NECROMANCY, the art or practice of magically conjuring up the souls of the dead, is primarily a form of divination. The principal purpose of seeking such communication with the dead is to obtain information from them, generally regarding the revelation of unknown causes or the future course of events. The cause of the death of the deceased who is questioned may be among the facts sought.

More generally necromancy is often considered synonymous with black magic, sorcery, or witchcraft, perhaps because the calling up of the dead may occur for purposes other than information seeking or because the separation of divination from its consequences is not always clear. There is also a linguistic basis for the expanded use of the word: the term black art for magic appears to be based on a corruption of necromancy (from Greek 
neiros, “dead”) to nigromancy (from Latin niger, “black”).

Limited to the practice of magical conjuration of the dead, necromancy does not include communication employing mediums, as in Spiritualism or Spiritism. Nor does it include encounters with the souls of the departed during the spirit journeys of shamans, apparitions of ghosts, or communications in dreams, with the possible exception of those in dreams resulting from incubation.

Divination is undoubtedly a universal phenomenon found in all cultures. In the form of necromancy, however, it is relatively infrequent, though widespread. Only limited descriptions and documentation of the phenomenon are available and only for certain periods and regions. Necromancy presupposes belief in a form of life after death and the continued interest of the dead in the affairs of the living. As such it may well be associated with complex funerary and postfunerary customs and with ancestor worship.
Techniques of Necromancy. Necromancy is a theme often found in myths, legends, and literary works. Such texts may describe communications with the dead or state their messages, but they seldom provide information on actual techniques that might have been employed in a given community. With regard to classical antiquity, Greek and Roman accounts deal with cases described in myth and legend, but there is no evidence of actual necromantic practices, whether in inscriptions or in documentation of specific historic events. More generally, where actual descriptions exist of rites in other societies rather than fabulous accounts or rumors and accusations, inquiries are connected with burial and burial preparation. Here the questioning of the corpse may concern the cause of death and the identification of a murderer. Other necromantic practices involve rites at the grave site with the use of the name or some part of the deceased, often his or her skull. The response may be in the form of an utterance produced by the diviner, either in a trance state or through ventriloquism. It may also be revealed in the form of a sign; this may involve the interpretation of an omen or the drawing of lots.

The concept of necromancy is of limited utility for at least two reasons. First, it is linked to its history in the Western tradition and therefore difficult to employ in analyzing beliefs and practices of other cultures with different traditions. Second, necromancy is also only one of several types of divinatory practices, and these tend to shade into each other. For both of these reasons the term is of limited value in cross-cultural research, and it is not generally utilized in modern ethnographic studies.

Necromancy in Antiquity. The ancient Greeks believed that the dead had great prophetic powers and that it was possible to consult them by performing sacrifices or pouring libations at their tombs. Such offerings were also part of the funerary and
postfunerary ceremonies. The legendary visit of Odysseus to Hades to consult the seer Tiresias, as described in *Book 11* of the *Odyssey*, has also been classified as an instance of necromancy. Various other classical texts include references to formal oracles of the dead; however, these generally speak of practices not among Greeks but in remote locations or among barbarians. They cannot be considered reliable reports of actual practices.

Most information on necromancy among Nordic and Germanic peoples comes from the sagas. A number of references appear, for example, in the Eddas. Odin (Óðinn) is, among other things, god of the dead, and in one account he awakens a dead prophetess in order to consult her. It is not known whether or not such conjurations took place. Interpretation of the movement of rune-inscribed sticks appears to have been practiced. Necromancy was only one of numerous techniques of divination and one considered to be particularly dangerous, especially when the dead were not family members. It appears to have been prohibited even prior to the conversion of these peoples to Christianity.

Necromancy appears to have been unknown, or at least unreported, among the Etruscans and in the earlier periods of Roman history. It may have been introduced with other Hellenistic and Oriental divinatory and magic practices, all of which were prohibited by Augustus. Like other forms of divination and magic, which might include the use of poisons, necromancy was perceived as a potential political tool, dangerous in a world of personal power and ambition. The emperors, however, surrounded themselves with diviners of all sorts. The concerns of medieval Christianity with necromancy and magic have their roots in this period as well as in biblical prohibitions.
Numerous divinatory techniques are mentioned in the Bible. The account of the so-called Witch of Endor (<i>1 Sm. 28</i>) is frequently cited as an example of necromancy and of the prohibitions attached to it (cf. <i>Deuteronomy</i>, <i>Leviticus</i>, and <i>Isaiah</i>). Necromancy is mentioned in the Talmud among other divinatory practices. Although it is severely condemned, several examples are cited. The practice appears to have been rare, but it left its trace in rabbinic sources and medieval Jewish magical beliefs, perhaps reinforced by the beliefs of the Christians among whom the Jews lived. Magical beliefs, many of pre-Christian origins, continued throughout the Middle Ages.

**Late Medieval and Renaissance Necromancy.** The primary use of the term refers to the period between the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance. This was a time of great social and political instability and change. It was also the time when fear and persecution of witches took hold in Europe. In England the several shifts between Catholicism and Protestantism were linked to fears of resistance and repression. One of the crimes of which witches were accused was necromancy, conjuring up the dead as well as (or with the help of) the devil. It was in this context that the term necromancy came to be used as synonymous with demonic magic, that is, magic performed with the devil's assistance. It no longer referred exclusively or even principally to magic using bodies of the dead or conjuring up the spirits of the dead. There are two major sources of information about these beliefs and practices. These are the instructions used by witch-hunters and exorcists, on the one hand, and the surviving manuals and books of magic, on the other. Possession of such books itself was a basis for prosecution. The introduction of printing and as a result the availability of books to a larger number of people were in part responsible for the wider diffusion of such texts.
Manuals such as the *Munich Book of Necromancy*, which dates from the fifteenth century, are rich sources of information on the general subject of the magic of the period. It contains detailed information of what magicians claimed to be able to do and said they actually did. Interestingly this concerns not only specifics on how to gain magical powers through conjurations, and about the spirits that could be conjured up, but also provides information on various forms of stage magic, that is, illusionist experiments that could be performed for entertainment, such as producing the appearance of banquets, horses, and castles. Some aspects of modern illusionist stage magic seem to have a long tradition behind them.

To be accused and prosecuted for necromancy, the possession of such books of magic was often sufficient. Reading and owning books in themselves gave rise to suspicions. Suspect books were confiscated and burned. Lower-level clergy, men with some literacy, were frequently accused of practicing necromancy by the use of books. Women, who were less likely to be literate, seem generally not to have been suspected of manual-based necromantic practices. Rather, they were accused of using spells, of making pacts with the devil, and of having animal familiars. The fear of black magic and legislation against it often reflected anxiety over its possible use for political purposes. An example is King James’s 1604 decree of death for anyone using the body of a dead person or any of its parts for purposes of magic. This fear is also seen in writings of the period. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* shows witches conspiring to practice necromancy: they collect body parts on a battlefield, and in Act IV they use the dead to prophecy.

**Necromancy in Archaic Cultures.** Spanish chronicles, composed shortly after the conquest of Peru, record that the Inca had two special classes of diviners who
consulted the dead, one group specializing in dealing with mummies of the dead and another consulting various spirit beings and their representations, which the Spaniards referred to as idols. The reports are written from the perspective of sixteenth-century Spaniards at a time when, in their own country, the Inquisition searched out necromancers and others considered sorcerers and heretics.

In the Huon Gulf region of New Guinea, throughout the nineteenth century and prior to the arrival of missionaries, all deaths were attributed to magic. The identification of the sorcerer who had caused the death was carried out by a diviner, who conjured the spirit of the deceased into one of several types of objects. It was then questioned, and "yes" or "no" responses were obtained from the motion of the object. The most common object used was a stunned eel, whose convulsions were interpreted as "yes" responses. Other objects might be an upturned shell or a piece of bamboo held in the hand. The movements of these objects were subject to some manipulations, and the answers were often used to confirm suspicions held by popular opinion.

In Haiti a tradition exists that is derived from both European influences of the colonial period and West African traditions. As part of postfunerary rites of vodou initiates, one of the two souls with which every person is endowed is removed from a temporary sojourn underwater and settled in a family shrine. During this ceremony the soul is questioned on various matters of interest. At a later time it may be called into a jar for purposes of consultation. Like conversations with the dead in parts of Africa, as, for instance, among the Zulu, this process appears to involve ventriloquism by the performing ritual specialist. It is also believed that sorcerers can send the spirit of one or more dead persons into the body of a victim to cause illness and eventual death if appropriate counter-rites are not
performed. These involve the identification of both the dead and the sender. The diagnostic process may involve the direct questioning of the dead using the patient as a medium or by scrying (water gazing) or using other divinatory techniques. The Haitian example suggests the difficulty in drawing clear lines between sorcery, divination, diagnosis, and healing, that is, between rituals with positive or negative intent or even among the various divinatory techniques. As a result it is doubtful that the term necromancy is used appropriately for any of these practices.

From the perspective of research methods, it is important to distinguish between studies based on written sources, often of a fragmentary nature, and ethnographic studies of living people, their beliefs, and their customs. In contrast to written sources, living people can be observed and questioned, so a larger context for their understandings can be discerned.

The term necromancy has changed meaning in the course of time. The practices described as necromantic were seen as the very essence of evil in the period of the Renaissance. Calling up the dead to question them, as described in Greek literature and myth, was not necessarily evil but might be concerned with decision making about the future and practical matters. How the dead are understood as potentially active in the world of the living has varied not only from culture to culture but also from period to period. Often distinctions are made between those who died a natural death and those who did not. In modern times faith healing by means of calling on the help of the dead has been referred to as necromancy in the United States. This gives the term a different meaning, unrelated to black magic. As interest in various aspects of the occult has seen a revival in the United States, curiosity about necromancy has also grown.
<XR>See also Divination.</XR>

<BH1>Bibliography</BH1>


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