

Vol. 2

INSTITUTE OF ETHNOLOGY AND FOLKLORE STUDIES  
WITH ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM  
BULGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

MAGIC, MIRACLES, AND MYSTICISM

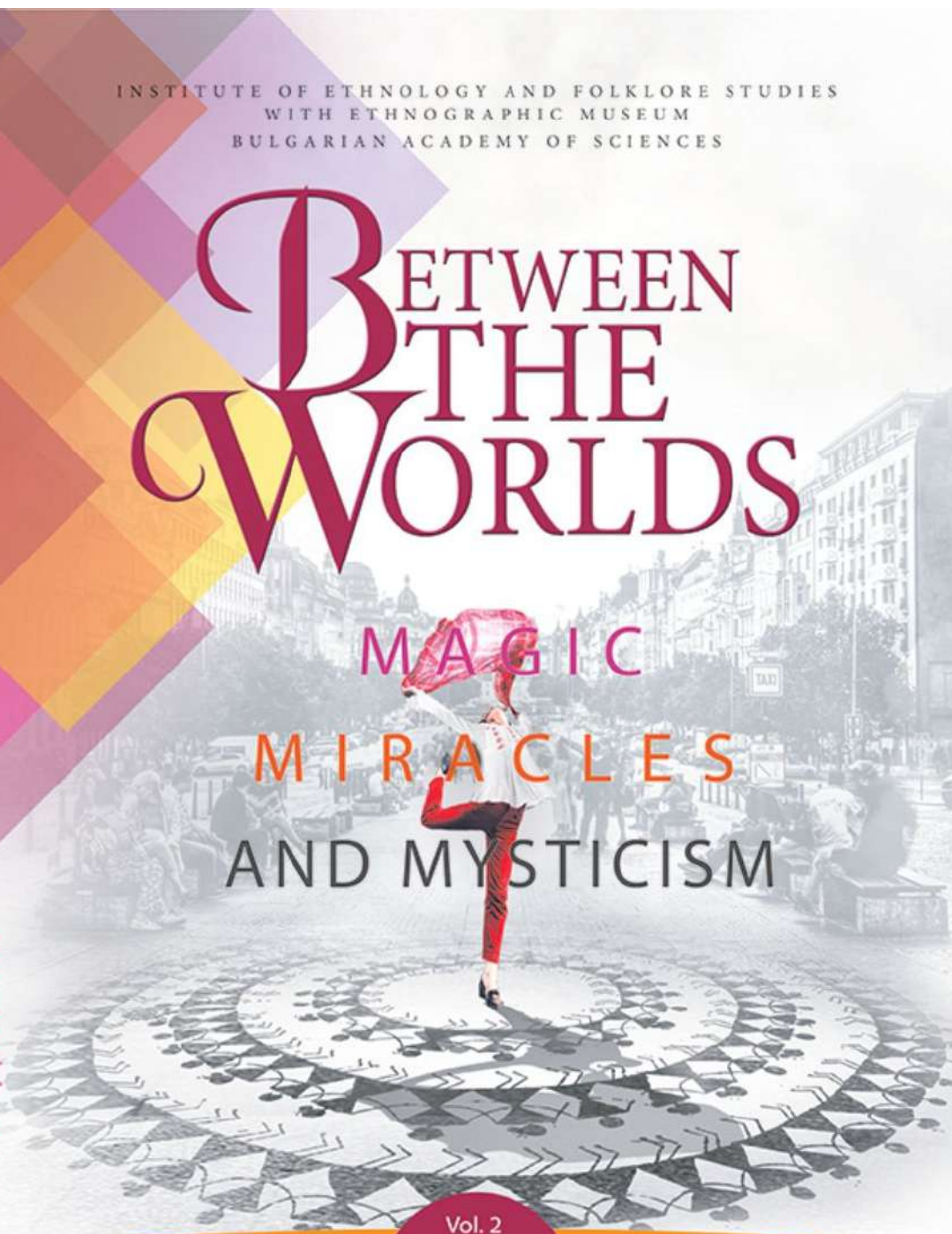
# BETWEEN THE WORLDS

MAGIC  
MIRACLES  
AND MYSTICISM

BETWEEN  
THE  
WORLDS

e-ISSN: 2683-0213

Vol. 2  
2020



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Maeva, M., Y. Erolova, P. Stoyanova, M. Hristova, V. Ivanova (eds.) (2020) *Between the Worlds: Magic, Miracles, and Mysticism. Vol. 2.* Sofia: IEFSEM – BAS & Paradigma.

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To cite this e-collection: Maeva, M., Y. Erolova, P. Stoyanova, M. Hristova, V. Ivanova (eds.) (2020) *Between the Worlds: Magic, Miracles, and Mysticism. Vol. 2.* Sofia: IEFSEM – BAS & Paradigma. URL: <https://conferenceworlds.wordpress.com/publications/>.

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e-ISSN: 2683-0213

Designed by Paradigma Publishing House, <http://www.paradigma.bg>

This e-collection is number 2 in the publication series based off of the  
'Between the worlds' conference proceedings.  
First edition 2020

This collection is open access and cannot be sold in any form.

Requests for information should be addressed to:  
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The publication of this e-collection was funded by Bulgarian Science Fund, Ministry of Education and Science (*KII-06-MHΦ/20*).

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All papers are double blind peer-reviewed. We thank all reviewers who kindly advised us during the process of preparation of the volume.





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E-collection of Conference Proceedings

**BETWEEN  
THE WORLDS:  
MAGIC, MIRACLES,  
AND MYSTICISM**

Vol. 2

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**Paradigma**

Sofia • 2020

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# DEFINING MAGIC IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

*Markham J. Geller*

**Abstract:** Although many attempts have been made to define ancient magic, this is often made more complicated by assuming that magic can also include medicine, divination, witchcraft, and mystical speculation. I will argue that, in antiquity, each of these topics represents a separate discipline which cannot simply be included under the heading of ‘magic’ nor should they be confused with magic. Once these disciplines are treated separately, it is possible to arrive at a much clearer meaning for ‘magic’, which sets it apart from other types of theory and practice within a general category of ‘ancient science’.

**Keywords:** magic, Ancient world, ancient science

It is indeed an honour to be the opening speaker at this very interesting and important conference on Magic, Miracles, and Mysticism, three related but very different topics. Magic is a subject of unending fascination, which develops in certain directions to include unexpected events, which we usually call ‘miracles’, and magic also leads to speculation about the world around us which we cannot easily explain, which we usually call ‘mysticism’. My aim is to deal exclusively with magic, particularly in its earliest phases, to take us back to the origins or earliest phases of magic, to see how it develops as a separate discipline in the ancient world. I will leave to others the other fascinating topics of miracles and mysticism, which became prominent in later periods of magic. Of course, ancient scholars thought about unexpected happenings, like the dividing of the Red Sea in Exodus, but in the world of the Bible such sudden events did not belong to magic but to religious or pious narratives. This reminds us of the need to understand ancient magic as a *discipline* which influenced but did not share in later forms of mystical thinking.

There are several related problems here, and I will take them in turn. The first is how to define magic, which is always a slippery problem and not easy to grasp, which is why the question of defining magic always crops up at conferences like this. What is magic? There are two approaches to this question: we can think of magic in a way which appeals to our modern sensibilities, or we can see how ancients defined magic, a classic emic-etic approach. I would like to offer this definition: magic was, in antiquity, a technical means for altering one’s physical or social environment, within significant logical limitations. To illustrate this rule of thumb, one clear example is curing disease by means of incantations and rituals as well as medications, which can alter the course of a disease or change its symptoms. This is a clear case of altering the physical environ-

ment. Another is to reduce anxieties arising from the social environment, such as fear of the evil eye, for which magic can offer protection. The same kind of protection is on offer against bad omens, curses, or even divine anger and punishment, all of which can be diverted through the correct application of magical spells and rituals. But these measures are not miracles, in any sense. One cannot, for instance, alter a lunar eclipse, but magic can seek to avert any bad omens resulting from this same lunar eclipse. The same applies to all other aspects of the natural world: magic cannot change nature but can influence the effects of nature. So much for our modern appreciation of ancient magic. But how did the ancients define it?

In fact, ancients did not usually define magic, and this has caused gross misunderstandings over time. For many biblical exegesis, ‘magic’ was considered to be illegitimate, based on the famous statement in Exodus 22.18, that ‘you must not allow a witch to live’. The Hebrew word for ‘witch’ is *mekashephah*, which is derived from a more abstract word, *kishuf*, meaning ‘witchcraft’, and these two Hebrew terms are closely related to Babylonian or Akkadian words *kashaptu* and *kishpu*, meaning ‘witch’ and ‘witchcraft’, with more or less the same range of meanings. But ‘witchcraft’ is not magic. It shares some basic characteristics, since it aims to alter one’s physical and social environment by influencing what happens to an individual. The witch’s curse might influence illness; the sickness gets worse rather than get better. Witchcraft might cause a person to imagine that colleagues or companions or family find one ugly or hateful. Witchcraft might make one have bad dreams or believe that the gods have turned angry; all of this reflects deep seated feelings of anxiety. None of this is very desirable, but what is interesting is how poorly attested witchcraft as a discipline is in antiquity. We have virtually no ancient handbooks from Mesopotamia to explain how to perform so-called black magic. Instead, we have numerous incantations and rituals showing how to protect us *against* witchcraft (cf. Schwemer, 2019: 36–64; Abusch, 2002). This leads to an interesting observation: you do not actually need witches in order to have witchcraft. Witches are by their nature anonymous and we never normally know who they are. They are a dark and hidden enemy, which affects us from the shadows, and we only have a vague idea about their tools of the trade. We know that they use figurines of their victims, which act as proxies for their aggressive magic, so whatever they do to the figurines or images can also affect us. How can we counter this kind of aggressive magic? We will return to this question shortly, but first we have to return to our original question: if witchcraft was not magic, then what exactly was magic to ancient practitioners?

Let us begin by looking at words for magic, for which we can start with the Greeks. Although they had terms which they could have used, Greek, and then Latin, preferred to use a Persian word, *mageia*, which of course is our word for magic. It is not clear why Greeks had to borrow a foreign word for this very basic concept, since Greeks did not often borrow foreign vocabulary. The best way to define *mageia*, however, is the way Fritz

Graf described it in his important book on magic in the ancient world: ‘Magic (Greek *mageia*, Latin *magia*, is the art of the *magos*, *magus*’ (Graf, 1997: 20). We know this *magos* from the Christmas story, the famous three Magoi who visited Bethlehem because, being astrologers, they knew that a new king was born. The *magos* is the Persian priest who is also an astrologer and conducts healing rituals, in short, performs *mageia*. In the Babylonian world, there is also no actual word for ‘magic’, but there is a word for the ‘magical expert’ or exorcist. He is called an *ashipu*, who -- like the *magos* -- happens to be a temple priest. What does the *ashipu* do? -- he performs *ashiputu*, which can only be understood as whatever the *ashipu* gets up to. These may be incantations, or rituals, or even normal priesthood activities. There was never any need to explain the term *ashiputu*, because the meaning was obvious: everything which the *ashipu* does (Frahm, 2018: 9–47). As it turns out, this is far from unusual. Take the English word ‘witchcraft’, which clearly just means the art or craft of being a witch. Remember the famous British pop song, ‘Do you believe in miracles?’ Actually, in the ancient world, the answer would probably be ‘yes’, but not in relation to magic. There are no reports of ‘magical miracles’ from the Ancient Near East. From a Mesopotamian perspective, unwritten but widely understood rules governed the worlds of both gods and men, and breaching these rules would imperil the social order of the cosmos. One primary example of this is the myth known as Inanna’s Descent to the Netherworld, in which the goddess Inanna leaves her heavenly abode and visits the world of the dead, which was known as the KUR.NU.GI, the ‘land of no return’. Inanna’s presence in the Netherworld upset the natural order in ways which caused consternation among the gods, and the situation could only be saved by Enki, the god of wisdom, who resorted to magical means to rescue Inanna from her Netherworld captivity (Jacobsen, 1997: 205–232). But this is the stuff of mythology, not an historical narrative referring to humans but to gods, which is a very different sort of universe. In reality, one did not employ magic to try to change the natural patterns of life and death, day and night, tides and floods. One could pray to the gods to win favour, in hope that gods would send the seasonal floods or rain, but this is different from praying for floods or rain, and when the irrigating floods do finally come, this is not perceived as a miracle. Magic itself does not bring floods or rain, but it can help ensure divine favour, which is ultimately responsible for natural events. Mesopotamia also had no wonder-performing holy men who could freely dispense miracles, since magic was a technology, able to manipulate the natural order within established boundaries and limitations.

Although there was no philosophical reflection in ancient magic regarding this kind of narrative, there was a relevant issue of the close relationship between magic and religion. Magic requires the ether of religion in order to thrive. The difficulty comes when we try to find a clear line of demarcation between magic and religion. What is the difference, for instance, between an incantation and prayer? It can be difficult to

distinguish magic from liturgy, which is often viewed as a continuum, a sliding scale of requests for divine help based on belief in benevolent deities. Scholars have struggled with this question without finding completely satisfactory answers (cf. Lenzi, 2011). One difference is that which we already mentioned, that magic does not normally need miracles. Magic may ask for divine protection or healing or a reversal of bad luck, but none of this is cosmic. The aims of magic all fall within the realm of what is possible within natural limits; it is incorrect to speak of the 'supernatural' in regard to Mesopotamia. There is one further difference: magic uses elaborate rituals, such as fumigations, censers and torches, peeling onions, and other kinds of cleansing procedures, since the primary area of magical application was for ill health. None of these magical rituals reflect what happens in temple rituals in conjunction with prayers. So, while incantations and prayers can sometimes look similar, magical rituals differ from temple rituals and are really readily distinguishable.

Nevertheless, if a major interest of magic is to heal illness or more realistically alleviate symptoms, how is any of this different from what happens in medicine? Again, this is another area of overlap which is sometimes difficult to pry apart, in order to differentiate magic from medicine, if both disciplines intend to heal a patient. But once again, we turn first to the Greek world, to see how this difference looks in practice. Any of our impressions about Greek magic are governed by a single book of the Hippocratic corpus, on the so-called Sacred Disease.<sup>3</sup> This treatise insists that while older healing practices depended upon the services of magicians and charlatans, new Hippocratic medicine operated along more rational principles which involved observation and medical theory. The facts are somewhat different. Magic carried on being practiced in Greek healing circles, but yet our knowledge of Greek magical texts is rather poor. One reason is explained by the Roman historian Suetonius, who reported that the Emperor Augustus had 2000 magical books burned in 13 BCE. As Hans Dieter Betz points out, 'the first centuries of the Christian era saw many burnings of books, often of magical books, and not a few burnings that included the magicians themselves' (Betz, 1986: xli). It seems clear that Greek magic was, for a variety of reasons, either considered to be illicit or heretical. Apart from curse tablets and some binding incantations, the largest single corpus of magic in Greek and Demotic is an assortment of magical texts from Egypt, the so-called Greek Magical Papyri, which are a syncretistic mixed bag of spells and divination drawn mostly from Egyptian, Greek, and Jewish magic, and it remains difficult to make sense of these papyri. The picture from Mesopotamia, however, is very different.

There are two very large corpora of healing texts from Mesopotamia, one magical and the other medical, and these reflect different strategies for treating illnesses. In a nutshell, the biggest difference between magic and medicine in Mesopotamia is one of

<sup>3</sup> There is an enormous literature on this topic, but see generally Jacques Jouanna, 1999.

style as well as content. Magic is drama. It includes elaborate ritual procedures, exotic aromas, special venues, colourful costumes, music and chanting, and everything which gives magic the aura of a theatrical performance (see Panayotov, 2020: 129–158). Medicine is the opposite of show biz. It is sober and quiet and serious. It involves taking pills, drinks, enemas, purges, occasional surgery, and other unpleasant types of treatments.<sup>4</sup> Both magic and medicine have something in common, that both attempt to give the poor patient some feelings of confidence that whatever is being done will be helpful, that treatment will reduce pain or fever or swelling or especially anxiety, and that the future promised to be better than the present. But magic and medicine have one thing in common: neither deals in miracles. The healing which was on offer, or the possible reversal of ill-fortune, was not anything which interfered with nature but were actually part of nature. As Lorraine Daston has pointed out, miracles are a ‘divine suspension of natural laws’ (Daston and Park, 1997: 14). Babylonians never signed up to this idea.

If we have magic in the ancient world but no miracles, what about mysticism? This is a more difficult question than it appears at first, since we certainly have mystery cults in antiquity which claim to own the secrets of the cosmos and of life in general, or at least know how to acquire these secrets from their divine sources (see Johnston, 2019: 694–719). But the question is whether these have anything in the ancient world to do with magic.

Scholars in ancient Mesopotamia had no difficulties in labelling their work as ‘esoteric’ or as ‘hidden’ or even as ‘secret’, only to be studied by those educated enough to understand magic and medicine and divination and astrology and similar disciplines (Lenzi, 2008). Among these, one of the most prominent genres of texts within the Mesopotamian scholarly curriculum was forecasting the future, based on signs or coded messages thought to come directly from the gods. These forms of divination took many forms, but the most enduring of these is astrology, which carries on even today, based on the principles established by Mesopotamian scholarship. Astrology was characterised as ‘heavenly writing’, as if the stars represented messages which one could read once one had the proper know-how (Rochberg, 2004). Other forms of messages could be derived from the complex examination of entrails of animals, or noting the patterns of oil on water, or flights of birds, or dreams, or a variety of many other forms which messages could take, usually mediated by professional diviners.<sup>5</sup> The question is whether predictions from these events were always seen as personal messages from gods, or alternatively, whether forecasts were programmed into nature or the cosmos. One example of natural predictions were medical diagnoses, which were made from careful observations of symptoms and signs from the patient’s body, to chart the course of a disease.<sup>6</sup> In general, however, the knowledge of how to predict future events is by

4 For a general survey, see Geller, 2010, and for translations, see Scurlock, 2014.

5 See Maul, 2018.

6 For a general treatment of the Babylonian diagnostics, see Heeßel, 2000.

its very nature esoteric or secret knowledge, since the connections between omens and predictions are often less than obvious. Here is a random sample of divination, this one dealing with birds and stars, showing how difficult it is for us to appreciate the underlying logic of divination texts, dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

If in the house of a man a patient is sick and in the morning behind the house a falcon crosses from the outer left corner to the outer right corner – that patient: he will [recover] soon.

If in the house of a man a patient is sick and in the morning behind the house a falcon crosses from the outer right corner to the outer left corner – that patient: his sickness will be long.

If in the house of a man a patient is sick and in the morning behind the house of the sick a falcon flies away – that patient: he will die.

If a man is about to plow a (fallow) field and a falcon crosses from the right of the man to the left of the man – he will see luxuriance of the field.

If a man throws the seed and a raven goes upon it and caws to the left of the man – the furrow will increase its yield.

If a man is about to plow a (fallow) field and a falcon crosses from the left of the man to the right of the man – the furrow will decrease its yield (De Zorzi, 2009: 95).<sup>7</sup>

Here is another example from the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

If a star twinkled from the right of the man to the left of the man – favourable; the patient: he will die.

If a star twinkled from the left of the man to the man right of the man – unfavourable; the patient: he will recover.

If a star twinkled in front of the man – attaining of the desire; the patient: he will die.

If (a star) twinkled directly in front of a man and passes by him – not attaining of the desire; the patient: he will recover (Ibid., 105)

From our modern perspective, neither of these passages makes much sense as rational inferences, that a patient's chances of survival can be determined by either the flight of birds or twinkling of a star. This reflects the nature of secret knowledge, based upon assumptions or logic which is never adequately explained, despite the fact that we possess literally thousands of similar omens from Mesopotamia. This does not mean

<sup>7</sup> Translation from De Zorzi, 2009: 95.



that these associations are completely illogical, but that they reflect an underlying esoteric or secret knowledge of the cosmos. One of the standard notations is that omens are either ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’, or that astronomical phenomena are either ‘regular’ or ‘irregular’, indicating an ordered cosmos. Nevertheless, because the criteria behind these omen predictions are not apparent, access to this level of knowledge was only available to scholars with proper training and sensitivity to these cosmic patterns. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that within this intellectual framework, there was little need for mysticism or a higher order of knowledge of the cosmos, beyond what was already present within the Babylonian episteme.

In my opinion, the ancient world of Mesopotamia had no special need of mysticism, because divination seemed to push back the boundaries of secret knowledge of the cosmos. There was no special relationship between mysticism and magic. The professional exorcist or *ashipu* who dealt with magic also operated as a temple priest. He occupied a completely independent sphere of influence from that of the professional diviner, a layman who usually advised the king and crown. But there is a problem with our evidence. The clear distinction in disciplines was lost in the West, especially in Greek magic, which confused magic and divination, as can be seen in the Greek Magical Papyri. These texts often refer to a lamp used for forecasting the future, in the same collection of magical incantations designed as binding spells or love charms.<sup>8</sup> Later Greek and Demotic scholars or librarians from Egypt collected and assembled all manner of texts trying to influence the natural order, without bothering to make clear genre distinctions between ritual and prognosis. The main problem is not that the ancient papyri obscured these distinctions, but rather that modern scholars have failed to understand the differences between the genres of magic and divination.

My message is one of caution. It is essential that we know how to define the conceptual frameworks of magic and mysticism as they developed from their ancient roots. The ancient world before the Greeks had no dedicated term for ‘nature’ and may not have even had an abstract idea of ‘nature’, as we think of it.<sup>9</sup> Magic was a tool for manipulating the cosmos or natural order. In its original form, there was no need to apply miracles to the mechanistic views of the cosmos, which were already governed by rules determining whether events were normal or abnormal. Magic played no role. By the same logic, there was no need for mystical speculation, since divination itself encompassed a formal kind of cosmic knowledge which did not follow the logic of everyday life, nor was it influenced in any way by magic. By the time we arrive at Late Antiquity and Middle Ages, these ideas have evolved dramatically, and of course miracles and mysticism follow naturally from concepts of magic. But these novel concepts cannot be traced directly back into antiquity, when different rules applied.

8 For an example in Greek of lamp divination, see Betz, 1986: 133–134, with many more examples in Demotic.

9 See the stimulating arguments of Rochberg, 2016.

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