

Talking Heads: Necromancy in Jewish and Christian Accounts from Mesopotamia and beyond¹

[Cabezas parlantes: necromancia en fuentes judías y cristianas desde Mesopotamia y más allá]

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Abstract: Relations between Jewish and Christian communities in Late Antiquity involved interactions relating to a complex cultural and religious landscape. An intrinsic aspect of the exchange between Jews and Christians refers to attitudes towards pagan communities in their shared environment as a common discourse pertaining to a symbolic construction of the “Other”. More specifically, a persisting *topos* was the implication of “pagan” communities and their respective religious specialists in illicit magical practices including necromancy. In the following, a discussion of testimonies regarding variants of necromantic practices in ancient, rabbinic and Christian sources will explore the dissemination and special characteristics of the different necromantic accounts in Late Antiquity and contextualise this peculiar practice of a divinatory “talking head” as evidenced in contemporary Jewish and Christian traditions.

Keywords: Necromancy; Religion History; Late Antiquity; Rabbinic Tradition; Christian Tradition.

Resumen: Las relaciones entre las comunidades judías y cristianas en la Antigüedad Tardía engloban interacciones relacionadas con un complejo contexto cultural y religioso. Un aspecto intrínseco del intercambio entre judíos y cristianos hace referencia a las actitudes entre las comunidades

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paganas en su entorno compartido, como un discurso común perteneciente a una construcción simbólica del “otro”. En concreto, un *topos* persistente era la implicación de comunidad “pagana” y su respectiva religiosidad especializada en una práctica mágica ilícita, que incluía la necromancia. A continuación, se discuten los testimonios relacionados con las variedades de prácticas necrománticas en fuentes antiguas, rabínicas y cristianas, en las que se estudiará la diseminación y las características especiales de la necromancia en la Antigüedad Tardía y se contextualizará la peculiar práctica de adivinación de las “cabezas parlantes” como una evidencia en las tradiciones contemporáneas judías y cristianas.

Palabras clave: Necromancia; Historia de la religión; Antigüedad Tardía; Tradición rabínica; Tradición cristiana.



Introduction

Relations between Jewish and Christian communities in Late Antiquity involved interactions relating to a complex cultural and religious landscape. An intrinsic aspect of the exchange between Jews and Christians refers to attitudes towards pagan communities in their shared environment as a common discourse pertaining to a symbolic construction of the “Other”. More specifically, a persisting *topos* was the implication of “pagan” communities and their respective religious specialists in illicit magical practices including necromancy.² Beyond the attestation of polemical clichés against religious specialists of

² See Stephen D. Ricks, “The magician as outsider: the evidence of the Hebrew Bible”, in Paul Mirecki & Michael Meyer (eds.), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 131-141; cf. Alan F. Segal: “Orthodox Christians and Jews appear to have generalised the negative implication of magic to every outside group – including each other”, “Hellenistic Magic: Some Questions of Definition”, in R. van den Broeck & Maarten J. Vermaseren (eds.), *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions: Presented to Gilles Quispel on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, (Leiden: Brill, 1981), pp. 349-375, esp. 370.

antagonistic communities, information provided by rabbinic and Eastern Christian sources indicates a communication and shared cultural knowledge in the wider area of Mesopotamia around the 7th/8th centuries.

Necromantic practices referring to an impressive amount and variety of techniques, tools and functions are attested in various cultures and historical periods around the world. A very specific form of necromancy attested in Mesopotamia required the special preparation and use of a “talking head”. In the following, a discussion of testimonies regarding variants of necromantic practices in ancient, rabbinic and Christian sources will explore the dissemination and special characteristics of the different necromantic accounts in Late Antiquity and contextualise this peculiar practice of a divinatory “talking head” as evidenced in contemporary Jewish and Christian traditions.

Talking heads in rabbinic sources

In a famous biblical passage, Rachel steals the *teraphim* of her father, Laban, and flees from Harran together with Jacob (Gen 31:19). Later rabbinic tradition offered some very intriguing explanations of the nature and function of these somewhat mysterious *teraphim*.

In Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer (PRE) we read: “God came to Laban the Aramaean in a dream ... [and Laban says to Jacob]: “yet wherefore hast thou stolen my Teraphim, which I worshipped? “What are the Teraphim? They slay a man, a firstborn, and he is red (in colour). All that a man requires (to know) is not written here. This is impossible, since the men who dispute about the knowledge of making (the Teraphim) have increased. Everyone who follows that knowledge will ultimately go down to Gehinnom. And they pinch off his dead, and salt it with salt (and spices), and they write upon a golden plate the name of an unclean (spirit), and place it under his tongue, and they put it in the wall, and they kindle lamps before it, and bow down to it, and it speaks to them. Whence do we know that the Teraphim speak? Because it is said, “For the Teraphim have spoken vanity” (Zech. X.2).

On that account had Rachel stolen them, so that they should not tell Laban that Jacob had fled and not only that, but also to remove idolatrous worship from her father's house." [36]³

PRE begins the explanation of the biblical teraphim with the description of their preparation, which would first require the slaughtering of a first-born man, "red in color".⁴ The text implies that the knowledge of the preparation of the teraphim was quite widespread. It further explains, that the "manufacturing" of the teraphim would prescribe the severing of the head of the victim from his body. Then the head would have to be prepared using salt and spices, probably for its better preservation. A golden plate inscribed with the name of an "unclean spirit" would be placed under its tongue, which, as is implied in the text, animates the head and enables it to "talk". The practitioners of this "occult" knowledge will be punished in the Gehenna.⁵

This story is attested in a few other rabbinic sources as well. In Midrash Tanhuma (Parashat Va-Yetze 12), as in PRE, the victim should be a first-born man but the type of necromancy is nearly identical. The Tanhuma adds an etymological explanation of the name of the teraphim: "Why are they called teraphim? Because they were works of *toreph* (filth), works of uncleanness". Furthermore, this passage specifies that the name on the golden plate is that of a demon and

³ Gerald Friedlander, *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer: (the chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great) according to the text of the manuscript belonging to Abraham Epstein of Vienna* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.; New York: Bloch Publisher: 1916).

⁴ See Daniel Sperber, "Teraphim: Mummified red men", in D. Sperber, *Magic and Folklore in Rabbinic Literature* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1994), pp. 115-118. According to Sperber, the sacrifice of red men might be associated with the Phoenicians; the name "Phoenician" derives from the Greek "phoenix": meaning red or crimson, probably because of their famous crimson dyes. Moreover, Sperber suggests that the teraphim could be "a distant recollection of an ancient Phoenician practice", because according to various reports, in times of crisis they would sacrifice their first-born; see D. S. 20.17; Apollod., 19.1; Hdt., 7.197; cf. E.A. Wallis Budge, *Amulets and Superstitions* (London: Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1930), p. 251. On the sacrifice of the "red" men or red-haired men in Egypt, see D. S., 1.885.

⁵ See Friedlander, *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer*, 274, for manuscript variations. On PRE, see Steven Daniel Sacks, *Midrash and Multiplicity: Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Renewal of Rabbinic Interpretative Culture* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009).

that they also perform “certain magical rites”, when putting it under the tongue. The head is then placed in an already available niche in the wall, where the head would speak in a whisper.⁶ The belief that the demons would operate through the idols was, of course, very common in polemical literature against idolatry, as already demonstrated in the Bible.⁷

A similar account is evidenced in the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Genesis 31:19. This text repeats the information about the sacrificial choice of a first-born man. It also mentions magical formulas inscribed on the golden plate.⁸ The textual evidence implies that this was a common practice – albeit the rabbinic texts do not specify its origins or practitioners. Accordingly, the use of the teraphim by Laban is placed in a broader cultural and religious context.

Finally, the story is included in the medieval midrashic compilation, *Sefer ha-Yashar* (31.41).⁹ The special cultic preparation of the head before its acquiring a divinatory “quality” is reiterated. This text adds that “they” would first take off the hair of the head-stressing, perhaps, in this way, its appearance like a skull. Moreover, this text emphasises that it is the “name” written upon the golden plate that animates the head. This passage suggests that alternatively, manmade, anthropomorphic idols manufactured with precious metals could similarly be used. Significantly, the magical power attributed to the figures (or the heads) was explained as an influence by the planets. Accordingly, the future-telling activity was linked here with astrological as well as alchemical beliefs.

As noted, the rabbinic stories primarily function as exegetical glosses on Gen 31:34, explaining Rachel’s theft of her father’s house idols. According to the rabbinic interpretations outlined above of this

⁶ See Samuel Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu. An English translation of Genesis and Exodus* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1996), p. 198.

⁷ Cf. LXX Deut 32:17; LXX Ps 105:37; LXX Isa 65:11; Bar 4:7; the idea of pagan gods as demons lives on in the Christian literature too: 1Cor 10:20-21. Rev 9:20; Iustinus Martyr, *Dial.* 30.3; Tert., *Apol.* 22.1.

⁸ Michael Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), p. 109; cf. Timothy J. LaVallée, *The Targum Pseudo-Jonathan Genesis 31:19 and the Skull and Corpse Necromancy* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Michigan, 2002), with an extensive collection and discussion of related source material.

⁹ Mordecai M. Noah, *The Book of Yasher* (New York: A.S. Gould, 1840), p. 75.

passage, Rachel stole the idols because they could speak and therefore, could be used for divination. This idea implies that divination was directly associated with idolatry. The association of the teraphim with the “talking heads” was linked with Zech 10:2: “For the Teraphim have spoken nonsense (NRSV)”. Thus, the idols were already viewed as animated. Accordingly, it might not be so surprising that, the teraphim became actual talking heads in later re-writings and exegetical interpretations of the biblical story.¹⁰ Moreover, the notoriously evil and cunning character of Laban would lead to the conclusion that he acquired those idols through some kind of a criminal act.

The sources stress that the magical manipulation of the severed head enables its oracular power and its subsequent use for divination. A significant common element is the emphasis on the demonic power operating through a golden plate as the animating power behind the oracular faculty of the head. The use of engraved golden plates (lamellae) would suggest pagan burial practices. The exact wording on the plates is not specified. However, the rabbinic texts agree that it was the name of a demon.¹¹

¹⁰ See Joseph Dan, “Teraphim: From Popular Belief to a Folktale”, *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 27 (1978), pp. 99-106.

¹¹ The use of golden lamellae in magic, especially as amulets for protection was quite widespread in Antiquity, and they were also used as *Totenpässe* (passports for the afterlife) in burials associated with the Orphic mysteries, see A. Bernabé & A. I. Jiménez San Cristobal, *Instructions for the Netherworld: The Orphic Gold Tablets* (Boston: Brill, 2008); Radcliffe G. Edmonds, *Myths of the Underworld Journey: Plato, Aristophanes and the “Orphic” Gold Tablets* (N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Roy Kotansky, “Incantations and Prayers for Salvation on Inscribed Greek Amulets: The Magic Lamellae”, in Christopher A. Faraone & Dirk Obbink, *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 107-137, esp. 116. Commonly lamellae would be inscribed with verses related to facilitating the passage of the soul to the underworld. The oldest known lamellae are from Greece and dated to the fourth century B.C.E. Similar lamellae have also been found in tombs in Palestine from the second century B.C.E. and later. They are often compared with the coin placed on the lips of the corpse, the so-called Charon’s obol - widely used in ancient Greece and other places, as a fare to pay the ferryman for the passage to the underworld, see Susan T. Stevens, “Charon’s Obol and Other Coins in Ancient Funerary Practice”, *Phoenix* 45.3 (1991) pp. 215-229; on coins in graves in Palestine, see the coin found in the mouth of the skull of a woman (dated 42/43 CE), Zvi Greenhut, “The Caiaphas’ Tomb in North Talpiyot,

The teraphim were explained in terms of surviving pagan practices in several biblical passages.¹² The teraphim are used as part of a cult in Judges 17 and 18. There they are included in a list of cultic equipment which belonged to Micah the priest. However, they are not identified as objects of worship per se. Laban's pagan beliefs were stated already in Gen 31:30, where it was stressed that Laban kept household gods (teraphim).¹³ Later exegesis built upon that information and described in some detail the preparation of these gods and their cultic veneration and place in the household shrines. This practice probably corresponded to actual everyday piety practices in pagan houses which kept private shrines. It is, however, striking that the rabbinic sources in view do not actually understand these house idols as man-made artefacts but primarily as actual heads of slaughtered men, especially and carefully prepared for divination purposes.

Jerusalem", *Atiqot* 21 (1992), pp. 63-71, esp. 70; Levi Y. Rahmani, "A Note on Charon's Obol", *Atiqot* 22 (1993), pp. 149-150. The use of golden lamellae is also attested for Christian heretics in later Syriac historiography, see Michael the Syrian on the Montanists making a similar use of golden plates in burial, see Susanna Elm, "Pierced by Bronze Needles", *JACS* 4.4 (1996), pp. 409-39: 424, quoting J.-B. Chabot, *Chronique*, trans. vol. II, pp. 287-288.

¹² For a discussion of the etymology of the word (teraphim), see William O.E. Oesterley, *Immortality and the Unseen World: A Study in Old Testament Religion* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; New York: Macmillan Co, 1921), pp. 108-109. Oesterley argues that the teraphim were household gods of non-Israelite origin looking like a man that belonged to the head of the family (Judg 17; Sam 19:11-17) Their worship could have been a remnant of ancestor-worship and was generally condemned, (2 Kgs 23:24; 1 Sam 15:23; Zach 10:2; however, see also Judg 17:5; and Hos 3:4); the biblical evidence would suggest a Babylonian origin for this practice (Ezek 21:26), (Immortality, 153); cf. also Friedrich Schwally, *Das Leben nach dem Tode: Nach den Vorstellungen des alten Israel und des Judentums, einschliesslich des Volksglaubens im Zeitalter Christi* (Giessen: J. Ricker, 1892), p. 35.

¹³ Martha A. Morrison, "The Jacob and Laban Narrative in Light of Near Eastern Sources", *The Biblical Archaeologist* 46 (1983), pp. 155-164; Benjamin D. Cox & Susan Ackermann, "Micah's Teraphim", *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 12 (2012), pp. 1-38; see also Karel van der Toorn, "The Nature of the Biblical Teraphim in the Light of the Cuneiform Evidence"; *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990), pp. 203-233, who explores the association with necromancy); cf. Josef Tropper, *Nekromantie: Totenbefragung im Alten Testament* (Kevelaer & Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1989).

The description of Laban's cultic behavior in front of his "household gods" reflects common idolatrous behavior as described in Mishnah Sanhedrin 7:6: "One who engages in idol worship (...), sacrifices, offers incense, pours libations, prostrates himself, accepts it as a god, and says to it 'You are my god'".¹⁴

However, as already noted, the rabbinic sources do not regard Laban as a pious pagan but make him into a villainous magician by transforming the idols into heads of killed people. The practice associated with Laban appears to be a complex combination of an idolatrous divination technique that involved necromancy. Moreover, according to our sources, young men or even children were murdered so that their skulls or heads could be manipulated for divination. Interestingly, the victims were not chosen randomly but in order for them to be able to be used effectively, they had to fulfill certain cultic criteria. The ritual nature of the intended murder is thus underlined. These requirements involved careful planning in choosing the prospective victims. More specifically, the common requirement that the victim should be a firstborn male refers to cultic prescriptions that relate to a biblical background. In a provocative overturning of the Mosaic Law (Ex 13:1), the first-born males here are sacrificed to demonic powers that are naturally perceived as antagonistic to God.¹⁵

The detailed description of the cultic preparation in these sources is striking. Even if all accounts originally refer to Laban, they also imply that these practices were common among idolaters, probably originating from Laban's homeland, namely Mesopotamia. Moreover, all the texts suggest that with the proper preparation and magical manipulation, these severed heads, kept in shrines in pagan homes, could actually impart important – or occasionally, even ordinary – revelations to their worshippers. It appears that known idolatrous practices were -intentionally or not – misunderstood and criminalized

¹⁴ *The Mishnah: A New Integrated Translation with a Commentary*, edited by Machon Yisrael Trust, vol. 8 (Jerusalem: Israel bookshop, 2007).

¹⁵ On the afterlife of the legend of the oracular use of the head of a firstborn scholar in Hassidic folklore in Prague, see Howard Schwartz, *Leaves from the Garden of Eden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 276-282 and 416-417; cf. Dan, "Teraphim", p. 102.

and finally, connected with the Biblical archetypical arch-villain and idolater, Laban.¹⁶

Necromancy in the Bible and in the Rabbinic Literature

Necromantic practices are based on the belief that the souls of the dead hover in an intermediate status between life and death for a certain period of time after death. Dead bodies are believed to retain a magic power that allows for their manipulation in a number of magical practices – divination being one of them.

Necromancy and all kinds of divination are regarded as an abomination by God (Deut 18:11, 12), and are outrightly condemned by the Mosaic Law and may be punished even by death (Lev 19:31; 20:6; 20:27; cf. 1 Sam 28:9).¹⁷ However, there is enough evidence in order to conclude that necromantic practices were well known in biblical times, and even tacitly tolerated in a certain context.

The best known case of necromancy in the Bible is the evocation of the soul of Samuel at Endor (1 Sam 28). The invocation of the spirit of Samuel provides evidence for the practice of necromancy as well as for the knowledge of related divination techniques. Saul asks for the assistance of a religious specialist, a witch, in order to communicate with the spirit of the dead. For this necromantic séance, he is –even if only mildly- reproached in the Bible (1 Chr 10:13-14).¹⁸

Necromantic practices are mentioned in several places in rabbinic literature as well.¹⁹ The positive or negative evaluation of these

¹⁶ See Karin Hedner Zetterholm, *Portrait of a Villain: Laban the Aramean in Rabbinic Literature* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002).

¹⁷ Cf. Isaiah, who strongly condemns the consultation of the dead (8:19; 19:3; 29:4, etc.), and the condemnation of Manasseh for practicing divination and witchcraft (2 Kgs 21:6; 2 Chr 33:6).

¹⁸ See Josef Seidel, “Necromantic Praxis in the Midrash on the Seance at En Dor”, in Claudia J. Setzer (ed.), *Resurrection of the Body in Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), p. 103. Cf. I. Al. 6.340-42, who appears to demonstrate a certain sympathy for the witch and her métier.

¹⁹ See Giuseppe Veltri, *Magie und Halakha. Ansätze zu einem empirischen Wissenschaftsbegriff im spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Judentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), p. 73.

practices depended on the persons involved as well as on the legitimation of their authority. As L. Blau maintains, the rabbis believed in necromancy, even if they rejected it as demonic.²⁰

Evidence of knowledge of various necromantic practices is to be found in a number of rabbinic sources.²¹ A necromantic rite is described in GenR 11:5 as a proof that the dead receive a respite from judgment on that day. In bGittin 56b, we are told that the ghosts of Titus, Balaam, and Jesus are summoned from the Gehenna to provide advice for Onqelos, the nephew of Titus, as to whether he should embrace Judaism.²² Rabbinic sources suggest that necromancy involves the proper manipulation of remains for the successful communication with the spirit of the specific dead person. The familiarity with actual specific practices from their respective environment is often implied in this context.²³

Skull necromancy (craniomancy) is one of the divinatory methods attested to in rabbinic sources. BSan 65b explains the difference between two major necromantic practices, one of them involving a skull. More specifically, the passage explains: “Our Rabbis taught: *Ba'al ob* denotes both him who conjures up the dead by means of soothsaying and one who consults a skull. What is the difference between them? – The dead conjured up by soothsaying does not ascend naturally [but feet first], nor on the Sabbath; whilst if consulted by its skull it ascends naturally and on the Sabbath too. [You say,] it ascends: but whither – does not the skull lie before him? – But say thus: It answers naturally, and on the Sabbath too.”²⁴

According to this passage, the spirit “comes up naturally” in the case of a skull used for divination, which suggests a belief that the soul of the dead has not departed from the skull and may even appear

²⁰ *Das altjüdische Zauberwesen* (Strassburg: K. Trübner, 1898), p. 53.

²¹ bBerachot 59a. 18b; bShabbath 152b; bBabba Bathra 58a.

²² See Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton, N.J.-Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 85 and 90.

²³ See Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1939), p. 223 and the references in: Daniil Chwolohn, *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus II* (St. Petersburg: Buchdruckerei der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1856), p. 151.

²⁴ *The Babylonian Talmud*, edited by Isidore Epstein (London: Soncino Press, 1961).

on Sabbath. The association between the skull and the ghost is presupposed. The ghost did not need to “come up” to be questioned by the officiant in that case because the officiant already had the skull (and therefore the ghost) before him.²⁵

Another Talmudic passage, bShab 152b, implies that the dead soul still hovers around the body for a certain period of time: “A certain Sadducee said to R. Abbahu: You maintain that the souls of the righteous are hidden under the Throne of Glory: then how did the one [practicing] necromancer bring up Samuel by means of his necromancy. There it was within twelve months [of death], he replied. For it was taught: For full [twelve months] the body is in existence and the soul ascends and descends; after twelve months, the body cease to exist.” According to this source, necromancy is possible within twelve months after death of any deceased person, violently slain or not. Furthermore, we also encounter in the same Talmudic tractate two divergent opinions about the time period and the conditions required for the soul to linger between this world and the hereafter. More specifically, the discussion addressed the issue whether the soul was still around until the sealing of the grave or until the decomposition of the flesh. The latter opinion assumed that the preservation of the flesh would ensure the longer presence of the dead spirit: “Rab Judah assembled ten men every day and they sat in his place. After seven days he [the dead man] appeared to him in a dream and said to him, ‘Thy mind be at rest, for thou hast set my mind at rest.’ R. Abahu said, ‘The dead man knows all that said in his presence until the top-stone [golel] closes [the grave]’. R. Hiyya and R. Simeon b. Rabi differ therein, one maintains, until the flesh rots away – because it is written, ‘But his flesh upon him hath pain and his soul with him mourneth. He who says, until the top-stone closes [the grave] because it is written, and the dust return to the earth as it was and the spirit return unto God.’” (bShab 152b)

Necromancy was particularly condemned if the methods applied were not approved of by the rabbis (Baba Bathra 58b). However, the

²⁵ Cf. T.Jer.San. 7: 10 adds that an ordinary individual consulting a skull can bring up a king, which is not possible by necromantic incantation alone. Thus, the spirit does not have to literally “ascend”.

belief that the dead still live in their graves and can communicate with the living for a long time was acknowledged.²⁶

The rabbis reportedly also practiced necromancy. Baba Mezia 17b describes Rab performing necromancy himself, and charms in cemeteries, in order to examine the cause of death of certain corpses.²⁷ Apparently, a rite of necromancy that involved fasting and sleeping in cemeteries as a means to achieve communion with the dead was well known.²⁸ Finally, rabbinic literature would prescribe harsh penalties for necromancers.²⁹

²⁶ See Tobit 4:17 on feeding the dead or giving them drink but see also the criticism of similar offerings to the dead in Psalm 106:28 and in LXX Sir 30:18; cf. Nathan Mac Donald “Bread on the Grave of the Righteous’ (Tob. 4.17)”, in Mark Brekin (ed.), *Studies in the Book of Tobit: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (London-N.Y.: T&T Clark, 2008), pp. 99-103.

²⁷ According to Trachtenberg, necromancy only played “a minor role in Jewish magic” judging from the scarce references in the rabbinic literature. He notes that according to certain traditions questioning an immortal benevolent spirit, such as the consulting of the spirit of a dead rabbi, could have been acceptable. In contrast, “questioning the corpse” would be forbidden. Generally, spending time (esp. at night) on graves, using incantations or burning spice and incense would also be condemned, as these actions were associated with malevolent magic (*Jewish Magic*, 233); cf. the necromantic rituals in the apocryphal 5th-6th century *Sefer ha-razim*, see Philip Alexander, ““Sefer ha-Razim” and the problem of black magic in early Judaism” in Todd Klutz (ed.), *Magic in the Biblical World: From the Rod of Aaron to the Ring of Solomon* (London: T&T International, 2003), pp. 170-190.

²⁸ BSan 65b; bHag 3b; these passages apparently refer to incubation practices; see the criticism of similar practices in Isa 8:19-22; 19:3; 65:4; Zech 10:2; cf. Hieron., Is. 18.65 (PL 24.657A); Oesterley, *Immortality and the Unseen World*, p. 140; Friedrich Schmidtke, “Träume, Orakel und Totengeister als Kinder der Zukunft in Israel und Babylonien“, *Biblische Zeitschrift* 11 (1967), pp. 240-246; Ann Jeffers, *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria* (Leiden: Brill; 1999); Jean-Marie Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives in the Biblical World* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

²⁹ See Veltri, *Magie und Halakha*, p. 73.

Necromancy in the Ancient World

Necromancy was widely practiced in the ancient Mediterranean and beyond.³⁰ There exists a significant amount of evidence for necromantic practices in ancient Mesopotamia.³¹ Egypt and Babylon were in general considered as centers of magical wisdom and activities, as evidenced in the Christian but also in the rabbinic literature.³²

Famous necromantic accounts are included in Lucan's *Pharsalia* (6.588-830) featuring the notorious witch, Erichtho, in the *Ethiopica* by Heliodorus with the old woman of Bessa (6.12-15), and probably most

³⁰ On necromancy among Thracians, Phoenicians, Greeks and ancient Germans, see Hdt. IV.94; Cic. Tusc. 1.16; cf. Chwolsohn, *Die Ssabier*, p. 150; Cf. Albert Henrichs: 'It is likely that human sacrifice for ritual purposes was practiced in Egypt, Syria, and North Africa well into Imperial Age. This would explain why the alleged ritual murder of the Jews as propagated by Apion (a native Egyptian), the rites of the Egyptian Gnostics (...), the alleged Christian crimes as viewed by Tertullian (a North African) and Minucius Felix (...) and finally the ritual scene of the *Phoinikika* (most probably to be located in Egypt) repeat a related and largely identical ritual pattern' ('Pagan Ritual and the Alleged Crimes of the Early Christians', in Patrick Granfield & Josef A. Jungmann (ed.), *Kyriakon. Festschrift J. Quasten*, vol. I (Münster: Aschendorff, 1970), pp. 18-35, esp. 35; cf. Jan N. Bremmer, "Ancient Necromancy: Fact or Fiction?", in Krzysztof Bielawski (ed.), *Mantic Perspectives: Oracles, Prophecy and Performance* (Warszawa: Ośrodek Praktyk Teatralnych "Gardzienice", 2015), pp. 119-141, who concludes: "both material and literary sources show that the idea and practice of necromancy as an accessible form of divination with the dead persisted albeit in a changing form, until the end of the ancient world" (J. N. Bremmer, "Ancient Necromancy...", p. 141).

³¹ See Daniel Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 133, n. 14.

³² See for example, *Clem.Recogn.* 1.5, or the legendary Egyptian necromancers, Jannes and Jambres, who, interestingly, acquire a Mesopotamian origin in the Armenian lore, see Michael Stone, *Armenian Apocrypha Relating to Angels and Biblical Heroes* (Atlanta GA: SBL Press, 2016), p. 258 ff; cf. Brigitte (Rivka) Kern-Ulmer, "The Depiction of Magic in Rabbinic Texts: The Rabbinic and The Greek Concept of Magic", *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 27 (1996), pp. 289-303, esp. p. 294; cf. *The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres, the Magicians: P. Chester Beatty XVI*, edited by Albert Pietersma, (Leiden: Brill, 1993), pp. 16-22 and the discussion in Emmanouela Grypeou, "Talking Skulls: On Some Personal Accounts of Hell and Their Place in Apocalyptic Literature" *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 20.1 (2016), pp. 109-126, esp. 124-125.

famously in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* with the rather satirical account with the Egyptian priest, Zatchlas (*Met.* 2). All three accounts relate stories of reanimation of corpses through carefully performed magical procedures. Moreover, they share certain common features, such as the use of herbs and the indication that the ghosts invoked are angry and resentful. The technique involves bringing the corpse to an upright position as a symbol of its return to life and its re-animation. Moreover, these novelistic accounts refer to the manipulation of the corpses of already dead people.

Historiographic sources, however, also include reports of murders with the intention of using the corpse for hepatoscopy, a very popular divination method in Antiquity. A famous inscription from first century Rome relates how a four-year-old slave belonging to Iulia Livia, the sister of Germanicus, was carried off by "the cruel hands of a witch (saga), and killed by her arts", presumably for necromantic purposes.³³ Similarly, another account by Zacharias Scholasticus informs about the intended sacrifice of an Ethiopian slave-boy by local magicians in the late fifth century Beirut (*Life of Severus*, PO 2, 1907, 57-59).

Accusations of human sacrifices for magical purposes circulated for a number of (often unpopular) Roman emperors. Hadrian's young lover volunteered to die in human sacrifice so that the emperor could perform necromancy (Dio Cassius, *Hist. Rom.* 69.11). Emperor Elagabalus reportedly investigated the entrails of beautiful boys (Lampridius, *Elagabalus* 8). Eusebius reports that Macrianus, the chief of the Egyptian magicians, corrupted the emperor Valerian into sacrificing children and babies for necromancy (HE 7.10).

This polemical topos became a standard motif in the Christian literature dealing with the reign of Emperor Julian. Julian, a pagan emperor, who attempted to re-introduce and consolidate pagan cults

³³ *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 8522, in *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, edited by Hermann Dessau, vol. 2.II (Berlin: apud Weidmannos, 1892). Cf. Eusebius on the Emperor Maxentius, who used to inspect the bowels of newborn infants (HE 8.14.5; VC 1.36); and on similar accusations during the time of Valens, *Amm.Marc.* (Res Gest. 29.2.17); see also Richard Gordon, "Imagining Greek and Roman Magic", in Valerie Flint et al. (ed.), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome* (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), pp. 159-276.

and idolatry into the Empire was angrily attacked by the Christian authors of the time and was commonly accused of horrific magical practices.³⁴ His idolatrous practices were often associated with human sacrifice for divinatory purposes.³⁵ Theodoret (HE III.27) reports of several chests full of the heads of men that were found in Julian's palace at Antioch; in addition, many dungeons were discovered filled with dead bodies. Theodoret stresses that these findings related to Julian's "abominable gods".³⁶ Chwolsohn argues that these skulls must have belonged to sacrificial victims.³⁷

Necromantic practices were often associated with heretics or other sectarian or marginal groups. For example, as evidenced in contemporary sources, necromancy was attributed to the sect of the Pythagoreans. Significantly, Cicero claimed that Vatinius, a self-proclaimed Pythagorean and hated Roman statesman, killed boys for necromancy (Cic. *Vat.* 18; cf. Aug. *Ciu.* 7.35).³⁸

³⁴ Julian was accused of consulting with demons in deserted tombs, and more significantly of tearing the heart of living children and fetuses from pregnant women for magical purposes; see Theodor Nöldeke, "Über den syrischen Roman von Kaiser Julian", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 28 (1874), pp. 263-292.

³⁵ According to Thdt. *HE* III.26, the Emperor Julian sacrificed a woman in the temple in Harran, in order to examine her liver; cf. Soc.Sch. *HE* 3.13; The pagan sacrifice of boys – and in some cases of girls too – for necromantic purposes during the reign of Julian is also mentioned by John Chrysostom (*De Babyla contra Iulianum et gentiles* 79.4) and Gregory of Nazianzus, specifically, argues that boys and virgins were sacrificed and dissected for conjuring up the dead and divining (*Contra Iulianum* 92, PG 3: 624.27).

³⁶ Cf. Theophanes, *Chronographia* I.82 and George Cedrenus, *Compendium Historiarum* (PG 121: 573); Similar to Theodoret's description of the gruesome findings in Julian's palace in Antioch, Rufinus *HE* II.24. *Or* 11.24 reports that preserved heads of infants in gilded urns were discovered by Christians in the temple of Serapis in Alexandria; cf. *Vita Athanasii*, in Photius, *Bibliotheca*, cod. 258; 483b, 25s. and Socr.Sch. *HE* 3.2.

³⁷ See Chwolsohn, *Die Ssabier*, p. 150.

³⁸ See David Ogden, "It was held that particularly authoritative divination could be affected through boy-sacrifice", in *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds; A Sourcebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 174; see also Ogden for refs to the supporting evidence (Ogden, "It was held that particularly authoritative...").

Augustine reports that pagans accused Peter the Apostle of necromantic practices. Peter reputedly killed a one-year-old boy, dissected it and buried it with nefarious rites (*ritu nefario sepultus*), in order to secure the success of Christianity (Ciu. 18:53).

The Martyrdom of Pionius reports that the Jews accused Jesus, an allegedly violently slain (βιοθανής) person, that by practicing necromancy (νεκυιομαντείαν), he managed to come back to life along with the cross (13.8-9).³⁹

The use of murdered people for divination was linked with the belief that dead people who died an untimely or an unjust death would haunt the world of the living as ghosts, mediating between this world and the hereafter, that is, they would still linger in-between the two worlds, because their death was not or should not meant to happen. This belief might explain the use of innocent victims, such as young souls whose resentment would have been even stronger. As Aune remarks, “those who had recently died of unnatural (i.e. violent) causes (...) and who had not been properly buried (ἄταφοι), such as executed criminals (...) had the right profile for the job, for they were expected to resent their fate and threaten both human and supernatural beings”.⁴⁰

A famous and early attribution of necromantic practices to an arch-heretic rival is attested in the Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions (3.24). Simon Magus admits (or even boasts) to the Apostle Peter that he performed miracles with the assistance of the ghost of a violently slain young man. Simon had managed to manipulate the ghost through the use of magical incantations. Simon also explains how the souls when released from the body remain in the celestial sphere and gain thus prescience. Accordingly, these souls may be used for divinatory purposes.

³⁹ On Jesus' post-resurrection appearance as a ghost, see Israel Muñoz Gallarte, “Luke 24 Reconsidered: The Figure of Ghost in Post-Classical Greek Literature”, *Novum Testamentum* 59. 2 (2017), pp. 131-146.

⁴⁰ Jean-Jacques Aubert, “Threatened wombs, aspects of ancient uterine magic”, *Greek Roman and Byzantine Studies* 30.3 (1989), pp. 421-449, esp. 437; cf. Julia Doroszewska, “When the Dead Love the Living: A Case Study in Phlegon of Tralles' *Mirabilia*”. *Scripta Classica* 12 (2015), pp. 137-149; Antonio Stramaglia, *Res inauditae, incredulae storie di fantasmi nel mondo greco-latino* (Bari: Levante, 1999).

Tertullian refers to (pagan) necromantic practices which would involve the invocation of prematurely and violently slain people (ἄωροι βιαιοθάνατοι) (*De anima* 57). Furthermore, he explains that the βιαιοθάνατοι still roam the earth and as such they may be manipulated (*De Anima* 55). Tertullian attributes these practices to demonic deception. The ghostly manifestations conjured up by necromancers are manipulations exercised by demons, who take over the dead body. Tertullian indicates that the manipulation of the remains in order to invoke the spirit of the dead body was a well-known and widespread practice already in the second century. Furthermore, he refers to observances in which the demons represent themselves as the souls of the dead (*De anima* 57).⁴¹

Necromancy in Christianity

In the first centuries of the Christian era ‘unholy sacrifices’ and magic were common among pagans, according to patristic references.⁴² Divinatory practices were promptly associated with idolatry and naturally sharply condemned by the Church Fathers.⁴³ Furthermore, sacrifices to the idols (i.e. demons) would operate as a means to secure demonic assistance in evil actions.⁴⁴ Necromancy was a vice according

⁴¹ Cf. I., *BI* 7.185: demons are the ghosts of the wicked dead.

⁴² See, e.g., Athenag., *Leg.* 26-27; Minucius Felix, *Octavianus* 267; Eus., *DE* 5; Tert., *Apol.* 23; *De anima* 56-57; Lact., *Inst.* 4.27; On accusations of human sacrifice as part of pagan rituals see Eusb., *HE* 8.14; 9.9; *VC* 1.36; Porph. *Abst.* 2; Gr. Naz., *Or.* 4.3 (First Invective Against Julian).

⁴³ See Ephr. Syr., *Memra on Nicomedia* 10.193-197; 11.351-355; 385-388; Eus. Ant., *Engast.* 16 (PG 18: 648); On ecclesiastical witchcraft, see E. Peterson, *Frühkirche, Judentum und Gnosis* (Darmstadt, 1959), pp. 333-345; On arguments against divination, see Iustinus Martyr, *Dial.* 135.4; Tat., *Orat.* 12.10; Tert., *Apol.* 4.2; Origen, *Cels.* 5.9; Octavian, *Apol.* 27.1; Ambr., *Hex.* 6.7.33; Ath. Al., *Inc.* 55; Eph., *Contr. Julian, passim*; Hippol., *Can.* 15; *Const. App.* II.22; II 62; VII.6; Aug., *Confessiones* 4.2; Ev. Ioann., *Tract.* 7.7; *De Catechisandis Rudibus* II.27; specifically, against necromancy, see Lact., *Inst.* 23; Iohann. Chrys., *Comm. on Rom.* XIII. 11-14; 25.4; Cur. H., *Catech.* 4.37.

⁴⁴ See Nicephoros Gregoras, *De Insomniis* (PG 149: 616) on the general practice of sacrificing to demons to secure their help; cf. Theodoros Balsamon, *In Can.* LXI Conc. in Trullo (PG 137: 720); cf. Michael Psellos, *De Daem.* (PG 122: 877.881); See

to Basilius of Caesarea (*Orationes/Exorcismi*; PG 31: 1684.43). Isidore of Seville (*Etymologies* VIII) condemns divination of various kinds, including necromancy in a careful classification of terminology.

The use of magic and divination was condemned at a number of councils and synods.⁴⁵ Imperial legislation issued decrees against magic and various forms of divination, which must have included necromancy even if it did not necessarily always feature separately.⁴⁶ Notably, harmful magic was condemned in the Theodosian Code (9.16) and punished with the capital punishment. The legislation introduced by Constance II associated sacrifice and divination practiced by pagans with harmful magic, including, of course, necromancy.⁴⁷

As observed, imperial law condemned magic that was considered dangerous and deviant. Interestingly, we encounter in the Christian literature cases of didactic or beneficial consultation with the dead or even resurrection of dead people performed by renowned Christian monks and holy men. These are not actually portrayed as cases of necromantic practice *stricto sensu*, since they lack the ritual techniques used in necromantic recipes in order to invoke the spirits of the dead. Moreover, the literary evidence unequivocally stresses the divine assistance and granted permission to the Christian officiant in this context.

In addition, divinatory practices are considered as forms of religious deviance when they are performed outside of the confines of the institutionalised religious establishment. As Antigone Samellas

Alexander Kazhdan, "Holy and Unholy Miracle Workers", in Henry Maguire (ed.), *Byzantine Magic* (Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996), pp. 73-82; cf. Richard H. Greenfield, *Traditions of Belief in Late Byzantine Demonology* (Amsterdam: A.M. Hakkert, 1988), p. 254 for the later Byzantine tradition.

⁴⁵ See Spyros N. Troianos, "Magic and the Devil: From the Old to the New Rome", in John Petropoulos (ed.), *Greek Magic: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 44-52, esp. 46.

⁴⁶ See Matthew Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London-N.Y.: Routledge, 2001), p. 281.

⁴⁷ C.Th. 16.10; 15.6.; see Nicanor Gomez Villegos, "La repression de la magia en lo Imperio romano", in R. Teja (ed.), *Profecía, magia y adivinación en la religiones antiguas* (Aguilar de Campoo: Fundación Santa María La Real, Centro de Estudios del Románico, 2001), p. 171.

concludes: “It was not just the moral and murderous character of necromancy that preoccupied the Church Fathers but also the negative implications which the perpetuation of idolatrous rituals might have for their authority (...). They observed that Christians haunted graves to appease the demons by the performance of sacrifices; poured libations upon the thirsty souls; sang incantations and invoked the name of the dead. They protested that it was only God who had the right to call up souls from Hades and not ventriloquists and charlatans, yet in the end they tried to compete with their rivals by assuming the role of the magician themselves”.⁴⁸

Craniomancy

The use of human skulls in magic and divination constitutes just one among several evidenced necromantic methods, which is, still, attested in various forms and usages. There is abundant literary and material evidence of preparation of human skulls for divinatory purposes, which, however, did not usually involve the actual killing of the victim.

Skull questioning and using of skulls to summon the dead are hallowed shamanistic practices stretching back thousands of years in Africa and the Middle East and, indeed, may be found all around the globe. In that context, they were often associated with the cult of the dead, and more specifically often with the ancestors' cult. Accordingly, there were socially acceptable and honoured practices.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Death in the Eastern Mediterranean (50-600 AD)* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2002), p. 290; cf. Stephen E. Potthoff, *The Afterlife in Early Christian Carthage: Near-death experience, ancestor cult, and the archaeology of paradise* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 50-87.

⁴⁹ See Hdt., 3.4.26 on the Issedonians. On anthropological studies on skull cults, see also Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 245; 434ff.; Alfred Haffner, *Heiligtümer und Opferkulte der Kelten* (Stuttgart: Theiss, 1995), p. 80; Adolph Reinach, “Le rite des têtes coupées chez les Celtes”, *Révue de l'histoire des religions* 67 (1913), pp. 41-48; Karina Croucher, *Death and Dying in the Neolithic Near East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 3-154; Hans-Dieter Bienert, “Skull Cult in Pre-Historic Near East”, *Journal of Prehistoric Religion* 5 (1991), pp. 9-23; Michelle Bonogofsky (ed.), *Skull*

The best known example of head divination from antiquity is the oracular head of Orpheus.⁵⁰ According to the literary tradition, Orpheus, renowned for his oracular powers, was killed, dismembered and decapitated. His head then made revelations from a hollow in the earth on the island of Lesbos. Orpheus' head may be viewed as prototypical for this specific divination practice in classical literature.⁵¹ However, ancient literature actually knows of several mantic heads.⁵² Aelian in *Varia Historia XII.8* reports an anecdote about Cleomenes, king of Sparta, who cut off his friend's, Archonides, head and kept it in a jar of honey.⁵³ Cleomenes used to carry it around with

Collection, Modification and Decoration (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); D. Schmandt-Basserant, "The plastered skulls", in Michelle Bonogofsky (ed.), *Symbol at 'Ain Ghazal* (Berlin, 2013); George R. Head, "The Severed Head in Earliest Neolithic Times", *Journal of Prehistoric Religion* 2 (1988), pp. 51-56. See Julia Kristeva, "Over the course of history, worshipping the skulls of ancestors became not only a cult of the beyond, prototype for divine worship, but also a cult of memory, filial, familial, and clan based" (*The Severed Head: Capital Visions*, Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 14.

⁵⁰ Philostr., *Her.* 306; cf. the *Life of Apollonius* 4.1.4; Ogden, *Necromancy*, p. 125.

⁵¹ On the oracular head of Orpheus, see William K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and the Greek religion: a study of the Orphic movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), pp. 35-37; Margot Schmidt, "Ein neues Zeugnis zum Mythos von Orpheushaupt" *Antike Kunst* 15 (1972), pp. 128-137; Christopher Faraone, "Orpheus' Final Performance: Necromancy and a Singing Head on Lesbos", *Studi italiani di filologia classica* 97 (2004), pp. 5-27; Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans. Interpretationen altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972), pp. 224-225, esp. n. 30; George Dimitrokales, "La Tête Coupée d' Orphée: Re-examination et Ré - interprétation d'un Mythe Ancien", *Extrait des "Actes du XIe Congrès International d'Études Classiques, Cavala (Grèce), 24-30.8.1999"*, vol. II (Athènes: 2002), pp. 319-330.

⁵² See Waldemar Deonna, "Orphée et l'Oracle de la Tête Coupée", *Révue des Études Grecques* 30 (1925), pp. 44-69, who lists numerous historical parallels for mantic heads and remarks: "On attribute l'origine de cette pratique aux Juifs et aux Syriens, qui constituent ainsi leurs puissants talismans, les "teraphim" mentionnés par le nombreux auteurs", cf. W. Deonna, "Orphée et l'Oracle...", p. 52; On the oracle-giving head of Orpheus and Celtic, Icelandic and other local parallels, see also Jan N. Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 46-47, and esp. n. 91.

⁵³ Honey was widely used as preservative in antiquity, including its use in burial practices see Hdt. 1. 198; X., *HG.* V.3.19; Plin., *HN.* 2.24; Statius, *Silv.lib.* III. *Carm.* 2.v.117 (II.2.118); Porph., *De Antro Nympharum* C.XV.:15: purifying as well as preservative; Lucr. 3.5..901; I., *Antiq. Lib.* XIV.74.

him and to consult it on important decisions. The sophist Libanius was accused of cutting off the heads of two women in order to use them for sorcery.⁵⁴

The existence of skulls or house and temple idols that could speak (and most notably to cry out loudly) is attested to in many sources that accused the pagans of magic and demonic manipulation. For example, Eusebius knows of a Jupiter image that could speak (*HE*. IX.3). According to Pope Damasius as evidenced in Photius (c. 242, 1045), a student of Proclus had seen in the house of a certain Quirinus, human skulls the size of a pea that cried out loudly.⁵⁵ Similarly, in a Coptic text from the sixth century, the Panegyric on Macarius, Bishop of Tkow, the idol of a local deity, the not-further identified god, Kothos, by the agency of its resident demon, would cry out and warn the pagans of the coming of angry Christian monks to their village. Interestingly, it was said that the idol was kept in a niche of their

⁵⁴ Lib., *Or.* I.93; Ogden, *Necromancy*, p. 209; cf. Campbell Bonner: "It is probably true that magicians sometimes used skulls for various purposes, and the horror was magnified by popular report" ("Witchcraft in the Lecture Room of Libanius", *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 63 (1932), pp. 34-44); Mediaeval evidence for this and other uses is to be found in Armand Delatte, *Anecdota Atheniensia* (Liège: Faculté de philosophie et lettres de l'université de Liège, 1927), pp. 396, 450, 589. See also Theodor Hopfner, *Griechisch-ägyptischer Offenbarungszauber* (Leipzig: H. Haessel, 1921), vol. i, pp. 373 and 376.

⁵⁵ See Chwolsohn, *Die Ssabier*, p. 153 for refs; On the use of *calvaria magica* in antiquity, see Alfonso Abt, *Die Apologie des Apuleius von Madaura. Beiträge zur Erläuterung der Schrift De Magia* (Giessen: A. Töpelmann, 1908), pp. 217-218; Arthur Marmorstein, "Beiträge zur Religionsgeschichte und Volkskunde III", *Mitteilungen zur jüdischen Volkskunde* 30 (1927), pp. 41-42; Matthew Dillon, *Omens and Oracles: Divination in Ancient Greece* (London-N.Y.: Routledge, 2017), pp. 116-118; On a historical discussion of the motif of craniomancy and its afterlife in Medieval Europe, see Christa Agnes Tuczay, *Kulturgeschichte der mittelalterlichen Wahrsagerei* (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2012), pp. 311-320; see also the legend from Carinthia in Austria about a skull in an old chapel that would answer three questions on certain days, in Anton V. Avanzin, "Bemerkungen zum weissagenden Totenkopf", *Carinthia* 160 (1970), pp. 974-977; see A. V. Avanzin, "Bemerkungen zum weissagenden...", pp. 975-977 on further examples from the Nordic (Eddae), Persian (Tutinama), Latin and other traditions see L. Kretzenbach, "Zur Kärtner Sage vom redenden Totenkopf", *Carinthia* 162 (1972), pp. 499-503; cf. also Leander Petzold, *Der Tote als Gast: Volkssage und Exempel* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1968), pp. 55-59.

house and the pagans would bow down their heads and worship it, when entering the house.⁵⁶

Hippolytus describes an oracular practice involving a skull, which he explains as a deceptive trick used as part of a spectacle: “They place a skull on the ground and make it appear to talk in the following way. It is made of an ox’s caul that is molded on Tyrrhenian wax and freshly mixed gypsum. When the membrane is spread around it, it has the appearance of a skull. It seems to speak to all, when an instrument is operated (...). 2. Preparing the windpipe of a crane or some other long-necked animal, a fellow jester secretly attaches it to the skull, uttering what he wants. If he wants it to disappear, he surrounds it with a heap of coals and appears to offer incense. The wax, absorbing the coals, melts, and so the skull is thought to disappear” (Ref. IV.41).⁵⁷

The Greek magical papyri attest to the use of skulls for divination and magical purposes in Late Antiquity.⁵⁸ The recipes involve skulls of people killed by violence (however, not by the magician for this purpose) and prepared in different ways.⁵⁹ The evidence suggests that there was not a standard or predominant method used when handling skulls for divination but that the crucial details, such as the content and recipient of the invocations, the participating powers and the handling could be quite diverse. The skull becomes a communication medium between the officiant and the supernatural power, once properly prepared either through wreathing and/or through inscriptions of *vocae magicae*. Indeed, the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* also prescribe certain magical recipes that require the inscription of skulls as well the use of lamellae on the mouths of skulls. Thus, the magical

⁵⁶ D.W. Johnson, *A Panegyric on Macarius, Bishop of Tkôw attributed to Dioscorus of Alexandria*, 2vols (Louvain: Peeters, 1980) vol. 1, pp. 29-31; vol. 2, pp. 21-24.

⁵⁷ *Refutation of All Heresies*, trans. by M. David Litwa (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), pp. 159-160; See Richard Ganschinietz, *Hippolitos' Kapitel gegen die Magier. Refut. Haer. IV. 28-48* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1913).

⁵⁸ See PGM IV 1928-2240; PGM IV 2140-44; PGM XII 401-44; PGM IV 2006-2125; PGM IV 2025-2039.

⁵⁹ Ogden, *Magic*, pp. 202 and 211.

papyri provide a textual basis for the technical preparation of skulls for necromantic or other magical purposes.⁶⁰

Interestingly, inscribed skulls were also found in Nippur, in Mesopotamia, along with inscribed magical bowls among the ruins of Jewish houses and cemeteries dated to the 7th century CE. The skulls were inscribed with Aramaic spells. Dan Levene remarks that the fact that the script on the skulls is a square Aramaic script used by Jews in Mesopotamia suggests a Jewish use. He also notes that the texts inscribed on the skulls are similar to texts found on incantation bowls but that the necromantic purpose is not fully evident.⁶¹ However, as James Montgomery observed the magical inscriptions on a human skull were the “stock apparatus of a necromancer”.⁶² Montgomery argues that the use of skulls (calvaria) in classical magic is also attested to in ancient texts, such as in the *Apology of Apuleius*. Similarly, Gideon Bohak maintains that the human skulls, which were found inscribed in Aramaic might all be Jewish magical artefacts, produced by Jews in Late Antique Mesopotamia.⁶³

Talking Heads in Mesopotamia

As we observe, the ritual preparation of the head of the victim for divinatory purposes has no direct parallel in any of the above discussed skull/corpse necromantic techniques or recipes. Probably, the most striking feature of this method was that the head was

⁶⁰ See also the discussion in Christopher A. Faraone, “Necromancy goes Underground: The Disguise of Skull- and Corpse Divination in the Paris Magical Papyri (PGM IV 1928-2144), in Sarah Iles Johnston & Peter C. Struck (eds.), *Mantike: Studies in Ancient Divination* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 255-282.

⁶¹ Dan Levene, “Calvariae Magicae: The Berlin, Philadelphia and Moussaieff skulls”, *Orientalia* 75.4 (2006), pp. 359-379.

⁶² James A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1913), pp. 256-257.

⁶³ Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 193.

preserved intact and could “speak” with its actual tongue.⁶⁴ The purpose of this special technique must have been to safeguard the constant presence of the spirit for a longer period of time as a medium between this world and the realm of the dead.

In the anonymous work, known as the *Chronicle of Khuzistan*, the “Manicheans” in Syria are accused of sacrificing people in the service of magic.⁶⁵ According to this source, these “Manicheans” used to capture a man at the beginning of a year and to imprison him in a house under the earth. They would look after him throughout this year and then kill him as a sacrifice to the demons. At the end, they would practice magic and divination with his head for an entire year. In this way, they would kill one man each year.

The *Chronicle of Khuzistan* is considered a first-hand account of the mid-seventh century North Mesopotamia, probably composed by a local church official of the Nestorian Church in Syriac.⁶⁶ Apparently, it presents the earliest dated Christian account of cultic practices involving a mantic head in Syria. It should be noted that the work is a compilation of short stories and probably an abridged version of a longer chronicle. In this report, the account refers generally to the Manichaeans in Syria. The story in the *Chronicle of Khuzistan* implies a certain degree of secrecy, since the man is imprisoned in a subterranean place. The victim was offered as a sacrifice to demons, that is, to some pagan, probably local, deity. The text stresses the need for the regular sacrifice, since they would be able to practice divination very specifically with his head for a year. The requirement for this annual sacrifice may correspond to the belief that we also encounter in the rabbinic sources that the souls of the dead still hover between heaven and earth for about a year.

⁶⁴ Chwolsohn argues that the preserved heads were simply nodding puppets (*Die Ssabier*, 154). However, a skull/head with an intact mouth could not just nod but actually “speak”.

⁶⁵ See Ignatius Guidi, *Chronica Minora* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1903), pp. 15-39; Theodor Nöldeke, “Die von Guidi herausgegebene syrische Chronik”, *Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-historischen Classe der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 28 (1893), pp. 1-47.

⁶⁶ See Sebastian P. Brock, “Syriac Sources for Seventh-Century History”, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 2 (1976), pp. 17-36, esp. 23-24.

Similarly, according to the *Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre*: “the Manicheans of Harran had a monastery there, where they used to celebrate once every year a great and violent feast during which they used to offer sacrifices. During this great feast, they used to practice divination. As their feast approached, they had the custom of grabbing and imprisoning a man for one year, to slaughter in their feast. They used to take off the head, put a coin in its mouth and place it in a niche, to worship and practice divination with it.”⁶⁷ This report relates to the year 764-765.

The *Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius* (a.k.a. *Chronicle of Zuqnin*) is written roughly a century later than the *Chronicle of Khuzistan*. It originated in the vicinity of Amida, modern Diyarbakir and ca. 200km away from Harran.⁶⁸ This text provides additional as well as divergent information compared to our earlier Christian source. The “Manichaeans” are now located in a concrete place, namely, in Harran, and their activities are connected with an institutional building, a monastery. Accordingly, the sacrifice described acquires a very specific cultic character and the more so, since the sacrifice took place as part of a larger ritual festival. As in the rabbinic sources discussed, the head of the sacrificial victim was placed in a niche, a coin was put into his mouth and it was worshipped and used for divination.

The motif of the use of the “oracular head” of a captured man for divination purposes lived on in a number of later sources and traditions. Most prominently, it can be found in some detail in the 10th century *Fihrist* of al Nadim, among other Arabic sources.⁶⁹ In the

⁶⁷ Amir HARRAK, *Chronicle of Zuqnin* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1999), p. 203.

⁶⁸ See Brock, *Syriac Sources*, pp. 20-21.

⁶⁹ See *The Fihrist of al-Nadim*, ed. and transl. by B. Dodge, (N.Y. and London, 1970), vol. II, pp. 753-754. On human sacrifice among the Sabians of Harran, see D. Chwolsohn, *Die Ssabier*, pp. 386-387; Michel Tardieu, “Sabiens coraniques et ‘Sabiens’ de Harran”, *Journal Asiatique* 274 (1986), pp. 5-6; Sinasi Gündüz, *The Knowledge of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 211.; Bernhard Dodge, *The Sabians of Harran* (Beirut: E. Sarruf, 1967), pp. 60-85; on further Arabic sources referring to the ‘prophetic head’ in connection to the Sabians of Harran, see Tamara Green, *The City of the Moon God: Religious Traditions of Harran* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 94-101; Amir HARRAK, “Anti-Manichean Propaganda in Syriac

Fihrist, it is mentioned that the “Sabians of Harran” would take a man of a certain (mercurial) constitution and they would put him for long time in oil and borax and then they would perform magic and divination with his head, as they believed that he would be animated by the planet Mercury. It is probable, that the Sabians of Harran, famously, a cult of star worshippers, were confused with the “Manicheans” of the Syriac sources.⁷⁰ Theodore bar Koni reports in the eighth century that Mani introduced the worship of the demons as gods as well as the worship of the sun, the moon and the stars and all sorts of horoscopes (Liber Scholiorum, Mimra XI.58). Consequently, it might have been a common misperception after the seventh century, to confuse star worshippers, such as the Sabians, with the “Manicheans”.

Amir Harrak, argues that the accusations against Manicheans in the Syriac sources go back to pagan anti-Jewish claims reported by Josephus in *Against Apion* II.89-96. Josephus includes a narrative about an alleged law of the Jews, which prescribed that they should catch a Greek foreigner and fatten him up for an entire year before sacrificing him with their “accustomed solemnities”. Then they would taste his entrails and take an oath to remain at enmity with the Greeks. However, the details of Josephus’s story recall similar stories in the Roman literature about conspiracy oaths that purportedly

Literature”, *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 54 (2004), pp. 49-67, esp. 53-54; Judah B. Segal, “Sabian Mysteries”, in Edward Bacon (ed.), *Vanished Civilizations: Forgotten People of the Ancient World* (London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1963), pp. 201-220.

⁷⁰ As A. Harrak states: ‘What Arab authors said about the Manicheans was borrowed mainly from Christian sources as they themselves confessed while compiling their sources’, *Anti-manichean Propaganda*, 61. Characteristically, al-Mamun calls them ‘zendiq’ in the above quoted passage. Although this term means ‘heretic, unbeliever’ in the Islamic literature, the Manicheans were also called “zendiq”. François de Blois suggested that the enigmatic Sabians (Sabiun) of the Qur’an were actually Manicheans, ‘those whom Muslim writers on pre-Islamic Arabia called the zandiqa among the Quraysh’. In the Mandaean literature the Manicheans are also referred to as ‘Zandiqe’, see Mark Lidzbarski, *Ginza: der Schatz oder das grosse Buch der Mandäer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1925), pp. 229-231. See, Fr. de Blois, ‘Sabians’, in *The Encyclopedia of Qur’an*, vol. 4, 2004, p. 512.

involved murder and cannibalism.⁷¹ Therefore, the narrative in *Against Apion* does not suffice to explain the “anti-Manichean” allegations of the Syriac chronicles in their full complexity. Most notably, the necromantic context is missing from Josephus’ account.⁷²

The “Manichaeian” “head-cult” according to the Syriac chronicles presents the closest parallel narrative to the rabbinic traditions about Laban’s teraphim. Jewish traditions about the teraphim and about divination practices of the ‘pagans’ reverberate through the Syriac polemical literature against the “Manicheans”. The Christian sources, however, do not report of a mummification procedure or other preparation of the head. Neither is there any explanation offered why the victim had to be imprisoned for a year. However, a connection with pagan practices, rituals and sacrifices is clearly suggested. The information sounds like a “bricolage” of hearsay circulating in the area.

The Christian chronicles are dated between the mid seventh and the mid eighth centuries. The dating the rabbinic sources is a challenging task. *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* is dated not earlier than the second half of the eighth century. The dating of both the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan⁷³ and the Midrash Tanhuma⁷⁴ have been hotly

⁷¹ Cf. Franz. J. Dolger, “Sacramentum infanticidii: Die Schlachtung eines Kindes und der Genuss seines Blutes als vermeintlicher Einweihungsakt im ältesten Christentum”, *Antike und Christentum* 4 (1934), pp. 188-224.

⁷² See *Anti-Manichean Propaganda*, p. 65. John Reeves argues similarly: ‘One can easily discern that several details of the atrocities attributed to the Manichaeans by the Syriac Christian reports provided above are modelled on this Antiochus legend’ “A Manichaeian ‘Blood-Libel’?”, *ARAM* 16.2 (2004), pp. 217-232, esp. 222; Reeves suggests that the association with the Manichaeans could be attributed to the Manichaeian cultic veneration of Mani-portraits, cf. J. Reeves, “A Manichaeian ‘Blood-Libel’?”, p. 231.

⁷³ On the debate on the dating of the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, see Avigdor Shinan, “The Palestinian Targums. Repetition, Internal Unity, Contradictions”, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 36 (1985), pp. 72-87, who argues for a post-Islamic date and C. T. Robert Hayward, “The Date of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan”, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 40 (1989), pp. 7-30, who supports a much earlier date.

⁷⁴ Scholars have proposed a wide range of dates for the Midrash Tanhuma from the fifth to the first half of the ninth century C.E. However, even an early dating does not rule out later additions and modifications, see Herrmann L. Strack- Günter Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* (München: C.H. Beck, 1982), pp. 279-

debated. However, considering the dating of the shared motif on the oracular head from the parallel traditions, it would be safe to assume that the stories included in the Targum Ps.-Jonathan and in the Tanhuma circulated not earlier than the seventh century CE. Accordingly, the discussed evidence suggests that the information about recipes for the preparation of divinatory heads of actually murdered persons emerges around the same time period in Mesopotamia and is employed by both Christian and Jewish sources in polemics against “others”.

According to Michael Morony, pagan cults were still current “all over Iraq in the late Sasanian period”.⁷⁵ Moreover, there were mixed villages, where Christians lived with Zoroastrians, Jews or pagans. John bar Penkaye reports in the late seventh century that there were still people who worshiped astral and other local deities in the region.⁷⁶ Interestingly, Jacob of Edessa, writing in the late seventh century as well, attests to the use of dried human heads by the pagan Syrians as amulets.⁷⁷

As observed, both the rabbinic and the Syriac reports focus on the area of Harran as the locus of this peculiar necromantic practice. Laban lives in Harran in Gen 27:43 and as Chwolsohn suggests there is broad evidence of alleged human sacrifice in Harran in Late Antiquity.⁷⁸ Accounts referring to human sacrifice are often connected with exotic places, to places that are perceived as being located at or near the dangerous margins of the world and of civilisation. There exist numerous reports of human sacrifice,

283. More recent studies have favoured a later dating and significantly, not earlier than the mid-eighth century, see John T. Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma. Vol. I. Genesis* (S. Buber recension) (Hoboken N.J.: Ktav Publishing House, 1989), XII; Allan Kinsky, *A Critical Edition of Midrash Tanhuma Shemot* (Ph.D. diss., Jewish Theological Seminary: New York, 1990), esp. Introduction; Marc Bergman, *The Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature. Studies in the Evolution of the Versions* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2003).

⁷⁵ Michael Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 384.

⁷⁶ Morony, *Iraq*, pp. 395-396.

⁷⁷ See Robertson Smith, *Religion of the Semites* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1927), p. 362.

⁷⁸ Chwolsohn, *Die Ssabier*, p. 147.

especially among neighbouring or exotic peoples.⁷⁹ Harran may have functioned as such a marginal place in Mesopotamia due to the long and persistent survival of a strong pagan community there.

The details in the description of the preparation in the rabbinic passages discussed stands out. The rabbinic sources suggest a familiarity with specific necromantic recipes and rituals, possibly through oral transmission about certain pagan practices that ostensibly circulated in Mesopotamia. As G. Bohak also remarks, the rabbinic discussions about the *teraphim* disclose much familiarity with the magical and divinatory rituals of their own world, including the use of specially prepared talking skulls with inscribed lamellae placed in their mouths to make them speak.⁸⁰

As is obvious from the evidence examined above, the association of magic with murder was very common in the literature of Late Antiquity and stressed the dangerous character of maleficent magic. Killing the victim does not feature in the known necromantic recipes but is part of the polemical dossier against dangerous and/or powerful individuals or groups that abuse magic (and power). Necromancy was not only vicious because of its communication with and manipulation of the dead using the assistance of demonic powers but also because it turned the officiants into common criminals. Obviously, this constitutes an important difference to the official religious specialists who could interrogate and converse with the spirits of the dead with divine assistance. The professional magicians, idolatrous priests, heretical teachers, etc. functioned as part of a counter-culture or rather a sub-culture that followed its own very specific rules and techniques. The list of forbidden cultic activities, such as sorcery, astrology and divination served their delimitation with respect to the approved rites performed by the official religious specialists (e.g. exorcism, etc.).⁸¹ Accordingly, these were illegitimate

⁷⁹ See, for example, Porph., *Abst.* II. 54-56; Plu., *De Isid.* C. 73; Eus., *PE* 4.16; Thdt., *Affect.* L.VII; Procop., *Pers.* I.19.

⁸⁰ Bohak, *Jewish Magic*, p. 390.

⁸¹ On exorcisms in the Early Church see Iustinus Martyr, *Dial.* 30.3; 76.6; 85.1-3; Thphl.Ant., *Autol.* II.8; Origenes, *Cels.* I.6; VII:7.; Ath.Al., *Inc.* 32; *Apost.Trad.* 6.8; 20.3; Eus., *HE* VI.43.11; Canon of Laodicaea XXIV; (CIG 9792); Ps.-John Chrysostom,

and dangerous in contrast to the legitimate, sanctioned rites and invocations (prayers).

The Syriac Christian literature and the rabbinic literature clearly use common sources - possibly even oral ones- that refer to necromantic sacrifices among the pagans in Harran.⁸² The details demonstrate interesting differences between the various accounts. The stronger coherence and broader dissemination of the versions of the story in the rabbinic literature suggest a closer familiarity with these cults compared to the somewhat “sketchy” information in the Syriac literature. Still, the rabbinic sources and the Syriac accounts, if read side-by-side, enable us to reconstruct a more complete picture of this peculiar necromantic rite. The complementarity of the respective information is a clear indication of shared cultural knowledge.

Moreover, our text evidence shows that the Christian and Jewish communities were not only in dialogue with each other but they were also respectively concerned with their pagan neighbours as regards their cultic and ritual life and beliefs. Thus, the sources reveal the ongoing communication and exchange between religious communities. The related descriptions and evaluations of “forbidden” practices refer to a common system of values as well as to common perceptions by contemporary Jews and Christians about issues of ritual authority and its legitimation. Finally, Christians and Jews seem to have shared certain common codes in identifying (and even incriminating) “foreign” cults and their adherents.

Oratio (PG 64: 1061 B/C); Christoph Marksches, *Das antike Christentum. Frömmigkeit, Lebensformen, Institutionen* (München: C.H. Beck, 2006), p. 126.

⁸² On oral communication between Jewish and Christian communities, see C. Hezser, “Oral and Written Communication and Transmission of Knowledge in Ancient Judaism and Christianity”, *Oral Tradition* 2 (2010), pp. 75-92; R. Kiperwasser-S. Ruzer, “Zoroastrian Proselytes and Syriac Christian Narratives: Orality-Related Markers of Cultural Identity”, *History of Religions* 51 (2012), pp. 197-218.