

Traces of Necromantic Divinatory Practices in the Picatrix

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Abstract: In the famous medieval magical manual called the 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 article, 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



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1. Defining the Problem

In my article, I will examine from a new perspective an intriguing part of a medieval Latin magical manual known as the Picatrix. The Latin Picatrix is a translation of a text originally written in Arabic (Ghyat al-akm, 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.¹ 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 (Forshaw 2018, p. 16), 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 Ghyat 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 Sabean 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 center when local and Hellenistic religious elements created a special syncretic culture. Some of the city's inhabitants were the so-called Sabeans, whose² 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 to be their prophet and a corpus of Hermetic treatises to be their holy book.

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

In my article, 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. These are the following:

- 1.§ Who might have been the so-called Harranian Sabeans and what role did Hermes play in their religion, assuming that such a community really existed and that it was not just a later invention of Muslim esoteric scholars?³
- 2.§ What was the role of Harran (if any) in the development of Arabic Hermetic literature, and in what aspects did the city contribute to the transmission of Hermetica to the Arab world?⁴
- 3.§ 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 it was used unconsciously). This agrees well with the common and general scientific use of the term *magia* in the early Middle Ages. The original meaning of the Greek term *necromanteia* has a more concise meaning. It was used for a special kind of divination, i.e., the divination through the dead (or through 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. At the same time, contrary to this confessed aim, the book is full of demonic rituals and ceremonial magic conjuring astral spirits, so the reader has the impression that the book is not only a compendium of natural philosophy, but in many pages it is a manual for not only natural magic, but for demonic magic as well. In this context, the *Picatrix*, at least partly, contains necromantic rituals, namely, in the original meaning of the word. 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 article, I will prove that their former layers may hide the original function of these magical rituals, which were necromantic divinatory practices.

In this article, I argue that the compiler of the Latin version made some fundamental changes in the descriptions for religious reasons. If we examine not only the Latin texts, but also some Arabic sources, we should have the impression that the so-called Experiment on children was originally a necromantic ritual when the head of the sacrificed person was the tool for a divinatory practice. During the changes made by the translator or compiler of the *Picatrix*, the human sacrifice was replaced by animal ones. Originally, during divinatory practices, the magician conjured spirits of the heavenly bodies and powers as well. Therefore, with the examination and analysis of the given text, an intricate structure of necromantic and demonic divinatory rituals can be reconstructed with the help of the *Picatrix* text.

2. The “Experiment on Children”

In the following, I describe the ritual known as the Experiment on children, analyze the function of the elements it contains, and attempt to reconstruct its original meaning. In the first reading, it appears to be 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.

A rather similar version of the ritual with significant differences is found in the so-called Letters of the Brethren of Purity⁵. 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](#)

[Halflants 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.⁶

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 monkey⁷ 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 Sabeans who were born outside of Harran. In the following, I will demonstrate that this function can be determined if we focus on 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 suitable for 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 the 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 (the 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.

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 emphasizes 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* (d'Alverny and Hudry 1974; Saif 2015, pp. 254–57) 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.⁸

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

On the other hand, the astrological references of other sections of the book (para. 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 Sabians 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 the rule of Scorpio 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 favorable to Mars to please him and to save the people of the Sabians 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.¹⁰ 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.

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.¹¹ Some external pieces of evidence prove that the interpretation of the experiment as a divinatory ritual should be correct.

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,¹² 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 a copper vessel filled with burning fire in the boy's hand to scare him. Although, in the book, just before this passage, the Arabic text also refers to child sacrifices, the presented rituals include an animal sacrifice instead of a human one, as we saw in the case of the

Latin version. After all this, the priest offers some prayers toward the 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. 238–39).

The role of the rooster¹³ 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*, p. 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 *Natural History* (10, 24–25), Pliny reports that lions, the nobles of the animals, are also afraid of the rooster. This fact also shows the strength of this bird. In conclusion, we can argue that the Sabaeans counteracted the awesome and potentially dangerous power of planet Mars with the radial light emanating from the sacrificed rooster.

Now, let us turn our attention back to the 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 Sabean 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 Sabean people. Moreover, as the astrological elements suggest, the ritual 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 his wrongdoings away 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, p. 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. Furthermore, according to the letter of the Brethren quoted, during the ceremony, there was a patron of the boy who begged the priest to sacrifice the cockerel 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 focusing on the following problems.

- 1.§ How does the wider context of the description help us to better understand the meaning of the ritual?
- 2.§ What can we decipher from other accounts about a specific rite of the Harranians, which refers to a particular kind of necromancy?
- 3.§ 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 emphasized 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'¹⁴ and considered them to be idolaters who had already been notorious in his father's time. These remarks can be related to the analyzed chapters of the *Picatrix* and can 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, which will become clearer. It is important to emphasize that the text as a whole assumes that these paragraphs must be read as a 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. ([Attrel and Porreca 2019](#), pp. 180–81)

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. 202–16; [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 the 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 being immolated, 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 color 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. 240–41).

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 the 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, p. 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)¹⁵ was appropriate specifically for divinatory purposes, not just to summon spirits or demons.

It is worth considering some parallels of the elements of the rituals described above. In the following, I would like to show some examples of necromantic rituals, where the heads of the dead and pure boys are playing the central part.

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 types 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). In this passage, the witch, Erichtho, is looking for a cadaver of a dead soldier on the battlefield, because she needs one whose organs are intact enough to give out voices for divination during her necromantic ritual. It is obvious enough that the myth of Er (Plato, *Republic*, 10.614–10.621) contains a similar idea. Platon alludes to the fact that after a battle, when the bodies were collected, everyone thought that Er was dead, but his body was intact. Twelve days after his supposed death, he was revived in the pyre to give an account of the fate of the dead souls in the underworld. Philostratos also gives a close parallel. He reports that Apollonios of Tyana visited the shrine of Orpheus in Lesbos. According to the legends concerning this shrine, once the head of Orpheus gave oracles there after women in Thracia tore his body apart. Apollo terminated its oracles because Orpheus' head obscured the fame of his oracles (*Life of Apollonios* 4, 14).

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. 391–93). 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 through the 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.¹⁶ 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 the 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.

5. 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 center 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, 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 the necromantic elements that can be reconstructed preserve the memory or traces of genuine human sacrifice is doubtful, but it is striking that both the Arabic and Latin sources suggest that the 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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Notes

- ¹ For the textual history of the 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).

- 2 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 of the 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 summarize the main sources and the main topics examined in the secondary literature. Since the very meaning of the term ‘Sabean’ 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.
- 3 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 Sabaeian/Hermetic doctrine was the famous scholar, Thābit ibn Qurra.
- 4 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 it 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 Sabeian school that closely resembled the Platonic academy. Another important conclusion was that Hermetic literature spread from Harran and Baghdad to the Muslim world.
- 5 The Brothers of Purity were an Islamic mystical group, active in the second half of the 10th century, for whom the religion of the Sabeans was so important that they analyzed the ritual and reconstructed it in a mystical way. For the relevant text (Letter 52), see de Callatay and Halfants (2011, pp. 137–41).
- 6 For a description of the ritual as an initiation, cf. Green (1992, p. 207). Regarding the Sabeans and the sources about them, see especially van Bladel’s critical analysis (van Bladel 2009, pp. 64–114).
- 7 The monkey also appears in Mandaean ideas, at one of the stations of the astral journey of the soul (Rudolph 1987, p. 346, fig. 45).
- 8 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. 127–60).
- 9 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 honored 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 was entering Aries, because it is the house of Mars, and similarly, when the Sun is entering Scorpio, they made another sacrifice of this kind (Transl. by Attrell and Porreca 2019, p. 179).
- 10 We will see another aspect of the killing of birds in another parallel.
- 11 According to the author of the Arabic text, the rituals of the Harranites existed and were also practiced at this 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.
- 12 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).
- 13 The account of the Brethren of purity connects this with Plato’s *Phaedo* (118 A). Cf. de Callatay and Halfants (2011, p. 141).
- 14 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 summarizes 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.
- 15 The appearance of the cephalomancy in the 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.

¹⁶ See D. Ogden's detailed analysis of the subject: [Ogden \(2001\)](#), pp. 191–201).

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