
Rosetta

Mureddu, N. (2013) ‘‘Ad omnia quae uelit incredibilis’’: An Overview of Ancient Magic from the Roman Context to its Late Antique Perspective and Models’

Rosetta **14**: 38-53.

<http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue14/mureddu.pdf>

‘Ad omnia quae uelit incredibilis’: An Overview of Ancient Magic from the Roman Context to its Late Antique Perspective and Models

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Introduction

Magic and Magician are, in modern societies, two terms linked to false and backward beliefs, but their social meaning in the ancient world was a serious matter and had a very powerful influence on the daily life of man.

This short paper will try to briefly describe the history, meaning and main characteristics of ancient magic from its Greco-Roman ancestry to the Late Antique age, in order to make the reader familiar with the subject. Consequently I will be using Late Antiquity as a paradigmatic historical period, to pinpoint its relationship with the emerging Christian faith, but also to understand how much its attributes changed during the theoretical reinterpretation of the new religion. The case of Simon Magus, a controversial and still debated wizard active in the early years of Christianity, will provide the final example for this research. Given the brevity of this paper, the analysis will be reduced to its minimum terms and will aim to be nothing more than a stimulus for further studies to be conducted on this subject.

The Magician and his background

As Rives states in his research, when we encounter the word “Magic” in classical sources, either in its Greek form *μαγεία* or in the Latin, *magia*, it had already lost its original meaning,¹ which in Avestan, the old Persian sacred language, indicated the priest in charge of operating religious rituals for the benefit of the supreme god Ormuzd and of his worshippers.² It was probably after the Persian Wars that Greek civilisation came into contact with these rituals, which were full of chants and incomprehensible mumblings, and recognised in them a connection with an obscure

¹ Rives, J.B., ‘Magus and its cognates in Classical Latin’, in R.L. Gordon and F.M. Simòn, *Magical practice in the Latin West* (Leiden/Boston, 2010), p. 53.

² Rives, ‘Magus and its cognates in Classical Latin’, p. 55.

supernatural world believed to generate malignant power.³ One of our best sources for the definition of magic is Apuleius, who in his *Apology* states: 'In the Persian language, magician is what in ours is called priest.'⁴

Among the rare literary testimonies about magic, Apuleius represents our best witness to the beliefs of common people concerning magic during the Roman age: a private power almost omnipotent and able to damage and even destroy whoever was considered an opponent: 'They call magician he who, speaking in communion with the immortal gods, obtains the power to do whatever he wishes through the strength of his spells.'⁵

In this description we identify two elements specific to a religious ritual: communication with the gods and chants. However, there was a clear distinction between true and proper religion (*Religio*) and superstition (*Superstitio*) of which magic was the extreme branch. The Romans defined *religio* as the traditional honours paid to the gods by the State with legal rites and sacrifices; and recognised as religious people all those who carried out sacrifices and rituals in accordance with the State calendar.⁶ Cicero states: *Those [...] who carefully reviewed and so to speak retraced all the lore of ritual were called 'religious' (from 'relegere', to retrace).*⁷

This implies a belief in the existence of gods and spirits which, if propitiated by specific actions, did not hinder daily life but rather improved it with good fortune and prosperity. For instance, we can consider the *Carmen Arvale*, a religious spell composed to keep war away and allow the fields to bear fruit.⁸ Hutton states that in the Roman world everything was strictly prescribed according to a calendar and had to be devout to the divine.⁹

³ Fowler, R.L., 'The concept of magic' in *TCRA*, III, 2005, p. 283.

⁴ Apuleius, *Apology*, I, 25, 9.

⁵ Apuleius, *Apology*, I, 26, 6.

⁶ Beard, 'The boundaries of Roman religion', p. 217.

⁷ Cicero, *On the nature of the gods*, II, 28.

⁸ *Carmen Arvale*, in *C.I.L.*, VI, 2104.

⁹ Hutton, *The pagan religion of...*, p. 289.

Roman *Superstitio* was, still according to Cicero, about: *people who spent whole days in prayer and sacrifice to ensure that their children should outlive them.*¹⁰ These were termed 'superstitious' (from 'superstes', survivors)¹¹ and soon, under the Empire, the term began to signify the cult of foreign practices, implying irregular actions towards the gods. Magic was one of these and, although having the same premises - the belief in gods and spirits - it interacted with the gods according to its own agenda. The magician's principal aim was not praying to these entities with devotion, on the contrary he tried to coerce them with spells in order to use their powers for their own purposes. According to Mauss, magic was a mysterious rite. Since illegal, it was performed in secret, in dark, hidden places, manipulating especially those nocturnal and chthonic deities related with the underworld.¹² The action itself was called *maleficium*.

Pliny gives a doubtful account of a series of side-disciplines which assisted the magical doctrine in his time, these are: concepts of natural medicine, confidence in operating the same rites through which regular religion worked, knowledge of astrology, and awareness of the effects caused by particular animal parts and plants.¹³ Despite Pliny's skepticism towards this *magorum uanitas*,¹⁴ both common people and the elite of Rome believed it to be real and feared its power. There is, though, a distinction to make: it is true that magic was not legal, but at the same time not all magic was abhorred. In his study, Hutton explains that a branch of magic which used natural properties as a harmless aid in everyday life, a rudimentary pharmaceutical resource, was indeed tolerated.¹⁵ This kind of good magic was a direct descendant of the shaman in primitive societies and was a fairly common feature, even though it was viewed with suspicion and usually the performers lived at the margins of communities.¹⁶

What was, instead, feared and condemned was so-called black magic. As Beard points out, it was made illegal by the *Lex cornelia de sicariis and ueneficiis* of 81

¹⁰ Cicero, *On the nature of the gods*, II, 28.

¹¹ Cicero, *On the nature of the gods*, II, 28.

¹² Mauss, M., *A general history of magic*, p. 23.

¹³ Pliny, *Natural History*, XXX, 1, 18.

¹⁴ Pliny, *Natural History*, XXII, 20.

¹⁵ Hutton, R., *The Pagan religion of the ancient British Isles* (Oxford, 1991), p. 290.

¹⁶ Hutton, R., *The Pagan religion of the ancient British Isles*, p. 290.

B.C., which includes this discipline among the crimes of poisoning.¹⁷ Performing a spell meant polluting in a very toxic way the spirit and body of a victim, the aim being to control, damage and sometimes kill him or her. Fowler adds that the punishment for such abuse was, in fact, the death penalty.¹⁸

The essence of what magic could perform is represented by Lucan in his *Bellum Civilis*:

These sinful rites and these songs
Abhorred Erichtho, fiercest of the
race, Spurned for their piety, and yet
viler art Practised in novel form. To
her no home Beneath a sheltering
roof her direful head Thus to lay down
were crime: deserted tombs Her
dwelling-place, from which, darling of
hell, She dragged the dead. Nor life
nor gods forbad But that she knew the
secret homes of Styx And learned to
hear the whispered voice of ghosts At
dread mysterious meetings.¹⁹

In this description of the Thessalian witch Erichtho, it is immediately clear that the rites she operates are not legitimated by common acceptance. Erichtho hides in a cemetery, which, as Clark explains, is a sacred and untouchable space in the Roman tradition.²⁰ She misuses the space by inhabiting it, she desecrates the tombs by unearthing corpses, and she uses necromancy on them to predict the future – none of which was acceptable according to Roman concepts of civility. Of course Lucan is a poet and we cannot take his literary description as historical evidence, nevertheless it is indicative of some 1st century A.D. perceptions of what a magical practice involved. The most impious action was invading the gods' sphere to obtain self-accomplishment. According to the magical disciplines, gods, or sometimes minor divinities, could be invoked by spells and pushed to interfere with reality in order to favour the magician.

¹⁷ Beard, M., 'The boundaries of Roman religion', in M. Beard, J. North, S. Price, *Religions of Rome*, (Cambridge, 1998), p. 233.

¹⁸ Fowler, 'The concept of magic', p. 284.

¹⁹ Lucan, *Pharsalia*, VI, vv. 507-515.

²⁰ Clark, G., 'Translating Relics', in J. Crick *et al.*, *Early Medieval Europe*, (Hoboken, 2001), p. 164.

Of this turbulent relationship with magic, the late antique age offers a unique view. For the first time, a battle takes place between concepts of the divine. If, in the past, magic had only been condemned by the state, and ended violently with the execution of the magician, real or suspected, in the Christian age the entire discipline was threatened by a new class of holy men and a new system of faith.

Magicians and Saints in Late Antiquity

The role of the Christians on the historical scene changed radically between the 2nd and 4th centuries A.D. During the Roman persecutions Christian rites were considered black magic in themselves, as they incorporated secret and exclusive meetings, supernatural deeds, such as resurrection from death, and the Eucharistic meal, misunderstood as a cannibalistic act.²¹ Soon after Constantine's edict in 313 A.D., however, Christianity acquired the legal power and duty to defend its own community from the demonic power of the old deities, symbols and rites.²²

Yet the behavior of the ministers of the Church now appeared ambiguous. All the texts describing anecdotes about the evil power of magic belonged to the patristic tradition, but why did the Church keep stressing the existence of supernatural forces? Why did the Church not declare the old gods or demons as fake, simply negating their power *in toto*?

Firstly, we need to point out that the Christians had acquired and adapted the Roman dichotomy of *Religio* and *Superstitio*. The former was now intended as the worship of the true God, the Christ, and the latter was the belief in false deities present among pagan cultures.²³ Secondly, the followers of the Christian faith did not stop believing in magic and false gods, the pagan deities were instead propagandised as demons which still inhabited the earth, acting as capricious spirits, cantankerous and hostile to men. Magic, therefore, was the art that allowed impious men to use these demons for evil purposes.²⁴ This eventuality was a serious concern, especially for the political authorities of the time. In fact, magical arts were

²¹ McGowan, A., 'Eating People: Accusations of Cannibalism Against Christians in the Second Century', in JECS, II, 4, 1994, 422.

²² Beard, 'The boundaries of Roman religion', p. 225.

²³ Beard, 'The boundaries of Roman religion', p. 216.

²⁴ Ogden, D., *Magic, witchcraft and ghosts in the Greek and Roman worlds* (Oxford, 2002).

believed to influence politics and even endanger social life indiscriminately, for the benefit of the conjurers. An invaluable example of this trend is the anecdote told by John Chrysostom²⁵ about an event which occurred in Antioch between 371 and 372 A.D. under the emperor Valens. Some *palatini* had misused the money of the treasury and while preparing the case, an accusation of sorcery arose. The trial ended with a mass death-sentence and in the destruction of all the books suspected of containing spells. According to Ammianus, the *codices* were *mostly books of various liberal disciplines and law*.²⁶ This gives an idea of the extent to which magic was feared in the 4th century AD and the panic it could generate.

Against this background, magicians were accused of generating misunderstanding in front of people, since soon after the example of Christ, they started acting like him and calling themselves gods able to perform miracles:

Because after Christ's ascension into heaven the devils put forward certain men who said that they themselves were gods; and they were not only not persecuted [...], but even deemed worthy of honours.²⁷

Apparently these magicians were not considered charlatans. The Christians, in fact, thought they truly possessed powers, owing to the intercession of demons. Who were these wizards? A place in biblical mythology was soon found for them: they were descendants of those fallen angels driven away by God and left roaming on earth to cause temptation with malignant powers.²⁸

It is unclear whether magical powers were believed to be conferred upon the practitioners by means of direct contact with the demons, or if such creatures were meant to possess superhuman knowledge that needed to be taught and understood. Sometimes it is made clear that, unlike Sanctity, acquired by devotion, prayer and eremitism, magic was a *τέχνη*, an art, a science that could be learnt and was taught within special academies, the most famous of which was in Memphis, Egypt - a country reputed as the homeland of magic.²⁹ From Egypt the discipline quickly

²⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homily on Acts*, 38.5.

²⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Histories*, XXIX, 1, 41.

²⁷ Justin, *Apology*, 26.

²⁸ Fowler, 'The concept of magic', p. 286.

²⁹ Graf, F., 'How to cope with a difficult life' in P. Schaffer and P. Kippenberg, *Envisioning Magic* (Leiden, 1997), p. 94.

spread to neighbouring areas, especially in Palestine and Syria which shared the same aura of mystery. Jerome's account is instructive: he tells about a boy who, dismayed by the choice of chastity made by a girl he coveted, went to Memphis and remained there for a long period, learning magic. Once ready, he employed his art, writing formulae on a tissue and hiding it under the girl's threshold. She abruptly changed her mind and shouted the boy's name. Her relatives, suspecting a *maleficium*, called St. Hilarion who immediately intercepted the spell and destroyed it.³⁰

It is evident that the Christian church constructed a new mythology about magic. In this environment, Christian hermits and future Saints acted as policemen of the supernatural. They hunted and defeated demons, desecrated pagan temples which they were believed to infest, exorcized people possessed by them, and neutralised the magical incantations and the powers of the dark artists. Written chronicles of ambiguous personalities, who, in the name of their various philosophies, performed almost the same prodigies as the saints began to be circulated. The aim of this was to demonstrate the final inferiority of their magic in comparison to the power of the new holy men. Apollonius of Tyana is one of these pagan magicians, operating in Cappadocia during the 1st century A.D. He drove away evil spirits from boys through written spells, he healed injuries with the simple touch of his hands, he invoked ghosts of illustrious men to fulfil his thirst for knowledge, he knew how to face vampires and, apparently, he could resurrect the dead.³¹ As he was active in the 1st century A.D., nearly contemporaneous with Jesus, he was sometimes confused with Christ himself and was therefore a great concern for later Church fathers, who had to work hard to differentiate the two characters before the faithful.

It is comprehensible that in a world destabilised by wars, invasions, different philosophies, cults, and mysteries, imposing a new faith was not easy. This is especially the case in a period when – unlike the modern age when religion and science have more defined contrasts in their respective creeds – the difference between one belief and another was less marked. After all, Christianity believed in a man who declared himself to be the son of God and performed miracles that were

³⁰ Jerome, *Life of Hilarion*, 12.

³¹ Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius*, III, 38,39, IV, 11-16, 25, 45.

not so different from magic. All we can see is that the Church fathers kept these rivals of Christ alive – indeed, reminding their faithful to trust only he who was the true God and providing *exempla* of fakers in their sermons, who, once unmasked by the saints, encountered a complete defeat and an ignominious end.

The example of Simon Magus

According to a wide range of documents issued from the early years of Christianity onwards, Simon of Gitta was said to have lived in the 1st century A.D. in Palestine, Egypt and Rome and had a series of encounters with the apostles. During his education in Alexandria, he studied Greek Literature and, in addition, Practical Magic. He came to represent the epitome of the evil sorcerer, enemy of the Christian authorities, and is thus an interesting conclusion for our study.

As the earliest reference to him shows, he was not interested in the salvation of the soul, but in the acquisition of power through mastering the occult and materiality. The first mention of his behaviour comes from the New Testament, Acts of the Apostles:

Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, 'This man is the power of God that is called Great.' And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed.³²

It was clear that Simon was going to be a source of trouble for the Church. In this first fragment he tries to make commerce with the divine power - a practice continued by some heretic clerics during the middle ages and called, indeed, Simony. Peter curses him for being blasphemous and Simon retreats from his purpose, this time not giving proof of his arts. Later sources give more detailed accounts, in the *Clementine Literature*, an account of facts narrated by one pseudo-Clement who, standing by St. Peter in his evangelic mission, witnessed the danger of an antagonist like Simon Magus. Within this corpus of scripts, a member of Peter's

³² Acts of the Apostles, VIII, 9-21.

circle, Aquila, who happened to have known Simon, gives details of his life, narrating the characteristics of the evil opponent:

This magician is vehement towards all things that he wishes, and wicked above measure. For in all things we know him well, since from boyhood we have been assistants and ministers of his wickedness; and had not the love of God rescued us from him, we should even now be engaged in the same evil deeds with him. [...] By nation he is a Samaritan, from a village of the Gettones; by profession a magician yet exceedingly well trained in the Greek literature; desirous of glory, and boasting above all the human race, so that he wishes himself to be believed to be an exalted power, which is above God the Creator, and to be thought to be the Christ, and to be called the Standing One. And he uses this name as implying that he can never be dissolved, asserting that his flesh is so compacted by the power of his divinity, that it can endure to eternity. Hence, therefore, he is called the Standing One, as though he cannot fall by any corruption.³³

Here comes the worst accusation, his professing to be an immortal God, imperishable and incorruptible. This is what he claims to be able to do thanks to his magic:

Me, Simon, who by magic art am able to show many signs and prodigies, by means of which either my glory or our sect may be established. For I am able to render myself invisible to those who wish to lay hold of me, and again to be visible when I am willing to be seen. If I wish to flee, I can dig through the mountains, and pass through rocks as if they were clay. If I should throw myself headlong from a lofty mountain, I should be borne unhurt to the earth, as if I were held up; when bound, I can loose myself, and bind those who had bound me; being shut up in prison, I can make the barriers open of their own accord; I can render statues animated, so that those who see suppose that they are men. I can make new trees suddenly spring up, and produce sprouts at once. I can throw myself into the fire, and not be burnt; I can change my countenance, so that I cannot be recognised; but I can show people that I have two faces. I shall change myself into a sheep or a goat; I shall make a beard to grow upon little boys; I shall ascend by flight into the air; I shall exhibit abundance of gold, and shall make and unmake kings.³⁴

³³ Pseudo-Clement, *Recognitions*, II, 2.8.

³⁴ Pseudo-Clement, *Recognitions*, II, 2.9.

This is a very exhaustive list of what magic could enable people to do according to late antique beliefs, it is a power capable of changing matter and the laws of physics. How was this possible? Simon himself explains the psychic mechanic of it all:

Simon began thus to explain [...]: 'I have,' said he, 'made the soul of a boy, unsullied and violently slain, and invoked by unutterable adjurations, to assist me; and by it all is done that I command. [...] The soul of man holds the next place after God, when once it is set free from the darkness of his body. And immediately it acquires prescience: wherefore it is invoked for necromancy. [...] When the presiding angels are adjured by one greater than themselves, they have the excuse of our violence who adjure them, to permit the souls which we invoke to go out: for they do not sin who suffer violence, but we who impose necessity upon them.'³⁵

We see the same necromancy used by the witch Erichtho, perfectly integrated in a Judeo-Christian background. God and his angels replace the pagan deities that the magician coerces using his spells. Simon seems even to endorse Justin's theory of demons walking on earth, stating his super-humanity:

Do not think that I am a man of your race. I am neither magician nor son of Antonius. For before my mother Rachel and he came together, she, still a virgin, conceived me, while it was in my power to be either small or great, and to appear as a man among men.'³⁶

He is an imitator of Christ, but acted through necromancy, magical arts and represented a danger, since the majority of people believed in what they saw. As Irenaeus recalls:

He was worshipped by many as a god, and seemed to himself to be one; for among the Jews he appeared as the Son, in Samaria as the Father, and among other peoples as the Holy Ghost.'³⁷

This claim, also reported by Tertullian³⁸ and Epiphanius³⁹, was a direct challenge to the Trinitarian Christian system and could not be allowed by the authorities.

³⁵ Pseudo-Clement, *Recognitions*, II. 2.13.

³⁶ Pseudo-Clement, *Recognitions*, II.2.14.

³⁷ Irenaeus, *Adversos Haereses*, I, 23.

³⁸ Tertullian, *De Anima*, XXXIV.

³⁹ Epiphanius, *Panarion*, XXI, 1.

It is indeed St. Peter in his apocryphal acts, who, during one of Simon's prodigies, invokes Jesus' intervention and ends the magician's career, proving his false divinity:

So then this man standing on an high place beheld Peter and began to say: Peter, at this time when I am going up before all this people that behold me, I say unto thee: If thy God is able, [...] let him show that faith in him, is faith in God, and let it appear at this time, if it be worthy of God. For I, ascending up, will show myself unto all this multitude, who I am. [...] And Peter seeing the strangeness of the sight cried unto the Lord Jesus Christ: 'If thou suffer this man to accomplish that which he hath set about, now will all they that have believed on thee be offended, and the signs and wonders which thou hast given them through me will not be believed: [...] let him fall from the height and be disabled; and let him not die but be brought to nought.' And he [Simon] fell from the height [...]. And so Simon the angel of Satan came to his end.⁴⁰

The same anecdote has been passed on by many patristic writers, including Hyppolitus⁴¹, Arnobius⁴² and the Syriac *Didascalia Apostolorum*.⁴³

In historical terms, Justin's account of Simon's journey to Rome, where he performed successful miracles for the emperor Claudius, to the extent that statues were erected in his honour,⁴⁴ seems endorsed by a contemporary Roman statue with the inscription *Semo Sanc[t]us*,⁴⁵ found in the Tiber in the 16th century. Moreover, Hippolytus gives an account of an important work written by Simon and circulating in Rome, entitled *The Great Revelation*. This was followed by many adepts as a holy book and was the core text for the foundation of a sect,⁴⁶ the Simonians, still active by the time of Epiphanius, in AD. 367.⁴⁷ As we can see these are all indirect proofs - hardly convincing postulates.

⁴⁰ *Apocryphal Acts of Peter*, XXXII. 2-4.

⁴¹ Hyppolitus, *Refutatio Heresiarum*, VI, 7-20.

⁴² Arnobius, *Contra Gentes*, II, 12.

⁴³ *Didascalia Apostolorum*, I, 18.

⁴⁴ Justin, *Apology*, I.26.

⁴⁵ Gruter, J., *Inscriptiones antiquae totius orbis romani, in absolutissimum corpus redactae* (Amsterdam, 1707), 1.5., 95.

⁴⁶ Hyppolitus, *Refutatio Heresiarum*, VI, 7-20.

⁴⁷ Epiphanius, *Panarion*, XXI, 2.4.

Although popular belief focussed on whether to accept the real existence of a miracle man named Simon, modern scholarship has been divided by the theory of Baur, who sees Simon Magus as a combination of several personalities of the early Christian circle. These people could not be discussed openly due to their prestige - among them was St. Paul himself,⁴⁸ who was frequently at odds with St. Peter. Simon Magus could, then, have been a pseudo-historical character, invented in anti-Paulist literature of which the pseudo-Clementine branch is an example. This argument has been followed by many other scholars, such as Bockmuehl,⁴⁹ but rejected by others, such as Lightfoot, due to the dubious historical basis of conflict between Peter and Paul.⁵⁰

In the modern scholarship which espouses the idea of a fictional Simon, there remains debate as to who hides behind the mask of the Magus. My personal view is that the presence of a real person is in fact unnecessary. For a start, it is clear that the Church fostered magic and needed to make people believe in it. As the leaders of the new faith must have been aware, a world that does not believe in demons, spirits and magical arts would hardly believe in angels and holy ghosts. In a world ruled by dark powers the representatives of good powers were heroes - fear of supernatural forces was required to confer importance on the new protectors. As such, Jesus himself needed suitable rivals in order to be accepted as powerful - a power which is not displayed is invisible and open to doubt. In order to display the power of Jesus, opponents were required. Simon is probably nothing but an invented character, modelled, perhaps, according to contemporary events and internal church disagreements, to suit the Church's needs.

In the accounts featuring Simon as a protagonist, we can clearly see the strategies that the Church employed to convert the masses and to educate them in Christian belief. In the Acts of the Apostles (1st century A.D.) we see a still vague figure of Simon Magus, a character who seems fictional, and who does not appear to have any magical skill, despite being blamed for its use. His purpose in this passage is to

⁴⁸ Baur, F.C, Menzies, A., Zeller, E., Paul, *The apostle of Jesus Christ, his life and work, his epistles and his doctrine. A contribution to a critical history of primitive Christianity* (London – Edinburgh, 1875).

⁴⁹ Bockmuehl, M., *The Remembered Peter: In Ancient Reception and Modern Debate* (Tübingen, 2010).

⁵⁰ Lightfoot, J.B., *The Apostolic Fathers* (London, 1889–1890).

teach people that divine approval cannot be bought, but has to be earned through moral rectitude. This is a regular *exemplum* for a still small group of adherents, still being indoctrinated in the rules of Christianity. Later, in the 3rd century A.D., when the Church had acquired power and the most important patristic texts, including the Pseudo-Clementine homilies, were being written, Simon is presented to the large mass of Christianised people as a novelistic sorcerer who actually has supernatural powers, but is, nonetheless, inferior to Jesus Christ and dies humiliated by St. Peter. His purpose here was to teach the masses about the treacherous reality that awaited them beyond the Church. People at this point were choosing to become Christian because it was the state religion. They did not need just the basic *exempla*, but also needed their traditional beliefs to be revised. This included warning them against supernatural forces existing in the world, controlled by demons, that were not to be trusted, but could be fought against through faith and devotion to God, *alias* the Church.

Conclusions

Throughout this period of history we can see several changes in the understanding of magic. Its importance in human life was assured by the general conviction in the existence of supernatural entities capable of interacting with the natural world. Unlike the Roman *religio*, magic was believed to be used to control these interactions for evil purposes. This undermined the peoples' belief in the stability of their world, as they were concerned about the effects that such interaction could have upon their earthly existence. The magician was initially a secretive personality who operated in the dark. After Jesus Christ he was instead a demigod wandering in search of fame. In all periods, his peculiarity was the knowledge of uncommon arts, taught in remote places, and employed through spells and rituals. In Late Antiquity these performances were not presented as false in terms of effectiveness - they were false because they were not at the service of God and thus weaker and misleading. In this environment, magicians, intended as false imitators of Jesus, look like fictional characters. They were *exempla* modified time after time with the purpose of teaching the inferiority of the pagan magicians, who showed themselves capable of astounding deeds, but eventually perished shamefully when facing the saints before the newly converted masses.

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