

**COSMOLOGY, MAGIC AND DIVINATION:
NECROMANCY AND ORACLES OF THE DEAD IN ANTIQUITY
WEEK 6 SOURCES**

NECROMANCY: EVOCATION OF GHOSTS

Homer, *Odyssey*, 10.488, 11.13-149 (edited)¹

10.488. So I spoke. The divine goddess Circe answered me at once, “Zeus-born son of Laertes, Odysseus of the many devices, please do not remain in my house if you do not want to. But, first, you must accomplish another journey and come to the house of Hades and dread Persephone, to consult the ghost of Theban Tiresias, the prophet who is blind, although his mind is sound. For to him alone did Persephone grant retention of his wits even after death. But the other dead just flit about as shadows.”

[Odysseus is very upset and wonders how he will go to Hades in a ship. Circe gives him full instructions about the journey he must undertake and about the ritual that he must carry out in order to evoke the ghost of Tiresias. Odysseus then makes the journey.]

11.13. The ship came to the far edge of deep-streaming Ocean. That is the location of the people and city of Cimmerian men, buried in mist and cloud. Never does the shining sun look upon them with its rays, neither when he goes up to the starry heaven, nor when he turns back from heaven toward to the earth. Rather, baneful night is spread over the unfortunate mortals. Here we came and beached the ship, and took the sheep out. Then we went on foot along the course of Ocean, until we came to the place that Circe had indicated. There Perimedes and Eurylochus held the victims. I drew my sharp sword from my thigh and dug a pit a cubit wide this way and that. Around it I poured a full libation to all the dead, first with honey-milk, then with sweet wine, and third with water. I sprinkled white barley on top. I prayed at length to the powerless folk of the dead, and promised them that when I came to Ithaca I would sacrifice to them in my palace my best barren heifer, and that I would heap up a pyre with offerings, and that I would sacrifice to Tiresias separately an all-black sheep, the outstanding one among my flocks. But when I had prayed to them, the tribes of the dead, with prayers and vows, I took the sheep and jugulated them over the pit, and their dark blood flowed. The ghosts of the dead assembled from Erebus, brides, bachelors, old men who had suffered much, tender maidens with their fresh grief, warriors wounded by bronze-tipped spears, men killed in battle with their bloodied armour. From all sides they crowded en masse round the pit with a terrible cry. Fear gripped me and turned me pale. Then I roused my men and gave them the order to flay and burn the sheep that lay there jugulated by the pitiless bronze, and to pray to the gods, to strong Hades and dread Persephone. I myself drew my sharp sword from my thigh and sat there, and I did not allow the powerless folk of the dead to approach the blood before I made inquiry of Tiresias.

11.51. First came up the ghost of my comrade Elpenor, for he had not yet been buried under the earth of broad roads. We had left him unwept and unburied in Circe’s palace, since other concerns were pressing upon us. I wept on seeing him and felt pity in my heart. I gave voice and spoke to him: “Elpenor, how did you come under the dark of the west? You beat me on foot, while I came with my black ship.”

11.59. So I spoke, and he groaned and answered me, “Zeus-born son of Laertes, Odysseus of many devices, an evil demon and an excess of wine destroyed me. Lying in the palace of Circe I did not think to come back down by going to the tall ladder, but I fell straight down from the roof. My neck was broken and my soul came down to Hades. Now I beseech you by those left behind, those who aren’t here

¹ Homer, *Odyssey*, 10.488, 11.13-149 (extracts). Cited from Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp.179-182 (Source number 144).

now, by your wife and your father, who reared you when you were little, and by Telemachus, whom you left on his own in your palace. I know that when you leave the house of Hades here you will direct your well-made ship to the island of Aeaea. When you get there, lord, I bid you have thought for me. When you return do not leave me unwept and unburied, turning your back on me, lest I become a cause of the gods' anger against you. Rather, burn me with all my weapons, and heap up a barrow for me on the shore of the hoary sea, unfortunate man that I am, so that future generations too will learn of me. Do these things for me and fix my oar into the tomb, the one with which I used to row when I was alive and with my comrades."

11.79. So he spoke, and I said to him in reply, "Poor man, I shall do all this for you." We sat there exchanging miserable words, I on the one side holding my sword over the blood, while on the other side the ghost of my comrade had much to say.

11.84. There came up the ghost of my dead mother, Anticleia the daughter of the great-hearted Autolycus, who I had left behind alive when I went to holy Ilium. I wept to see her and I pitied her in my heart. But even so I did not allow her to approach the blood, deeply grieved though I was, before I made inquiry of Tiresias.

11.90. Then there came up the ghost of Theban Tiresias with his golden sceptre. He recognised me and addressed me: "Zeus-born son of Laertes, Odysseus of the many devices, why, poor man, have you left the light of the sun and come here to see the dead in this joyless place? But step back from the pit, so that I may drink and give you infallible information."

11.97. So he spoke, and I stepped back and fixed my silver-studded sword back into its scabbard. He drank the dark blood, and then the blameless prophet spoke to me: "...A death ever so gentle will come upon you from the sea, and it will slay you only when you are overcome by your old age, comfortable though it be. You will be surrounded by your people in fortunate condition. These infallible prophecies I declare to you...Whichever of the dead you allow to approach the blood will speak infallibly to you. But if you begrudge it to anyone, he will retreat."

QUESTIONS

- 1/ What ritual actions does Odysseus carry out in the above episode?
- 2/ Why does Odysseus perform this necromantic ritual? What is his aim in evoking the ghost of Tiresias?
- 3/ What can we ascertain from this episode regarding Greek beliefs about death, the underworld and ghosts?

NECROMANCY: ORACLES OF THE DEAD

Plutarch, *Moralia*, 109b-d (*Consolation to Apollonius*) (early 2nd century AD)²

They tell the following sort of tale about the Italian Euthynous. He was the son of Elysus of Terina, who was first among people there in virtue, wealth and reputation. He died suddenly from an uncertain cause. The thought that would have occurred to anyone else in the same circumstances occurred to Elysus: perhaps he had been killed by poisons. For he had been his only son, and he had a large estate and much money. He was at a loss as to how to test this possibility, so he arrived at some oracle of the dead [*psuchomanteion*]. He made the customary preliminary sacrifices, went to sleep, and saw the following vision. His own father seemed to stand by his side. Seeing him, he told him about his misfortune

² Plutarch, *Moralia* 109b-d (*Consolation to Apollonius*). Cited from Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp.188 (Source number 149).

concerning his son, and he besought him and asked him to help in discovering the cause of his son's death. His father replied, "This is the reason I have come. Take from this one here what he brings to you, and from this you will know everything you are grieving about." The one he pointed out was a young man who was following him, and he resembled Elysium's son in age and generation. He asked the boy who he was. He replied, "I am the demon of your son." And thus he offered him a small written tablet. He unrolled it and saw these three lines written on it:

"Indeed the minds of men wander in folly. Euthynous lies in his destined death. It was not good for him himself to live, nor was it good for his parents."

Maximus of Tyre, *Dissertationes*, 8.2 (2nd century AD)³

Somewhere in Italy, in Magna Graecia, at the so-called lake Aornos/Avernus there was an oracular cave and 'evocator' – men [*andres psuchagogoi*] were attendants of the cave. They took their name from their job. A man wanting an oracle would come to them, pray, sacrifice an animal, pour full libations, and call up the soul of any of his ancestors or friends. Then the ghost would confront him. It would be hard to see, and one could doubt that one was seeing it, but it would have the power of speech and could deliver prophecies. After discussing what was asked of it, it would depart. I think Homer knew this oracle, since he sent Odysseus to it, but, with considerable poetic license, removed the place from our sea.

QUESTIONS

- 1/ What do we learn from these passages about oracles of the dead? How would one consult an oracle of the dead and what rituals had to be performed?
- 2/ For what purposes were oracles of the dead consulted? Why do you think these oracles were consulted for such purposes?

NECROMANCY: REANIMATION

Lucan, *Pharsalia*, 6.588-830 (65 AD, Latin)⁴

588. The degenerate son of Pompey spoke to her first: "Glory of the Thessalian women, able, as you are, to reveal fates to peoples and to detail the future, I beseech you, let me have sure knowledge of the result that the fortune of war makes ready. I am not the lowest of the Roman hoard, but the brilliant son of Magnus, destined to be master of the world or to inherit total doom. My mind is stricken with doubts and is in panic, but, however, is ready to endure quantifiable fears. Deprive chance of the ability to rush upon us suddenly and unexpectedly. Either torture the powers above or leave them aside and press the truth from the ghosts. Open up the house of Elysium, call death itself and compel him to confess to me whom he seeks from among us. This is not a trivial task. It is worth even your while to trouble to inquire which way the hazard of so great a destiny is inclining." The impious Thessalian was delighted that her reputation had preceded her and said in reply, "If you wanted to alter the minor details of Fate, it would be a straightforward thing to induce the gods to bring to pass the actions you desired. It is granted to the craft to insert delays when the stars have urged on the death of a single man with their rays. And, even though every star should have destined a man for old age, we break off his life in the middle of his years with our herbs. But when a series of causes and effects derives from the very origin of the world, and all destinies are put under strain if you wish to make any change, and the human race as a whole feels the impact, in this case – we, the Thessalian gaggle, admit it – Fortune is more powerful than we are. But if

³ Maximus of Tyre, *Dissertationes*, 8.2. Cited from Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp.192 (Source number 154).

⁴ Lucan, *Pharsalia*, 6.588-830. Cited from Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp.193-198 (Source number 155).

you are content merely to know outcomes in advance, many and easy are the ways to the truth that will lie open before us. The earth, the sky, chaos, the seas, the fields and the Rhodopaeian rocks will speak to us. But the obvious method, in view of the fact that there is such an abundance of fresh death around us, is to raise a single body from the Thessalian plains so that the mouth of a corpse only recently dead and still warm may make utterance with full voice. We will not have to cope with a deathly shade, its limbs dried up by the sun, squeaking indistinctly to our hearing.”

624. So she spoke. She used her craft to redouble the darkness of the night. She shrouded her miserable head in a filthy mist and wandered amid the bodies of the dead soldiers, cast forth without burial. The wolves fled at once and the vultures too fled hungry, withdrawing their talons, as the Thessalian chose her prophet and, testing the innards, chill with death, came across the lobes of a hardened lung, firm and intact. She seeks a voice in the dead body. A question now hangs over the fates of many dead men: Who will she wish to call back to the world above? If she had attempted to raise up the complete armies, ranged against each other on the battlefield, and return them to war, the laws of Erebus would have allowed it, and the mighty monster would have drawn people up from Stygian Avernus to fight. Eventually a corpse was chosen, one with its throat cut, and brought. She put a hook into a deathly noose round its neck and dragged the pitiful corpse, destined to live again, over the crags and rocks. Dour Erictho stationed it under the high roof of the mountain cave she had dedicated to her rites.

642. There the ground fell steeply down, almost to the sightless caverns of Dis, it was pressed close by a colourless wood, its foliage drooping down. Yews, never raising their tops to the sky, impenetrable to the Sun, cut off its light. Within the cave is a morose darkness and gray mould, the product of protracted night. No light is shed except that which is manufactured with a spell. The air in the jaws of Tainaron is not as stifling as here. It is the dismal boundary between the hidden world and our own. It is such that the kings of Tartarus do not fear to let the dead pass to it. For, although the Thessalian prophetess does violence to the fates, it remains uncertain whether she is able to look upon the Stygian shades by virtue of drawing them up or by virtue of going down herself to them. She donned the coloured garb of the Fury. She scraped the hair back from her face to reveal it. She tied back her rough locks with bands of vipers. When she saw that the young companions were terrified and that Pompey himself was trembling, his face lifeless and his gaze frozen, she said, “Lay aside the terrors conceived in your fearful mind. Any moment now life will be restored anew in its true form, so that people will be able to hear the man as he speaks even though they are petrified. But if I displayed before you the Stygian lakes and the riverbank that resounds with fire, if I permitted you to look upon the Furies and Cerberus, shaking out his shaggy neck of snakes, and the giants, chained upon their backs, why should you be afraid, cowards, to look upon the ghosts that fear me?”

667. Then she opened up the chest with further wounds and filled it with seething blood. She rinsed the innards of corrupt matter and unstintingly administered the moon-juice. In this was mixed whatever creature nature had produced under ill omen. Nothing was missing: not the foam of the water-fearing rabid dog, not the guts of the lynx, not the hump of the dreadful hyena, not the bone marrow of a deer pastured on snakes, not the ship-stopper [*echenais*], which detains a hull in the middle of the sea, while the east wind strains her cables, not the eyes of snakes, not the stones that murmur when incubated under a mother eagle, not the Arabian flying snake, not the viper born beside the Red Sea, guardian of the precious pearl oyster, not the slough of the still-living Libyan horned snake, not the ashes of the phoenix that settles itself upon an Eastern altar. After putting these common-or-garden blights into her mixture, she added branches drenched in unspeakable spells, herbs on which her dread mouth had spat at the moment of their birth, and all the poisons she herself had contributed to the world. Then her voice, mightier than all the herbs in the bewitching of the gods of Lethe, poured out, first, mutterings that were discordant and not all of which sounded like the products of the human tongue. The voice contained the barking of dogs and the howling of wolves, the complaining cries of a scared owl and the night’s screech owl, the screeching and bellowing of wild animals, and the hissing of the snake. It expressed also the dashing of waves on rocks, the sound of the woods, and the thunder of a burst cloud. So many things did the single voice comprise. Then she pronounced more clearly a second set of utterances, in a Thessalian

spell, and penetrated Tartarus with her tongue. “Furies; Crimes of the Styx; Punishments [*Poenae*] of the guilty; Chaos, you who long to confound unnumbered worlds; Hades, Ruler in the earth, for whom the death of gods, deferred across long ages, is agonizing; Styx; Elysium, the reward of no Thessalian woman; Persephone, you who detest heaven and your mother; Hecate, the lowest manifestation of my goddess, by whose grace the ghosts and I hold converse, with silent tongue; Door-keeper of the broad house, you who throw human guts to the cruel dog; sister-Fates, destined to take up the threads of a life again and continue spinning; ferry-man of the flaming wave, reduced to a wornout old man by all the ghosts returning for me: hear my prayers. If I invoke you with a mouth sufficiently criminal and corrupt, if I never sing these incantations without first sating myself on human meat, if I have repeatedly opened up breasts, with the souls still in them, and rinsed them in warm brains, if any baby had been destined to live before it placed its head and entrails on your dishes, obey my prayer. I do not ask for a soul lying hidden in the cave of Tartarus and long accustomed to the dark, but one that is only just now abandoning the light and coming down. He still hesitates at the edge of the abyss of colourless Orcus and, even if he does give heed to these spells [or: drink down these herbal potions], he will still only join the other ghosts once. Let this Pompeian ghost, until recently our soldier, prophesy everything to Pompey’s son, if you are properly honoured by civil war.”

719. This she said, and lifted her head and foaming mouth. She saw the shade of the cast-out body standing beside her, in dread of the lifeless limbs and the hated bonds of its former prison. It was terrified to enter the opened breast and the guts and the organs smashed by the fatal wound. Ah pitiful man, from whom death’s final gift of immortality was unfairly snatched away. Erictho was taken aback that such delays had been permitted the fates. Furious with death, she beat the motionless body with a live snake, and she barked through the open clefts she had driven into the earth by her incantation and ruptured the silence of the kingdom. “Tisiphone and Megaera, you who scorn my calling, do you not drive this hapless soul through the emptiness of Erebus with your cruel whips? Any moment now I shall call you up by your true names and make you stand as Stygian hounds in the light of the upper world. I shall pursue you through tombs, through burials, ever hanging on your hells, I shall drive you from barrows and keep you from all urns. You, Hecate, decaying and colourless in appearance as you are, are in the habit of showing yourself to the gods above only after first making up your face. I will show you to them and forbid you to alter your hell-face. I shall blurt out, Persephone of Henna, the meal that traps you beneath the vast weight of the earth, the agreement by which you love the somber king of the night and the corruption you experienced that induced your mother to refuse to call you back. Upon you, Hades, worst of the world’s rulers, I shall send Titan, the Sun, bursting your caverns open, and you will be blasted by the instantaneous light of day. Do you obey? Or will I have to invoke him – him, whose invocation always shakes the earth and sets it quaking, the one who looks upon the uncovered head of the Gorgon, the one who even you cannot look down to, the one to whom you are the gods above, the one who forswears himself by the waters of the Styx?” At once the congealed gore warmed up, soothed the black wounds and ran into the veins and the extremities of the limbs. As the blood struck them the organs beneath the chill breast quivered, and life, creeping anew into the innards that had forgotten it, mingled itself with the death. Then all the dead man’s limbs shook, and his sinews flexed. The corpse did not raise itself from the ground gradually, one limb at a time. Rather, it shot up from the earth and was upright in an instant. The eyes were laid bare, the mouth an open grimace. His appearance was of one not yet fully alive, but of a man still in the phase of dying. He was still pallid and stiff, and in consternation at being brought back into the world. But his tightened mouth made no mutter. Voice and tongue were granted him only for replying. “Tell me,” said the Thessalian woman, “what I command you, and you shall be well rewarded. For if you speak truly to me I shall render you immune from the Thessalian crafts for as long as the world exists. Such is the pyre on which I will burn your limbs, such is the wood with which I will burn you, to the accompaniment of a Stygian spell, that your shade will hear nothing when mages sing their incantations to it. Let your second life be as valuable as this to you: neither words nor herbs will dare to break your sleep of protracted Lethe, Oblivion, when I have given you death. Ambiguity in prediction befits Delphic tripods and prophets of the gods above. But whoever is brave enough to seek the truth

from the shades and approach the oracles of hard death deserves to depart in certainty. I beg you, do not be sparing. Give things their names, give places, give forth a voice, through which the Fates may converse with me.” She added a spell by which she conferred knowledge of whatever she asked upon the shade.

With tears falling, the gloomy corpse said: “I did not see the sad threads of the Fates, called back as I was from the bank of the silent river. But what I did happen to learn from the all the shades is that the Roman ghosts are driven by wild discord, and impious arms have even broken the peace of the underworld. The Latin leaders, travelling in their various directions, have abandoned their homes in Elysium and gloomy Tartarus. These have laid open fate’s preparations. The blessed dead were sad of face. I saw the Decii, the souls of son and father alike given as propitiatory sacrifices to the gods in war, Camillus and the Curii, all weeping; Sulla complaining about you, Fortune; Scipio bemoaned the fact that his luckless descendant was destined to fall in the land of Libya; Cato the ‘greater’ enemy of Carthage, grieves for the death of his descendant, who refuses to be a slave. You alone, Brutus, first consul after the deposition of the kings, did I see rejoicing amid the pious shades. Threatening Cataline had broken and smashed his chains and was jubilant, as were the Marii and the bare-armed Cethegi. I saw the demagogic Drusi in their joy, those who made such wild laws, and the outrageous Gracchi. Their hands, restrained by everlasting iron bonds and Dis’ jail, applauded, and the host of the guilty is claiming the plains of the pious. The owner of the kingdom of the powerless opens up his colourless house. He hardens his sheer rocks and the tough steel chains, and makes ready the punishment for the victor. Have this for consolation, young man, the knowledge that the ghosts are preparing to welcome your father and his house to a place of peace and seclusion, and are reserving a spot in the bright part of the realm for the Pompeians. Do not fret about the glory of Caesar’s short additional life. The hour to level all leaders will come. Hasten to your death and, proud in your lofty spirit, descend to the underworld and trample underfoot the ghosts of the Roman gods [i.e. the deified emperors]. The only issue is which tomb is to be washed by the wave of the Nile, which by that of the Tiber. For the generals the battle is just about the circumstances of burial. Do not look into your own fate. Though I say nothing, the Fates will inform you. A more reliable prophet, your father Pompey himself, will furnish you with all predictions in the fields of Sicily. He too is unsure whither to summon you and whence to warn you off, what regions and what constellations he should bid you to avoid. Pitiful people, fear Europe, Africa and Asia! Fortune scatters your tombs over the lands of your triumphs. Wretched house, you will see no place in all the world any safer for you than Emathian Pharsalia.”

When he had brought this prophecy to this conclusion, he stood in silence, but with a gloomy expression that asked for death to be returned to him. Magical spells and herbs were required to make the corpse fall. Fate could not reclaim the soul for itself, having already exhausted its right to take it once. Then Erichtho constructed a pyre, using an enormous amount of wood. The dead man strode into the flames. She left the young man laid out on the kindled pile of wood, deigning at last to let him die. Then she accompanied Sextus back to his father’s camp. The sky was drawing on the colour of dawn, but night, at Erichtho’s behest, held back the day and provided thick shadows, until they arrived safely back within the tents of the camp.

QUESTIONS

- 1/ What powers does Erichtho, the Thessalian witch, claim for Thessalian witches, particularly as they relate to the workings of Fate?
- 2/ What ritual preparations does Erichtho carry out in this necromantic reanimation procedure?
- 3/ For what purposes is this necromantic ritual carried out?
- 4/ What gods and goddesses does Erichtho invoke and threaten in this necromantic ritual? Why do you think these deities would be particularly appropriate for such a ritual?