

Necromancy

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1. Core Definition

Necromancy is a term derived from ancient Greek, denoting the purported art, practice, or magical discipline of communicating with the spirits of the deceased. This alleged form of divination is typically undertaken with the explicit intention of summoning the dead to obtain knowledge, guidance, or to influence events. Historically, the practice has been associated with a wide range of motivations, from seeking prophetic insights and uncovering hidden truths to manipulating the future or even raising the dead in a more corporeal sense, although the latter is largely confined to fictional narratives. The essence of necromancy lies in the belief that the spirits of those who have passed retain a form of consciousness or access to information that is inaccessible to the living, making them potential sources of profound wisdom or powerful agency.

Unlike other forms of spiritism or mediumship that might focus on general communication with an afterlife, necromancy specifically targets the deceased for practical ends. This distinction is crucial, as the practitioner, often referred to as a necromancer, actively seeks to command or persuade these spirits rather than merely receiving passive messages. The information sought can range from revealing the location of lost items or treasures, foretelling future events, or even extracting secrets from the past that were known only to the deceased. The practice thus posits a metaphysical realm where the boundaries between life and death are permeable, allowing for interaction through specialized rituals and invocations.

The scope of necromancy is broad, encompassing not only direct communication but also various rituals designed to harness the power or knowledge of the dead. These rituals often involve specific incantations, offerings, and the use of objects believed to be connected to the deceased or the spiritual realm. While often sensationalized in popular culture as the act of reanimating corpses, the core historical and anthropological understanding of necromancy primarily concerns the consultation of spirits rather than their physical resurrection, though the two concepts can sometimes overlap in folklore and ancient texts. The persistent human fascination with death and the unknown has ensured that the concept of necromancy has endured across cultures and epochs, albeit often shrouded in mystery, fear, and controversy.

2. Etymology and Linguistic Origins

The term **necromancy** itself boasts a rich linguistic history, originating from ancient Greek roots that precisely capture its meaning. It is derived from the Greek words nekros (νεκρός), meaning "dead body" or "dead person," and manteia (μαντεία), which translates to "divination" or

"prophecy." Thus, the compound word literally means "divination by means of the dead." This etymological foundation provides immediate insight into the practice's fundamental purpose: to gain knowledge or insight through interaction with the deceased, rather than through other forms of spiritual contact.

Initially, in classical antiquity, the term primarily referred to the practice of consulting the dead for prophetic purposes. However, as the concept evolved through the Hellenistic period and into the Roman Empire, its meaning began to broaden, occasionally encompassing more generalized forms of communication with the spirit world, often for manipulative or magical ends. The Latin translation, *necromantia*, further cemented this understanding in Western scholarship and occult traditions. The transition of the term into various European languages maintained this core semantic link to the dead and divination, reflecting a persistent cultural preoccupation with the boundary between life and death.

Over time, particularly during the Middle Ages and Early Modern period, the perception of necromancy became increasingly intertwined with other forms of magic and the occult, often carrying strong connotations of illicit or forbidden practices. This shift was largely influenced by the rise of organized religion, which typically condemned attempts to commune with the dead outside of sanctioned religious contexts. Consequently, the term acquired a more sinister connotation, becoming associated with dark arts, demon summoning, and practices deemed heretical or dangerous. Despite these negative associations, the underlying etymological meaning--divination via the dead--has remained a constant conceptual anchor for the practice throughout its long history.

3. Historical Evolution and Early Practices

The practice of **necromancy** is not confined to any single culture or historical period but appears as a recurring motif throughout human history, suggesting a universal curiosity or anxiety about death and the afterlife. Evidence of practices resembling necromancy can be traced back to some of the earliest recorded civilizations. In ancient Mesopotamia, for instance, texts describe rituals aimed at communicating with the ghosts of the deceased, often through incantations and offerings, to seek advice or information. Similarly, in ancient Egypt, while their primary focus was on the journey to the afterlife, certain texts and funerary practices suggest attempts to interact with the deceased, particularly ancestors, for guidance or protection.

Classical antiquity provides some of the most prominent early accounts of necromancy. In ancient Greece, Homer's *Odyssey* famously depicts Odysseus' journey to the underworld (or the land of the Cimmerians, where the entrance to the underworld was believed to be) to consult the prophet Tiresias. This account describes Odysseus performing specific rituals, including offering blood, to entice the shades of the dead to speak. This narrative illustrates not only the belief in the possibility

of such communication but also the specific ritualistic components thought necessary for its success. The Greeks also had designated places, known as *nekyomanteia* or oracles of the dead, where such practices were allegedly carried out.

Moving into the Roman Empire and later the Middle Ages, necromancy continued to be practiced, albeit often under increasing scrutiny and condemnation from emerging monotheistic religions. Early Christian and Jewish texts frequently condemn necromantic practices as idolatry or communication with demons, reflecting a clear theological stance against attempts to bypass divine authority or established religious channels for spiritual insight. Despite these prohibitions, various grimoires and magical texts from the medieval period, such as the *Picatrix* or the *Grimorium Verum*, contained instructions for summoning spirits of the dead, demonstrating the continued interest and covert practice of necromancy even in environments hostile to it. This historical trajectory highlights necromancy's enduring presence as a human endeavor, constantly adapting and persisting across diverse cultural and religious landscapes.

4. Key Characteristics and Methodologies

The methodologies attributed to **necromancy** are diverse, yet they share several common characteristics centered on the belief in a permeable boundary between the living and the dead. The primary goal is usually to establish contact with a deceased individual's spirit or ghost to extract information or influence events. This process often involves the practitioner, known as a medium, acting as a conduit between the two realms. The source content explicitly mentions mediums and seances, which represent a popularized and often commercialized form of purported necromantic communication that gained significant traction in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In a seance, individuals gather, typically in a darkened room, to attempt collective or facilitated contact with spirits, often through the medium's alleged abilities.

Historically, traditional necromantic rituals often involved more elaborate and sometimes gruesome elements. These could include visiting burial grounds, graves, or other places associated with death. Practitioners might engage in specific preparations, such as fasting, wearing particular garments, or consuming certain substances believed to enhance spiritual receptivity. Offerings played a crucial role, ranging from food and drink (such as blood or wine) to more symbolic items, intended to appease or entice the spirits. The use of specific incantations, prayers, or magical formulas was also common, often meticulously detailed in ancient texts and later grimoires, with the precise wording and timing believed to be critical for the ritual's success.

Beyond direct communication, some forms of necromancy, particularly as depicted in folklore and later fictional works, suggest a more active manipulation of the deceased. This can extend to the reanimation of corpses, creating what are often referred to as zombies or golems, though this is a significant departure from the more common historical understanding of necromancy as primarily a

divinatory practice. The intent behind these practices could vary widely, from seeking forbidden knowledge to invoking protective powers or even inflicting harm upon enemies. However, in all its manifestations, the core characteristic remains the assertion of power or influence over the realm of the dead, either through direct interaction with spirits or by harnessing their residual energies.

5. Cultural Significance and Representation

The concept of **necromancy** has permeated diverse cultures and belief systems, leaving an indelible mark on religious narratives, folklore, and popular culture. Its presence in ancient epic poems, such as Homer's *Odyssey*, underscores its early role in shaping narratives about heroism, fate, and the afterlife. In many traditional societies, communication with ancestors or deceased elders is not necessarily viewed as necromancy in the Western sense, but rather as a respectful and often sacred practice, highlighting cultural variations in how interactions with the dead are perceived and categorized. These practices are often integrated into broader ancestor veneration systems, where the deceased are seen as continuing to play a role in the lives of the living, offering guidance, protection, or intercession.

In more modern contexts, particularly in Western literature and media, necromancy has largely been sensationalized and often demonized. From medieval mystery plays to Shakespearean dramas, and subsequently in gothic novels, horror films, and fantasy literature, necromancers are frequently portrayed as sinister figures who traffic in forbidden knowledge and dark powers. This portrayal often emphasizes the macabre and morally corrupt aspects of manipulating the dead, serving as a powerful narrative device to explore themes of morality, hubris, and the consequences of tampering with natural orders. Works like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, while not explicitly about necromancy, share thematic resonances with the reanimation aspect, exploring the ethical dilemmas of creating life from death.

In contemporary popular culture, particularly in fantasy fiction, role-playing games, and video games, necromancy has become a common magical discipline. Characters who practice necromancy are often depicted as powerful mages capable of raising armies of the undead, cursing enemies, or drawing strength from the souls of the departed. This pervasive representation, while often fantastical, reflects humanity's enduring fascination with the ultimate mystery of death and the desire to transcend its finality. The consistent presence of necromancy in cultural productions, whether as a feared reality or a fictional trope, demonstrates its deep-seated resonance within the human psyche and its capacity to evoke both terror and a strange allure.

6. Philosophical and Theological Perspectives

Philosophical and theological traditions across the globe have widely divergent views on the possibility and morality of **necromancy**. From a purely rationalist or skeptical viewpoint,

necromancy is dismissed as impossible, a product of superstition, delusion, or outright fraud, given the lack of empirical evidence supporting the existence of spirits or the ability to communicate with them. This perspective aligns with modern scientific understanding, which generally requires verifiable evidence and repeatable phenomena, neither of which has ever been demonstrably linked to necromantic practices. From this standpoint, any purported success is attributed to psychological factors, misinterpretation, or deliberate deception.

Religions, particularly the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), typically condemn necromancy as a forbidden and dangerous practice. In these traditions, communication with the dead, if possible, is often believed to be a deceptive act of evil spirits or demons, or an affront to divine order. The Old Testament, for example, contains explicit prohibitions against consulting the dead, equating it with detestable practices. Similarly, Christian theology often views such attempts as a direct violation of God's sovereignty over life and death, and as a means of opening oneself to malevolent spiritual influences. Islamic teachings also strictly forbid any form of divination, including seeking knowledge from the dead, categorizing it as shirk (polytheism or idolatry) and a grave sin.

Conversely, some indigenous religions and animistic belief systems may incorporate elements that, from an external perspective, resemble necromancy, but are understood within their cultural context as legitimate and sacred forms of ancestor communication or spiritual guidance. These practices are often integrated into the community's spiritual life, performed by revered shamans or spiritual leaders, and serve to maintain continuity with the past, offer healing, or ensure communal well-being. The interpretation of these practices thus largely depends on the specific cultural and religious framework, highlighting the subjective nature of defining and evaluating interactions with the deceased. Despite these varied perspectives, a common thread often runs through them: a profound recognition of death as a significant transition and a persistent human desire to bridge the gap it creates.

7. Debates, Skepticism, and the Role of Charlatanism

Throughout its long history, **necromancy** has been a subject of intense debate, consistently facing scrutiny and skepticism. The fundamental challenge to its validity stems from the absolute lack of verifiable, empirical evidence supporting the claim that communication with the dead is genuinely possible. Modern scientific methodology and critical thinking frameworks demand observable, measurable, and repeatable phenomena to validate extraordinary claims, criteria which no alleged necromantic practice has ever met under controlled conditions. This deficit of proof underpins the widespread view that necromancy, in the literal sense of contacting the deceased, is a pseudoscience or a superstitious belief.

A significant aspect of the skepticism surrounding necromancy, as directly noted in the source

content, is the historical prevalence of **charlatanism**. Numerous individuals throughout history who have claimed the ability to communicate with spirits, often referred to as mediums, have been exposed as scam artists. These individuals typically employ various techniques of deception, including cold reading, hot reading, sleight of hand, and theatrical effects, to create the illusion of spiritual contact. The Spiritualism movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries, while popular, was particularly rife with such exposures, as many prominent mediums were ultimately revealed to be frauds by skeptics and magicians like Harry Houdini.

The persistence of belief in necromancy, despite overwhelming evidence of deception and the absence of scientific validation, can be attributed to several psychological and sociological factors. These include the profound human desire to connect with lost loved ones, the comfort derived from the idea of an afterlife, and the tendency for confirmation bias to reinforce existing beliefs. Furthermore, the theatrical and emotional intensity of seances and similar performances can create a powerful subjective experience that is difficult for participants to rationally dissect. Thus, while the scientific and skeptical consensus firmly rejects the factual claims of necromancy, its cultural and psychological impact, and the debates surrounding its authenticity, continue to resonate in discussions about belief, human vulnerability, and the enduring mystery of death.

Further Reading

[Anthropology - Wikipedia](#)

[Religious Studies - Wikipedia](#)

[Folklore - Wikipedia](#)

[Occultism - Wikipedia](#)

[History - Wikipedia](#)

[Divination - Wikipedia](#)

[Spiritism - Wikipedia](#)

[Necromancer - Wikipedia](#)

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[necromantia - Wiktionary \(Latin\)](#)

[Middle Ages - Wikipedia](#)

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