

Magic and Medicine: Evidence of magical practice at the grave sites of victims of disease

There is no singularly agreed-upon definition of magic in antiquity. Most often, scholars define magic as a sinister and subcultural practice, as opposed to the more regular and state-approved religion. Magic has also been described as an irrational and largely symbolic practice, as opposed to the more practical and well-reasoned work of natural scientists and physicians. This effort to determine exactly what magic is, or to rule out what it is not, fails to recognize the many ways magic bleeds into more conventional religious and scientific practices. This is especially true for the treatment of disease in antiquity; ancient medicine and disease theory relied on belief in supernatural power just as much as it did on reason and practicality. This issue of the vague nature of magic brings up some questions that ought to be addressed, namely, how “weird” must a ritual be to count as magic and not as normative religious practice, and in what ways could magic have been integrated into normal activity, such as the treatment of illness? This paper aims to reconsider Malinowski’s “coefficient of weirdness” and explores the overlap between magic and medicine as shown by traces of ritual activity and the inclusion of magical objects in three late Roman sites containing the graves of victims of disease. A close analysis of these sites and their associated grave goods may show that the practices used to treat and comfort the diseased also extended to help those who died by disease on their way to the underworld.