Portentous Fantasies
Pliny's Representation of the Magi in the Historia Naturalis

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Pliny the Elder’s representation of the Magi in the Historia Naturalis. It seeks to determine not only who the Magi were in Pliny’s estimation but also how they were construed in the Roman popular imagination. The pronounced antagonism that Pliny demonstrates toward these occult practitioners is rooted in the fact that the whole notion of magic, as it was understood in the ancient world, was embedded in a negative labelling-system, and that the identity of the magician existed primarily in the imagination of those who were doing the labelling (i.e., branding others as “magicians”). In the HN, Pliny’s Magi are therefore represented as the proverbial “other” – outsiders who are perceived as engaging in foreign (and thus loathsome and abhorrent) practices. Pliny’s representation of and attitude toward the Magi therefore exemplify how magic-workers have commonly been regarded as individuals who engage in ritual or religious activity that is not endorsed by the dominant social institutions of the cultures in which they operate.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.........................................................................................................................ii

Table of Contents...........................................................................................................iii

1. Introduction..................................................................................................................1

2. The “Utopian” Worldview of Late Antiquity and the Emergence of the Magus..........7

3. Pliny and the Historia Naturalis....................................................................................10

4. The Identity of the Magicians in the Historia Naturalis: Who Were Pliny’s Magi?......16

5. The Lore of the Magi: The Magician as Expert in Healing and Occult Remedies......33

6. Ritual and Sympathy: Decoding the Lore of the Magi..............................................53

7. Locating the Magus in the Healing Arts of Imperial Rome.......................................68

8. Beyond Pliny: Uncovering the Identity of the Historical Magi...............................96

9. Conclusion...................................................................................................................106

Bibliography..................................................................................................................110
1. Introduction

In recent years, the scholarly examination of the cross-cultural phenomenon of magic (a term with an extensive history of debate which has generated a voluminous body of scholarly discourse, from fields as diverse as anthropology, sociology, history, classics and religious studies) has enjoyed a significant resurgence of academic interest. Not least among the studies that constitute such a resurgence have been those which seek to examine the various facets of magic in the ancient world. ¹ But situating such studies within the broader study of magic is a task certainly not without its challenges. Although a plethora of studies have emerged which seek to examine the phenomenon of magic, in all of its various dimensions, and to generate theories which account for its widespread presence across a broad sweep of historical and socio-cultural paradigms, scholars, the modern magicians who attempt, through feats of intellectual illusion-making and the ingenious manipulation of their material, to pierce its mysteries, have come no closer to establishing a consensus regarding magic: what it is, who performs it, and how it fits into and relates to the other paradigms (namely religion and science) which share some of its foundational characteristics. ²

As anthropologist Michael Winkelman has stressed, there is still a fundamental need to reassess the underlying assumptions and conceptions that inform the study of magico-religious phenomena. Indeed, outdated notions rooted in a dichotomy that stresses the fundamental split

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¹ Fritz Graf has referred to this renewed interest as "the modern boom in magical studies." Cited in Meyer and Mirecki (1995) 1. See, for example, Abusch (2002); Abusch and Van der Toorn (1999); Ankarloo and Clark (2001); Ankarloo and Clark (1999); Dickie (2001); Faraone (1999); Faraone and Obink (1991); Janowitz (2001); Johnston (1999); Jordan, Montgomery and Thomassen (1999); Meyer and Mirecki (1995); Ogden (2002); Schafer and Kippenberg (1997); and Scurlock (2006).

² Because even a brief overview of those major approaches to magic which have been presented over the course of the past 150 years and which have defined the field (many of which still generate significant scholarly discussion and inquiry) is quite beyond the scope of this investigation, I have elected to refrain from presenting such an overview. Instead I have attempted, throughout the course of my analysis of Pliny's representation of the Magi, to weave in some of those theories which are germane to the discussion. The theories which I have chosen to highlight are those which remain current in the anthropological literature and which continue to have an influence on those
between “primitive” and “civilized” mentalities and “traditional” and “scientific” modes of thought still permeate the literature. But in the wake of the many anthropological studies that have emerged during the course of the twentieth century, rooted as they are in the direct observation of magico-religious phenomena and cross-cultural healing traditions (usually non-western), it is now increasingly acknowledged that such distinctions, insofar as they exist at all within a society, are usually found together within that same society, and that the so-called “rational” and “irrational” are merely two different ways that people seek to engage with their surrounding environments. 3 Scholars have therefore begun to appreciate the fact that traditional western conceptions of magic are based upon a foundation that is characterized by a system of gross misconceptions. 4

Western scholars who deal with non-western materials invariably approach texts and traditions as outsiders (in terms of their temporal, cultural and locative dispositions) who attempt to understand the experiences and writings of other cultures by customarily imposing upon them the trappings of their own cultures. 5 From the perspective of cross-cultural studies, this is referred to as an etic approach, one which seeks to understand a non-native culture through the use of its own cultural inheritances. When employing a methodology that seeks to access certain aspects of religious experience and supernatural phenomena, however, there is among scholars discourses generated in the name of magic. For excellent discussions of the history of the scholarly approach to magic, see Middleton (2005); Pels (2003) 1-38; Sorensen (2007) 1-30; and Winkelman (1992) 1-8.

3 The dichotomy between “natural” and “supernatural” has also been prevalent within the discourse on magic – both ancient and modern. But as Anderson notes, the notion of the “supernatural” is an ethnocentric concept born out of an analytical, scientific paradigm – and one, moreover, that “takes for granted that everyone should adopt an equally secular point of view.” Anderson (1996) 53.

4 Winkelman (1992) 4: “Rather than mere products of deluded minds or misguided efforts to relieve anxiety, magico-religious healing practices have been increasingly recognized as effective. And in contrast to the perspective that magical practices were based on childish, ignorant or dull witted mistakes, we find modern psychological perspectives on shamanism indicating that it has represented an advanced level of transpersonal development and human evolution.” Cf. Pels (2003) 6, who notes that, “For most of its history, anthropology was a science of the ‘West’ about the ‘rest’, and it is now widely agreed that much of the discourse produced by anthropologists was Occidentalist and produced an image of Westerners for themselves.” See also Carrier (1995).
an increasing emphasis upon stepping outside of our own value-ridden acculturations and attempting to situate ourselves within the cultural framework of the text or tradition with which we are engaging: “If we can bracket our own presuppositions, temper our ingrained sense of superiority, and resist the temptation to evaluate the truth claims of foreign traditions, we find that their experience of the world possesses its own rationality, its own coherence, its own truth.”

Such an approach is known as a derived etic perspective, one which seesaws back and forth between the native (i.e., emic) and the imposed (i.e., etic) perspective until an understanding is reached that is rooted in and derived from the original historical or socio-culture context.

Nowhere is such an approach more vital than in studies which seek to examine magical and religious phenomena. With regard to such phenomena, it is now recognized that most attempts to define the parameters of magic, for example, have been generated from an exclusively Occidental intellectual tradition which is highly ethnocentric, and that the conception of magic is a modern construct deeply rooted in the modern western rationalistic paradigm - which in turn had its beginnings in ancient polemical traditions that were born out of the antagonism that grew up between Christians, Jews and pagans. In light of such considerations, some scholars have suggested that the whole category of magic, steeped as it is in socio-cultural baggage, should be obliterated from the discourse altogether.

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5 For a discussion of the inherent flaws in such an approach and how it tends to unfold in the study of the ancient world, see Lloyd (2004) Ch. 1.
7 As G. E. R. Lloyd recognizes: “We cannot, on pain of distortion, impose our own conceptual frameworks. Yet we have to... Our primary obligation is to make sense of our subjects in their terms, to allow them their voice, their differing viewpoints on fundamental issues. To be sure I cannot consider myself as one of them.” Lloyd (2004) 2, 9.
9 J. Z. Smith (1995) 66. Phillips (1991) suggests that the whole category of magic should be replaced with a less ethnocentric concept such as unsanctioned religious activity. Cf. Ritner (1995) 44, and Dickie (2001) 22, who feel that it is important, in spite of all the limitations inherent in isolating the dominant characteristics of magic, to present a working definition of it. Segal, however, cautions that “no single definition of magic can be absolute, since
While many different theories have been presented which have sought to isolate the defining features of magic and to locate it within a specific theoretical framework, it is now recognized that magic, as it plays itself out in lived experience, is always fluid and dynamic - that it is always "contextually relative, situationally adaptive [and] never abstract", that the "system' of ideas and practices" which comprises it is "constantly immanent... and shifting in response to new circumstances", and that it is a "synthetic concept that covers a broad range of cognitive, cultural and social phenomena." As such, it requires, as Jesper Sorensen has proposed, not just one explanatory theory but rather "several types of theoretical models addressing different descriptive levels." 

One such explanatory theory that has proven particularly useful in the examination of ancient magical activity was originally set forth by Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim and has also been widely employed by classicists grappling with the concept of magic as it emerged in the Greco-Roman world. This sociological approach to magic revolves around the observation that magic is usually enacted outside of the dominant religious institutions and performed by private individuals who are thought to operate in secrecy and engage in ominous or transgressive activities. The practitioners who are imagined to engage in such activities are therefore met with suspicion, and sometimes even with outright hostility, and are relegated to the liminal and marginal spaces of a society.

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10 The major theories which have defined the discourse on magic include those of Tylor (1958); Frazer (1911-15); Mauss (1902-1903); Levi-Bruhl (1910) and (1978); Durkheim (1915); Malinowski (1935) and (1948); Evans-Pritchard (1975); Levi-Strauss (1963), and Tambiah (1968), (1985) and (1990).


12 Sorensen (2007) 3
In the ancient world, "magic" and "magician" were pejorative terms that were invariably applied from the outside and whose objective was meant to discredit that which had the misfortune of being tagged with such a label. It was particularly used as a means of stigmatizing illegitimate or unsanctioned "religious" behavior – particularly that of "socially or culturally deviant groups." 15 It was not uncommon, for example, for pagans to accuse the early Christians of engaging in magical activity. At the same time, however, the Christians were assailing the pagans with the same accusations. As Peter Brown observed, charges of sorcery "represented socially-accepted modes of attack against political enemies when other modes of asserting rivalry were not an option." 16 We are therefore left to ponder what exactly constituted magic in the minds of the ancients – and whether it was, in fact, a category that extended beyond that of the polemical imagination. 17 For as Alan Segal observed, the charge of magic "helps distinguish between various groups of people from the perspective of the speaker but does not necessarily imply any essential difference in the actions of the participants." 18

Although the term *magus* appears to have been borrowed from an ancient Persian word that was originally associated with an esteemed religious practitioner, it was adopted into the Greek language, and later the Latin language, and used polemically to refer to a ritual practitioner who existed on the fringe of society and who was reputed to engage in ritual actions that were either malevolent in their intent (i.e., practices involving necromancy, voodoo, curses and poisoning) or occult in their orientation (i.e., practices involving divination, astrology and

13 Ibid.
14 See Mauss (1902-1903) and Durkheim (1915).
15 Versnel (1991) 177.
16 Brown (1972) 125.
17 Indeed, scholars such as H. Versnel proclaim that it did not: "magic does not exist, nor does religion. What do exist are our definitions of these concepts." Versnel (1991) 177. Cf. J. Z. Smith (1995) 16: "...in academic discourse, 'magic' has almost always been treated as a *contrast* term, a shadow reality known only by looking at the reflection of its opposite... in a distorting, fun-house mirror." See also Sorensen (2007) 16.
the manipulation of demons). From the beginning, then, the whole idea of *mageia*, as it
developed in the Western imagination, existed as an *etic* category, an abstract concept meant to
designate that which was thought to be inherently undesirable or illegal, and which was
perceived as being outside the accepted norms of the social order. 19

While magic is by no means solely defined through its role as an instrument of social
disqualification or magicians by their status as social deviants, this social definition is
particularly profitable for a study which seeks to examine the role of the Magi in Pliny’s *Historia
Naturalis*. For Pliny, with his penchant to approach the Magi as outsiders who were engaging in
nonsensical religious and ritual activities, is as guilty of approaching these ancient magic-
workers through the lens of his own socio-cultural inheritances as were those post-colonial
anthropologists examining the alien magico-religious activities of non-western practitioners. It is
therefore with the intent to wrest the Magi from the clutches of such an *etic* approach that this
study seeks to examine Pliny’s portrayal of these ancient characters. In particular, it approaches
the ancient material as a window into a socio-cultural context which, though it may not cohere
with our modern understanding of the world, possesses its own inherent logic and rationale.

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19 The notion of *mageia*, when it began to emerge as something of a concept, first in fifth-century Athens, and later
in late republican Rome, originally materialised as a negative category of thought. The term *mageia* was used to
refer at first to that which was foreign and existed on the margins of Greek society (i.e., the Persian fire-priests) and
later to that which was illegal (*pharmakon* and *veneficium*), or simply not condoned by society as a whole (which
usually included any activity or ritual that was secret or performed outside of the accepted social order).
2. The “Utopian” Worldview of Late Antiquity and the Emergence of the Magus

The early centuries of our era witnessed a paradigm shift that affected all cultures and religious entities of the Mediterranean world. Peter Brown characterized this period as a time of “spiritual revolution” which generated an entirely “new mood” in antiquity. He spoke of a “yearning for intimacy in a bottomless universe” and the “sense of an imminent ‘breakthrough’ of divine energy”. More recently, Giovanni Filoramo has described the ancient Mediterranean landscape as a “religious world in ferment” characterized by “a newly formed geography... of the sacred, a different conception of the biorhythms of religious life, and a paradoxical way of imagining, and giving shape to, the relationship between the human and the divine.” Indeed, the zeitgeist of this age seems to have generated an almost archetypal life force of its own, which played itself out like a great tidal wave sweeping its way across the Mediterranean world and seizing everything and everyone in its wake: pagan, Christian and Jew alike. It represented man grasping across the cosmic divide and attempting to peer through the veil that separated the realm of mundane reality from that of the cosmic splendor and ultimate translucence of the mythopoetic realms.

Drawing from his extensive knowledge of the ancient world, Jonathan Z. Smith conjectured that part of this paradigm shift involved a shift from an environment of religious experience rooted in a “locative” worldview to one mediated by a “utopian” cosmovision. For hundreds of years the religious experience that had characterized the ancient Mediterranean world had been centered around a particular temple or cult center which was situated in a fixed

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20 See especially Filoramo (1990) 20, who characterizes this period as “a watershed between the two decisive periods of imperial history: the Augustan Restoration and the ‘crisis’ of the third century.”
place and a particular location. The deity and the divine energies with which such cult centers were associated were therefore thought to be intimately connected with a particular piece of land – one which was often linked in some unique way with the mythological heritage of the site and which was thus felt to embody a quality of the numinous. Smith’s seminal contribution was his observation that there occurred a fundamental shift in late antiquity from this locative framework to one which he described as “utopian”.

In the period of late antiquity, Smith proposed, there was a general “severing of the archaic ties between religion and land”. In a development which he termed “diasporic religion”, the connections between the deity and the land began to disintegrate and those factors which epitomized the religious experience (such as the direct beholding of the deity) were no longer rooted in a particular place but projected outward onto the screen of heaven. In seeking to partake of the divine presence of the god/goddess, an individual no longer journeyed to its cult center but began to engage in certain ritual techniques developed for the sake of achieving visions, epiphanies and heavenly journeys. As a result of this impulse, there was a shift away from priests and kings as the primary bridge-builders between the earthly community and the mythopoetic realms and eventually these religious functionaries no longer served as the key individuals upon whom the possibility of a divine encounter rested. Instead this function was taken over by a host of “god-men, saviors and religious entrepreneurs.” As the temple’s role as the focal point of the intersecting energies between humans and deities began to disintegrate, the

24 Examples included Apollo at Delphi, Asclepius at Epidauros, Artemis at Ephesus, Isis in Rome, and Yahweh in Jerusalem.
26 See also Filoramo (1990) 31-32: “The search for a vision that would produce direct contact with the highest point of the hierarchical scale, for an experience that would guarantee a one-to-one (monos pros monos) meeting with the divine, even in matters of commercial transactions or problems in one’s career, is at the same time valuable evidence of a significant change; communication with the divine was now being sought, a profound experience to be accomplished in the first person, without assistance from intermediaries or interpreters.”
27 Ibid.
mystical force of the divine was disseminated and took up residence within a multitude of traveling holy men, ritual practitioners, and itinerant sages. As Filoramo proclaimed, “what had once been the destiny of heroes and demigods now became the privilege of anyone who succumbed to the blandishments of some god’s itinerant minstrel.”

As religious and ritual experience became increasingly divorced from the cult center, a development that was paralleled by an emerging sense of cultural dislocation and an increasing hunger for mystical and occult experiences, a host of individual religious specialists, purveying their various technologies of the sacred and promising various healing and occult miracles, began to emerge and make their way throughout the Mediterranean world, many descending upon the great centers of Alexandria, Athens and Rome. While Rome was inclined to perceive itself as the sophisticated hub at the center of the world, with its manicured fingers reaching out into all the far corners of the empire, casting a benevolent, civilizing glow onto all those regions which had the good fortune of being within the reach of its refining light, in fact, all around it was a world whose influences were gathering strength and pressing in upon it. And Rome, the glowing gem of the Mediterranean, desiring to preserve itself from the debased otherworldliness of the East, and not wanting to bear the stigma of occultism in the face of the rarefied and high elitism of its classical façade, was the crossroads at which many of these new energies would meet.

Among the religious specialists who exemplified these new energies was the *magus*, a mysterious and shadowy figure whose identity was steeped in a mixture of ancient eastern legend combined with contemporary socio-cultural anxieties that were rooted in the fear of the unknown, the dislike of secretive activity, and the antagonism toward all that which was foreign and unfamiliar in its essence. It is in the shadow of such a figure that we find the Magi emerging from the pages of Pliny’s encyclopedic work, the *Historia Naturalis*.

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3. Pliny and the Historia Naturalis

Commenting upon his uncle's impressive collection of writings, Pliny the Younger referred to the *Historia Naturalis* as “a work remarkable for its comprehensiveness and erudition, and not less varied than Nature herself.” 29 Amassed of thirty-seven books and spanning a vast array of subjects including biology, physics, medicine, anthropology, history and ethics, it has been dubbed by modern scholars as everything from a “literary monstrosity” 30 to the “most important single source extant for the study of civilisation.” 31 In light of such hyperbolic assessments, it is not surprising that its subsequent cultural and intellectual influence was enormous; long after the fall of the Roman Empire, it would prove among the most significant sources (along with Aristotle and Galen) to which scholars, encyclopedists, doctors, surgeons and physicians would refer. 32 Moreover, as Randy Bancroft notes, it provided another service by virtue of the fact that when approaches to the natural world later came under the influence of Christian ideology and ceased to be regarded as a worthy focus of veneration and investigation, the *Historia Naturalis* succeeded in sustaining “an interest in the wonders of the natural world.” 33

As a wealthy landowner and prominent member of the equestrian order, Gaius Plinius Secundus (CE 23/4-79) - from what we are able to discern from two letters written by his

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29 Pliny the Younger, *Ep. 3.5.*
31 Thorndike (1923) 43. For further contradictory opinions regarding the scholarly merit and historical importance of the *Historia Naturalis*, see Allbutt (1921) 213-14, Scarborough (1969) 63-64, Stahl (1962) Ch. 7, esp. p. 106, and Stannard (1965) 420-25. Judging from the most recent work to emerge upon Pliny, the general inclination among contemporary scholars seems to be toward a more favourable treatment of the *Historia*. See, for example, Beagon (1992) and (2005), French (1994), Healy (1999) and Wallace-Hadrill (1990). As Beagon notes, “it is only comparatively recently that the value of the *Historia Naturalis* as a historical document of first-century attitudes has been acknowledged.” Beagon (1992) 23-24.
nephew,\textsuperscript{34} as well as from his own statements scattered throughout the \textit{HN} - enjoyed a distinguished career largely in service to the emperors, exercising his military duty in Germany, practising law under Nero, making his way through a number of procuratorships and assuming a position on the consilium of Vespasian and Titus, and finally taking command of the fleet at Misenum in 79 CE. Over the course of his career he travelled widely throughout the Mediterranean, having occasion to visit Germany, Spain, Africa, Greece and Egypt. He famously met his death at the age of fifty-six on the west coast of Italy when, in the name of scientific enquiry, he fell prey to the suffocating fumes of the erupting mount Vesuvius on August 24, 79 CE.\textsuperscript{35}

Pliny's equestrian background and distinguished career place him in a unique position at the centre of Roman society and culture – a position which was to him nothing less than a place of privilege at the centre of the civilised world.\textsuperscript{36} Being in a place of such privilege, he was in a position to produce a work\textsuperscript{37} which "casts a flood of light on the cultural world of early imperial Rome."\textsuperscript{38} Indeed, the \textit{HN} can be viewed as something of an assimilation of popular belief in the early Empire and it has been heralded as representing the "epitome of the culture of the first century."\textsuperscript{39} Mary Beagon, in her survey of the thought of Pliny the Elder, therefore emphasises the need, in analysing a work as broad and all-encompassing as the \textit{HN}, to examine the ideas of Pliny in the broadest possible context, in terms of its "general tradition, key ideas, and recurring

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\textsuperscript{34} Pliny the Younger, \textit{Ep.} 3. 5 and 6. 16.
\textsuperscript{36} See, for example, \textit{HN} 7. 130ff.
\textsuperscript{37} The \textit{Historia} was only one of several works produced by Pliny; also attributed to him are writings, now lost, upon "Throwing the Javelin from Horseback", the \textit{German Wars}, and the history of Rome. He also wrote a treatise on rhetoric and one on grammar. According to Pliny the Younger these writings, even though they were written in small characters and on both sides of the papyrus rolls, amounted to 160 volumes. Pliny the Younger, \textit{Ep.} 3. 5.
\textsuperscript{38} Wallace-Hadrill (1990) 81.
\textsuperscript{39} Beagon (1992) 15.
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patterns of thought.” Indeed, such an approach is demanded by Pliny’s own scholarly methodology: his voluminous work was largely the result of an ardent love of reading and study which he is said to have done not only during the evening hours and well into the night, after having finished with his daily professional and administrative duties, but also while travelling and even while bathing. And, as Pliny himself estimates, the HN was the outcome of his perusal of some 2000 books by over 100 authors - a gross underestimate according to modern scholarly assessment. It is, therefore, the very thing for which the HN has been criticised and censured – its daunting mass of unwieldy material drawn piecemeal and without critical assessment from an extensive array of earlier writings, many of which are based upon traditional and popular beliefs – which, in fact, proves of benefit to the examination and exploration of the first-century socio-cultural matrix out of which it was born. In light of these considerations, it is hoped that an analysis of the role of the Magi, as they are presented in the Historia Naturalis, will not only afford us a glimpse of the magician’s role and relationship to Roman society in general, but will also serve as a lens through which to examine some of the dominant modes of socio-cultural conditioning that were characteristic of early imperial Rome.

One of the characteristics of the HN is the tendency of its author to introduce his own – or so it would appear – moral reflections and intellectual judgements regarding the topic at hand. More often than not such “chauvinistic moralizing” serves to emphasise Pliny’s disapproval of the luxury, vice and lack of moral standards that were thought to be axiomatic of his day. It should be noted, however, that Pliny’s moralising stance belongs to a complex rhetorical

40 Ibid., 26. Cf. 53. “The development of thought is gradual and complex and not to be encapsulated in the writings of any one author, especially when he is a generalist rather than a philosopher, an inheritor rather than an innovator.”
41 Pliny the Younger, Ep. 3. 5. 8-9; HN Preface 18.
42 HN Preface 17.
43 Thorndike (1923) 46.
discourse that characterised much of the written and oral expression of early imperial Rome. As Catherine Edwards has demonstrated, such techniques constituted “a powerful discourse through which Romans negotiated conflicts and tensions in their social and political order” – especially those concerned with gender, social status and political power. Among those whom Pliny attacks – including doctors, emperors, and the Roman populus in general – no other group of people bears the brunt of his rhetorical wrath so consistently, so ardently, as do the Magi. Indeed, one cannot come away from the HN without the impression that Pliny was on a personal crusade to utterly disempower this body of occult practitioners – even if his presentation was influenced by the rhetorical conventions of his day. Almost every explicit reference or allusion to these particular auctores is tempered with a polemical remark, and the word that Pliny most frequently employs in relation to their lore is vanitas: “deception”, “falsity”, “nonsense”, or “fraud”.

Though references to the lore of the Magi frequently supplement those books of the HN that deal predominantly with medicinal remedies - a fact which would seem to imply a certain amount of confidence in their authority - Pliny remains consistent in his endeavour to expose what he feels to be “the most fraudulent of all disciplines” (fraudentissima artium). At the beginning of book thirty, for example, after having already presented many open assaults upon and derogatory comments about the Magi, he triumphantly offers a precise statement of his intent: “In the previous part of my work I have often indeed refuted the fraudulent lies of the Magi (magicas vanitates), whenever the subject and the occasion required it, and I shall continue to expose them.” Later in book thirty-seven, when he embarks upon a discussion of gemstones and their various properties, he once again, with all the melodrama that characterises his

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45 See C. Edwards (1993) The mastery of invective was also part of the art and training of rhetoric and served to demonstrate the speaker’s fluency in such an art. Edwards, 10. See also Russell (1986) and Onnerfors (1956).
46 See, for example, NH 22. 20; 26. 18; and 28. 86, 89, 94, 112; 29. 81-82; 30. 1; 37. 54, 118 etc.
47 See books 20-32, in particular.
rhetoric, affirms his commitment to his professed crusade: “to the greater profit of mankind I shall incidentally confute the abominable falsehoods of the Magi, since in very many of their statements about gems they have gone far beyond providing an alluring substitute for medical science into the realms of the supernatural.” 49 At other points throughout his work, Pliny is sure to preface the recommendations of the Magi with such statements as “it gives me great pleasure to refute here, as elsewhere, the falsehoods of the Magi”, 50 or his claim that, in presenting some of their remedies and beliefs, he is exposing their lies for all to see. 51 One of the most common ways in which he attempts to disassociate himself from their recommendations is simply to temper his references to them with some demeaning adjective or description (e.g. the “lying Magi”), branding them as fraudulent impostors, and implying that their statements are absurd and impudent lies.

It is clear, then, even from a brief examination of Pliny's treatment of those whom he referred to as the “Magi”, that this learned Roman author demonstrated a distinct hostility – whether it was his own or part of the ethical consciousness of the society that had reared him 52 – toward this particular group of practitioners. But in referring to the “Magi”, whom exactly did he have in mind? In some instances, it is clear that he alludes to a written work, one of the many that he had employed during the course of his research, but what about the possibility that he is referring to a group of contemporary magic-workers – to those seers, charlatans and tricksters

48 HN 30. 1.
49 HN 37. 54. Sed etiam maiore utitilte vitae coarguemus Magorum infandam vanitatem, quando vel plurima illi prodidere de gemmis ab medicinae blandissima specie ad prodigia transgressi.
50 HN 37. 118.
51 HN 29. 68. See also 30. 19-20 and 37. 169.
52 Edwards cautions us against assuming that such demonstrations of hostility – couched as they are in rhetorical invective – are entirely a reflection of the personal sentiments of any given writer. Often such examples of moralising are to be taken more as a representation of the interests of the social group as a whole. Edwards (1993) 11-12.
who are often alluded to within the context of other ancient literary and historical sources? To what extent are these figures influencing Plinian prejudice, and how might we approach them as individuals who were part of the social fabric of early imperial Rome? In order to answer such questions, we must turn now to Pliny's methodology and use of sources.

53 See especially Lowe (1929), Tavenner (1916) and more recently Graf (1997).
4. The Identity of the Magicians in the Historia Naturalis: Who Were Pliny's Magi?

The problem associated with Pliny's use of the term "Magi" hinges upon a complex linguistic and etymological problem that has its roots in ancient Persia. Those words related to the term Magi [magus, "magician"; magia, "magic" (noun); magicus, "magic" (adjective)] may be traced back through the Greek (magos, mageia, magikos), to the old Persian word magu (or magush), a term which was used to refer to a religious official or "priest". The Indo-European root of the Persian word is magh, which means "to be able, to have power". This, in turn, appears to have been related to the Avestan term designating a "member of a tribe" (moyu). 54 It may therefore have been, as some of the later sources suggest, 55 that the Persian term magu refers to a religious practitioner who belonged to a particular tribe or clan – either by virtue of his birth or through membership in a priestly organization in which he had been trained. At some point the word found its way into the Greek-speaking world, where it makes its first brief appearance in a fragment of Heraclitus. 56 Shortly thereafter it appears in the writings of Herodotus, used in reference to a Persian priest who offers prayers and incantations on behalf of the community, recounts certain mythological lore concerning the "birth of the gods", and engages in the preparation of sacrificial (animal) victims. 57 Knowledge of the term for this Persian priest may have, in part, been perpetuated by the historian Xanthus of Lydia (whose works Herodotus used),

55 See, for example, Porphyry De abstinentia 4.16 who speaks admirably about the Magi and divides them into three "genera" according to their beliefs about meat-eating and the proper treatment of animals. Porphyry claims that he acquired his information from one Eubulus, who wrote a history of Mithra which consisted of several books. Ammianus Marcellinus, who likewise claimed to be drawing from "ancient records", suggests that the Magi were originally a group of religious experts whose power and influence grew over time. Eventually, they became a "strong clan", acquired a name of their own, and formed a community in which they lived together and abided by their own laws. According to Ammianus, they always exercised a high degree of political power and were highly esteemed for their religious expertise. Ammianus Marcellinus Roman History 23.6.32-36. Cf. Herodotus (Hist. 1.131) who also refers to the Magus as a member of a caste.
56 Heraclitus DK 12B F14.
57 Herodotus 1. 132. See De Jong, 91-119 for a commentary upon this passage. For additional commentary upon the transmission of the term from Persian to Greek, see Beck (1991). Cf. Kingsley (1994) 192-94.
who is known to have composed an entire treatise upon the subject. However, there is also the possibility that, after the Persian expansion into Ionia and Aeolia in the late sixth century BCE, mendicant priests of Iranian descent filtered into Greek cities such as Ephesus, where Heraclitus – or even Herodotus in Halicarnassus – may have directly encountered them.

Though the Greek language had its own native term for a magician-type figure (goes), the Persian derivative, with its more colourful and exotic connotations, was quickly adapted for such usage, as is evidenced in the writings of Sophocles and Euripides, and later in those of Plato, Gorgias, Aristotle, and Theophrastus. The adoption of the Persian term into the

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58 Diogenes Laertius 1. 2; FGrH. 765; Clement of Alexandria Strom. 3. 11. 1. See also Kingsley (1995). It is interesting to note, however, that Herodotus claims that his description of Persian religion comes from his own "personal knowledge" (1.131).
59 See Burkert (1983) and (1992) Ch. 2. Nock (1972) 308-330, also suggested that the term was transmitted through the Ionians, upon whom the Persian priests, with all their colourful paraphernalia and incomprehensible foreign rites and prayers, had made an indelible impression. Kingsley (1994) 191-92 and (1995) Ch. 21 argues for an Iranian influence upon Anaximander and Pythagoras. Cf. Graf (1995) 36 who believes that the transmission of the term was not associated with the physical presence of Persian priests in the Greek-speaking world, but rather with the Greeks' desire to cast – by adopting a Persian word - certain indigenous practices in a dangerous, foreign and xenophobic light. It is worth noting, however, that in later centuries, these enigmatic foreign priests, who were explicitly referred to as the "Magi" or "Magusaei", were encountered throughout the Mediterranean in regions such as Media, Parthia, Egypt, Galatia, Phrygia, Lydia and Cappadocia. In a letter to Bishop Epiphanius, Basil of Caesarea (c. 330-79 CE) noted that the "Magusaeans" were a noteworthy presence in Cappadocia. He claimed that they had long ago come from Babylon to settle there and were now "scattered all over the country". They lived an insular existence, in which they choose not to mix with other men, and remained faithful to their ancient customs and practices. See Letter CCLVIII to Epiphanius the Bishop, 4. See also Pausanius (fl. c. 150 CE) who, in his Description of Greece (5.27.6), claimed to have witnessed the Magi light alters in the Persian sanctuaries of Lydia. This they did through their intonation of "barbarian" chants. See also Pseudo-Clement Recognitions 9. 21 for references to the "Magusaei" residing in Media, Parthia, Egypt, Galatia, and Phrygia.
60 See Burkert (1962).
61 Versnel (1991) 182 agrees that it was partly due to the "strange, exotic and shady rituals of the Persian fire-cult" that the term magos eventually usurped the native Greek term goes. Kingsley (1994) 193-94 stresses, against Nock, the numerous practices associated with the Persian priests which the Greeks would, without a doubt, have recognised as being "magical". These include the use of magical amulets and formulae, a recognition of the numinous power inherent in plants, the ability to manipulate the weather, and the capacity to journey to the underworld.
62 See Sophocles OT 387.
63 See Euripides Or. 1497ff.
64 Plato Rep. 9. 572E; Cf. Alc. 1. 122A where the author appeals to the ethnographic use of the term magos, and insists that the Persian priests had never practised any odious forms of magic.
65 Gorgias Hel. 10. We find in Gorgias one of the first conscious parallels being drawn between goetelia and mageia: both, he says, are associated with deceptive illusions. Janowitz (2001) 9 and n. 4 notes that it is not uncommon for a religious term, when adopted into a foreign culture, to develop negative connotations. She cites as examples two indigenous terms that have found their way into the English language: voodoo and fakir.
66 Aristotle in Diogenes Laertius, Proem 1.
Greek language is certainly not without significance, for as Fritz Graf has recently argued, it signifies "a deep and radical change" in the religious mentality of the ancient Greeks – one in which several disparate elements coalesced to form the abstract notion of magic that would ultimately be bequeathed to the western world. Graf's argument is reminiscent of Richard Gordon's earlier observation that the adoption of the category of Persian magic provided an "empirical pattern" for what had formerly been a variety of activities whose only unifying characteristic was that they were all deemed inferior to civic ritual.

It was in this form that the terms *mageia* and *magos*, first adopted by the Greeks and later appropriated by the Hellenised Roman elite, made their way into the Latin language. When we eventually find the term *magus* surfacing in the Roman world in the first century BCE, we generally find it being employed in the sense of "magician" and used to refer to a ritual practitioner who engages in divination through the use of various means, is reported to have dealings with demons and spirits of the dead, and who is thought to have access to a certain numinous or transempirical power (which can be utilized for the sake of accomplishing anything from inflicting harm upon his fellow humans to controlling weather patterns). Rarely, however, do we find the term being used anymore in the ethnographical sense of a "Persian priest" or "Magian".

While it is true that, in the period of the early Empire, the term *magus* was probably more commonly used in reference to the figure of the magician or quack, and that it was with such a

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67 Theophrastus *Hist. pl.* 9. 15. 7.
69 Gordon (1987) 77-79.
70 See Dickie (2001) Ch. 5.
71 See Nock (1972) 309-10 and Tavenner (1916) 4. For examples of ancient sources that employ the term *magus* in the sense of "magician", see Horace *Carm.* 1. 27. 22; Ovid *Medic.* 36; Lucan 6. 431; 440; 450; 577; 767; Tacitus *Ann.* 2. 27, 32; 6. 29; 12. 22; Apuleius *Met.* 2. 5; 6. 16, Pausanias 5. 27. 3, and Origen *Hom.* 13. 5.
figure that the average Roman associated the term, 72 the word itself never lost its association with the Persian priest, in particular, or with the Eastern seer in general. In his Apologia, for example, Apuleius reminds his audience that the term magus, “if what I read in a large number of authors” is true, is first and foremost the Persian word for “priest” - for those who are well-versed in science and have a particular skill in “ceremonial law, sacrificial duties and the binding rules of religion.” 73 We also find such a differentiation in the writings of Philo of Alexandria. He explicitly makes a distinction between the “magic” of the Magi, the Persian priests of old whose inclination it was to engage in the meticulous investigation of Nature, and that of the magicians, vulgar impostors and charlatans (and even “old wives” and slaves) who sought to “deceive unsuspecting persons” and manipulate the affections of men and women by way of incantations. The latter he equates with sophistry, comparing their art with that of augurs, ventriloquists, jugglers and enchanters. 74 Even as late as the third century, the etymological foundations of the term magos had not been lost to Philostratus, 75 and by the fifth century Proclus could still appeal to the authority of the Persian Magi on a point related to his feelings about prayer. 76

We find, then, that by the time of the early Roman Empire, there had emerged two distinct meanings with which the term magus was associated: a magician in the popular sense of the word, and a Persian priest of old. It is difficult to determine to what degree the two meanings

72 As Nock (1972) 324 and Tavenner (1916) 4-5, concluded.
74 Philo On Dreams 1. 38. See also Qoud. Omnis probes 74. Cf. De Spec. Leg. 3. 100.
75 See Philostratus VA 1: 2. For other instances of the term magus used to refer exclusively to a Persian priest, see Strabo 3. 13-15; Plutarch De Is. et Os. 46-47 (369E-F); Cicero Div. 1. 23, 41, 46-47, 90-1; Leg. 2. 26; Fin. 5. 87; Tusc. 1. 108; Nat. D. 1. 43; Ammianus Marcellinus 23. 6, 32-6 and Lucian Men. 6. See also Diogenes Laertius 1. 6-9 where it is necessary to note that the Magi of Persia were not magicians and did not practice the “black art” (ten de goetike mageian oud’ egnosan). Dio Chrysostomus, Or. 36. 41, also writes that the Greeks refer, in their ignorance, to magicians (goetas) as “Magi”. To him they were men who specialised in the worship of the gods.
76 Proclus in Tim. 1.
co-existed, or were known in common parlance; our sources seem to suggest, however, that while the former usage proved the more popular (ultimately evolving into a term of abuse and derision), the latter was familiar to those who constituted the educated and intellectual sphere of society, particularly, it seems, to those (such as Philo, Apuleius and the neo-Platonic thinkers) who were more philosophically orientated. We find, however, that Pliny, even though he is perhaps the epitome of the well-read and highly educated Roman, and though he is well aware of the Magi’s eastern connections, makes no explicit distinction between the two meanings. To whom, then, we must ask, was Pliny, in his numerous references to the “Magi”, referring? Did Pliny’s status as a privileged equestrian exemplifying a professional position of power and prestige at the heart of the Roman Empire somehow dictate the way in which he approached and ultimately portrayed the whole phenomenon of the magus? Such questions are, needless to say, of seminal importance, for their answers determine what conclusions we may draw regarding both the presence and the mythology of the magus in the early Roman Empire.

Pliny’s well-known statement that there existed no book from which something of worth could not be garnered is a claim indicative of his general methodology: though an argument can be made for his recognition of and commitment to, at least in principle, personal observation and experience, it is upon the written word that he relies for most of his information. This he himself acknowledges when in the Preface to the Historia he claims to have, in his endeavour to produce an opus magnum of unprecedented scope and majesty, consulted approximately 2000 works, the authors of which he proceeds to list. Many of these, owing to their “abstruseness”, had never been utilised, and so he is the first, or so he claims, to have set down many facts which

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77 On the difficulties of attempting to recover the opinions and belief systems of those who existed outside the milieu of the privileged literary elite (which, of course, constituted the majority of ancient peoples) see Lloyd (2004) 10.
78 Pliny the Younger Ep. 3. 5.
79 See Thorndike (1923) 53-55.
had previously been ignored by or unknown to his contemporary audience. Indeed, the extent to which such a statement adheres to the truth can be seen in the number of authors whom he cites as being sources for his magico-medical remedies: there are no less than twenty-five. And even when he is less explicit regarding the place from which he derived his information, his prescriptions are often prefaced with the phrase “I have found in my authorities... (inveni apud auctores). There are also instances where he appears to record a certain magico-medical recipe verbatim, taking it directly from its original source (that original source perhaps being a collection of magical recipes not unlike those found in the Greek Magical Papyri) and using it in his own work. It is clear, then, that when he says that he finds (invenio, reperio) a certain remedy or bit of interesting lore, he is not generally referring, in the tradition of Aristotle or Theophrastus (who often obtained their information firsthand from learned informants such as herbalists and root-cutters) to his own personal field-work, but rather to the plethora of literary sources with which he was so familiar. This is not, of course, to say that the oral tradition was

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80 HN Preface 17-33.
81 HN Preface 17. That Pliny knew his sources well is suggested by his discovery that some of the “most professedly reliable” writers of his day had copied - often verbatim - the works of older authors, and had done so without any acknowledgement. HN Preface 22. Such a statement also supports the fact that Pliny had access to both contemporary and older authors, and that when it came to some of the more ancient works, he was not simply deriving his information from secondary sources; he had direct access to copies of the originals.
82 These include Apollonius (28. 7); Archelaus (28. 34); Arceon (28. 7); Ascepiades (26. 18-20); Bithus Durrachinus (28. 32); Caecilius (29. 85); Cato (28. 21); Chrysippus philosophus (30. 103); Dalion (28. 262); Democritus (24. 156-58; 26. 19-20; 28. 7 and 113-18); Deotimus (28. 83); Granius (28. 42); Icatides Medicus (28. 83); Lais (28. 82); Marcion Zmyrnaeus (28. 38); Muletos (28. 7); Metrodorus (27. 178); Orilus (28. 38); Orpheus (28. 34); Osthanes (28. 5-6, 256, 261); Pythagoras (24. 156-58); Salpe (28. 38-82, 262); Sotira obstetrix (28. 83); Theophrastus (28. 21); and Varro (28. 21).
83 For example HN 20. 215; 22. 11; 23. 141; 28. 65, 161.
84 See HN 28. 86-87 and 32. 92.
85 On Pliny’s extensive use of literary sources concerned with drug lore and medical botany, see Scarborough (1986) 64-75. It is interesting to note, in light of Pliny’s own criticism of those contemporary authors who were plagiarising older authors without any acknowledgement (HN Preface 22), that Pliny is himself revealed, in the course of Scarborough’s investigations, to be doing the same thing: quoting from his sources verbatim without any reference to the original authority.
entirely ignored by Pliny, or that he did not recognise - or utilise - the wealth of information
that it potentially afforded, but as G. E. R. Lloyd observes, the inclination to record knowledge
by way of writing, which in turn was accompanied by an increasing “temptation to rely more and
more on the written word,” made it difficult for Pliny to exploit such a tradition as
“systematically” as he could the written material. 87

If, then, Pliny was referring mainly to written sources, to whose works was he referring
when he presented the various recommendations of the Magi? Judging from scattered references
found throughout the Historia Naturalis, it is likely that rather than referring to a generic group
of contemporaries who dabbled in the various magical arts, he was in fact referring to a corpus of
“magical” writings which were vaguely associated with the names of Zoroaster and Osthanes –
and with Eastern wisdom in general. 88 A. D. Nock, for example, suggested that Pliny used the
term “Magi” in the same doxographical sense that one would use other generic titles such as “hoi
Stoikoi”, “hoi Epikoureioi”, or “hoi Platonikoi” to refer to the various works of the Stoics,
Epicureans or Platonists. 89 We know from the work of Joseph Bidez and Franz Cumont 90 that
such a body of literature – consisting of various magical remedies and usually associated with
the names of Osthanes, Zoroaster and the Magi in general – was in existence from at least the
third century BCE. 91 The establishment of such a corpus was inspired both by the growing
Greek conviction that the fountain of wisdom and learning had its source in the East, as well as

86 There are some instances where Pliny does, in fact, refer to the expertise of contemporary specialists. See, for
example, HN 11. 16 (bee-keepers); 28. 67 (midwives); 31. 45 (water-diviners); 32. 61 (specialists who know about
oysters); and 33. 90 (specialists in gold-solder). Cf. 9. 33; 9. 51; 21. 144; 26. 24; 27. 67.
87 Lloyd (1983) 148. Lloyd notes the potential disadvantages inherent in such a trend; while book knowledge
“facilitated the transmission of knowledge between literate individuals in one generation and those in another,
Pliny’s texts illustrate how it could also act as a barrier to communication between different groups of his own
contemporaries.” See Lloyd, 148-49.
88 Such a view was originally presented by Nock (1972) 321-23, and supported by P. Green (1952) 111-18.
89 Nock (1972) 322.
90 See Bidez and Cumont (1938).
by a desire upon the part of the library of Alexandria to acquire the greatest collection of written material that the Western world had ever seen. Though these works, produced for the library at Alexandria and later copied and circulated throughout the Mediterranean world, may indeed have retained something of the Persian spirit, they were certainly not genuine translations of the Eastern originals – though it appears that many claimed to be.

The possibility that such collections of magical remedies and books associated with sorcery were something of a commonplace in the early Empire is suggested by a pithy remark made by Horace in one of his *Epistles*:

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The words of the wise on magic charms you can use
To soothe the pain and practically rout the disease.
Or is your tumour ambition? Miracle cures
In the booklet will renovate you; just read them through
Three times in the right frame of mind. . .
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Suetonius also tells us how in 12 B.C., the emperor Augustus demanded the confiscation and burning of more than 2000 books on such subjects as prophecy, divination, astrology and magic. After this dramatic move, private ownership of such works was forbidden. The fact that such drastic measures were being taken suggests that the ownership of these magical books was perhaps a common phenomenon – and one which, if we are to judge from a remark made in the Acts of the Apóstles, was not easy to eradicate; during the reign of Claudius, hundreds of

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91 Cato the Elder had used a pseudo-Pythagorean treatise on magical plants which purported to be a compilation of some of the knowledge that Pythagoras had acquired from the Eastern *magoi*. *Cato Agr. Orig.* 157 with Pliny *HN* 20. 78; 24. 158.
93 See *HN* 30. 4 and *Porphyry* *Plot.* 16 for some of those who claimed to possess the true doctrines of Zoroaster.
94 *Horace* *Epist.* 1. 34-41. *sunt verba et voces, quibus hunc lenire dolorem possis et magnam morbi deponere partem. laudis amore tumes; sunt certa piacula, quae te ter pure lecto portersunt recreare libello.* Cf. *Epod.* 17. 4-5. See also Lucian *Philops.* 11-12 where the author refers to a case in which a Babylonian magician, in the course of executing some marvellous feats, refers to an “old book” out of which he gleans seven sacred names. See also *Philops.* 31.
95 *Suetonius* *Aug.* 31. 1.
96 *Tacitus* *Ann.* 6. 12. Cf. *Paulus*, *Sent.* 5. 23. 14-18, who also, in the third century CE, specified that the possession of “books on magic arts” was illegal. See also Vettius Valens *Anthol.* 4. 24 and 5. 10.
books upon magic still remained in the possession of the magic-workers at Ephesus. Pliny, too, sheds light upon this corpus of magical writings: he refers to a “still extant treatise on magic” by the famed magus Osthanes—the man whom, according to Pliny, was responsible for delivering the “monstrous craft” of magic to the western Mediterranean, and by extension to the whole world, when he accompanied the Persian king Xerxes upon his campaign against the Greeks.

Christopher Faraone has also emphasised the increasing pool of evidence which points to the likelihood of there having been a longstanding (dating at least from the first century CE) and widespread (from Egypt and Syria to Sicily, Rome and Carthage) use of magical handbooks similar – and often identical – to those of the Greek Magical Papyri. “Scholars reluctant to treat the PGM as part of a much wider cultural phenomenon,” he says, “ignore at their peril the growing evidence that many similar handbooks were indeed known and used widely throughout the Mediterranean basin.” It appears, then, that there was in Pliny’s day a whole host of magical writings available to virtually anyone who wanted access to them.

While some appear to have been haphazard collections of magical recipes and spells, similar to those that we

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98 Ephesus was so infamous a centre of magic that magical books were referred to as “Ephesian scripts”. The substantial number of magical books that were burned there during this episode is indicated by the remark that, when calculated, the value of the books amounted to 50,000 silver coins. Acts 19. 19. In a more esoteric vein, we also have the “Hermetic” work of Thessalus (ca. CE 41-68), The Power of Herbs, the Catalogus of which is testimony to the many ancient works which discussed the relationship of plants and herbs to the planets, zodiac, and other occult lore. See also PGM 12. 401-44 which refers to “the holy writings, in translation”, as well as to the secret explanations of the magical properties of plants, the knowledge of which had been gathered by a group of scribes from “many copies” of the sacred writings, “all of them secret”. Also PGM 13. 16-21 where the writer cites a list of secret incense which he claims to have found in a book that he had in his possession called the “Key of Moses”. He also refers to another “sacred book” by Hermes called the “Wing” – which, he claims, had plagiarised the “Key of Moses”.


100 See HN 30. 8. See also Hull (1974) 30.


102 Betz (1995) 153 claims that some magical writings, the likes of which we find in the PGM, could be purchased in the local marketplace.
find in the Greek Magical Papyri, others may have been associated with specific personalities and highlighted specific areas of expertise.  

Associated with Pliny's Magi are a number of Greeks who were reputed to have studied and been influenced by their (magical) teachings. These include Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, and Plato, all of whom are said to have ventured overseas in search of the occult wisdom associated with the Magi, and to have incorporated such wisdom into their own writings when they returned to Greece and Italy. Of these it is Democritus about whom Pliny has the most to say.

As far as Pliny is concerned, it was the particular responsibility of Democritus, the keenest student - next to Pythagoras - of the Magi, that magic was spread and perpetuated throughout the known world; "it is certain," he claims, "that Democritus especially instilled into men's minds the sweets of magic." This he did by journeying to the East in order to obtain certain magical writings, upon which he thereafter based his own writings. Among these writings was a treatise called the Chirocmeta, a work upon many "marvellous phenomena" which apparently laid forth the various magical purposes for which a variety of plants (and probably stones and animals) could be employed. Upon several occasions these works are condemned by Pliny and proclaimed to be untrustworthy and absurd, so "lacking in

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103 For later references to magical books see Ammianus Marcellinus 28. 1 27; Dio Chrysostom Hom. 38; Origen C. Cels. 4. 33; Paulus Sent. 5. 23. 14-19; CTh 9. 16. 12 and the Canon of Ps.-Ath. 71-72. See also Dickie (2001) 262-67. A fragment from a book of magical recipes, dated to the fourth century CE, was also recently recovered from a private household in Upper Egypt. Dickie (1999) 164.
104 See HN 24. 156-60; 25. 13; 30. 8-9.
105 HN 24. 160.
106 HN 30. 9.
107 Ibid.
credibility and decency” that those who admired Democritus’ more philosophical and scientific writings were forced to deny that these magical writings were in fact his.  

Though Democritus seems to have had a long-standing reputation as a Pythagorean philosopher who had journeyed to the East to receive occult teachings, there is an emerging scholarly consensus that the Hellenistic Egyptian Bolus of Mendes was largely responsible for making the philosopher into the archetypal magus-figure that Pliny, and many others, came to know him as. It is now thought that Bolus, who may have been a Hellenised Egyptian priest, appropriated the name of Democritus and attached it to a number of his own writings. Such writings (now lost) included treatises on a wide range of occult subjects, and were probably based on earlier works – some of which may have been attributed to the Magi. Matthew Dickie has demonstrated that some of Bolus’ medico-magical material had its roots in Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets; it is his opinion, however, that Bolus found most of his material in further intermediary texts.

Whether Pliny had direct access to the works of Bolus (whom he believed to be the philosopher Democritus) or whether he knew them through another source is still a matter of debate. The latter possibility was presented by Max Wellmann, who argued that Pliny had

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110 HN 30. 9. Aulus Gellius (10. 12. 6-8) was among those who ardently insisted that such works were not produced by the hand of the true Democritus. Columella RR 7. 5. 17 also thought that those works attributed to Democritus, and dealing with magic, were spurious. Vitruvius, however, accepted them as genuine (9. 1. 4).

111 There is evidence from the fourth century BCE that a legend had arisen that made Democritus the student, and indeed even the son, of Pythagoras. Duris of Samos FGrHist 76 F23. See also Kingsley (1995) 327f. On Democritus visiting the East, see Diogenes Laertius 9. 34-35; Aelian VH 4. 20; Hippolytus Haer. 1. 13; and Suda s. v. = Diels 68A2.

112 For Democritus as magus see PGM 7. 167, 168-86, 795; 12. 351; Cicero Fin. 5. 50; Pliny HN 24. 156, 160; 25. 13; 30. 9; Aelian VH 4. 20; and the late alchemical manuscript P. Holm. 12. 4 (Halleux).


115 Works associated with the “pseudo-Democritus” included the Plušika dunamera (more popularly known as Peri sumpathon kai antipathon), Thaumasia, Paignia, the Cheiromecta, a Chaldaios logos, and works on the Nubian and Babylonian sacred texts. See Brashear (1995) p. 3413, n. 135, and Gordon (1997) 134-36.
acquired the information contained in Bolus’ writings from a Roman doctor called Sextius Niger, a physician called Xenocrates of Aphrodisias who was active during the time of Nero, and a compilation of Bolus’ writings put together by the Pythagorean magus Anaxilaus of Larissa. Whatever the case may be, it can reasonably be concluded that Bolus himself cited the Magi as his main authority, but that Pliny, in order to add variety to his discussion, cited both the Magi and “Democritus” as his informants. For it does seem, when we examine the HN, that Bolus was, in fact, drawing upon information from some Magian source. This can be seen in the following quotation, where Pliny is referring to Bolus (whom he cites as “Democritus”), who is in turn referring to the Magi: “The Magi use [the plant aglaophotis], he tells us, when they wish to call up the gods.” It may be, then, in light of the relative frequency with which he is referred to in the HN and cited as an authority upon magical prescriptions regarding plants, that Bolus is an intermediary source, perhaps the main link between Pliny and the Eastern Magi.

There is also the possibility, however, that, in addition to the writings of Bolus, Pliny also had recourse either to other pseudepigraphical works that purported to be written by Democritus, or to additional works that likewise claimed to record the lore of the Magi. We know, for example, that Pliny knew of at least two other works which claimed to invoke the authority of the Magi: one by Zachalias of Babylon and one by Pythagoras. In his discussion of gem-stones, Pliny refers to a treatise on magical gem-stones which Zachalias had dedicated to King

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117 Wellmann (1889).
118 Ibid., (1907).
119 Ibid., (1928) 48-52.
120 HN 24. 160. See also HN 21. 62 Democritus... narrat... magos Parthorumque reges hac herba uti ad vota suscipienda.
121 Thus Nock (1972) 322.
122 Cf. Dickie (2001) 120 who believes that Bolus is the primary source from which Pliny drew his Democritean and Magian information.
Mithridates, and it is clear that he regards the author as one of the great purveyors of Magian teachings. He also refers to a work on the magical powers of plants which purported to be a compilation of the teachings that Pythagoras had received when he visited the Magi of the East. While the work itself is explicitly cited three times, there are several other instances that are recorded in relation to Pythagorean teachings which may have heralded from the same source. Among the other treatises that Pliny may have known include a work by Hermippus of Smyrna, who belonged to the first half of the third century BCE; Pliny refers to Hermippus as having engaged in a meticulous discussion concerning the art of magic. Dickie makes the point that it would have been difficult for Hermippus to produce such a work without discussing the actual magical lore that constituted the art of magic. Finally, there was a treatise that was said to have been written by the Alexandrian grammatikos Apion which was entitled On the Magi. In addition to mentioning this work in his list of cited authors, Pliny refers to Apion in a way that suggests that he knew him to be an expert in plant-lore and necromancy. The two magical plants that Pliny mentions in association with this individual may have come from the latter’s book on the Magi. Considering the number of sources that Pliny claims to have had access to during the course of his research, it would not be difficult to imagine that he also had recourse to works such as these.

To whom then was Pliny referring in his numerous references to the “Magi”? It seems reasonable to conclude that when he made such references, he had in mind a certain group of

123 HN 37. 169.
124 Pythagorean books on plant-lore: HN 19. 94; 24. 156-59; 25. 13. Cf. 20. 78. Pythagorean teachings: HN 20. 101, 134, 185, 192, 219, 236; 21. 109; 24. 116. Cato the Elder also knew the work. Agr. Orig. 157. Pliny believed that the author was, in fact, Pythagoras, but he did acknowledge that there were those who attributed the work to the Hellenistic doctor Cleemporus. Whatever the case may have been, it appears that the Pseudo-Pythagorean author did attribute at least some of his material to the Magi.
125 Pliny HN 30. 3-4.
127 HN 30. 18, 24. 167.
practitioners who, though not necessarily Persian, were almost certainly connected with the East. This can be inferred from his statement that both Pythagoras and Democritus visited “the Magi of Persia, Arabia, Ethiopia and Egypt.” 128 We find that for Pliny the term has clearly lost the exclusively Persian connotations that it initially had when it first entered into the Greek language. Moreover, it refers, in Pliny’s mind, to a group of practitioners with whom Zoroaster (who is, in fact, recognised as being a Persian), being the “father” or “progenitor”, the original begetter and mastermind behind magic, was vaguely and inarticulately linked. 129

Though it is unlikely that Pliny had access to any ancient treatise directly associated with these Magi (if, in fact, there ever were any), he may have possessed some of the pseudo-Magian writings that had emerged in the Hellenistic era – such as the still extant treatise of Osthanes to which he refers. 130 It is likely, however, that much of the information he presents as being in some way connected with the Magi is, in fact, derived from intermediary Greek sources like that of Bolus, who in works such as the Chirocmeta, appears to have preserved at least some of the Magian lore, and in so doing proved a bridge between the occult knowledge of the East and the Historia Naturalis – between Pliny and the Magi.

We might ask, however, if this is in fact the end of the story. When Pliny furbishes his work with phrases such as “according to the fraudulent claims of the Magi. . .” or “if we are to believe the lies of the Magi. . .”, are we to suppose, in a world and age that was pervaded by both the widespread belief in and practice of magic, that Pliny’s hostility toward the Magi was

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128 HN 25. 13.
129 On Zoroaster see HN 7. 72; 30. 3-8; 37. 133, 150, 157, 160. Nock (1972) 321 suggested that Pliny’s authority upon the Persian Zoroaster may have been Apion; he appears in Pliny’s list of cited authors. It is clear, in any case, that the knowledge collected regarding Zoroaster is second-hand – in spite of Hermippus of Smyrna’s purported possession of two million lines of Zoroaster’s original writings.
130 HN 30. 8. See also HN 30.14 ut narravit Osthanes, species eius plures sunt. Namque et aqua et sphaeris et aere et stellis et lucernis ac pelvibus securibusque et multis aliis modis divina promittit, praeterea umbrarum inferorumque colloquia. “As Osthanes said, there are several forms of magic; he professes to divine from water,
rooted solely in his dislike of a group of practitioners and body of literature about which he had only vague and indefinite impressions? Perhaps not. The Magi of tradition and literature – those referred to in Democritus who were cast in a certain Eastern mystique – may have served as a specific target of reproach for Pliny, an explicit nexus around which he could vent his obvious antagonism and anxiety, but it is likely that in his mind the term was equally associated with the ritual practitioners and medicine men who proved a well-known presence upon the ancient Roman landscape. He refers, in other words, to a body of writings popularly known to be associated with the Eastern Magi, but is influenced in his judgement of those writings by his firsthand knowledge of the magic-workers who were part of the contemporary Roman milieu. In fact the two – those who appear referenced in Bolus and who were said to be responsible for a host of magico-medical writings, and the magic-workers of Pliny’s own day – may have had little in common. As far as using the Historia Naturalis as a source with which to shed light upon their practices – either the practices of the Magi of tradition or those of Pliny’s day - there are certain problems and limitations regarding the amount of information that may be gleaned from the work and used in our investigations.

First, Pliny is less than consistent or clear in revealing how or to what extent he draws from the Magi. Part of his practical objective was to produce a comprehensive and complete survey based upon knowledge acquired in the past, one which would ultimately serve as a handbook of remedies to which the literate Roman could refer piecemeal, as one would to an encyclopaedia, when in need of a remedy to assuage his ailments. His task, as Jerry Stannard

globes, air, stars, lamps, basins and axes, and by many other methods, and besides to converse with ghosts and those in the underworld."

131 Nutton (1985b) 44. As Scarborough says, “the Natural History met a need filled today by a comprehensive popular encyclopaedia, and the pharmaceutical sections served the same purpose as seen today in the revival of books on herbal lore.” Scarborough (1986) 61. Cf. HN 28. 1-2, where Pliny makes a statement that implies that his ultimate objective is to aid in human suffering.
has noted, was “to collect, describe and record.” 132 He drew widely - and, as some have claimed, uncritically - because he wished to include every possible remedy, cure or recommendation that he could find - not because he necessarily believed in the efficacy of all of them, but because he wanted his work to be of the utmost practical value. 133 In book twenty-eight he thus asserts that he will include in his work “foreign things” and, indeed, even “outlandish customs”. 134 He therefore does not hesitate, when the recommendations of ordinary medicine (i. e., those rooted in the domestic and folk traditions) prove worthless, to supplement them with the *remedia Magorum*, 135 and often even to cite the Magi upon their own authority. Part of the problem, however, lies in the fact that there are many instances in which it is virtually impossible to discern whether he is citing the Magi or not. (This is further complicated by the fact that many of the other remedies which we find in the *Historia* are just as “magical” as those associated with the Magi.) One passage, for example, begins with the words *magorum haec commenta sunt*, but it is virtually impossible to tell what qualifies as the *magorum commenta* and what does not. 136 In other instances Pliny appears to refer to the Magi by way of a mere pronoun – even when they

133 See Stannard (1982) 4 where Pliny is compared to a modern anthropologist. “A careful reading suggests that Pliny was not always advocating or even accepting some of the grosser superstitions and magical practices about which he wrote. It is rather the case, that like a modern anthropologist, he was reporting what he learned from his informants.” See *HN* 30. 137. A point that Stannard neglects to clarify, however, is the fact that Pliny’s “informants” were more the result of his extensive reading than of any firsthand observation. See Lloyd (1983) 42-47 for an in-depth examination of the way in which Pliny utilised Theophrastus’ *Historia Plantarum* as one of his sources. Lloyd succeeds in demonstrating that Pliny (though he did occasionally appropriate the viewpoints of his authorities and insert them into the *HN* without much critical discernment) was in fact capable of exhibiting a certain degree of critical awareness regarding his material; at times we even find him challenging and eclipsing the viewpoints and opinions of his authority.
134 *HN* 28. 2-3. Two of Pliny’s additional claims are also of interest: first, that he has endeavoured to include “views almost universally believed”, and second, rather amusing in light of the 37-volume outcome of his efforts, the claim that he has “stressed careful research rather than [an] abundance of material”. See also *HN* 37. 31 where he says that “certain details can scarcely be included as serious items, but I must not omit them, since they have been put on record.”
135 See *HN* 30. 98. See also *HN* 21. 66, 166, 176; 22. 50, 61; 30. 98. Cf. Celsus *Med* 6. 6 (8E) for a similar example.
136 *HN* 28. 47-49.
have not been cited explicitly for several chapters. We cannot ultimately discern, then, just how many of the medico-magical prescriptions which appear in the *Historia* are, in fact, drawn from the lore of the Magi.

An additional frustration lies in the fact that Pliny consciously places limitations upon the amount of Magian material that he is willing to include in his work. This is due to his opinion that their lore is loathsome, despicable, and even dangerous. In book twenty-eight, for example, he says that though he will deign to present *some* of their more moderate claims, there is a limit to that which he feels is appropriate to repeat. Indeed, even that information which does manage to find its way into his discussion is in need of an apology upon his part, and as for that which cannot be recorded, it is, he declares, “detestable and unspeakable.” In another passage, he claims that besides refraining from mentioning abortificients and love-philtres (he remembers that the famous general Lucullus had been poisoned by way of the latter), he will also leave out of his handbook, “especially as I have utterly condemned all faith in such practices,” any other “portentous magic” (*magica portenta*) - unless, that is, its inclusion is required for purposes of warning and refutation. Clearly there was much more information regarding the practices of the Magi to which Pliny had access, but which he chose, due to the ultimate objective of his work – not to mention his own moral underpinnings and agenda – not to include.

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137 Pliny appears to be referring to the Magi at *HN* 30. 95-100, but we are obliged to refer back several chapters for the antecedent of *eorum*, which appears at 30. 91. See also *HN* 37. 14ff. Throughout the *HN*, there are many other instances that prove even more baffling.

138 *HN* 28. 86-87.
5. The Lore of the Magi: The Magician as Expert in Healing and Occult Remedies

In spite of the limitations that Pliny placed upon Magian lore we still find that a fair amount of the Magi’s occult knowledge found its way into the Historia. And it is not surprising, given the fact that nearly half the books of the HN deal at least in part with remedies for diseases and ailments, that it is with the realm of healing and medicine that we find the Magi most often associated. Indeed, it is clear that Pliny has no doubt that a major part of the Magi’s identity was bound up in an association with the healing arts – in particular with the herbal lore and esoteric wisdom associated with plants and animals (and, to a lesser extent, stones).\(^{140}\) Indeed, it is with a view of the *magus* as a kind of flamboyant medicine man and expert in herbal and animal lore, that one leaves the Historia.

The burgeoning fields of ethnobotany and ethnopharmacy, interdisciplinary sciences that deal “with the pharmaceutical means, considered in relation to the cultural determinants which characterise the uses of these means in a given human group”,\(^ {141}\) have determined that many, if not most, indigenous, traditional and pre-industrial cultures possess a rich heritage and in-depth knowledge concerning the properties and potential uses of many plant materials and plant species - particularly in terms of their innate curative value. Indeed, it is estimated that between 25 and 50 percent of the modern drug pharmacopoeia hails from plant substances which were originally used within a folk context.\(^ {142}\) Plants have been used by people not only as medicinal remedies, however, but also as foodstuffs, and the raw materials out of which dwellings, clothing

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\(^{139}\) *HN* 25, 25. In another instance he expresses his distaste at the thought of including in his discussion a popular charm used to avert hailstorms – in spite of the fact that his revered Cato had included just such an incantation in his writings. *HN* 17. 267. Cf. 30. 137 where Pliny is less reluctant to include claims which he regards as being fantastic.

\(^{140}\) Given Pliny’s claim in book thirty that magic was an offshoot of medicine, such an association is hardly surprising. See *HN* 30. 2.

\(^{141}\) Pieroni, et. al. (2002) 217. For current issues in ethnopharmacy and ethnobotany, see also the collection of essays in Posey (1999) and Schultes and Von Reis (1995). For an ethnobotanical approach to the botanical writings (i.e., *De historia plantarum* and *De causis plantarum*) of Theophrastus, see Hughes (1985).

\(^{142}\) See Farnsworth and Morris (1976) and Holmstedt and Bruhn (1983).
and other basic household necessities are made. They have also been used for ritual and religious purposes, perhaps the most important of which has been the use, usually on the part of a community's religious experts, of certain hallucinogenic plants to generate altered states of consciousness. In brief, then, ethnobotany may be characterized, according to Gordon Willey, as the "story or study of peoples' interaction with plants," or, as Wade Davis puts it, a "science of discovery" which seeks to document "the ongoing dynamic interrelationship between humans and plants."

As Davis notes, the task of the ethnobotanist is twofold. First, in the face of the alarming rate at which cultural and biological diversity is disappearing, there is a need to excavate "the immense repositories of folk beliefs" in an effort to collect and catalogue all the knowledge which pertains to the potential benefits that plants might have for human societies. But the task of the ethnobotanist is not only to record the varieties of known plants and plant uses but also to record "a vision of life itself." Such a task is admittedly much more challenging and, as Davis stresses, the ethnobotanist must strive to

...understand not just how a specific group of people uses plants but how that group perceives them, how it interprets those perceptions, how those perceptions influence the activities of members of that society, and how those activities, in turn, influence the ambient vegetation and the ecosystem upon which the society depends.

As Davis further contends, "the old practice of ethnobotanical discovery, of finding new plants, labelling them according to the rules of binomial nomenclature, and incorporating their use into modern society has been augmented by an intellectual perspective that views both the plants and their utilization as but a metaphor for understanding the very cognitive matrix of a particular

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144 Willey (1995) 400.

145 Davis (1995) 40, 43.
society.” In light of these observations, we may look upon Pliny - with his passion to seek out and excavate all the repositories of folk knowledge that were available to him during his day, and to do so for the sake of providing beneficial healing remedies for his fellow citizens - as an early ethnobotanist who followed in the footsteps of Theophrastus and Dioscorides. In terms of Davis’ second, more challenging task of situating such botanical knowledge within the greater framework of its socio-historical context, Pliny, with his tendency to draw uncritically from a host of different literary sources whose origins were by no means culturally homogenous, most certainly missed the mark. Hence it is the task of the modern historian, and indeed the objective of this study, to attempt to redress this shortcoming and uncover something of the “totality of the place of plants in a culture.” In this case, that culture is ancient imperial Rome.

Though the names of many plants and herbs are given by Pliny in association with the Magi, few such flora can now be identified. Indeed, of all branches of inquiry into the ancient world, ancient botany is among the most challenging for scholars to grapple with. And we find that the complications associated with the identification of plant names was probably just as much an issue for ancient botanists as it is for modern researchers. Pliny highlighted the problem when he noted the fact that, depending upon the geographical location, a variety of names were often given to the same plant. Indeed, Dioscorides, writing around the same time as Pliny, provided some twenty different names for the mandrake root – perhaps not surprising given the fact that the mandragora officinarum is a plant indigenous to countries around the

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146 Ibid., 44.
147 Ibid., 40.
148 Ford (1978)
149 That facet of ethnobotany which draws upon literary and archaeological sources to shed light upon the use of plants within their socio-historical contexts and to help facilitate a greater understanding of the ways in which pharmacology is related to the deeper dimensions of a culture, such as religious and spiritual belief, is now known as “historical ethnobotany”. See Schultes and Von Reis (1995), esp. 93-146.
151 HN 25. 29.
Mediterranean basin and associated with a rich folkloric tradition that saw it being used as both a fertility drug and an aphrodisiac.\textsuperscript{153} Further circumscribing the ancient gathering of plant knowledge was the fact, as Pliny laments, that several plants, though their curative potential was known, lacked formal names.\textsuperscript{154}

In any case, whether Pliny was in fact familiar with the plants and plant names that he found showcased in the prescriptions of the Magi, he generally offers no objection – neither to their names nor to the ways in which his authorities recommended that they be employed. Indeed, he appears to agree with them that “there is nothing which cannot be achieved by the power of plants.”\textsuperscript{155} And when we examine the ways in which these plants were being employed by the Magi, in particular, we find that much indeed appears to have been achievable. Many, for example, are used, as we might expect, for curative purposes. What make the Magi’s prescriptions regarding plants and herbs unique, however, are the various special qualifications that characterise their gathering and administration. One particular flower, the “heliochrysus”, for example, rather than being taken orally or applied to the physical body in some other traditional manner, is simply to be worn as a chaplet.\textsuperscript{156} Other specimens are to be plucked, not haphazardly, but with the left hand and without looking backward, and accompanied by a statement regarding the intended use of the plant.\textsuperscript{157} The anemone, which was characterised by the Magi as having a kind of “mystic potency”, is to be gathered when it first blooms – the gathering being accompanied by a statement of intent – and then taken and wrapped in a red cloth, stored in the shade, and later used as an amulet when one fell prey to tertian or quartan

\textsuperscript{152} Dioscorides \textit{Materia Medica} 4. 75.
\textsuperscript{153} See, for example, \textit{Genesis} 30: 14. Here a barren Rachel implores her sister Leah to “give me, I pray thee, of thy son’s mandrakes.”
\textsuperscript{154} \textit{HN} 25. 16.
\textsuperscript{156} \textit{HN} 21. 66. See also 25. 129-30.
\textsuperscript{157} \textit{HN} 21. 176; 22. 50.
fevers. Likewise, the potency and healing powers of the heliotrope were captured best when tied on to the ailing patient in three or four knots, and accompanied by a prayer that the patient would recover to untie these knots. Such is the nature of many of the recommendations for which the Magi are known and cited.

Besides being used for medicinal and curative purposes, there were, according to the Magi, numerous other purposes for which plants and herbs could be employed. According to Magian lore, certain plants had the power, for example, to help people "obtain their requests more easily." Moreover, when the juice of the "chicory" was combined with oil and used to anoint the body, it had the potential to render a person more popular. Also used to increase one's popularity and to give grace and glory was "heliochrysus". Indeed, in the botanical works of Pythagoras and Democritus - who as we have seen were professing to cite the Magi - there appear to have been a whole host of marvellous powers attributed to plants: the ability to freeze water, heal snake-bites, evoke the gods, produce in their recipients the powers of divination, and coerce criminals into revealing their crimes by terrorizing them with the hauntings of spirits and phantoms.

In book twenty-five of the Historia, we again find that the Magi had attributed supernatural powers to certain plants and herbs, and in a later chapter an extended commentary is given upon the so-called "sacred plant" (Hiera Botane). So enthusiastic about the

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158 HN 21. 166.  
159 HN 22. 61.  
160 HN 20. 174  
161 Ibid. Pliny also notes that "so great are [the chicory’s] health-giving properties that some call it Chreston." In light of the fact that the juice of the chicory was to be "rubbed on" or "anointed" (khristos) and that its benefits were so pronounced that it was referred to as "Chreston" (khrestos, "good", "honest", health-bestowing"), Allegro suggests that the early Christians may have been using a sacred plant whose main function was to alter consciousness. He cites Suetonius’ account of Jews having been expelled from Rome by the emperor Claudius on account of their making a disturbance "at the instigation of Chrestus." Suetonius, Claud. 25. 4. See Allegro (1970) p. 51 and p. 238, n. 27.  
162 HN 21. 66.
supreme power of this plant were the Magi that a host of marvellous claims was made for it: those who anoint themselves with it, for example, will, it was said, gain their wishes, increase their popularity, and rid themselves of troublesome fevers – or, for that matter, of any other disease or ailment from which they may be suffering. The Magi suggested that this particular plant be gathered around the time of the Dog-Star, without “the action being seen by sun or moon.” Before the plant is plucked an offering of honey and honey-comb should be made to the earth, and a circle drawn around the plant with an iron tool; it should then be plucked with the left hand and raised high above one’s head.\textsuperscript{165} Jerry Stannard has cited this wonder plant as being the ancient equivalent of vervain,\textsuperscript{166} but John Allegro, in a much neglected study focussing on the religious and cultic significance of ancient plants substances, notes that Pliny’s description of it is more reminiscent of other descriptions given of the mandrake.\textsuperscript{167}

Finally, in book twenty-six, several plants discussed by the Magi are listed, the powers claimed for which are so outlandish, says Pliny, that they succeeded in destroying “confidence in all herbal remedies” – presumably by making a mockery of their true healing potential.\textsuperscript{168} Among these are plants that are said to dry up rivers, open doors that are closed, force hostile armies to withdraw in terror, and magically supply all the needs of the envoys of the Persian king. To such claims, Pliny responds with bitter sarcasm, questioning why such wonder-working plants had never been employed in Roman warfare or used in Italian irrigation. Clearly the claims of the Magi regarding the “wonderful powers” of plants\textsuperscript{169} had proved too exorbitant even for him.

\textsuperscript{163}\textit{HN} 24. 156, 157, 160, 161, 164.
\textsuperscript{164} \textit{HN} 25. 13ff.
\textsuperscript{165} \textit{HN} 25. 105-108.
\textsuperscript{166} On the antiquity of \textit{hiera botane}, also called \textit{verbena} or \textit{verbanaca}, see Stannard (1982) 17-18.
\textsuperscript{167} Allegro (1970) 67-68.
\textsuperscript{168} See \textit{HN} 26. 18-20.
\textsuperscript{169} \textit{HN} 24. 167.
Certainly from the time of Homer,\(^{170}\) with his reference to the mysterious moly,\(^{171}\) used by Odysseus to liberate his men from the sorceries of Circe, there had been a prevailing belief that there was inherent in various plants a living power – a power, moreover, that could, if one knew the appropriate ingredients and incantamenta with which to accompany them, be harnessed and used for one’s desired ends.\(^{172}\) Such a power was popularly believed to be responsible for many marvellous and otherwise inexplicable feats – as is evidenced in Pliny’s sources. Indeed, Pliny tells us that there still existed in his time many among the common people who believed that eclipses were the result of “the compelling power of charms and magic herbs”\(^{173}\) – charms and herbs which were no doubt believed to have been prepared by the magus.\(^{174}\) There were also, of course, those natural healing (and sometimes harmful) properties which many plants exhibited. As is the case in many traditional and pre-industrial societies, such properties were associated with certain distinctive energies – sometimes conceptualized as spirits – that were thought to mystically inhabit or embody the plants,\(^{175}\) and which therefore allowed human beings to engage with the “spirit” or “intelligence” of a plant or plant spirit in ways that could facilitate an exchange of information. The idea that certain herbal prescriptions and plant lore were rooted in divine revelation was therefore not uncommon in antiquity. Pliny himself attributed the discovery of some of his remedies to dreams and other experiences of a mystical nature.\(^{176}\) But it

\(^{170}\) Homer, Od. 10. 305-306.

\(^{171}\) See Scarborough (1991) 139 and 165, n. 24. See also Stannard (1962). Pliny describes the moly plant as being “the most renowned of plants” with which are associated the “most potent sorceries.” Apparently there were reports during his day that it grew around Arcadia and Pliny claims to have met a “herbalist physician” (herbarum medicis) who reported that the plant could be found in Italy and, if Pliny so desired, acquired within a few days’ journey from Campania. HN 25. 26-27.


\(^{173}\) HN 25. 10.

\(^{174}\) See Evans-Pritchard (1976), chs 1 and 2, where the magician is commonly held responsible for inexplicable phenomena.

\(^{175}\) See, for example, Posey (2002).

\(^{176}\) See HN 25. 17-18. Cf. 20. 144; 23. 56; 25. 47. For further examples see Budge (1928) and Hull (1974) 33-34; 41-42, 47. The notion that healers confer with certain divine powers – sometimes directly associated with the plant and sometimes not – is a phenomenon found across various cultures and as part of numerous healing traditions. Posey,
was also the ritual and various other occult accoutrements (which were thought to enhance the therapeutic value of the herbs) which ensured that the abundant plant-lore of antiquity would find a natural niche within the cultural notion of “magic”. In this respect, it is probably not dissimilar to the African Zande tradition, made famous by the early twentieth-century studies of Evans-Pritchard. Here magic is intimately associated with the use of “medicines” – plant and vegetable substances which were thought to contain potent energies which could only be activated through the use of the sorcerer’s special rituals and verbal spells. Such “medicines” were used to provide protection against the malign intentions of certain evildoers, as well as to punish such individuals. 177 And so it was that the magician became widely identified with the herbal arts 178 - and as such with a certain ominous mystique. For as Lloyd notes, “as in numerous other societies, those with claims to special knowledge about wild plants were often viewed with a certain admiration and even awe.” 179

The “special knowledge” that such an individual would have possessed included two different components. First, he would have been among the few who knew how and where to acquire the various plants and herbs that were cited among his magical writings (i.e., how to recognize and identify them and where they were most likely to be found growing), how to best extract and utilize their healing properties (i.e., whether they should be taken in their natural

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177 See Evans-Pritchard (1976).
178 The fact that the idea of the magician as a practitioner who was well-acquainted with the powerful properties and uses of plants was not simply a popular legend that entered mainstream consciousness as a presumed fact and showed up in the poetry and literature of the day is attested by the Greek Magical Papyri: in the recorded spells, incantations, formulas and recipes that appear in these magical texts there are mentioned over 450 plants, minerals, herbs, animal products, and other substances that were to be used by the practising magician. See, for example, PGM 4. 286-95 and 2967-75 and also PGM 12. 401-404.
179 Lloyd (1983) 120.
form, boiled into a tea, ground up, combined with other foodstuffs, or applied to the body as
lotions, salves, ointments or poultices), and how to administer them to his patients (i.e., what
dosage was deemed appropriate and whether they should, in order to exploit their maximum
healing potential, be combined with other healing remedies). Furthermore, he would have
known with what incantations, rituals and prayers these plants and herbs were to be employed.
Cultivating such an expertise would have been no small feat, and as we learn from the various
contemporary anthropological studies which highlight other cross-cultural healers still present
today in the less developed world (i.e., curanderos, shamans, witchdoctors, and medicine
men/women), it would have likely required a commitment of many years to master such an
art. Indeed, the high degree of specialization that would have been required to master the herbal
art may very well have necessitated the development of a class of specialists who had been
exclusively trained in such an art and who would have been exceptionally well-versed in all the
details of herbal therapy – and who may very well have desired to preserve the secret and arcane
nature of their art. This is suggested by Pliny when he attributes society’s general lack of
herbal knowledge to the fact that “those who possess it [i.e., knowledge of plant properties]
refuse to teach it, just as though they would themselves lose what they have imparted to others.”

According to Nutton (1985a) 144, this would not have been as easy as Pliny, with his exhortations to the
common man to get out and search hill and vale for his own remedies, suggested. HN 24. 5. The fact that searching
for one’s own herbal remedies was not as simple a matter as Pliny and other naturalists made it sound is suggested
by the proliferation of the ancient drug trade and the apparent success of those who were engaged in it.
Invariably, such specialists, based upon their role as experts who can both harm and heal, acquire a reputation as
practitioners who are either themselves spiritually potent or who have the key to a field of knowledge that is
powerful and therefore, by extension, potentially dangerous. The anthropological literature is therefore riddled with
tales of shamans and sorcerers who retaliate against their enemies by either maiming (physically, socially, or
politically) or killing them – usually through various magical and supernatural means.
See the comments of Ruck in Wasson (1978): “In unlettered cultures, the knowledge of the herbalist – the
knowledge of the properties of plants and their use – was everywhere a body of secret lore passed on by word of
mouth from herbalist to apprentice and sometimes from one herbalist to another” (pp. 53-54).
HN 25. 16: turpissima causa raritatis quod etiam qui sciunt demonstrare nolunt, tamquam ipsis peritum sit
quod tradiderint aliis.
informal group of plant magicians who had been schooled in the use of plant knowledge but who jealously guarded such knowledge. Such claims to knowledge and secrecy would have therefore afforded these individuals a certain anxious reverence among their contemporaries.

In spite of their obvious place of importance within the magical arts, plants and plant-lore are not the only means of healing with which we find the Magi associated. Pliny’s Magi also appear to have been specialists in the body of knowledge that had developed regarding animal simples. It should be noted, however, that as was the case with the vast body of herbal knowledge which had developed by Pliny’s time, the host of animal remedies that furbish the pages of his twenty-eighth book – some of them connected with the Magi and some of them not – may have been part of a folk tradition that extended well back into the murky depths of antiquity. 184 Unfortunately our evidence is too limited to say with any degree of certainty that this was the case, 185 and whether there was in fact a native Italian tradition of herbal magic, or whether the natives of Italy had received the tradition from the East, 186 has long been a point of conjecture. Most scholars who have dedicated their careers to understanding Greco-Roman medicine operate from the assumption that the tradition was in fact indigenous. But there

184 See W. H. S. Jones (1957); W. B. McDaniel (1944); J. M. Riddle (1987). See also Nutton (1985b) 42; Scarborough (1969) Ch. 1; Stannard (1987) esp. 95, 97; and Tavenner (1916) 16-17, 22-23; 25.
185 Support for an indigenous Italian folk tradition consists of scattered references to magico-medical remedies – some of which are explicitly identified as being drawn from popular belief - found in some of the works of Italian medical writers. See Celsus Med. 3. 23. 7; 4. 7. 5; 4. 8. 4; 4. 9. 7; 4. 13. 3; 4. 16. 2; 5. 28. 7; 6. 9. 7; 9. 7; 13. 3; Scribonius Largus 13 and 17. Cf. Serenus Sammonicus Liber Medicinalis 50. 8-9. In addition there are at least 12 recipes in Cato’s work on agriculture. There are also instances in the HN where Pliny (in spite of the fact that he is known to have drawn most of his material from other written sources) appears to be drawing from popular belief. See, for example, HN 28. 35-46. On the interesting history of the plant verbena (also known in antiquity as hiera botane), which can be traced back to indigenous religious ceremonies conducted by the verbenarius, see Stannard (1977) 33-46.
186 On the transmission of plant and drug lore from the Near East to the Greek and Roman worlds, see Burkert (1983) 115-20. See also Budge (1913); Edelstein (1967) 231, n. 87, and Scarborough (1991) 162. On the “continual east-to-west drift of ‘religious technology’” (a term coined by Walter Burkert), see Faraone (1999) 36-38. Jones also noted that the approximately 1000 plant and 100 animal remedies recorded by Pliny in the HN (many of which involved products that were definitely not indigenous to the Italian peninsula) could not possibly have all been part of an early Italian folk tradition. He proposed the existence of a later stratum of imported medicamenta, for which he called upon evidence from Scribonius Largus. See Jones (1957) 461, 469-71.
nevertheless remains the possibility that there existed a sub-stratum of Italian herbal-lore that had its origins in the East – in Egypt, Persia, Babylonia and Assyria.\(^{187}\) As several recent studies have stressed, it is not improbable that from the eighth century BCE onward there was a gradual infiltration of Near Eastern magico-religious, medical and herbal lore into Greece and Etruria. Notions, for example, that certain incantations and charms could be employed to supplement the efficacious value of a herbal remedy, that various animal parts contained a living power that had the capacity to impart healing energies to a diseased part of the human body, or that an ailment could be magically transferred from its human host to another living victim (i.e., an animal) were deeply rooted in Near Eastern healing traditions, and “handbooks” featuring various medico-magical remedies and prescriptions, no doubt similar to those which Pliny utilized, were certainly not uncommon in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.\(^{188}\) In fact, as early as Homer, we have allusions to Egyptian medicine and drugs that suggest that they were quite famous, and in the *Odyssey* we find Egyptian doctors being praised as “knowledgeable beyond all humans.”\(^{189}\)

As R. Thomas has noted, our evidence concerning the transmission and circulation of Near Eastern imports into the western Mediterranean world, facilitated by a trading network that interlaced its way throughout the Mediterranean basin, is “overwhelmingly rich”. But as Thomas admits, some imports are more easily facilitated than others, and while artistic motifs, musical

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\(^{187}\) The numerous remedies that Pliny gives that involve parts of the elephant (8 remedies), lion (10), camel (10), crocodile (19), chameleon (15), hippopotamus (7), lynx (5), and hyena (79) suggests that some of his concoctions may have had their origins in Africa. Cf. Scribonius Largus *Comp.* 122.

\(^{188}\) The Ebers papyrus, for example, a scroll which was composed about 1500 BCE, contains 879 recipes and highlights various prescriptions involving plant extracts, animal organs and minerals. Only twelve of these prescriptions, however, are explicitly magical. See David (2004) 140-41. From Assyria we have 660 clay tablets (*ca.* 1900-400 BCE) that showcase the healing potential of about 1000 medicinal plants and remedies – including those that are reputed to exorcise demons. It is not surprising then that Theophratus, in his nine-volume *Inquiry into Plants*, included references not only to plants native to Greece but also those that came from the Middle East. Also worth noting is the fact that certain types of divination – those involving the entrails and livers of birds – are common to both Greece and the Near East. The fact that the Greek terms concerning different parts of the liver correspond to those of the Akkadian terms suggests that there was indeed a direct link between the two traditions. See Burkert (1992) 46-51.

\(^{189}\) Homer *Od.* 4. 220-32.
instruments and other goods may have easily made their way into the Greek-speaking world and beyond, the same cannot be said of other less concrete imports; “trading contacts alone cannot prove the exchange of anything in the realm of ideas: complex ideas and theories are, after all, transferred considerably less easily than pots and luxury goods.”

In any case, what we do know is that by the time of the first century BCE there was a body of folk medicine that was sufficiently rooted in the Italian tradition to at least be perceived by people such as Pliny to be indigenous. Whatever the case may have been, it is worth stressing that there is little to differentiate the animal lore of the Magi from those concoctions that may have belonged to the folk wisdom of early Italy. Pliny is obliged to defend his decision to include in his work all such remedies – regardless of what tradition they are believed to have heralded from. Because his foremost desire is to improve the human condition and provide an aid for the maintenance of human welfare, he must record things “revolting to speak of”, and run the risk of causing disgust among his readership.

Judging from the HN, the body of knowledge concerning animal simples that the Magi possessed was extensive – possibly even greater than their knowledge of plant-lore. Indeed, almost every conceivable animal can be found within the context of their recipes and prescriptions: everything from common domestic (cats and dogs) and farm (goats, pigs and cows) animals, to various species of birds (such as the horned owl and swallow), mammals (lions, gazelles, wild boars), sea creatures (crabs and sea urchins) and reptiles (frogs, lizards, snakes, and salamanders), to the more poignantly “magical” scarab beetle and bat. And it is no wonder that Pliny cautioned his readers regarding the unappealing nature of the remedies that were to be found among his recommendations. Among those proposed by the Magi are such

190 Thomas (2004) 175, 176.
191 HN 29. 61; 28. 1-2.
delectables as a dried lizard’s liver, the blood of a bat, the brain of a camel “dried and taken in vinegar”, the dried dung of a wild boar “sprinkled in a draught of wine”, the gall of a sacrificed she-goat, the testicles of a rabbit or a boar, the kidneys of a hare “to be swallowed raw”, and the heart of a black jackass taken upon bread. With such a colourful hodgepodge of various animal parts, it is no wonder that there developed in the western tradition such a grotesque picture of the practitioner of magic: Horace’s Canidia, the three witches of MacBeth, the hoary old hag found in the tales of the Grimm Brothers: we find their forebears all right here in the pages of Pliny’s HN.

Animal parts such as these were employed in a myriad of different ways by the Magi. A typical example of one of their recipes involves the following procedure. The dung of a cow is taken and heated in some leaves over a bed of hot embers. It is then mixed with the faeces of a goat, taken hot into the hollow of the hand, and placed in a cloth that has been soaked in oil.

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201 J. Z. Smith (1995) 24, has suggested that some of the animal materia found in the PGM may in fact be code names for plants. His suggestion is based upon a section of the PGM where a variety of animal parts are revealed to have a secret herbal counterpart. The author of the text claims that the Egyptian scribes used such a system of code names so as to prevent the ignorant masses from learning and using the powerful herbal remedies. PGM 12. 401-44. In light of such a possibility, it is interesting that we find Dioscorides quoting the Magi as sources of “special” names of plants. Allegro (1970) 33. In light of the fact that there appears to be – at least in a few cases – a common source to which Pliny’s sources and the PGM can be traced (see above), it may have been that some of Pliny’s animal materia were also, at one point, code names for plants and herbs. This would, of course, explain their abstruse character.

202 The frequency with which dung and urine appear in Pliny’s prescriptions is notable. Jones suggested that because of the “loathsome character” of such ingredients, they may have been aimed at expelling the demons which were thought to be the cause of the disease. Alternatively, they may have been thought to possess a concentrated degree of life-essence and thus to be particularly instrumental in restoring one to his or her optimum state of health. W. H. S. Jones (1957) 462. See also W. B. McDaniel (1944) 77-81. Roman folk medicine was certainly not the only strain of ancient medicine that recommended such substances: their use can also be found in Babylonian, Egyptian, Syrian, Greek and European herbals. Budge (1928) 27. It is also interesting to observe that the original list of ingredients for the popular hand cream “Curel” included pig’s urine.
This, in turn, is placed upon the ailing part of the body (in this case the abdomen) until "the warmth is thought to have reached the loins." When this is accomplished, the hand that administered the poultice is rubbed with pounded leek, and the loins with a concoction of dung and honey. 203 Such a prescription is claimed by the Magi to relieve sciatica. An equally abstruse recommendation involves taking a tortoise and laying it upon its back, chopping off its head with a bronze knife, and letting the blood drain into an earthenware pot. According to the Magi, blood that has been procured in this way may be used to cure the skin condition *erysipelas* and rid oneself of warts. 204

Often in such Magian recipes, it is not the entire animal that is to be used in some concoction, but merely a small part of it – for example, the claw of an owl, the tooth of a live mole, the liver of a mouse, the stones from the gizzard of young swallows, or the eyes of a crab. 205 Occasionally such parts are reduced to ashes and taken with liquids, as in the case of a burnt viper's skin, taken to improve one's vision. 206 If a patient has a toothache, the Magi recommend a prescription of the ashes of the burnt head of a mad dog, which are to be combined with the "oil of Cyprus" and drained into the ear nearest the troublesome tooth. 207 For pains in the tendons there are the ashes of a burned owl's head taken in honeyed wine with lily root. 208 In other recommendations, the part of the animal needs only to touch the injured or diseased part of the body, and there are several instances where the Magi suggest that the animal part be used as

204 *HN* 32. 41.
205 *HN* 28. 229; 29. 59; 30. 20, 91; 32. 115-16.
206 *HN* 32. 73.
207 *HN* 30. 21.
208 *HN* 30. 110. See also 28. 96, 215; 32. 55, 72.
an amulet, hung around the neck or attached either to the arm or some other afflicted part of the body. 209

Also factoring into the Magi’s animal lore were certain animals held in high esteem and regarded as having a certain numinous power about them. These included the tick, which fascinated the Magi with its purported capacity, having no physical outlet in its body, to live a maximum of seven days, 210 the chameleon, upon which Democritus wrote extensively, 211 and the mole, the eating of whose heart, while “fresh and still beating”, could confer upon one the powers of prophecy and divination. 212 Among these special animals was also the hyena, 213 an animal, says Pliny, for which the Magi had great admiration, even attributing to it “magical skill (magicas artes) and power (vis).” 214 Judging from Pliny’s extensive commentary upon this animal, it seems that the Magi treated it to a complete autopsy, attributing virtually every inch of it with some special ability to relieve human suffering and affliction. The special power inherent in the hyena’s physical vessel could only be harnessed and utilised, however, if it were captured when the moon was passing through the constellation of Gemini – and killed without the loss of a single hair. 215 Such a feat would yield cures for headaches, toothache, ophthalmia, cataracts, pains in the loins, quartan fevers, foul breath, colic, dysentery, infertility, and any of the other “dangerous diseases” of the day. 216 Moreover, it was not only for the relief of physical suffering that the parts of the hyena could be employed; other social and psychological inconveniences

209 For animal parts used as amulets, see HN 28. 95 and 98 (teeth of an hyena); 28. 102 (spinal marrow of an hyena); 28. 229 (right eye of a wolf); 28. 229 (excrement of a cat and claw of an owl); 29. 66 (parts of a “basilisk”); 30. 91 (tale of a python); 30. 100 (beetles and tale of a scorpion); 30. 101 (caterpillar); 30. 102 (slug); 30. 102 (spotted lizard and snails); 30. 83 (tick from the left ear of a dog). On magical amulets, see Tavenner, 76-113.
210 HN 30. 82-83.
211 See HN 28. 112-18.
212 HN 30. 19-20.
213 The hyena is a native of North Africa, but because it would have been brought to Rome for participation in forms of entertainment such as gladiatorial shows, Pliny would probably have been familiar with it.
214 HN 28. 92. The word vis is here used in the sense of “mana”.
215 HN 28. 94.
could also be redressed. The extreme end of the animal’s intestine, for example, if it were worn upon a person as an amulet, would, according to the Magi, prevail “against the injustices of leaders and potentates”, and bring about a positive outcome in trials and law suits. 217 To ward off midnight hauntings and the fear of ghosts and demons, one could tie one of the animal’s teeth to a thread and use it as a protective amulet, 218 and for barrenness brought on by sorceries, a woman could concoct a brew which consisted of its kidney combined with wine and frankincense. 219 Even the fraudulent tricks of the magicians could be rendered ineffective by this most wondrous of animals: if its blood were taken and smeared upon every doorpost, the magicians would be rendered incapable of engaging in their practices, being unable to “call down the gods or speak with them, whether they try lamps, bowl, water, globe, or any other means.” 220 For those undergoing sexual and romantic crises, having the corpse of a dead hyena hanging about could also be of benefit: hairs from its muzzle acted as a love charm if applied to a woman’s lips, 221 and the anus, if worn on the left arm as an amulet, was said by the Magi to be so potent an aphrodisiac that “if a man but espies a woman, she at once follows him.” 222 A hyena’s genitals could also be taken in honey in order to stimulate one’s “desire for their own sex”, 223 and hairs of its anus, reduced to ashes, mixed with oil, and made into an ointment, could be used on a man suffering from a case of “shocking effeminacy”, rendering him at once of “modest character” and “strictest morality.” 224

216 See HN 28. 94-106.
217 HN 28. 106.
218 HN 28. 98.
219 HN 28. 102.
220 HN 28. 104.
221 HN 28. 102.
222 HN 28. 106.
223 HN 28. 99.
224 HN 28. 106.
Though the majority of the Magi’s recommendations are in fact medicinal in character, the hyena is not the only animal from whose parts marvels and wonders may be wrought – or from which psychological grievances could be tended. The blood of the fabulous dragon called the basilisk, for example, sometimes referred to, Pliny tells us, as “Saturn’s blood”, can be used to aid one in requests not only to potentates, but even to the gods. Pliny also makes the following points about this enigmatic substance:

The basilisk, which puts to flight even the very serpents, killing them sometimes by its smell, is said to be fatal to a man if only it looks at him. Its blood the Magi praise to the skies, telling how it thickens as does pitch, and resembles pitch in color, but becomes a brighter red than cinnabar when diluted. They claim that by it petitions to potentates, and even prayers to the gods, are made successful; that it provides cures for disease and amulets against sorcery. 225

Other animal remedies are equally fantastic. For example, lion fat – especially that found between the eyes “where no fat can be” – ensures, when it is rubbed upon a man, his popularity with kings and commoners alike. 226 When combined with rose oil, it protects against treachery and the attacks of wild beasts. 227 Another special concoction, consisting of the tail and head of the “dragon”, 228 the hair from the forehead and marrow of a lion, the foam of a victorious racehorse, and the claw of a dog, “all attached in deer hide with deer sinew and gazelle sinew plaited alternately,” promises its wearer invincibility. 229 The ointment of the dragon’s eyes, “dried and beaten up with honey,” frees the person who is rubbed with it from his fear of ghosts and evil spirits, and its heart, worn as an amulet wrapped in gazelle skin, ensures a winning case

225 HN 29. 66: According to Allegro, the word “basilisk” (basiliskos) actually means “womb-blood” and is therefore used here as a code word for menstrual blood. Allegro also notes that the alternative name “Saturn’s blood” is likewise associated with an old Sumerian word for “womb”. Here Pliny also notes that “Saturn’s blood” was the same color and consistency as pitch, a substance which the ancients saw as being the metaphorical equivalent of menstrual blood. See Allegro (1970) 65 and 246-247, n. 15, 16. On the various folk traditions in Pliny that portray menstrual blood and other substances associated with the female body as having certain supernatural and magical powers, see Richlin (1997).

226 HN 28. 89.

227 HN 28. 90.

228 Draco is probably a reference to the python.

229 HN 28. 68.
in court.  

For those who were plagued by night terrors and the fear of spirits and demons (evidently a common anxiety in the ancient world, given the number of recommendations that are given for it), there was also another recommendation: that the eyes, gall, and intestines of a serpent be “boiled in wine and oil, cooled by night in open air, and used as an embrocation night and morning.”  

For protection against the poisons and charms of sorcerers there was a starfish, smeared with the blood of a fox, and fastened to the top of a door with a bronze nail, and the blood and genitals of a black male dog, the former of which was to be sprinkled over the inner walls of one’s home, and the latter buried under the threshold of the front door.  

In the realm of love, there were also several animal parts that were recommended as aphrodisiacs and antaphrodisiacs: the ash of a spotted lizard wrapped in a linen cloth, the “foam of an ass after copulation”, collected in a red cloth and enclosed in silver, or a lizard which had drowned in a man’s urine. The Magi also claimed that a man could ensure his wife’s fidelity by engaging in the following procedure: by taking a reed and impaling a frog from head to toe, and then “planting a shoot in his wife’s menstrual discharge.” If it is, alas, too late to prevent her adulterous adventures and she has already taken a lover, all is not lost: if she is given to drink the urine of a he-goat (accompanied by the spikenard plant to disguise the repugnant taste) she will develop an aversion to him and, if rubbed with the blood of a tick picked off a black wild bull, she will become uninterested in sexual intercourse (presumably with the lover rather than with the husband).  

And if he wishes to know her innermost secrets, he

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230 HN 28. 67.  
231 HN 30. 84.  
232 HN 32. 44.  
233 HN 30. 82. Cf. 25. 115; 32. 23.  
234 HN 30. 143.  
235 HN 28. 262.  
236 HN 30. 141.  
237 HN 32. 49-50  
238 HN 28. 256.
can take the heart of a horned owl and, while she is sleeping, place it at her left breast: this will make her reveal all her private matters. 239 If the extracted tongue of a living frog is placed over her heart, she will even answer - while sleeping - any question that he asks her. 240

As was the case with the plucking and administering of plants and herbs, a certain amount of ceremony and ritual is associated with the Magi’s recommendations concerning animal simples. In attempting to rid oneself of a painful spleen, for example, they suggested that the spleen of a calf be obtained, adding that it is important that it be bought at the price requested, without any haggling. The spleen is then to be cut in half and attached to each side of the patient’s tunic. As he puts his tunic on, each half of the spleen should be allowed to fall to his feet, at which point he is to pick them up and put them in the shade to dry. “At the same time as this happens, the diseased spleen of the patient is said to shrink, and he himself to be freed from his complaint.” 241 For the same ailment, the spleen of a sheep may also be used. First it must be placed over the patient’s spleen by an attendant who asserts aloud that he is administering a cure for the infection. Then, said the Magi, it is to be plastered into the bedroom wall and sealed with a ring, this being accompanied by a charm dictated no less than twenty-seven times. 242

There are also many other procedures of a ceremonial nature that are associated with the prescriptions of the Magi. For the protection of infants against diseases, particularly epilepsy, the brains of a female goat should be passed through a golden ring and then administered “drop by drop” to the baby before it is given any milk. 243 To cure urinary incontinence, it was recommended that the patient, after having consumed the genitals of a boar soaked in sweet wine, urinate in a dog’s bed while repeating the formula: “That I may not urinate like a dog in its

239 HN 29. 81-82.
240 HN 32. 49.
241 HN 28. 201.
242 HN 30. 51.
In treating sciatica, the Magi recommended that an earthworm be placed upon a broken wooden dish that had been repaired with an iron band. The dish should then be filled with water, the sodden earthworm put back in the place where it was dug up, and the remaining water drunk by the ailing patient. Tertian fevers may be treated by attaching as an amulet – before sunrise – the eyes of a river crab which had been released, albeit maimed and blinded, back into the water, and epilepsy with the flesh of a goat which had been roasted upon a funeral pyre and the gall of a bull which had not been allowed to touch the earth. The salted liver of a cat, killed under the waning moon, could be taken with wine for quartan fevers, and a bat which had been carried three times around the house and then hung upside-down in a window could be used as a talisman – presumably to ward off evil.

243 HN 28. 259.  
244 HN 28. 215.  
245 HN 30. 54.  
246 HN 32. 115.  
247 HN 28. 226.  
248 HN 28. 229.  
249 HN 29. 82-83.
6. Ritual and Sympathy: Decoding the Lore of the Magi

As Jesper Sorensen has noted in his illuminating study of magic from a cognitive perspective, “the ritualisation of action is a universally recognized mode of interacting with agencies believed to influence aspects of life beyond the control of the individual or group.” 250 To the modern observer, as well as to many of the cultural anthropologists who have examined the phenomenon of magic within its various socio-cultural contexts, it is the ritual and formulae that truly render such prescriptions as those associated with the Magi “magical”. However, rituals are not based on the system of Newtonian-Cartesian logic with which we in the modern (western) world are so familiar and ultimately dependent upon. They are rather dictated by “pre-specified symbolic relations and their ability to express fundamental values, orientations and representations of a society through this symbolic system.” 251

Because ancient and traditional cultures were more deeply attuned to such symbolic systems, as well as the “laws” upon which these “symbolic relations” were inherently based, prescriptions such as those associated with the Magi may not, in fact, have been viewed as being innately “magical” in the way that we might think of them. Indeed, Stanley Tambiah, a contemporary anthropologist whose reflections upon the magical mentality have garnered much attention, posits the existence of two modes of thought and therefore two different – but complementary - ways of approaching the world. One such approach is the familiar mode that is dictated by causality (the so-called normal cause-and-effect relationships upon which mundane experience is based) and based upon scientific reasoning. The other, which Tambiah claims is universally present within all human societies, is represented by what he refers to as “analogical reasoning” and expressed through “performativity”, which is constituted by ritual actions that

serve to build a bridge between magical actions and the natural referents toward which they are
directed. Magic, rooted as it is in analogical reasoning and “conventional intersubjective
understanding”, therefore has the potential to go beyond science, based as it is on “instrumental
action” and the “fragmentation of phenomena”, and to offer human beings the creative
possibilities that the causal mode of thinking cannot. In earlier studies that examined issues
associated with magic, such as those of Frazer and Tylor, the magical mode of thinking was
regarded as a primitive – and by extension inferior – form of scientific reasoning that stood as
testimony to indigenous and traditional cultures’ underdeveloped and deficient cognitive
faculties. In light of more recent studies, however (such as those of Tambiah), it has been
recognized that such an approach cannot be supported by the evidence. For example, modern
 technological societies steeped in scientific reasoning still bear the vestiges of a rich heritage of
magical thinking (and indeed some scholars have even argued that magical thinking is actually
on the rise in these societies). Moreover, it has also been noted that in those cultures, such as
that of the Azande, whose socio-cultural bedrock is based upon a magical worldview, there
generally exists a firm knowledge of the way in which normal cause-and-effect relationships
operate and a clear distinction is made between scientific and analogical reasoning.

Returning to Pliny, we find that he was standing at the juncture between these two
modes of thought. With all the characteristic ambiguity of his stance, we find that he was far
from certain as to what to make of the various magically-orientated practices that were evidently
so prevalent during his day. Though he refused to present in his writings a common incantation

\[252\] Tambiah (1990) 109. Cf. Sorensen (2007) who also takes a pragmatic and performative stance but argues that
magic is not a system of thought but rather a “type of action and a mode of understanding action.” It is “a goal-
directed mode of action based on an internal standard of rationality” (13).

\[253\] See, for example, the collection of essays in Meyer and Pels (2003).
employed by his fellow Romans to avert hailstorms, implying that it would have been beneath his intellectual dignity and educational status to do so, there are in fact several instances where he does insert, and without comment or apology, similar incantations. Moreover, regarding the powers inherent in ritual, he makes the revealing comment that “it takes a bold man to deny that Nature obeys the behests of ritual, and an equally dull man to deny that ritual has beneficent powers.” Later, in a more formal discussion concerning the power (vis) of ritual and formulated incantations (incantamenta carminum), he proclaims that “as individuals... all our wisest men reject belief in them, although as a body the public at all times believes in them unconsciously.” In light of his later observation that there is “nobody who does not fear to be spell-bound by imprecations (deprecationes),” such a statement would appear to have some truth to it. In fact, judging from Pliny’s discussion, the widespread belief in the power of ritual and formulaic phrases was still very prevalent indeed. When there are many, for example, who believe that the reciting of a charm can be used to crush pottery, kill a serpent, or even reverse the consequences of a magical spell, it is no wonder that the elder Cato had had no qualms about including in his De Agricultura a charm for the comparatively moderate purpose of mending broken bones. And such belief was not only characteristic of the private sphere; it was also, being a significant aspect of the religious life of Rome, wholly sanctioned by the civic community. It was widely believed, for example, that a sacrifice not accompanied by an

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254 HN 27. 267. Cf. 28. 29. “We certainly still have formulas to charm away hail, various diseases and burns, some actually tested by experience (quaedam etiam experita), but I am very shy of quoting them, because of the widely different feelings they arouse (in tanta animorum varietate). Wherefore everyone must form his own opinion about them as he pleases.”

255 See, for example, HN 27. 131. On the inclusion of the incantation presented here, see J. H. Phillips (1981).

256 HN 2. 141.


258 HN 28. 19.

259 HN 28. 19-20. People will also, we are told, write these charms upon their walls in hopes of preventing fire.

appropriate prayer was a sacrifice done in vain, and concerted efforts were still made by the
magistrates and their attendants to ensure that the words of the formulaic prayers were exactly
correct, and that the attending rituals suitable. Given such considerations, Pliny concludes that
there is indeed “power in certain ritual formulas (carmina),” and that the gods do in fact hear
such prayers and are moved by their words and their intent.

What we find in Pliny’s seemingly ambiguous stance is symptomatic of a much greater
tension that was becoming particularly prevalent during the early imperial period. Pliny, as an
educated and pragmatic member of the elite who is drawing a significant component of his
information from the realm of the folk sector, is straddling two symbolic systems which, in
certain sectors of society, were becoming increasingly divorced from one another – one of which
was rooted in the “mythopoetic” or “analogical” worldview, to use Tambiah’s terminology, and
the other of which was rooted in the “rationalistic” or “causal” worldview. This tension is
particularly immanent in the HN – in Pliny’s baffled stance, in his constant waffling back and
forth between the two worldviews, in his inability to pledge allegiance to one symbolic system
alone, and in the way in which he at one moment unconsciously ascribes to an analogical
perception of the world while in the next ardently condemning it. Pliny has often been criticised
for his lack of a coherent approach and his mismatched assemblage of contradictory facts, but the
inherently emotional and personal tenor with which he often engages his material speaks to the
fact that this was a conceptual battle in which Pliny was only but one participant. The
undercurrent of tension that plays itself out in the ebb and flow of Pliny’s expanding and
contracting allegiance to the different symbolic systems is an impulse that courses its way

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261 *HN* 28. 11-12.
262 *HN* 28. 13. See also *HN* 28. 14. “Many indeed assure us that by words the destinies and omens of mighty events
are changed.”

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through the entire age – and which, not surprisingly, is most easily detected in the output of the educated elite.

In any case, what is clear is that the various ritualistic activities that accompanied the Magi’s remedies were originally designed and included with the belief that they would either increase or ensure the efficacy of those natural ingredients that were included in their recipes. There was not only “power” (vis) in the plants, herbs and remedies themselves, but also in the words, actions and recitations of the practitioner. 264 As G. Van der Leeuw put it, “magical prayer owes its powerfulness to precise recitation, to rhythmical sequence, to the utterance of the name together with other factors.” 265 There was a sense that to get hold of the name of a thing was to command a certain power over it – to tap into its creative force and to unleash its innate potential. Language was therefore a means by which human beings could exercise a degree of power and control over their environment.266

We get the sense from the ancient sources that the universe was perceived as a living, dynamic system of energy and power, and that it was through symbol, act and word that the magician was able to harness this power and use it for his intended purpose. As Plutarch put it, “men make use of consecrated symbols that are obscure... in guiding intelligence toward things Divine.”267 The observation here that many of the “symbols” (symbola, which might include animals, plants, herbs, stones, images, talismans, charakteres, or sacred letters)268 seemed obscure to the observer is of interest: like the age-old prayers and rituals that the Roman

263 Vis could conceivably be understood as the ancient equivalent of mana, the Polynesian term (introduced to the English-speaking world in 1892 by John H. King) used for the impersonal force inherent and at work in the universe.
264 For additional examples of rituals intended to accompany the gathering of herbs and plants see PGM IV 286-95 and 2967-75.
266 See Tambiah (1985) 30-32. See also Malinowski (1965) passim and Austin (1962).
267 Plutarch, De Is. et Os. 78.
magistrates continued to perform generation after generation – prayers and rituals which had been products of the old mythopoetic paradigm and thus employed from time immemorial - the incantamenta and ritualistic actions included in the recipes of the Magi (such as spitting three times, repeating certain formulae, or plucking herbs with the left hand at a particular time of the day, month or year) had probably, for the most part, lost much of their original meaning. They continued to be performed, however, long after their original significance had been lost, because the people of Pliny’s day – hovering as they were between the “analogical” and the “causal” worldviews – were still willing to entertain the possibility that the power and efficacy of magical formulae did not depend upon the performer’s understanding of the factors involved; these lay, rather, in the formula or ritual itself. As Marcel Mauss noted, “a magician does nothing, or almost nothing, but makes everyone believe that he is doing everything, and all the more so since he puts to work collective forces and ideas to help the individual imagination in its belief.”

The magician’s power, in other words, is not an inherent quality located within his own person (in the way that Evans-Pritchard’s Azande believed the witch’s power to be an immanent part of his or her personhood, for example); it is located, rather, outside the magician, within the repository or container that is the ritual or symbol. As Claude Levi-Strauss observed, by engaging in the ritual dynamic of his performance, the magician is making “additions to the objective order of the universe,” and as such “filling in links in a chain of causation between events that are distant from one another in space or in time.”

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269 Mauss, 142. See also Scarborough (1969) 20. The fact that the original experience out of which such ritual gestures evolved has been lost, does not, however, mean that such actions had always lacked some innate rationale. On the contrary, as Norbeck stressed, “the foundations of magical practice are thus due to experiences actually lived through, from which man received the revelation of power, or magical rules, to attain desired ends. Passed on to other members of society, these formulas became stripped of the emotions which surrounded them at their birth and are transformed into the prosaic and essentially emotionless acts which characterize most of magic.” Norbeck (1961) 47.

therefore derived from his knowledge of the forms, which are in and of themselves a kind of power.

The individual who chose to practice magic in Pliny’s day may or may not have known why it was that he engaged in the ritual actions and ceremonial rites that he found in the prescriptions of his magical books or that had been passed down to him orally; we may, however, glimpse the rationale underlying such prescriptions by examining other magical traditions, both ancient and modern. A recently published work by C. L. Zalewski on magic and herbal lore, for example, sheds some light upon the rationale that may have informed the otherwise mysterious harvesting techniques recommended by Pliny’s authorities. Zalewski tells us, for example, that certain herbs are gathered at certain times because each herb has its own “special time” – a time of the day or year when its life force is at its most vital and dynamic. For many herbs, this time would be spring – a time often recommended by Pliny for the gathering of plants and herbs. The frequent recommendation that certain plants be picked at sunrise may have been due to the fact that if they were cut before the sun had come up when they were still wet with dew, they would not have dried well, but if cut at noon, “when the sun has made the leaves flag”, they would by that time have been lacking in the full power of their life force. The dawn is therefore deemed the optimum time to harvest certain plants and herbs because it is thought to be both a practical and a particularly potent time for the plant (one when “the sap has risen to its heights and is excreted.”)

In addition, we find in Pliny that there was a kind of mystical power attributed to dew, which was in turn connected to the cosmological power of certain planets. Venus, as the morning

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271 Zalewski (1990)
272 See, for example, *HN* 25. 144f. On gathering the Anagallis: “Some instruct the digger to say nothing until they have saluted it before sunrise, and then to gather it and extract the juice, for so they say its efficacy is at its greatest.”
273 Ibid., 8, 25, 26.
and the evening star, served as "the deputy of the moon" and was also referred to as Isis, "Mother of the Gods." The cosmological power of Venus, proclaims Pliny, is "the cause of the birth of all upon earth" and when it rises it is responsible for scattering a "genital dew (genitali rore) with which it not only fills the conceptive organs of the earth but also stimulates those of all animals." Picking a dew-laden plant in the early hours of the morning would therefore ensure that the plant was still bathed in the life-giving energies of Venus, and therefore at the very peak of its potency. Pliny therefore makes the passing comment that the juice of the leaves of the white mandrake plant are "deadly" when they have been touched with dew and retain their harmful properties "even when kept in brine." He also notes that medicamenta are produced after the rising of the principal planets, and after the dew has been warmed (but presumably not dried) by the sun. These circumstances yield "heavenly gifts for the eyes, ulcers and internal organs." Pliny also explicitly notes that the moon, with its saturating night energies, was thought, like Venus, to have a profound affect not only on plants but also on humans. Its cycle of waxing and waning, which was perceived to have an amplifying and diminishing effect upon all those things which resided on the earth, controlled not only the blood of human beings (particularly menses) but also the sap of plants. Therefore, a plant gathered at the time of the full moon, at the peak of its potency and saturated with powerful lunar energies, would have

274 HN 2. 37-38: huius natura cuncta generantur in terris; namque in alterutro exorto genitali rore conspergens non terrae modo conceptus inplet, verum animantium quoque omnium stimulat.

275 HN 25. 150.

276 HN 11.37. "And if this substance is kept when the dog-star is rising, and if, as often happens, the rise of Venus or Jupiter or Mercury falls on the same day, its sweetness and potency for recalling mortals' ills from death is equal to that of the Nectar of the gods."

277 HN 2. 221: "...the moon is rightly believed to be the star of the breath, and that it is this star that saturates the earth and fills bodies by its approach and empties them by its departure; and that consequently shells increase in size as the moon waxes, and that its breath is specially felt by bloodless creatures, but also the blood even of human beings increases and diminishes with its light; and also that leaves and herbage...are sensitive to it, the same force penetrating into all things."
been a plant capable of many marvellous healing wonders. 278 Pliny makes no objection to such beliefs (and indeed, in some cases, he even affirms them) so we can therefore assume that there existed in his day a belief that the fruits of the earth, and the various healing benefits that these fruits were capable of providing, were intimately connected to the energies of the greater cosmos, particularly as they were manifested in and transmitted to the earth by the principal planetary bodies. 279

There are also several instances in the Magi’s prescriptions where it is recommended that a circle be drawn around certain plants. 280 The idea behind such an action is that it will have a purifying effect, cleansing the plant’s immediate vicinity of any potentially harmful elements or negative energies. 281 It may also have been thought to serve as a way of protecting the herb-gatherer from the powerful (and therefore potentially dangerous) energies of the plant itself. 282 Likewise, the exhortations not to allow the plant to touch the ground, or to hold the plant high above one’s head after having plucked it, may have been due to a belief that the vital energies of the plant (those which are ultimately responsible for its healing and magical effects) may drain back into the earth if it touches the ground, the plant thereby being depleted of its optimum healing power. In the same way that the earth is thought to act as a conductor of the plant’s vital

278 See HN 18. 321ff. where Pliny tells us that Virgil, drawing from the lore of Democritus, recommended that certain activities (such as harvesting plants and trees) be done in conjunction with particular phases of the moon. The fact that Democritus is associated with such astrological wisdom is of interest, because, as was discussed above, it was he who was among those Greek philosophers who were most intimately associated with the Magi.
279 That some of the Magi’s healing prescriptions were connected with such “star wisdom” is not surprising; many of the ancient sources suggest that the Eastern priest-magicians were unrivalled in terms of their knowledge of astronomy and the ways in which the planets were interlinked with and ultimately effected the earth. This was accomplished through a “perfect sympathy” that united all the parts of the universe and wed the microcosm to the macrocosm. See Philo De Abrahamo 68-71 (on the star wisdom of the Chaldeans); Diodorus Siculus 2. 28: 29-31 (also on the Chaldeans); and Proclus In R. 2 [296E3] (on the astrological books of Zoroaster, who was widely regarded as being the progenitor of the Magi).
280 For example, HN 25. 50: “First a circle is drawn round it with a sword; then the man who is going to cut it looks to the East with a prayer that the gods will grant him permission to do so.” See also Pseudo-Dioscorides 4. 60 where the instructions for cutting the mandrake plant include drawing three circles around it with a sword (while facing west) and then dancing around the plant while proclaiming everything possible about the “mysteries of love.”
energy, so too is the human body—hence the orders in Pliny’s prescriptions not to touch the plant or herb with one’s bare hands. 283

Other rites of a ceremonial nature which appear in the Magi’s recipes include the recommendation that an offering (perhaps of honey or grain) be made to the earth from which the herb has been extracted, and that a statement of intent (i.e., a declaration of how the plant is to be employed by the gatherer) 284 be made before the plant is plucked. The first of these is, according to Zalewski, required as a kind of sacrifice given “to appease and deter the elementals from depleting the vital force of the pulled plant”. Part of the ancient worldview involved the notion that “to take any of the fruits of the earth necessitated some measure of compensation or sacrifice to the god.” 285 Ideally, such a payment was to be “at least qualitatively equivalent to the gift received”; thus it was always the first fruits of the harvest and the first-born of animals that were regarded as being most suitable. 286 But other natural products could also serve as compensation. Thus Pliny notes that when the “Asclepion” plant was pulled up from the earth, “it is a pious duty to fill in the hole with various cereals as an atonement to the earth.” 287 As far as offering a statement of intent, this rite is meant to serve as a “warning” for the plant, one which allows it a chance to “close off vital circuits in its stem and activate others”, thus isolating some of its vital energies in those parts of it which will be plucked, and protecting its main body

282 Allegro (1970) 78.
283 Zalewski (1990) 25. Josephus claims that it was actually fatal to touch the mandrake plant and that if one wanted to seize it then one had to bring along “the thing itself, the root, hanging from one’s head.” (BJ 7. 181) Another magical plant was believed to be so deadly that anyone who uprooted it would promptly die. Thus certain ingenious techniques were invented to wrest it from the earth—such as tying a dog to the plant and then calling the animal forth so that it would uproot the plant without the herb-digger having to touch it. See Josephus BJ 7. 185. See also Aelian (VH 9.32) where a bird is tied to the plant “henbane” so as to serve the same purpose. According to Theophratus (Hist pl. 9. 8. 6), “black hellebore”, whose toxins could be absorbed through the skin, was said to be so potent that one could become intoxicated if one tarried too long in its gathering.
284 See, for example, HN 21. 176: “the Magi recommend... gathering it with the left hand without looking back, while saying for whose sake it is being gathered.”
285 Sometimes the permission of the god also had to be acquired, as was the case with cinnamon. HN 12. 89f. Cf. Theophrastus Hist. pl. 9. 5. 2; Herodotus Hist. 3. 111.
from the complete depletion of its vital energy.\textsuperscript{288} As Evans-Pritchard put it, the intent must be 
made clear "because the medicines have a commission to carry out and they must know exactly 
what the commission is." Only then will they "do as they are bid."\textsuperscript{289}

Also part of the rationale behind many of the Magi's remedies – not to mention many of 
those remedies that appear in the \textit{HN} that are not in any way linked with the Magi – is a principle 
that the Greeks called \textit{sympathia} (Latin, \textit{concordia}). The idea of \textit{sympathia} may be summed up 
in the following statement: "like produces like; the part represents the whole; the opposite acts 
on its opposite."\textsuperscript{290} A. J. Festugiere perceived it in more general terms, as something akin to 
"action and reaction in the universe,"\textsuperscript{291} and Pliny himself recognised and referred to such a 
principle,\textsuperscript{292} stating that it had originated with the Greeks,\textsuperscript{293} and that the emergence of medicine 
was intimately associated with its development.\textsuperscript{294} He even endeavoured to present something of 
a theoretical discussion upon it, but we find that his understanding of it as a philosophical 
principle was elementary at best. Pliny was, after all, no philosopher. He perceives it as "Nature 
at war or at peace with herself along with the hatreds and friendships of things deaf and dumb," 
and gives as examples such phenomena as water putting out fire, the moon causing an eclipse of 
the sun, the magnet attracting iron, or the belief that the diamond, "unbreakable by any other 
force" is broken by a goat's blood.\textsuperscript{295}

\textsuperscript{287} \textit{HN} 25. 30-31: \textit{hac evolsa scrobam repleri vario genere frugum religio est ac terrae piamentum.} 
\textsuperscript{288} Zalewski (1990) 32. 
\textsuperscript{289} Evans-Pritchard (1976) 122. 
\textsuperscript{290} Mauss, 98. 
\textsuperscript{291} Festugiere (1944-54) vol. 1, p. 76, 89. 
\textsuperscript{292} \textit{HN} 20. 1-2; 24. 1; 28. 147; 32. 25; 37. 59. Pliny also uses the expression \textit{concordia rerum aut discordia} to refer 
to the principle of sympathy. See \textit{HN} 24. 1; 29. 61. 
\textsuperscript{293} \textit{HN} 20. 1. 
\textsuperscript{294} \textit{HN} 24. 5; 29. 61. 
\textsuperscript{295} \textit{HN} 20. 1-2. We are reminded of Empedocles' theory of "Love and Strife." See Empedocles Frr. 27 and 31 
(Simplicius in \textit{Phys.} 1183, 28); Fr 35 (Simplicius \textit{de caelo} 529 I).
The concept of sympathy, made famous by James Frazer in *The Golden Bough,* can be found in both Greek folk medicine and in the Hippocratic tradition. Later the Greek natural philosophers reflected upon it as a philosophical principle. The concept was incumbent upon the idea that there is an underlying unity inherent in the cosmos – which serves as a bridge between the noetic and the material worlds, and that all things of the natural order are united by a kind of *implicate order* - an invisible network or cosmic web of mutual relations which are constantly interacting and influencing one another. Interestingly, Philo of Alexandria noted that the “Chaldeans” (i.e., eastern sages whose reputation may have been influenced by legends concerning the Magi) seemed to have a particularly eloquent understanding of *sympathia* as a unifying power that permeated the cosmos:

The Chaldeans appear beyond all other men to have devoted themselves to the study of astronomy... adapting things on earth to things sublime, and also adapting things of heaven to things on earth, and like people, who availing themselves of the principles of music, exhibit a most perfect symphony as existing in the universe by the common union and sympathy of the parts for another, which though separated as to place, are not disunited in regard to kindred.

The idea of sympathy, in its most sophisticated incarnation, is therefore based upon the notion of an impersonal divine power, an “expanding energy that penetrates the different parts of the

296 Frazer (1911-15) See esp. vol. I, pp. 52-219 for a general discussion of sympathy as it appears in many cultures and traditions throughout the world. For examples of sympathetic magic in medicine, see vol. I, pp. 78-84. See also Evans-Pritchard (1937) 449, 450, 483-84, 485-87, and Tylor (1958) 112-59. A more sophisticated rendering of the concept is Tambiah’s notion of “analogue reasoning.” See Tambiah (1985) passim.

297 As an actual concept, it may have been recognised in the fourth century BCE, but it was not formulated in philosophical terms until the Stoic thinker Posidonius of Apamea (ca. 135-50 BCE) articulated his understanding of it. See Pseudo-Aristotle *Problems* 886a24 and Theophrastus *On Odors* 63. Cited in Scarborough (1978) 359.

298 A term presented by the contemporary physicist David Bohm.

299 Philo of Alexandria, *De Abrahamo* 68-70. Wallis (1972) 107, describes the notion of *sympathia* as it developed in relation to the theurgic practices of the Neo-Platonists. Theurgy, he says, was a “practice justified by the idea, first, that each part of the universe reflects every other part, and secondly, that the whole material world is the reflection of the invisible divine powers. Such that, resulting from the network of forces or sympathies linking image to archetype, manipulation of the appropriate material object that corresponds to a divine power, brings the theurgist into contact with it. The principle also justified the production of long lists of stones, plants and animals, expressing the power of the seven planets, and substantiated the belief that the sympathy linking all parts of the universe allowed the magician to attract the power of the divine spheres.” In pioneering the practice of theurgy, the Neo-Platonists were probably influenced indirectly by the teachings of the Magi, as mediated through the writings of the sage Democritus.
universe, sometimes in the traditional, familiar forms of the classical pantheon, sometimes spilling over into the esoteric spheres of magic and astrology to the point where it reaches the dimensions of cosmic energy pervading and animating everything." 300 As such, sympathy is, in the words of ethnologist Holger Kalweit, a "telepathic communication network", and thus the "route along which magical powers pass." 301 The Christian apologist Eusebius (ca. CE 260-339) had a good grasp of its medical implications when he referred to the principle in the following terms: 302

There are many kinds of roots, and herbs, and plants, and fruits, and stones and other powers, both solid and liquid of every kind of matter in the natural world; some of them fit to drive off and expel certain diseases; others of a nature to attract and superinduce them; some again with power to secrete and disperse, or to harden and bind. . . some things occur by physical necessities, and wax and wane together with the moon, and . . . there are countless antipathies of animals and roots and plants.

Eusebius was writing long after Pliny, but because the principle itself was not exclusive to the third century (it can be found imbedded in the thought of virtually every culture and historical period), we may think of his understanding as representative of Pliny's time also. 303

It is not surprising, then, given the fact that sympathia proves an almost inevitable feature of magic 304- as the numerous studies of anthropologists have attested – that we should find it characterising most of the formulae of the Magi. 305 As Tambiah notes in reference to the "scheme of symbolic classification" that informs the magical world-view, materials such as plants and roots are selected "on the basis of their spatio-temporal characteristics such as size

300 Filoramo (1990) 22-23. Filoramo does not explicitly identify such a force with sympathia, but he does acknowledge that it represented "the basso continuo of many religious concepts, even during the imperial period."
301 Kalweit (1992) 177 and Mauss, 102. See also Kalweit (1992) 230-31, who describes the life of traditional and indigenous cultures as "a continually flowing spiritual experience" in which "all aspects of nature are perceived as expressions of the nonmaterial, mysterious power of the ground of life. This energy, the blueprint of perceivable being, can be stored or tapped into; it can be transferred from one person or object to another; it can be used positively for healing or negatively for destruction – just as we use electricity."
302 Eusebius Praep. evang. 4. 1 (131C-132A).
303 For more illuminating references to the principle of sympathy see Cicero Div. 2. 33, Plotinus Enn. 4. 4. 40, and Iamblichus Myst. 2. 11.
304 As Mauss noted, "all magical rites are sympathetic and all sympathetic ritual is magical." Mauss, 12.
305 Tavenner concluded, based upon his extensive study of magic in Latin literature, that "all prophylactic magic of the Romans was based on this principle." Tavenner (1916) 113. Cf. 123. See also Stannard (1982) 14.
and shape and their sensible properties like colour and hardness, which are abstract concepts and which are given metaphorical values.”

Thus we find in the Magi’s recommendations regarding plants, for example, that “the recognition of a similarity, fanciful or real, between the morphological appearance of a plant (colour, habit, armature) or some portion thereof (seed capsule, root, leaf) and a symptom or abnormal condition of the human body,” will result in the assumption that because such a similarity exists, the plant will have a certain therapeutic power when applied in some way to that physical symptom. A plant which excreted a milky white substance would therefore be used as a galactagogue, and one which was characterised by some red substance would be used in association with physical conditions characterised by redness: jaundice, erysipelas or bloodshot eyes.

A plant which resembled a scorpion could be used to assuage the sting of a scorpion. Also mentioned are several types (i.e., Orchis, Ophrys, Serapias, Aceras) of orchidaceous plants: because the roots of these plants resemble testicles, or orchides, they were thought to be efficacious if used in association with problems of the male genitalia. Similarly, they could be employed as an aphrodisiac, or used to enhance the possibility of producing a male child.

Somewhat more straightforward and easy to comprehend are the sympathetic associations which characterise the animal remedies of the Magi. The kidneys of a hare, for example, are

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306 Tambiah (1985) 43.
307 See Stannard (1982) 14-15, and (1987) 104. See also Lloyd (1966) 180. “A relationship of similarity may sometimes constitute a magical bond between two things, so that what happens to one of them may influence what happens to the other.”
308 HN 22. 88 (soncus = Sonchus oleraceus L.); 22. 82 (iasine = Convolvulus arvensis L.); and 27. 121 (polygala = Polygala venulosa).
309 HN 24. 94. Here the leaves of sumach (Rhus coriaria L.) are employed.
310 HN 20. 133, 145, 155, 162, 164, 182, 185, 223, 236 etc. See Stannard (1982) 15. Cf. HN 36. 56 where orphites, a marble with serpentine stripes, is used as an amulet against snake-bite.
311 HN 26. 96.
312 HN 26. 95.
313 HN 26. 97.
prescribed for pain in the kidneys, \(314\) and the spleen of a sheep for a diseased spleen. \(315\) Such recommendations are based upon the notion that like cures like. In a similar vein, it is believed that eating a hare’s testicles will ensure the conception of a male child, or that if one removes the foetus from the uterus of this animal, it will increase the fertility of a woman who has eclipsed her child-bearing years. \(316\) The idea here is that the life force energy inherent in the healthy part of the animal will be energetically transferred to the diseased or malfunctioning part of the human body. Similarly, goats and gazelles, who are known for the power of their vision, may find various portions of their bodies prescribed for diseases of the eyes, \(317\) and parts of a bird known as the “ossifrage”, whose single intestine reputedly had the capacity to take care of all the animal’s digestive functions, are used for the prevention and cure of colic and indigestion. \(318\) Crab’s eyes, wrapped up with the flesh of a nightingale and enclosed in the skin of a deer, could be used to “drive away sleep and cause watchfulness.” \(319\) Here the rationale is clear: the eyes of the animal are employed for purposes of “watchfulness”, and the flesh of a nightingale, the proverbial creature of the night, to assist a person in staying awake. The eyes of a crab could likewise be used - provided those eyes had been plucked out of a living crab and the crab allowed to go free - as an amulet for diseases of the eyes. Again, the rationale behind such a prescription lies in the idea that there is inherent in the crustacean’s eye the ability to transfer its living power to the patient, and therefore heal the ailment; this will only happen, however, if the animal lives. Thus the crab is released, the eye amulet absorbing the disease and transferring it to the still living animal, who will then presumably die.

\(314\) HN 28. 199.
\(315\) HN 30. 51.
\(316\) HN 28. 248-49.
\(317\) HN 28. 170-72.
\(318\) HN 30. 20. 60.
\(319\) HN 32. 115-16.
7. Locating the Magus in the Healing Arts of Imperial Rome

As we have seen in our analysis of Pliny's presentation of the Magi, magic, in the period of the early Empire, was perceived and accepted – at least in one of its incarnations – as a potential practice for the achievement and maintenance of human health and well-being; indeed, the majority of the material cited in relation to the Magi involves prescriptions designed to alleviate human suffering, in both its physical and psychological aspects. In light of the Magi's apparent presence in the realm of healing and medicine, we might question how their occult recommendations and practices related to the other healing arts of the day – to the folk medicine of native Italy, and the professional, "scientific" medicine primarily associated with and practised by the Greeks – and where the magicians themselves (or those who were identified as such in the Rome of Pliny's day) stood in relation to other contemporary healers such as doctors, physicians, herbalists, druggists, and even the head of the household unit, the *paterfamilias*.

In order to address such issues, some reflections upon the relationship between medicine and magic are in order.

First, it is important to stress that the terms "medicine" and "magic" as we know them cannot be blithely projected, with all their modern connotations and clear-cut distinctions, onto antiquity. As W. H. R. Rivers noted in his early anthropological study of medicine, magic and religion, there exist societies for whom these three abstract notions "are so closely inter-related that the disentanglement of each from the rest is difficult or impossible." Rivers was one of the first anthropologists to observe that, among some peoples, the idea of medicine as a social process could not be claimed even to exist, so bound up was it with "other classes of natural

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Traditionally it had been the *paterfamilias* who assumed responsibility for the administration of herbal remedies to the members of his household. See Scarborough (1969) 19. See also 100-101.
phenomena.” 321 More recently, social scientists working in the realm of medical anthropology have stressed the diversity of various ethnomedical systems as they are represented across assorted socio-cultural paradigms, and it has been stressed that the foundations upon which a culture develops “socially accepted designs” of illness and disease and chooses to cope with human suffering are by no means cultural universals. 322 Barbara Pillsbury, for example, has noted that every culture produces its own “adaptive methodologies” for dealing with disease and that these represent an “indigenous etiology” – a “system explaining the occurrence of illness and disease based on the worldview and religious beliefs of the particular people in question.” 323

In light of such considerations, George Foster has made a useful contribution by distinguishing two different types of medical systems: the naturalistic (i.e., that which explains illness in “impersonal, systematic terms” and which perceives disease as being the result of “such natural forces and conditions as cold, heat, winds, dampness, and above all, by an upset in the balance of the basic body elements”) and the personalistic (i.e., that which attributes illness to the “active purposeful intervention of an agent, who may be human [a witch or sorcerer], nonhuman [ghost, ancestor, evil spirit], or supernatural [a deity or other very powerful being]”). 324

Arthur Kleinman, the most prolific and eloquent advocate of such cross-cultural approaches, has stressed that the ethnomedical system (which he refers to as the health care system) is a social reality, which, like any other social reality, consists of a “system of symbolic meanings” which is constructed, and which an individual internalizes during a process of

321 Rivers (1924) 1. On the interface between modern medicine and magic, see Verrips (2003). She successfully demonstrates that “the differences between modern, scientifically orientated physicians, on the one hand, and premodern, magically thinking, and acting healers, on the other, are less profound than one is inclined to believe. A sharp boundary between science and magic is difficult to draw, especially for a modern patient” (226).
322 For a summary of the structural elements which constitute the ethnomedical system, see Good (1987) 22-24.
323 Pillsbury (1978) 1.
324 Foster (1976) 775. It should be stressed that these two systems are not mutually exclusive and that, indeed, they are generally found within the same socio-cultural system. It is not uncommon, however, to find that one system is favoured over the other.
enculturation. A medical system, as a complex arrangement of interconnected components, can therefore be viewed as "a cultural system... anchored in particular arrangements of social institutions and patterns of interpersonal interactions" and fuelled by "socially legitimated power." 325 It is created and maintained "by a collective view and shared pattern of usage operating on a local level, but seen and used somewhat differently by different social groups, families, and individuals." 326 When a variety of systems are in conflict, as was the case in ancient Rome, "the sources of legitimization and power impinging upon the health care system will eventually determine which view prevails, which clinical reality is sanctioned." It is therefore these sources of power (which may be rooted in political, economic and environmental determinants) which will ultimately be responsible for the social construction of the medical system and the way in which it is ordered – which will, in turn, dictate not only how illness is treated, but also how patients and healers will interact with one another. 327

Kleinman proposes a model which can be employed cross-culturally and which is useful to keep in mind when examining the ancient ethnomedical system that characterized imperial Rome. According to this model, a local cultural system is composed of three interconnected dimensions which include the popular sector, the folk sector, and the professional sector. The popular sector is the most dominant (and least studied among anthropologists) and includes the individual, the family, and the social network. In most traditional cultures, it is the popular sector which is the largest and most diffuse and from which the majority of individuals seek assistance. It consists of therapeutic treatment being administered either by the individual him or herself or by those within his or her immediate social network. In his effort to compose something of a

325 Kleinman (1980) 24, 35-36, 44. For an example of how Kleinman's work might be applied to the ancient ethnomedical system, see Nijhuis (1995).
327 Ibid., 44.
handbook of healing remedies and prescriptions that could be self-administered, it is the popular sector to which Pliny is catering. The second sector, the folk sector, is that part of the system which includes a variety of non-professional and non-specialist healers. This is the sector to which the Magi and other magico-religious practitioners belonged. The third sector, the professional sector, is the institutionalized dimension of the medical system; as such it retains the highest degree of social power. It is the professional sector to which the Greek medici belonged.

As Kleinman observes, each domain demonstrates a different “medical language” and each of these languages is rooted in a different set of beliefs and cognitive structures. Hence, the choice of practitioner to which an individual will turn will ultimately depend upon “the cognitive and value orientations of a culture.” 328 Therefore, as is revealed by the HN, in the Rome of Pliny’s day, it is the popular sector that is most endorsed as the appropriate domain in which to receive healing, and it is the professional sector which is considered the most suspect. In modern Western culture, the reverse is true.

While it would be false to claim that in ancient Rome the idea of a professional medical sector rooted in a “rationalistic” approach did not exist as something of a category (it was transmitted as such from the Greeks), it should be stressed that the boundaries between it and other less “naturalistic” or “scientific” modes of healing (particularly those associated with the folk sector) were less than pronounced. While the idea of “medicine” in general may have been partially recognised as a notion embodying certain social and rationalistic precepts deeply rooted in and carried over from the Greek tradition, the same could not be said of “Roman medicine” in particular. John Scarborough, for example, saw Roman medicine not as an entity unto itself, but rather as a synthesis – one which combined and encompassed all the many different threads of ancient healing: those from the Hippocratic and Alexandrian schools, the domestic medicine that

328 See Kleinman (1980) 49-60.
was perceived to be indigenous to the Italian countryside and its rural inhabitants, and various other strains such as astrology, religious medicine, and, not surprisingly, magic. 329 What united these methodologies was the fact that they all “rested on a set of traditional approaches” which allowed “the individual to interpret his life in connection with the world in which he lived,” rather than in isolation from it. 330

With so many different modes of healing interacting with and fertilising one another, it is not with ease that one engages in a discussion of the relationship between medicine and magic. How did they stand in relation to one another? Was magic simply a branch of medicine which served to supplement the latter when the techniques of professional medicine failed (as Pliny had suggested), 331 or was it a strain of healing perceived as an entity unto itself – one which was perhaps even in competition with medicine? 332 Part of the problem in attempting to answer such questions lies in our limitations as modern observers. As the various voices from medical anthropology have consistently recognized, our modern worldview, steeped as it is in a modern rationalistic paradigm, simply will not allow us (at least not without considerable effort and self-analysis) to step into a paradigm that operated from a level of ill-defined categories and concepts – one in which the notions of medicine and magic (as far as they existed at all) played off of and shaded into one another, and thus formed something of a continuum.

As Ludwig Edelstein pointed out in his seminal paper on Greek medicine and its relation to religion and magic, there was in the ancient world no pronounced distinction made between the “natural” and the “supernatural” – with, as we moderns would have it, the former being pinned to medicine and the latter to magic. As G. E. R. Lloyd put it, “the boundaries of the

330 Scarborough (169) 148.
331 HN 30. 2. Cf. 37. 54. See also Tavenner (1916) 61ff.
332 Such a possibility is suggested by Kee (1986) 2, 3, and Nutton (1985b) 40.
supernatural were and remained a battleground throughout ancient science.” 333 Even in the writings of the Hippocratic physicians (those with whom modern rationalism is most commonly associated) we find interwoven concepts associated with both “science” and “religion”, for in antiquity these were not perceived in dualistic terms. Ancient investigators were not interested, as are their modern counterparts, in establishing the objective reality of nature as distinct from human experience. Instead, reality and human experience were conceived as one, as a continuum – or, as ethnologist Holger Kalweit puts it, “a symbiosis of God, world and ego.” 334 Thus those forces which were responsible for the ordering of the cosmos – everything from the movement of the heavenly bodies to the sickness and health of the physical body – played a significant part in “scientific” medical theory. Hence, the origins of disease could not simply be perceived as the result of natural phenomena, for present in such natural phenomena were all the forces of the universe, playing themselves out in the microcosm that was man. 335 Not surprisingly we find that such a philosophy echoes the cosmovision associated with those who practised magic. It is not surprising, then, to find the great Galen – quoting the Alexandrian anatomist and physiologist Herophilus – proclaiming that plants were “the hands of god.” 336 that amulets may be used when

333 Lloyd (1975) 10. See also p. 15, n. 50. See also Lloyd (1979) 49. “No straightforward account, in which “science” and “philosophy” together and in unison stand opposed to “magic” and the “irrational”, can be sustained in the face of the evident complexities both within and between the theory and practice of medicine on the one hand and those of the investigation concerning nature on the other.” Cf. Stannard (1982) 17. “Superstition and magic were closely connected with the practice of medicine in all strata of Roman society. Insofar as they helped to shape beliefs about the use of plants for medicinal purposes, they were as much a part of Roman life as was illness itself.” See also Kee (1986) 5.


335 See Edelstein (1967) 212-14, 225, 246. There was only one group of physicians in antiquity (i.e., the Methodists) who rejected the notion that disease was the result of divine will. For a wonderful illustration of the way in which practical, “scientific” investigation could be combined with a belief in the inherent divinity of the cosmos, see Rufus of Ephesus, On the Anatomy of Parts of the Body, Rufus von Ephesos, Krakenjourale, ed. and trans. Manfred Ullmann, 2. Quoted in Kee (1986) 55. “Man, in effect, in the eyes of the philosophers, is a microcosm; he is the representation of the beautiful order of heavenly things, manifesting an art varied as to the construction of the parts and as to the achievement of their functions. Consequently it is important to learn the subjects of study which anatomy as well as other branches of medicine supply.” Here the “scientific” investigation of the human body is seen as a way in which to honour and explore the forces of the cosmos.

336 Galen 12, p. 966. Cf. Scribonius Largus Comp. 1-3; Plutarch Quaest. conv. 4. 1. 3 (663c).
medical techniques failed, 337 that such substances as the ashes of frogs or “hippocampi” have a
certain remedial power, 338 that the flesh of vipers were effective in elephantiasis, 339 or that
because we, in his words, receive “the force of all the stars above,” the moon’s position in
various constellations will have an effect upon the course of a disease. 340

Galen was not the only physician in the ancient world whose works incorporated, without
apology or justification, magical aspects within their contexts. Indeed, the majority of works
dealing with pharmaceutical material that emerged from classical antiquity included – along with
aspects of both “scientific” empiricism and “religion” – recommendations which we would label
“magical”. 341 Thus we find in Pedanius Dioscorides’ medical encyclopaedia many of the same
prescriptions which we found associated with Pliny’s Magi: recommendations involving plants
and animals which clearly incorporate the principles of sympathetic magic, 342 recipes for love-
philtres, and suggestions for the donning of various amulets – the likes of which are promised to
aid in such things as the relieving of toothache, the easing of birthing pains, the prevention of
pregnancy, and even the winning of favour with kings and judges. 343 We find similar instances
in Dioscorides’ earlier contemporary Cornelius Celsus (CE 14-37); at a number of points in his
De Medicina he too enters into the realm of the so-called “magical”. In a treatment
recommended for constricted breathing, for example, he suggests that the lung of an animal, “as

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337 Galen 11, p. 792. Galen also refers to one of his works as a “sacred book” (hieron logon) which has been
“composed as a hymn of the god who has created us.” Galen De Usu Partium 3. 10, (ed. G. Helmreich) vol. 1, p.
338 Galen 12, p. 362.
339 Galen, Subfiguratio Emperica 10.
340 Galen 9, p. 901. panton men ton anothen astron apolauomen tes dunameos . Cf. 1, p. 53 where he reprimands
many physicians for paying no heed to the stars. See also Galen, De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac
341 See Scarbrough (1991) 151. Cf. Edelstein who, in spite of his recognition that magic and medicine were not two
inherently separate modalities, was convinced that the principles of magic were rejected wholeheartedly by the
medical profession. Edelstein (1967) 232, n. 88; 233-34; 246. While it is true that medical writers did in fact
commonly reject “magical” practises, as Lloyd notes, “what they included under that heading varied from writer to
342 See, for example, Dioscorides Materia Medica 2. 10; 2. 125.
fresh as possible," be roasted "without touching iron in the cooking," and then eaten. 344 Other magical or folk remedies include the consumption of a nestling swallow for the prevention of angina, 345 the use of the spleen of an ox to help with an enlarged spleen, 346 and the eating of the liver of a fallen gladiator. 347 For certain other ailments, drinking from the skull of a dead person may also prove of benefit. 348 Such instances of magical remedies, interspersed throughout what are otherwise fairly "scientific" works, suggest an undercurrent of belief – one akin to that of the magicians – involving a certain numen or intangible power through which the forces of sympathy were thought to have operated. Other physicians who appear to have been influenced by such a belief-system include Archigenes, who was often cited by Galen and in whose works prescriptions of an occult nature were not uncommon, 349 Rufus, who regarded amulets among those "natural remedies" that could be used to alleviate human suffering, 350 and the Empirics who, according to Galen, put much credence in dreams and chance experience. 351

In light of the blurred boundaries between medicine and magic it is perhaps not surprising that Pliny's attitude toward the medici of his day was equally as hostile as that toward the Magi. In both cases, however, his hostility is implicitly bound up not with the worldview from which they operated (as we have seen, Pliny himself operated from much the same worldview), but rather with the empirical practises of their ars. 352 In any case, just as he is inspired to venture out upon a great diatribe against magic and magicians, so also is he impelled to fire a barrage of hyperbolic insults against doctors and physicians. Indeed, Pliny sees the rise of the medical

343 For more material see Riddle (1985) 82-88 and Kee (1986) 35-47.
344 Celsus Med. 4. 8.
345 Ibid. 4. 7.
347 Celsus Med. 3. 23. 7 Cf. Scribonius Largus Comp. 16 and 17.
348 Celsus Med. 3. 23. 7.
350 Rufus, fr. 90 (ed. Lloyd) p. 42.
351 See Thorndike (1923) vol. 1, 155-57.
profession as the ultimate example of barbarian invasion, and wholly supports the opinion of Cato, who had described the Greek physicians as a “worthless people” who had, with their fancy medical theories and newfangled practices, conspired to “murder all foreigners” – and to do so, moreover, for a fee. Cato apparently regarded these foreign doctors as a crop of crafty and unscrupulous charlatans and forbade his son to have any dealings with them. Pliny continues Cato’s diatribe with a host of accusations delivered against those individuals associated with the medical profession, at one point claiming that they had even surpassed “Magian nonsense.”

This last complaint of Pliny – that the antics of the Greek doctors outdid even those of the Magi – is interesting, for we find that many, if not all, of the accusations launched against the physicians, can also be found to have been levelled against the Magi. Pliny’s hot-blooded antagonism toward both the Magi and the Greek doctors appears to have been associated with the fact that he felt himself to be on a kind of crusade to encourage his fellow Romans to return to the domestic folk medicine which had originally, before the infiltration of all this foreign “nonsense”, been the sole trajectory of Roman healing. Because the remedial powers were thought to reside strictly in the folk remedies themselves, Pliny’s preferred method required the assistance of no specially qualified individual, and thereby allowed for the preservation of the Roman ideal of self-sufficiency. Both the Greek physicians, with all their elaborate medical theory, and the magicians, with their rites and symbola, posed a threat to the very ideal that he extolled.

First and foremost among Pliny’s objections was the fact that the medici were foreigners. Cato clearly identified the medical profession as one which was explicitly Greek in nature, and

354 HN 26. 20.
Pliny himself notes that few native Romans had by his time taken up the craft; indeed, of the many medical sources which are cited throughout the *HN*, those which are Greek vastly outnumber those that are Roman. Thus there emerges, as a theme throughout Pliny’s work, a certain xenophobic sentiment – one which also surfaces in relation to the Magi. Like the Greek physicians, they too had acquired a certain foreign mystique; the sources from which Pliny was drawing (such as Bolus) were not only themselves Greek, but had their origins even farther afield with the Persians (Zoroaster and Osthanes) and other *barbar externique*. Important to note, however, is the fact that Pliny and Cato were by no means unique in their anti-alien sentiments; though the relationship between the Roman and Greek cultures in particular had always been a complex one, with elements of Hellenic culture never ceasing to be an object of fascination and veneration which influenced and defined the evolving sense of Roman identity, there always remained an undercurrent of antagonism toward Rome’s cultural predecessor. And this thrust of antagonism seems to have manifested itself with particular ardour against the Magi and the *medici*.

Besides objections to the physicians’ status as foreigners, there are also a number of other accusations launched against them – accusations which also reflect those levelled against the Magi. Both, for example, are accused of being associated with quackery and purported to be

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355 The task of preparing and administering the remedies would probably have been the responsibility of the *paterfamilias*, but any one could have done it. R. Jackson (1988) 11. On self-sufficiency see Beagon (1992) 208-9.
356 *HN* 29. 193. Of the almost 180 doctors whose names we have recorded in Roman inscriptions of the first century CE, only 15 of them can be shown to be natives of Italy. Of those doctors whose names were recorded in Rome over the course of three centuries, 93% are those of foreigners - and usually Greeks at that. See Nutton (1977).
357 Beagon (1992) 204.
358 See, for example, *HN* 29. 193.
359 *HN* 28. 6-7. Cf. 30. 8. As for the Persian religion itself, writers such as Herodotus, Pliny and Plutarch tended to view it as a particularly evil form of fraud and sacrilege. See, for example, Plutarch, *De superst.* 166. See also M. Smith (1978) 71-74, and Bidez and Cumont (1938).
bound up in charlatanism and fraud. \(^{361}\) They were also both objected to on moral grounds: Pliny
noted the legend that Archagathus, the first Greek physician to arrive in Rome ca. 219 B.C., \(^{362}\)
had been nicknamed the “Executioner” (\textit{carnifex}) on account of his newfangled healing
techniques, \(^{363}\) and the Roman author saw the physicians of his own day as following in his
footsteps by making their experiments “at the cost of our lives.” \(^{364}\) Indeed, he even described the
medical profession as being a “fertile source of poisonings” \(^{365}\) - much as he had the craft of
magic, with its prescriptions for abortificients, knowledge of love-potions that had the capacity
to kill, and ceremonial rituals which passed one’s ailments along to one’s neighbours. \(^{366}\) And
while Pliny may not have gone so far as to hold the Magi responsible for the waning morals of
the Empire (at least as far as we can tell from his writings) – as he did the Greek doctors - \(^{367}\) he
did view their pursuits as being intellectually arrogant and ethically unsound. Like the Greek
physicians, who tampered with nature by producing elaborate compound prescriptions and elixirs
composed of countless numbers of exotica, \(^{368}\) the Magi, too, were famed for their elaborate
rituals and \textit{incantamenta}; both, in other words, in their arrogance and vainglory, were attempting
to supplement, or even to eclipse, the powers of Nature, and by doing so were coming between
the natural substance and its recipient. To Pliny this was simply unacceptable. \(^{369}\)

\(^{361}\) \textit{HN} 24. 5; Cf. 29. 25-26 where medicine is described as a “showy parade,” and doctors as utterly incompetent. Cf.

\(^{362}\) \textit{HN} 29. 12-13.

\(^{363}\) \textit{HN} 29. 18. Only a physician, claimed Pliny, could “commit homicide with complete impunity.” On the problems
associated with such a claim, see Nutton (1986) 33-34.


\(^{365}\) \textit{HN} 28. 85-86. Cf. 30. 18 where it is said that the power inherent in magic comes from “the art of the poisoner.”

\(^{366}\) \textit{HN} 29. 20; 29. 26-28.

\(^{367}\) \textit{HN} 24. 5; 29. 24. The so-called “Mithridatic antidote” (\textit{mithridatium}) was said to be composed of fifty-four
ingredients. Cf. Celsus \textit{Med.} 5. 23. 3 who puts the number at thirty-six.

\(^{368}\) See below. The one accusation against doctors for which I have been unable to find a similar claim against the
Magi is that of avarice; one of the things for which the \textit{medici} were castigated was the claim that they took
advantage of the sick by charging colossal sums of money for their services. See \textit{HN} 24. 5; 29. 14; 29. 21-23; 29. 28.
The strain of medicine that Pliny advocated was that which involved no intermediary – the old way of doing things whereby an individual had no choice but to take to the hills and fields in search of his own plants and herbal remedies. As Pliny noted several times, Mother Nature, in all her beneficence, had provided an ample supply of natural remedies – remedies which could be found practically right outside the city gates and gathered by virtually anyone, without cost. Indeed, “not even the woods and the wilder face of Nature are without medicines,” he proclaimed, “for there is no place where the holy Mother of all things did not distribute remedies for the healing of mankind, so that even the very desert was made a drugstore.” The fact that the elder Cato had recognised and chosen to honour such an observation was part of the reason why he was held in such high esteem by Pliny; by administering the type of herbal remedies that are to be found recorded across so many of the pages of the HN, Cato prolonged the life not only of himself, but also of his entire household. The same could be said of Antonius Castor, whom Pliny praised for establishing his own special herb garden – the garden from which he presumably plucked the herbs that kept him alive until past the age of one hundred.

Pliny’s exhortations to his readers to take a more active, elemental role in their health and healing make the whole process sound rather simple: one is either to turn to his or her own “kitchen garden” for herbal simples or to go out and hunt them down in the hills. Though it sounds straightforward enough, there would, in fact, have been complications involved. For the thousands of poor inhabitants bursting the seams of the Roman metropolis, the possibility of

370 On the notion of self-sufficiency in Pliny and in Roman medicine, see Beagon (1992) 208-09.
371 HN 24. 1. Cf. 24. 5; 34. 108 and 26. 10-11 where Pliny accuses the advent of Greek medicine as being responsible for the decline of herbal and folk medicine. Elsewhere, Pliny attributes such a decline to “Magian deceptions.” HN 26. 18.
372 HN 29. 15-16.
373 HN 25. 9.
having a plot of land upon which to grow flowers and herbs was not very promising. And as far as combing the fields outside the city walls in search of special flora, there hardly would have been enough naturally growing herbs and plants available to service an entire city. \(^{374}\) There was also the problem of identification; if one had not been personally trained in the ways in which to distinguish particular species of plants, it would hardly have been an easy task to find them. Pliny himself notes that many of the extant handbooks had not presented adequate descriptions, and that he himself knew the exact means of identification only because Antonius Castor, “the highest botanical authority of our time,” had been kind enough to show him about his herb garden. \(^{375}\) Cultivating an expertise in herbal remedies was no simple matter. We may, for example, recall the researches of Evans-Pritchard, who in his study of the African Azande, emphasised how difficult and comprehensive an undertaking it was for a youth to become a medicine man in Zande society. Years of training had to be undertaken in the form of an apprenticeship to an older medicine man who slowly educated the apprentice in terms of the location, identification and employment of healing plants and herbs. Furthermore, as it was a widely acknowledged fact that no one shaman or witch-doctor could possess a comprehensive knowledge of the art, the young man was also obliged to seek out additional teachers and bribe them to impart some of their knowledge to him. Becoming an expert in the healing wisdom of plant and herbal lore was no less than a lifetime’s achievement. \(^{376}\)

If, then, herbs and plants were not widely accessible and could not generally be sought out independently and administered to oneself and one’s family, to whom or what would an inhabitant of imperial Rome turn when he or she was in need of medicinal assistance? With the

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\(^{375}\) HN 25. 4, 9. See also 25. 16 where Pliny admits that it is only the illiterate country folk who know anything about medicinal plants and herbs. Cf. HN 22. 94. Cf. Dioscorides Materia Medica Preface, 6-7.

\(^{376}\) See Evans-Pritchard (1976) Ch. 6.
squalid, poverty-stricken conditions to which most ancient townspeople were subject, not to
mention a slew of new diseases that were on the rise in the early Empire, 377 there must have
been a burgeoning market for anyone with any claim to the powers and knowledge of healing.
Domestic medicine, after all, with its multitude of age-old cures and superstitious
recommendations, though it probably still had a major part to play in ancient healing 378 -
especially since it could be administered by virtually anyone, regardless of social standing or
technical training - surely had its limitations. When its techniques were exhausted an individual
might therefore conceivably seek out external assistance.379 Those to whom he might appeal for
help would have included the local physician (who may have been formally appointed by the
town council), 380 other self-proclaimed doctors and quacks, a host of travelling healers, the local
herbarius or drug-vendor, and presumably the practitioner of magic. 381 Within the ancient
healing landscape, such individuals not only learned from one another and drew upon each
other's expertise, but also vied with one another for potential clientele.382

377 See Nutton (1986) 40. See HN 26. 1ff. Here Pliny notes the appearance of new diseases such as mentagra,
elephantiasis and colum.
378 As it has right down through the centuries and into modern times. See McDaniel (1950) for an account of the
long life that a folk remedy such as that which Cato presents in his De Agricultura could enjoy. McDaniel traces this
remedy’s continued appearance throughout Europe and even into North America. See also Leland (1892) for an
account of the magical and folk remedies which, at least until the twentieth century, remained a distinct part of the
rural life of Northern Italy. Much of Leland’s material can be found to be either identical or a variation of
prescriptions and remedies found in such Roman writers as Ovid, Virgil, Pliny, Cato, Varro and others. See also
McDaniel (1944).
379 See Rivers, 81 where it is noted that among such peoples as the Melanesian and Papuan, a specially qualified
practitioner (such as a sorcerer, priest or leech) will only be consulted either when domestic remedies have failed, or
in the case of a severe illness.
380 See Nutton (1985b) 34. See also Flemming (2000) 38.
381 See Flemming (2000 33 who identifies “an impressive array of persons and institutions to whom individuals in
the Roman imperial world might turn if they deemed their state of health or somatic functioning to be in need of
attention.” Among these she identifies the following: diverse physicians, both male and female, midwives, medical
attendants and trainers, root-cutters and herbalists, and other dealers in medical materials, various workers in magic,
astrologers, dream-interpreters, a number of old women, and numerous temples and sanctuaries with their own
personnel.
382 Lloyd (1979) 38-39, 45; Nutton (1985b) 40; Edelstein, 207.
It is important to note that there existed in the ancient world no legally-sanctioned, professional medical qualifications, no formal training or apprenticeship that a person was obliged to partake of before he was accepted as a healer. Indeed, as Nutton notes, the claim to doctorhood had as much to do with self-identification and the assertion – sometimes before a magistrate – that one was a physician or healer, as it did with any socially-sanctioned qualifications; it had, in Nutton’s words, “as much to do with an individual’s perception of his own role and position in society as with his competence in book knowledge or practical experience.” This lack of formally required credentials made medicine an “open science” – and paved the way for a whole host of ill-qualified, quasi-physicians to enter Roman society and compete for the attentions of the sick and ailing.

In his survey of Roman medicine, Scarborough noted that there were two categories of ancient physicians in Rome: those formally trained and highly competent doctors (who had usually spent time training at Epidaurus, Cos or Cnidus) who serviced the upper echelons of society, and the illiterate, often incompetent doctors who catered to the masses. It was the lower-grade physicians whom Pliny no doubt had in mind when he referred to the crowds of medicine men, now “to be met everywhere”, who had lured the Roman away from his self-administered herbal remedies. It was probably also these individuals to whom he was

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383 See Ulpian Dig. 50. 13. 3 who declares that anyone who professed to be able to offer medical treatment – even if he specialised in one part of the body only – would be accepted as a doctor (and thus made exempt from the payment of taxes). Those who relied exclusively upon incantations, however, would not be regarded as such, for such magical techniques were not deemed part of medical practice. The passage is important, for though it suggests that the perimeters within which an ancient medical professional could operate were very wide indeed, it also demonstrates that a distinction was made between the practitioner of medicine and that of magic. See also Galen 11, p. 792. For additional instances of incantations being rejected by representatives and associates of the ancient medical profession, see Edelstein (1967) 236-39.

384 Nutton (1985b) 33.

385 See also Lloyd (1979) 39.


388 HN 25. 16.
referring when he launched his vitriolic attack against the so-called *medici*. Beginning with the Roman conquest of Greece in the third century BCE, great numbers of these poorly qualified and ill-equipped natives of Greece had descended upon Italy in their search for employment, probably bringing with them foreign remedies and exotic drugs in hopes of enticing the Romans away from their domestic treatments. Popular sentiment toward such quack physicians is reflected in a number of epigrams in which a so-called doctor is accused of killing his patient, the deceased,\(^{389}\) as well as in a satirical poem by Horace:\(^{390}\)

Where is the man
Who ventures to administer a draught
Without due training in the doctor's craft?
Doctors prescribe who understand the rules
And only workmen handle workmen's tools.

Such criticism was not infrequent, and renegade healers were often accused of attempting to conceal their lack of knowledge and expertise with an array of fancy frills and general charlatanry.

A certain amount of showmanship and theatrical display were needed if the physician was to compete against other healers of the day for potential patients. The types of antics that were employed by such physicians included giving public lectures and demonstrations to enthusiastic crowds of onlookers, dazzling an audience not only with their medical implements and paraphernalia, but also with their impressive rhetorical abilities.\(^{391}\) Dio Chrysostom described such exhibitions as a kind of “spectacle or parade” performed before a crowd “all agape with admiration and more enchanted than a swarm of children,”\(^{392}\) and Plutarch malignly referred to them as sheer “sophistry.”\(^{393}\) Galen noted that though these charlatans produced an

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\(^{389}\) Gow and Page (1965) Book 11. 112-26, 257, 280-81, 382, 401. See also Martial *Ep.* 1. 47; 5. 9, and 6. 31.


\(^{391}\) See Nutton (1985b) 36 on the relationship between one’s rhetorical abilities and his potential healing power.

\(^{392}\) Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 33. 6

\(^{393}\) Plutarch How to tell a Flatterer from a Friend 32 (71A).
impressive display with all their finery and fancy medical accoutrements, they were ill-educated in medical theory and produced impressive results only by way of accident - if at all.  

The degree to which the practices and antics of these quack physicians corresponded with those of the so-called “magicians” is emphasised by two other sources which refer to demonstrations that were being given by the latter. In Origen’s *Contra Celsum*, written in the late third century CE, we find the anti-Christian polemicist Celsus referring to the activities of magic-workers and “those who are taught by the Egyptians” who also, in an attempt to draw in potential clientele, exhibit their techniques and talents within the context of the public demonstration. For a few obols, he says, they “make known their sacred lore in the middle of the marketplace,” driving demons out of men and “blowing away” their diseases. Among their demonstrations and displays are included the invoking of the souls of dead heroes, the displaying of “expensive banquets and dining-tables and cakes and dishes which are non-existent,” and various other exhibitions of wonderworking. Hippolytus of Rome (ca. CE 170-236) and Plotinus (CE 205-269/70) also make reference to the public displays of these practitioners. The picture they paint is much the same as that of Celsus and those who refer to the exhibitionist *medici*: amidst a throng of gawking and noisy Romans, Hippolytus says, the magicians (*magoi*) introduce certain foreign drugs and concoctions, and engage in other forms of sorcery. They claim, says Plotinus, that diseases are caused by spirit-beings (disease in the ancient world was often associated with the presence of an evil spirit or *daemon*) and that they have the ability to drive these spirits out by way of magical formulae.

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394 Galen 14. pp. 600-601. Cf. Lucian, *Adversus Indoctum et libros multos ementem* 29 who lists among the physicians’ tools, “silver cupping-glasses”, “gold inlaid scalpels” and “ivory pill boxes.” The false physician, he says, flaunts such fancy tools but does not know how to use them, thus making way for a true doctor - one who wields a knife with a sharp edge and a rusty handle.

395 Origen *C. Cels.* 1. 68.

396 Hippolytus *Haer.* 4. 4.

397 Plotinus *Enn.* 2. 9. 14.
come away awestruck and deeply impressed by the magician’s antics, the intelligent man, who knows that disease is the result of various psychosomatic conditions, is not persuaded.

With such references to the driving out of demons, the “blowing away” of diseases, and presentations involving various exotic drugs, it appears that both the low-grade physician and the practitioner of magic were advertising their talents as healers, and in doing so, appealing to virtually the same audience. It is important to emphasise, however, that both the quack doctors and the magic-workers to whom these sources refer were not necessarily two distinct species of practitioners working within the framework of ancient medicine. In fact, it is more likely that they were among an entire host of itinerant healers and wonder-workers who made their way from city to city in search of potential clientele. Such vagabond performers were known variously in Greek as agyrtai (the term for a begging holy man), ageirontes (“those taking up a collection”), planetoi (“wanderers or vagabonds”) or planoi (“those who create delusions in the minds of other men”). In Latin they were called circulatores, a word which was derived from the term for “circle” (circulus), and referred to a performer who succeeded in gathering about him a ring of spectators. These itinerant performers appear to have been associated with a veritable smorgasbord of different pursuits: they might have practised astrology, divination, prophecy, philosophy, conjuring tricks, necromancy, or certain types of doctoring. Some were salesmen and others nothing more than common beggars. Some may have had a certain degree of expertise in one or more of these skills, but all appear to have included several in their repertoire. What united them was the fact that they were performers and that part of their identity was bound up in

399 See Vett. Val. 2. 17. 57 where all of these figure are lumped together under one astrological configuration. These include the ochlagogoi (one of the Greek equivalents of circulatores), magoi, planoi, thytain (those who perform sacrifices for purposes of divination), doctors, astrologers, bankers, counterfeiters and forgers. See also Flemming (2000) 55-56.
their quick-witted versatility, and their shape-shifting ability to tune into the curiosities of the crowd and give it what it wanted. 400

Judging from our evidence, these versatile, itinerant entertainers could have hailed from virtually any place in the Mediterranean, including anywhere in the “East”, Greece, or Italy itself. Of those who were natives of the Italian peninsula, we have the case of one Lucius Clodius, a pharmacopula circumforaneus from Ancona who made his way from one market town to another, selling drugs and herbal concoctions. 401 We learn from Cicero that he was paid the substantial sum of two thousand sestertii to administer a fatal drug to a woman in Larinum. 402 We also have the case of the Marsi, an indigenous tribe who dwelled in the Abruzzi mountains east of Rome. There was a tradition in which these people were rumoured to be the descendants of Circe, a legend perhaps born out of the widespread knowledge of their miraculous healing powers and expertise in drug lore and snake-charming. 403 They joined other circulatores in the local markets of Italy, promoting their drugs to passers-by and engaging crowds of onlookers with their daring displays of snake-charming. 404

There would also have been itinerant performers who came to Rome from Greece and the East. We hear, for example, of one Simmias, described as a “crowd-puller”, and Chariton, a “travelling salesman.” Both had their own special herbal concoctions to be used as antidotes against snake, tarantula and insect bites, and we find that Galen was interested enough to record them in his writings. 405 Resourceful Greeks must have become quite a common feature upon the

400 The fact that the herbarius, as well as other “makers of medicines”, are also found among performers (i.e., snake-charmers, mimes and dancers) suggests that they were but one among a host of itinerant performers. Ptolemaeus Mathematicus; Tetr. 4. 4; Firmicus Maternus Math. 4. 14. 17 and 7. 17. 7.
401 Flemming (2000) 44 describes the pharmacopola as “a flattering and dishonest profiteer, a pedlar of worthless promises and poisons.”
402 Cicero Pro. Clu. 40.
405 Cited in Nutton (1985a) 139.
Roman landscape for we find Juvenal complaining that many had abandoned their birthplaces in the Peloponnese, Macedonia, the islands of Andros and Samos, and Caria to come to Rome and promote themselves as anything from teachers of literature and rhetoric, to painters, doctors, augurs and magicians. Writing from a Greek perspective, Lucian warned young men about journeying west and seeking to make their living in Rome: the Romans had become prejudice against and suspicious of the Greeks because many had gone to the capital and falsely fashioned themselves as philosopher-type figures who were adept in prophecy and magic-working, claiming that they knew love spells, and that they had the capacity to summon spirits against one's enemies. These figures are mentioned in association with the households of wealthy Romans, but in order for a man to procure a resident position within such a household he no doubt had to begin by demonstrating his talents in the marketplace, establishing his reputation, and perhaps travelling from one city to another until he found someone willing to permanently employ him.

Some of these men may also have exploited their connections with places further afield than Greece, fashioning themselves as Egyptian or Chaldaean “holy men” and pandering to the Roman fascination with all things “Eastern”. Among the skills that they paraded in the marketplace and temple precinct would have been, as we have seen, various feats of exotic wonderworking, many of which were probably connected with healing. The circulator, if he wanted to attract clients and patrons beyond his public performance, would have had to convince his audience that he had something to offer them as individuals: a special drug to cure some

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406 Juvenal Sat. 3. 69-76.
407 Lucian De Mercede conductis potentium familiaribus 40.
408 The fact that there were several instances in which “magicians” (which may have included Chaldaeans, mathematici, goetes or magoi) were expelled from the capital suggests that there were many who were more or less living permanently in Rome.
grievance, a spell to win over a loved one, an incantation to drive out a demon who was wreaking psychological havoc, or the means to summon up a spirit-being against an enemy. 410

But it was not only these itinerant healers and wonder-workers who commanded the attention of would-be patients and vied for the patronage of ailing clients. There were probably other players in the theatre of ancient healing. There appears, for example, to have been special categories of both herbalists (*herbarii*) or “root-cutters” (*rhizotomoi*), and “drug-vendors” (*pharmakopolai*). 411 We know, for example, that Theophrastus, Dioscorides and Galen all turned to these individuals in their search for useful plant and drug lore. 412 The *herbarius* or *rhizotomos* seems to have enjoyed a reputation as something of a specialist – one who had been trained firsthand in the properties and identification of herbs and plants and the rules that governed their collection. 413 He also knew the ailments for which they could be used, as well as the way in which to administer them. Not surprisingly he was also well-versed in the traditional folk-elements (the ritual formulae and incantations) that accompanied the gathering and administration of the remedies. He was thus a kind of keeper of the knowledge of the healing power of plants. Because he had received this tradition – forged in the fires of hundreds of years of value-affirming trial and error – he was afforded a certain amount of power or anxious reverence among his contemporaries. This sometimes expressed itself in a degree of fear or hostility upon the part of those such as Pliny, whom we find accusing the *herbarius* of harmful

410 Among these feats the *circulator* could also be found engaging in various conjuring tricks such as carrying water in sieves, making beards turn red with a brush of his hand, calling up visions of Castor, and coaxing prophetic utterances out of boys, goats and tables. See Tertullian *Apol.* 23; *Idol.* 9; *praescript.* haer. 43; *Carn Christ.* 5.

411 On the *herbarius* and *rhizotomos*, see Flemming (2000) 43-44.

412 See Theophrastus *Hist. Plant.* 9. 8 passim.; 11. 7 and 9; 15. 2; 16. 3; 18. 3 and 10; 20. 4; Dioscorides *Materia Medica* 1. 12f. and Nutton (1985A) 144.

413 We often hear of one root-cutter, Crateuas, who was associated with the court of Mithridates IV. Apparently his works enjoyed a wide readership in antiquity. See Pliny *HN* 25. 4. 8 and 25. 26. 62; Galen 11. 795, 797 K; Dioscorides *Materia Medica* 1. 1. 1. Galen also attributes some of his remedies to the root-cutters Pharnaces and Antonius. Galen 13. 205 and 935 K respectively.
practices, dishonesty, and a tendency to hoard his knowledge rather than teaching and sharing it.

The drug-vendor also seems to have been a specialist of sorts. The prospect of specialising or making a living out of selling drugs and potions had greatly increased with the expansion and opening up of the Roman empire and the increased wealth of some of its citizens. The Roman drug-vendor could now include among his concoctions (which may have included spices, herbs and medicinal plants) exotica from all over the “East” – from Egypt, Arabia, India, and the eastern coast of Africa, as far south as Zanzibar. By the second century the foreign drug market had become such a familiar part of Roman society that even Galen was moved to lament the fact that the mass infiltration of exotic drugs had been responsible for the demise of the drug-vendor’s knowledge of local plants and herbs. The drug-vendor’s concoctions became increasingly elaborate, and there grew up in some cities certain quarters that were explicitly associated with drug-dealing - which, it is interesting to note, developed something of a bad name.

What we find in the early imperial period, then, is an environment in which there must have been a fair degree of competition, an environment in which quick-witted and multi-faceted performers and circulatores vied with one another and with herbarii, pharmakopolai and medici in their fervent attempts to attract clientele and win prestige. In a highly agonistic culture, authority among such practitioners “was established in an essentially competitive and

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416 HN 27. 67. See also 25. 16 and 74.
418 Galen 14. 30. K See also Pliny HN 13. 17f.; 24. 4-5; 25. 16.
419 See Nutton (1985a) 142.
420 Pliny HN 34. 108. Nutton (1985A) 140.
hierarchical framework.” 421 What is important to stress with regard to this stock of practitioners, however, is that any one of them could have been labelled a “magician” – and indeed were. For, as terms of abuse and denigration, goes and magus were labels that were almost invariably applied from the outside. They were simply not used as terms of self-definition; there was no person in antiquity who voluntarily assumed the title of “magician” – no matter what sort of activities he was engaged in. As a form of “othering”, the act of projecting such a title onto a person was meant, at best, to cast an aura of false religiosity, deceit and deception about him, and therefore to discredit and insult him, and at worst to mark him off as a marginal and possibly even dangerous individual, the likes of which no respectful citizen should have had dealings with. All of these individuals – the circulator from the “East” who practised necromancy and performed feats of prophecy in the market square; the low-grade medicus from Greece who attempted to impress potential clients with his display of medical finery; the herbarius who travelled from town to town with his pouch full of herbs, roots and remedies that he administered in conjunction with incantations and ritual formulae; and the pharmakopoles who was known to have concoctions that could kill 422 – played out their roles as individuals on the periphery of society, and were often, because of their unique areas of expertise and the special kinds of knowledge that they had acquired, seen as possessing a certain ominous power. It was not uncommon, therefore, for them to be looked upon with fear and branded “magicians”.

422 That there existed an explicit relationship between the art of poisoning and the art of magic is seen in the Latin terms veneficium, veneficus and venefica which had connotations of both magic/magic-worker and poison/poisoner. The same parallel can be found in the Greek language. See Gordon (1987) 63. “This indicates that at the level of popular culture ‘use of drugs’ suggested ‘sorcery’ more strongly than it suggested ‘medicine of a Hippocratic kind.’” As C. R. Phillips notes, “the lack of universally accepted definitions of unsanctioned religious activity [a term Phillips uses which includes the activities of magic-workers] and the parallel lack of a general theory of naturalistic causation made poison and unsanctioned religious activity appear similar since both apparently invoked hidden forces and thus frustrated normal forensic proofs.” Phillips (1991) 264.
It should be stressed yet again, however, that professional roles were not as clearly demarcated as we might wish them to be. For the sake of clarity one finds it necessary to emphasise certain categories of practitioners, but the reality of the matter is that the ancient world was not characterised by the sharply defined division of labour that characterizes modern economic systems. Professional categories were much more diffuse and those who peddled their wares and flaunted their wiles in the Roman marketplace could have laid claim to any number of the practises and areas of expertise associated with these various practitioners – all while promoting themselves as a “doctor” or “seer”. This point is illustrated in Lucian’s satirical account of the life of Alexander of Abonuteichos. Alexander’s mentor, though he fashioned himself a physician, was equally accomplished in the arts of magic and wonder-working; he was “one of those who advertise enchantments, miraculous incantations, charms for your love-affairs, ‘visitations’ for your enemies, disclosures of buried treasure, and successions to estates.” Moreover, he was also, being well-versed in potions that both hindered and healed, an expert in drug-lore. There were no doubt other cases too where, though a man’s public persona was characterised by his claim to be a medicus, his private practice involved many of those proceedings which were explicitly “magical” in nature.

One wonders, given the assortment of healing practitioners that the ancient Roman had at his disposal, which type he might have been most inclined to seek out. Who among these practitioners was most aligned with popular thinking? Of those that we have considered, most

423 Lucian Alex. 5. 4. 180-82. A similar portrait is found in Apuleius’ Met. 10. 25 where a “certain physician of known villainy” is bribed by the wife of a client to use his knowledge of drugs to produce a poisonous elixir with which he might kill his patient. In the early third century, a person who was found to be a pharmakeus kai goes was apparently sent into exile. Dio Cassius, 78. 17. 2.
424 The fact that the physician, but not the magician, was made exempt from paying taxes would have been a good incentive for a practitioner of both magical and medical techniques to promote himself as a doctor rather than a worker of magic. See above, note 383. See also Nutton (1986) 30-58. The fact that the magic-worker remained a socially, culturally and politically marginalised figure would also have played a part in such an identification. See R. Gordon (1987) 66, 71-72.
probably inspired some degree of faith among the masses; whose assistance the potential client would ultimately have chosen to seek out, however, would have depended upon a variety of factors including the degree to which the "healer" had convinced his audience of his skills and talents, the amount of money he requested for his services, and his previously established reputation (i.e., word of mouth). If there did in fact exist any conceptual division in the world of ancient healers it was probably most prevalent between that class of renegade practitioner under consideration and the more high-brow medici who had been trained at the medical schools of Epidaurus, Cos, Cnidus and later Alexandria (though, as we have seen, even they could be sympathetic to some of the more "magical" approaches born out of the mythopoetic worldview). There is definitely the sense that the former, appealing as it did to no particular sector of society, was more democratic whereas the latter, which seems to have catered more to the educated and wealthy upper tier of society, was more exclusive. But the division was not simply a matter of money or education.

We can get more of a sense of the interaction between healing practitioners from similar situations that have been examined, in their living context, in more recent times. W. B. McDaniels, for example, who spent much of his life doing field research in rural Italy, found that it was not uncommon for unlettered common folk (in both the towns and the "backward districts") to turn to the local "wise woman", herbalist, backwoods healer, witch or warlock (strega, stregone). They did so for a number of reasons: because they could get medicinal advice for a fraction of the price that they would have paid to see an accredited physician, because they had tried the modern physician and found his approach wanting, and, perhaps most importantly, because there still existed during that time (early twentieth century) a general fear and suspicion

425 Jackson notes how quickly news of a healer's success or failure could travel in the ancient world, and what a monumental effect it could ultimately have upon his practice. Jackson (1988) 65.
of scientific medicine.  

In the Azande society, Evans-Pritchard discovered that the accredited healer (in this case the witch-doctor) was only called in as a last resort. If the ailment were minor the patient would attend to himself or perhaps call upon family members or relatives to give him advice. Only then, if the grievance grew worse or failed to improve, would he seek out the assistance of the professional healer.  

A similar state of affairs may have existed in the ancient world. In fact, a comment made by Plutarch in his discussion regarding superstitio seems to suggest that it may have been the physician who was last on the patient’s list of potential specialists: the “superstitious man”, he says, “casts the doctor from his house” because he “classifies all diseases as afflictions of a god or attacks of an evil spirit.” This passage suggests that there were some individuals who would reject the aid of the traditional doctor because the traditional doctor was not versed in the arts of exorcism and demonology. It would follow then that such individuals would perhaps have turned to the multi-talented circulator because it was this itinerant healer and magic-worker – as he had succeeded in demonstrating in his marketplace exhibitions – who was widely known to have had associations with evil spirits, as well as to possess the power to coerce and manipulate the gods.  

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426 McDaniel (1944) 72. The situation in rural Italy is similar to that in various African villages, where therapeutic treatment is derived primarily from local healers and based upon a combination of naturalistic and personalistic healing modalities. Commonly these modalities of healing compete with western biomedical approaches, which are likewise viewed with distaste and suspicion. See, for example, Du Toit (1985); Janzen (1985); Fako (1985); and Spring (1985).  


428 Jackson (1988) 138, notes that “the cost, risk, uncertainty, discomfort or sheer pain” of professional medical treatment proved a definite deterrent to those seeking outside assistance. Many were more inclined to seek out methods of healing that were more aligned with traditional thinking - such as visiting the sanctuaries of Asclepius in hopes of procuring a “miracle cure.”  


430 Plutarch De superst. 7 (168bc). According to Lloyd, it was not only the “superstitious man” of Plutarch’s treatise who ascribed to such a belief; there is, he says, “ample evidence” that a belief in the notion that otherworldly beings (gods or demons) were the cause of disease was present among both the educated and non-educated “long after the classical period.” Lloyd (1974) p. 15, n. 50. See also Galen 18B p. 17f. and Plotinus Enn. 2. 9. 14.  

431 Pliny includes references to the Magi’s association with otherworldly entities at HN 24. 160; 28. 104; 30. 14, etc.
In early imperial Rome, there were two characteristics that especially defined and united this type of practitioner. First among these characteristics was his status as a marginalized figure. This was due to his activities, which were generally associated with fraudulent, dangerous, and immoral exploits, his special knowledge and areas of expertise, and sometimes his status as a foreigner. This aspect of the magic-worker’s identity permeates the pages of the HN and comes to the surface in Pliny’s not infrequent outbursts of antagonism toward the historical Magi. Here we see shining through not only the animosity of Pliny and his society toward the occultists of the East (though, in fact, such figures were sometimes looked upon with a certain degree of veneration and their “alien wisdom” turned to as a means of legitimising “new values in the broadest sense religious” ⁴³²), but also their antagonism toward those figures on the fringe of society who peopled the marketplaces and temple precincts of early imperial Rome.

The second characteristic that defined this stock of practitioners was the fact that the individual most likely to be identified as a *magus* was a kind of composite figure: he could demonstrate several skills and play many parts, including those of healer, herbalist, drug-vendor, exorcist, savant, seer, trickster or wonder-worker. Though he may have specialised in certain areas of expertise, he was generally known for his broad scope of talents - his association with a whole spectrum of different activities, many of which had an air of the supernatural or exotic about them, and any one of which could result in his having been branded a “magician”.

As we have seen, one branch of these activities – the one most prevalent in the HN – was that of the healing arts. Both the Magi of Pliny’s historical imagination and the magic-workers of his own day appear to have established themselves as practitioners of occult healing techniques and experts in herbal and animal lore. Their expertise may have included a knowledge of the healing powers of plant and animal *materia*, what ailments and afflictions these could be used to

medicate, and the various ritual and formulaic stipulations that often accompanied the gathering and administration of such materials. An expertise in the healing arts was, then, one of the several areas with which the so-called "magician", at least as far as popular thinking was concerned, could be equated. And this, of course, thanks to Pliny's crusade to encourage his fellow Romans to return to more traditional methods of healing and therapy, is the area in which the *Historia Naturalis* has proven the most illuminating.
Beyond Pliny: Uncovering the Identity of the Historical Magi

Perhaps the most important point that has come to light over the course of our examination of the *HN* as a source shedding light upon the character, activities and social position of those practitioners of the magic arts who were prevalent in Pliny’s day is the fact that there was no *magus* per se – no “magician” who was identified with a specific social role and way of being in the way that, say, a philosopher, lawyer, teacher or blacksmith would have been. There was no body of professionals identified with particular institutions and practices who had a special role to play in society and whose *very identity* was derived from its magic-working (as, for example, is the case with the shaman in indigenous societies). Though there were, of course, certain individuals who engaged in magical activities, the *magus* as such was a product of every individual’s unique imagination, and therefore existed more as a projection than as an actual reality. While it is true that people of the ancient world seem to have had a general idea of what they felt such a figure did (i.e., he was usually identified with ritual, with otherworldly powers and beings, and with secret – and oftentimes ominous - activity), the notion of the *magus* was somewhat of a nebulous and ill-defined concept; the practitioner whom an individual chose to look upon as a “magician” would really have depended upon that individual’s (i.e., the one who was doing the labelling) own experience of and relationship to the socio-cultural sphere. Thus, in the later Roman Empire, we have pagans calling Christians “magicians”, and Christians calling pagans “magicians”.

Because the idea of the *magus* was not bound up with an individual’s personal identity, such a figure could only be found in two places: in the eye of the observer’s imagination, or within the contoured depths of remote history. When Pliny refers to the “Magi”, for example, he most assuredly has a special assortment of practitioners in mind: he imagines a certain type of
individual who is bound up with the occult, has “Eastern” affiliations, and is in some way associated with such legendary figures as Zoroaster and Osthanes. These figures are foreigners, have access to all the wisdom and learning of the ancient civilisations, and have a certain otherworldly or supernatural mystique about them. This is the picture of the historical Magi that Pliny cradles in his mind’s eye but, as we have seen, his opinion of them also seems to be coloured by his personal experience of those contemporary practitioners – many of whom would also have been foreigners – who proved a familiar sight in the Rome of his day. These individuals appear to have been a watered down version of what we may imagine the true historical (i.e., Persian) magus to have been.

Anthropologist Michael Winkelman, in his cross-cultural examination of 47 different societies which host religious practitioners (including several Circum-Mediterranean societies) similar to that of the shaman or magician, has suggested a typology consisting of four complexes that are useful in examining the magico-religious activity of the ancient world: Shamans, Shaman/Healers, Priests and Sorcerer/Witches. Winkelman’s typology is based upon the long recognized hypothesis that different religious practitioners and magico-religious practises arise out of various factors associated with a society’s degree of social complexity. The type of religious practitioner who proves most visible in a society will therefore depend upon whether that society is rooted in a hunting-gathering economy bereft of “hierarchical political integration”, or whether it is a more complex entity “typified by agriculture, social stratification, and political integration”. In general, simple societies tend to allow for the possibility of

\[433\] See Winkelman (1992) 6-8.
\[434\] Ibid., 6-7. See also Mary Douglas (1970) and (1973) who suggests that those cultures which have a high degree of internal differentiation, marked by very distinct social boundaries and strong personal and social codes of conduct are more likely to nurture a worldview strongly rooted in notions associated with sorcery. Societies that are more flexible and whose social codes are more relaxed and diverse are more likely to nurse notions associated with witchcraft. On the differences between sorcery and witchcraft, see Kapferer (2003) 11-12.
direct control over (and interaction with) the supernatural, while the belief structures of more complex societies are rooted in notions of lack (or the outright repression) of control: hence “beliefs and practices in more complex societies indicate a displacement of responsibility, repression of awareness, and reduction of direct ego control over information revealed or actions taken; practices and beliefs in simpler societies indicate a more direct ego contact with supernatural power and experiences.” 435

According to Winkelman, the first magico-religious complex, that of the Shaman, is found primarily in simple societies that have no formal class structure and are lacking in political and administrative organization beyond that of the local level. Shamans’ primary magico-religious activities involve healing and divination and, though their therapeutic activity may involve the use of herbal medications, or certain “hands on” techniques such as rubbing, massaging, sucking and blowing, their primary activity is enacted through interaction with spirits. They exercise their supernatural power through their connections with animal and other minor spirits and universally engage in practices related to the induction of alternate states of consciousness (i.e., fasting, drumming, dancing, sleep deprivation, sexual abstinence, and the use of hallucinogenic substances), often for the sake of engaging in a soul journey on behalf of a sick community member. As a result of their perceived power and the belief that they have the capacity to engage with and control various supernatural forces, they enjoy a high social status and exercise a significant degree of “charismatic power” not only as community leaders (who make judiciary decisions, resolve disputes and organize communal hunts), but also as military chiefs. Shamans are found universally across a wide cross-section of indigenous societies and

435 Ibid., 8.
were probably present "in all regions of the world at some time in their hunting and gathering past."  

The second type of magico-religious practitioner, the Shaman/Healer, is the direct descendent of the Shaman and is found in sedentary, agricultural societies, often alongside that of the Priest. The primary magico-religious activity of the Shaman/Healer revolves around healing and divination, occasional malevolent (i.e., magical) acts, and certain agricultural rites. These activities likely include the application of herbal remedies, the use of spells and charms, certain ritual techniques, and other forms of spirit control such as exorcism. Shaman/Healers may also provide protection against the activities of malevolent magicians or harmful spirits and the use of alternate states of consciousness generally proves a significant part of their training. Unlike the Shaman, however, they do not possess any socio-political power (except in cases where there is no Priest) and they are generally part-time practitioners who engage in other subsistence activities as a way of supplementing their magico-religious activities. Although they are not known to engage explicitly in immoral behaviour, there is the recognition that they have the capacity to use their power to afflict suffering upon others. Both the Shaman and the Shaman/Healer are frequently inspired to take up their practice as the result of an otherworldly experience that reveals to them their special healing vocation; such experiences may result from an illness, a spontaneous vision, a dream or a vision quest. Both practitioners also have the capacity to cultivate a high degree of specialization (focussing, for example, on one specific type of healing or disease), but whereas the Shaman will generally operate individually and of his own accord, the Shaman/Healer may be part of an institutionalized network and may therefore

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436 Ibid., 50.
“have a significantly higher incidence of joint ceremonies, formal group activities, and the formal acquisition of professional status through ceremonial initiations.” 437

The remaining two complexes highlighted by Winkelman include that of the Priest and the Sorcerer/Witch. Priests are predominantly found in more complex sedentary societies whose major mode of subsistence is agriculturally determined. Such societies are generally organized around a distinct class structure and enjoy a degree of political organization beyond that of the local community. Priests seldom engage in healing (with the exception of exorcisms) and are rarely associated with malevolent acts. Their primary magico-religious activity revolves around the performance of agricultural rites and the propitiation and worship of the spirits – particularly through the mechanism of sacrifice. Unlike the Shamans and the Shaman/Healers, they do not engage with the supernatural realms through the use and induction of alternate states of consciousness (although occasionally some will use social isolation, sleep deprivation, sexual abstinence, and alcohol consumption as a means of gaining a greater degree of contact with the divine). Among the four complexes, Priests enjoy the greatest degree of social status and the broadest range of socio-political power, and may exercise control in the domains of political, legislative, judicial, economic, and military power. Their moral status is deemed to be exclusively benevolent and they are not known to engage in any immoral or malevolent behaviour. Priests are generally selected through social inheritance or political appointment and they are typically full-time practitioners who belong to a formally organized group and whose professional positions prove the source of their livelihood.

Sorcerer/Witches, on the other hand, are typically selected for their role “in an involuntary process of social labelling” 438 and are thought to engage in their magico-religious

437 Ibid., 34.
438 Ibid., 34.
activities (which may include causing sickness or eating the body and soul of a victim, killing fellow community members, or destroying an enemy's socio-economic status) either for their own delectation or for the monetary gains which come from acting on behalf of a client. Winkelman argues that the Sorcerer/Witch was originally a shamanic practitioner operating in a small community whose characteristics were adopted and attached to those practitioners who were working in more complex societies. Within these more complex societies, the characteristics associated with the shamanic practitioner were adopted and later used "in the process of social persecution of individuals not necessarily involved in magical activity, but persecuted through an ascriptive labelling process in which these characteristics are attributed to them in order to justify their persecution." 439 It is interesting to note, therefore, that the Sorcerer/Witch complex is the only magico-religious practitioner type which commonly includes women (Shamans and Priests are almost exclusively male). Though they are found in all types of societies, they are most common in those that are more complex (i.e., those that have a high degree of social stratification and political integration beyond the level of the local community). Sorcerer-Witches are believed either to possess skills that are innate to their personhood or to acquire them from other malevolent practitioners. Although they are not trained to develop a capacity for altering consciousness, they often have "metaphorical or indirect references to ASC", including those that allude to animal transformation and soul flight. 440 They are also thought to have the capacity to exercise control over spirits and to have the wherewithal to manipulate ritual power. Due to their reputation for specializing in harm-inducing and objectionable activities, they are relegated to positions in which they are completely stripped of any socio-political power and which are predominantly defined by their marginal status. Rather

439 Ibid., 76-77, 88.
440 Ibid., 35.
than exercising their own socio-political power, as is the case with the Shaman and the Priest, they are invariably subjected to the power of other practitioners, particularly that of the Priest. Winkelman therefore suggests that the Sorcerer/Witch status is a label that is rooted in persecution - a status that emerges as the result of one group of individuals persecuting another.

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Based on Winkelman's assessment, the Magi were viewed by Pliny and his contemporaries as being representative of the Shaman/Healer complex, magico-religious practitioners who specialized in various healing and divination activities, were experts in certain ritual techniques, and who were relegated to the lower echelons of the socio-political regime. Occasionally, however, their identity also shaded into that of the Sorcerer/Witch complex. But in their original Persian context, they would have been regarded as Priest figures. For we find an ancient memory encoded into the sources that links these Magi figures with ancient technicians of the sacred who embodied priestly and ritual functions and who evidently enjoyed a special social status.

What we can discern from our sources regarding the Magi proper is that they were associated with the semi-legendary figure of Zoroaster, who, judging from our later sources, was connected with several mystico-philosophical works that were generated in his name. 442 They were also associated with a clan of priests who engaged in ritual practices (especially those associated with fire and with sacrifice) on behalf of the primary Persian deity Ahura Mazda. 443

441 Ibid., 86-92.
442 Proclus In R. 2: "Myself, in fact, I have come across four books of Zoroaster On Nature..." See also Lucian Menippus 6; Plutarch De Is. et Os. 45-47; Apuleius Apol. 26; Pliny HN 30. 3-5; Ammianus Marcellinus 23. 6. 32-36; Origen C. Cels 1. 16; Dio Chrysostomus Or. 36. 39-60; Diogenes Laertius 1 (prologue); Arobius Against the Heathen 1. 5; Clement of Alexandria Exhortation to the Heathen 5; Pseudo-Clement Recognitions 4. 27-29. See also Philo of Bybos (in Eusebius Praep. evan. 1. 10. 52-53).
443 Derveni Papyrus (column six).
They worshipped the elements (fire and water in particular) and may have approached the planets as divine beings. They had a reputation as great sages who were particularly well-versed in cosmic wisdom and who articulated a philosophy that later had a profound influence on the Greek philosophers. However, they were regarded by the Romans and the Christians as being transgressors of the natural order, dealers in demonology, sacrificers of humans, and the ultimate progenitors of the magical and occult arts. Many sources suggest that their roots were ancient but that there existed conclaves scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Many sources agree that they were experts in astronomical and astrological wisdom. Several sources (including Pliny) allude to them as being experts in a variety of occult lore – including that associated with plants, animals and minerals.

If, then, we examine the functions with which the Magi were more broadly associated (such as the use of incantations, the performance of sacrifices, and the preservation of the community’s mythological heritage), it would probably be more fruitful to compare them to religious experts and to locate them within the framework of Winkelman’s Priest complex, than to approach them as mere magicians or sorcerers. But again, the difficulty with which we approach such designations bespeaks the challenges that we are confronted with when we attempt to situate the terms “magic” or “magician” within any particular socio-cultural context.

444 Herodotus Hist. 1. 131; Strabo Geography 15. 3.13-14.; Diogenes Laertius 1 (prologue); Firmicus Maternus Err. prof. rel. 4. See also Ammianus Marcellinus 23. 6. 32-36.
445 Strabo Geography 15. 3. 13-14.
446 Philo De Abrahamo 68-71; Plutarch De Is. et Os. 45-47; Pliny HN 30. 8-11; Dio Chrysostomus Or. 36. 39-60; Diodorus Siculus Bibliotheca historica 2. 28. 29-31; Diogenes Laertius 1 (prologue); Clement of Alexandria Strom. 1. 15.; Eusebius Praep. evang. 10. 4; Iamblichus VP 3-4; Proclus In R. 2; Porphyry Life of Pythagoras 6, 11-12; Porphyry Abst. 4. 16.
447 Tertullian Apol. 22; Clement of Alexandria Exhortation to the Heathen 4; Arobius Against the Heathen 4. 12.
448 Tertullian Apol. 22.
449 Ammianus Marcellinus 23. 6. 32-36; Pseudo-Clement Recognitions 9. 21; Pausanius 5. 27. 6; Basil of Caesarea Letter CCLVII To Epiphanius the Bishop 4.
450 Diodorus Siculus Bibliotheca historica 2. 28: 29-31 (Diodorus refers to the “Chaldaeans” as the supreme masters of star wisdom but, judging form the other characteristics with which he associates them, he may have in fact been
For, as has already been noted, “magician” is often a term applied from the outside whose sole objective is designed to discredit and malign.

Because the Persian Magi were intimately associated with ritual techniques (i.e., incantations, sacrifice) which appear to have been used to supplicate the gods and because they were well known to have been among the greatest experts in astronomical and astrological lore, their name was adopted to refer to the florescence of ritual practitioners who plied their trades throughout the Mediterranean and often passed through Rome, advertising their talents at various community gathering places such as the temple or marketplace. But later writers (i.e., Apuleius, Iamblichus, and Diodorus of Sicily) who were more philosophically inclined tended to have a much more expansive and laudatory vision of the Magi. Moreover, it was probably no accident that the Christian gospels retained an account of Jesus’ birth which included the three Magi, inspired by some portentous occurrence in the heavens, journeying from the East to herald the birth of the “king of the Jews”. 

Indeed, those who bore the name “Magi” were not simply ritual specialists who sought to control the gods, manipulate natural forces and divine the future, but priests of great learning who were steeped in the knowledge of the deepest mysteries of the cosmos and workings of the universe. They were not marginalized figures to be denigrated, but rather sages to be admired and emulated, and their supreme achievements celebrated.

synonymously referring to the Magi); Philo De Abrahamo 68-71; Ammianus Marcellinus 23. 6. 32-36; Proclus In R. 2.

Matthew 2:1-2. See also Clement of Alexandria Strom. 1. 15. The gospel writers, in employing the term “Magi” most certainly did not intend such a designation to allude to any common sorcerer. When they employed the term, they meant for it to convey a sense of the majesty, dignity and ancient wisdom that was associated with these figures. Cf. Augustine who suggested that they were common magicians who had been converted by grace. (Serm. 20. 3-4.

451 See, for example, Porphyry, De abstinentia 4. 16: “Among the Persians, indeed, those who are wise in divine concerns, and worship divinity, are called Magi; for this is the signification of Magus, in the Persian tongue. But so great and venerable are these men thought to be by the Persians, that Darius, the son of Hystaspes, had among other things this engraved on his tomb: that he had been the master of the Magi.” See also Plutarch De Is. et Os. 45-47; Apuleius Apol. 26-27, 90; Diodorus Siculus Bibliotheca historica 1. 96-98; Diogenes Laertius 1 (prologue). The fact that many of the most eminent Greek philosophers (i.e., Pythagoras, Plato, Democritus) were thought to have studied with the Magi also bears witness to the fact that they were sages of great wisdom and repute. See above.
indeed, though Pliny's antagonistic reception of them may have been dictated by the underlying prejudices of his day, there were some later philosophers who did in fact embrace them as their revered predecessors, who regarded them as being among the greatest sages of Eastern wisdom, and who sought to cast themselves in their sagely light.
9. Conclusion

During Pliny's day, the Mediterranean world was teetering on the cusp of a new paradigm which would be characterized by the eruption of new cosmological visions and an increased fervor for direct contact with the divine. Such an impulse resulted in a veritable explosion of the occult arts and sciences – an explosion which later saw the production and proliferation of magico-mystical writings (such as the *Greek Magical Papyri* and the corpus of Jewish writings known as the Merkavah corpus), the development of mystically-orientated philosophical traditions (such as Neo-Platonism and *theurgy*), and an increase in legal sanctions which sought to eradicate all occult practices and to oust all unorthodox religious specialists from the capital of the empire.

We get the sense from the *HN* that Pliny was desperately trying to hold back the floodwaters that would ultimately see such influences inundate the western empire. By attempting to preserve the traditional Roman agenda, he was seeking to erect a wall against all outside influence – particularly that coming from the East, whether it was Greek, Egyptian, Syrian, Persian or Babylonian. He was one of the last writers who would stand as a bridge between republican and imperial Rome, advocating and upholding the pure, untainted spirit of Roman pragmatism and fighting against the new, cosmopolitan energies that were percolating through the empire and threatening to muddy the clear waters of Roman sensibility. Throughout the pages of the *HN*, we can feel Pliny's desperation, matched only in its intensity by his

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453 On the *PGM*, see Betz (1986) and (1991). On Merkavah mysticism, see Arbel (2003); Davila (2001); Schafer (1992); and Scholem (1946).
454 On *theurgy* and the magical undercurrents of Neo-Platonism, see Athanassiadi (1992) and (1993); Johnston (1992) and (1997); and Shaw (1985), (1987) and (1995).
passionate drive to preserve Rome's utilitarian façade and to prevent it from becoming tarnished by the foreign influences that appeared to be invading it from every possible direction.

We find, however, that Pliny, staunch Roman equestrian, born and bred in the soils of Rome's utilitarian matrix, is a voice crying out in the wilderness of burgeoning influences from the East, a voice which desperately attempts to uphold the traditional (insular) Roman ways in the face of a torrent of foreign influences. Pliny attempts to erect a damn, but as we can discern from his desperate pleas for a return to the traditional Roman Way, free from the taint of distasteful foreign energies, it is clear that he is already awash in the tidal wave of outside influences. This is manifested in the wide range of books that he has read and accessed, and in the onslaught of Greek medicine men and other foreign healers and miracle workers who are inundating Rome right before his eyes. While Rome tried desperately to uphold the refined and chiseled façade of classical rationalism, and to maintain its glowing utilitarian sheen, all around it were pressing in upon it the mystery-laden and mystical currents of the East.

We find then that the portrait of the Magi that emerges from the *HN* is a highly prejudiced and discriminatory one. Once the Magi had been great priests revered not only by their communities but also by the whole eastern Mediterranean world, but as they have been translated into the Roman socio-cultural context, they have become associated at best with the Shaman/Healer figure and at worst with the Sorcerer/Witch complex. They have been stripped of the social status which came with their priestly duties and they have become marginalized figures whose power is seen in a negative light; rather than acting on behalf of their communities, as was the case with the ancient priest, the magicians with which they are associated are seen as transgressing socio-cultural boundaries and using their arcane knowledge.

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456 On the magician's negative use of ritual power, see Gordon (1987) and (1997).
and occult powers in the pursuit of negative objectives and malevolent activities. They are therefore looked upon as figures worthy of fear and disdain, who needed to be set apart and ultimately evacuated from the normal social realm. As possessors of occult powers and arcane knowledge, and dealers in disease, death and otherworldy forces, they were relegated to the margins of the social sphere.

Pliny’s biased agenda, and by extension the portrait of the Magi which it engendered, was representative of the pragmatic approach to the world that was characteristic of the dominant Roman mentality of his day, and steeped in the occidental tendency to approach all things East as “Other” - as fundamentally foreign and therefore lacking in all those characteristics that rendered Rome the radiant centerpiece and jewel of the Roman Empire. Moreover, Pliny attempts to understand the eastern wisdom of the Magi exclusively through his own cultural lens. And the only way that he can understand the foreign prescriptions of these half-legendary figures is to approach them by way of something with which he is familiar. Hence he examines their lore in light of the Roman folk tradition, steeped as it is in the “magical” accoutrements of ritual and sympathy, and measures them against the itinerant healers, medicine men and sorcerers whom he encounters traveling through Rome and descending upon the marketplace to exhibit their healing techniques and ply their pharmaceutical wares. But for Pliny, that which is most lauded and most acceptable is that which has been nurtured in the soils of the motherland. For example, he is not merely advocating the benefits and advantages of plant-based medicinal remedies; he is, rather, singing the praises of Roman plant-based medicinal remedies – those which have been gathered and plucked from the familiar fields around the hills of Rome or grown in one’s own private herb garden. Hence, plant-based remedies from the East – and by extension those advocated by

457 On the transgressive nature of magic, see especially Gordon (1990).
Magi – fall far behind in terms of their acknowledged value. Foreign remedies simply do not measure up – no matter how great a reputation they have for inspiring miraculous cures.

In spite of the limited agenda with which Pliny approaches the Magi and their attendant tradition, we can nevertheless discern from his writings that there were certain ritual practitioners whose influence was becoming an increasingly prominent part of Roman life, and if we seek to peel away the layers of Plinian prejudice that distort their representation, we are able to get a sense of who these practitioners were and what roles they were playing upon the greater stage of life in the ancient Mediterranean world. There is no doubt that, in Pliny’s day, there were certain ritual experts who practiced magic (i.e., individuals who used various forms of divination and astrology and who may have also been trained in the use of potions and curse tablets), and that their presence became increasingly prominent as the decades went by. But whether the Persian Magi to whose written works Pliny was referring were magicians in this sense of the word, is certainly a matter up for debate.

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110

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