

New Insights on Magic and Early Christianity

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ABSTRACT

In this note I present two contributions in recently published edited volumes. Through the lenses of scholarship on ancient magic, these may bring intriguing perspectives to the study of early Christianity. The first (Sanzo 2020) is an illustrated discussion on the heuristic utility of the category "(ancient) magic." In the course of his analysis, the author reflects also on how applying a balanced and nuanced approach could help the scholar explore certain aspects of early Christianity over against the social and cultural environment in which it developed. The second (Conti 2022) observes, starting from the sermons of Maximus of Turin, the challenges inherent to the process of Christianisation in Late Antiquity. Among other merits, it draws attention to the specifics of Christianisation in rural regions, where practices labelled later as "magical" were part and parcel of the rhythm of life, as opposed to the (far better documented) urban context. The contribution shows the importance of addressing these specifics in order to properly understand e.g., the mechanisms of transition to the Middle Ages.

Amongst the scholarly investigations in the field of pre-modern magic published since the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, two ambitious volumes of studies bring enriching perspectives. The first, *Ancient Magic: Then and Now* (Mastrocinque, Sanzo, and Scapini 2020) has a threefold aim, corresponding to the three sections of the volume: Firstly, it restates the heuristic value of the category "ancient magic"; secondly, through a series of case-studies, it engages the results of various scientific disciplines in comprehensive reflections on a number of sources; and thirdly, it traces the fundamentals of a reception history of ancient magic (Scapini and Sanzo 2020). The second volume, *Nemo non metuit: Magic in the Roman World* (Pollard and Conti 2022), forms together with *Civilizations of the Supernatural* (Conti 2020) – to which it constitutes a sort of "prequel" – a larger project co-ordinated by

KEYWORDS

Ancient magic; religion; hypercriticism; rural Christianity; Maximus of Turin.

Fabrizio Conti. It seeks to outline, through a series of case-studies dedicated to particular types of artefacts, practices, as well as attitudes, the place and role of magic in Roman culture from its beginnings to the collapse of the empire (eighth century BC to fifth century AD).

In the following, I shall present two contributions from these two volumes, which bear considerations of import for our knowledge of early Christianity. The first is a theoretical discussion on the utility of the technical terminology related to magic in studying the ancient (including early Christian) world. The second draws attention to the interaction between Christianity and traditional cults in the countryside.

1. In the opening chapter of *Ancient Magic: Then and Now*, tellingly titled "Deconstructing the Deconstructionists: A Response to Recent Criticisms of the Rubric 'Ancient Magic,'" Joseph



E. Sanzo (2020) considers “ancient magic,” applied with circumspection and qualification, is still a useful heuristic instrument in the study of practices, artefacts, and mentalities commonly perceived as “magic” in Mediterranean Antiquity. Drawing on his extensive experience in the study of amulets and the Greek Magical Papyri,¹ Sanzo engages in a critical dialogue with opinions that call for abandoning the concept of “magic,” given the biased, pejorative, connotations it acquired throughout history.

Beyond the ideological and cultural prejudices inherited from the early Modern period, the thrust of the matter in the context of Late Antiquity is that “magic” became a rhetorical construct in discourses that emphasised the dichotomy between “illicit” and “accepted” religiosity (which, as Sanzo notes, is the religiosity sanctioned by the elite: Sanzo 2020, 27, 29).² As Majastina Kahlos (2020, 130) observed, “magic’ is a socially constructed object of knowledge whose content and formulations vary according to different social contexts and circumstances.” This is especially visible in early Christian self-reflection and polemic, where elitist discourses transformed magic into the hallmark of religious alterity – although surviving sources (in particular, the Greek Magical Papyri) offer ample evidence to the contrary.³

Against this background, Sanzo examines three alternatives proposed in recent scholarship: replacing “magic” as an analytical category with critically assumed notions of “religion” and “ritual (power)”; giving preference to (untranslated) ancient terminology; and disaggregating the concept of “magic” into its typological and functional constituents (such as healing, divination, exorcism, amulets, curse tablets, etc.). The author convincingly shows that all these replacement theories entail problems of their own, often more dangerous than those evoked by “magic.” In fact, “religion” and “ritual,” equally deconstructed in scholarship as ambiguous, binary, and biased terms, can be subject to the same critique as “magic” (Sanzo 2020, 30, 32-4). Moreover, the preference for ancient terminology (e.g., *μαγεία*,

φάρμακεία) implies a reductive hermeneutical approach. Not only does it deprive of the possibility of historical-comparative analysis, but it also carries the danger of infusing ancient terms with established modern meanings (equating *μαγεία* with magic, for instance), thereby failing to do justice to the semantic complexity of such terms. As Sanzo argues, in a text such as Acts 8 – the confrontation of Peter with Simon Magus –, *μαγεία* and its cognates do not necessarily refer to magic (Sanzo 2020, 30-31). Finally, unpacking magic in its constituent rubrics creates artificial divisions in practices or artefacts that the ancients perceived organically. Sanzo here invokes the use of the same magical symbols (*charakteres*) across objects with various functions, or canon 36 of the Council of Laodicea (fourth century), which places under the same umbrella experts in different kinds of magic: magicians, enchanters, numerologists, astrologers, amulet-makers, and even amulet wearers. Similarly, the functional distinction of artefacts is contradicted by multifunctional rituals and objects attested, e.g., in the Greek Magical Papyri. Here, Sanzo analyses BGU III 954 (a sixth century Coptic papyrus amulet), and Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 (sixth – eighth century), which combine requests for healing, protection, and exorcism (Sanzo 2020, 35-7).

In contrast to these hypercritical views on magic, Sanzo (2020, 38) proposes a balanced approach that “neither completely avoids the term ‘magic’ nor naively absorbs and reproduces the ideological baggage associated with the term in its traditional (scholarly) usage” – namely, a case-by-case application of “magic” as a useful heuristic category in addressing specific research questions. Instead of assuming a theoretical understanding for the term and applying it to the source material, this approach retrieves the usefulness of the rubric “magic” starting from the material itself. It constitutes, therefore, a qualified usage,⁴ one that allows, moreover, the simultaneous application of multiple analytical categories. In this sense, the often blurred lines between magic and religion become apparent, allowing the scholar to eschew cramming sources (be they commonly



perceived as “magical” or not) into one-sided taxonomical rubrics. Sanzo’s (2020, 41) final observations are particularly interesting:

Such taxonomic flexibility ought to be multi-directional and not limited to objects typically deemed “magical.” There is much value in treating early Christian prayer, for instance, as a magical practice (...) to raise new questions in light of different comparanda and research frameworks. Situating early Christian prayers within the world of amulets, curses, and the like can help raise new questions about the poetics of prayers. What principles of analogy or contiguity – if any – were at work? How did historical precedents and authoritative traditions function in a given prayer? What role did local specialists play in the promotion of certain forms of prayer and ideas about prayer? How do the material characteristics of an object inscribed with a prayer contribute to the prayer’s efficacy?

A similar claim – in answer to similar research questions – could be made with regard to early Christian eulogia or contact relics. If nothing more, using “magic” as a heuristic tool in reference to these objects would help better situate them in the historical-cultural and religious space of Antiquity.

2. The final contributions of the volume *Nemo non metuit: Magic in the Roman World* (Pollard and Conti 2022) address early Christian attitudes to magic, illustrating well how ecclesiastical writers deployed it rhetorically as an umbrella-label for all deviant religiosity (to include “paganism” as well as “heresy”). Amongst these, Fabrizio Conti’s (2022) “Pagan and Christian Identities in the Later Roman Empire: Maximus of Turin and His Sermons on Magic and Superstition” discusses a cluster of sermons in which Maximus, the late fourth – early fifth century bishop of Turin, seeks to counter pre- or non-Christian rituals and beliefs still observed in the lands entrusted to his pastoral oversight.

Conti starts from the contrast between town and countryside in the process of

Christianisation, an aspect that received less scholarly attention than it deserves.⁵ In contrast to the intellectual, elitist polytheism of towns, in rural regions, such as *Italia annonaria* (to which Turin belonged), pre-Christian religiosity deeply infused the yearly rhythm of life. The rituals connected to significant moments in the agricultural and calendrical cycles endured well beyond formal conversion to Christianity (Conti 2022, 494-5). Thus, if the challenge of the first centuries was to affirm Christian identity against the declared polytheism of the social majority, in Late Antiquity ecclesiastical authorities were faced with the survival of its shattered fragments in (at least nominally) Christianised communities. This created a new set of binaries amongst which magic played an important role.

Through Maximus’ sermons, Conti (2022, 496) observes how urban bishops adapted their polemical discourses to rural contexts. Such discourses contributed not only to the shaping of Christian identity, but also to the definition and imposition of categories such as “pagan,” “magic,” and “superstition.” Conti illustrates this, *inter alia*, with the reception of the portrait of Simon Magus, progressively associated with magic (i.e., illicit practices) in the first Christian centuries. Maximus’ sermons draw on the clash between Peter and Simon as outlined in the apocryphal *Acts of Peter* to present Simon as an exemplary figure for the fate that awaits followers of non-Christian beliefs and practices. The labelling and condemnation of these beliefs and practices as magical is evident (Conti 2022, 497-98; 508-10).

Another aspect emphasised by Conti is that in the attempt to eradicate “pagan” elements, ecclesiastical authorities depended on the active co-operation of landlords. These, in turn, were often wary of disturbing the status quo on their estates. Conti identifies Maximus’ twofold strategy of response to this situation: On the one hand, in line with earlier (apologetic) reasoning, he condemned the observation of non-Christian religiosity as sinful and certainly incompatible with the Christian faith;⁶ on the other hand, he made it clear that the sin (and the afferent



condemnation in the afterlife) extended also to those who tolerated such behaviour. This included anyone who witnessed or had any knowledge of non-Christian practices and failed to take proper action (Conti 2022, 498-503, drawing on sermons 106-7). Moreover, Conti shows how the rapprochement between these rural observances, “superstitions,” and magical practices was developed to the point that “magic” could be a term applied to all.

This analysis thus situates Maximus’ programme at the turning point of the late antique controversy against magic (and paganism), which will then be progressively appropriated into medieval discourses on sin. Beyond insights into Maximus of Turin’s pastoral efforts, Conti’s contribution has the merit of exploring the

complexity of the rural space as the melting pot of Christian and pre-Christian, syncretistic religiosity. As the author observed, Christianity succeeded in fragmenting monolithic Graeco-Roman cults. Yet elements such as fertility and healing rites, crop magic, divination, or other practices especially related to agriculture (which ultimately secured the welfare of rural populations) proved so embedded into everyday life that they were perceived as indispensable existential performances. Ultimately the survival of such rites in later, modern and even contemporary popular religiosity, albeit clothed in Christian form, shows that the condemning efforts of ecclesiastical authors, both late antique and medieval, were only partially successful.

NOTES

1. See, e.g., Sanzo (2019, 2017, 2016, and 2014).
2. See also Maraschi (2022).
3. As shown by Sanzo (2020, 29). For the rhetorical use of the label “magic” by early Christian authors, see the second contribution discussed in this note.
4. Sanzo (2020, 39-40): “Are any of the inherited qualities of magic inappropriate for the source(s) we are examining? If so, we should be explicit with our readers about such incongruities. This kind of analysis will inevitably need to be nuanced, taking

into account the strengths and weaknesses of a given theory/theorist or of the boundaries around a given corpus of sources.”

5. Admittedly, this is partially due to the fact that the surviving evidence on the ancient countryside is by far poorer compared to what we know of urban environments.
6. Such as the customs connected to the celebration of the Kalends of January (sermon 63 and 98), in particular the offering of gifts in hope of securing an auspicious year, which Maximus deemed incompatible with the observance of Christmas and Epiphany. See Conti (2020, 510-13).

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Magical Objects, Magical Writing: Amulets Across the Ages

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ABSTRACT

This note focuses on recent discussions on gemstone amulets from Late Antiquity through insights offered in two contributions to the volume *Textual Amulets from Antiquity to Early Modern Times: The Shape of Words* (Theis and Vitellozzi 2022). After a general presentation of the volume, I turn to the first two chapters, penned each by one of the volume's editors. Paolo Vitellozzi's paper examines the evolution of the textuality of magical gems in light of speech act theories and taxonomies elaborated in earlier secondary literature. Vitellozzi also analyses the complex interaction of medium (the gemstone), text and image in the course of this evolutionary process, showing how writing progressively assumed magical efficacy. In the following paper, Christoffer Theis analyses a specific category of magical gems, namely those which represent divinities with multiple heads. Theis' observations implicitly complement Vitellozzi's conclusions on the textuality of gemstone amulets. In the final paragraphs of this note, I briefly comment on Christian amulets and isopsephisms.

KEYWORDS

Amulets; gemstones; speech acts; magical writing; representations of deities; isopsephisms.

Amulets are some of the most common apotropaic devices employed in various cultures throughout history to negotiate man's constant struggle with (hostile) preternatural forces. Typically reduced in size, amulets could be fashioned from various materials and in various shapes, and were expected, through contact with the beneficiary (person, object and / or space), to magically

protect from, avert and / or reverse the effects of phenomena perceived as harming. As such, these objects constitute precious sources for historical, cultural, as well as anthropological research, as the recent surge in scholarly attention attests.¹

Equally intriguing, among these scientific works, is the volume of studies edited by Christoffer Theis and Paolo Vitellozzi (2022),