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THE BIRTH OF THE TERM ‘MAGIC’


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In 1920 Samson Eitrem made a trip to Egypt, where, out of his own pocket, he bought several papyri, among which were four magical ones. After a thorough study of the available magical papyri in the major European libraries, he brought out a first edition of the Oslo magical papyri in 1925. This was the beginning of a long interest which lasted virtually until his death in 1966, when he left behind an unfinished manuscript of over seven hundred pages on Greek and Roman magic and divination. In some ways, Eitrem was ahead of his time, since it is hard to think of any other subject which, in recent years, has attracted so much scholarly interest as magic. During the Second World War the proofs of the third volume of Karl Preisendanz’s Papyri Graecae Magicae, together with the index, had perished under the bombs of the Allies. This unfortunate accident surely was a major handicap for the study of ancient magic, which since languished until it once again became a subject of interest from the late 1960s onwards, the epicenter of this development being Cologne. In the last decade, especially, we have seen many new translations, new or revised editions, and inspiring collections of studies of the magical texts, be it Greek, Roman, Jewish or Coptic. We also have a new study of the discovery of the great ‘Theban magical library’, two bibliographical surveys and the first major and admirable synthesis.

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1 This contribution is the revised, first part of my Eitrem Lecture, ‘From mageia in Classical Greece to magic in the Apocryphal Acts’, which I delivered at the University of Oslo on 18 September, 1998; the Appendix has also profited from a discussion by our Groningen research group ‘Religious Symbols’ on 28 September, 1998. The second, ‘Christian’ part will appear in J. N. Bremmer (ed.), The Apocryphal Acts of Andrew (Leuven, 1999). I have kept the oral style, but added notes. I am very grateful to my hosts, in particular Jens Braarvig and Sigurd Hjelde, for a most pleasant reception.


4 Honoris causa I mention A. Henrichs, L. Koenen, R. Merkelbach and D. Wortmann.


6 For example, R. Merkelbach and M. Toti, Abrasax, 4 vls (Opladen, 1990–96: the last two volumes are by Merkelbach alone); R. W. Daniel and F. Maltomini (eds.), Supplementum Magnum, 2 vls (Opladen, 1990–92); P. Schäfer and S. Shaked (eds.), Magische Texte aus der Kairoer Geniza I (Tübingen, 1994); R. Kotansky, Greek Magical Amulets I (Opladen, 1994).


Now it is well known that our concept of magic has its roots in ancient Greece. This origin was investigated in a famous article by Arthur Darby Nock in 1933. Nock (1902–63) was a marvellous scholar and probably the best expert on ancient religion as a whole in the period of 1930–1960. As so often with brilliant scholars, he showed his genius already at an early age. When he was only 27, the great Russian ancient historian Michael Rostovtzev (1870–1952) already send him a copy of his The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire (1926) with the inscription: ‘in remembrance of (the international conference in) Oslo and all I learned from him there’. Nock’s impressive erudition and low level of theorizing makes that his work has lasted even better than that of his friend Martin P. Nilsson (1874–1967), although the latter was certainly his match in the area of Greek religion. His reputation is probably the cause of the fact that no contemporary investigation into magic has taken the trouble to see whether his views can be improved upon. When the origin of the Greek terms magos and mageia is mentioned, scholars invariably refer to Nock. Yet a closer look at Nock’s article soon reveals that he did not collect all the available evidence and that his views on Iranian religion are outdated; moreover important new evidence has been discovered both on the Iranian and the Greek fronts since the appearance of his study.

Given the recent developments, it seems a fitting subject for this contribution in honour of Eitrem to investigate once again the question where, when and why the terms magos and mageia arose in Greece. In an Appendix, I will conclude with making some observations on another, related subject: the famous opposition of magic versus religion.

The birth of magos and mageia

It is evidently impossible to discuss the meaning of the terms magos and mageia for the whole of antiquity. As the Magi were closely associated with the Persian king and his empire, I limit myself to the period before the arrival of Alexander the Great, when their place in society and, perhaps, their doctrines must have undergone more or less serious changes. In this period, the oldest attestation of the word magos occurs in a passage of the philosopher Heraclitus as given by Clement of Alexandria in his Protreptikos (2.22.2). On the question as to who is the object of Heraclitus’ prophecies, the Church Father provides the following quote: ‘those who wander in the night (nyktipolois): Magi (magoi), bacchants (bakchois), maenads (lênaïs), initiates (mystais)’ (fr. 14 DK). There are various oddities in the quotation: the term used for ‘bacchant’ is not attested before Euripides, that of ‘initiate’ without any 10


11 For Nock see the bibliography mentioned by Zeph Stewart in his ‘Introduction’ to Nock, Essays; add now W. M. Calder III, Men in Their Books (Hildesheim, 1998) 233–4, 284f.

12 Cited by Stewart in his ‘Introduction’ to Nock, Essays.


15 As is noted by A. de Jong, Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature (Leiden, 1997) 222 n. 62.


17 This aspect of the Magi is not taken into consideration in recent studies of their position in the Persian empire, but seems to me highly likely.

18 I follow the punctuation argued by Graf, Gottesnähe, 25 = Magic, 21.
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The term ‘magos’ occurs only three times in our evidence, all in relatively early texts. In addition to Heraclitus we find it in Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex. Unfortunately, the precise date of this play is unclear, but there is a general consensus that it belongs to the thirties or twenties of the fifth century. When Oedipus has concluded that Creon has conspired with Teiresias to overthrow him, he denounces him for setting upon him ‘this magos hatcher of plots, this crafty begging priest, who has sight only when it comes to profit, but in his art is blind’ (387–9, tr. Lloyd-Jones, slightly adapted). In this passage magos must mean something negative like ‘quack, charlatan’, still very much as in Heraclitus. The connection with the begging priests also occurs in On the Sacred Disease. This treatise on epilepsy is ascribed to Hippocrates but generally dated to the end of the fifth century or even to the beginning of the fourth century; it also is the first pamphlet-length attack on magic in our sense of the word. According to the anonymous author, those people who first called the disease ‘sacred’, were the sort of people who are ‘now magoi and purifiers and begging priests and humbugs. These are exactly the people who claim to be very pious and to possess a superior knowledge’ (2). In a derogatory manner, the magoi are again combined with begging priests and other private religious practitioners, as in Sophocles.

The connection of magoi with magic starts to appear not in philosophy but in tragedy. Photius (s.v. magous) mentions that mageia occurred in the tragedians (TGF Adesp. 592 Snell–Kannicht), but until now the word has not turned up with any certainty in the available evidence. Our first example of magos occurs in Aeschylus’ Persians (472 BC). In a roll-call of the dead Persian commanders, the messenger to the Persian queen mentions Magos Arabos, ‘Magos the Arabian’ (317). From Elamite tablets found in Persepolis we now know that the name *Magus was not uncommon among the Persians, but Aeschylus’ combination of Magos with Arabia also shows that he did not have a clue about the nature...
of the Persian Magi. And indeed, the frequent attempts at identifying Persian religious elements in his Persae have not been very persuasive.27

The situation is different with the later Euripides. In his Suppliants of ca. 424–420 BC Iphigeneia says how much she hates those who try to prolong their life with mægumata, ‘charms, spells’ (1110); in the Iphigeneia in Tauris (1338) of ca. 414 BC the messenger relates how Iphigenia prepared the sacrifice of Orestes, ‘while she sang barbarous songs like a magos’ (mageuousa: 1338), and in the Orestes of 408 BC a Phrygian slave ascribes the escape of Helen to ‘black magic or the tricks of magoi or thefts by the gods’ (1497).

Towards the end of the fifth century we find the ‘two arts of goêteia and mageia’ in Gorgias’ apology for Helen (10). Although the passage is not crystal clear, it is the first certain mention of mageia in our texts. The second example occurs in the already mentioned On the Sacred Disease. As we have seen, the anonymous author connects magoi with purifiers, and the same combination recurs when the author somewhat later proceeds with the rhetorical question: ‘if somebody is able to remove the disease by purifying and mageuôn . . . ’ (3). However, the latter term comes close to our ‘magic’ when the author rejects as human trickery the feat of a man bringing down the moon ‘mageuôn and sacrificing’ (4).28 Finally, at the end of his work he once again stresses that a real healer ‘would not need to resort to purifications and magiê (v.l.: mageumatôn) and all that kind of charlatanism’ (18). It is clear that for the author magoi are people who practise healing techniques comparable to those of purifiers and begging priests, that is, to people of an inferior theology and an inferior cosmology.29

We have three negative examples left. In his Republic (572e), which for our purpose may be dated to the first half of the fourth century,30 Plato speaks about the son of democratic man and his encouragement towards lawlessness by his father and relatives: ‘when these dread magoi and tyrant-makers come to realize that they have no hope of controlling the youth in any other way, they devise to engender in him a sort of passion etc.’ Less pronounced is his statement in the Statesman (280e), where we hear of the ‘mageuttikê (sc. technê) regarding spells to ward off evils’, but considering Plato’s rejection of magic, it can hardly be interpreted in a positive manner; still, the passage is interesting, since it seems to be the first to speak of magic as a technê,31 an expression which will later become especially popular in Latin.32 Finally, in 330 Aeschines (3.137) denounces Demosthenes as a ‘magos and sorcerer’ as no scoundrel before him has ever been.

Until now I have focused on the more dubious magoi, at least from a Greek point of view, but concomitant with them we also hear about authentic Magi, the hereditary technologists of the sacred from western Iran. These were probably mentioned first in Greek literature by Xanthos of Lydia, an area with a strong Persian presence.33 Xanthos was an older contemporary of Herodotus,34 who had dedicated a part of his work on Lydian history to the magoi, which was later called Magika. In the two extant fragments he mixes fact and fiction by relating that the magoi practised incest (true) and wife-swapping.

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27 See the refutation by Hall, Inventing the Barbarian, 86–93.
31 Note now also its occurrence in SEG 41.981 and, probably, PLitPalauRib 26 a7, b3, cf. A. Stramaglia, ZPE 88 (1991) 77.
33 N. V. Sekunda, Achaemenid colonization in Lydia, Rev. Et. Anc. 87 (1985) 7–29; Briant, Histoire de l’empire perse I, 721–5. As Fritz Graf suggests to me, Magi may well have been active in the cult of Zeus Baradates (SEG 29.1205; 36.1089).
34 See now Bob Fowler, JHS 116 (1996) 64; the discussion in FGrH 1001.
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(untrue), but he is the first Greek to mention Zarathustra, if in that curious and still unexplained Greek form of Zoroaster. According to Momigliano, ‘Xanthus also referred to the Magi without apparently connecting them with Zoroaster’. Although our evidence is much too fragmentary for such a conclusion, his younger contemporary Ktesias certainly seems to have called Zoroaster a Magus.

Xanthos’ magoi do not look like ‘charlatans’, and neither do they, on the whole, in the work of Herodotus, who is still our best source on the position and nature of the earlier magoi. It is striking that the ‘father of history’ nowhere feels the need to introduce the magoi, but evidently presupposes familiarity with them on the part of his readers. According to Herodotus, they were specialists in the interpretation of dreams (1.107–8, 120, 128; 7.19) and solar eclipses (7.37). They were also indispensable for libations (7.43) and for sacrifices (7.113–4, 191), where they sang a theogony (1.132). Moreover, they observed the rites of exposure and killed noxious creatures (1.140). At least one of these characteristics recurs in the early fifth-century Elamite tablets found in Persepolis, where a Magus receives wine for a particular ceremony, lan.

It is only once that Herodotus seems to connect the Magi with magic. That is when he uses the term pharmakeusantes, ‘hocus-pocus’ (Van Groningen) for their ritual in his report of the horse sacrifice by the Magi during the Persian crossing of the Thracian river Strymon (7.114). The verb derives from pharmakon, ‘philtre, medicine’, which produced not only the male pharmakeus, ‘sorcerer’, but also the female pharmakis. In a subtle article, the Swiss archaeologist Margot Schmidt has pointed out that sorceresses were absent from the citizen women of classical Athens, since they lacked the social space to perform sorcery; whenever they are mentioned they are foreigners, such as Medea or the Thessalian sorceresses of the Clouds (749). This Athenian social condition, which may well have been prevalent in the whole of Greece, will also be the reason why both magos and goês (below) lacked female equivalents. Considering the etymology, the term pharmakis was probably once limited to a woman who collected herbs for magic, but gradually it must have absorbed (or: been ascribed) qualities from the male sorcerers.

After this brief excursion into Greek gender problems, let us now return to male magicians. Some of Herodotus’ information about the Magi recurs in Xenophon’s Cyropaedy, where they have to sing hymns to all the gods at sunrise (8.1.23) and to choose the gods to whom to sacrifice (8.1.23, 3.11). From Xenophon’s younger contemporaries, Dino mentions that the Magi were interpreters of dreams (FGrH 690 F 10), and Theopompus (FGrH 115 F 64), in perhaps the most interesting information of it all, that the Magi taught the resurrection.

35 For the incest see now De Jong, Traditions of the Magi, 424–32.
38 A. Momigliano, Alien Wisdom (Cambridge, 1975) 142.
39 Ktesias FGrH 690 F 1; Kephalion FGrH 93 F 1 and Jacoby ad loc.
41 For the terms see W. Artelt, Studien zur Geschichte der Begriffe Heilmittel und Gift = Studien zur Geschichte der Medizin 23 (Leipzig, 1937) 38–96.
42 Schmidt, Sorceresses, 60.
43 Magos is not used for females until the Roman period, cf. AP 5.16; Luc. Asin. 4; Aesop. 117 Halm; Et. Magnum 103, 18 Gaisford. Latin maga first appears in Seneca, Herc. O. 523, 526. This is why I do not follow Graf, Gottesnähe, 27, in translating magewousa in IT 1338 as ‘wie eine Magierin’.
44 For women using herbs in magic see Od. 4.220 (Helen), 10.213 (Kirke); Sophocles F 534 Radt (Medea); Melanipides PGM 757 Page (Danaids).
In addition to these historians, it is especially the philosophers who were interested in the Magi. Plato’s pupil Heraclides Ponticus (fr. 68 Wehrli) wrote a dialogue Zoroaster, which, presumably, featured his Magus who had circumnavigated Africa before visiting the court of Gelo at Syracuse (fr. 69–70 Wehrli). According to Aristotle, the Magi were older than the Egyptians (fr. 6 Rose), and in his Metaphysics (1091b8) he included them among those who hold that ‘good’ is the source of all; other details can be found in his pupils Eudemus (fr. 89 Wehrli), Clearchus (fr. 13 Wehrli) and Aristoxenus (fr. 13 Wehrli). This Peripatetic interest makes it even more likely that the almost certainly spurious Platonic dialogue Alcibiades Maior has to be assigned to the same milieu, since it mentions that Persian educators teach their youths ‘the mageia of Zoroaster, the son of Horomadzos: that is the cult of the gods’ (1.122a). The explanation is clearly apologetic, just as Dino (FGrH 690 F 5) had already denied that the Magi practised ‘black magic’ (goêtikêen mageian).

Having looked at all the testimonies regarding Magi and magoi in the fifth and fourth centuries, we can now draw the following conclusion: in tragedy, rhetorics and earlier philosophy, magos is a term of abuse, whereas historians and Aristotelian philosophers tend to take the Magi seriously. The two traditions converge, so to speak, in the late fourth century when the second group asserts the claims of the ‘real’ Magi against the abusive interpretation of the first group. Moreover, the abusive usage of magos is hardly attested before the 420s in Athens, when we suddenly start to find a whole cluster of references.

This development has not been taken into account into the most two recent explanations for the semantic development from Magus to magician. According to Peter Kingsley the Magi were always magicians in the eyes of the Greeks, since they controlled the weather and knew how to return from the dead. However, attempts at controlling the weather were perfectly normal in Greek religion, and Magical returns from the dead are not attested before Roman times.

Fritz Graf, on the other hand, has looked for an explanation in Tylorian terms. In his Primitive Culture, Edward Tylor (1832–1917), one of the founding fathers of social anthropology and the history of religion, observes that many cultures called their neighbours ‘magician’, such as the southern Scandinavians did with the Lapps and Finns. However, like Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) in his classic study of magic, Tylor also observed that these neighbours are usually of a lesser development. Now there can be little doubt that the Greeks in general, and the Athenians in particular, had developed a rhetoric in which the Persians were ‘the Other’, the opponents whose despotism, slavishness, luxury and cruelty were the exact opposite of all the virtues of the Greeks. At the same time, though, they had been highly impressed by the Persians and in many spheres of life busily copied them. One can thus

52 Hall, Inventing the Barbarian, 56–100 and passim.
hardly say that they looked down on Persia in the same way in which southern Scandinavians once viewed Lapps and Finns. Although the element of ‘the Other’ may well have played a role, there is, I suggest, also a more concrete reason as to why the Greeks came to consider the Magi as magicians.

Before coming to that reason, let us first look at the question as to when the Greeks will have first witnessed Magi. According to (Pseudo-?)Aristotle a Syrian Magus had predicted a violent death to Socrates (fr. 32 Rose), but this anecdote is just as untrustworthy as Seneca’s report that Magi were present in Athens at the moment of Plato’s death and had sacrificed to him – a story which looks like an invention by his later followers, who even claimed that Magi had come to Athens to learn from Plato. Although these notices are unreliable, the Ionians must already have had opportunities to see Magi, who probably also accompanied Xerxes in AD 480, in the later sixth century. As in his Acharnians (91–122: 425 BC) Aristophanes parodies an embassy scene which assumes knowledge of a Persian embassy on the part of his audience. Magi may also have been intermittently witnessed during such Persian visits in the course of the fifth century.

However this may be, we move onto firmer ground with a different notice. It is now nearly forty years ago that in Derveni, a few kilometres from modern Saloniki, Greek excavators discovered the completely charred top of a papyrus roll on the funeral pyre in a tomb of about 300 BC. More than 200 fragments were recovered which together make up more than 24 columns of text. The content proves to be an allegorical commentary on an Orphic theogony in terms of Presocratic physics, of which the original text must have been written around 420–400 BC. The commentary constitutes the largest parts of the extant papyrus (20 columns), but it is preceded by a much shorter theological introduction (6 columns). This part was already known, but more fragments have been published in 1997 and they, rather unexpectedly, reveal the activity of magoi. In what is now column VI we read:

... prayers and sacrifices assuage the souls, and the incantation (epôidê) of the magoi is able to change the daimones when they get in the way. Daimones in the way are enemies to souls. This is why the magoi perform the sacrifice, just as if they were paying a penalty ... And on the offerings they pour water and milk, from which they also make the libations ... Initiates make preliminary sacrifices to the Eumenides in the same way as the magoi do. For the Eumenides are souls.

There are many interesting aspects to this fragment, but for our purpose we will only discuss three of them. First, it seems now reasonable to assume that at the end of the fifth century wandering magoi (be it Persian or Hellenised ones) were present in the Greek world precisely at the moment that we find the first references to ‘magical’ magoi. Unfortunately, we cannot say exactly where these private magoi practised, since nothing is known about the authorship or place of composition of the original text.

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56 Embassies could make a lasting impression, as is well illustrated by the visit of the Byzantine emperor John VIII Palaiologos to the Council of Ferrara of AD 1438, which is often reflected in contemporary paintings, cf. Miller, Athens and Persia, 90; add C. Ginzburg, Indagine su Piero (Turin, 1994) 35–7, 82–4.
57 For the allegorical aspect see now A. Laks, Between Religion and Philosophy: the Function of Allegory in the Derveni Papyrus, Phronesis 42 (1997) 121–42.
59 For the connection between the two parts see G. W. Most, The fire next time. Cosmology, allegoresis, and salvation in the Derveni Papyrus, JHS 117 (1997) 117–35 at 125–31.
Many possibilities have been canvassed, from Stesimbrotus to Prodicus, but none is really convincing.

The fact that the dialect is Ionic with an Attic overlay might suggest some connection with Athens, but Bob Fowler informs me that his just completed study of the dialect of the mythographic fragments shows that at the end of the fifth century Ionic writers, who may have had no personal connection with Attica, already started to adopt Attic forms. In any case, more than a century later Philochorus did indeed read the commentary.

Secondly, whereas libations of milk are attested for the Avesta and recur in Strabo’s description of the Cappadocian Magi, water seems to have been completely absent from Zoroastrian libations. Geo Widengren has compared the beaker with water in the Mithraic mysteries, but none of his many examples mentions Zoroastrian libations of water.

In other words, the author (or his Magi) must have adapted their rites to those of the Greeks, who actually did libate with water.

Thirdly, the magoi use incantations: the term used, epôidê, is typical for a charm and as such already occurs in Homer; it also fits the frequent references to the singing of the Magi.

The activity of these magoi may well have given rise to a negative valuation for two reasons in particular. First, the incomprehensibility of their Avestan will have suggested voce magicae and possibly influenced Euripides’ picture of the ‘barbarous songs’ of Iphigeneia (above). Secondly, unlike Greek priests the Magi customarily whispered their Avestan and other ritual texts in a very low voice: Prudentius’ Zoroastreos susurros (Apoth. 494). This whispering must have made the activities of Magi look like ‘magical’ rites in the eyes of the ancients, since murmuring was closely associated with magic by both Greeks and Romans.

In addition to them being ‘the Other’, there are then also two very concrete reasons as to why (all?) Greeks will have looked at the Persian Magi as sorcerers. Although the Greeks must have seen Magi before, the available evidence strongly suggests that familiarity with wandering Magi became much stronger in the final decades of the fifth century, as is also illustrated by (directly or

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62 The various suggestions have been listed and refuted by R. Janko, The Physicist as Hierophant, ZPE 118 (1997) 61–94, whose own suggestion, Diagaras, is hardly more persuasive than those refuted by him.

63 Janko, The Physicist, 62.


65 Strabo 15.3.14 with the detailed discussion by De Jong, Traditions of the Magi, 139–42. For Cappadocian Magi note also CIMRM 50 no. 19 and RECAM II.404.


indirectly) the Derveni papyrus. The areas where this development took place must have been Ionia and Athens, exactly where we would have suspected the possible presence of Magi.

Now in religion, as of course in economics, it is not enough to prove a ‘supply’, but there must also be a ‘demand’ from religious ‘consumers’. Fortunately, this ‘demand’ is well attested in late fifth-century Athens, where we witness a growing dissatisfaction with traditional religion and an increasing interest in private cults.73 The presence of privately practising Magi perfectly fits this development.

The development did not mean that from that moment on magos/mageia became the ruling designation for the area of magic, witchcraft and sorcery. The Greeks had already the terms goês/goêteia,74 which continued to remain popular next to magos/mageia, perhaps even more popular, since Demosthenes, for example, uses goês not magos in his insults.75 As Greek linguistic purists of the Roman period considered goês ‘more Attic’ than magos,76 mageia and cognates never became really popular in later Greek culture. The Romans lacked this prejudice and thus used magia, magicus and magus/maga much more frequently than the Greeks ever did. However, the status of the Persian Magi always remained a positive factor in the valuation of the term magos/magus, as was still the case in early modern Europe,77 and later ‘magicians’ therefore called themselves not goês or pharmakeus, but magos/magus.

APPENDIX: Magic versus Religion

Over a long period of time, social anthropologists have now been debating the question whether there is a difference between magic and religion, and if so, how magic should be defined.78 Given the greatly increased attention to magic among classicists, it is hardly surprising that this debate has now finally reached us as well. In an important article, my compatriot Henk Versnel has recently argued that ‘rejection of the word “magic” will soon turn out to be unworkable’ and that ‘it would be utterly unpractical to completely eliminate religion as one of the obvious models of contrast’. He even argues that ‘the question whether distinctions should be drawn between magic and religion or magic and other features within religion is (...) of minor importance. What is important is to make a distinction between magic and non-magic, and it will be impossible – and, if possible, utterly impractical – to completely eliminate religion as one obvious model of contrast’. He even argues that ‘the question whether distinctions should be drawn between magic and religion or magic and other features within religion is (...) of minor importance. What is important is to make a distinction between magic and non-magic, and it will be impossible – and, if possible, utterly impractical – to completely eliminate religion as one obvious model of contrast’.79 Versnel is a declared follower of the etic approach, that is, the use of concepts developed by us, not by the actors, in order to have a common platform for communication and discussion. This is undoubtedly the most satisfactory position from a scholarly point of view and in this respect I wholeheartedly agree with him.80 Yet, in order to be workable, the etic definition of a concept should always be as close as possible to the actors’ point of view: if not, it will soon cease to be a useful definition. In this respect questions may arise about Versnel’s position that we need religion as an obvious model of contrast to magic. I would like to make five observations which throw doubt on his (but not only his!) position.

75 Dem. 18.276, 19.102, 109; 29.32.
76 Phrynichus 56.8 de Borries.
79 Versnel, Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic-Religion, 177, 187 (with extensive bibliography).
80 For interesting considerations about the problem see now also B. Boudevijnse, Fieldwork at Home, Etnofoor (Amsterdam) 7 (1994) 73–95.
First, attention in the debate is always focused on the definition of magic, as if the meaning of religion is generally agreed upon. In fact, religion was not yet conceptualized as a separate sphere of life in the Greco-Roman period and the term ‘religion’ only received its modern meaning in the immediate post-Reformation era, when the first contours of a separate religious sphere started to become visible.81

Secondly, the example of religion suggests that when analysing a concept we must also be sensitive to its semantic development. Here, we may point to the relatively late appearance of the word magic in Western Europe. Linguistically, English magyk long existed alongside magique, which derived from Old French art magique. Modern French magie replaces magique only in the sixteenth century, German Magie is not to be found before the seventeenth century and Danish magi appears only in the eighteenth century.82 Evidently, in the period stretching from the later Middle Ages to the beginning of the early modern era a need was felt for a new term, although the reasons for this development are still largely obscure.83 Moreover, magic was not a static concept. The Renaissance invented the idea of a magia naturalis and the Romantics considered magic an art which could help ‘das Göttliche zu produzieren’ (Fr. Schlegel).84 To oppose magic to religion, then, is to use two terms and concepts, which did not exist in antiquity, but are both the product of late- and post-medieval Europe.85

Thirdly, we should take into consideration that the ancients themselves did not oppose magic to religion. This becomes apparent when we look at both pagan and Christian positions. In his Apology, Apuleius first states that magiam (...) artem esse dis immortalibus acceptam, but he knows of course that this is the favourable interpretation of magia. He therefore continues that more vulgari a magus is somebody who through a communio loquendi cum deis immortalibus effects everything he wants through ‘an incredible power of incantations’ (omnia quae velit incredibili quadam vi cantaminum: 26.6). One cannot fail to note that Apuleius does not contrast magic with religion, and neither do the early Church fathers. Admittedly, Justin points out that, unlike Christians, Jews and pagans exorcise with drugs, incense and incantations; Irenaeus stresses the absence of incantations and any other ‘wicked, curious art’ in Christian miracles, and Origen denies that Christians use incantations, names of demons or magical formulas. Yet none of them formulates the debate in terms of an opposition magic-religion.86

Fourthly, in these texts the contrast is not between magic and religion tout court, but between magic and normative religious practice. Evidently, magic was construed dialectically in terms of what it was not.87 Does that mean that magic is an unworkable concept? Not necessarily so. When we look at the

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87 I vary here an observation by Clark, Thinking with Demons, 9 on the construction of witchcraft.
most frequent noted oppositions between what is normally called magic and religion, such as secret/public, night/day, individual/collective, anti-social/social, voces magicae/understandable language, coercive manipulation/supplicative negotiation, negative gods/positive gods and so on, we cannot fail to note that the positive characteristics are approved of by most religions, just as the negative ones are generally disapproved of or negatively valued. Evidently, the structure of most religions is similar enough to share a common number of negative practices and values – dual classification and inversion being very widely spread ordering principles of ancient and, still, modern cosmology.

This ‘family resemblance’, to use the well-known Wittgensteinian term, between religions enables us to continue using magic as a concept with a recognisable referent to reality. However, at the same time we must always remain aware of the fact that cultures rarely agree in detail as to what constitutes magic. That is already clear in antiquity where magic only becomes thematized in later Classical Greece, whereas the Later Roman Empire seems obsessed with it.

Fifthly and finally, it is usually neglected that the moment of birth of the opposition magic-religion is only recent and can be established fairly exactly. Indeed, James George Frazer himself, the author of the famous The Golden Bough, who did most to popularise the opposition, tells us in the preface to the second edition of his opus magnum (1900), which had been published with the new subtitle A study in magic and religion, that he had derived the opposition from Sir Alfred Lyall (1858–1936) and Frank Jevons (1835–1911), the first an able colonial administrator in India and the second an average classicist and historian of religion in Durham. Lyall had opposed native Indian witchcraft to the ‘religion of civilization’ and Jevons had contrasted the race ‘less civilised’ with magic to the race ‘more civilised’ with religion.

Now since the Hippocratic On the Sacred Disease the contrast between superstitious and ‘authentic’ religious practice has become a virtually fixed aspect of discussions of religion until the time of Frazer. However, the terms of this debate did not always remain the same. Whereas in antiquity the opposite of accepted religious practice could be expressed with the terms deisidaimonia, mageia/magia or superstition, the latter term became the ruling concept in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, and it remained so until the nineteenth century. Frazer changed this situation in two aspects. He not only subsumed the beliefs and practices which used to be called superstition under the category ‘magic’, but he also separated this category from religion in time. Whereas earlier generations of scholars had considered superstition a part, albeit a misguided one, of religion, Frazer suggested that magic had actually once preceded ‘authentic’ religion.

Frazer’s temporal distinction between magic and religion was immediately criticised by folklorists and soon abandoned, but his use of the term magic became an instant scholarly success among anthro-
Due to the more recent technological developments, we can now much easier gauge the nature of Frazer’s influence in this respect. As I first showed in my discussion of the term ‘ritual’,
the computerisation of the catalogues of the university libraries enables us to search for certain key terms in the titles of books. It is illustrative of Frazer’s new approach that books with both terms ‘magic’ and ‘religion’ in their title are not attested before the year 1900, but virtually immediately become a normal feature of social anthropology and the history of religion after Frazer’s work, and they have remained thus ever since – witness the title of Keith Thomas’ classic Religion and the Decline of Magic (1971). In fact, the very first book which uses the terms in the main title is Magic and Religion by Andrew Lang (1844–1912) of, note the year, 1901 – a clear indication of the interest Frazer had evoked with his new categorisation. The opposition, then, is a typical product of the Victorian middle-classes with their strong need for positive self-definition against the colonial subjects abroad and the peasants at home. It has no place in a discussion of magic in antiquity.

97 As my colleague Lourens van den Bosch points out to me, the term ‘magic’ is also still absent from the indices of the books of Max Müller (1823–1900), the most famous historian of religion of the second half of the nineteenth century.
99 A. Lang, Magic and Religion (London, 1901) with already a devastating critique of the categorisation (46–75).
101 For information I would like to thank Sigurd Hjelde and Herman Roodenburg. Peter van Minnen commented on the penultimate version of the original lecture, Goffe Jensma discussed the Appendix with me in an enlightening manner, and Bob Fowler most helpfully criticised various versions and corrected the English.