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## Article

# Traces of Necromantic Divinatory Practices in the Picatrix

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**Abstract:** In the famous medieval magical manual called Picatrix, the unknown author describes the phenomenon of magic with the term nigromantia. As is well known, the original meaning of the Greek term necromantia has a more concise meaning. It is used for a special kind of divination, i.e., divination through the parts of a cadaver and the conjured spirit of the dead. Seemingly in the Picatrix, no necromantic ritual can be found; moreover, the author stresses that his main goal is pious, i.e., to find the path leading to the ultimate source of the universe, the one and only God. In my paper, I show that on some pages of the Picatrix, there are traces of divinatory practices that may be connected to the original meaning of the term nigromantia. In the third book of the manual, descriptions of some interesting rituals attributed to the pagan Sabeans of Harran and their teacher, the god Hermes can be found. During the practices, the magician involved conjured spirits of the heavenly bodies and powers as well. Because of this, by looking closely at and analyzing the given text, it is possible to piece together a complex web of necromantic and demonic divinatory rituals.

**Keywords:** Picatrix; necromancy; medieval magic; Harran; Sabeans of Harran; Astral magic

## 1. Defining the Problem

In my presentation, I will examine from a new perspective an intriguing part of a medieval Latin magical manual known as Picatrix. The Latin Picatrix is a translation of a text originally written in Arabic (Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm, 10th century) via a Castilian version which was made in the court of Alfonso the Wise (Pingree 1981), but the Latin text differs considerably from the Arabic version.<sup>1</sup> The Arabic and Latin versions compile many sources, and they might include the works of earlier Greco-Latin authors, thus providing a Neoplatonic-Hermetic interpretation of early medieval magic (Pingree 1980). The history of the reception of the text is remarkably interesting. Even though the Latin translation was made with royal support, we know nothing about it until the Renaissance, when learned magicians such as Ficino and Mirandola started using it with restrictions. The texts confront researchers with an overly complex matrix of philological problems since the sources of the Arabic Ghāyat and the Latin Picatrix certainly provide many layers that have only partially been explored. Moreover, as a magical manual that has survived in its entirety, it is also an interesting source for the history of magic.

In the present context, the most important fact is that the book contains descriptions of the astral religion of the mysterious Harranian Sabeian community and the magical elements that allegedly played a role in their religion. The ancient city of Harran is in south-eastern Turkey. In the early Middle Ages, after the Muslim conquest, it was an important cultural and political centre when local

<sup>1</sup> For the textual history of Picatrix, see Pingree 1986. (The edition of the Latin text with an introduction to the manuscript tradition.) For the Arabic text, see Ritter and Plessner 1962. For a modern English edition of the Latin Picatrix with notes and an introduction, see Attrell and Porreca 2019. For the Hungarian translation of the Latin text, with an introduction and afterword on the history, structure, and afterlife of the text, see Frazer-Imregh and Hamvas 2022.

and Hellenistic religious elements created a special syncretic culture. Some of the city's inhabitants were the so-called Sabeans, whose<sup>2</sup> identity and religion are still a matter of debate; some scholars think they were a pagan group that worshipped stars (cf. Genequand 1999) and considered Hermes Trismegistus as their prophet and a corpus of Hermetic treatises as their holy book.

The lack of a critical edition that compares the Arabic and Latin versions also impedes research.

#### General Remarks

In my paper, I analyze a sequence of rituals attributed to the so-called Sabeans of Harran. The text can be found in the seventh chapter of the third book of the Latin Picatrix (Picatrix, III. 7. 36). I will present an interpretation of the ritual that may enlighten a different function from the previous ones. Before quoting and analyzing the passage, it should be noted that its context raises several problems.

1. Who the so-called Harranian Sabeans might have been and what role Hermes played in their religion, assuming that such a community really existed and that it was not just a later invention of Muslim esoteric scholars?<sup>3</sup>

2. What was the role of Harran (if any) in the development of Arabic Hermetic literature, and in what aspect contributed the city to the transmission of Hermetica to the Arab world?<sup>4</sup>

3. However, the following considerations also help us to understand why the author of the Picatrix could use the term 'negromantia' or 'necromantia' as a synonym for magic, (even if unconsciously). The question is important because it is presumable that necromantic rituals attributed to the Sabeans of Harran appear in the third book of the Picatrix (Picatrix III, 7, 36-40) as simple initiation cults. In this paper, I will prove that their former layers may hide the original function of these magical rituals, which were necromantic divinatory practices.

In the following, I describe the ritual known as *Experiment on children*, analyze the function of the elements it contains, and attempt to reconstruct its original meaning. In the first reading, it appears rather functionless in the Latin text. If we assume that the description must have been in the original context, this purposeless position suggests that significant changes were made during the compilation of the sources and the translation processes.

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<sup>2</sup> The literature on Harran and the Sabeans of Harran and Baghdad is quite rich and varied, with almost no consensus among scholars on the identification people who were called Sabeans. However, fixing the problem is inevitable, given that the Harran Sabeans as followers of a kind of Hermetic-astral religion are already mentioned in early sources. Their assessment is also disputed by the Arab authors who mention them. I will refer to some of these sources below. The contemporary sources on the Sabeans have been examined critically by van Bladel 2009, pp. 64-114, who argues that the sources on the religion of the Sabeans should be read with criticism and reservations. On Harran and its significance (prior to van Bladel's analysis), see T.M. Green's thorough analysis (Green 1992). These authors also summarise the main sources and the main topics examined in the secondary literature. Since the very meaning of the term 'Sabeans' is disputed, and the authors may use the word in several senses, I use the term 'Harranian Sabeans' to refer to the group of people who, according to the sources, lived in Harran and followed a specific astral religion. Some details of this religion will be discussed in the following.

<sup>3</sup> The possibility that the Hermetic Literature was transmitted to the Arab authors by the inhabitants of Harran, which had long remained a pagan city, was already suggested by W. Scott based on Chwolson's work (Chwolson 1856, cf. Scott 1924, pp. 97-111.) Already at this time, from the early decades of the twentieth century, the view was beginning to spread that the books attributed to Hermes were the basic reference for the Sabaeans and that one of the central figures in the spread of Sabaeans/Hermetic doctrine was the famous scholar, Thābit ibn Qurra.

<sup>4</sup> Affifi (Affifi 1951) even takes it as evidence that the Harranian pagans transmitted Greek philosophy to the Muslim world. Since for a long time, the most widely accepted view was that the Harranian Sabeans were the remnant of the pagan religion of Mesopotamia, the author considers to be a fundamental fact that in early times they had a pagan Mesopotamian religion, which later was mixed with Persian and Hellenistic elements. Affifi also treats as evidence that later the excommunicated Thabit ibn Qurra went to Baghdad, where he founded a Sabeans school that closely resembled the Platonic academy. Another important conclusion was that Hermetic literature spread from Harran and Baghdad to the Muslim world.

A rather similar version of the ritual with significant differences is found in the so-called *Letters of the Brethren of Purity*<sup>5</sup>. The writer of this text was a member of a secret society of Muslim philosophers who held esoteric teachings, setting forth their doctrines in the epistolary form in Basra in the second half of the 10th century (de Callatay and Halfants 2011, p. 102). Their report is perhaps one of the sources of the description found in the Picatrix.

Now, it is necessary to examine the passage in question.<sup>6</sup>

*The Experiment on children* – the description of the ritual in the Latin version. (Picatrix, III, 7, 37):

They have one experiment on children, which is in the month when the Sun is dwelling in Scorpio. They take a boy, lead him to a secret house prepared for this operation, and stand him on his feet. They bring up one handful of tamarisk and set it on fire in a tin censer. They speak words relevant to Mars over the boy and dress him in the clothes of Mars. If a fire were to touch the boy's backside, they would judge him incapable, unsuitable, and untrained for this ritual. If the fire were to touch him in the front, they claim that he is suitable and apt for this operation. Then, they lead him to the house of their prayers and inspect him to see whether his limbs are healthy. Then they lead him to another dark house with his eyes covered. A priest is prepared ahead of time and places one stick of red tamarisk upon the boy. They dress him in a hide, and he places a burning censer next to his feet on the right-hand side. He places another censer with water on the left. The mother of the boy then comes with a cock in her hands and sits in the door of that house. Next, the priest takes up a cooking pot full of burning coals in his hands. The priest summons him and binds him with the fetters of an oath that he never reveals his secrets. The boy is greatly terrified so as not to reveal this to anyone. They tell him that if he were to reveal anything to anyone about these things, he would die immediately. When the priest has finished these things, he should uncover and open the boy's eyes. His mother comes with the above-mentioned cock and the priest takes it with this hands and decapitates it above the boy's head. At once, the mother throws a red cloth on him and takes him out of the house. When the boy leaves the house, he immediately puts a ring on his finger with the image of a monkey<sup>7</sup> on it (Attrell and Porreca 2019, p. 179).

### 3. Interpretation: The Experiment on Children as a Necromantic Divination Ritual

The interpretation of the ritual is questionable for several reasons. First, and perhaps most importantly, the Latin text ultimately does not make clear what the purpose of the ritual is. The title of the passage and the letter of the Brethren suggest that it is an initiatory ritual that may involve the initiation of young Sabians who were born outside of Harran. In the following, I will demonstrate that this function can be determined if we focus some basic elements of the descriptions.

In any case, it is clear that a boy is first tested. During the test, he is examined to see whether he is adept at the ritual. If he is found appropriate, his eyes are covered and then he is subjected to certain procedures that will grant him particular secrets that should not be revealed to anyone. We shall see that this does not necessarily indicate that we are facing an initiatory ritual here, rather one might suggest that he will obtain divine secrets through a divinatory practice. As we will see, this is proven by the astrological elements of the ritual, the role of the boy, and the sacrifice of given animals: all of these are in the core of the magical operation in question. Moreover, I am convinced that the parallel sources quoted above (ancient Greek and Latin material and medieval Arabic texts) reveal the probable meaning of the ritual, but some internal motifs may also indicate this function.

<sup>5</sup> The Brothers of Purity were an Islamic mystical group, active in the second half of the 10th century, for whom the religion of the Sabians was so important that they analysed the ritual and reconstructed it in a mystical way. For the relevant text (Letter 52), see de Callatay and Halfants 2011, pp. 137-141.

<sup>6</sup> For a description of the ritual as an initiation, cf. Green 1992, 207. About the Sabians and the sources about them, see especially van Bladel's critical analysis (van Bladel 2009, pp. 64-114).

<sup>7</sup> The monkey also appears in Mandaean ideas, at one of the stations of the astral journey of the soul (Rudolph 1987, p. 346, 45 fig.)



As I indicated, the circumstances and some elements of the performance of the ritual suggest that in this case we may be dealing with some kind of divinatory practice. First, in the paragraph preceding the ritual, the author himself refers to Hermes as the master and prophet of the Harranians, who have taught the Sabeans the proper way to make offerings. The procedures ordered by Hermes involve the following elements in general:

1. Decapitating the sacrificed animal, 2. removing the liver; and 3. eating the liver. (Picatrix, III, 7, 35.)

The decapitation of the sacrificial animal plays a significant role in the quoted text (in this case, a rooster), and the examination of the liver in turn was a common divinatory method in antiquity. When in other contexts the Picatrix refers to animal sacrifice, the author also usually emphasises that the sacrificed animal must be decapitated. Regarding animal sacrifices, the importance of beheading can be explained with the help of *On the stellar rays* (Saif 2015, pp. 254-257.) attributed to al-Kindi. According to him, if a living creature dies naturally, the radiation from its body ceases for unspecified reasons. However, if it dies suddenly (for example, because of human intervention), the effect of the natural radiation of its body is still very much felt. The animal sacrifice is therefore not only a part of the presentation of a sacrifice that pleases a particular planetary spirit to be invoked, but is itself a magical operation that enhances the effect of a particular magical object (e.g. a talisman) which receives this radiation by means of magical operation. The decapitation of the sacrificial animal is an important feature of the ritual because it preserves the vital force of the sacrificed animal, which has magical power and can be preserved in a magical object. This may also be related to the fact that in this way, the liver remains suitable for divinatory procedures. Therefore, in a necromantic operation, the corpse of a dead animal or a person who died violently should be used.<sup>8</sup>

The paragraph, which precedes the description of the ritual, makes references to the planet Mars understandable. According to the author of Picatrix, the Harranians followed an astral religion in which each planet has its own cult and a sanctuary. According to the Sabeans, Mars is a harmful planet. They called it the *Lord of malefactors* but was highly revered by them and sacrifices were made to it to impel its rage.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, the astrological references of other sections of the book (paragraphs 36-40), and the aforementioned test on the boy to check his purity by fire, may suggest that these paragraphs contain not an initiatory- but a divinatory ritual. The astral aspect of it is highlighted by the author, who states that the Sabeans perform it when the Sun dwells in Scorpio (this indicates the period 23 October to 21 November), probably because Mars itself is the ruling planet of Scorpio. At the same time, the Sun is under Scorpio's rule during this period. In this context, overall, the Sun illuminates the celestial area in question. This is certainly an ideal constellation for the divinatory ritual because the Sun grants the power of divination through the medium. To sum up: this constellation strengthens the effect of the magical operation. At the heart of the ritual, therefore, there is a magical operation, during which a sacrifice is to be offered at a time favourable to Mars to please him and to save the people of the Sabeans from any harm caused by him.

Based on all that has been said before, it must not be excluded that the version in the Latin translation depicts a sacrifice that substitutes the process of the immolation of the boy.<sup>10</sup> In this way instead of the boy, the rooster is killed, and the human sacrifice is replaced by an animal sacrifice. Originally the boy dressed in clothes appropriate for the cult of Mars and placed under the authority of Mars was ultimately sacrificed to please the spirits of Mars.

<sup>8</sup> The Greek term for such a dead person is *biaiothanatos* ('one who has died a violent death'), see, e.g. PGM IV 1928-2005. On the role of this category in Greco-Roman magic see Johnston 1999, pp. 127-160.

<sup>9</sup> Picatrix, III, 7, 36: They would call Mars in their language *Mara Smyt*, which means the lord of malefactors. They say he is a malefactor because he is swift in his malign effects. According to their opinion, his form is the shape of a man holding a sword in his right hand, and a burning flame in his left while threatening in turn with blade and fire. For this reason, he was honoured among them, and they sacrificed for him in fear and to prevent his evil. The sacrifices which they made to him they performed when the Sun is entering Aries, because it is the house of Mars, and similarly when the Sun is entering Scorpio, they make another sacrifice of this kind. (Transl. by Attrell and Porreca 2019, p. 179.)

<sup>10</sup> We will see another aspect of the killing of birds in another parallel.

The fact that the rite known as *The Experiment on children* may be a sacrifice substituting a child sacrifice is confirmed also by the fact that in the *Picatrix* the description of it can be found immediately after the reference to Harranian child sacrifices.<sup>11</sup> Some external pieces of evidence prove that the interpretation of the experiment as a divinatory ritual should be correct.

### 3.1. External Evidences

According to the author of the Arabic version of the text, the Harranians do not call Mars the *Evil Lord* or *Lord of Malefactors*, but the *Blind Lord*,<sup>12</sup> and this epithet, together with the fact that the boy is dressed in clothes associated with Mars, may explain why his eyes are covered. We can read here that if a Sabeian boy not born in Harran later returns to the city, he is taken to the so-called House of the mysteries. In this sanctuary, he is subjected to a test by fire. Then his mother sits down at the entrance to the shrine and the priest puts in the boy's hand a copper vessel filled with burning fire to scare him. Although in the book just before this passage the Arabic text also refers to child sacrifices, the presented rituals include animal sacrifice instead of a human one, as we saw in the case of the Latin version. After all these, the priest offers some prayers toward Sun, and the boy is deprived of his shackles, and his eyes are freed. In the end, he is not sacrificed, but instead of him, the rooster brought by his mother is decapitated (Ritter and Plessner 1962 pp. 238-239).

The role of the rooster<sup>13</sup> is perhaps a result of its significance in magical operations, because the rooster is a solar bird and has an apotropaic function, as Plutarch reports (*De Iside*, 369f). In this context, the sacrifice of the rooster can be a sacrifice offered to the Sun. Here, we should use an example to illustrate how the sacrifice of a solar bird can keep away demons or evil spirits. In a work by Porphyry, an incident was described in the sanctuary of Isis, where Plotinus's daemon was to be summoned. Porphyry writes that the séance was interrupted when one of the assistants of the ritual, willingly or unwillingly, killed the birds before the end of the procedure. Through this act, the deity who had appeared in place of the daemon disappeared suddenly, because the assistant interrupted the operation through his clumsy act (*De vita Plotini*, 16, 12). This case explains the function of the sacrifice of the solar bird in the *Picatrix*, since it keeps away the divine spirit or daemon that appears during the ritual. The role of the rooster in magical operations is also highlighted by Proclus, who in his *Techné hieraticé* (On sacrifice) describes it as a powerful solar bird (Copenhaver 2015, p. 92). In conclusion, we can argue that the Sabaeans counteracted the awesome and potentially dangerous power of the planet Mars with the radial light emanating from the sacrificed rooster.

Now, if we turn our intention back to *Picatrix* to the point where the description of the ritual ends. The author of the Arabic translation contends that the immolation of the rooster merely serves to replace the original sacrifice and that by the time the ritual is complete, the boy will have inherited the untold secret pertaining to the Sabeian people (Ritter and Plessner 1962, p. 239). In this we can see how the Latin translator changed one of the elements of the original text: in the Latin *Picatrix* there is no mention of human sacrifices or any replacement of a sacrifice, while the Arabic text is clearly referring to it.

Having examined and roughly interpreted the technical elements of the ritual, we must try to find an explanation of the origin and purpose of the ritual in the Latin *Picatrix*. From what we have seen so far, it seems evident that it is a kind of divination and an apotropaic ritual in which these two elements are combined, so the divination process is used to obtain a prophecy to unfold secrets concerning the future of the Sabeian people. Moreover, as the astrological elements suggest, the ritual

<sup>11</sup> According to the author of the Arabic text, the rituals of the Harranites existed and were also practised at his time. He then refers to their terrible customs, including the sacrifice of children. (Ritter and Plessner 1962, p. 237.) However, the Latin text does not mention child sacrifice, but only animal sacrifice, which leads one to suspect that the author of the Latin version deliberately changed the text and thus the context. It is also interesting that the Arabic text attributes these rituals to Hermes Trismegistus, even though Hermetic texts such as Asclepius explicitly condemn blood sacrifice.

<sup>12</sup> It is not inconceivable that we should also expect a Mesopotamian influence here and see in the *Blind Lord* the god Nargal identified with Mars. Cf. Green 1992, p. 198.

<sup>13</sup> The account of the Brethren of purity connects this with Plato's *Phaedo* (118 A). Cf. de Callataÿ and Halflants 2011, p. 141.

is essentially addressed to Mars in such a way that its malevolent power is influenced by the benevolent Sun. It is worth enumerating the elements of the ritual, based on the Porphyrian parallel quoted above. If we consider Porphyry's text, one might claim that the *Experiment on Children* is a ritual in which the spirit of the planet Mars is invoked. By employing the sacrifice, the Harranians prayed to him to grant their requests and to turn away his wrongdoings from them. The consequences of these are that the mind or spirit of the medium (i.e., the boy), illuminated by the Sun, may be capable of receiving the prophecy. Furthermore, it is conceivable that it was originally a necromantic ritual involving the sacrifice of the child or boy who was the medium. (The phrase 'to stand him on his feet' also suggests that divination was made through the reanimated boy, as parallels from antiquity show. On the phenomenon of 'systasis' cf. Ogden 2001, p. 205; Dosoo 2014, pp. 392.) The sacrifice of this boy was later replaced: the child ceases to be a victim, but becomes only a medium. In both cases, however, the purpose is to invoke a divine being, namely a planetary spirit, for divination. In the case of the substitution of the sacrifice, the immolation of the rooster is a logical step, since it ensures the safe completion of a dangerous ritual, which is dedicated to the otherwise malevolent Blind Lord, namely Mars. In addition, according to the quoted letter of the Brethren, during the ceremony, there was a patron of the boy who begged the priest to sacrifice the cockrell instead of the boy. This may also indicate that a human sacrifice could originally have occurred during the ceremony.

#### 4. The Astral Religion of Harran and the Harranian Necromantic Divination

In the following, I would like to shed light on the meaning of the ritual by focussing on the following questions.

- a. How does the wider context of the description help us better understand the meaning of the ritual?
- b. What can we decipher from other accounts about a specific rite of the Harranians, which refers to a particular kind of necromancy?
- c. This divinatory and necromantic procedure is made even clearer by ancient examples, which explain why it is important to employ a pure boy during the procedure.

In the *Picatrix*, the *Experiment on children* is immediately followed by the presentation of two other rituals in which the decapitation of the sacrificial animal plays a particularly important role. It is not by chance that the importance of the removal of the head is emphasised in the *Picatrix*. According to a report of the 10th-century Ibn al-Nadim, the ninth-century caliph al-Ma'mun called the Sabeans the 'masters of the head'<sup>14</sup> and considered them idolaters, who had already been notorious in his father's time. These remarks can be related to the analysed chapters of the *Picatrix* and help to understand it as well. The following paragraphs of the manual (37-40) may help us understand not only the elements of the ritual, but its meaning and purpose will become clearer. It is important to emphasise that the text as a whole assumes that these paragraphs must be read as a

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<sup>14</sup> Cited in Pingree 2002, p. 23. The value of al-Nadim's report is questionable (on this see Green 1992, p. 192), since the report goes back to a lost work by al-Sarakshi (a disciple of al-Kindi, ninth century), which on the other hand was supposedly based on al-Kindi's authority. In any case, this report implies that there was a continuing interest among al-Kindi and his disciples in the teachings of the Harranian Sabeans. For more on this, see Mattila 2022, pp.98-99. Mattila also briefly summarises the religion of the Sabians based on al-Nadim's account. Only a few points of interest are highlighted here, which may have some parallels with some elements of the *Picatrix*.

According to this account, God is one and transcendent. The spirits of the planets are agents of divine providence, but there are also prophets - such as Hermes - who warn people of the true doctrine and of God's power to reward and punish. They pray three times a day according to the position of the Sun. Animal sacrifices are important to them, and the role of the rooster is of particular importance. The interesting thing about this account is that, according to al-Sarakshi and al-Nadim, all the teachings of the Sabeans are essentially the same as those of Aristotle, although al-Kindi is said to have seen a Hermetic book used by them. So Hermes was not only their prophet, but also the teacher of some of their doctrines.

whole and that the passage referred to as *the Experiment on children* cannot be fully interpreted without considering the following paragraphs and other sources on the religion of the Sabeans of Harran.

In III, 37, 40 the Latin text contains the following description:

They had a locked house, which none entered, wherein there was a deep pit. When the Sun entered the first degree of Leo, they made a red ram enter from the land of Canuiz and covered it with precious cloth. They led it to gardens and places filled with trees and flowers. Making great celebrations there, they gave it as much wine to drink as it could take. They led it to that house at night and threw it into the pit and there they washed it with sesame oil. Next, they took it out of the pit, and gave it dried roses to eat, mustard, lentils, chickpeas, rice, honey, and wheat, all mixed together. At the end of the twenty-eight days after the entrance of the Sun into Leo (namely, that night), they led it out of the city or out of the populated area into the woods, and there they decapitated it. There, they made a hole and buried the ram in it. The head, however, they carried back to the house of the ritual and set it in front of their images. They claimed they could hear a feeble voice from it from which, allegedly, they learned their king's lifespan and the waxing and waning of their peoples. The man who discovered this operation or the one who taught us this secret, was Barnac Elbarameny, who ended his final days in the land of the Indians; a certain class in India were called Brahmin after his own name. Among those peoples, certain sages have many diverse operations of this kind that, if we wanted to cite them all, we would be prolonging our book inordinately (Attrell and Porreca 2019, pp. 180-181).

This description finally reveals the purpose of the ritual. According to the text, we face a divinatory practice in which the future of the Sabeans is predicted using a head as the tool for the operation (*cephalomancia*). This method of divination has many ancient parallels (Ogden 2001, pp. 202-216; Faraone 2005). This may suggest that the Picatrix and our sources referring to the Harranian rites have preserved a dense antique layer. A comparison of the Latin version and the Arabic sources also shows that the Latin translation clearly describes a substitution of the human sacrifice instead of the original form of the ritual, which is preserved in the Arabic text. It is conceivable that the substitution of the boy for the ram appeared in the Latin text as a consequence of the influence of the story of Abraham and Isaac (Pingree 2002, p. 23). As the Arabic text shows in the case of the *Experiment of children*, a non-Harranian redheaded youth was employed, who was finally sacrificed after a 28-day period during which he was provided with all kinds of goods, but after immolating, his head and vocal organs were preserved, so his head was still capable of giving voices.

The astrological elements explain the exact and necessary circumstances of the ritual. The Sun's daily and nightly houses are in Leo, and when the Sun dwells in Leo, it exerts its most beneficial effects. The reddish colour of the young man's skin is certainly related to this astrological reference, namely, to the heating power of the Sun. The substitution of sacrifice, that is, the slaughtering of a ram (aries) instead of a boy, may also be explained by an astrological element: the Sun's exaltation is in Aries (i.e., at this point the Sun's benevolent power is at its peak), and, as the text makes clear, the prophecy refers to the king and his people (Ritter and Plessner, 1962, pp. 240-241).

Ibn-al-Nadim also gives the astrological constellation for the ritual in question. According to him, it is performed each year when Mercury reaches its exaltation on the fifteenth degree of Virgo (which in turn implies a delay of one month compared to the Picatrix's quoted report). In any case, this astrological constellation also confirms that in the Picatrix we are dealing with a divinatory ritual. The reliability of the operation must be guaranteed because the dignity of Mercury is the greatest in the ecliptic right in this position. Moreover, Mercury is also the lord of eloquence and speech, so this constellation must be chosen to ensure that the prediction made through the head is reliable. The purpose of the ritual is also clear from the latest quoted passage (Picatrix, III, 37-40). The author of Picatrix says that it is a divinatory procedure that specifically refers to the future of the Harranian people. Ibn-al-Nadim also confirms that the head of the human victim answered different questions, suggesting that the purpose of the ritual was to make divinations. In any case, one can strongly argue that this is a necromantic divinatory operation supported by the correctly chosen astrological constellation under the influence of the proper planets. Additionally, the similarities to Greek magical



papyri (Faraone 2005, 264) seem to support the notion that a magical action carried out by a head served as a special kind of magical operation. The interrogation of the skull (*anacrisis tón skyphón*; the word 'skyphos'-cup is essentially a synonym for skull)<sup>15</sup> was appropriate specifically for divinatory purposes, not just to summon spirits or demons.

## 5. Parallels to the Ritual: Divination, Necromancy, and Cephalomancy

It is worth to examine some parallels of the elements of the rituals described above.

The preparation of the victim for the ritual (i.e., the soaking in sesame oil) is intended to allow the head to be easily removed from the trunk. The obvious aim is to preserve the integrity of the organs capable of producing various kinds of sound. Therefore, the young person to be sacrificed is not merely a medium, but an actual victim whose head is used in a necromantic ritual. There are several parallels in antiquity, for example, Lucan's well-known description in his *Pharsalia* (VI, 619-631).

There is one more element to be mentioned. In the ritual, the chosen boy is subjected to fire and is tested to see if he is appropriate to participate in the magical operation. In this procedure, the indisputable requirement of ritual is the purity of the boy (Dosoo 2014, pp. 391-393). Only a pure soul is fit to be a temporary medium for the deity. Justin Martyr (*Apology I*, 18, 1.) reports that pagans used to perform necromancy by examination of the internal parts of young children, which he considers to be proof that the perception of the soul does not cease with death (Ogden 2001, p. 196). Young boys are needed because their souls are not attached to the body so tightly, which is why they can more easily contact the spiritual world.<sup>16</sup> It is also clear from the magical papyri that boys can only be used as mediums if previously they have not participated in such a ritual. It is striking that in most cases the mediums are boys. These data also demonstrate that such rituals were certainly an existing practice and often involved sacrifice of the chosen medium. All of this suggests that, in this case, we are not dealing with a rite of initiation but with a necromantic divinatory ritual.

## 6. Summary

To sum up, the quoted passage from the Latin *Picatrix* (the 36-40 paragraphs in the seventh chapter of Book 3), forms a coherent whole. The text describes a divinatory magical operation attributed to the Sabeans of Harran, in which they used necromantic rituals to obtain reliable prophecies about their people. Mars, the Sun and Mercury are at the centre of the rituals, and the astrological constellations in the texts provide a fairly reliable guide to the purpose of the divination procedures.

The presumptive sources that define the content of the text do not give a firm indication of the religion of the so-called Sabeans of Harran. The Letters of the Brethren of Purity present a modified form of the procedures, which leads us to suspect that the description refers to an initiatory rather than a necromantic ritual. However, the Latin *Picatrix* has preserved many elements that show convincing parallels with certain classical Greco-Latin sources, so we cannot rule out the possibility that the author of the *Picatrix* also used literary examples to reconstruct the supposed religion of the Sabeans of Harran.

However, this does not rule out the possibility that both our Arabic sources and the *Picatrix* preserve the memory of a pagan religion that once existed in Harran, in which certain necromantic rituals performed at the time of the appropriate astrological constellations played a vital role. This pagan religion may have been based on early Mesopotamian elements, but astrological references suggest that the sources of the authors reflected a Hellenistic version of their religion. The compiler of the *Picatrix* adopted this and perhaps reworked it according to classical patterns. Consequently,

<sup>15</sup> The appearance of the cephalomancy in *Picatrix* raises the possibility that the text originally has oriental roots, which in the description have been broadened with Hellenistic elements. (Faraone 2005, p. 268.) In PGM, the authors make a deliberate effort to conceal the original necromantic form of the rites, for example, by substituting words, where the term *scythos* is used instead of *kephalos*.

<sup>16</sup> See D. Ogden's detailed analysis of the subject: Ogden 2001, pp. 191-201.

the invocation of astral elements and planetary spirits played a key role in this religion, as did certain divinatory procedures, which explain the significance of the astrological elements in the sources. We have also seen that astrological constellations explain the relationship of the examined ritual to divinatory procedures. Whether necromantic elements that can be reconstructed preserve the memory or traces of a genuine human sacrifice is doubtful, but it is striking that both the Arabic and Latin sources suggest that substitution of the sacrifice occurred. Furthermore, these elements suggest that the boy who plays the vital role in the ritual is the victim himself, and also the medium through whom the addressed planetary spirit can prophesize. Additionally, this does not rule out the possibility that over time, this necromantic divination evolved into an initiation ceremony like the one the Brethren of Purity described.

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