In *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds* Daniel Ogden presents 340 texts in new translations, along with brief but lucid commentaries. This is the first book in the field to unite extensive selections from both literary and documentary sources. Alongside descriptions of sorcerers, witches, and ghosts in the works of ancient writers, it reproduces curse tablets, spells from ancient magical recipe books, and inscriptions from magical amulets. Each translation is followed by a commentary that puts it in context within ancient culture and connects the passage to related passages in this volume. Authors include the well known (Sophocles, Herodotus, Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, Pliny) and the less familiar, and extend across the whole of Greco-Roman antiquity.

**Second Edition Includes:**
- New preface
- Updated bibliography
- New source-passages, such as the earliest traces of the Medea story (epic fragments)
- A werewolf tale (Aesop’s Fables)
- Excerpts from the most systematic account of ancient legislation against magic (Theodosian Code)
Chapter 1: Introduction
Pages 3-8

SUMMARY

This chapter serves primarily as a summary of the contents of the book’s ensuing chapters, and is accordingly strongly reflected in the chapter summaries that follow in this Instructor Guide.

Chapter 2: Greek Sorcerers
(see also Ch. 15, nos. 301-5)
Pages 9-32

SUMMARY

The first collection of passages bears upon the earlier home-grown Greek sorcerers of various kinds. We begin with the Pythagorean-inspired traditions of a group of men that supposedly flourished in the Archaic period, whom we now call, at least for reasons of convenience, the Greek ‘shamans.’ These men had a number of miraculous capacities, many of which proceeded from their abilities to detach their souls from bodies during life. In the Classical period a range of largely hostile sources constructs for us, under the terms goêtes (‘sorcerers’), magoi (‘mages’) and others an impression of a nebulous group of supposedly fraudulent and beggarly magical professionals that concerned themselves with such things as the curing of illness, the manufacture of curse tablets and the well-being of the soul in the afterlife. Amongst these a sub-group of ‘evocators’ (psychagôgoi) is identifiable. Also, the phenomenon of the ‘ventriloquists’ (engastrimuthoi, etc.), men or women with prophetic demons in their stomachs that used their hosts as mouthpieces, is first found in this period.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you understand by the term ‘shaman’ and how helpful is it when applied to individuals in the ancient Pythagorean tradition?

2. Magoi, goêtes, agurtai, manteis, epôidoi, Orpheotelestai: to what extent did these terms share any conceptual ground in the Greek Classical period?

3. Can any objective meaning be ascribed to magos, goês and related terms as deployed by Hippocrates and Plato?

4. Why might one have engaged the services of an ‘evocator’ (psychagôgos)?

5. How important were souls and ghosts to the work of early Greek practitioners of magic and sorcery?
Chapter 3: Alien Sorcerers
(see also Ch. 15, nos. 306-11)

Pages 33-60

SUMMARY

Many of the more engaging and exciting portraits of male practitioners of sorcery in the Greco-Roman literary tradition depict them as deriving from the lands of the yet more ancient civilizations of the Near East and Egypt, and as manipulating the wisdom of these civilizations. The frequent representation of sorcerers in this way in the extant texts may, perhaps, be explained in part as an example of the Greek tendency to ‘invent the barbarian’, that is, to project attributes regarded as undesirable or bizarre among free Greeks onto alien peoples. From at least the Classical period onwards the Greeks tended to identify the Persians as the fount of alien magical wisdom, and their projection of magic onto other races of the Near East, notably Babylon’s Chaldaeans, tended to be derivative to this. Yet the Homeric Odyssey, with all its magic, including some Egyptian, must have reached its final form long before the Greeks had even heard of the Persians.

Questions for Discussion

1. Which of the peoples of the Near East came to be particularly associated with magic and sorcery, and why was this?

2. Do Greek projections of Persian magoi relate to any historical phenomenon in Persian culture?

3. How helpful are Pliny’s observations on the tradition and lore of the mages for our understanding of magic in an ancient context?

4. How unique in antiquity was Lucian’s famous tale of The Sorcerer’s Apprentice?

5. Are there common themes in Greek representations of Egyptian magic?
Chapter 4: The Rivals of Jesus
(see also Ch. 15, nos. 312-14)

Pages 61-77

SUMMARY

Three figures of the early AD period for whom substantial and developed literary portraits survive are looked at in greater depth. Two of these, Apollonius of Tyana and Alexander of Abonouteichos, were Neo-Pythagoreans, and in part revived the work of the ‘shamans.’ The first is known primarily from the positive but ironic third-century AD biography of him by of Philostratus; the second is known almost exclusively from the extremely hostile portrait of him by the second-century AD Lucian in his Alexander or The False Prophet. These two pieces accordingly offer an interesting antithesis. Also included here is a substantial portrait of Simon Magus, supposedly the great rival of St. Peter, whose existence may well have been all but entirely fictional.

Questions for Discussion

1. How do we account for the extraordinary similarities between the Jesus of the New Testament and the Apollonius of Tyana of Philostratus’ biography?

2. Is it appropriate to describe the monster defeated by Apollonius in Corinth as a ‘vampire’?

3. Can we rehabilitate Alexander of Abonouteichos?

4. How much did Apollonius and Alexander have in common?

5. Was it fair to call Simon a magos?
Chapter 5: Medea and Circe
(see also Ch. 15, nos. 315-18)

Pages 79-101

SUMMARY

We turn to female practitioners of magic or ‘witches’, the representation of which in the Greco-Roman tradition is much more frequent than that of male practitioners, but it is almost entirely fictive. We cannot therefore conclude on this basis alone that women were more inclined than men to turn to magic in reality. We look first at a series of portraits, some of them extended, of the two great and foundational witches of Greek mythology, the kindred Medea and Circe. Both of them are very ancient figures, and were developed in the early epics. No early epic account of Medea survives, although there is perhaps a dim reflection of such an account in the Hellenistic Argonautica of Apollonius of Rhodes. Circe, however, a quite complex figure, features prominently in the Odyssey.

Questions for Discussion

1. Is it right to describe the Homeric Circe as a ‘witch’? Why do some people think not?

2. What light may be shed on the Homeric portrayal of Circe by the religions of the ancient Near East, or by international folktales?

3. To what extent is Circe typical as a female character in the Odyssey?

4. What can we say of the representation of Medea in the earliest Greek literature, including the texts that survive only in fragments?

5. To what extent do the powers attributed to Circe and Medea in the earliest Greek literature map onto the powers attributed to male practitioners in the earliest Greek literature, and with what significance?
Chapter 6: Witches in Greek Literature

SUMMARY

This chapter looks beyond the major figures of Circe and Medea to other portraits of witches, witch-like women and women accused of witchcraft in Greek literature. The ‘Deianeira tradition’ embraces not only the story of Deianeira herself, who accidentally killed her husband Heracles whilst trying to administer a love spell, but also cases of other women, fictional and even supposedly historical, caught in the same circumstances. Theoris of Lemnos holds the distinction of being the first named woman in the historical record to have been brought before a court for witchcraft – or something akin to it. Finally, Theocritus’ Simaetha poem gives us a magnificent portrait of a young(ish) woman embarking on an elaborate and multifaceted love spell.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the Deianeira tradition tell us about ancient Greek ideas about female agency and responsibility?

2. Was Theoris of Lemnos a witch?

3. What was Sophron’s magic-themed mime really about?

4. Is Theocritus’ Simaetha a precocious and sophisticated witch or a hapless amateur?

5. Does the supposition that Simaetha is a prostitute make Theocritus’ poem more interesting or less?
Chapter 7: Witches in Latin Literature

Pages 115-145

SUMMARY

This chapter is devoted to the Latin response to the witches of the Greek literary tradition. We look first at poetry, in which witch figures became commonplace, and secondly at the novels. Latin literature offers a productive series of portraits of hag-witches, many of great elaborateness, which prefigure the modern western stereotype of the witch in a most striking fashion. Notable figures here are Horace’s Canidia, subject of an intriguing cycle of shorter poems, Lucan’s Erictho, the most dread, powerful – and professional – witch of them all, and the ghastly Meroe and Panthia of Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*.

Questions for Discussion

1. Do the many thumbnail portraits of witches in the Latin poetic tradition tell us more about the practice of witchcraft in the Roman world or more about the conventions of Latin poetry?

2. Why did the Romans like their witches ‘Gothic’ in style?

3. Was Horace’s portrait of Canidia based upon a real woman?

4. What is the role of humour in the Latin witch tradition?

5. How do the Latin novelists give such a sinister effect to their witch stories?
Chapter 8: Ghosts
(see also Ch. 15, nos. 319-24)

Pages 146-178

SUMMARY

Ghosts and cadaverous material play an important role in the unlovely craft of the Latin witches, which brings us to consideration of the world of ghosts and the dead in their own right in this chapter. It was the restless dead that were most likely to manifest themselves in the world of the living as ghosts, and it was accordingly the restless dead too that lent themselves most easily to exploitation for magical purposes. Much of the material presented here is devoted to the laying of ghosts, and in this connection there survive some entertaining stories about haunted houses. Attention is also given to the [Jewish-influenced] evidence for the expulsion of possessing ghosts from individuals. The souls of young boys, whether resident still in their bodies or not, were so highly valued for magical operations that they could, in popular imagination at any rate, even be ‘manufactured’ for the purpose. The supposed purity of the soul of the living boy in any case gave it a privileged position in attempts to communicate with ghosts and other powers. Finally in this chapter we look briefly at werewolves, which could sometimes be regarded as akin to ghosts.

Questions for Discussion

1. How consistent were ancient attempts to schematize and categorize the restless dead?
2. What did ancient ghosts want?
3. Can we reconstruct any traditional ghost stories from antiquity?
4. By what methods might one have dealt with problematic ghosts in the ancient world?
5. Why do werewolves belong in a sourcebook devoted to magic and ghosts in the ancient world (if they do)?
Chapter 9: Necromancy
(see also Ch. 15, nos. 325-32)

Pages 179-209

SUMMARY

The most direct use of ghosts for magical purposes was for necromancy, which, in its proper sense, as used here, signifies ‘divination from the dead’, and this forms the subject of this chapter. Ghosts could be evoked for divination either at Oracles of the Dead or at tombs. The existence of the former practice seems to be attested already in Homer’s Odyssey. The Roman period sees the emergence of a new variety of necromancy, alongside the evocation method, that of the reanimation of corpses. Other varieties of magical divination, some of them not entirely unconnected with ghosts, are also considered here.

Questions for Discussion

1. By what methods might one have spoken with a ghost in the ancient world?

2. When one visited an Oracle of the Dead, did the consulter descend to the ghosts, or did the ghosts ascend to meet him?

3. Some people believe that Oracles of the Dead only ever had an imaginary existence in the ancient world. Are they right?

4. What sorts of real-world magical practices might literary sequences of corpse-reanimation correspond to and elaborate?

5. What was the role of divination in ancient magic?
Chapter 10: Curses

Pages 210-226

SUMMARY

Another important magical use for ghosts, directly or indirectly, was in the execution of binding spells (in Greek katadesmoi; in Latin defixiones), though they were not the sole agents of them. The tablets, typically made of lead and rolled up or nailed through, that contained these binding spells were made throughout antiquity and beyond, and they are found deposited in all the lands that once belonged to the Roman Empire. The main themes of these fascinating texts are now conventionally classified under five headings: legal curses, competition curses, trade curses, erotic curses and the slightly distinctive ‘prayers for justice.’ All these categories are exemplified here, with the exception of the larger and more complex erotic one, treatment of which is deferred to the next chapter. Included with the treatment of binding spells are also some passages on another quite curious variety of cursing, that of the ‘evil eye,’ a phenomenon with a rather greater extent than the world of Classical antiquity.

Questions for Discussion

1. How did one go about making and enacting a binding spell?
2. How far was the making of curse tablets and prayers for justice professionalized?
3. Should we make a radical distinction between ‘binding curses’ and ‘prayers for justice’?
4. To what extent do curse texts and prayers for justice give us access to the genuine problems and anxieties of individuals in the ancient world?
5. How did the ‘evil eye’ work?
Chapter 11: Erotic Magic
(see also Ch. 15, nos. 333-5)

Pages 227-244

SUMMARY

In addition to being the chief concern of witches in the literary portraits of them, and the subject of many of the more striking curse tablets, erotic magic was the dominant theme of Egypt’s Greek magical papyri, which are given prominence here. These papyri, which derive largely from the third and fourth centuries AD, are made up of both (substantial) recipe books and actually deployed curse texts. Consideration is given to the two principal varieties of erotic magic, curses of separation and curses of attraction, and to some of the paraphernalia particularly associated with the latter, the drawing-down of the moon, the iunx or ‘wryneck’, and the hippomanes or ‘horse-madness’ substance which was conceptualized variously as a plant, a gland or a secretion. Attention is also given to some magical techniques ancillary to erotic magic, namely those offering contraception or the procurement of abortion.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why was erotic magic apparently the single most popular variety of magic in the ancient world?

2. Is it possible to make a radical separation between erotic spells of separation and erotic spells of attraction?

3. Can erotic curse texts tell us anything about the gender profile of magical use in the ancient world?

4. When a Thessalian witch ‘drew down the moon’, what actually happened?

5. What, exactly, was a iunx and how did it work?
Chapter 12: Voodoo Dolls and Magical Images
(see also Ch.15, no. 336)

Pages 245-260

SUMMARY

‘Voodoo dolls’ or kolossoi were already thriving in the early archaic period, long prior to the development of binding-curse tablets, to which they were closely related in use and deposition. Indeed these intriguing artefacts had no doubt been in use before literacy returned Greece. Like the tablets too, they were used throughout antiquity, wherever Greco-Roman culture was to be found. They attempted in a (primarily) plastic medium what binding-curse tablets attempted in a verbal-and-plastic one. Hence the restraint of the victim was achieved ‘sympathetically’ through his representation as bound or twisted or even as decapitated in his corresponding doll. The dolls were made from a wide range of materials: lead, bronze and clay ones survive, but the literary sources speak of them having been made in a wide variety of perishable materials too. Similar dolls were also used for laying ghosts, where they provided new bodies for them.

Questions for Discussion

1. How likely is it that voodoo dolls were first used in the Greek world for the specific purpose of ghost-laying?

2. How valuable for our understanding of ancient magical culture is the Louvre-doll evidence set?

3. How do the literary sources expand our understanding of the voodoo dolls of the archaeological record?

4. What real-world magical practices might Lucian’s tale of the Hyperborean mage elaborate?

5. How convincing is Apuleius’ defense on the subject of his Hermes doll?
Chapter 13: Amulets
(see also Ch. 15, nos. 337-8)

Pages 261-274

SUMMARY

Amulets were the most pervasive of magical tools in antiquity. They thrived from long before the historical age, and they continued to thrive long after antiquity. Indeed they do so still today, as any wearer of the crucifix will attest. Amulets afforded many forms of protection to their wearers, and in particular were often curative or exorcistic. Many of them too bestowed erotic attractiveness or general favor. At the simplest level, they were no more than a protective or empowering bond: the basic Greek term for amulet, periama (or periaption), literally means ‘object tied around,’ and in some cases they could consist of just a tied thread. From the imperial period there survive a number of amuletic texts. These were usually inscribed on silver lamellas or papyrus strips which were rolled up, like curse tablets, and then worn in a bronze tube or fabric pouch around the neck. This type of amulet is particularly useful in telling us how the ancients understood them and their functions. Also from this period, and from Greco-Roman Egypt in particular, there survive vast numbers of intaglios, engraved gemstones primarily designed to be set in rings. These too sometimes carry brief texts.

Questions for Discussion

1. Given that an amulet could be anything ‘tied round’, how easy is it for us to distinguish what was and was not regarded as amuletic in antiquity?
2. What was the range of contexts in which one might deploy an amulet in the ancient world?
3. Did any amulets have what we might today recognize as a medical function?
4. Why is the Antaura amulet so important to the history of ancient (and medieval) magic?
5. What real-world magic might tales of invisibility-conferring rings elaborate?
Chapter 14: Magic and the Law
(see also Ch. 15, nos. 339-48)

Pages 275-299

SUMMARY

Greek legislation against magic is hard to find: such evidence as there is for it is supplied. While we have a considerable amount of information about classical Athenian law as a whole, even here the evidence for legislation against magic per se is thin. The evidence for Roman legislation against magic is, by contrast, plentiful, even if we are not always able to recover the full texts or meanings of the laws in question. The chapter closes with two forensic speeches on magical subjects. Apuleius’s Apology is a defense speech against a series of charges of magical practice, chiefly erotic magic, and is usually held to be a fundamentally historical document. Libanius’s speech Against the Lying Mage is a fictitious speech based upon an imaginary premise. Both speeches are interesting for the sophistic tricks they play on the subject of magic and for their engagement with the long magical traditions behind them.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the fact that there are so few traces of legislation targeted specifically against magic in the ancient Greek world tell us about Greek attitudes to it?

2. To what extent did the Romans concatenate magic with foreign cults and with private divination?

3. What can we learn about the Romans’ changing attitudes to magic from the history of their legislation about it?

4. How might one argue the case that Apuleius’ Apology does not document a historical trial?

5. To what extent does Libanius’ speech Against the Lying Mage recycle the stereotypical ideas attached to sorcerers and sorcery over the course of Classical antiquity?

Chapter 15: Supplementary Texts

Pages 300-336

SUMMARY

This chapter, unique to the Second Edition, supplies a series of supplementary passages for the foregoing chapters, as indicated above.
Conclusion

As a sourcebook, this volume does not offer an over-arching conclusion, but the following supplemental assignments offer an opportunity to take a more synoptic approach to its contents.

Supplemental Assignments

1. What are the problems with the definition of ‘magic’ in the context of Classical antiquity?

2. Should ancient notions about witches and witchcraft be regarded as tools of gender control?

3. How did early Christianity receive and respond to pagan concepts of magic?

4. This sourcebook avowedly pursues the particular associations between ghosts and magic in the ancient world: is it helpful to do so?

5. ‘The modern scholarship of ancient magic exhibits the same cabalistic tendencies as the object of its study.’ Discuss.

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