

Magic in the Ancient Greek World. By DEREK COLLINS. Blackwell Ancient Religions. Malden, MA, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing Company, 2008. Pp. xiv + 207. Paper, \$28.00. ISBN 978-1-4051-3239-8.

This is a thought-provoking and informative, if uneven, examination of the actual practice of magic in the ancient Greek world, as opposed to the representation of magic and magical practices in the poets. Collins (C.), who identifies himself as a historian of magic (p. 166), examines magical practices from an anthropological and historical perspective, considering both physical (e.g., curse tablets and binding figures) and textual evidence (e.g., the use of Homeric verses for magical purposes in the late antique period, and the overt discussions of the practice in the Neoplatonists). In this, he attempts to determine not so much what magic really was (an impossible question, as he notes) as what its practitioners thought it was and what social and cultural constructs made the existence (or belief in) and practice of magic possible. In the process, C. both illuminates some major problems in assessing historical magic—what was magic thought to be, how would you recognize it if you saw it, and what enabled it to exist?—and offers new avenues of exploration for the study of the phenomenon.

C. expresses the wish that his work will be of value to a broad audience, i.e., “accessible to non-specialists and challenging to specialists” (p. xi). Specialists may find some of the overt analysis of magical practices and the mindset that enabled their existence interesting, although fully half the book sets out the background to and framework for that analysis. But C.’s study will prove very useful to non-specialists, in particular students, who will find much of value in his explication of these theories and methodological approaches and how they underlie his study of specific magical practices and the cultural constructs that support them. C. provides this background through a survey of anthropological schools (Chapter 1) and a clear and explicit discussion of the intellectual and theoretical framework that made Greek magic (be thought) possible (Chapter 2). Non-specialists will also benefit from C.’s sensible approach to defining magic and its relationship to religion, and from his clear delineation of issues in the practice of magic (e.g., the role played by the “characters” / *kharactēres* on curse tablets in facilitating communication with the supernatural, as distinct from the curse text itself, pp. 73–8). The summary of each chapter (p. xiv) is especially useful for helping the student make sense of the evidence presented, the argument based on it, and the argument’s broader context. The summary is omitted, however, for Chapter 3

(Binding Magic and Erotic Figurines), perhaps because C. finds “no simple way to summarize” it (p. 101), and Chapter 5 (Magic in Greek and Roman Law), an informative if uneven section whose relevance to the overall study is not apparent.

C.’s examination of the social constructs that allow a belief in magic and magical practices is clearly laid out and persuasively argued. C. contends that how magic is conceived and how that understanding affects the practice of magic are the product of the traditional underpinnings of a particular culture, and that recognizing this link is the key to understanding of magic (or what it was thought to be and how it was thought to work). C. argues that the existence and practice of magic, however defined, are offshoots of the religious practices and social customs in the ancient Greek world and should be understood on that basis. For example, the principle behind “binding” (compelling another party to do what one wants) remains the same, whether one pierces a clay figurine to compel an unwilling partner in an erotic situation (“magic”) or makes an offering to a statue of a god in an effort to convince that god to assist one (“religion”): both situations require the belief that inanimate objects can have social agency, and that that agency that can be convinced or compelled to act as one wants if the inducements are sufficient. Curse tablets deposited in the graves of the restless dead “work” because the depositors live in a world in which it is thought that the unsatisfied dead are angry and their anger can be channeled. By assimilating “magic” to normal cultural practices and beliefs, C. obviates the need to distinguish between “magic” and “religion,” a modern distinction made problematic by the importation of modern and medieval notions of evil and the demonic into our understanding of them. At the same time, by taking this approach, C. offers insights into both the nature of magic and its function in the Greek world.

C. sets out the theories and framework for his approach in a clear, detailed and accessible way. It is unfortunate, therefore, that the actual practice of Greek magic receives only brief analysis. Of the five chapters (not including the cursory introduction and the conclusion), two provide background and methodology, and one is concerned largely with Roman laws against magic (ranging from the Twelve Tables, through Apuleius’ speech defending himself against charges of using magic to seduce and marry a wealthy older woman, to a brief discussion of Christian and medieval law). C. recognizes that the inclusion of Roman law in an analysis of Greek magical practices might seem odd (p. xii), and he tries to head off criticism by explaining that the Romans used Greek precedents “for their own

understanding of magic and its effects" (p. 132) and that Roman and medieval magical practices were "essentially Greek in nature" (p. xii). Be that as it may, the Romans were not Greeks, still less were medieval Christians, and C. does not demonstrate that these cultures conceived of the practice of magic in the same way the Greeks did. On the contrary, C. admits that the Romans absorbed and adapted Greek practices (p. 132), and that very adaptation of Greek practices into a Roman framework calls into question the value of a study of Roman law as evidence for earlier Greek practices. Roman law could have used a more detailed study in a separate work. But as it stands, it tends to detract from C.'s exploration of how magical practices were understood by Greeks. Further exploration of how the laws of the various Greek city-states dealt with magic would have been preferable.

C.'s discussion of specific magical practices is a useful contribution to our understanding of the ancient Greek world. Had he applied his anthropological examination to other such practices, the contribution would have been even greater. While C.'s reluctance to consider the evidence offered by literary representations of magic is understandable—magical practices and the mindset that allows them can differ between fiction and reality, although a discussion of how literary representations do or do not correspond to the "objective" practices might have been informative—his omission is less easy to understand when it comes to magical practices for which there is historical evidence and which could have augmented his discussion. For example, practices relating to restless ghosts (e.g., armpitting / *maschalismos*) could have strengthened the analysis of curse tablets (because both presuppose that the unhappy dead are interested in and can be controlled by the living), while offering insight into the nature of ghosts and how to deal with them in their own right (i.e., to stop them from harassing you or use them for your own purposes). Similarly, the absence of any discussion of amulets, which C. admits would have fit nicely into several chapters (p. xi), is lamentable. Amulets were a common magical tool, so a consideration of how they fit into magical practices and how they were thought to function would have been helpful.

Overall, C. has provided a good introduction to the theory and study of magical practices and their cultural contexts, and one that will facilitate further work on ancient magic. Fewer digressions into Rome practices and beliefs might have allowed him to broaden that insightful introduction and so provide a more substantial foundation for the study of Greek magic.

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