The History of Magic

From Alchemy to Witchcraft,
from the Ice Age to the Present

CHRIS GOSDEN
# Contents

**Illustrations**  ix  
**Tables**  xxii

1. What is Magic and Why is It Important?  1
2. The Deep History of Magic (c. 40,000–6000 BCE)  34
3. The Magic of the Cities: Mesopotamia and Egypt (4000–1000 BCE)  71
4. Chinese Magic: Deep Participation (c. 20,000 BCE–present)  109
5. Shamanism and Magic on the Eurasian Steppe (c. 4000 BCE–present)  146
6. Magical Traditions in Prehistoric Europe (10,000–0 BCE)  188
7. Jewish, Greek and Roman Magic (c. 1000 BCE–1000 CE)  239
8. The Magics of Africa, Australia and the Americas  285
9. Medieval and Modern Magic in Europe (500 CE–present)  349
10. Modern and Future Magic  399

*Timeline: Global History of Magic*  433

**Notes**  437

**Bibliography**  447

**Acknowledgements**  451

**Index**  455
Illustrations

Figure 1.1. A volvelle – a paper construction with moving parts for finding the places of the planets within the zodiac. It is the counterpart of the astrolabe, which was used for making observations of the sky (Apianus, Astronomicon Caesareum. Ingoldstadt, 1540. British Library Maps C.6.d.5, Pl. 27).

Figure 1.2. An eighteenth-century Ethiopian Ketab scroll with prayers for undoing spells to protect its owner. Kept in a silver case. Ketab scrolls originated in the Aksumite Empire (first–eighth centuries CE) and combine Arabic and Christian influences. By the nineteenth century several million were in use. In Amharic script (British Library C11269-07).

Figure 1.3. A guide to interpreting the shapes formed by tea leaves in the bottom of the cup (from How to Read the Future with Tea Leaves, translated from Chinese by ‘Mandra’ (1925). Stamford: Dolby Brothers. British Library 8633. eee.31).

Figure 1.4. The earliest surviving use of the term ‘abracadabra’ – in a cure for malaria. The word is in the triangle at the bottom right and is reduced by one letter every line, which will result in the disease diminishing in virulence (see Chapter 6). Quintus Serenus Sammonicus, Canterbury, thirteenth century (British Library Royal MS 12E.XXIII, f. 20).

Figure 2.1. Map of the Palaeolithic cave sites mentioned in the text (drawn by Chris Green).

Figure 2.2. Lion person tusk figurine from Stadel Cave (© Museum Ulm. Photo: Oleg Kuchar, Ulm).
Figure 2.3. Painted Ice Age cave art (from the photograph 'Ekainberri', Arazi Aranzadi; courtesy of Ekainberri Management).

Figure 2.4. ‘Shaman’, from Les Trois-Frères Cave in France (from Abbé Breuil (1952), Quatre cents siècles d’art pariétal. Montignac and Dordogne: Centre d’études et de documentation préhistoriques).

Figure 2.5. Map of sites mentioned in the text, dating between the Late Glacial and the Ubaid periods (drawn by Chris Green, after Eleni Asouti and Dorian Q. Fuller (June 2013), ‘A Contextual Approach to the Emergence of Agriculture in South-West Asia: Reconstructing Early Neolithic Plant-food Production’, Current Anthropology, v. 54, no. 3, Fig. 1).

Figure 2.6. Hilazon Tachtit burial – the burial of a so-called female shaman (from Cyprian Broodbank (2013), The Making of the Middle Sea. London: Thames and Hudson, Fig. 4.5).

Figure 2.7. Photograph of the excavations and a plan of Göbekli Tepe (© DAI. Photo: E. Kücük; plan: Klaus Schmidt, et al.).

Figure 2.8. Narrow side of pillar in Enclosure D at Göbekli Tepe (© DAI. Photo: N. Becker).

Figure 2.9. The variety of animals, such as snakes, scorpions and spiders, as well as abstract designs, carved on pillars at Göbekli Tepe (© DAI. Photos: C. Gerber, D. Johannes, I. Wagner).

Figure 2.10. A plastered skull from Jericho (© The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved. Accession Number 1954,0215.1).

Figure 3.1. Map of Mesopotamia and Egypt with the main sites mentioned in the text (drawn by Chris Green).

Figure 3.2. Visualization of the White Temple at Uruk on its ziggurat (drawn by Chris Green, after artefacts-berlin.de and DAI).

Figure 3.3. Clay tablet – a fragment of a Babylonian astronomical diary discussing astronomical and meteorological
phenomena observed during the year 331–330 BCE, months 6 and 7. Mention is made of the defeat of Darius III by Alexander the Great and of Alexander’s triumphant entry into Babylon (© British Museum, Accession Number 1880,0617.496).

Figure 3.4. The goddess Tawaret appears on a number of objects, including the so-called magical wands or knives made from hippo ivory, ebony or glazed steatite (courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accession Numbers 86.1.91 (top); 30.8.218 (bottom)).

Figure 3.5. Scarabs and intaglios made into finger rings that were used as protective devices. These are made from various stones placed in gold settings. They date from the Twelfth Dynasty, c. 1820 BCE. Abydos, Tomb G62. (© British Museum, Accession Number EA 37308).

Figure 3.6. This scene comes from Queen Nedjmet’s Book of the Dead, stolen from the Royal Cache at Deir el-Bahari. Nedjmet and Herihor, her husband (whose burial has never been found), are making offerings to Osiris, Isis and the four sons of Horus, who are also watching a small scene of weighing the heart (© British Museum, Accession Number 10541).

Figure 4.1. General view of Fu Hao’s Tomb, showing the bronze vessels around the edge, human skeletons on ledges and traces of Fu Hao’s coffin in the centre (photograph courtesy of Jessica Rawson).

Figure 4.2. Bronze owl-shaped wine vessel from Fu Hao’s Tomb (courtesy of Henan Provincial Museum; photo Niu Aihong (牛爱红)).

Figure 4.3. Shang Period (1192 BCE) oracle on an ox scapula. The text says that there will be no misfortune in a particular ten-day period (British Library OR.7679/1595).

Figure 4.4. The main sites and topographic features mentioned in the text (drawn by Chris Green).

Figure 4.5. The reconstruction of the East Gate at Shimao (drawn by Chris Green, after Zhouden Sun, et al. (2018),
Illustrations

‘The First Neolithic Urban Center on China’s North Loess Plateau: The Rise and Fall of Shimao’, *Archaeological Research in Asia*, v. 14, 33–45, Fig. 7).

Figure 4.6. The main site at Liangzhu and the surrounding dam-system sites (drawn by Chris Green after Nobuya Watanabe, *et al.* (2017), ‘Utilization of Structure from Motion for Processing CORONA Satellite Images: Application to Mapping and Interpretation of Archaeological Features in Liangzhu Culture, China’, *Archaeological Research in Asia*, v. 11, 40, Fig. 1).


Figure 5.1. Earliest known depiction of a Siberian shaman, by the Dutch explorer Nicolaes Witsen, who journeyed among the Samoyed and Tungus people in 1692. He entitled this *Priest of the Devil* and gave the shaman clawed feet to match this description (Amsterdam, 1705. British Library T00002-01).

Figure 5.2. Map of the Steppe with the central grassland shaded and the main sites mentioned in the text (drawn by Chris Green).

Figure 5.3. Standing stone, attributed to the Okunev culture (courtesy of Yury Esin; illustration by Peter Hommel).

Figure 5.4. One of the more complex carved stones from the Okunev Period, from Belyo Lake, Khakassia (illustration by Peter Hommel).

Figure 5.5. A photograph and plan of Urt Bulagyn Khirigsuur (photo courtesy of Josh Wright; plan drawn by Chris Green, after Francis Allard and Diimaajav Erdenebaatar (2005), ‘Khirigsuurs, Ritual and Mobility in the Bronze Age of Mongolia’, *Antiquity*, v. 79, no. 305, 552, Fig. 3).

Figure 5.6. View of one of twenty-three deer stones in the Jargalantyn-Am complex in the Khanuy Valley in Mongolia (photograph and illustration by Peter Hommel).
Figure 5.7. Plans of the burial mounds of Arzhan 1 (top) and Arzhan 2 (bottom) (from Konstantin V. Čugunov et al. (2010), 'Der skythenzeitliche Fürstenkurgan Aržan 2 in Tuva', Archäologie in Eurasien, v. 26, 8, Fig. 77 (left); and 18, Fig. 22 (right). © DAI).

Figure 5.8. The bodies of a man and woman, together with their grave goods, in Grave 5, Arzhan 2 mound (from Konstantin V. Čugunov et al. (2010), 'Der skythenzeitliche Fürstenkurgan Aržan 2 in Tuva', Archäologie in Eurasien, v. 26, 28, Fig. 36. © DAI).

Figure 5.9. Reconstruction of the man and woman from Arzhan 2 and their gold adornment (from D. V. Pozdnjakov, in Konstantin V. Čugunov et al. (2010), 'Der skythenzeitliche Fürstenkurgan Aržan 2 in Tuva', Archäologie in Eurasien, v. 26, 212, Fig. 225 (left); and 214, Fig. 226 (right). © DAI).

Figure 5.10. Tigers and leopards attacking elk. Tattoo on the right arm of a woman in Burial Mound 5, Pazyryk (L. L. Barkova and S. V. Pankova (2005), 'Tattooed Mummies from the Large Pazyryk Mounds: New Findings', Archaeology, Ethnology and Anthropology of Eurasia, v. 22, no. 2. 48–59, Fig. 14; artist Darja Kirillova).

Figure 5.11. A headdress showing a bird of prey with the head of a deer in its beak from Pazyryk 2 (top), which was supported by a felt cap decorated on either side by leather appliqués in the form of a bird of prey attacking a deer (bottom) (courtesy of the Hermitage Museum).

Figure 5.12. Iron dagger inlaid in gold with animals and abstract designs on the blade (from Konstantin V. Čugunov, et al. (2010), 'Der skythenzeitliche Fürstenkurgan Aržan 2 in Tuva', Archäologie in Eurasien, v. 26, Pl. 40, 1. © DAI).

Figure 5.13. Bronze objects in the characteristic ‘Perm Animal Style’ from Perm Oblast and the Komi Republic (Russian Federation) (from V. A. Oborin and G. N. Chagin (1988), Chudskie drevnosti Rifeya. Permskii zverinyi stil (The Animal Style of Perm), nos. 14, 27, 52).
Figure 6.1. Excalibur being returned to the lake by one of Arthur’s knights, and a hand receiving it. The dying Arthur is in the foreground (*La Mort le Roi Artus* c. 1316, France. British Library Add. MS 10294, f. 94v).

Figure 6.2. Map of topography and sites in Europe mentioned in the text (drawn by Chris Green).

Figure 6.3. Royal Mail stamp (2017) showing a reconstruction of the antler frontlet from Star Carr, possibly worn for ceremonial purposes (object photograph © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved. Stamp design © Royal Mail Group Ltd).


Figure 6.5. The Iron Gorges region of the Danube, showing many of the main Mesolithic sites (drawn by Chris Green, after Dušan Borić, *et al.* (2014), ‘Late Mesolithic Life-ways and Deathways at Vlasac (Serbia)’, *Journal of Field Archaeology*, v. 39, no. 1, 5, Fig. 1; using data from Jarvis (2008)).

Figure 6.6. The plan of a trapezoidal-shaped house and the same rendered as a geometrical form, which is echoed by the burial of a human body with legs bent. All from Lepenski Vir (from John Chapman and Bisserka Gaydarska (2011), ‘Can We Reconcile Individualisation with Relational Personhood? A Case Study from the Early Neolithic’, *Documenta praehistorica*, v. 38, 21–44, Fig. 8.6; courtesy of John Chapman).

Figure 6.7. Sculpture from Lepenski Vir (collection of the National Museum in Belgrade, Inventory Number LV_37).

Figure 6.8. Newgrange, Ireland, showing quartz facing and the entranceway into the passage (© National Monuments Service, Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht).
Figure 6.9. The Nebra Disc, showing Sun, Moon and stars (© Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie Sachsen-Anhalt. Photo: Juraj Lipták).

Figure 6.10. A plan of Stonehenge, showing some astronomical alignments (drawn by Chris Green, after Ezequiel Usón Guardiola, et al. (2014), ‘The Influence of Religious and Cosmological Beliefs on the Solar Architecture of the Ancient World’, International Journal of Architectural Engineering Technology, v. 1, no. 1, Fig. 1).

Figure 6.11. The Trundholm Chariot, found in a bog in northern Denmark in 1902, is thought to depict the Sun and its passage across the sky (National Museum of Denmark, Object Number B7703. Photo: John Lee).

Figure 6.12. The Glauberg Brooch, showing a variety of creatures (Pavel Odvody/© Keltenwelt am Glauberg).

Figure 6.13. A detail of the Aylesford Bucket, showing entities who were part human and part horse (© The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved. Accession Number 1886,1112.3).

Figure 6.14. The Torrs Pony Cap, from Torrs, Dumfries and Gal- loway, Scotland (© National Museums Scotland. Accession Number X.FA 72).

Figure 6.15. The Battersea Shield, one of the most famous items of British Celtic art (© The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved. Accession Number 1857.0715.1).

Figure 6.16. (top) A Late Bronze or Early Iron Age deer stone from Darvi Sum, Khovd Aimag, in Mongolia, showing the four faces of the deer stone, one of which depicts a chariot both in plan and as if from above; (middle) the back of a couch in the burial at Hochdorf, Germany, showing, among other scenes, a chariot partly in profile and partly from above; (bottom) detail of the chariot (© Landesmuseum Württemberg. Photos: P. Frankenstein/ H. Zwietasch).

Figure 6.17. The Desborough Mirror, from the Late Iron Age, with engraved decoration (© The Trustees of the British
Illustrations

Museum. All rights reserved. Accession Number 1924,0109.1).

Figure 7.1. Map of the areas and sites mentioned in the text (drawn by Chris Green).

Figure 7.2. Man harvesting a mandrake root with the help of a dog. Mandrakes are seen to be either male or female, and this one is obviously male. This illustration is from a sixteenth-century manuscript, which shows the persistence of some magical practices (Giovanni Cadamosto, *Herbal with Treatises on Food, Poisons and Remedies, and the Properties of Stones* (British Library Harley MS 3736, f. 59).

Figure 7.3. Incantation bowl with Aramaic inscription, Mesopotamia, c. fifth–sixth centuries CE (courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accession Number 86.11.259).

Figure 7.4. Roman gold amulet made from a rectangular sheet (lamella) cut from gold foil, with sixteen lines of incised text along the short axis. Twelve magical characters on lines 1–3 are followed by the main text on lines 3–16 in Greek cursive writing. A charm to ensure safe child-birth for Fabia, daughter of Terentia. The lamella is complete, though with extensive rolling, creasing and post-depositional crumpling. Found in Cholsey, Oxfordshire. The inscription reads ‘Make with your holy names that Fabia whom Terentia her mother bore, being in full fitness and health, shall master the unborn child and bring it forth; the name of the Lord and Great God being everlasting’ (translation by Dr Roger Tomlin. © British Museum, Accession Number 2009,8042.1).

Figure 7.5. *Charactères* of the alphabet of the angel Metatron (drawn by Chris Green).

Figure 7.6. Delphic Oracle in the painting *The Oracle* by Camillo Miola (Biacca) (digital image courtesy of the Getty’s Open Content Program, 72.PA.32).

Figure 7.7. Early-fourth-century BCE Greek curse tablet (courtesy of © Jessica L. Lamont 2015, Piraeus Museum, Attica (ΜΠ 11948)).
Figure 8.1. Mavungu, an example of a *nkondi* (previously known as a nail fetish), from the village of Nganza, Kakongo, Democratic Republic of Congo (courtesy of the © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. Accession Number 1900.39.70).

Figure 8.2. Map of the areas and sites in Africa mentioned in the text (drawn by Chris Green).

Figure 8.3. The human figure in an eared cap holds the horn of an eland, which is presenting itself ‘nicely’ as a target to be shot (from Mark McGranaghan and Sam Challis (2016), ‘Reconfiguring Hunting Magic: Southern Bushman (San) Perspectives on Taming and Their Implications for Understanding Rock Art’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, v. 26, no. 4, 585, Fig. 3b (digital rendering: Brent Sinclair-Thomson; courtesy of Sam Challis)).

Figure 8.4. One of the larger heads from Lydenburg (courtesy of the © Iziko Museums of South Africa, Social History Collections).

Figure 8.5. An *ikenga* figure of the Igbo people, Nigeria, from the Amobia area of Awka – a city famous for its blacksmiths (courtesy of the © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. Accession Number 1938.15.43).

Figure 8.6. Engraving of late-nineteenth-century Luba Bilumbu diviners, Democratic Republic of the Congo (from Verney Lovett Cameron (1877), *Across Africa*, 347 [n.p.]).

Figure 8.7. Baule Mouse Oracle, Côte d’Ivoire (1990) (Frobenius-Institut, Frankfurt am Main. Photo: Lorenz Homberger).

Figure 8.8. A man practising *nggàm* – interpreting the changes in the position of objects caused by a freshwater crab to predict the future (Rhumski, Cameroon) (by Amcaja – own work with Kodak CX6200 digital camera, CCBY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=230266).

Figure 8.9. Map showing the topography of the Americas and sites mentioned in the text (drawn by Chris Green).
Figure 8.10. The site of Poverty Point, showing the main monuments and features (drawn by Chris Green after Tristram R. Kidder (2012), ‘Poverty Point’, in The Oxford Handbook of North American Archaeology, Timothy R. Pauketat (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, Fig. 38.2).

Figure 8.11. The main features and alignments at Cahokia (drawn by Chris Green, after Susan M. Alt (2012), ‘Making Mississippian at Cahokia’, in The Oxford Handbook of North American Archaeology, Timothy R. Pauketat (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, Fig. 41.1).

Figure 8.12. Huitzilopochtli, the God of the Sun or of War (from the Codex Borbonicus; courtesy of Ancient Americas at LACMA).

Figure 8.13. Haida carved and painted box (courtesy of the © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. Accession Number 1884.57.25).

Figure 8.14. Map showing the topography of Australia and sites mentioned in the text; also, seven sine waves depicting the Seven Sisters songlines that cross the continent (concept and execution by Chris Green).

Figure 9.1. The onion in the Pitt Rivers Museum, donated by Lady Tylor to the Pitt Rivers Museum after E. B. Tylor’s death in 1917 (courtesy of the © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. Accession Number 1917.53.776).

Figure 9.2. A page from Simon Forman’s casebook for 16 October 1598 (The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS Ashmole 195, f. 175r).

Figure 9.3. Wax tablets, crystal ball, obsidian mirror and gold disc belonging to John Dee in the British Museum (©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved. Accession Numbers 1838,1232,90 a and b; 1838,XVI.5; OA.106).

Figure 9.4. John Dee demonstrating an experiment before Queen Elizabeth I at his house in Mortlake (Wellcome Collection. CC BY).
Figure 9.5. Newton's sketch of the properties of the Philosopher's Stone (Babson College's Grace K. Babson Collection of the Works of Sir Isaac Newton: Manuscripts, 1660–1750 (bulk 1660–1726); Call Number MSS BAB 1–53; The Huntington Library).

Figure 9.6. Varieties of hexafoils and other protective marks (courtesy of © Matthew J. Champion).

Figure 10.1. Many séances were obviously held for entertainment and profit. The Egyptian Hall (a homage to Ancient Egypt in Kensington) was home to many performances, and Maskelyne and Cooke were the most successful entrepreneurs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (flyer for performance in 1883. British Library Evan 2557).

Figure 10.2. Signed portrait of Aleister Crowley (originally published in The Equinox (1913)).

Figure 10.3. Attempt to depict the balance between the observable universe and dark matter (courtesy of NASA).

Figure 10.4. Extensive network of grass roots with mycorrhizal fungi (photo by Vaceslav Romanov).

Figure 10.5. The possibility of magical protection. A fourth-century CE Greek Egyptian papyrus scroll. It has an image of a ring and the caption: 'May something never happen as long as this remains buried' (a page from a handbook on magic, British Library B 20142–64).

Figure 10.6. Eleusine plant used by the Azande for Amatong magic to prevent witchcraft (photograph by E. E. Evans-Pritchard; courtesy Wellcome Trust).
Tables

Table 2.1. An outline chronology of the Late Glacial to the Mid-Holocene.

Table 3.1. Main events and some aspects of history of Mesopotamian magic.

Table 3.2. The main periods and dynasties of Ancient Egyptian history.

Table 4.1. Some of the main periods and developments in Chinese history.

Table 4.2. Simplified Chinese astrological connections between planets, elements, colours and animals.

Table 5.1. Some of the major cultures, dates and developments on the Steppe.

Table 5.2. An outline history of magic on the Steppe.

Table 6.1. The main prehistoric periods in Europe through to the Roman Empire.

Table 7.1. Some relevant periods and dates in Jewish history.

Table 7.2. A schematic history of Jewish magic.

Table 8.1. Broad chronology of Africa since the Last Glacial.

Table 8.2. Broad chronology for the Americas, from human colonization to white settlement.

Table 8.3. Broad chronology for Australia, from first colonization through to white settlement.

Table 9.1. Broad chronology of cultural changes in Europe, from the Early Medieval Period to the present.