

CHARMS AND THE DIVINING ROD: TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN MAGIC AND PSEUDO-SCIENCE, 15TH TO 21ST CENTURIES

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The rise of treasure hunting as a typical element of popular magic in the 15th century coincided with the beginnings of dowsing. Treasure hunters did not rely on the divining rod exclusively, they also used a variety of charms addressing the spirit world. In contrast to that, miners who used the divining rod treated it more like a technical instrument in a modern sense. With the success of mining as a motor of technical and economical innovation, the divining rod enjoyed a breath-taking career. In the 18th century, it had become the divinatory object par excellence that could be used to find virtually anything. The 19th century witnessed the breakdown of the traditional magico-religious treasure hunt. Instead of trying to talk to the spirit world in order to find treasures, treasure hunters became interested in historical narratives that provided clues which helped to discover hidden or lost objects. Even though dowsing was eliminated from professional mining, it managed to survive. The very fact that dowsing was largely non-communicative – it was even claimed that the ability to dowse depended entirely on the individual, inner and non-transferable qualities of the dowser – seemed to be the key to its continuing success in the area of fringe science and fringe medicine. Only in recent years, the new interest in spirituality combined dowsing and the use of incantations again.

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What was the purpose of charms in the context of dowsing? This article will try to discuss this question in a long term perspective stretching from the earliest beginnings of dowsing in the early 15th century to the esotericism of the early 21st century. This article is based on a wide variety of sources from German-speaking Europe, France and Britain: folkloristic and historic collections of spells, demonological and scientific tract and modern esoteric literature.¹

The divining rod was a very special and comparatively recent variety of the ubiquitous magical staff. In contrast to the magician's wand the divining rod is supposed to find lost or hidden objects. Thus, contrary to the claims of popular literature about dowsing, we should not count Moses' staff that struck water out of a rock, the magical wand that granted wishes mentioned by Cicero or Siegfried's golden rod in the Lay of the Nibelungen as divining rods (Waele 1927: 275; Ludwig 1998: 368–369; Ruff 2003: 262–271). We do not encounter divining rods used to locate specific objects before the end of the Middle Ages. The earliest source appears to be Johannes von Tepl's *Ackermann aus Böhmen*, the Bohemian Ploughman, a poem about a fight between a ploughman and the Grim Reaper written around 1400.² Tepl mentioned in this text a "soothsaying divining rod". Even though Tepl used this expression as a metaphor for a person it is quite clear that he thought a divining rod could be used to gain knowledge. The next texts to mention the divining rod are charms. The earliest charm seems to date back to the first half of the 15th century. It is written in a Bavarian or Austrian dialect. The charm was a part of a lengthy ritual. It belonged clearly to the context of the learned, clerical magic of the late Middle Ages. The text explained that anyone who wished to use the divining rod should first go to mass, donate a silver coin, then select twigs of hazel that had grown over the last year. The magician kneeled down, facing in turn East, South, North and West saying:

In the name of the Father I have searched you. In the name of the Son, I have found you. In the name of the Holy Spirit, I cut you ...*Egrediet virga de radice yesse... Et flos de radice eius ascendet* [A rod shall grow out of the root of Jesse. And a flower shall arise out of that root] ...O eternal and omnipotent living Son of God hear me and think of my desire. O God creator of heaven and earth through your divine incomprehensible power that you have used since the beginning of the world, I remind you that you shall pay attention to my desire and to my endeavor with these rods so that in them power shall be ready to reveal the right truth that I poor sinner desire to learn. O sacred God of eternal wisdom through all the power that you used in the firmament of the sun, of the name of all the stars and of the seven planets give me poor sinner, your creature and your servant that I in this hour shall find a good time to succeed in the endeavor that I will undertake through all the power of the wicker rod that you gave to it. Amen.

Finally, the charmer implored the rod in the name of God and the three Magi to "show the truth" (Klapper 1905: 55–56). The rather elaborate description of

the actions of the conjurer who searched for the rod, found, and cut it is strongly reminiscent of magical formulae used by herbalists.

A more simple ritual from the German Southeast of the first half of the 15th century began with a charm that addressed the rod:

Be greeted in the name of God, sapling, who has created me and you on this earth. Sapling you are called in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost that you shall retain all the power that God has given to you and to me on earth. In the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The rest of the incantation implored the rod in the name of God and various saints to reveal reliably where silver, gold, buried treasure and mineral water [“das wasser des arczts”, literally: the doctor’s water] could be found (Klapper 1905: 56–57). This charm from the first half of the 15th century is the earliest source that suggests that the divining rod could find water. Until now, historiography assumed that the earliest source that mentioned dowsing for water was a Bavarian law from 1612 (Dillinger 2012: 98). Thanks to this newly discovered charm we may safely say that dowsers started looking for springs about 200 years earlier. Of course, they did not simply look for any kind of water. As water was readily available in most parts of Europe, there was hardly any demand for simple water witching. The 15th century charmer had a mineral spring with water of therapeutic value in mind.

Lengthy conjurations seem to have been the exception rather than the rule. After 1450, we encounter a number of much shorter formulae. A Swabian magical spell dating back to the second half of the 15th century provides a good example. It emphasizes the practical use of the rod:

I conjure thee, four hazel rods, in the name ... [of the four Evangelists] ... so that you show us to the real treasure we hope to find. I conjure thee in the name of the three holy Magi ... that they [=the rods] show us the real hidden treasure as they [= the Magi] were shown the true child Jesus Christ by the star which led them” (Eis 1964: 146–147).

This charm alludes to searching and finding as the main elements of dowsing. The rod shall be as successful as the three Magi who led by the star found the child in the manger at Bethlehem. The text might invoke the four Evangelists as symbols for truthfulness or just as especially powerful saints.

In the late 17th century, dowsers used this charm:

Rod of hazel, I break you and conjure you through the power of God the All Highest that will show me where the hidden gold or silver or precious stones are hidden in the ground. I conjure you with these words that you

shall have as much power as the staff of Moses on which he hanged a snake in the desert. I conjure you that you shall have as much power as Aaron as he led the children of Israel through the Red Sea. I conjure you that you shall have as much power as John the Baptist as he baptized Christ in the river Jordan” (Sökeland 1903: 205).

The whole imagery of power in this charm is less than convincing. Neither Aaron nor the Baptist are good symbols for power. What they seem to have in common is water. However, water witching is not alluded to: The dowser wants to find gold, silver and precious stones. The charmer did not really know his Bible. He gets the allusion to Moses totally wrong. He overlooks the obvious parallel between the rod and the staff of Moses and mentions the wrong Biblical episode: According to the Book of Numbers, the bronze snake was put on some pole not on the staff of Moses. We may safely assume that this charm did not originate in the priestly context of learned magic.

At the same time, in the late 17th century, we encounter this charm:

Be greeted in the name of God, noble rod, with God the Father I search you, with God the Son I find you, with the power of God the Holy Ghost I break you. I conjure you, rod and growth of one summer, with the power of the All Highest that you will show me what I command you to show and that you do it surely and truthfully, so purely and so clearly as Mary the mother of God was a pure virgin when she gave birth to our Lord Jesus, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost” (Klapper 1905: 53–54).

The charm seems to imply that the rod could be used to discover a variety of objects. The charmer carefully avoids mentioning any specific items the rod is supposed to find: It will show everything that the charmer might want to look for in the future. The rest of the charm invokes the trinity as a source of power and the Virgin. The purity of the Virgin is presented as a parallel to the infallible reliability the charmer expects of his rod: The rod’s reliability is presented as an equivalent to honesty. Thus, it has a certain moral quality. The charm does not draw any parallels between the charmer’s successful search for the rod itself and the searches he wants to perform with the rod. The reason for that might be that the subject changes: The charmer found the rod, but now the rod is supposed to find something for him.

All of the divining rod charms I have found so far addressed the rod itself. Occasionally, they spoke to God like prayers. The charms never addressed the object the dowser hoped to find. The aims of the charmers are obvious: They want to make their rods powerful and reliable instruments. They try to achieve this by establishing a link between the rod and superhuman beings. In truly

magical fashion, the charms presented metaphors like reliable connections. The rod was addressed like a sentient, indeed like a rational and responsible being.

The charms themselves hint at the social contexts in which divining rods and dowsing charms have been used: treasure hunting and mining. In the early modern period, treasure hunting was clearly a magical activity. The magic of treasure hunters had essentially two aims: magic helped them to locate the treasure. It also helped them to communicate with the sprits guarding the treasure while it held these spirits at bay at the same time. Treasure hunters used a whole arsenal of magical instruments and texts. The divining rod was arguably a most important part of the arsenal but it was just one of great variety of magical objects treasure hunters employed. Treasure hunters used crystals and mirrors that showed treasures hidden in the earth, early modern equivalents of Ouija Boards that allegedly could be used to communicate with the dead, and ceremonial swords. Treasure hunters used magical writings of any description, be it printed books, manuscripts, loose sheets with magical characters on them or elaborate drawings of magical circles. The symbols and texts were supposed to enable the treasure hunters to communicate with the spirit beings that guarded the treasure (Dillinger 2012a: 85–113).

The guardians of treasures were of supreme importance for early modern treasure beliefs. Ghosts were the most important but by no means the only treasure guardians. Numerous people believed that fairies watched over or in fact owned the treasures. If these mysterious beings were addressed in the proper way they could be persuaded to give away at least a part of their riches. Demons could be treasure guardians. Strangely enough, the saints and the angels could be treasure guardians, too. The patron saints of treasure seekers were St. Corona, and especially St. Christopher. The most important charms treasure hunters used addressed these saints. There were innumerable versions of the so-called St. Christopher Prayer. All Christopher Prayers followed the same pattern. They implored the saint in the name of God, the trinity, Jesus' sufferings, and of course in the name of other saints to help the charmer find a treasure. St. Christopher was asked to protect the treasure hunters from any harm, to keep evil spirits away from them and to lead them safely to the treasure. A Christopher Prayer from Southern Germany, confiscated in 1741, consisted largely of a litany-like invocation of the saint. Ever-repeated formulae which called upon the saint filled 43 narrowly written pages. The prayer begged St. Christopher, the "treasurer" in the name of God to reveal the hidden treasure "consisting of silver and gold in a good currency accepted in this country". This was a standard feature of Christopher Prayers. As counterfeiting bedevilled the early modern economy, the contemporaries evidently thought it best to ask the saint explicitly for valid coins. The text of the 1741 prayer went on to suggest

what the treasure seekers should do in case they encountered a demon. The demon would ask them ritually for their wishes. They should simply tell the demon that they wished nothing but “God’s mercy, life everlasting and money, 15 000 florins,” in the name of St. Christopher. Again, much shorter charms could be used to the same effect. In the Rhineland, treasure seekers used the formula: “St. Christopher we gave you an undying treasure, our souls, now give us a treasure of money” (Dillinger 2012a: 85–91).

Another patron saint of treasure seekers was St. Corona. So-called Corona booklets contained spells and incantations used by treasure magicians. Very like Christopher, Corona could be asked to show the way to a treasure, or simply to bring money; in one remarkable text she was asked to provide the exact sum of 99 000 florins. A Corona Prayer from Styria written in 1794, resembled – at least at first glance – the ‘official’ prayers of the Catholic church more closely than many Christopher Prayers. The person saying the prayer asked the saint to intercede on his behalf. As Corona had proven her love to Christ through her martyrdom, God would honour her intercession. All of that was of course in keeping with orthodox Catholic piety. However, the help expected from God at the intercession of St. Corona was the very concrete alleviation of the financial situation of the charmer. God should send money through the saint. The text’s theology was as questionable as its syntax:

Virgin and martyr Corona, I, a poor sinner, ask you to remember your great mercy and honour and your control over the treasures of the world and whoever asks you in the name of Jesus Christ your dear bridegroom, in his name you have power to give worldly goods to me, a poor and needy person, so I beg you with all of my humble heart, oh virgin and martyr Corona relief me from my needs and my poverty by giving me 50 000 florins of good gold for the salvation of my soul through the neediness and the redemption of the body.

The prayer stressed that the money Corona was supposed to bring would be used to the greater honour of God. Thus, it was in God’s best interest to send Corona with the money. This rather grotesque prayer-like charm ended, very like many Christopher Prayers, by ritually dismissing the saint after she had brought the treasure.

Now go away in the peace of God, which shall be between you and me, go back to the place where you came from, the eternal peace of God shall be and shall stay forever between you and me, and you will come again, when I wish to see you. Now go away and be blessed, through God and his holy five wounds, and go away in the peace of God, and the blessing

be between you and me and the mine. Amen (Dillinger 2012: 88–89; Reiterer 1905: 424–427).

The elaborate dismissal is strongly reminiscent of magical formulae used to conjure up and to control demons. The magician clearly regarded the saints as dangerous. However, the magician said clearly that he expected St. Corona to come back to him whenever he called her: Dangerous as she might be, she did bring treasure. Saints and demons were more or less interchangeable in treasure-hunters' conjuration. Extreme care had to be used when dealing with the spirit world.

Evidently, treasure hunters who used incantations that would make saints bring the treasure directly do them did not need divining rods anymore. Apart from that, all of these formulae and magical objects could be used together. For early modern treasure hunters, the charm used for the divining rod was often only the beginning of an elaborate magical enterprise. The divining rod was the most simple and the least costly magical object used. The charm said over it was often the most simple of a number of magical formulae used by treasure hunters. Treasure hunting could turn into a magical potpourri. In 1679, a professional treasure hunter handed out amulets to all his helpers and carried a lead tablet with magical signs himself. He found the treasure site with a divining rod over which he had said a secret charm. When he drew a magical circle with some symbols in it on the ground with a sword. He put birch twigs on the edge of the circle, said a lengthy conjuration and then he allowed his helpers to start digging in strictest ritual silence (Dillinger 2012: 108–111).

Treasure hunting and dowsing, especially dowsing using charms smacked of witchcraft. All magic could be condemned as demonic i.e. as virtually identical with witchcraft. In 1689, a spectacular case from Grenoble drove home this message. Canon LeBrun tried to convince the successful female dowser Olliva that she did the devil's work. Olliva did not feel guilty in any way. However, she agreed to pray fervently for God's help: if dowsing really was magic God should not allow the rod ever to move in her hand again. And indeed, after that Olliva lost her dowsing skills completely (Le Brun 1700: 226; see also Dym 2011: 147–148). In this episode, the prayer worked like a counter charm. While usual dowsers' charms implored the rod to move or asked God to grant it the power to move Olliva's prayer asked God to keep the rod from moving. This inversion narrative emphasized that dowsing had nothing to do with the dowser. It depended on the intervention of superhuman forces. Olliva was no witch – canon LeBrun never suggested that she could be a witch. She had used demonic forces unbeknownst to herself. We might see the Olliva episode as a rough parallel to the cases of female demoniacs in 17th century France: They

were the more or less passive and innocent victims of demons that manipulated the material world.

Miners seem to have been a lot more scrupulous than treasure hunters simply because mining was usually under the direct control of the state. After all, magic was, at least in theory, a punishable offense. Nevertheless, early texts about mining dating from the beginning of the 16th century already mention dowsing for minerals as a matter of course. This suggests that at least in the pioneer mining centers of Germany, dowsing had become an integral part of mining around 1500 at the latest. Authors sympathetic to dowsing do not tire of reminding us that Georg Agricola one of the founding fathers of the mining technology and modern engineering wrote at some length about the divining rod. However, many of them fail to acknowledge what Agricola actually had to say. Agricola's main concern was that dowzers used "cantonibus" [charms]. The engineer Agricola got suspicious when he learned that neither the exact shape nor the material the rod was made of mattered a great deal. To his practical mind this could mean only one thing: that the effectiveness of the rod was entirely based on the charms dowzers used. This proved that dowsing was magic. Therefore, Agricola explained he could not possibly repeat and write down the charms of the dowzers, even though he knew them. Agricola who did not hesitate to reveal and to spread sensitive and valuable knowledge concerning the cutting-edge technology of mining did not want to spread magical knowledge. The innovation he wanted to support required to break free from a questionable tradition of magic. A self-respecting Christian miner would never use anything that came "ex incantatorum impuris fontibus" [out of the impure wells of charmers]. Without the illicit charms, the divining rod would not work. Only simple folk working in the mines tried to dowse without knowing the right charms. Agricola's verdict was shared by a number of miners and mining entrepreneurs. Even though some schools for miners taught dowsing, they avoided using charms and incantations (Agricola 2003: 26–28, see also Barrett / Besterman 1926 S. 6–9; Knoblauch 1991: 74–77; Dym 2011).

Dowsing without invoking any superhuman beings and without talking to the rod: this might not have looked like magic anymore. But did it work? Obviously, even though a number of miners embraced it, the new practice of dowsing without charms was not enough. The innovative practice needed an innovative explanation.

Not everybody who advocated dowsing advocated the power of the divining rod. In 1693, LeLorraine de Vallemont, a Catholic cleric wrote a book on the exploits of Jacques Aymar, arguably the most prominent dowser of the early modern period. Vallemont explained that the divining rod merely helped the dowzers to concentrate and in a way to express what they felt. He argued that

certain particles rose from subterranean water as well as from mineral or hidden treasures which caused the movement of the divining rod. Vallemont explained that these particles were “les atomes” which had been described by the ancient Greek philosophers and more recently by Boyle. The particles entered through the pores into human bodies. Sensitive persons – such as Aymar – could feel the particles’ influence. Aymar did not need any charms. He never used any kind of incantation and tried not to interact with the spirit world. He could dowse simply because he had a talent for dowsing. He was more sensitive than ordinary persons and could feel what was quite outside of the reach of the senses of normal human beings (Vallemont 1693: 28–40). Alexander von Humboldt, the great naturalist and explorer, explained why the divining rod did not work in his hands: “I belong to the kind of people who are by nature so inferior that precious metals cannot excite them” (Sökeland 1903: 283).

Thus, in dowsing, the person of the dowser was all that mattered. Apart from the obvious chance to explain failures without questioning dowsing in general, this explanation had three major advantages. First of all, it helped to distinguish dowsing from witchcraft, indeed, it placed both activities firmly in totally different contexts. The idea that dowsing depends on the person of the dowser alone contradicted the interpretation of dowsing suggested by the Olliva episode. Demonology would always argue that the person of the magician did not matter at all, as Satan was behind all magic. According to the demonologists, the devil was the true author of all the seemingly miraculous feats of the witches. The witches themselves were the devil’s tools, expendable and unimportant. If you explained the ability to dowse as a natural quality of the dowser’s person which worked independently of all the charms and tools he might or might not use you implied that dowsing could not have anything to do with witchcraft. The suggestion that the ability to dowse is essentially a talent that some people have was strangely compatible with popular concepts of magical powers. Folk belief might still maintain that some kinds of people had magical powers, such as virgins and vagabonds, but it essentially accepted the idea that some individuals could have occult talents others simply did not have (Sperling 1668; Albinus 1704; Dillinger 2007: 51–54; Dillinger 2012: 153–163; Dym 2011: 65–66).

Secondly, if dowsing depended on a natural ability of the dowser only, one did not have to maintain that there was any connection between the rod and the object one looked for. There was no need to speculate any further about quasi magnetic forces that linked the rod with mineral veins, water or buried treasure. The exact shape and the material of the rod had never really mattered. A variety of rods seemed to work. They came in a number of forms and were made from different but mostly very cheap materials. In addition to that,

there were any number of suggestions about the right way to hold them. What all of these rods and techniques of using the rod had in common was that they were simple, cheap and meant for general use (Zeidler 1700: 40–46; Ruff 2003: 246–248; Agricola 2003: 26–28). It goes almost without saying that this added greatly to the appeal of dowsing.

If one assumed that the rod was simply an instrument the dowser used involuntarily to express what he felt, it was easy to understand why neither the form nor the material of the rod nor its exact handling mattered. If the divining rod moved at all, that was because of some reflex-like spasm in the muscles of the dowser. This spasm was in turn caused by dowser's sensitivity to elemental particles or as Vallemont had said "les atomes." Johann Gottfried Zeidler, an Enlightened Protestant theologian, poked fun at this notion by suggesting ever more ludicrous replacements for divining rods. Zeidler explained that you might as well use a sausage as a divining rod: "If you hold a Frankfurter the right way it makes a perfect divining rod and moves so strongly in your hand that it might break" (Zeidler 1700: 48).

Thirdly, if the success of a dowser depended on his personal talent alone, charms did not matter anymore. All the old charms of dowers had been about the rod, God and the saints and about the objects the dowser had hoped to find. Of course, the dowser himself was the charmer, so he played an active part insofar as he recited and used the charm. But the charm said nothing about the charmer himself. It was not designed to give him any special powers. Thus, the innovative explanation of dowsing that suggested that the success of the dowser depended on his sensitivity to minute particles made the entire tradition of charms obsolete.

With this kind of innovative explanation to support it, the popularity of dowsing soared. Even though in the early 16th century, dowers seem to have focused on finding metals or minerals, their work became quickly a lot more diversified. In the 18th century, they dowsed not only for minerals, water, and treasure troves. Dowers claimed that they could find all lost goods. In the 18th century, they searched for forgotten boundary stones, they found suitable sites for building, they searched for game in the nearly exhausted hunting grounds of the nobility, they used the divining rod to find an unoccupied place in the churchyard, dowers could even find out if a woman was pregnant. When they themselves had gotten lost, they could find the right way with their rods. They could even find mistakes in history books. In the 18th century, dowsing was not even about searching and finding anymore. The divining rod simply provided answers to all kinds of questions. At the beginning of the 18th century at the latest, it had become the all-purpose instrument of divination (Albinus 1704: 130–134, 494–499, 516–525; Zeidler 1700: 533–546).

This is how the divining rod survived. With the rise of the industrial, urban capitalist society traditional magical treasure hunting broke down. Modern treasure hunters are would-be historians or pseudo-archaeologists. They communicate with the dead not by using charms and incantations but by reading historical documents. Instead of trying to talk to the spirit world in order to find treasures, treasure hunters have become interested in historical narratives that provide clues which help to discover hidden or lost objects. The magic has turned into history; the communication of the charm into the interpretation of a source (Dillinger 2011: 178–210). Improvements and technical innovations in mining engineering marginalized dowsing during the 18th century. Experience and the increasing specialization of mining technology together with the rise of geology as an exact science transformed the whole industry. However, during the 18th century dowsing without the use of charms had become the universal technique of divination. It was cheap and simple. It could be done without charms, indeed without any of the complex magical lore the traditional treasure hunts had required. The very fact that dowsing was largely non-communicative seemed to be the key to its continuing success. As it was claimed that the ability to dowse depended entirely on the individual, inner and non-transferable qualities of the dowser himself the powers of the rod could be explained as being really the powers of the dowser. This helped to avoid the inconvenient question how exactly dowsing was supposed to work.

Dowsing survived mainly in two contexts: Water witching – a field in which comparatively cheap amateurs could still prosper – and the medical field understood in a very broad sense. Today, many dowsers claim to be able to detect so-called E-Rays – the mere existence of which is not recognized by science – which are supposed to make people ill. Dowsing for so-called ley lines became fashionable late in the 20th century. Others use the dowsing rod to find effective medicines or healthy food. The divining rod proved to be – in more than one sense – incredibly flexible. However, most of the dowsers of the 19th and 20th centuries followed the pattern established in the 18th century that suggested dowsing without the use of any charms (Prokop & Wimmer 1985; Knoblauch 1991: 182–266; Dillinger 2011: 157–159; Kivari 2016: 13–16).

Modern esotericism brought the charms back into dowsing. The divining rod or its more modern equivalent the pendulum are supposed to answer complicated and specific questions. The vocabulary of the rod and the pendulum is limited: They can move or point in a specific direction. This might be interpreted as yes, no, maybe. If the rod is supposed to solve a more complicated problem or even to help the dowser through a decision making process, the dowser needs to ask very precise, specific questions. If he or she cannot use charts or devices like the Quija Board he or she has to ask series of questions.

In the 1960s, the British Society of Dowsters recommended that the dowser should enter into a pseudo-dialogue with the rod. Any problem the rod was supposed to deal with had to be broken down into a series of questions that could be answered with yes or no (Bell 1965: 6–8). Of course, this dialogue was no charm or incantation. However, it suggested the idea that the dowser should address the dowsing instrument i.e. that he should talk to it. Of course, the dowsters maintained that they did not really need the rod to find what they were looking for: the dialogue with the rod was simply supposed to help them focus. Still, this analogy of communication became an important element of the preparation for dowsing in a way that was reminiscent of the old charms. As early as 1986, the idea that a dowser had to talk to a pendulum in order to “program” it like a computer figured prominently in a book about ‘spiritual dowsing’ (Lonegren 1986). Before the dowser could even know what the movement of the pendulum meant he had to establish some kind of rapport with it. In 1990, a book that recommended dowsing as a way to find healthy food stressed the same point. The dowser had to ask the pendulum what movement stands for ‘yes’ and which movement stands for ‘no’. Thus, the author suggested that the pendulum had a certain autonomy; he compared it to a dog that had to be trained. There were even mock questions that were supposed to test the reliability of the pendulum (Bailey 1990: 45–56). The analogy between the pendulum and a computer that had to be programmed seems to have been more convincing than the one between the pendulum and a pet that had to be trained (Ozaniec 1994: 13). In 1999, a guide for dowsters stressed how important it was to “interact” with the pendulum. This was more than a pseudo-dialogue. The dowsing instrument needed to be “programmed”. Indeed, “the technique for asking the pendulum questions is similar to that of using a computer.” One needs to “activate” it and to ask questions in a specific way. Only then could the dowsing instrument become an “extension of your psyche.” At any rate, it was a good idea to invoke some force of light before dowsing in order to ward off any kind of negative influence (Eason 1999: 16–22). The influence of digital technology on contemporary dowsing is obvious: precision and the right phrasing of questions matter. The prayer-like charms of the late Middle Ages and the early modern period have been replaced by programming, a stylized simplified language comparable to a computer language. Dowsing: The Ultimate Guide for the 21st century explained in 2010 that divining rods had to be disciplined. The book compared the divining rod to an unruly child. It needed to be told precisely what it had to do. The central element of dowsing was the art of asking the right questions in the proper way. The dowser should say out loud what he expected of the rod always adding a polite ‘please’. This seems to suggest that the dowsing instrument had become more than an inanimate instrument.

Still, it was not claimed that the dowsing instrument should be regarded as a living or conscious entity that by itself could have or gain any kind of information about the material world. All the dialogues with the rod were supposed to be simply a means to access the “vast hidden database of human awareness” (Brown 2010: 38, 61–70).

The little dialogues between dowzers and dowsing instruments modern esotericism so urgently recommends mirror the old charms. The communication with the rod has two aims: charge the rod with power and make sure that it answers every question correctly. Essentially, this is what the late medieval and early modern charms did, too. The charms invoked God and the saints. They seemed to remind the rod, the fellow creature of the dowser, that their creator wanted it to be effective and truthful. The example of the saints should teach the rod to tell the pure truth. After Agricola’s criticism, new quasi-scientific explanations for the presumed effectiveness of dowsing were formed that rejected the use of charms. The more these new explanations focused on the person of the dowser himself the more important became his or her concentration. The dowsing instrument helped the dowser to concentrate. In order to do this, it needed to be in perfect harmony with the dowser, in a way it helped him to realize what he knew or felt already. The modern dialogues with the dowsing instruments do not really reveal any objective fact. They are supposed to help the dowser to explore his or her own mind and to use his or her full potential. Neither the authority of God nor the reality of the material world matter anymore. In modern dowsing, the charmer charms himself.

NOTES

¹ Dowsing is just beginning to attract the attention of historians, see Dym 2011, Dillinger 2012, Dillinger 2017. Folkloristic studies, even if they work with some historical materials, do not use key secondary and primary sources, Kivari 2016.

² Tepl, Johann von: *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen* (ca. 1400), http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/?id=5&xid=2828&kapitel=1#gb_found.

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