AHAN7011: COSMOLOGY, MAGIC AND DIVINATION 2016
Week 3

Divination, Magic and Religion

Portion of a Demotic Magical Papyrus (PDM lxi), from the British Museum, EA 10588.2, recto

Themes and Questions to Consider

- The role of divination within magical and religious practices in the ancient world
- Controversies, connections and boundaries between religion and magic
- What is magic? What is religion? What is divination? Can we define them? Can divination help us to distinguish between 'religious' and 'magical' practices?
- Anthropological and historical perspectives and debates on the nature of magic and religion.

Greek and Roman Religion

- Polytheistic and pagan: involving worshipping and honouring many gods, goddesses and divine beings
- Mythological
- Mystery cults: optional. Initiation
- 'Embedded' within everyday life (no Greek word for 'religion'; Roman *religio*)
- No dogma or orthodoxy but systematic use of divination
- Orthopraxy: Action rather than belief? But shared worldview and sense of meaning and efficacy

Similarities between Magical and Religious Practices

- The use of ritual, prayer, sacrifice and the invocation of traditional gods and goddesses
- The use of divination
- Both often claim to offer a special relationship with the divine
- Often, both claim to be 'therapeutic' in some sense: offering individuals help in a medical, social or spiritual context

Triadic (three-form) Statue of Hecate

Hecate depicted as a triple goddess, from the Mithraeum at Sidon, now in the Louvre

Imperial Roman fresco depicting Hermes with his *caduceus* wand

From Pompeii, in Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

Divination in a Religious Context

Next to the grove is a sanctuary of Demeter; she and her daughter are standing, but the image of Earth is seated. Before the sanctuary of Demeter is a spring. On the side of this towards the temple stands a wall of stones, while on the outer side has been made a descent to the spring. Here there is an infallible oracle, not indeed for everything, but only in the case of sick folk. They tie a mirror to a fine cord and let it down, judging the distance so that it does not sink deep into the spring, but just far enough to touch the water with its rim. Then they pray to the goddess and burn incense, after which they look into the mirror, which shows them the patient either alive or dead. This water partakes to this extent of truth…

Pausanias, *Description of Greece* VII.21.11-12

Divination in a Magical Context (1)

PGM VII, 359-69: Request for a dream oracle: Take a strip of clean linen and write on it the following name. / Roll it up to make a wick, pour pure olive oil over it and light it.
The formula to be written is this: 'HARMIOUTH LAILAM CHŌOUCH ARSENOPHRĒ PHRĒU PHTHA HARCHENTECHTHA.'

In the evening then, when you are about to go to sleep, being pure in every respect, do this: Go to the lamp, say 7 times the following formula, extinguish the light/and go to sleep.
The formula to be spoken is as follows: SACHMOUNE PAĒMALIGOTĒRĒĒNCH, the one who shakes, who thunders, who has swallowed the serpent, surrounds the moon, and hour by hour raises the disk of the sun, CHTHETHŌNI IS YOUR NAME. I ask you, lords of the gods, SĒTH CHRĒPS: reveal to me concerning the things I wish.

In Betz, *GMPT*, p. 127, tr. W. C. Grese

Divination in a Magical Context (2)

Another spell in the same papyrus (*PGM* VII, 505-28, 'Meeting your own daimon', begins:

'Hail, Tyche and Daimon of this place, and present hour, and the present day, and every day. Hail, the surrounding environment which is earth and heaven. Hail, Sun: for you are the one who has set yourself over the holy firmament with an unseen light ORKORĒTHARA. …'

lines 506-510, trans. D. G. Greenbaum

Approaches to Categorising 'magic' and 'religion' (1)

- James Frazer (*The Golden Bough* [London, 1911-15], 222): "By religion, then, I understand a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life…It is true that magic often deals with spirits, which are personal agents of the kind assumed by religion; but whenever it does so in its proper form, it treats them exactly in the same fashion as it treats inanimate agents, that is, it constrains or coerces instead of conciliating or propitiating them as religion would do."

- Frazer opposed magic and religion on the basis that magic compels and coerces divine beings, whereas religion propitiates, supplicates and begs them.

Approaches to Categorising 'magic' and 'religion' (2)

- But many 'magical' invocations and spells show a supplicatory and respectful approach towards the god or goddess invoked. (Example: passage from PGM IV 'Mithras Liturgy')
- Similarities between the most common type of magical spell = *defixio* (binding spell) and the traditional religious prayer.
- Example: the religious prayer of Chryses in Book 1 of the *Iliad*: here the priest reminds Apollo of his piety on many occasions, so the god may feel the readier to punish the Achaeans for their blasphemy.

'Magic' and 'Religion': Intentions and Aims

- Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (*Magic, Science, Religion and Other Essays*, 1954) distinguishes magic from religion based on intention: magic employed to achieve concrete, mostly individual goals. Religion not primarily purpose-motivated, or at most focuses on long-term goals which concern collective issues of society

Challenges:

- Many 'magical' invocations and spells have a higher spiritual intention or aim, e.g the Mithras Liturgy
- Theurgy: a type of ritual used by philosophers and wise men in the late antique period which aims to unite the soul with the divine.
- Many ancient Greek religious rituals have concrete, practical goals. (Example: Fowler excerpt)

‘Magic’ and ‘Religion’: Social approaches and the public/private divide (1)

- The second classical approach to magic was to explain it in terms of social categories:
- Émile Durkheim (*Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, 1912, 62): religion is the communal cult and beliefs of a group, the expression of collective identity. Magic, on the other hand, is an individual, private practice, which may be secret and a potential threat to group identity.
- Marcel Mauss (*A General Theory of Magic,* 1950, 18-25): Social prohibition forms the boundary between magic, seen by society as subversive, and religion, sanctioned by society. Therefore religious practices are predictable, prescribed and official while magical practices are considered unauthorised and abnormal.

‘Magic’ and ‘Religion’: Social approaches and the public/private divide (2)

- This approach seems more reasonable and is held by many Classicists who see social context and attitudes as very important, e.g. R. Fowler, Fritz Graf etc.

Problems:

- Private, individual domestic worship of the gods
- Many kinds of ‘magical’ invocations and curses which appeal to justice are found in public. For instance, they are set up in public squares and carved on gravestones
- The Mystery cults. They involve a more individual and spiritual approach which cannot really be classified as wholly ‘public’

The Distinction between 'Magic' and 'Religion' (1)

- Fritz Graf (*Magic in the Ancient World*, 1997): argues that the opposition between magic and religion existed self-consciously in Greek and Roman cultures although at an earlier stage in their existence, they did not make any such distinction.
- He argues that two factors gave rise to the hiving off of magic from religion, of which it had been an integral part: on the one hand, self-conscious philosophical reflection on the nature of the divine had led to a purified conception of the gods completely at odds with the assumptions about the nature of the divine made by those who practised *mageia* (Frazer's view?)
- On the other side, natural science began to look at nature as a closed system within which changes were to be attributed to physical causes only.

The Distinction between 'Magic' and 'Religion' (2)

- Currently Classicists often view magic as a manifestation of ritual power and as a subclass of religious ritual.
- For example, Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki, introduction to *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, 1995, 3-5); Einar Thomassen, 'Is magic a subclass of ritual?' in *The world of ancient magic*, eds Jordan, Montgomery and Thomassen, 55-66, 1999).

Magic, Religion and Science

"A clear distinction can be made between 'magic' and 'religion' *when the latter is Judaeo-Christian in nature*; likewise, a clear distinction can be made between 'magic' and 'science' of the Western variety....Yet the basis and merit of these distinctions was precisely their limitation: *they were wholly ethnocentric and made no sense when applied to the cultures of peoples who did not share the Judaeo-Christian religions or the Western variety of science*." (my italics)

-Murray and Rosalie Wax, 'The Notion of Magic', 495

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