

## Classical antiquity, possession and exorcism in

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Although it was far more common in classical antiquity to think in terms of supernatural agents acting upon humans rather than indwelling them, gods, demons, and ghosts were commonly thought able to possess both men and women, with a variety of consequences. Where such possession was believed to be harmful, exorcism was employed, although evidence for exorcism, in the narrow sense of expelling a malign entity from a human host, is scant before the beginning of the Roman imperial period.

Possession could be considered valuable and actively solicited, particularly where associated with oracular divination, theurgy or artistic activity. Possession by the god Apollo, was, for example, central to the ancient Pythian oracle at Delphi, as well those of Claros and Didyma. Similarly, a class of freelance diviners, the *engastrimuthoi* (literally 'belly-talkers'), who plied their trade throughout the Mediterranean from at least the fifth century BCE claimed their powers came from supernatural beings that possessed them (see Ar. *Vesp.* 1019-20; Pl. *Soph.* 252c; Luc. *Lex.* 20; Plut. *De def. or.* 414e; cf. also Acts of the Apostles 16:16-24). Indeed, evidence from Greco-Roman Egypt shows that some used rituals to actively seek possession by demons in order to acquire such an ability (PGM IV. 3205). Possession by a god or demon was a significant element in the practice of theurgy, the use of rituals to invoke the presence of, or achieve union with, the divine, a development particularly associated with Neoplatonism in the later empire (Iambl. *Myst.* 3.5). Possession by the Muses, daughters of Mnemosyne and Zeus, were believed, particularly in early Greece, to be key to the creation of poetry, music and dance (Hes. *Op.* 22-25; Hom. *Od.* 1.1; Pl. *Phaedr.* 265b; Democr. fr. 17, 18). However, some forms of divine possession were more ambiguous and potentially problematic. Possession associated with the ecstatic worship characteristic of gods such as Dionysus or Cybele could be thought threatening to both individuals and the wider society (Soph. *Ant.* 955-65; Livy 39.8-19; *ILLRP* 511) and that associated with love, and particularly the activity of Eros and Aphrodite, could be equally disastrous, seen most famously in the case of Phaedra (Soph. *Phaedra* fr. 684; Soph. fr. 941, unidentified play).

Some forms of possession were perceived to be unequivocally harmful to the human host either because they were thought to cause illness or because of the abnormal and self-destructive behaviour exhibited by the victim (Philostr. *VA* 3.38, 4.20; Plut. *Marc.* 20.5-6). Demons were chiefly held responsible for such harmful possession, although it is important to note that ideas about demons in the Greek and Roman worlds were variegated and demons were not always thought of as malign. Initially the Greek term *daimon* was chiefly used to refer to unidentifiable, irrational, discarnate, lesser spirits who were either independent or functioned as intermediaries between the worlds of humans and gods (Pl. *Symp.* 202d -203a; Apul. *De deo Soc.* 143-5); forces that lay behind such phenomena as divination (Arist. *Pyth.* fr. 3; Apul. *Apol.* 43; Apul. *De deo Soc.* 20; Diog. Laert. 7.32; Paus. 3.17.8; Plut. *De def. or.* 431b) and the execution of divine vengeance (Aesch. *Pers.* 354; Aesch. *Ag.* 1501, 1508; Soph. *Trach.* 1235; Hipp. *Morb. sacr.* 1.40; Hes. *Op.* 121-128). Some were commonly believed to be spirits of the dead, or, more specifically, the dead heroes of the Golden Age, the untimely dead, or the dead who had lived evil lives (Hes. *Op.* 121-128; Luc. *Luct.* 24; Apul. *De deo Soc.* 15 though cf. Tert. *de anima* 57). For some, such as Plato, demons were largely benevolent and useful (Pl. *Symp.* 202d -203a); indeed, Socrates could talk of his *daimonion* (a diminutive of *daimon*), as a trustworthy internal voice that restrained him from doing wrong (Plato, *Apology* 31c-d, 40a). However, for most, they were believed to be capricious and dangerous, and from at least the time of Homer onwards they had been predominantly associated with human misfortune (for example, Elpenor's death in the *Odyssey* (Hom. *Od.* 11.61) or the suicide

of young women (Hippoc. *Virg.*) From about the second century CE demons became increasingly assumed to be evil, something that developed under Jewish and Christian influence but also emerged independently, as is evident from the demonology apparent in the influential Chaldean Oracles. Ghosts too could be thought responsible for harmful possession (Philostr. VA 3.38) although they were often conceived of as synonymous with demons (Joseph. *BJ* 7.6.3; Justin *Apol.* 1.18; Paus. 1.32.4-5). Such ghosts belonged to those who had met untimely or violent deaths or whose remains had not received proper burial. Ghosts were generally believed to be dangerous in their own right or open to the malevolent control of magicians and witches (Apul. *Met.* 9.29-31; Suet. *Nero* 34; Hippoc. *Morb. Sacr.* 1.18).

Exorcism in the classical world could take a number of forms. In some cases the practice appears to have been straightforward, involving threats or commands aimed at the demon or ghost (e.g. Luc. *Philops.* 16; Philostr. VA 38; indeed, the Greek word *exorkidzo*, from which the English term *exorcism* is derived, means to adjure or to command). However, in some exorcisms the process involved complex preparations and rituals, and the use of specially crafted objects, such as amulets and rings, and they were carried out by skilled, though often despised, practitioners (e.g. PGM IV.3007-86; *Dig. Leg.* 50.13.1.1-3). In addition to the recovery of the victim, it was not uncommon for physical proof of the departure of the demon to be expected (Joseph. *AJ* 8.45–9; Philostr. VA 4.20.2-3; cf. Acts of Peter 11). Exorcisms in classical antiquity appear to have had much in common with purificatory rites widespread from the archaic period onwards and also often used to respond to ill-health, especially where the pollution was believed to have resulted from a transgression or the direct action of the gods (e.g. Hippoc. *Morb. Sacr.*)

Belief in harmful possession and the practice of exorcism became more widespread from the early imperial period onwards, becoming particularly significant in late antiquity, something apparent in Christian hagiography of that period. Both possession and exorcism were especially identified with peoples associated with the Near East, such as Jews and Syrians (Joseph. *AJ* 8.45–9; Luc. *Philops.* 16), though those from even further afield, such as India, could be thought to possess such knowledge (Philostr. VA 3.38). Exorcists and exorcistic practices associated with cultures viewed as exotic and of great antiquity, from the perspective of Greeks and Romans, seem to have been particularly valued; Eleazar, a Jewish exorcist, for example, performed an exorcism using Solomon's ring before the emperor Vespasian (Joseph. *AJ* 8.45–9; cf. Acts of the Apostles 19.13-16). Such a cultural change probably came about largely as a result of the dominance of Christianity which disseminated ideas that had first become prominent in Judaism from about the third century BCE (see Tobit, 6:7, 16–17, 8:3). However, it could also be found independent of, or only tenuously related to, Christianity or Judaism, for example in the Greek Magical Papyri, a collection of ritual texts from Greco-Roman Egypt (e.g. PGM 4.1227) or Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, which recounts the exploits of a late first-century neo-Pythagorean wonder-worker and exorcist (Philostr. VA 4.10, 20, 25, cf. 3.38).

Suggested reading:

Betz, Hans Dieter. *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Brenk, Frederick E. 'In the Light of the Moon : Demonology in the Early Imperial Period'. In *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II.16.3.*, edited by H. Temporini and W. Haase, 2068–2145. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1986.

Ogden, Daniel. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.