basis

Markers:

- 1) Evidence of ritual actions, including spoken or written words and the manipulation of objects
- 2) Evidence of drawing on religious traditions for both efficacy and exoticism
- 3) Evidence of private or personal activity

Categories of *materia magica*

- 1) written or inscribed objects
- 2) figurines and representations
- 3) naturally occurring plants and animals including parts of bodies
- 4) household objects that have been repurposed for magical use

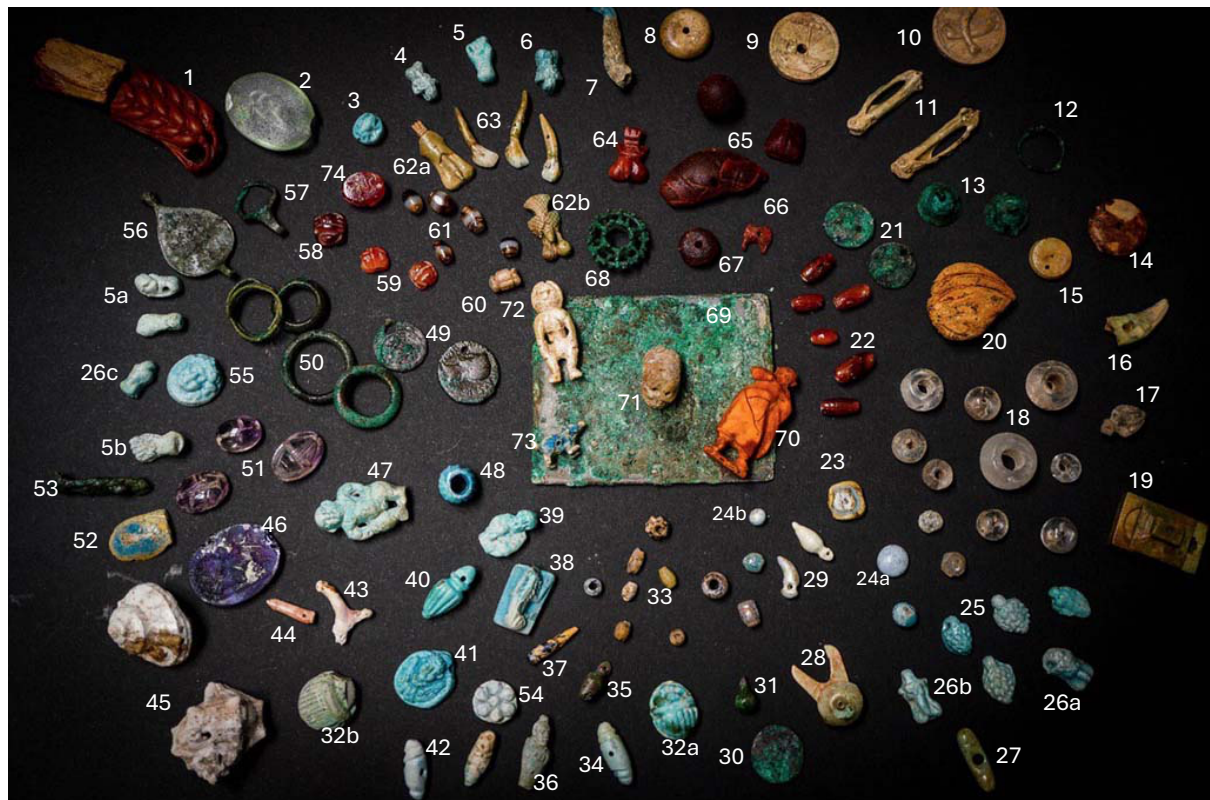


Figure 6: The 'Sorceress' kit', labels an addition by the author.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ The Sorceress' Kit, Cesare Abbate (photographer), 'Treasure of Amulets' <<https://pompeiicommitment.org/en/inventario/the-so-called-sorcerers-treasure-trove/>> [accessed 01/11/2025]

Object Number	Description / materiality if known	Category	Wilburn's markers	<i>Materia Magia</i>
1	Ear of wheat made from carnelian	Amulet	1	1, 2
2	Glass paste with a figure of a dancing satyr on one side and the head of Dionysus on the other.	Amulet	1	2
3	Faience with face	Amulet	1, 2	2
4	Phallic faience amulet	Amulet – <i>fascinus</i>	1	2
5a and b	2 x Faiences in shape of hand amulet	Amulet	1	2
6	Phallic faience amulet	Amulet – <i>fasninus</i>	1	2
7	Unknown object, possibly an arm		1	2
8	Bone button	Household item		4
9	Bone button with an image of a ship	Household item	1	1, 2, 4
10	Bone button with image two crossed courgettes	Household item / amulet	1	1, 2, 4
11	2 animal bones – possibly chicken wings	Natural materials		3
12	Unknown object – possibly a bronze bracelet	Jewellery		
13	2 x bronze bells	Possibly amuletic – <i>tintinabulum!</i> ?		
14	Unknown object, possibly a button	Household object		
15	Unknown object, possibly a button	Household object		
16	Animal tooth with hole for thread	Natural material / amulet	1	3
17	Unknown object, possibly a bead	Jewellery		
18	10 x Clear glass beads	Jewellery		
19	Unknown wooden object, possibly a mould as has a circular shape inside with a lid.	Unknown		
20	Walnut	Natural material		3
21	Coins with holes for thread	Household object / amulet	1	4
22	6 x Beads possibly made of amber or red glass	Jewellery		
23	Unknown object	Unknown		
24a and b	Round beads, material unknown	Jewellery		

25	4 x faience pendants, possibly in the form of bunches of grapes	Amulet	1	2
26a and b	2 x faience phallic amulets	Amulet – <i>fascinus</i>	1	2
27	Bead, material unknown with hole for thread	Jewellery		
28	Unknown and unusual object, possibly made of wood or bone	Unknown		
29	2 x pendants, one made of a tooth	Jewellery / Amulet	1	
30	Coin or mirror	Household object		4
31	Unknown object	Unknown		
32	Faience scarab beetle with hole through it for thread	Amulet	1, 2	2
33	Small bone beads	Jewellery		
34	Bead, material unknown, with hole for threading	Jewellery		
35	Metal object with thread hole, possibly a bell	Jewellery		
36	Bead with the face of a male	Jewellery / Amulet	2	2
37	Unknown bone object	Unknown		
38	Phallic faience	Amulet – <i>fascinus</i>	1	2
39	Faience in shape of man – possible deity	Amulet	2	2
40	Faience pendant	Jewellery	1	2
41	Circular pendant, possibly representing the Egyptian god Bes, a protector of households as well as mothers, children and childbirth	Amulet	1, 2	2
42	2 x beads, material unknown	Jewellery		
43	Animal bone	Natural material		3
44	Bone object with hole for threading	Jewellery	1	
45	2 x sea shells	Natural material		3
46	Glass image of Dionysius' head	Amulet – <i>intaglio</i>	1, 2	1, 2
47	Figure, possible the Egyptian god Bes	Figurine	1, 2	2
48	Blue faience bead	Jewellery		
49	2 x coins with holes in for thread	Jewellery / Household object / amulet		4
50	Bronze bracelets	Jewellery		

51	3 x amethyst scarab beetles	Amulet	1, 2	2
52	Unknown object	Unknown		
53	Unknown object, possibly a nail	Household object		4
54	Flower, material unknown. Has a hole in its side indicating it would be worn on thread.	Jewellery / amulet	1,	
55	Circular faience, with male deity	Amulet	1	2
56	Large metal pendant, possibly a <i>bulla</i> . Unknown if this is inscribed	Amulet (bulla?)	1	1?
57	Metal pendant	Jewellery		
58	Carnelian object, possibly a scarab	Amulet – <i>intaglio</i>	1, 2	2
59	Carnelian or amber beads	Jewellery		
60	Bone bead	Jewellery		
61	5 beads, material unknown	Jewellery		
62 a and b	Phallic pendants, material unknown possibly bone or stone	Amulet – <i>fascinus</i>	1	2
63	3 x large animal teeth	Natural material	1	2
64	Phallic carnelian object	Amulet – <i>fascinus</i>	1	2
65	Unknown carnelian objects. The largest may be phallic and has been inscribed	Possible <i>fascinus</i> amulet		1
66	Unknown carnelian object with thread hole	Unknown	1	
67	Bead made of red stone	Jewellery		
68	Unknown object, made of metal, similar in appearance to some dodecahedrons such as the one found at Corbridge on Hadrian's Wall. Suggestions for similar items have included use as gaming pieces or for knitting	Household object		4
69	Mirror	Household object		4
70	Male figure, material unknown	Figurine	2	2
71	Skull, possibly fashioned from bone, possibly with a hole for thread to be worn.	Amulet	1	2
72	Figure, possibly Harpocrates made of bone	Figurine	1, 2	2
73	Dog, possibly made with faience. Has a hole in its side	Amulet	1	2

	indicating it would be worn on thread.			
74	A carnelian incised gem depicting a seated woman or craftsperson	Amulet – <i>intaglio</i> Inscribed	1	1, 2
Other	Objects not shown in the above image but included in the find include spindles and whorls	Household object		4

The catalogue above provides an overview of the objects recovered from the chest and reflects my ideas of where magical practise *may* be evident when considered as a collection as a whole. It is important to note that while Wilburn’s methodology is primarily designed to identify contexts where magic *has already* been performed, reassessing the claim that this is a ‘sorceress’ toolkit’ also requires consideration of objects that may not yet have been used in magical practices, but were instead being *stored* in preparation for potential magical use. In this sense, the categorisation employed here does not seek to identify definitive instances of magical activity, but rather to assess the likelihood that particular objects were selected, retained, or curated for magical purposes. The following analysis therefore examines the material categories present within the assemblage and evaluates the probability that they were, or could have been, employed in magical practices.

Analysing the ‘sorceress’ kit’

Looking for markers of magic

Wilburn’s first marker of magic is to find evidence “of ritual actions, including spoken or written words and the manipulation of objects”. There is indeed a great deal of evidence for this within the collection, in the items we might label as amulets or ‘magical gems’. The most striking examples are the creation of *intaglio*, faience objects, scarabs and figurines where gems, stones, bones and glass pastes have been manipulated to include the visual form of people, animals or deities. Object 74 shows the best evidence of inscribing with the image of someone sat down, either a woman or a craftsperson, and the scarabs look also to have been ‘tooled’ to give them their form. The *intaglio* with the dancing satyr and Dionysus’ head are more likely to have been formed by using a mould. Similarly, the examples of *fascinus* have clearly been manipulated in terms of their formation. The bone skull (71) has also undergone

some manipulated from its raw form to its final form, both being carefully carved and with a hole through the mouth suggesting it's potential to be worn as an amulet. Other objects too, seem to have been manipulated to be turned into something which can be worn – the coins and animal teeth for example.

Amulets and magical gems, were “ubiquitous in ancient daily life for different reasons, mainly medical, social and religious”¹¹¹ and were often worn to keep the evil eye at bay. Amulets were not viewed in the same negative way that for example baneful magic was and the wearing of them is not forbidden in the legal body of laws. Pliny for example writes about *fascinus* offering protection from the evil eye for young children¹¹² whilst boys and girls wore *bulla* and *lunula* amulets until they came of age. There is even evidence that slaves were allowed to wear amulets as shown in a mosaic from Tunisia.¹¹³ In this sense then, it is not particularly remarkable to find amulets which have been manipulated as we would expect to find them within a house. What is more difficult to ascertain is if these objects have been manipulated within the context of the domestic setting. There is no clear indication that any of these have been created within the House of the Garden. They could simply have been bought elsewhere for the wearer. Dasen and Nagy note that magical gets were “made by ritual experts who selected the components of different cultural traditions, both ancient and of their own time, that they deemed to be effective”.¹¹⁴ The question for us when considering if this collection really is a ‘sorceress’ kit, is whether the person who possessed them was creating them or simply using them. This is a difficult question to answer. There is a large volume of these manipulated objects here, but that could simply point to a particularly superstitious owner! There are, however, several copies of the same manipulated objects, for example the scarab beetles, faience grapes, and faience faces which may support that some form of production was taking place and is indicative of potential ritual readiness. A further possibility, given that we cannot be sure that the amulets were manipulated in this site is that the owner was selling them as a merchant, rather than offering their services as a ‘sorcerer’.

¹¹¹ Véronique Dasen and Árpád M. Nagy, ‘Gems’, in *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, ed. David Frankfurter (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019) p.416.

¹¹² Warrior, *Roman Religion*, referring to Pliny the Elder’s description in *Natural History* 28.39. p.96.

¹¹³ Ancient Origins, *The Strict Rules Dividing Ancient Roman Social Classes* (2020) <<https://www.ancient-origins.net/history-famous-people/roman-social-classes-0014503>> [accessed 27/01/2026].

¹¹⁴ Dasen and Nagy, *Gems*, p. 416.

Wilburn's second marker of magic is drawing on religious traditions for efficacy and exoticism. Again, there is evidence of religious links here, particularly in the imagery found on several of the amulets – Dionysus / Bacchus possibly appears on the glass pastes and on the blue faience as well as Bes, whilst the form of Harpocrates may also be interpreted as one of the figurines. Similarly, links to Egyptian religious beliefs are evident by the inclusion of the scarab beetles (32 and 51). These are particularly convincing evidence for magical practice, given that we have other examples of scarabs made from semi-precious stones being used in spells, recorded both in the literary and archaeological record. One spell from the Book of the Dead gives instructions as follows: "To be inscribed on a scarab made from nephrite, mounted in fine gold, with a ring of silver and placed at the throat of the deceased".¹¹⁵ It does not appear that the scarabs have been inscribed with a spell as we see on examples from Egypt, though the images I have used do not show the underside. It is therefore difficult to ascertain if their purpose was to be used in magical activities, as a religious amulet or if they were simply an exotic item collected for its interest. Indeed, there is much evidence of Pompeiian's 'Egyptomania', evidenced through the imagery found in villas and the founding of the cult of Isis within the town.¹¹⁶

The notion of choosing items for efficacy and exoticism is however a little more straightforward. Of note is the materials used to make the amulets, some of which were believed to have magical properties. Pliny discusses at length the practical and magical properties of various gemstones, though often disparaging of some of the superstitions associated with them. He notes for example that "the Magi falsely claim that the amethyst prevents drunkenness... Moreover, they say that if amethysts are inscribed with the names of the sun and moon are worn hanging from the neck along with baboons' hairs and swallows' feathers, they are a protection against spells. Again, they assert that, however they are used, amethysts will assist people who are about to approach a king as suppliants, and that they keep off hail and locusts if they are used in conjunction with an incantation which they

¹¹⁵ Raymond O. Faulkner (trs. and ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005) p.63. For further examples of scarabs being used in spells see Roy. D. Kotansky, 'Textual Amulets and Writing Traditions in the Ancient World' in *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, ed. David Frankfurter (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019), pp. 507-554.

¹¹⁶ Maria Setnam-Burland, *Egypt in the Roman imagination: A study of aegyptiaca from Pompeii*, (2002), < https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353619741_Egypt_in_the_Roman_imagination_A_study_of_aegyptiaca_from_Pompeii [accessed 28/01/2026].

prescribe.”¹¹⁷ Similarly, when discussing the “many falsehoods” told about amber (or electron as the Greeks called it), and describing the far away geographic locations it is found in, Pliny tells us “we see the female peasantry in the countries that lie beyond that river wearing necklaces of amber, principally as an ornament, no doubt but on account of its remedial virtues as well; for amber it is generally believed, is good for affections of the tonsillary glands and fauces”¹¹⁸. Amber, it is worth noting, also has the unusual property of creating static electricity when rubbed, hence the Greek name ‘electron’, in addition to preserving insects within it. This may have added to the belief that it held magical properties. It is clear then that many Romans had a firm belief in the magical uses of semi-precious stones, often based on associations of colour or the properties of the stone. This may explain why we see a great deal of amber jewellery in this collection.

The final marker, identified by Wilburn, that of personal or private practice, is perhaps the most difficult to assess from the collection. Unlike other forms of magical practice, such as curse tablets or *defixiones*, which may name either the practitioner or intended target, the ‘sorceress’ kit’ is not accompanied by any written texts that explicitly identify its user or purpose. This absence makes it impossible to determine with certainty whether the objects were employed in specific ritual acts, or for whose benefit such acts may have been intended. Despite this limitation, the context of the find allows for a cautious probabilistic interpretation. The objects were stored together within a wooden chest in a rear room of a private dwelling, rather than in a public or commercial space such as a temple or shop. This suggests that the items were intended for personal use, or at least for use within a domestic context, rather than for a communal or officially sanctioned religious practice. Wilburn does emphasise that private magical practices might be better ascertained not because they are undertaken in secret locations, but because they are characterised by goals that are individual in nature such as promoting healing, protection or fertility.¹¹⁹ As many of the items have holes, indicating they were threaded to be worn, we may assume that these objects were intended to be used for personal use.

¹¹⁷ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, XXXVII.124 < https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/60688/pg60688-images.html#BOOK_XXX_CHAP_43 > [accessed 27/01/2026]>.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, XXXVII. 401-402.

¹¹⁹ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 19.

In this case, the collection does not appear as the residue of previous ritual or magical practice, but rather a curated collection of objects, which may or may not have been stored for future use. The private context therefore does not demonstrate magical activity conclusively, but it does strengthen the likelihood that the objects formed part of a personal collection intended for individual or family use.

Evidence of magical material

As discussed above, Wilburn argues that magical activity may be identified through material attested in both “outsider” sources – such as literary, epigraphic, and historical accounts of magic - and “insider” sources, including spell manuals like the Greek Magical Papyri and other practitioner-oriented texts.¹²⁰ He proposes four common categories of likely material evidence, each of which is considered below.

The first category comprises inscribed objects that convey a spell or use of language. In the case of the ‘sorceress’ kit’, there is no clear evidence of written inscriptions on any of the objects. While several items are engraved with images, no letters, words or magical formulae are present. Given that many of the spells in the PGM explicitly require the written inscriptions this absence could be interpreted as evidence against the collection’s use as a ‘sorceress’ kit’. However, such a conclusion must be approached with caution. Numerous spells in the PGM call for written inscriptions to be made on perishable materials such as laurel leaves¹²¹ or papyrus, which would be unlikely to survive archaeologically. For example, PGM IV.52-85 instructs the practitioner to write a spell “With blood from the hand or foot of a pregnant woman ... on a clean piece of papyrus” and to wear it tied to the arm.¹²² Similarly, other spells rely exclusively on spoken incantations, leaving no material trace, as in PGM III.263-75, which instructs the practitioner to “Take your finger and place it under your [tongue] before you speak to anyone. Say these things along with the [great name]: “make me know in advance the things in each person’s mind, today”.¹²³

¹²⁰ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p.55.

¹²¹ See PGM II. 64-184 for example of use of laurel leaves to be written on, Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p. 14.

¹²² Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p.38.

¹²³ Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, p26.

The absence of inscribed objects within the House with the Garden, therefore, cannot be taken as conclusive evidence that the assemblage lacked a magical function. Rather it highlights the limitations of archaeological visibility and reinforces Wilburn's argument that magical practice often leaves only partial or ambiguous material traces, requiring us to look for further evidence.

The assemblage includes several objects that align with Wilburn's second category of potential magical material: figurines and representations. Three human figures are present in the collection (objects 47, 70, 72), each of which could, in principle, have been used as magical objects. Figurines in magical contexts often operate through the concept of mimesis, representing either a specified individual (the practitioner or victim) or a divine or supernatural agent. Actions performed upon the representation were believed to act directly upon the intended person, reflecting the logic later put forward by Frazer.¹²⁴ Where figurines are intended to target a specific person, this connection is frequently reinforced through the inclusion of body parts (*ousia*) from the represented person into the figurine, (such as hair or nail clippings) or by modelling the figurine in a way that represents the person.¹²⁵

Well documented examples of such practices include the cache of binding figurines discovered in the remains of a fountain dedicated to Anna Perenna, where lead containers held human figurines. These are presumed to be the handiwork of a woman, after a small fingerprint was found on one.¹²⁶ Another example of this type of magic is the female figurine, now housed in the Louvre. Found in Egypt within a ceramic jar, an accompanying *defixio* tablet identifies the figurine to be, Ptomeais, the victim of an erotic binding spell intended to compel her to into loving a man, Sarapammon.¹²⁷ This closely parallels the instructions given in PGM IV. 296-466, which calls for the insertion of "magical material" (*ousia*) into the figurine.¹²⁸

In cases of binding magic, figurines are typically made from malleable material – most commonly wax, clay or dough – allowing for detailed shaping, inscriptions to be made and for the insertion of *ousia* or pins. Such examples are found both in the archaeological record and

¹²⁴ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*

¹²⁵ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 75.

¹²⁶ Christopher A. Farone, 'When Spells Worked Magic', in *Archaeology*, Vol. 56. No.2 (2003), pp.48-53, p. 50.

¹²⁷ Christopher A. Farone, 'When Spells Worked Magic', in *Archaeology*, Vol. 56. No.2 (2003), pp.48-53, p.52

¹²⁸ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p. 44.

in literary accounts such as Theocritus' Simaetha¹²⁹. By contrast, the figurines in the 'sorceress' kit' are fashioned from harder materials such as bone, faience or stone, making them unsuitable for these kinds of actions. On material grounds alone, it therefore seems unlikely that these objects functioned as binding figurines.



Figure 7: Magical figurine; Musée du Louvre E 27145; image source: Brent Nongbri 2022¹³⁰

However, figurines could also serve other magical purposes, particularly where representing deities or spirits invoked to assist in ritual action. PGM IV. 2359-72, for example, instructs the practitioner to “fashion a figure of Hermes” as part of a business spell, and calls for the practitioner to make offerings of a cock, Egyptian wine and to provide a lamp for him.¹³¹ Similarly, in Lucian's *Philopseudes*, a sorcerer creates a figure of Eros and makes offerings to it so that it will send dreams to the target of a spell. In such cases, the figurine functions not as a surrogate victim, but as a supernatural force, compelled to aid the magical undertaking. It is therefore possible that the figurines in the sorceress' kit may have been used in this way, although such figurines would also not be uncommon on household altars for religious purposes. As a result, distinguishing between magical and religious use remains problematic. Wilburn is similarly cautious in jumping to conclusions, noting that while figurines used in

¹²⁹ Andrew Wilburn, 'Figurines, Images, And Representations Used In Ritual Practices', in *Guide To The Study Of Ancient Magic*, pp. 456-506, p. 488.

¹³⁰ Brent Nongbri, 'A Cursed Figurine', *Variant Readings* (2023), < <https://brentnongbri.com/2023/01/07/a-cursed-figurine/> > [accessed 27/01/2026].

¹³¹ Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, p. 81. Also see Wilburn, 'Figurines, Images, And Representations' pp. 496-497.

aggressive ritual activity have been able to be identified through the presence of clear markers - inscriptions, the physical posture or physical characteristics present - the absence does not preclude a ritual purpose: "Images... could represent another person or a divinity without these visible markers; practitioners could voice the connection between artefact and antecedent; and pre-existing objects or animals could be repurposed for use in rituals."¹³²

Additional figurative items in the 'sorceress' kit', including the skull and the dog may also suggest some magical use. Given the holes in both, it appears these were intended to be worn as amulets. The PGM does contain a spell calling for the use of a skull, although given that the instructions call for a text to be written on the cranium, it seems unlikely the skull in the sorceress' kit fulfilled this role.¹³³ Alternatively, the skull may have functioned symbolically, as we see elsewhere in Pompeian imagery. The 'Momenti Mori' mosaic found in the triclinium of a Regio I house, served the purpose of reminding guests to live in the moment.¹³⁴ It also seems plausible that the skull could be used as an amulet against the evil eye.

The dog figurine finds a closer parallel when compared to a spell within the PGM. In this the practitioner is told to mould a little dog out of dough or unmelted wax and to place the eyes of a bat into the eyes of the dog. It is then threaded with *ousia*, and Hekate is called upon to assist in a love spell.¹³⁵ Wilburn argues that in this example the dog does not represent the victim but "is instead a duplicate of one of the hounds of Hekate".¹³⁶ The use of a dog may also be symbolic of another magical purpose as Pliny notes the medicinal uses for dogs, including restricting the effects of narcotic drugs.¹³⁷ While this provides a possible interpretative framework, the absence of associated ritual features on the dog (such as *ousia* or inscription) again limits the certainty of any magical attribution.

When judging if the figurines within the 'sorceress' kit' had a magical function, it is difficult to make any definite conclusions. There are aspects which are consistent with other recorded uses of figurine, but the lack of overt ritual modification or textual suggest they cannot be securely identified as magical on this basis alone, and have the potential to be religious iconography, or in the case of the dog, even a toy! This ambiguity again reinforces Wilburn's

¹³² Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p.

¹³³ Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, IV. 1928-2005.

¹³⁴ Joanne Berry, *The Complete Pompeii*, (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2013) pp. 234-235.

¹³⁵ Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, IV.2943-66, p. 94.

¹³⁶ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p.81.

¹³⁷ Pliny, *Natural History*, XXIX, 14. 391-392 < https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/60688/pg60688-images.html#BOOK_XXX_CHAP_43 > [accessed 27/01/2026].

emphasis on probability rather than certainty and highlights the need to consider other examples of *materia magica* and context for further clarification.

Ird category identified by Wilburn consists of natural ingredients, including plants and animals which may have been sacrificed or harvested for use in ritual actions as well as *ousia*. This category is particularly well represented within the 'sorceress' kit' and may provide some of the strongest material indicators of potential magical activity. Within both the "insider" and "outsider" sources of magical records, we find a great deal of detail outlining how this material may be used in sacrifices, as incense, or for their associated magical properties. As has already been mentioned Pliny's *Natural History* outlines the uses of stones, plants and animals in both magic and medicine. Whilst some plants may have had a physical effect on the practitioner, many were used because of their symbolic associations with divinities or the intention of a spell.¹³⁸ As ever though, we must be cautious in presuming the presence of natural materials is indicative of magical practice. To ascertain if this is the case with the sorceress' kit, we must attempt to identify a connection between the natural materials and evidence within texts which may shed light on their use.

Among the organic materials present are animal bones (11), teeth (16, 29 and 63), shells(45), and walnuts (20). Several of these items are explicitly mentioned within magical recipes preserved within the PGM and by Pliny. For example, animal teeth and bones are commonly used for apotropaic functions or in amulets to treat illness. Pliny for example describes the use of a black dog's longest tooth within an amulet to treat fevers¹³⁹ as well as listing the uses of wolf's teeth when worn as including prevention of infants being startled when worn, preventing weariness in horses.¹⁴⁰ Wilburn also argues that the image of a dog had apotropaic associations, and uses the example of the 'Cave Canem' dog mosaics in Pompeii to argue that these held both a practical warning and a magical protective use.¹⁴¹ The prevalence of drilled teeth suggests that they were commonly used as amulets.¹⁴² The drilled teeth within the

¹³⁸ Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, p. 84-85.

¹³⁹ Pliny, *Natural History*, XXX. 30. 454 https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/60688/pg60688-images.html#BOOK_XXX_CHAP_14 [accessed 28/01/2026].

¹⁴⁰ Pliny, *Natural History*, XVII.78.364, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/60688/pg60688-images.html#BOOK_XXX_CHAP_14 [accessed 28/01/2026].

¹⁴¹ Wilburn, 'The Archaeology of Ritual', pp.103-115 and pp. 108-11.

¹⁴² Adam Parker, 'Teething Problems: Pierced Tooth Amulets and Sensing Pain in the Roman Archaeological Record', *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal*, 6 (1), pp.1-22 < <https://traj.openlibhums.org/article/id/9314/>> [accessed 28/01/2026]

Pompeii collection, suggests they were intended to be worn or suspended, and therefore supports their use had a magical function.

The collection also includes two bones which appear to be the wings of a bird, though this is not confirmed. The use of birds in sometimes, violent sacrifices, is also well attested in both the archaeological record and within the *PGM*¹⁴³, with roosters commonly being found with *defixiones*. Watson argues that the purpose of the violent killing of both birds and puppies was so that the intended victims would not be able to defend themselves as the animal itself could not defend itself.¹⁴⁴

The inclusion of shells within the sorceress' kit is particularly interesting as this was cited as one of the key reasons for interpreting the assemblage as female owned.¹⁴⁵ The use of shells within Roman magic and especially as amulets, is well documented¹⁴⁶. It has been argued that women in particular, made use of shells because of their perceived resemblance to female genitalia and their associated connotations of fertility, sexuality, and protection (Chierici 1999). A recent case study of Iron Age Veneto, similarly, found that shell amulets occurred more frequently in female graves than in male burials, suggesting a gendered pattern in their symbolic use.¹⁴⁷ There is also an example of a seashell being used within a love charm within the *PGM*¹⁴⁸. However, caution is required when extrapolating from these associations. Shells could also be used for decorative purposes and given Pompeii's proximity to the coast, it is plausible that these were simply collected items.

The final category of *materia magica* identified by Wilburn consists of ordinary household objects that have been repurposed for use in magical practice. This category highlights one of the greatest methodological problems of identifying magic archaeologically, as has been

¹⁴³ Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, 12.14-95, p154 lists several birds to be choked and used in a sacrifice to Eros.

¹⁴⁴ Lindsay C. Watson, *Magic in Ancient Greece and Rome*, W (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. 132.

¹⁴⁵ Wilburn suggested the seashells were fertility symbols in an interview given at the time of the discovery of the 'sorceress' kit' in Isaac Schultz, 'Found: A Stash of Mystical Charms And Amulets In Pompeii'.

¹⁴⁶ A. Chierici, 'Keraunia', *Archeologia Classica* 41, (1989) pp. 329-382 and A. Chierici, 'Amuleti nei Corredi Funebri Paleoveneti e dell'Italia Anti.' in: Paoletti, O. (ed.) *Protostoria e Storia del Venetorum Angulus. Atti del XX Convegno di Studi Etruschi e Italici.*, (Pisa: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Nazionali, 1999), pp. 169-216.

¹⁴⁷ Elisa Perego, 'Magic and Ritual in Iron Age Veneto, Italy', in *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 20(1), (2010), pp. 67-96, <https://student-journals.ucl.ac.uk/pia/article/id/278/> [accessed 28/01/2026].

¹⁴⁸ Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, VII. 300a-310, p. 125.

discussed above, but the Pompeii collection does hold several items which show they have been adapted for magical use.

The coins provide the most obvious evidence for transformation from household object into an amulet, given that they have been pierced, presumably for a thread to be inserted and worn as an amulet. Other examples of coins being mounted either rings or as pendants have been found and arguably show a personal veneration to the emperor, which may suggest more of a religious rather than magical use.¹⁴⁹ However, they could be amulets associated with gaining wealth, which may suggest their involvement in magical activities. The two bells found also may have had an amuletic function, and are often found in examples of *tintinnabulum*, a phallic amulet to ward off the evil eye.

The inclusion of mirrors within the box may also suggest some magical practices, both apotropaic in function and divinatory. Catoptromancy was a form of scrying with Pausanias describing how mirrors were lowered over the water of a fountain by sick individuals, before an oracle used the reflection to predict the likelihood of recovery.¹⁵⁰ Whilst more research is needed on the potential uses of mirrors within Roman domestic settings, it is plausible that the mirrors included here could have been used for the purpose of divination or as a method of warding off evil. Their storage within the box suggests the latter is not the case though, indicating a state of storage. As the mirrors do not seem to have been manipulated in any way though, it is impossible to ascertain if they held a magical or mundane function.

The final example of household objects to consider is that of the jewellery. In the press release, Massimo Osanna suggested the beads “could have been necklaces that were worn during rituals rather [hic] being used to look elegant”.¹⁵¹ This is possibly one of the greatest assumptions made about the collection and is rightly criticised by Mary Beard.¹⁵² As whatever thread was holding the beads together has disintegrated we cannot know in what form these beads were used and whether they were combined with amulets. We may consider if the beads’ material was chosen for its magical associations (we have already noted Pliny’s

¹⁴⁹ Jonathan Williams, ‘Religion and roman Coins’, in *A Companion To Roman Religion*, ed. Jörg Rüpke, (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011) pp. 143-163, p.158.

¹⁵⁰ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, trs. W. H. S. Jones, 7.21.12, <https://www.theoi.com/Text/Pausanias7B.html> [accessed 28/01/2026].

¹⁵¹ ‘‘Sorcerer’s treasure trove’ uncovered at Pompeii’, *Ansa* (2019).

¹⁵² Mary Beard, *A Sorceress at Pompeii?*, (2019)

comments on the medicinal and electric qualities of amber for example), though again this is speculation and cannot be verified from the find's context alone.

This section has considered at length the material evidence to question whether this collection can rightly be labelled as a 'sorceress' kit'. Wilburn's methodology has provided a useful framework for considering this, and there are certainly elements that *could* indicate a magical function. There are clearly many amulets here, but whether these indicate ownership by a professional sorceress must be questioned. Amulets were common items, so their presence does not necessarily indicate any practice out of the ordinary. What is perhaps more exceptional is the quantity of amulets and other potentially magical material. Indeed, there are no other records of such a large collection of amuletic items found in their natural setting, yet alone a domestic one.¹⁵³ However, issues remain around making any definitive answers. Much of the evidence of magical practice we have has been ascertained by accompanying inscriptions or textual documents, which we do not have in this case study. This certainly does not rule out any of the contents being used in ritual or magical ways, but it does make it more difficult to prove.

Considering gender and social status

The final aims of this investigation were to consider the claims made in relation to the gender and social status of the collection's owner. At the time of the discovery, Massimo Osanna described the artefacts as "objects of everyday life in the female world"¹⁵⁴ and hypothesised that the jewellery in particular may have been used in rituals for "fertility, seduction, or to seek good omens for a birth or pregnancy"¹⁵⁵. These statements make a vast assumption on the gender of the owner of the kit, which can only be partially supported by the material finds. In this sense, the inclusion of beads and bronze bracelets may indicate more feminine jewellery although this is not necessarily the case, and they could just have easily belonged to a child.

A further valid possibility for reaching this conclusion can be drawn from some of the evidence of the house itself. Firstly, the skeletons found in the house were of women and children,

¹⁵³ Whilst the Carlisle collection of *intaglios* is significant in number, we must remember their deposition was mainly accidental.

¹⁵⁴ Archaeological Park of Pompeii, 'The Luck And The Protection Against The Bad Fate In The Jewellery OF Regio V'. (2019)

¹⁵⁵ Ansa, 'Sorcerer's Treasure Trove', 2019

indicating a female presence within the house. This may, however, be proof that men did not live there, they may well have been trying to find a way out when the roof collapsed on the sheltering victims. Second, is the image in the *triclinium*, thought to show the *domina* of the house.¹⁵⁶ It may also be that Osanna has drawn this conclusion as he suggests the building may have been used to house prostitutes.¹⁵⁷ This is based on crude graffiti on the outside walls and in one of the bedrooms. However, the inference of prostitution from sexual language is highly interpretive, particularly as such graffiti covers nearly every area of Pompeii. There is also potentially a gendered and social status assumption being made here in that the presence of prostitutes and therefore women of lower morality, may be an indicator of magic which was viewed by the Roman elite in many cases as equally immoral.

It is also possible that these comments were formed because of long-standing associations between women and magical activity in both ancient and modern contexts. Greek and Roman literary sources, repeatedly portray women as witches performing gruesome, baneful or amorous magic¹⁵⁸. Horace's Canidia, Lucan's Erictho, Apuleius' Thessalian witches, even Plutarch's portrayal of Cleopatra using magic to seduce Anthony, all contribute to this stereotype. And these stereotypes have stood the test of time, continuing into the works of Shakespeare, the Wizard of Oz, and many other modern-day films and television productions. These representations, however, do not match the archaeological record, which show that magic was practised by both men and women in the ancient world, indeed there is more evidence of men undertaking magical practices than women. Dickie's study of curse tablets leading him to conclude "that men were the main participants" in erotic magic¹⁵⁹ and Stratton notes that "archaeological evidence indicates that *men* account for the vast majority of extant 'spells' recovered from the ancient world (approximately 86% of erotic spells)".¹⁶⁰ As such, we must question if Osanna's beliefs are the result of social constructivism, rather than solidified in known facts.

¹⁵⁶ Pompeii Archaeological Park, *House with the Garden*.

¹⁵⁷ Osanna, *Les Nouvelles Heurs De Pompéi*, pp. 100-101.

¹⁵⁸ An excellent evaluation of Roman literary portrayals of female witches is covered in the following: Diana Gibson, 'Waking the Witch: Exploring Gender, Magic and Power Dynamics in Ancient Rome', (2025), Honors Thesis, <<https://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1917&context=honors>>.

¹⁵⁹ Matthew W. Dickie, 'Who Practised Love-Magic in Classical Antiquity and in the Late Roman World?', *The Classical Quarterly*, Vol 50., No 2. (2000), pp.563-583

¹⁶⁰ K. B. Stratton, 'Male Magicians and Female Victims: Understanding a Pattern of Magic Representation in Early Christian Literature', *Lectio*, 2 (2004), <http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/04_2/PDF/stratton.pdf>, pp.1-14, p. 2.

Similarly questionable are the statements made by Osanna to ANSA, suggesting that he thinks “that it is more likely that the objects belonged to a servant or slave than the owner of the house”.¹⁶¹ The supporting evidence given for this was that the collection did not include any gold. However, both the press statement and excavation records put out by the Pompeii Archaeological Park, contradict this. The former states “The high quality of amber and glass pastes and the engraving of the figures confirm the importance of the domus owner”¹⁶² whilst the latter states “Several pieces are characterised by the high quality of the materials, as well as the craftsmanship. Among the examples of glass paste, those engraved on one side with the head of Dionysus and on the other with a dancing satyr are extraordinary”.¹⁶³ This contradiction clearly undermines Osanna’s initial statement – a slave is simply unlikely to have been able to purchase such high-quality gems.

Similarly questionable, is the argument that it must belong to a slave due to a lack of gold in the collection. As has been mentioned in the many examples from the *PGM* cited above, most of the textual sources on magic call for specific objects to be used in spells, either for their associated properties, symbolism, or malleable qualities to be moulded or inscribed. To a practitioner, following magical recipes accurately would have been more important than a show of wealth. Added to this is the argument that magic was normally a private activity, often conducted in secret. Often spells call for magical items to be disposed of or buried, and as such it would be unlikely that anyone would be inclined to use gold in any such spell work.

Is there then, any supporting evidence to suggest that the collection did in fact belong to a servant or slave? We do know that although slaves were restricted from wearing elaborate jewellery, they could and did wear amulets, as shown in a 2nd century mosaic in Tunisia (Figure 8). Whilst it may be possible that a slave used some of the more basic amulets in the collection – the animal teeth pendants for example, it seems unlikely that the more elaborate gems would be worn by slaves working in what is essentially, a modest house. Stronger evidence may come from the find location. The wooden chest was stored in one of the smaller rooms at the rear of the house. These areas normally doubled up as both practical working areas and sleeping quarters for slaves and servants, making it a more likely location to find it in if it did

¹⁶¹ ANSA, *Sorcerer’s treasure Trove* (2019).

¹⁶² Pompeii Archaeological Park, ‘The Luck And The Protection Against The Bad Fate In The Jewellery Of Regio V’ (2019).

¹⁶³ Pompeii Archaeological Park, *The Regio V Excavations*.

belong to a slave or servant. And yet, it is similarly likely that it was found in this area, simply as it was a storage area.



Figure 8: Roman mosaic from Dougga, Tunisia. Two large slaves carry wine jars and wear amulets.¹⁶⁴

Again, there is the possibility of social constructivism at play here. Like Frazer's views, many countries, particularly highly religious ones such as Italy, still view religion as superior to magic in terms of rationality and validity. In this sense we must question if Osanna's statements reflect socially constructed views – if this is a magical kit, it must belong to a less educated individual like a slave, who may morally less developed, perhaps a prostitute. The analysis above highlights that the evidence for the collection belonging to a woman and a slave is significantly questionable at best and shows a lack of scholarly professionalism at worst.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions

It is perhaps understandable that Osanna's response to this find was framed in dramatic and engaging terms. Any discovery that offers a glimpse into the personal lives of Pompeii's inhabitants is compelling, and this find was undoubtedly exceptional. It is therefore unsurprising that the initial that the initial press release attracted significant attention, and that narratives were shaped in ways that enhanced its appeal. Yet, as Mary Beard commented

¹⁶⁴ By Dennis G. Jarvis - Flickr: Tunisia-4718 - A Banquet, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=22436409> [accessed 26/01/2026]

“what you *call* it makes a huge difference to how you *think* about it”.¹⁶⁵ Generalised or sensationalised labels, particularly those linked to gender and social status, risk obscuring rather than clarifying our understanding of the material record and the ancient world.

This study has sought to reassess the so called ‘sorceress’ kit’ through a methodological approach, grounded in detailed material analysis, contextual evaluation and comparison with both literary and archaeological evidence. In addressing the central research question – whether this collection can be meaningfully described as a ‘sorceress’ kit’ – the analysis suggests that elements of magical practice are indeed present. The unusually large number of amulets indicates belief in the use of apotropaic items and of familiarity with the magical associations of particular items, iconography, and materials. In this sense, the collection reflects engagement with magical thinking as part of everyday life.

However, describing the owner as a ‘sorceress’ or ‘sorcerer’ is far less certain. As outline earlier, such terminology implies a degree of specialist knowledge or professional practice that cannot be substantiated here. In the absence of any inscribed texts, explicit ritual instructions, or evidence for manufacture of magical objects on site, it remains impossible to determine whether magical actions were taking place at the House with the Garden, or whether the objects were simply a collection purchased elsewhere, retained for protective or devotional purposes. Many of the items are consistent with what might be expected for any superstitious Roman household to have. That said, the sheer volume of the amuletic material exceeds what is commonly encountered and suggests a particularly sustained engagement with such practices.

The remaining objects, including the natural material and repurposed household items, do not, in isolation prove magical activity. However, their deliberate storage together points towards a unified purpose, even if that purpose cannot be definitively identified. That being said, there is still the chance that this is the storage of random items, much like the modern junk drawer found in many modern houses!

What then of the social status and gender, of the owner? Again, without textual finds these questions remain frustratingly unresolved. The presence of female skeletons within the house, and the depiction of a possible *domina*, may suggest female association, but such conclusions rest on informed inferences rather than firm evidence. Similarly, arguments that

¹⁶⁵ Beard, *A Sorceress at Pompeii?* (2019)

the collection belonged to a slave or servant are difficult to sustain given the presence of high-quality jewels. Future analysis of the DNA studies of the skeletons, may yet provide further insight, but at present these remain unpublished.

Despite these uncertainties, this study raises several issues of wider significance. It highlights the persistence of sensationalised interpretations in the presentation of archaeological finds, and the ease with which ancient and modern assumptions – particularly around gender and magic – can shape scholarly and public narratives. It also demonstrates the value of Wilburn's etic, rather than emic methodology. By focusing on materiality, informed by but not universally led by contemporary literary sources, this approach allows for a more productive engagement in analysing potentially magical artefacts. Applied here, it has revealed forms of domestic magical practice that might otherwise have been overlooked.

More broadly, this study has highlighted the potential for Wilburn's methodology to be applied to other domestic contexts, both within Pompeii and further afield. Such work offers the possibility of identifying more examples of *materia magica*, and for a greater understanding of how magical practices functioned within domestic settings without reliance on reductive stereotypes.

Perhaps the most fitting conclusion to this thesis are the words of Mary Beard, whose lone critique prompted this investigation: "So "sorceress's kit" this new find may be. But can we agree to keep the question mark in? It's a "*possible* sorceress's kit". On the evidence available, it is precisely that question mark – carefully retained – that allows the assemblage from the House with the Garden to contribute more meaningfully to our understanding of Roman domestic magic.

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