

The aim of my paper was to call attention to similarities between rebus and charms. Words used in double meaning, the orientation of the script (up and down, etc.), Latin words instead of national language, numbers and musical notes read as texts, words divided into pictures, abbreviations read as words or changed into full words – all such forms can be used in magic texts too. Puzzles in general combine text and drawing in unexpected ways, and as such are well represented in our mass media too.

Rebus studies are intriguing and complicated. I wanted only to stress here that if we study magic formulas, incantations, double-meaning expressions, multilingualism and similar forms, we have to check rebus studies too.

### Postscript

My paper is a shorter version of a lengthy survey of the history of the rebus.

I list here only the most important **publications**:

Bosio, Franco. 1993. *Il libro dei rebus*. Milano: aValiardi.

Danesi, Marcel. 2002. *The puzzle instinct: the meaning of puzzles in human life*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Haver van, Jozef. 1964. *Nederlandse incantatieliteratuur. Een gecommuniceerd compendium van nederlandse bezweringsformules*. Gent: Secretariaat van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor taal- en letterkunde.

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## Necromancy from Antiquity to Medieval and Modern Times

**Abstract.** Scholars agree that necromancy is defined as a special mode of divination by evocation of the dead, while the similar term nigromancy became a synonym for black magic as opposed to white magic or the art of trickery or illusionary magic. Although the latter was often suspected of crossing the line to demonic magic, necromancy was always located in a forbidden area.

**Key words:** divination, necromancy, witch of Endor, conjuration of the dead

The art of necromancy is based on three premises:

- 1) The survival of the soul after death
- 2) The supernatural knowledge of the spirits
- 3) Communication between the living and the dead

Necromancy is found in all times and cultures and occurs in paganism as well as in biblical sources. One of the oldest accounts is a representative example. In Homer's "Odyssey", Ulysses evokes the spirits of dead in order to learn the future. Guided by Circe he performs several rites until two spirits appear but he waits for the expert Tiresias. Various instances of necromancy have been recorded by the Greek authors, Plutarch, Herodotus and Pausanias, and the Roman authors, Horace, Cicero, Tacitus and Dio Cassius. Poets like Lucan narrate horrific but impressive dramatic rituals based on necromancy.

Although necromancy is considered the most condemned divination practice, the Bible includes the necromantic episode of the woman of Endor which has given rise to much debate. In Christian thought necromancy holds an unsavoury proximity to demoniacal influence although it was believed that God allows the apparitions of dead spirits. The nature of spirits and demons who appeared in the guise

of dead relatives was an often disputed matter. Necromancy is defined as divination by the evocation of the dead. Medieval sources equate necromancy with nigromancy. Deriving from the Latin word *niger* = black, the term refers to black magic or the black art. Black magic is defined as employing the help of evil spirits, while white magic was based on human dexterity and trickery.

The three fundamental ideas behind necromantic practice are 1. the concept of the survival of the soul after death, together with 2. the presumption of a superior knowledge by the disembodied spirit, and 3. the possibility of communication between the living and the dead. Communication with the spirits requires certain conditions as there are special times, places and rites that have to be observed.

### Necromancy in Pagan Countries

More or less elaborated forms of necromancy can be found in every cultural area of antiquity, and according to antique sources the practice is reported as common in all known pagan countries. Where necromancy originated is not known, although the historian Strabo is convinced that this form of divination was used in the land where all magic was supposed to come from, Persia (Strabo *Geographica* 1961–2005: XVI: ii, 39). The practice was also recorded in Chaldea, Etruria, Babylonia and Egypt. Moses warns the Israelites against engaging in the practice of divination with the help of the dead like the Canaanites (Deuteronomy 18: 9–12).

In Greece and Rome, evocation of the dead took place especially in caverns, in volcanic regions and near rivers and lakes which, according to the common opinion, were the boundaries with the otherworld. Consequently the oracle site in Thesprotia was near the River Acheron that was supposed to be one of the rivers of hell. The cavern oracle of Laconia near Taenarus also claimed that it was a hell entrance. (Ogden 2001: 29–61) The most famous Italian oracle of Cumae is situated in a cavern near Lake Avernus in Campania. (Ogden 2001: 61–74).

The oldest Greek account of necromancy is in Homer's tale of Ulysses' visit to Hades (*Odyssey* 2014: IX) and of his evocation of souls by means of the various rites indicated by Circe. It seems remarkable that, although Ulysses tries to consult only the expert



Figure 1. *The Witch of Endor* (Master of Otto van Moerdrecht).

in prophecy, the seer Tiresias, a number of unnamed spirits appear, together or successively, until the desired seer arrives.

Besides poetical and mythological sources, Greek and Roman historians record several instances of necromantic practices. At Cape Taenarus Callonda evoked the soul of Archilochus, whom he had murdered (Plutarch 1844: Xvii; Plutarch 1927: 560; Ogden 2001: 29–42). Periander tyrant of Corinth, and one of the seven wise men of Greece, sent messengers to the oracle on the River Acheron to ask his dead wife, Melissa, where she had put a stranger's treasure (Herodotus 1974: 5. 92; Ogden 2002: 188–189).

Necromancy is mixed with incubation in the case of Elysus of Terina in Italy, who desired to know if his son's sudden death was due to poisoning. He went to the oracle of the dead and, while sleeping in the temple, had a vision of both his father and his son who gave him the desired information (Plutarch 1927: xiv). Among the Romans, Horace miscallenously mentions the conjurations of the dead several times (Horace 1994: I, viii, 25 sq.), and so does Cicero (1971: I, xvi). Even emperors were rumoured to have practised necromancy: Drusus (Tacitus 2004: II xxviii), Nero (Sueton 1998 vo. II: xxxiv; Pliny 1963: xxx, v), and Caracalla (Dio Cassius 1955: lxxvii, xv). The grammarian Apion pretended that he had conjured up the soul of Homer, whose country and parents he wanted to discover (Pliny 1963: xxx, vi). Sextus Pompeius consulted the famous Thessalian

magician Erichtho to learn from the dead the issue of the struggle between his father and Caesar (Lucan 1992: VI).

### Rituals of Blood

Concerning necromantic rituals in Antiquity we do not have detailed information about rites or incantations apart from the account in the *Odyssey*. This record says that Ulysses dug a hole and poured libations around it. Then he sacrificed a black sheep and spirits or shades who were attracted by the blood came forward, and eventually Tiresias appeared. Lucan describes a horrific scene (1992 *Pharsalia* VI) in which his cruel sorceress Erichtho performs her bloody craft. While murmuring incantations, she drags the corpse around pouring blood into its veins to reanimate it.

Christian authors drawing from pagan sources assumed the above-mentioned characteristics of necromantic rituals, and added their own conclusions. Isidore of Seville, following Lucan (1992: VI) states that necromancers conjure up the dead with their magical charms to learn the future.

*They dare to offer for sale the demon they summon, so that anyone can destroy his enemies with evil arts. They enjoy blood and sacrifices and often touch the bodies of the dead. By the imprecations of necromancers the resuscitated dead seem to prophesy and answer questions. [...] In questioning them, blood is poured on the corpse, for it is said demons love blood. Whenever necromancy is performed blood is mixed with water, so that they may be called forth.* (Isidore of Seville 2008: Book 8: 10–11)

Medieval theologians subscribed to the same views, and only rarely is a deviation from the common opinion to be found (Harmening 1979: 20sq).

### Conjuration and Raising Dead Prophets and Speaking from the Belly: Necromancy in the Bible

The prophet Isaiah provides us with the first Biblical account of necromancy. It is generally recognized as pre-exilic in date and the earliest description of the Hebrew practice of necromancy (Schmidt 1994: 147–154).

*and when they say to you / 'Consult those-who-return and the Knowers who chirp and mutter! Do not a people consult their Gods the dead on behalf of the living?' (Isaiah 8: 19)*

The identity of the so called Knowers has been disputed: are they the dead, the ancestors who have special knowledge about the future? Who are these the practitioners who have the special knowledge enabling them to communicate with the dead?

The Hebrew term *‘ōbôth* indicates the spirits of the dead in its first meaning, and a second connotation concerns the divining spirit the texts are talking about when referring to the Pythia, who possesses or is possessed by a Pythonic spirit. The Vulgate adopted the term, (Deuteronomy 18: 11; Isaiah 19: 3) and also applied it to diviners who foretell the future with the help of Python. In the latter case it is not clear if the spirit is a spirit of a dead person or a demon. A third meaning of the term *‘ōb* connects it with a leather bag holding water (Job xxxii, 19), a denotation that could be linked with the Pythonic spirit talking from the belly of its host. This reference can be explained as an indication of an assumed deception: the diviners do not really communicate with the spirit of the dead, they imitate it only. On the other hand, belly-talking had been a faculty accepted in antiquity since the voice of a medium would change when possessed by a spirit and would sound as if it came from a cavity. Isaiah's remark (8: 19) makes sense then, when he says that necromancers "murmur" or "mutter".

Many references in the Bible only mention necromancy as an offence against Mosaic Law. According to Leviticus the Mosaic Law forbids it (Leviticus 19: 31; 20: 6), proclaiming that divination by evoking the dead is detested by God and is punishable by death (Leviticus 20: 27; cf. 1 Samuel 28: 9). In 6 occurrences in the Bible diviners are reported to have a Pythonic spirit. In Acts 16:16 the female slave meets St. Paul announcing that he comes from the true God, but he seemingly does not want to hear this message from a heathen slave and exorcises her.

The most disputed and at the same time the most famous case of necromancy in the Bible is the evocation of Samuel by the so called witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28). King Saul, who was at war with the Philistines, asked God whether he would be victorious in the battle that was about to take place. He did so by legal means of divination,

but God did not answer him and so he sought answers through the practice of necromancy that he had himself forbidden. He went to Endor to a woman who allegedly had a divining spirit and she called forth the soul of the prophet Samuel and spoke to him. The woman told him the prophet's word, that God had abandoned him and that he would be defeated. This dramatic narrative has given much room to diverse interpretations. Some exegeses deny that the risen dead is really the prophet Samuel and say that the woman of Endor has deceived the desperate king, while others claim that it has been the devil who took the form of Samuel. Finally others deem Samuel's appearance real (Kleiner 1995: 27–136; Wagensommer 2010: 68–76; Schmidt 1994: 201–227). The necromantic questioning of Samuel through the woman of Endor sparked a wide and very diverse range of responses from Christian and Jewish scholars alike. Among others, Josephus, Justin Martyr, Origen, Augustine, Tertullian, Jerome and later Martin Luther and John Calvin offered interpretations of the scene at Endor. Over the centuries theologians have disputed about the apparition: was it truly Samuel's ghost or rather a Pythonic spirit that was permitted to assume Samuel's form? Even among those who have chosen the view that it was Samuel, there is disagreement over the source of the power behind his conjuration. Some view Yahweh as the source while others hold the opinion that there was demonic deception behind the scene.

### **Between Demon Evocation and Evocations of the Dead: Necromancy in the Christian Era**

During the first centuries of the Christian era, the Church fathers reported that necromancy was still in use among the pagans (Tertullian, *De anima* 1947/2007: LVI, LVII). As necromancy was associated with demon evocation like other forms of magic Christians were warned against demonic intervention. Since it was common among pagans, even converted Christian still practised this old form of divination (Tertullian, *De anima* 1947/2007: LVII). Therefore the pronouncements of church authorities in synods and councils, and papal edicts, and laws laid down by Christian emperors like Constantine, Valentinian, Valens, Theodosius and others are directed against practitioners of pagan magic. Old German glosses link the word *helliruna*, with the root *hel* meaning 'death' with

Middle High German *heltn* 'to conceal'. To call the soul back from hell = *sela von hello kihalota* (Graff 1963: 852). Old German *galdre* and Old Norse *galdr* refer to 'necromancy' or 'the evocation of the dead'. In the Old so-called Poetic Edda, in the *Grógaldr*, *Svipdagr* calls his dead mother Groa, a *völva*, back from her grave to learn her charms. She helps him successfully in a task set by his cruel stepmother (Edda 1991: 235–238).

Medieval necromancy hovers between the connotation of black magic and conjuring up the dead. A paper manuscript of Zurich shows that alongside the more commonly accepted meaning of necromancy as black art (= nigromancy) the older meaning of conjuring up the dead is still in existence (Grimm 1968: 866; 3: 411).

### **The Old Norse Ritual of Sitting out in the Open on Nine Squares**

In the Old Norse saga there is peculiar technique of divination called *utisetá* that is practised on burial mounds. There were three method of isolating the magician from the world around himself or herself. One was the ox-hide, which was marked with nine squares and was stood or sat upon. A second was the setting out of hurdles, or lengths of wood, to form a skeletal nine-square arrangement, with the centre square being occupied. The third method was the platform, usually supported by four posts, which was called *sejd hjallr* 'magical platform'. The first and second methods interest us here. In the *Mariusaga*, a man sat on a freshly tanned ox-hide in an enclosed part of the forest to learn the outcome of battle (Pärpola 2004: 263). He had to draw nine squares on the hide and the devil or the dead would answer the question.

"*Faereyinga Saga*" ("Färingar Saga") chapter 40 narrates the story of Thrand, who draws a structure with nine squares and then he sits calmly beside the fire and three dead people appear to join him (Thrand 1994: 92–95; Lecouteux 2009: 68–63). In Norway the ritual of *utisetá* serves to wake up the dead or trolls (*útisetá at vekja troll upp*). In the Balder's dream in the Poetic Edda Odin allows the dead to rise up from the ground. After Balder's death he wakes up a *völva* to learn Balder's fate in the afterworld. "Magic he spoke and mighty charms / Till spell-bound she rose and in death she spoke" (Edda 1991: 196–197).

All conjurations of the dead start with the same formula: “Wake up, wake up, good lady”, sings Svipdag: “Wake up Angantyr, Hervör calls you” in the *Hervor Saga*. In his “History of the Danes” Saxo Grammaticus adds further details. The giantess Harthgrepa wants to know the future of her charge Hadingus. Since a dead man lies in the house where they both spend the night, she scores runes on a piece of wood and demands that Hadingus should put them under the dead Man’s tongue. The corpse wakes up and is furious because they have disturbed him, cursing them angrily: “Perish accursed he who hath dragged me back from those below, let him be punished for calling a spirit out of bale!” (Saxo Grammaticus. 2006, I, VI: 4).

The Old Norse sources agree that the awakening of the dead is painful for them; they only reluctantly appear and often take revenge on the living. Groa rebukes her son Svipdag although she had promised to aid him. The awakened *völva* shows Odin Balder’s fate but constantly tries to sink back into the ground. Anantyr tells her daughter that it is madness to wake up the dead and threaten them. The *Färingar Saga* gives a strange death ordeal: Thorgrimm the evil had killed Sigmund to steal his golden ring. Thrand visits him and makes a big fire in the living room and has four wooden grates put into a square. Nine fields are placed on each side of the square. He sits on a chair and demands that no one should speak to him. He sits for a while. And then a man comes into the room all wet, warms himself and disappears, another man shows up and disappears, the third man is Siegmund carrying his head in his hands. Thrand is able to reconstruct the crime that has happened and tell how the three men came to die. The golden ring is also found and Thorgrim is disclosed as murderer (Lecoutex 1987: 97; Lecouteux 2009: 68–73).

Apart from Scandinavian death rituals, the medieval reporter Caesarius of Heisterbach mentions necromancy as the most common kind of conjuration practice. The 5th book of his dialogue of miracles deals with a cleric who demonstrates to an incredulous knight all kinds of magic rituals including conjuring up the dead and demons. The purpose of necromancy is now extended to all kinds of answers to problems and enigmas (Caesarius 2009: 298–303, 952–953, 961, 965, 967, 1011, 1013, 2180). Interestingly enough, Caesarius mentions a closed circle for the magician to conjure the dead, while the

ritual of *utisetar* required the nine squares. Possibly the magic circle is a more southern kind of ritual magic not prominent in the North (Ellis 1968: 161–162; Raudvere 2002: 113).

In confession books necromancy is rebuked as a sin. In a 14th century treatise about the seven sacraments necromancers are compared with heretics: “Weder das sacrament sunden die ketzer [...] Vnd die do swarcze kunst treiben also nigromancia, dy man treibit mit den toten vnd erem gebeyne, is sei mensche adir fie.” (Pietsch 1884: 190f.).

In Hans Sachs’s history “*Ein wunderbarlich gesicht keyser Maximilian*” the conjuration of the dead is motivated by curiosity. The spectators want to know, what shape and appearance the dead have in their altered state. So the dead wife of Emperor Maximilian, Mary of Burgundy, is conjured up. In the version ascribed to Trithemius (1462–1516) an unknown magician calls up the empress and two other dead persons. When Maximilian tries to speak to the ghost of his wife it vanishes. Luther’s version identifies the magician as Tritheim himself who asks the spirit the question the Emperor was keen on, whom he should take for his second wife (Sachs 1870 vol. XX: 483.485; Luther 1883: Nr. 4450). The “*Wagnerbuch*” of 1593 mentions necromantic practice on several occasions and the diabolic spirit Auerhahn explains how he has to get into a dead body in order to speak from its mouth (Das Wagnerbuch 2005: 193, 15).

In recent times, necromancy, as a distinct belief and practice, reappears under the name of spiritualism although the narratives about necromantic rituals show that the dead are made to appear by force and in many cases come very reluctantly while in Spiritualism they seem to come willingly.

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# THE RITUAL YEAR 10

MAGIC IN RITUALS AND RITUALS IN MAGIC

Edited by  
Tatiana Minniyakhmetova and Kamila Velkoborská

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