

MIRRORS AND DIVINATION:
CATOPTROMANCY, ORACLES AND EARTH GODESSES IN
ANTIQUITY

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Divination was a widespread phenomenon in ancient Graeco-Roman religion: the Oracle at Delphi, the most famous oracular sanctuary in ancient Greece, operated for at least a thousand years, with kings, civic officials and private individuals consulting the oracle for advice.¹ Many other types of divination were also widely practised in the Graeco-Roman world: for example, haruspicy, the examination of the entrails of sacrificial animals, is a divinatory practice attested to from at least the eighth century BC to the late antique period. Other types of divination practised included augury, astrology and dream incubation. The practice of divination using mirrors was called Catoptromancy in the ancient world, derived from the Greek word *katoptron* meaning mirror, or metaphorically, reflection; presumably because one looks into a mirror as one would look into a reflective pool. Catoptromancy involved divination by images seen reflected on a shining surface, usually a mirror but sometimes water or another analogous reflective medium. This was not a particularly well-known or prevalent form of divination in antiquity; however, there are some notable and striking instances of its use recorded in various literary sources. Pausanias, a travel writer, Artemidorus, a writer on dream interpretation, and Iamblichus, a Neoplatonist philosopher, all refer to Catoptromancy; their accounts allow a glimpse into the ancient practices and rituals involved in this type of divination.

It seems clear that two types of Catoptromancy were practised in Graeco-Roman antiquity. The first kind, generally practised at oracular temples and sanctuaries, uses mirrors by lowering them into water. The

prophet or prophetess would then utter an oracle based on his or her vision in the mirror. The second type of Catoptromancy invokes a god or *daimon* (semi-divine being) to appear as a luminous vision by using reflective surfaces to conduct light; the god or *daimon* would then give the practitioner oracular information. The French scholar Andre Delatte argues that the first type made no appeal to supernatural power but relied on the natural ability of any glittering surface to encourage divination by exciting the imagination, whereas the second kind of catoptromancy had a very clear religious character, and employed invocations to both gods and *daimones*.² I would like to offer a few suggestions regarding the interpretation of these two types of Catoptromancy.

Catoptromancy at Oracle Sites and in Mystery Cults

Pausanias' *Description of Greece*, a second century AD travel guide, gives us the clearest extant account of this first type of Catoptromancy.³ In his discussion of the sanctuary of Demeter at Patras he discusses an oracular ritual utilising the practice of Catoptromancy:

**tou de alsou~ ieron ecetai Dhmhtrou~: auth men kai h
pai~ estasi, to de agalma th~ Gh~ esti kaqhmenon. pro
de tou ierou th~ Dhmhtrou~ esti phgh: tauth~ ta men
pro~ tou naou liqwn anesthken aimasia, kata de to
ekto~ kaqodo~ e~ authn pepoihtai. manteion de entauqa
estin ayeude~, ou men epi panti ge pragmati, alla epi
tw kamnontwn. katoptron kalwdiw tw leptwn dhsante~
kaqiasi, staqmwmenoi mh prosw kaqikesqai th~ phgh~,
all' oson epiyausai tou udato~ tw kuklw tou katoptrou.
to de enteugen euxamenoi th qew kai qumiasante~ e~ to
katoptron blepousi: to de sfisi ton nosounta htoi
zwnta h kai teqnewta epideiknusi. toutw men tw udati e~
tosouto metestin alhqeia~...**

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...⁴

Pausanias' description does not inform as to whether the mirror was lowered into the spring vertically or horizontally. It is interesting to note that this oracle was not consulted on any matter concerning the inquirer, as with most oracular practices in the ancient world, but rather just for cases of illness. There seems to be a parallel here with the purposes of the divinatory practices at sanctuaries of Asclepius, where sick people went to receive cures and advice about their health through dream incubation, by sleeping in the temple in order to receive an oracular dream. Unfortunately, Pausanias does not fully describe how the oracle was produced, neither mentioning whether a prophet or prophetess uttered the oracle nor explaining how the actual ritual worked. Generally, oracular practices in antiquity involved the consultation of a prophet or prophetess who was thought to utter the words of a deity, in some cases while in a trance-like state. Therefore, presumably, a prophet or prophetess composed their oracle from the observation of the vision in the mirror and was thought to utter the words of a divinity, most likely Demeter since this ritual is located in her temple. However Pausanias does not give any details and therefore does not tell us whether the prophet was in a trance-like state or not. However, there are various details in his account that are extremely interesting. For example, the catoptronic ritual is associated with the spring by the temple and linked specifically with the water of the spring. As we have seen, the Greek word *katoptron* can mean reflection as well as mirror, indicating the connection between mirrors and water because of their common reflective qualities. Many Oracles in ancient Greece and Asia Minor had a spring near the temple, which served a variety of divinatory purposes other than the reflective revelation described

in Pausanias' account. For example, the Pythia, the prophetess at Delphi, drank from the Kastalian spring located near the temple before uttering oracles.⁵ There was also a spring at the Oracle at Claros from which the prophet drank before uttering his prophecies; the spring water was thought to have oracular power which inspired the prophet.⁶ Again, there was a spring at the Oracle of Didyma, which the priestess bathed in before delivering oracles.⁷ Pausanias asserts that at Hysiae, there was a half-finished temple of Apollo and a sacred well and in former days oracles were obtained from the well by drinking from it.⁸ In the very elaborate ritual preparations of the Oracle of Trophonius in Boeotia the consultant had to bathe in the river Hercyna and then had to drink from two springs; the priests called the water from these springs, the water of Forgetfulness (*Lethe*) and the water of Memory (*Mnemosyne*) respectively.⁹ Therefore from these examples it appears that the ritual Pausanias describes is linked with hydromancy, divination practised by looking into water, and lecanomancy, divination practised by observing water or oil in a bowl or basin. This is confirmed by the emphasis in the text upon the water as the instrument which partakes in the truth. Thus, water was a common feature at oracular sites and was often involved in oracular rituals, including Catoptromancy.

Another notable feature of Pausanias' account is that the Catoptromantic ritual occurs at a temple of Demeter. Demeter was an ancient Greek goddess associated with the earth, fertility and crops.¹⁰ Pausanias tells us that there were statues of Demeter, her daughter Persephone and the goddess Earth, or Ge, at this temple.¹¹ The earth was often linked with water in ancient Greek thought: both were thought to possess prophetic power.¹² For example the earth goddess Ge was said to possess the Delphic Oracle long before the god Apollo did; the legendary origins of this Oracle are linked with this ancient earth goddess.¹³ Indeed Ge is often considered to have been the prophetess *par excellence*.¹⁴ The practice of Catoptromancy was not only linked with the prophetic power of water, through its shared reflective properties and other uses in oracular rituals, but more surprisingly it was also linked with the prophetic power of the earth.¹⁵ Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica*, an ancient handbook of dream interpretation from the second century AD, states that the mirror is associated with the earth and, incidentally, it is associated with foretelling death for the sick, in a discussion of the meaning of mirrors in dreams:

nosounta~ de anairei: ghinon gar esti to katoptron, ex oia~ an h pepoihmenon ulh~.

But it [the mirror] portends death for the sick. **For the mirror belongs to the earth**, whatever the material it may have been made from. [my bold]¹⁶

Oracular practices using mirrors were associated with earth goddesses and their chthonic power. One reason that the mirror might be associated with the earth is that both were viewed as feminine and were thus connected with feminine aspects of divine power. Indeed Artemidorus also suggests that the mirror is a symbol of a woman:

ei men tucoi erwn gunaiko~, ou thn erwmenhn oyetai all' ippon h katoptron h naun h qalassan h qhrion qhlu h esqhta gunaikeian h allo ti tw shmainontwn gunaika.

...if he is in love with a woman, he will not see his beloved in a dream, but rather a horse, **a mirror**, a ship, the sea, an animal that is female, a piece of feminine apparel **or anything else that signifies a woman**. [my bold]¹⁷

The use of Catoptromancy at oracle sites was linked with water and the earth, both of which were thought to possess prophetic power. Mirrors were associated with earth goddesses because they were perceived as feminine.

The other reference to mirrors in Pausanias' work is very revealing in these respects. Although it does not comprise an explicit account of Catoptromancy, it is very interesting in the light of these associations between Catoptromantic rituals, the earth, earth goddesses and water. Pausanias describes a sanctuary at Lykosoura in Arcadia which is dedicated to a mysterious goddess to whom he refers simply as Despoina, the Mistress (**to ieron th~ Despoinh~**).¹⁸ He enigmatically describes Despoina as follows:

tauthn malista qewn sebousin oi Arkade~ thn Despoinan, qugatera de authn Poseidwno~ fasin einai kai Dhmhtrō~.

**epiklhsi~ e~ tou~ pollou~ estin auth Despoina, kaqaper
kai thn ek Dio~ Korhn eponomazousin, idia de estin
onoma Persefonh . . . th~ de Despoinh~ to onoma edeisa
e~ tou~ atelestou~ grafein.**

This Mistress the Arcadians worship more than any other god, declaring that she is the daughter of Poseidon and Demeter. Mistress is her surname among the many, just as they surname Demeter's daughter by Zeus the Maid. But whereas the real name of the Maid is Persephone . . . the real name of the Mistress I am afraid to write to the uninitiated.¹⁹

Pausanias reports that this temple was associated with the goddess Demeter, along with Despoina, the Mistress; altars to both goddesses stand in front of the temple. The statues of the goddesses were constructed from one piece of stone, which was dug up from the earth within the sanctuary in obedience to a dream (**alla kata oyin oneirato~ legousin**).²⁰ The fact that the statues were constructed from the same piece of stone clearly reflects the link between the goddesses, and the oracular dream instructing the Arcadians to dig the stone from the earth indicates a connection between these goddesses, the earth and oracles.

Pausanias then alludes to a mirror displayed on the right wall of the temple:

**en dexia de exionti ek tou naou katoptron hrmosmenon
estin en tw toicw: touto hn ti~ prosbleph to
katoprton, eauton men htoi pantapasin amudrw~ h oude
oyetai thn archn, ta de agalmata twn qewn kai auta
kai ton qronon estin enargw~ qeasasqai. para de ton
naon th~ Despoinh~ oligon epanabanti en dexia Megaron
esti kaloumenon, kai telethn te drwsin entauqa kai th
Despoinh quousin iereia oi Arkade~ polla te kai
afqona.**

**On the right as you go out of the temple there is a mirror fitted
into the wall. If anyone looks into this mirror, he will see himself**

very dimly indeed or not at all, but the actual images of the gods and the throne can be seen quite clearly. When you have gone up a little, beside the temple of the Mistress on the right is what is called the Hall, where the Arcadians celebrate mysteries, and sacrifice to the Mistress many victims in generous fashion. [my bold]²¹

This fascinating passage states those exiting the temple who look into the mirror can see themselves only dimly or not at all, but the statues of the goddesses can be seen very clearly. This suggests the mirror has some special significance since it is not reflecting what one would expect, i.e. the person standing in front of it most clearly and the statues of the gods in the background less clearly because they are more distant. Rather this mirror reflects the statues of the gods most clearly, showing the divine that lies behind the human. The fact that immediately following this comment Pausanias describes the Arcadian mystery ceremonies devoted to Despoina seems significant: it raises the possibility that the mirror displayed on the temple wall had some connection with these mystery ceremonies.

Mirrors were certainly linked with the mystery ceremonies held in honour of Dionysus. A fresco in Room 5 of the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii which depicts scenes from Dionysiac Mysteries²² shows a young satyr looking intensely into a cup. A Silenus, a mythical creature who was a follower of Dionysus, holds up a mask (which was a cultic object sacred to Dionysus) behind the satyr and a girl on his right looks frightened. It is generally believed that this is a scene of Catoptromancy. Some scholars argue that the satyr is a medium who tells the Silenus what he sees on the shining surface; the Silenus then interprets the vision as an oracle for the girl, who looks terrified because of the content of the oracle.²³ In the adjacent room, Room 4, which also contains frescoes depicting Bacchic scenes and is thought to be linked with Room 5, a rectangular mirror rests on a painted cornice in the right-hand corner of an architectural vista above a mural depicting a priestess. This mirror is tilted so that the reflection of a red-skinned figure is partially visible.²⁴ The similarities with Pausanias' account of the mirror in the temple at Lykosoura are striking: both mirrors are placed to the right-hand side of the wall (which may be significant given that omens appearing on the right were considered to be auspicious in antiquity) and both reflect effigies of deities. Given this evidence and its location in a temple, it is possible that the mirror described by Pausanias

may also have been a sacred object used in the mystery ceremonies devoted to Despoina.

Thus, a complex web of associations are apparent in the use of mirrors in ancient Graeco-Roman religion and divination. This first type of Catoptromancy practised at oracular temples was clearly connected with earth goddesses, particularly Demeter, and with ancient Greek religious conceptions of the prophetic power of water and the earth. These links suggest that Catoptromancy was perceived as having a feminine and chthonic nature, at least as it was practised at oracle sites. Catoptromancy, and mirrors in general, also lead us to aspects of Graeco-Roman cults which are obscure to us: the feminine and chthonic power of Greek goddesses was linked with mystery cults which remained, and still remain, shrouded in secrecy and obscurity because of their initiatory and therefore, secretive, nature. All initiates had to take an oath of silence, and so a thick veil of secrecy obscures the nature of these ancient Graeco-Roman mystery cults. Pausanias' description of the mystery cult at Lykosoura as well as the mirror found in the Villa of Mysteries at Pompeii raise the possibility that mirrors played a significant role in the mystery cults of antiquity. However the use of the mirrors is also shrouded in the secrecy of initiation, affecting the tentative nature of the conclusions drawn here.

Catoptromancy in private, ritual practices: evoking the light

The second type of Catoptromancy utilised reflective surfaces, seemingly in imitation of mirrors. It involved the invocation of a god or a *daimon* to appear as a luminous vision on a reflective surface by using water to conduct light; the invoked being was thought to provide oracular information. This type of Catoptromancy is primarily discussed by the Neoplatonist philosopher Iamblichus in the third century AD in his work, *On the Mysteries*.²⁵ This type of Catoptromancy Iamblichus calls, evoking the light (**fwto~ agwgh** or **fwtagwgia**).²⁶ Although Iamblichus does not specifically refer to a mirror in his description, it is clear that the practices he alludes to can be classified as Catoptromancy, since they entail divination by images seen on a reflective surface.

According to Iamblichus, the use of water or any other transparent, reflective surface for evoking the light is just a means to an end; any

accessory or instrument that one can shine and conduct light through seems to be appropriate:

**Eniote d' au kai di' udato~ agousi to fw~, epeidh
diafane~ on touto eufuw~ diakeitai pro~ upodochn tou
fwto~. Allote d' ei~ toicon auto poiouein epilampein,
tai~ ierai~ tw~n carakthrw~n katagrafai~
proeutrepizonte~ edran aristw~ ei~ ton toicon tw fwti,
kai ama aposthrizonte~ auto entauqa en tini sterew
cwriw, wste mh epi polu diaceisqai.**

Sometimes, moreover, they also conduct the light through water, since this, being transparent, is naturally well suited for the light's reception. At other times they cause it to shine on a wall, having expertly prepared in advance a place on the wall for the light with sacred inscriptions of magical symbols, and at the same time fixing the light on a solid place so that it will not be too diffused.²⁷

Iamblichus emphasises this point repeatedly: any instrument which conducts light is appropriate.²⁸ In this form of Catoptrromancy, water and mirrors are merely instruments for conducting the light which can be used interchangeably. Iamblichus' explanation of the operation of this type of divination is philosophical: the light illuminates the soul vehicle of the practitioner and acts as a conduit for the divine light which surrounds the soul; then the divine appearances within the soul vehicle, set in motion by the gods' will, take possession of the imaginative power within us.²⁹ In other words, the imagination is affected from the outside by the gods, ultimately causing the appearance of divine visions on the reflective surface. Iamblichus emphasises that the imagination is a passive receptacle of divine visions.³⁰

The later Neoplatonist philosopher Damascius also refers to an evoking the light ritual where a wall is used as the reflective surface upon which the light is shone.³¹ These types of rituals are also attested to in the *Greek Magical Papyri*, a collection of papyri from Graeco-Roman Egypt containing a variety of magical formulae, hymns and rituals.³² However these rituals do not seem to utilise a reflective surface such as a mirror or water, but instead use a lamp.³³

Conclusion

Due to the nature and scarcity of the evidence, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about these two types of Catoptromancy; however, I would like to suggest some modifications to Delatte's distinction between these two types. Delatte argued that the second type of Catoptromancy, evoking the light, had a far more supernatural and religious character than the first type. The use of terms such as supernatural have been widely contested and debated in recent academic research, as has the distinction between religion and magic.³⁴ I would suggest that Delatte's distinction between them is anachronistic since both types of Catoptromancy are clearly religious, the first type as much as the second since it was used at oracular sites consecrated to specific deities. As we have seen, the prophet or prophetess at Patras was probably thought to utter the words of a divinity, most likely Demeter. A distinction drawn between them in terms of public ritual, which any individual could utilise in a recognised public institution (the first type), and private ritual, undertaken by private individuals possibly in secrecy (the second type), would seem to provide a more accurate categorisation. Similarities do seem to be apparent in both types, since the mirror seems to be interchangeable with any shining, reflective object in both types of ritual. Both types use the mirror or a similar reflective surface to inspire the human soul of the prophet or practitioner: in the first case to utter oracles and in the second case, to perceive divine visions. In both cases the practitioner was thought to be the recipient of divine truth. However, another distinction between these types would seem to be the natural phenomena which are utilised in conjunction with them. In the first type of Catoptromancy, this is clearly water; in the second type, it is more predominantly light, and water only functions to replace the mirror rather than being used in conjunction with it. The first type of Catoptromancy is very clearly connected with the prophetic qualities of water and the earth, and is linked with the worship and cult of earth goddesses, particularly Demeter. The second type is connected with light; a phenomenon which, for Iamblichus at least, acted as a conduit and reflection of divine beings. At the oracle sites, the prophet or prophetess looks into the mirror-in-water, which imperfectly reflects divine truth. With the second type of Catoptromancy, Iamblichus tells us that one uses the reflective surface representative of the mirror, to focus or direct the

light, but looks at the light rather than the mirror. In conclusion a complex yet fascinating network of associations surrounded the use of mirrors in divinatory practices in the ancient world. This network of associations suggests the falsity of an overstatement of this distinction between the two types. Both types of Catoptromancy, that used at oracle sites and the practice of evoking of light, share the same ultimate aim: to use elemental phenomena to gain a vision of truth and knowledge from the gods.

¹ Joseph Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 5 – 6; H.W. Parke, *A History of the Delphic Oracle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1939), 4.

² Andre Delatte, *La Catoptromancie Grecque et ses Dérivés* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres de L'Université de Liège, 1932), 8–9.

³ K.W. Arafat, *Pausanias' Greece: Ancient artists and Roman rulers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8, suggests that Pausanias' work was written between the 130s and approximately 175-80 AD. Cf. John Elsner, *Pausanias: A Greek Pilgrim in the Roman World Past and Present* 135 (1992): 3–29.

⁴ Pausanias *Description of Greece* VII.21.11-12, trans. W.H.S. Jones (Vol III Loeb Classical Library, 1966).

⁵ Pausanias *Description of Greece* X.24.7, trans. W.H.S. Jones (Vol IV, Loeb Classical Library, 1965).

⁶ Iamblichus *On the Mysteries* III.11 (124.8 –126.3), trans. Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon & Jackson P. Hershbell (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); Pliny *Natural History* II.106.232, trans. H. Rackham (Vol I, Loeb Classical Library, 1938); Tacitus *Annals* II.54, trans. J. Jackson (Vol III, Loeb Classical Library, 1931).

⁷ Iamblichus *On the Mysteries* III.11 (127.6 – 7).

⁸ Pausanias *Description of Greece* IX.2.1, Vol IV.

⁹ Pausanias *Description of Greece* IX.39.7-8, Vol IV.

¹⁰ For oracles urging Greeks to worship Demeter, cf. H.W. Parke, 330.

¹¹ Pausanias *Description of Greece* VII.21.11, Vol III.

¹² W.R. Halliday, *Greek Divination* (London: Macmillan, 1913), 121 – 123; Cf. A. Bouché-Leclercq, *Histoire de la Divination dans L'Antiquité* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1880), Vol II, 252: Gaea devait donc être, aux yeux des Hellènes des premiers âges, la divinité prophétique par excellence, et nous verrons les théories des âges postérieurs lui rendre peu à peu le privilège exclusif d'alimenter l'inspiration des oracles.

¹³ Aeschylus *Eumenides* 1 – 8, trans. H.W. Smyth (Vol II, Loeb Classical Library, 1932); Euripides *Iphigenia Among the Taurians* 1259–1269, trans. D. Kovacs (Loeb Classical Library, 1999); Plutarch *Moralia* 421C, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (Vol V, Loeb Classical Library, 1936); Apollodorus *The Library* I.4.1, trans. James G. Frazer (Vol I, Loeb Classical Library, 1921); Cf. Fontenrose, 3.

¹⁴ Cf. Jules Herbillon, *Les Cultes de Patras* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1929), 30 –31.

¹⁵ Cf. for example Pausanias *Description of Greece* IX.10.6, Vol IV.

¹⁶ Artemidorus *Oneirocritica* (The Interpretation of Dreams), 2.7, ed. Roger A. Pack, *Artemidori Daldiani Onirocriticon Libri V*, 108 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1963); trans. R. White (Park Ridge: Noyes Classical Press, 1975).

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- ¹⁷ Artemidorus *Oneirocritica* (The Interpretation of Dreams) Book 4, Introduction, ed. Roger A. Pack, *Artemidori Daldiani Onirocriticon Libri V*, 240 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1963); trans. R.J. White (Park Ridge: Noyes Classical Press, 1975).
- ¹⁸ Pausanias *Description of Greece* VIII.37.1, Vol. IV.
- ¹⁹ Pausanias *Description of Greece* VIII.37.9-10, Vol. IV.
- ²⁰ Pausanias *Description of Greece* VIII.37.2-3; 37.4, Vol. IV.
- ²¹ Pausanias *Description of Greece* VIII.37.7-8, Vol. IV.
- ²² Elizabeth de Grummond, Bacchic Imagery and Cult Practice in Roman Italy, in *The Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii: Ancient Ritual, Modern Muse*, ed. Elaine K. Gazda, 81-82 (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 2000), argues persuasively that the fresco cycle may depict a Bacchic ritual and have a firm basis in reality since a number of cultic titles found on second century AD inscription might plausibly be used to describe figures in the Pompeian paintings. She follows many other scholars who also hold this view.
- ²³ Richard A.S. Seaford, The Mysteries of Dionysus at Pompeii in *Pegasus: Classical Essays from the University of Exeter*, ed. H.W. Stubbs, 59, 62-64 (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1981).
- ²⁴ Brenda Longfellow, Liber and Venus in the Villa of the Mysteries, in *The Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii: Ancient Ritual, Modern Muse*, ed. Elaine K. Gazda, 121-122 (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 2000).
- ²⁵ Iamblichus *On the Mysteries* III.14.
- ²⁶ Iamblichus *On the Mysteries* III.14 (132.7-9).
- ²⁷ Iamblichus *On the Mysteries* III.14 (134.2-7).
- ²⁸ Iamblichus *On the Mysteries* III.14 (134.8-10).
- ²⁹ Iamblichus *On the Mysteries* III.14 (132.9-14).
- ³⁰ Iamblichus *On the Mysteries* III.14 (133.1-7). Cf. Emma C. Clarke, *Iamblichus' De Mysteriis: A manifesto of the miraculous* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 85.
- ³¹ Damascius *The Philosophical History* Fragment 75F, trans. Polymnia Athanassiadi (Athens: Apamea Cultural Press, 1999).
- ³² Hans Dieter Betz, introduction to *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz, xli (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), who states that the extant texts date mainly from the second century BC to the fifth century AD.
- ³³ *Papyri Graecae Magicae* IV.930 – 1114, trans. W.C. Grese and E.N. O'Neil; VII.540 – 578, trans. Jackson P. Hershbelle in *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz, 56, 133-134 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
- ³⁴ Since J. Goody, Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problems *British Journal of Sociology* 12 (1961): 142-157, many scholars tend to view the dichotomy profane-sacred (or: supernatural) as a Western ethnocentric construct. Cf. also H.S. Versnel, Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic-Religion *Numen* 38 (1991): 178, 193. Social anthropologists, ethnologists and Classicists have long debated the meaning and possible definition of magic and its relationship with, and possible distinction from, religion. The literature on this matter is vast, and this is intended as a brief summary rather than an exhaustive account. The debate began with Sir 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 them. The second classical approach to magic was to explain it in terms of social categories: cf. Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris: Quadrige, 1912), 62, for whom 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* (London: Routledge, 1950), 18-25, follows Durkheim in evaluating magic from a social and moral standpoint. 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. The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1954), 87-90, argued that we should distinguish magic from religion based upon their intention: magic is employed to achieve concrete, mostly individual goals. Religion is not primarily purpose-motivated, or at most focuses on long-term goals which concern collective issues of society. Most of these discussions of the nature of magic and religion are motivated by the desire to provide a definition of the notion of magic which will hold for all cultures and explain what all procedures thought of as magical have in common, i.e. they are based on the assumption that magic is a universal notion and not one that is culturally specific. Cf. the discussion in Matthew W. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2001), 18-20. The notion of magic as a universal concept has been questioned by various recent anthropological studies, which argue that 'magic' is a modern-western biased construct which does not fit representations of other cultures: M. and R. Wax, The notion of magic *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963): 495-513; Edmund Leach, *Social Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 133, states: As for magic, which readers of Fraser's *The Golden Bough* might suppose to lie at the very centre of the anthropologist's interests, after a lifetime's career as a professional anthropologist, I have reached the conclusion that the word has no meaning whatsoever. On this basis some scholars have condemned the word magic as a 'semantic trap.' Cf. for example Dorothy Hammond, Magic: A Problem in Semantics, *American Anthropologist* 72 (1970), 1349-1356. The Classicist Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), has examined Greek and Roman magic, arguing that the opposition between magic and religion existed self-consciously in these 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*. 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. Currently Classicists often view magic as a manifestation of ritual power and as a subclass of religious ritual: cf. for example Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki, introduction to *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki, 3-5 (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Einar

Thomassen, Is magic a subclass of ritual? in *The world of ancient magic*, ed. David R. Jordan, Hugo Montgomery and Einar Thomassen, 55-66 (Bergen: The Norwegian Institute at Athens, 1999).