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The Wand Chooses the Wizard: Distinctions of Greco-Roman Staffs, Rods, and Wands in Ritual and Myth

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Abstract

Περὶ ὕπνου (“On Sleep”) - a 4th-century philosophical work attributed to Clearchus of Soli - provides an account of the use of a wand or "rhabdos" as a conduit for the extraction of a boy’s soul in which it is controlled by the object. Though the form or mechanics of this evocative device are not attested, the use of the staff or rod in magical contexts can be observed across ritual practices in antiquity. However, little speculation in the present century about the broad distinctions between classes of wand objects outside of those commonly attested in the Homeric canon has been made, and little legacy exists for a source of the thing called “magic” in mystic cults. By qualifying and supplementing Ferdinand de Waele’s 1927 *The Magic Staff or Rod in Graeco-Italian Antiquity,* which is the most recent compendium of Homeric references to wands in antiquity, this paper suggests the function of the wand or rod in ancient Greek rituals as twofold: as symbolic qualifiers for the source of magic they procure and as technical ritual tools. The dual function of the rod in Classical antiquity ultimately characterises the Greeks and Romans association with their world’s impalpable forces as a distinctly interpersonal, synergistic, and humanistic relationship, an unconscious pull and meeting of souls that provides a window into the more minute interdependency of celestial and terrestrial aspects of wands in Greco-Roman devotional practices.

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From gods, curses, poisons, vampires, and chthonic spirits to witches, shapeshifters, shamans, and holy men, Greco-Roman society presented a wide swath of supernatural forces - those of the somatic, the natural, and the metaphysical - that informed the prosaic encounters of its people. However, in this assemblage of beliefs about the unseen, little overt descriptive legacy exists for a source of the thing called "magic" in antiquity. The peoples of Classical antiquity seemed to have relied almost ubiquitously on slivers of an earthlier sphere, ordinary human goods exalted to the feats of godly proportion, to constitute their entwinement with the empyreal forces of their day, employed in religious rites that suggest the elusive "source" through visual and aural representation. *Περὶ ὕπνου* ("On Sleep") - a 4th-century philosophical work attributed to Clearchus of Soli - provides an account of the use of one such sliver, a wand or *rhabdos* used as a conduit for the extraction of a boy's soul in which his essence - at the direction of the practitioner - is controlled by the object. Though the form or mechanics of this evocative device are not attested, the use of the staff or rod in magical contexts can be observed across ritual practices in antiquity, specifically concerning distinctions between general sceptres and staves and the function of godly*rhabdoi* in Greek mystery cults. Accounting for the variety of objects present in contemporary textual evidence, this paper suggests the function of the wand or rod in ancient Greek and Roman religion as twofold: as symbolic qualifiers for magic users and as technical ritual tools.

The rod or staff can be first divided into two sectors as umbrella categorisations, one of which was to be used in the practice of *goeteia*, as an invented form of conduit to

anthropomorphise the act of magic casting, and the other to be used more generally as a long, straight staff. In his *The Magic Staff or Rod in Graeco-Italian Antiquity,* Ferdinand De Waele - an early 20th-century Classical scholar - intends his treatise as an encyclopaedia of sorts for the magical staff and identifies the relative function and origin of the Greco-Roman wands, staves, or rods associated with his definition of magic as a non-denominational force practised as an expression of the unseen in "primitive forms of religious thought" (23). Though de Waele's antiquated and seemingly prejudicial perception of non-Christian religious practices serves to cast a heavy bias on his analysis of differing wand forms and his discussion of ritual customs as a whole, he conversely acknowledges both this bias and the difficulty of writing the treatise, which relies on a small portion of data that has survived piecemeal from antiquity, with specific attention to the absence of the layman's thought. De Waele's identification of contemporary portrayals of the physical wielding and visage of staves and rod-like objects in religious contexts, specifically from Greco-Roman art objects, is nevertheless useful in discerning the archetypical attributions associated with named magical rods, concerning how these archetypes identify the source of the magic or unseen force they conduct. The first sector or type, *skeptron* or sceptre - the staff - is etymologically associated with rigidity in practice, its use inflexible and invariable. The other, *rhabdos*, relates to flexibility, or a channelling device capable of bending its form, possibly in service to the physical exaction of magic on the device (de Waele 25).

These two forms of the wand highlight a connection between the form and material of the object and its function. For example, the assertion that rigidity and impotence are related seems counterintuitive, but curse tablets from the 4th century B.C.E. in Athens demonstrate an

invocation of the lead tablet's inert, unyielding form as a representation of the intended effect to be placed on the bound target of the curse. In conjunction with Clearchus' description of the boy's body in *On Sleep* as "motionless… preserved… as if it were dead" further makes the connection between stiffness and impotence outside of traditionally sexual contexts. In this distinction is provided the fundamental difference between non-magical and magical staves, and how they are devised to the Greeks. Staves were evidently used for mundane purposes no less important to Greek life or society than those of magical conception (de Waele 26). The use of the staff could enable someone to walk; staves were used for self-protection in the day-to-day; longer staves could be used as an exclamatory tool, to wave in the air, to point at objects or people in reference, or as a pedagogical tool; and shepherd's staves were used to tend flocks in pastoral areas around urban Rome (Ogden 171). The disparity between magic - here in language, but also in form ("springier" wood vs hardwood or metal) yields in part from a Greek belief of some strong connection between fluidity and magic, that unseen sources of magical energy or power required a degree of flexibility to function and that magic itself was considered a fluid or malleable force. However, in conjunction with comparisons of artistic depictions on temple reliefs in Athens of the Vestal Virgins, Panathenaic Procession, and the goddess Athena - detailed by Dr. Meghan DiLuzio in her account of the roles of Roman priestesses in active religious performance - ritual objects seem to have often been tied to specific persons and contexts, rather than generically wielded in the same fashion as their non-magical counterparts (190-202). Thus, magical rods can be identified as objects that possess inherent flexibility themselves but which stem from a rigid or narrow tradition of use within human society as ritual tools.

In Greek mythology, the most striking and consistent example of wand or rod use stems from the Olympian Hermes, most commonly attributed as the herald or messenger of the divine, the god of travel, and a psychopomp - one who leads the dead to the underworld - the latter affirming him as a popular deity invoked in the use of curse tablets. In de Waele's fervent denial to refer to Greco-Roman magical figures like Hermes as gods, his singular view that the rod itself must be imbued with the power - not the deity itself - limits his scope of analysis. A broader perspective elucidates the further distinction of the rhabdos into another typological framework, one which serves to distinguish between the conduit and the source in relation to the divine. In Homer's Odyssey and Iliad, Hermes' *kerykeion-caduceus* - the specific term for his wand - is described only in brief instances where he is either leading humans - living or deceased - to a predetermined destination or serving as a herald, thus leading a message. In Homer's *Odyssey* Book XXIV (Homer 24), Hermes' *kerykeion-caduceus*, which is described specifically as a "golden rhabdos," can put people to sleep or to wake them from slumber, which he uses to arouse the spirits of Penelope's suitors in guidance to the underworld. Conversely, pictorial representations of Hermes on Attic kraters occasionally hold a split staff, used to draw a restless spirit from a grave, leading it up towards the Earthly realm again (de Waele 57). While the pictured spirit is attributed by 19th-century scholars as a chthonic Earth goddess, Pherephatta, the spirit is more closely identified with one of the *agamoi*, vengeful spirits of unmarried women deprived of marriage and child-rearing, their defining rights as women in the Greco-Roman world (de Waele 36). A clear iconographic and archetypical canon is set here with the specific rhabdos held by Hermes, affirming the rod as an object formed and associated with Hermes himself and his role as psychopomp rather than as a tool used by

everyday sorcerers or practitioners of magic. However, this presents the fundamental problem with qualifying the *kerykeion-caduceus* in comparison to the general rhabdoi, including Clearchus' *psuchoulkos rhabdos*: whether magic conducted from the staff stems from the god's ability to call upon the spirit, with the rod as a conduit, or the spirit's pull to the staff itself as a singular magical object, without the god's influence. Contextualising the caduceus' own power outside of the Homeric tradition provides a better base for its ability to portray the magical source.

Outside of the Homeric tradition, the *kerykeion* has seldom been depicted in Greek art and literature outside of the hands of its user, a suggestion of a necessary tie between the staff's magical properties and usefulness and the god wielding it demonstrates the source of the magic as the person rather than the object by god's nature as an inherently magical being. In regard to its use by the god, the physicality of the object is irrelevant, mentioned in Homer only for narrative recognition of the object. De Waele attempts to relate the *kerykeion* as a Judeo-Christian shepherd's crook, with Hermes as the prophetic Christ the Good Shepherd; while this is invalidated by the age of de Waele's sources, which span back as far as the 5th-century B.C.E when Christian influence on Greek society was incalculable, it does suggest a certain tie between the rod's singular link to the deity (47). The use of the caduceus for the aforementioned *nekromanteia* (the conduction of the dead) relates the staff to Hermes as the guide for the recently deceased and the rod as an object by which he can herd - not unlike the shepherd's staff - spirits into the underworld. For example, the caduceus' form originally appeared as an arm's-length rod topped with a figure eight in tribute to an infinite path, a clear connection to Hermes' scope of power as the god of travel and messages. The name (κηρύκειον

in Greek, later *caduceus* in Latin) is inextricably linked to Hermes: *kerykeion* translates to "herald's rod." Thus, it is designed specifically to fit Hermes' physiognomy and divine domain. In this way, the *kerykeion* performs no action or magic of its own and thus has no attributes that Hermes himself does not already possess; sleep magic and leading the souls of the dead are abilities that the god is portrayed fervently practising in ancient art and literature without the aid of a magical device. Furthermore, Hermes lack of restriction as a bearer of the wand, using it as both a magical conduit and "a kind of walking stick," identify the magic used to awaken and lead the souls or spirits as firmly within his own being, to be drawn through the staff as a conduit rather than a source (de Waele 56).

This characterisation of the *kerykeion-caduceus*' use as a vessel for the magic held inherently by Hermes himself - in a humanistic fashion typical of Greco-Roman views of the unseen world - differ fundamentally from *On Sleep's* description of the wand and its unnamed bearer, creating a distinction between divine wands and those held by human sorcerers or magic practitioners. In Clearchus of Soli's *On Sleep,* a physical aspect emerges in the use of the wand, requiring the body of the deceased boy to be "struck" with the wand for the incorporeal soul to be drawn out of its corporeal vessel (Ogden 171). The practitioner is in no way described and - rather than performing this body/soul separation himself - depends on the actions of the wand itself as the source of the magical encounter to "[lead] the soul" and "[bring] it back into association with the body" (Ogden 171). In all instances of spellbound agency, the soul follows the magical properties of the wand, with the practitioner or sorcerer merely serving as the guiding hand or possessor of the object. In this sense, either the wand is its own source of necromantic magic or a ritual tool to awaken the magic possessed within the target of the

wands' effects. In this sense, the ritual function is often lost when focus of the objects is attributed solely to socio-political status and extrinsic exhibition of power, distorting an object's meaning and significance (DiLuzio 202-204). Applying this same logic to the treatment of staves establishes that though the staves are used in similar ways, the *rhabdoi* cease to be involved from similar bearers - and thus cease to invoke the same magical source - as the specific *kerykeion-caduceus* wielded by the deity. The personal *kerykeion-caduceus* and *On Sleep's* generic *rhabdos* are thus differentiated by their bearer. Also involved is the will of the bearer in juxtaposition to the will of the target. The wand in the hands of the divine need not be magical in nature, or capable of suppressing the mortal will, because the god can perform magic unaided. For the practitioner in *On Sleep*, the will of the boy's soul must be controlled by the will of another human being. In comparison to curse tablets and amulets again, the human suppression of another human's will would require otherworldly powers from the divine or spiritual realms due to the humans' lack of inherent magic (de Waele 102). The wand, in this case, serves as a replacement for that invocation. The *rhabdos* in *On Sleep* further serves to present the duality of the wand as an object that can qualify, by its use, whether a practitioner is a source for magic but also as a tool to be used in technical rituals within a sublunary atmosphere. De Waele posits a "deterioration" of the rod from a conduit for godly forces to a simpler symbolic tool for non-magical practitioners, where the object on serves as a ritual tool with cultural and religious significance rather than magical power (69). This transition between earthly staff and divine wands can be exemplified through the visual qualities of the caduceus when wielded by two different deities, Hermes and Asclepius. With iconographic changes, something traditionally of divine or purely magical use can be repurposed over time for daily

ritual activities, possibly as the magical practice becomes less widespread and falls out of use; Sandra Blakely's account surrounding the frequency and somatic reasoning of ritual objects and their distribution throughout ancient Greek society concludes that as objective and concrete the ritual tools are in composition, they are part of a large, flowing arc of socially interactive change reciprocal to ancient grasps and depth of belief in specific religious concepts (Blakely 1-14). Hermes' *kerykeion-caduceus*naturally cleaved into one divine *rhabdos* - identified as Hermes' Caduceus - and a human *rhabdos,* a tool augmented by human vision to invoke the power of the original Caduceus' bearer, manifested in the physical appearance of the rod. An addition of two intertwined snakes, which could be adapted naturally from the original simple figure-eight shape adorning the rod, denote the adornment of the staff in a caparison of a powerful talisman, converting the magical attribution and source from Hermes, the inherent unseen power of the divine, to the object, then used to imbibe the human user with the staff's own powers. Iconography in the ritual object thus affirms its status as an "emblem of power" and alludes to divine powers. When pictured with Asclepius the Greek god of medicine, it serves as a symbol of medicinal health because of the balance between the two intertwined snake-like forms as reciprocally intertwined forces. When placed at the base of crossroads, the staff is emblematic of good trade (in association with Hermes as the herald or messenger), as do the wings of the *petasos*, Hermes' winged sandals, which were added to the staff as an invocation of the god (de Waele 63).

The caduceus' ritualistic uses align best with comparisons to the *thyrsus* - a long fennel rod about the height of a man topped with a pinecone - another ritual wand derived from a singular godly tool, the Thyrsus of Dionysus. In Giovanni Casadio's book *Mystic Cults in Magna*

Graecia, he argues that Greek mystery cults often involved imitation of the life, deeds, or mythological stories of the central god through the use of ritual tools to corporealise events unseen by the human eye, specifically in Chapter 1, which details the various uses of the *thyrsus* in mystery cults. The Cult of Dionysus' ecstatic rituals involved "bearing the *thyrsus*," an act which distinguished one as a member of an elite group of bacchants having been purified by the spirit of Dionysus (Casadio 50). The *thyrsus* was also commonly used in a dance ritual during the Bacchanalia, a series of festivals during the Roman period before anti-Bacchic legislation was passed in 186 B.C.E, that involved throwing the *thyrsus* in time with a series of foot movements (Euripides 940-944). After, the rod was displayed with the *kantharos*, a curvilinear wine cup, as a pair of representations of the phallus and female hips and genitalia respectively, as a tribute to Dionysus' involvement with fertility and pleasure (Casadio 51). The ritual use of the rod thus serves as a direct reincarnation. Therefore, the worshippers' relationship with their god is visually distinguished through using religious object unique to their belief system.

In this visual distinction between mundane staffs and divine wands, it is necessary to return to the original typological distinctions between rod and staff. Unlike the need for a flexible object involved with godly casting, in religious and spiritual contexts the sceptre or staff is used most frequently. This difference implies that in practical human use of the objects, the function and visage of the object is more important than its capacity to wield or conduct its own magical forces. Though overlap between *skeptera* or staves and *rhabdos* or rods occurred in the ritual sphere, staves or staves were more commonly attributed in rituals, as they were used not as tools to channel magical forces but to invoke (through their physical appearance, movements in the air, or use as a prod or weapon) the powers of other objects, deities, or

spirits. Their lack of flexibility is in this case irrelevant to their use. Returning to the Homeric canon reveals one such example in Agamemnon's sceptre, which was an heirloom bestowed upon his ancestors by the gods, a tool to serve as a show of sovereignty and an affirmation of his right to rule (de Waele 109). In being shown to the Achaeans by Odysseus to prevent them from fleeing the Trojan War, the staff serves as a metaphorical conduit rather than a physical one, channelling the charismatic prowess of its wielder and leveraging family history and ancestral reverence. Thus, the staff appears to invoke the dominion of the ancestors' souls over the battle to come.

The symbolic use of the wand also has ties to another of the most prominent Ancient Greek mystery cults along with the aforementioned Cult of Dionysus, which includes examples of wand use that affirm these objects' ritual capacity as firmly technical, practical, and/or emblematic. The Eleusinian Mysteries, a series of initiation rituals involved in the worship of Demeter and Persephone, include the use of a small stick or staff to stir the mixture drunk by Demeter during her mourning for Kore: *kykeon*. Through combining psychotropic drugs into the folds of wheat flour and wine, the climax of Demeter's search was emulated by female priestesses, a shared action between the goddess and initiates of the mysteries (de Waele 82). Further, rites surrounding the mixing of the *kykeon,* the grain and wine, involved a secret ratio or recipe heavily guarded by initiates, but the objects and crops involved - including the mixing wand - while still important to the ritual - were not considered to be held in any special regard. Thus, the staff served as a technical ritual tool without being magical or spiritually connected. This practice reveals that - not unlike Clearchus' *rhabdos* - the mixing staff's use as a technical ritual tool that could physically activate the forces within other corporeal objects without

imbuing its own power. Where Clearchus' *psuchoulkos rhabdos* employs "[striking]" or hitting "the boy with his wand" to stirs or awaken the soul (Ogden 171), the Eleusian mixing stick performs the act of mixing that physically stirs the mixture while simultaneously stirring or awakening the unseen forces present within the alchemical mixture that connects initiates directly to the goddess via shared experience.

Other forms of smaller ritual sticks also foreground connections between the practical use of the object and its religious involvement. Distinct from other invocations of the Olympian gods presented by the *thyrsus* and *kykeon* mixing staff are *eiresione*, small wooden sticks that invited good treatment by Apollo, in providing wealth, prosperity, good health, and serving as the Averter - the epithet of Apollo that routed evil. For those involved in the Thargelia or Pyanopsia, Athenian festivals take place in May and mid-Autumn respectively as an expression of thanks for Apollo's blessings, the *eiresione* were wielded as a representation of what worshippers had received from the god and were praying for in the future: the sticks covered in wool, olives or olive oil, fruits, nuts, and other crops and hung on the doors of houses encouraged individual wealth for each household. In this example, a contradiction seems to arise: the belief that the staff as an offering could both conduct the bountiful energy of the benevolent Apollo - thereby serving as a magical rod - while also symbolically portraying the devoutness of the city's inhabitants in the traditional role of the sceptre or staff. The tension between these two ideas ultimately characterises the futility of any strict categorical segregation between this paper's established umbrella terms, where emblematic meaning and supernatural energy are not mutually exclusive. In this context, Clearchus' wand is best represented as an object of both physical and metaphysical nature. Therefore, it is to be used in

physical acts such as a rigid staff by the practitioner to awaken the spirits and as a flexible rod by which the boy's spiritual energy is guided and wrought from the body. In identifying the faults in this analysis, the limited scope of extant rods and staves from Classical antiquity - specifically Greece - hinders a comparison between the shape of ritual rods as significant for use in the ritual. In addition, little written evidence exists for the exact movements attributed to more general *rhabdos,* and much of the exact rituals involved in extant depictions of rods - as de Waele explicates in his analysis of priestly rods (104) - were orally or demonstratively inherited, leaving no modern trace. It is also worth noting that many of the contemporary authors in which this paper's 20th-century and 21st-century sources rely present their own socio-political biases. In addition, etymologically comparisons between *On Sleep* and are hampered by an inability to locate any extant Greek versions of the text.

The magic wand or rod - like that employed by the practitioner in *On Sleep* - served as a tool to identify the bearer as someone of magical origins but which was reciprocally defined in its capacity for power and status as a "source" of magic by the bearer themself, serving as a conduit for magical bearers and as an ethereal connection in ritual use for non-magic bearers. Hermes's *kerykeion-caduceus* is an exemplar of the former, a physical incarnation of an individual power stemming from the god rather than the object, a conduit for his will in exerting his divine force and capabilities over others. Conversely, the Dionysian *thyrsus* presents an object steeped in mundanity, a vessel of the god adopted for human use with modification as a means to imitate, invoke, and commingle with Dionysus as the object of worship. In the context of Clearchus of Soli's *On Sleep,* the human practitioner's *psuchoulkos rhabdos* fits into this religious narrative, and into its own story, as the source of the magic -

inspired by the conduits of godly forces - that its non-magical practitioner employs to conduct the soul of his object. The dual function of the rod in Classical antiquity ultimately characterises the Greeks and Romans association with their world's impalpable forces as a distinctly interpersonal, synergistic, and humanistic relationship, an unconscious pull and meeting of souls.

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