

Greek Origin of Magic

In the era of the Greeks, people had methods of casting magic that would heal, and also magic that was intended to harm. The Greeks and Romans were notorious for creating and using effigies and other magical objects and items so that they could implore the gods or use the forces of nature to get what they wanted. Curse magic, and magic that was used to heal, was useful and popular in the pre-Christian Greek and Roman era, so much that it was eventually outlawed with the advent of Christianity in Rome.

The Greeks were a society of people that had developed their religion and magical ideas from the surrounding cultures that they conquered. The Greeks who practiced animism, had a spiritual understanding of nature, and they considered every thing that was living or non-living to contain a spirit or force. The Greeks had a deep interest in the soul, or spirit and they sought to understand the experience of conscious and unconscious states of being.

Greek and Roman curse magic had generally been used for two main purposes - first, to bind a subject to the magician's will, and secondly, to ward or protect from harm. Magic of the Greeks was known as *Goes*, or witchcraft.¹ The goal of Greek magicians was to locate these secretive forces of nature, called *physis*, and to study the similarities and opposites that they represented. Through this understanding they knew that they could control the forces of nature. The manipulation of these forces through the art and science of magic was called *dynameis*.² It was similar to the concept of the *daimones*, from which the word daemon was developed, representing the divine forces of the gods and their interaction with humans through the forces of fate.

Greek society employed the gods to help them with their magic, to aid them in spell casting, and cause certain effects. Attributed to Plato is a commentary on the availability and popularity of magic in the Greek era - "If anyone wishes to injure an enemy; for a small fee they (sorcerers) will bring harm on good or bad alike, binding the gods to serve their purposes by spells and curses."³

Greeks had a simple but effective method of spell casting, by using items and objects that were similar to the forces that they wanted to effect. Some of the oldest examples of these ritual effigies were

1. A. E. Waite. October 1999 ed. The Book of Ceremonial Magic. Citadel Press

2. Bengt Ankarloo, Valerie I J Flint, Stuart Clark, Frederick H Cryer, Marie-Louise Thomsen. 1999. Witchcraft and Magic in Europe. Vol. 2: Ancient Greece and Rome. University of Pennsylvania Press

3. Plato. 4th Cent. BCE. Republic. Oxford University Press. 2008

found throughout the Mediterranean dating as far back as the fourth century.⁴ Greek magicians used effigies, human figures they created called *kolusus*, that were made of wood or clay and shaped into the form of the magician's target. The substances these effigies were made of and how the figure was treated during spell casting was indicative of the desired result.

These basic natural figures made of wood or clay were no doubt meant to degrade over time. There were also figures made of more permanent substances, like lead, bronze or silver so that the figures would remain intact and unchanged.⁵

The intent of creating these effigies was a form of sympathetic magic. It worked under the principle that like, attracted like. If a magician created an effigy, they believed that it would contain a part of the target's soul or *eidolon*, and through this the magician could effect this target in many different ways. To burn, destroy or bind the figure would, as the Greeks believed, cause a similar effect in nature.

An effigy like this could be used to bind a god or a spirit, so that the magician could influence the forces of fate. These effigies were also used to restrain a god from taking action, or to specifically direct the god's forces of *daimones*. The forces of the gods were bound or captured within the effigy and the magician would direct the forces through the power of *dynameis* through the method of magic ritual.⁶ In this way humans were able to control the effects of fate through magic, and direct the actions of the gods.

Effigies of this type were often used in burials, to protect the spirits (the *eidolon*) of the dead. The Greeks performed these bindings on spirits to prevent the sometimes hostile *eidolon* of the dead from returning from the underworld. The Greeks believed that these unseen forces could not be destroyed but they could be bound and directed according to the magician's desires.

The Greeks also used these effigies to bind and control their fellow humans. For example, a Greek sorcerer could create an effigy of the war god Ares, and then bind this figure to the god and also to whomever they wished, to bring safety or victory in battle, or even to prevent war. They also used these magical figures to effect the outcome of court cases, to restrain rivals or enemies, and to

4. Construction and Use of Ancient Greek Poppets. 1996. Apollonius Sophistes. Referenced from: <http://www.cs.utk.edu/~mclennan/BA/GP.html> accessed 7/5/09

Also: Christopher A. Faraone. Binding and Burying the Forces of Evil: The Defensive Use of Voodoo Dolls in Ancient Greece, *Classical Antiquity*, Vol. 10, No. 2. Oct. 1991

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

influence lovers and bind them to each other.⁷

The figures were created from specific materials so that they would represent certain forces or effects. After the effigy was created, it was usually tied or bound, twisted or pierced with nails and animal fangs and claws. Each part of the process of creation would cause a certain effect.⁸ The nails and other objects were placed in certain areas such as the mouth, for silence, the heart to represent the binding of the target's will, and nails were also placed in the figure's hands to prevent action or cause loss of personal strength.

These *kolossoi* figures have also been found with the head or torso twisted to the left, a defensive type of binding to ensure an enemies confusion. Some have been found with the feet twisted backwards to prevent success of enemies. At times these objects were mutilated, burnt, hacked or buried to further restrain the target against any more actions that could happen. The combined effect of the creation and destruction of the *kolossoi* effectively symbolized, in a magical way, the destruction of an enemy.⁹

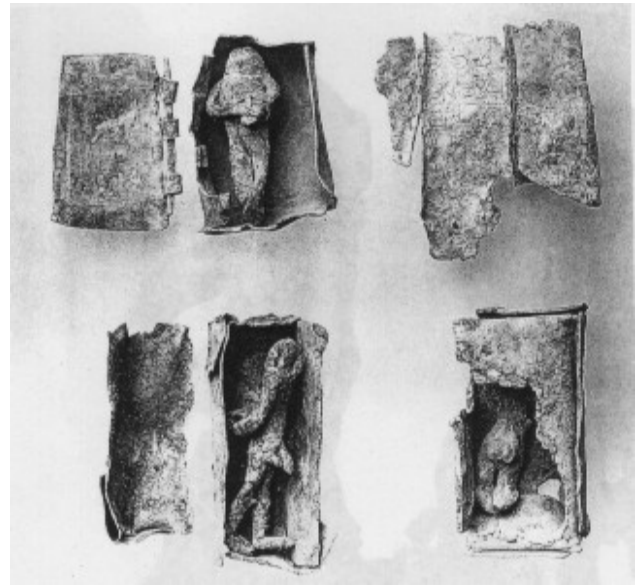


Illustration 1: *Kolossoi* in their containers (from a grave in Ceramicus)

By the fifth century, effigies were not the only method of binding magic that the Greeks had. They also cast personal curses by writing the spell on a tablet made of lead or copper. Known as *katadesmoi*, the oldest versions of these tablets were basic in design, consisting of a thin sheet of lead with the victims intended name scratched on it.

As the use of these curses continued, the tablets and methods of casting curse magic became more elaborate, employing the use of gods. Curse tablets were combined the use of lead or wax effigies and *kolossoi* that were pierced, or burned, intending to represent the fate of the victim of the spell.¹⁰

The Romans also used this same type of binding and offensive magic as

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸. Gideon Bohak. *Traditions of Magic in Late Antiquity, Aggressive Magic*. 1995. The Michigan Society of Fellows and Department of Classical Studies. Referenced from: <http://www.lib.umich.edu/pap/magic/agg.html> accessed 7/5/09

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰. *Ibid.*

the Greeks. Gods of the Greeks had also influenced Roman religion, along with the beliefs in the powers of the spirits of nature. Roman magic was developed after the practices and beliefs of the Greeks, and they had many practical and social uses for magical curse tablets.

Roman Curse tablets were known as *Tabulae Defixiones*, derived from the latin verb *defigere*, which means to pin down or to fix, describing the process of creating the curse tablet. This term also has its origins with the Latin word, *defixio*, associated with the magical act of prayer that would deliver the target of the spell to the powers of the underworld, sealing their fate. Essentially, the curses were designed to hand their enemies over to the forces of the gods, under the magician's direction.¹¹

The Roman Deifixiones tablets were created in a similar fashion as the *katadesmoi tablets*, to curse or bind an enemy or rival, to create boundaries, or to bind lovers together. Roman Curse tablets were inscribed with a magical alphabet, called the *voices magicae*, comprised of words and symbols representing deities, their principles and their divine actions against the magicians enemies. At times these inscriptions were written backwards, to undo certain actions within the spell, or to confuse an enemy.

Many tablets were created with lead, representing the god of the underworld, Saturn [Cronus] and the cold, and heavy characteristics of this metal were chosen to represent the slowing or fatigue of the magicians victim. The lead was symbolic, as well, representing the permanence of the spell due to the non perishable qualities of lead.¹²

The tablet was rolled or folded and then it was pierced with a nail to ensure the fixing of the victim to their fate. After the tablet was created it would be thrown into a well, placed in abandoned grave or thrown into a pit- effectively giving the persons fate to demons and the spirits of the dead. Many tablets had also been found in caves. All of these places represented a passage to the underworld, as the Greeks and Romans knew it.

Defixiones tablets were used in many different social contexts, from the disgruntled lover who wishes to coerce the object of his or her desire, to the chariot-races, theaters, courtrooms, and business transactions, where one participant would try to ensure his or her victory by binding or fixing a rival by persuading the gods through magic.

11. Matthew Dickie. *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*. Routledge; 1st Ed. 2003

12. Gideon Bohak. *Traditions of Magic in Late Antiquity, Aggressive Magic*. 1995 The Michigan Society of Fellows and Department of Classical Studies. Referenced from: <http://www.lib.umich.edu/pap/magic/agg.html> accessed 7/5/09

Roman society was a culture that thrived on competition, envy and revenge. These conflicts involved continual cycles of accusations, and recrimination followed by consultations with ritual experts, then a ritual would be performed, perhaps even in public, and if that did not appease the situation, the person seeking revenge would have possibly visited the priest of a temple to gain the gods favor for the casting of magic. In many aspects the consultation with gods in the use of curses was a contract with their divine powers.¹³

Sometimes these curses and bindings were carved into papyri, wood tablets, and even carved carefully into gems. These practices of magic were widespread in Rome, and the public had a genuine fear of personal reprisals due to its popularity. While certain aspects of Roman and Greek religion had relied on magic for centuries, practices like divination and sorcery became feared by those who were in authority, and laws were eventually created to try and control the activities of magic throughout the empire of Rome.

In 451 bc the Roman council lead by Lucius Cornelius Sulla created a ruling from the Twelve Tables, to prevent the widespread use of harmful magic. The Roman council created the *Law of Cornelia* (Concerning Assassins and Poisoners) which said: "... soothsayers, enchanters and those who make use of sorcery for evil purposes, those who conjure demons, who disrupt the elements, who employ waxen images destructively, shall be punished by death".¹⁴

Rulings against witches lasted for centuries afterward. This law was interpreted by Latin writers of the bible from the original Greek into the verse "Thou shall not suffer a witch to live".¹⁵ Originally,

13. Curse Tablets of Rome. Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies. from: <http://curses.csad.ox.ac.uk/beginners/creating-materials.shtml> accessed 7/5/09

14. Stephen Benko. Pagan Rome and the Early Christians. 1986. Indiana University Press.

15 [Exodus](#) 22:18 KJV (note: the original Greek translation of this verse stated the word: *pharmakeia*, instead of *witch*, meaning 'one who administered drugs.' in that age, it was common for a folk-healer to use both medicine and magic, and the meaning was contextual; but in the Christian Latin interpretation it took on the connotation of *witch*, as in one who harmed with magic to poison the soul.)

Image Credit:

Image 1. Kolossoi in their containers (from a grave in Ceramicus)
Referenced from: <http://www.cs.utk.edu/~mclennan/BA/GP-KolB.gif> accessed 7/5/09

the verses from Greek bible stated, "...suffer a well-poisoner to live". A witch who used magic became known as a poisoner in the age of Christianity, because they poisoned the soul with dark magic. This same Latin translation of *poisoner* as a witch was used during the trials of accused witches in the medieval era, and cited as a reason for their torture and killing.

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