

Roman Magic

by L.A. Curchin

The Romans often used magic in an attempt to achieve their desires. Like religion, magic involved a prescribed ritual. Unlike religion, magic depended not on the gods, but on things – plants, animals, stones, or words – that were thought to have supernatural powers.

A common type of magic was the use of protective devices to ward off disease or bad luck. Roman children wore an amulet – a lucky charm known as a “bulla” – around their neck, until, in the case of boys, they reached manhood and were able to protect themselves, or in the case of girls, until they got married and had a husband to protect them. The bulla was a circular medallion, often decorated, worn on a cord around the neck. Army generals also wore a bulla, for protection in battle. Spitting was another magical way to protect yourself. Pliny the Elder claims that spitting will ward off snakes and other dangers. If you boast or exaggerate, you should immediately spit onto your chest to avoid being punished by the gods. The satirist Juvenal says that courtroom lawyers tell so many whoppers, they slobber all over their shirt-fronts!

Magic words were useful in medicine. Cato tells us that to heal a fractured bone or dislocated joint, you should bring two halves of a split reed together while reciting the magic words, “motas vaeta daries dardares astataries dissunapiter”. Another use of words for magical purposes can be seen in the Roman use of obscenities. At Roman weddings, funerals and victory parades, people would make indecent jokes about the bride,

the deceased, or the triumphant general. This was a sort of reverse psychology to ward off evil: you could prevent bad things from happening by joking about them.

Magic numbers were a powerful device, especially the number three and its multiples. For instance, Pliny says you can cure sore eyes by touching them three times with the water left over from washing your feet – *don't try this at home!* – and you can protect fruit from frost by burning three live crabs in your orchard. According to the medical writer Marcellus, you can cure a wart by touching it with three beans, and then burying them. Some of these ancient folk cures had a long impact; burying beans to cure warts is recommended in chapter 6 of Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*.

“Sympathetic” magic is based on the principle that if you do something to one object, a similar effect will be produced on another object. The Romans used sympathetic magic to stir up the clouds. There was a rock called the “flowing stone” (lapis manalis), which sat outside the south gate of Rome. Whenever there was drought, the people dragged this stone inside the city, and immediately rain would follow. Sympathetic magic was also used in medicine. Pliny tells us that a quick remedy for broken bones is the ashes of a pig's jawbone; animal bone magically heals human bone.

All these types of magic had a legitimate and beneficial purpose. However, the use of destructive (“black”) magic, magic intended to hurt others, was illegal. The earliest Roman law code, the Twelve Tables of 450 BC, forbids two kinds of magic: using a harmful charm, and making a neighbour's crops move into your field. The Latin novelist Apuleius, who was put on trial for using magic to acquire a rich wife and take money from her family, proclaimed his innocence by denouncing black magic. He called it a terrible and mysterious art, performed in darkness all alone, with secret spells.