

## **The Infiltration of Magic and Witchcraft in to the Roman Empire: Testimony of Apulieus' *the Golden Ass***

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That the operational value of magic and witchcraft in the Roman east in late antiquity was most conspicuous is notable from the evidence derived from the revelatory tradition that infiltrated from non – Roman sources. This paper explores the *Golden Ass* in terms of the extent of the diffusion of magic and witchcraft in to the late Empire with reference to this tradition which formed a vital component of religious practices in the time of its composition.

### **Paper**

The primitive Roman agricultural community derived much inspiration from the conception that guardian spirits, collectively known as *Di Manes* and *Di Indigites*, continued to support the living from their nether depths ( Ogilvie, 1970 : 101). The assurance provided by this conception not only reduced the inseparable gulf between the human and the divine realm through means of annual sacrifice and festivals but also minimized the horror of an unpredictable future which was believed to prevail beyond human control. That all worldly processes were divinely articulated was a foundational element of almost any culture in antiquity. This finds no exception in Rome both in the Republic and the Empire ( Ogilvie, *op.cit.* 112-122 ). The infiltration of religious beliefs, norms, practices and observances from the African continent i.e. Seleucid Syria, Carthage, Numidia, Morocco; Semitic and Near Eastern cultures i.e. Egypt, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Babylonia through the influential channels of the Persian Invasion, Sethian, Mazdian, Zoroastrian, Magian doctrines, the Jewish Diaspora, expansion of territorial limitations of Rome and various conversions and reformations within the religious framework of the Empire contributed to the cosmopolitan character of the religion of the late Empire that it is not surprising that it moved as far as the religious milieu of the Italian High Renaissance ( Athanassiadi, 1992 : 45 -62, 1993 : 115 -120, 1999 : 149 – 183, Fowden, 1981 : 180, Dodds, 1951: 160, 180, 203, Mazur, 2004 : 29-56).

Influenced by his native Moroccan occult tradition Lucius Apuleius ventures in to forbidden territory – magic and witchcraft in his literary composition *the Golden Ass*. *The Golden Ass* apparently is invaluable testimony of the extent to which the influx of magic and witchcraft as forms of divination attracted the masses in the Roman east in late antiquity. This attraction eventually formed an obvious polarization in the traditional Roman religious framework – the state religion which formed an upper hand in society with its official priesthoods and celebrations of festivals and privately sustained divinatory practices supplemented by magic and witchcraft which were maintaining a fairly widespread profile despite their official ban but patronized by those emperors who favored their fatalistic temperament like Julian, Domitian, Severus (Digesser, 1998 : 129-146, 2000 : 91-97, 161-163). Although it was the Greek and Roman intellectuals who held magic and witchcraft to be pseudo-sciences on account of their narrow limitations which eventually progressed towards not only their total exclusion but a dichotomy in the religious ferment in Christian Rome it was Christian apologists like Augustine, Eusebius, Lactantius who wished to construct a polarization between Christian monotheism and pagan polytheism (Barnes, 2001 : 158-159, Wilken, 1984 : 134-137, Simmons, 1995 : 17-18, Athanassiadi and Frede, 1999 : 1-25). By no means unintentional or coincidental their critique of such pagan practices like magic and witchcraft was the deliberate result of their derision of all that could be classified as pagan. An appreciation of Apuleius' description of the black arts in *the Golden Ass* reflects the extent to which the pagan character of magical operations of witches and sorcerers was in debt to the age old religious tradition that infiltrated in to the Roman east in the time of Apuleius. Although time and space limitations prevents a detailed exploration of this tradition it will examine its remnants in some of the doctrines of the Neoplatonics and revelatory texts.

The core content of magic and witchcraft consisted of some allignment or association of demonic powers that could draw them down to the human realm through the medium of artificial structures and receptacles. This required some *techne* or skill which could manipulate these powers to entice them to be enslaved to the magician or sorcerer. That magic and witchcraft were progressive elements in the syncretistic tradition of religious thought which found it way in to the Roman east via the African and Near Eastern esoteric tradition is well attested in the

diffusion of late antique revelatory texts like *the Chaldaean Oracles* (Majercick, 1989) *Greek Magical Papyri* (Betz, 1996) and *the Corpus Hermetica* (Copenhaver, 1992). Distinct bodies of literature, these texts contained redemptive knowledge of things that exist, their nature and character, properties of divine, soteriological, eschatological, alchemical, theological, cosmogonical, moral and ethical elements in the cosmos and it is not surprising that their influence contributed to the revival of a once highly esteemed proportion of religious knowledge (Johnston, 1990 : 101-108, Lewy, 1956 : 693-700 ; Luck, 1985 : 231, 260-271 ; Abush, 2000: 60-80). Though inferior when compared to the superior types of celestial illuminations invoked in public oracular sanctuaries, the demonic entities addressed and descended to the corporeal realm by those who practice magic and witchcraft in Apuleius' *the Golden Ass* are by no means reluctant to respond to any request within their limitations. This is obvious in the canonical methods by which these requests are made and accomplished. The lines describing Merope's magical operations vary from "pulling down the heavens or uplift the earth, to petrify the running stream or dissolve the rocky mountain, to raise the spectral dead or hurl the gods from their thrones, to quench the bright stars or illuminate the dark Land of Shadows." (*Golden Ass*, 1.31) to the rites she performs "by the dark power of the spirits that she invoked she laid a spell on the gates and doors of every house in Hypata so that for forty eight hours nobody could come out in to the streets, not even by tunneling through a house wall. In the end the whole town had to appeal to her from their windows promising if she freed them never to molest her again but on the contrary always to defend he against harm, then she relented and removed the spell. But she took her revenge on the chairman of the meeting by spiring away his house at midnight – walls, floors, foundations and all with himself inside – to a town a hundred miles off. The place stood on the top of a waterless hill – the townspeople had to rely on the rain water for all purposes and the buildings were so closely crowded together that there was no space to fit the house in, so she ordered it to be flung down outside the town gates." (*op.cit*)

She does not hesitate to inflict horrible curses and punishments to those who go against her wishes like metamorphosis in to beavers or frogs

(*op.cit.* 1.32).

The rites which Meroe performs and the artificial structures created by Pamphile are similar. Apuleius describes how Pamphile prepares to entice demonic powers for her amorous needs :

"She had everything ready there for her deadly rites : all sorts of aromatic incense, metal plaques engraved with secret signs, beaks and claws of ill - omened birds, various bits of corpse flesh - in one place she had arranged the noses and fingers of crucified men, in another the nails that had been driven their palms and ankles, with bits of flesh still sticking to them. - also little bladders of life blood saved from the men she had murdered and the skulls of criminals who had been thrown to the wild beasts in the amphitheatre. She began to repeat certain charms over the still warm and quivering entrails of some animal or other, dipping them in turn in to jars of spring water, cow's milk mountain honey and mead. Then she plaited the hair I ( Fotis ) had given her, tied it in to peculiar knots and threw it with a great deal of incense oh her charcoal fire. The power of this charm is irresistible - backed you must understand by the blind violence of the gods who have been invoked, the smell of the hair smoking and cracking in the fire compels its owner to come to the place from which he is being summoned." (*op.cit.* iv.85)

There is a distinction between these rites and those performed by the ancient Egyptians and Chaldaeans as traceable in the aforementioned revelatory texts which incidentally directs the purified soul to revive its divine origin and conjoin the higher causal order of the cosmos. Late antique Neoplatonists like Iamblichus, Proclus, Porphyry and Plotinus who defend this ascent of the soul consider it to be far superior in depth and character than those operations of ordinary witches like Meroe and Pamphile. Such operations are however not despised nor assumed to be without effect because they reflect an initial stage of preparation for the soul's eventual ascent to the noetic realm. The Platonic and Neoplatonic conception of cosmic sympathy among noetic entities form the basis of the magical process of magical practitioners of late antiquity which operates through the forces of attraction or repulsion. Plotinus the Neoplatonic philosopher clarifies this situation:

"Now the works which arise from sorcery and magic arise in two ways: either by sympathy and the concord of similar things or by opposition and variance through the plurality and variance of the faculties." (*Theology of Aristotle*. v.175-176 = *Enneads*, iv.4,45.1-7)

Notwithstanding this dual quality of magic the infiltration of Jewish and Kabbalistic magic under the presidency of a body of diviners whose teachings were linked to the esoteric doctrines of the Phariseaics and Gnostics played a prominent role in their diffusion in to the Roman east. The Judaic tradition of apocalyptic visions evoked through the medium of magic and witchcraft was noticeable in Greek and Roman mysticism and often defended in Hermeticism and various sects of Judeo - Palestinian stock ( Johnston, 1992 : 311 ; S.A. Cook, F.E. Adcock, M.P. Charlesworth, 1951: 397-434 ). The knowledge of revelation or apocalypses provides evidence of not only their widespread acceptance but also their diffusion among the Jews who did not always form mutual alliances with the Gentiles but whose practices drove some of the Gentiles to acquaint themselves with Jewish esoteric doctrines. The *Book of Revelations*, a source book of Jewish mystical doctrines, composed somewhere in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. was already the topic of discussion among intellectual circles that it is feasible to opine that Apuleius may have been familiar with this tradition of wisdom and that could have been a predominant source of his knowledge of the black arts. The religious traditions that infiltrated in to the Roman east taught a genuine wisdom which could be learned through the medium of allegory or metaphor. The operations of those of a superior level of religious insight, the theurgists, whose ascent to the higher causal order of the cosmos could be perceived not in physical but in symbolic terms. The process could only be apprehended in terms of symbolic language as is demonstrated in a fragment of the *Chaldean Oracles* that alludes to the symbols sewn in the physical world:

"The Paternal Intellect has sown symbols throughout the cosmos ( the Intellect ) which thinks the intelligibles. And ( these intelligibles ) are called inexpressible beauties." (Fr.108)

The correspondence between this fragment and the Platonic theory of Recollection originally expressed in *the Meno* by which all human beings have prior knowledge of the Forms and so can perceive Forms by observing physical phenomena which are imprinted within these Forms is so striking that they have been influential in shaping the contemporaneous religious scene in the Roman east. (*Meno*, 72 b-d; 73b-d; 76 b-e). Neither Meroe nor Pamphile are conscious of the possibility of a symbolic ascent of the soul to the higher causal order of

the cosmos. But they certainly do use symbolical structures to construct artificial devices to help reduce the gulf between themselves and the demonic spirits whose passion, inertia and violence are crucial for the completion of their personal motives. The emotions of these demonic spirits are destructive and this is exactly what Neoplatonists like Iamblichus fears. Iamblichus comments on the revelatory and transformative character of divination concurring its truth as a science when he explains it in terms of astrology :

“For the signs of the measuring function of the heavenly circuits are manifest to our eyes, when they announce the eclipses of the sun and moon and conjunctions of the moon with the fixed stars and the experience of our sight is seen to confirm their prognostications. In addition, the observations of celestial phenomena preserved down the ages by both the Chaldaeans and ourselves (i.e. the Egyptians) testify to the truth if this science.” (*On the Mysteries*, ix.4)

A popular mode of divination in Apuleius' time was prediction by the lamp. The lamp contains an artificial light. Light is absorbed by all cosmic entities from the supremest of celestial light – the sun. The significance of the sun as a cultic objective as well as a symbol of religious expression is already noted by recent scholars (Bendlin, 2001: 190 – 295; Walraff, 2002: 100-120). The Christian tradition of visionary mysticism advocated by Dionysus the Areopagite and the subsequent scriptural interpretation of the soul's reception of angelic luminosity which functioned within the parameters of the sun's inspirational value found its way in to Medieval times through scholastic philosophy and Renaissance magic (Voss, 2007: 150 -169; 2000: 28 -40). When Apuleius notices the extent of lamp divination practiced in Madaura in Morocco and in the Roman provinces in the neighborhood where African and Near Eastern influence was more profoundly felt than in other regions it raises the issue of its validity for the purpose of predicting the future. After all he is keen about the possibility of deriving divinatory knowledge from the lamp. He exclaims :

“But is it really to be wondered at that this flame though small and artificially light should retain some memory of its father the sun, the prime source of fire, and so be able to foretell by divine instinct what is about to happen in the skies?” (*the Golden Ass*, 2.56)

When Pamphile predicts by the lamp and declares that “ tomorrow it will rain very heavily “she surveys the universe from the watch tower of her lamp and foretells what sort of a trip the sun is going to enjoy the next day.” (*op.cit* ).

Apuleius refers to an occasion when in her desperation Pamphile uses force on the sun:

“At present she 's desperately in love with a young Boeotian who really is wonderfully handsome and is using all her best sorceries to seduce him. Yesterday evening I heard her threatening the sun that if he didn't hurry up and set, to give her more time for her spells she'd throw a cloud of darkness around him and consign the earth to perpetual night.” (*op.cit*. iv.84)

Pamphile is nothing but an evil and amorous sorceress who manipulates artificial light for her benefit and who is ready even go to the extent of taking measures against the celestial objects. The method she adopts is what philosophers like Iamblichus find fault with. Iamblichus accepts that there is a degree of ecstasy in divine prophecy when he refers to the prophetic inspiration of the priestesses at Claros, Delphi and Delos ( iii.ii. 126.4 – 127.3; iii.xii. 129.1-4; Shaw, 2003 : 54-88; Clarke, 2001 : 76-78 ). It is through celestial inspiration that the act of prophecy could be exacted. However this inspiration transcends the torrent of emotions through which Pamphile addresses demons. Iamblichus refers to the sacred magical revelatory systems of the Chaldaeans, Egyptians and the Syrians which actually did advocate a higher form of magic, a system that transcended the base, vulgar, canonical methods that were very much in demand by the Meroe, Pamphile, the bakers' wife and the host of witches in the *Golden Ass*. The lamentable distortion of what was once held to be a divine art is exactly what Iamblichus acknowledges when he defends the genuine character of divination :

“Divination is accomplished by the acts and signs and consists of divine visions and scientific insights. All else is subordinate., instrumental to the gift of foreknowledge sent down by the gods.” (*On the Mysteries*, 111.1 )

In exactly a similar tone the *Chaldaean Oracles* condemns vulgar and base forms of divination which accords with the type of magic and witchcraft practiced by the witches in the *Golden Ass* :

"The starry procession has not been brought forth for your sake. The wide winged flight of birds is never true nor the cuttings and entrails of sacrificial victims. All these are play things, the props of commercial fraud. Flee these things, if you would open the sacred paradise of piety, where virtue, wisdom and good order are brought together." (Fr.107; Cf also the comments of Emma C. Clark in E.C. Clark, J.M. Dillon and J.P. Hershbell (eds and trs) 2003: 157).

The significance of daimons for the completion of prophecy in oracular sanctuaries is central in the revelatory tradition that infiltrated to the Roman east in the time of Apuleius. That the late antique Neoplatonic philosophers may have been aware of Plato's interpretation of daimons is evident when Iamblichus refers to their role in theurgic ritual (*Mysteries*, ix.3275.1-3). Diotima comments on the daimons in *the Symposium* :

"Daimons form the medium of the prophetic arts, of the priests' rites of sacrifice, rituals for special purposes and incantation, indeed of magic as a whole, that is sorcery." (*Symposium*, 202e7-203a1)

The daimon, in Platonic and Neoplatonic interpretation, were thought to be the intermediary link between gods and human beings since they allow men access to oracles, magical rites and incantations and bring these down from the higher, celestial realm. These were often invoked in magical procedures and were thought to be personifications of the sympathetic energies that pervaded the sensible realm through the planets, fixed stars, and earth. Magicians claimed to be able to manipulate divine powers by exploiting the sympathetic links between material substances and the corresponding energies, whether natural phenomena or daimons. It is not so unconvincing that Etruscan forms of divination practiced by the mass of charlatans, horoscope readers and astrologers of Apuleius' time somehow or other reflect germs of a sacred tradition of thought that had begun to filter in to the Empire proper which apparently accepted the predominant role of the daimon in theurgic ritual

(Athanassiadi, 1992: 121-124). But the demonic spirits were better known to respond to the summons of the common charlatans of late antiquity who obviously practiced an inferior type of magic and witchcraft that did not appreciate the sacred value of the daimon. Apuleius offers a graphic description of a woman whose immoral conduct had caused her husband to divorce her. She visits a "witch who had the reputation of being able to do whatever she liked with the help of charms and drugs, offered her valuable presents and implored her with either to soften the baker's heart and make him relent towards her, or if that was impossible to send some scepter of frightful demonic power to frighten the soul out of his body." (*Golden Ass*, xiii.225). Thereupon the "witch who was able to exert a certain pressure on the gods then set to work. She began with fairly mild experiments in the black art trying to influence the heart of the aggrieved baker and return it to its usual affectionate feelings for his wife. But when she found herself unable to make any impression on it she flew in a temper with the gods. She said that by treating her conjurations with contempt they were cheating her of the reward that had been promised to her if she succeeded; so she threatened to kill the poor baker by setting on him the ghost of a woman who had died by violence." (*op.cit.*xiii.225)

Clearly the witch applies her knowledge of magic and witchcraft for the exploitation of natural energies in the cosmos. Her passionate outburst of emotions are directed at demonic powers who are expected to submit to her will. It is her greed for gifts that prompts her to invite them to the human realm for the purpose of destruction. The extent to which the evil witch in league with passionate demons could move artificial limitations or boundaries is so intense that it results in the poor baker's death (*op.cit.* 226). It is exactly this type of demonic magic and witchcraft that the Christian apologists took pains to eliminate from Christian Rome. A line from Augustine provides adequate testimony :

"Moreover was it before Christian judges that Apuleius himself was accused of magical practices? If he had been convinced that the cats laid on his charge were truly religious and devout and in harmony with the operations of the divine powers, he ought not merely to have confessed to them but to have professed his pride in them. He should have laid the blame on the laws which prohibited such practices and held them worthy of condemnation when in fact they ought to be considered worthy of admiration

and reverence. Then either he would have won the judges to his opinion or else the judges would have conformed to the unjust law and inflicted the death penalty on him for his laudatory testimonial to magic and the demons would have given a recompense appropriate to the soul of a man who did not fear to sacrifice his human life for his testimony in praise of their activities. It was in this way our Christian martyrs acted when charged with the crime of professing Christianity, a crime which as they knew brought them salvation and glory." (*City of God*, viii.19)

On several occasions Augustine condemns the demons as defiled, passionate and not suitable for worship or any other acquaintance. (*op.cit.* viii.14-20; 4-25)

Manipulation of demonic forces for personal intentions was central in the magical operations of the charlatans whom Apuleius writes of in *the Golden Ass*. The formation of a strict boundary between natural and demonic magic was the focal point in the enterprise of harnessing unscrupulous demons. Iamblichus explains with clarity that when the true gods have imparted their light upon the practitioner,

"that which is evil and demonic vanishes from the presence of these more excellent entities in the same manner as darkness vanishes when light is present. The demons then are unable to disturb the theurgist in the smallest degree, because the theurgists have received from this divine light every virtue, have become good abs perfect and well – ordered in their actions, have been liberated from passions and disorderly behavior and have been purified of every atheistic and unholy sort of conduct." (*On the Mysteries*, 3.31; 176. 7-9)

Iamblichus does not dismiss artificial magic altogether since he firmly believes it not only as an initial stage of the material type of preparation for the soul's ascent but also the remnant of a distorted sacred tradition which filtered to the Roman east from non – Roman provinces (Dodds, 1951: 283-299). But what he is against is the harm caused in social conventions and the decline in the religious milieu. Proclus, another Neoplatonic philosopher contends that the gods ought to be considered as a whole because "every god has an undivided knowledge of things

divided and timeless knowledge of things temporal' ( *Elements of Theology*, Proposition, 124). There ought not be given any prominence to the inferior types like the demons for whatever reason. Apuleius' description of the tall and dark Chaldaean necromancer who attracts the women of Corinth by the name of Diophanes, obviously of African origin, is yet another example of one who practices the profane type of magic. Apuleius observes how he foretells future :

"For a fee he would tell people exactly on what day to marry or on what day to lay the foundation stone if they wanted the building to stand for ever, or on what day to conclude a business deal, or on what day to set out on a journey by land or sea." (*the Golden Ass*, ii.56).

The revival of a forgotten tradition in this unholy manner was a serious offence committed to its sacred character. Notwithstanding the attraction it caused among the Roman public there survived a tradition of thought that questioned the validity of magic and witchcraft for contemplative speculation ( Voss, 2003 : 139-156; Cornelius, 2004 : 1, 7, 20, 23). This included the speculations of the magi of the Italian High Renaissance like Marsilio Ficino, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, Giovanni Pico de la Mirandola, Cosimo de Medici whose refutation of Kabbalistic and Hermetic magic in terms of alchemy, poetry, medicine, music, astrology, surpassed the limitations of the type of magic and witchcraft practiced by the host of witches and wizards in *the Golden Ass*. Apuleius' own attraction to magic and witchcraft compels him to compose the work though he does not provide any judgement on behalf of the host of practitioners whom he brings to light within the fascinating framework of black arts. That the malevolent type of operations were devoid of a natural methodology including the knowledge of natural sympathies and antipathies of substances was something accepted by the Renaissance magi who were advocating the occult tradition of thought that became fairly widespread in late antiquity. This advocacy consisted of checking and neutralizing the destructive potency of demonic magic.

To sum up, the infiltration of magic and witchcraft was an inevitable result of the correspondences between Roman provinces in late antiquity. The attraction caused by Etruscan forms of divination extended far and wide in late antiquity resulting in the cosmopolitan character of Roman

religion. Apuleius' *the Golden Ass* is indeed testimony of the extent of this result.

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