**Karen Beggs**

**Student Number 87577309**

**210.103**

**Assignment 1: Essay**

Using ancient evidence, discuss the role of language in Greek and Roman magic. How important was language and to what ends was it used?

In the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, written and spoken words were believed to have great power when used in magic. Ogden argues that writing in the ancient world had magical powers as it could freeze the words permanently.[[1]](#footnote-1) Faraone asserts that there was a belief that formulaic language, written and spoken, had strong persuasive powers.[[2]](#footnote-2) Illiteracy was widespread in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds so the written word was not available to everyone and there was an assumption that those who could read and write had a measure of authority and were more powerful. Language was important to the ancient Greeks and Romans in their magic, as it was the primary method of communication with the gods, who were considered to possess a language unknown to mortals. Secret, magical and powerful words were employed by the magician to send messages to the gods. This essay will use ancient evidence to show the importance of language in Greek and Roman magic.

There are limited sources available from ancient times and few that deal with the beliefs and practices of ordinary people. Writers from the period regarded magic as anti-social and criminal but magical devices and rituals were in everyday use in ancient Greece and Rome. They were used in an attempt to control the forces of nature, people and animals.[[3]](#footnote-3) The rich and influential could afford to assert control in courtrooms but the poorer citizens used magic to try and manipulate situations. The power of magicians was based on their possession of the secret names and languages of the gods and spirits and “because of this they could summon them and force them to act under their command”.[[4]](#footnote-4) The force of a curse or spell was increased by rhetorical uses of repetition and rhythm and a belief that an individual could change the natural world with magic.

Our primary source for the use of magic in the ancient world is curse tablets. Approximately 1600 of these have been found and have been dated from circa 500BC onwards. Curse tablets were usually made of lead that was inscribed with a spell or curse, folded and often pierced with a nail, and then buried, often with a corpse who could take the request to the gods. The purpose of the curse tablets was to bind or restrain a victim and they fall into five categories; litigation, competition, trade, erotic and prayers for justice.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The use of language is important in these curse tablets as the words used carried the request to the gods. Early tablets were simple and concise in their language but by the Roman period they were lengthy, fluid and formulaic, and being produced by professionals. Words were written backwards and jumbled to increase the force of the curse, for example “just as these words are cold and backwards, so too may the words of Krates be cold and backwards”.[[6]](#footnote-6) Letters of the alphabet could be removed from words and vowels were also considered to be more powerful than consonants. Odd vowel combinations appeared on curse tablets in seemingly random sequences but carried weight and power in a message to the gods. The mixing of Greek and Latin words was considered powerful, as they could be understood by the gods but could cause confusion to the victim. Curse tablets found from the 1st century AD often have mysterious words on them that have no meaning in any language, and are known as Voces Magicae. They were believed to have great power as they were unintelligible to mortals but could be understood by the gods.[[7]](#footnote-7) The most common Voces Magicae is the Ephesia grammata, which were six terms endowed with power and while they were often used in curse tablets they could also be used in protective spells. These magical words could also be made into shapes and palindromes and used on the curse tablets as another powerful method of interacting with the gods. Using language that could not be understood by the procurer of the curse tablet gave the writer an appearance of having a special ability to summon the gods to do their bidding and made it all the more powerful.

Magical and unintelligible language was also used on gemstones to give the wearer power and protection. Gems were believed to have powers that were based on their colours for example; a white gemstone had power over milk in women and animals. Prayers were carved into the stones but like the curse tablets, the writing was often reversed and unintelligible. The gemstones were then charged with power in consecration ceremonies and sold to clients who wore them as amulets.

Ancient literature from the Greek and Roman eras is a valuable source of evidence of magic in ancient times and the language used to make the magic convincing. Herodotus, who lived in the fifth century BC, wrote of the shamans who had the ability to detach their souls from their bodies. These detached souls could then speak with the gods in their own languages, languages that mortals cannot understand.[[8]](#footnote-8) Homer’s Odyssey provides the first written evidence of a witch in Greek literature, whose name was Circe. Her magic involved the use of a wand and direct commands to achieve her wishes. Homer was writing of events that happened approximately 500 years before he was born, so we know that magic has been practiced for many centuries and the practitioners of it were believed to have special powers that gave them the ability to manipulate events. In contrast, Theocritus who lived in the third century BC wrote several works recounting everyday life in Alexandria. In one of these he relates the tale of two young women practicing magical rites to bring back a lover. In the tale she uses spells, which involve magical words and addresses them to the moon in the sky and the goddess Hecate in the underworld. Ancient literature shows that magic was told of in epic tales, and that magic played a part in everyday life, and the language used was important in the spells.

Language, as shown above, played an important role in Greek and Roman magic as it was the method of communication to the powers of the universe that could manipulate the forces of nature. However, the language used was also distorted, unintelligible and the domain of the magician or professional curse tablet writer. Brashear states that the language used was “Greek, pseudo-Greek, corruptions from Egyptian, Hebrew, Aramaic or plain gibberish” and goes on to declare that “any symbol, alphabetic or spontaneous fantasy creation of the soothsayer will have made a strong impression on an illiterate, gullible customer”.[[9]](#footnote-9) However these illiterate and gullible customers truly believed that the words were a language known to the gods and were willing customers of magicians.

The peoples of the ancient world used magic to try and influence their lives and the lives of those who surrounded them. The evidence from curse tablets and ancient manuscripts shows the power of language in magical spells and curses.

Words held power, as they were the means of communication with the gods who had their own secret languages and the words appeared to be more powerful if they were unintelligible to mortals. Magic in the ancient world was available to everyone and the use of magic over hundreds of years enforces the fact that it was seen as being effective. Belief in magic and the power of language were a powerful and effective combination for a magician plying their trade.

**Word Count; 1250.**

**Bibliography**

Bernao Farinas, Oscar M. “Rumplestilzchen: The Name of the Supernatural Helper in the Language of the Gods.” In *Poetic language and Religion in Greece and Rome,* ed. J Virgilio Garcia and Angel Ruiz, 51-59. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013.

Brashear, William. “Hocus-Pocus in Graeco-Roman Egypt.” In *Greek Magic: Ancient, Medieval and Modern,* ed. J. C. B. Petropoulos, 28-33. London: Routledge, 2008.

Dickie, Matthew W., *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World.* Oxford: Routledge, 2003.

Faraone, Christopher A. “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells.” In *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion,* ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink, 3-32. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Nagy, Arpad M., “Ancient Magical Gems.” In *Greek magic: Ancient, Medieval and Modern,* ed. J. C. B. Petropoulos, 34-40. London: Routledge, 2008.

Ogden, Daniel. “Binding Spells: Curse Tablets and Voodoo Dolls in the Greek and Roman Worlds.” In *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome,* ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, 1-90. London: The Athlone Press, 1999.

Ogden, Daniel. *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman World.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Salapata, Gina. The Classical World, in 201.103 Magic and Witchcraft, Palmerston North, 2017, topic 2.

Strubbe, J. H. M. “Cursed be he who moves my bones.” In *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion,* ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink, 33-59. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

1. Daniel Ogden, “Binding Spells: Curse Tablets and Voodoo Dolls in the Greek and Roman Worlds,” In *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome,* ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, 1-90 (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Christopher A. Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” In *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion,* ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink, 3-32 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gina Salapata, The Classical World, in 201.103 Magic and Witchcraft, Palmerston North, 2017, topic 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Oscar M. Bernao Farinas, “Rumplestilzchen: The Name of the Supernatural Helper in the Language of the Gods,” In *Poetic language and Religion in Greece and Rome,* ed. J Virgilio Garcia and Angel Ruiz, 51-59 (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013) 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Faraone, *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion,* 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman World,* 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman World,* 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. William Brashear, “Hocus-Pocus in Graeco-Roman Egypt,” In *Greek Magic: Ancient, Medieval and Modern,* ed. J. C. B. Petropoulos, 28-33 (London: Routledge, 2008) 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)