The practice of consulting the dead for divinatory purposes is widely practiced cross-culturally and firmly attested in the Greek world.\(^1\) Poets, for example, speak of the underworld journeys of heroes, like Odysseus and Aeneas, to learn crucial information about the past, present or future, and elsewhere we hear about rituals of psychagogia designed to lead souls or ghosts up from the underworld for similar purposes. These are usually performed at the tomb of the dead person, as in the famous scene in Aeschylus’ *Persians*, or at other places where the Greeks believed there was an entrance to the underworld. Herodotus tells us, for instance, that the Corinthian tyrant Periander visited an “oracle of the dead” (*nekromanteion*) in Ephyra to consult his dead wife (5.92) and that Croesus, when he performed his famous comparative testing of Greek oracles, sent questions to the tombs of Amphiaraus at Oropus and Trophonius at Lebedeia (1.46.2-3). Since Herodotus is heavily dependent on Delphic informants for most of Croesus’ story, modern readers are apt to forget that there were, in fact, two oracles that correctly answered the Lydian king’s riddle: the oracle of Apollo at Delphi and that of the dead hero Amphiaraus. The popularity of such oracular hero-shrines increased steadily in Hellenistic and Roman times, although divination by dreams gradually seems to take center stage.\(^2\)

It is clear, however, that the more personal and private forms of necromancy—especially consultations at the grave—fell into disfavor, especially with the Romans, whose poets repeatedly depict horrible

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\(^1\) For a general overview of the Greek practices and discussions of the specific sites mentioned in this paragraph, see A. Bouché-LeClercq, *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité*, vol. 1 (Paris 1879), 330-343. For a different evaluation of the evidence from that presented here, see Johnston in this volume, 287-92.

witches performing graveyard rituals or battlefield ceremonies that involve the handling and interrogation of corpses. The Roman authorities, moreover, gradually made certain forms of divination illegal, cracking down first on private ceremonies and itinerant professionals, and then by the mid-fourth century CE specifically restricting nocturnal graveyard visits and necromancy. In some ways, I think that this negative Roman reaction has affected our own modern views of these practices, for scholars often display a similar embarrassed silence and distaste for necromantic practices, and one sometimes hears that necromancy was not popular in the Greek world at all, but rather more typical of barbarians like the Persians or the more wild members of the Greek family, such as the Thessalians—indeed, some go so far as to say that it was more popular in the literary imagination of the Greeks than in their actual lives.

In what follows, I shall argue that in these later periods necromancy was probably more widespread than is usually supposed, but that it had gone “underground” so to speak to avoid detection by the authorities. In this paper, in fact, I argue that we can see signs of this late-antique concern about the propriety or legality of necromancy in the manner in which the scribes or redactors of the magical papyri seem to hide necromantic rites within other kinds of divinatory recipes or masquerade them in some other form. I have made the first part of this argument elsewhere, with regard to the magical recipes for graveside ceremonies at sunset, which invoke the setting sun to send up for oracular questioning the ghost of the dead person buried in that particular grave. There I argued in part that scribes or redactors of the

3 E.g. Horace Satires 1.8 and Tibullus 1.2.43-50; for discussion, see R. Gordon, “Imagining Greek and Roman Magic,” in B. Ankarloo and S. Clark, eds., Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: 2: Ancient Greece and Rome (Philadelphia and London 1999), 206-208. For Erichtho’s infamous necromantic rites in Lucan’s Civil War, see section three of this paper.


5 F. Graf, “Magic and Divination,” 284, is typical: “more-literary-than-real-necromancy.” This is, of course, a reasonable assumption, given the popular literary tradition and the scant archaeological evidence—but it is not clear that such rituals would leave any traces in the archaeological record anyway. One argument has been the relatively little necromancy in the PGM, but this can be explained (as I explain it in this essay) by the need to hide or masquerade it as something else.