

Abraxas

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The word **Abrasax** (Gk. ΑΒΡΑΣΑΞ, which is far more common in the sources than the variant form **Abraxas**, ΑΒΡΑΞΑΣ) was a word of mystic meaning in the system of the Gnostic Basilides, being there applied to the "Great Archon" (Gk., *megas archōn*), the *princeps* of the 365 spheres (Gk., *ouranoi*).^[1] In Gnostic cosmology, the 7 letters spelling its name represent each of the 7 classic planets—Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.^[2]

The word is found in Gnostic texts such as the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, and also appears in the Greek Magical Papyri. It was engraved on certain antique gemstones, called on that account **Abrasax stones**, which were used as amulets or charms. As the initial spelling on stones was 'Abraxax' (Αβρασαξ), the spelling of 'Abraxas' seen today probably originates in the confusion made between the Greek letters Sigma and Xi in the Latin transliteration. The word may be related to Abracadabra, although other explanations exist.

There are similarities and differences between such figures in reports about Basilides' teaching, ancient Gnostic texts, the larger Greco-Roman magical traditions, and modern magical and esoteric writings. Opinions abound on Abraxas, who in recent centuries has been claimed to be both an Egyptian god and a demon.^[3] The Swiss Psychologist Carl Jung wrote a short Gnostic treatise in 1916 called *The Seven Sermons to the Dead*, which called Abraxas a God higher than the Christian God and Devil, that combines all opposites into one Being.

Contents

- 1 Sources

Gnosticism



This article is part of a series on Gnosticism

History of Gnosticism

Early Gnosticism
 Syrian-Egyptic Gnosticism
 Gnosticism in modern times

Proto-Gnostics

Philo
 Simon Magus
 Cerinthus
 Valentinus
 Basilides

Gnostic texts

Gnostic Gospels
 Nag Hammadi library
 Codex Tchacos
 Askew Codex
 Bruce Codex
 Gnosticism and the New Testament

Related articles

Gnosis
 Neoplatonism and Gnosticism
 Mandaeism
 Manichaeism
 Bosnian Church
 Esoteric Christianity
 Theosophy

Gnosticism Portal

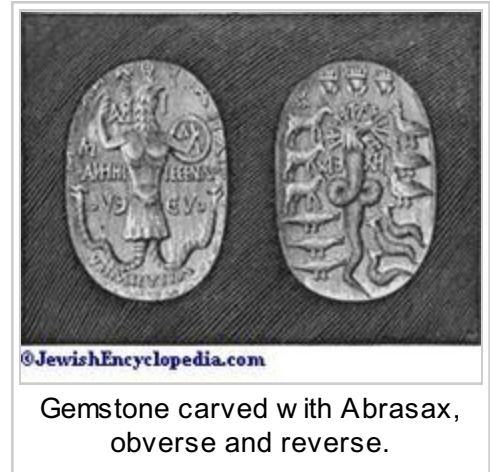
- 1.1 As an archon
- 1.2 As a god
- 1.3 As an Aeon
- 2 Abrasax stones
 - 2.1 Anguipede
 - 2.2 Hebraic names
 - 2.3 Magical papyri
 - 2.4 Origin
- 3 Etymology
 - 3.1 Egyptian
 - 3.2 Hebrew
 - 3.3 Greek
- 4 In modern culture
 - 4.1 Carl Jung (Seven Sermons to the Dead)
 - 4.2 Aleister Crowley
 - 4.3 Books
 - 4.4 Television
 - 4.5 Music
 - 4.6 Other
- 5 External links
- 6 References
- 7 Bibliography

Sources

It is uncertain what the actual role and function of Abrasax was in the Basilidian system, as our authorities often show no direct acquaintance with the doctrines of Basilides himself.

As an archon

In the system described by Irenaeus, "the Unbegotten Father" is the progenitor of *Nous*, and from *Nous Logos*, from *Logos Phronesis*, from *Phronesis Sophia* and *Dynamis*, from *Sophia* and *Dynamis* principalities, powers, and angels, the last of whom create "the first heaven." They in turn originate a second series, who create a second heaven. The process continues in like manner until 365 heavens are in existence, the angels of the last or visible heaven being the authors of our world. "The ruler" [*principem*, i.e. probably *ton archonta*] of the 365 heavens "is Abraxas, and for this reason he contains within himself 365 numbers."



Gemstone carved with Abrasax, obverse and reverse.

The name occurs in the *Refutation of all Heresies* (vii. 26) by Hippolytus, who appears in these chapters to have followed the *Exegetica* of Basilides. After describing the manifestation of the Gospel in the Ogdoad and Hebdomad, he adds that the Basilidians have a long account of the innumerable creations and powers in the several 'stages' of the upper world (*diastemata*), in which they speak of 365 heavens and say that "their great archon" is Abrasax, because his name contains the number 365, the number of the days in the year; i.e. the sum of the numbers denoted by the Greek letters in ABPAΣAΞ is 365:

$$A = 1, B = 2, P = 100, A = 1, \Sigma = 200, A = 1, \Xi = 60$$

As a god

Epiphanius (*Haer.* 69, 73 f.) appears to follow partly Irenaeus, partly the lost Compendium of Hippolytus.^[4] He designates Abrasax more distinctly as "the power above all, and First Principle," "the cause and first archetype" of all things; and mentions that the Basilidians referred to 365 as the number of parts (*mele*) in the human body, as well as of days in the year.

The author of the appendix to Tertullian *De Praescr. Haer.* (c. 4), who likewise follows Hippolytus's Compendium,^[5] adds some further particulars; that 'Abraxas' gave birth to Mind (*nous*), the first in the series of primary powers enumerated likewise by Irenaeus and Epiphanius; that the world, as well as the 365 heavens, was created in honour of 'Abraxas;' and that Christ was sent not by the Maker of the world but by 'Abraxas.'

Nothing can be built on the vague allusions of Jerome, according to whom 'Abraxas' meant for Basilides "the greatest God" (*De vir. ill.* 21), "the highest God" (*Dial. adv. Lucif.* 23), "the Almighty God" (*Comm. in Amos* iii. 9), and "the Lord the Creator" (*Comm. in Nah.* i. 11). The notices in Theodoret (*Haer. fab.* i. 4), Augustine (*Haer.* 4), and 'Praedestinatus' (i. 3), have no independent value.

It is evident from these particulars that Abrasax was the name of the first of the 365 Archons, and accordingly stood below Sophia and Dynamis and their progenitors; but his position is

not expressly stated, so that the writer of the supplement to Tertullian had some excuse for confusing him with "the Supreme God."

As an Aeon

With the availability of primary sources, such as the those in Nag Hammadi library, the identity of Abrasax remains unclear. The *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, for instance, refers to Abrasax as an Aeon dwelling with Sophia and other Aeons of the Pleroma in the light of the luminary Eleleth. In several texts, the luminary Eleleth is the last of the luminaries (Spiritual Lights) that come forward, and it is the Aeon Sophia, associated with Eleleth, who encounters darkness and becomes involved in the chain of events that leads to the Demiurge's rule of this world, and the salvage effort that ensues. As such, the role of Aeons of Eleleth, including Abrasax, Sophia, and others, pertains to this outer border of the Pleroma that encounters the ignorance of the world of Lack and interacts to rectify the error of ignorance in the world of materiality.

Abrasax stones

A vast number of engraved stones are in existence, to which the name "Abraxas-stones" has long been given. The subjects are mythological, and chiefly grotesque, with various inscriptions, in which ABPAΣAΞ often occurs, alone or with other words. Sometimes the whole space is taken up with the inscription. In certain obscure magical writings of Egyptian origin ἀβραξάς or ἀβρασάξ is found associated with other names which frequently accompany it on gems;^[6] it is also found on the Greek metal *tesseræ* among other mystic words. The meaning of the legends is seldom intelligible: but some of the gems are amulets; and the same may be the case with nearly all.

Anguipede

In a great majority of instances the name Abrasax is associated with a singular composite figure, having a Chimera-like appearance somewhat resembling a basilisk or the Greek primordial god Chronos (not to be confused with the Greek titan Cronus). According to E. A. Wallis Budge, "as a Pantheus, i.e. All-God, he appears on the amulets with the head of a cock (Phœbus) or of a lion (Ra or Mithras), the body of a man, and his legs are serpents which terminate in scorpions, types of the Agathodaimon. In his right hand he grasps a club, or a flail, and in his left is a round or oval shield." This form was also referred to as the Anguipede. Budge surmised that Abrasax was "a form of the Adam Kadmon of the Kabbalists and the Primal Man whom God made in His own image."^[7]

Some parts at least of the figure above mentioned are solar symbols, and the Basilidian Abrasax is manifestly connected with the sun. J. J. Bellermann has speculated that "the whole represents the Supreme Being, with his Five great Emanations, each one pointed out by means of an expressive emblem. Thus, from the human body, the usual form assigned to the Deity, forasmuch as it is written that God created man in his own image, issue the two supporters, *Nous* and *Logos*, symbols of the inner sense and the quickening understanding, as typified by the serpents, for the same reason that had induced the old Greeks to assign this reptile for an attribute to Pallas. His head—a cock's—represents *Phronesis*, the fowl being emblematical of foresight and vigilance. His two hands bear the badges of *Sophia* and *Dynamis*, the shield of Wisdom, and the scourge of Power."^[8]



Hebraic names

These Abrasax-stones often bear Hebraic names of God: Iao, Sabaoth, Adonai, Eloai. The name IAΩ, to which ΣΑΒΑΩΘ is sometimes added, is found with this figure even more frequently than ΑΒΡΑΣΑΞ, and they are often combined. Beside an Abrasax figure the following, for instance, is found: IAΩ ΑΒΡΑΣΑΞ ΑΔΩΝ ΑΤΑ, "Iao Abrasax, thou art the Lord".^[9] With the Abrasax-shield are also found the divine names Sabaoth Iao, Iao Abrasax, Adonai Abrasax, etc.^[10]

Magical papyri

The magic papyri reflect the same ideas as the Abrasax-gems. The following example will suffice: "Iao Sabaoth, Adonai . . . Abrasax".^[11] In the group "Iakoubia, Iaosabaoth Adonai

Abrasax,^[12] the first name seems to be composed of Jacob and Ya. The patriarchs are sometimes addressed as deities; for which fact many instances may be adduced.

The Leyden papyrus recommends that this invocation be pronounced to the moon:

[24] Ho! Sax, Amun, Sax, Abrasax; for thou art the moon, (25) the chief of the stars, he that did form them, listen to the things that I have(?) said, follow the (w ords) of my mouth, reveal thyself to me, Than, (26) Thana, Thanatha, otherw ise Thei, this is my correct name.^[13]

The magic word "Ablanathanalba," which reads in Greek the same backward as forward, also occurs in the Abrasax-stones as well as in the magic papyri. This word is usually conceded to be derived from the Hebrew (Aramaic), meaning "Thou art our father" (את רל אב), and also occurs in connection with Abrasax; the following inscription is found upon a metal plate in the Carlsruhe Museum:

ΑΒΡΑΣΑΞ

||ΒΛΑΝΑΘ

ΑΝΑΛΕΛ

It is evident that the last two lines ought to be read *Ablanathanalba*—i.e., ΒΛΑΝΑΘΑΝΑΛΒΑ for ΒΛΑΝΑΘΑΝΑΛΕΛ.

Origin

In the absence of other evidence to show the origin of these curious relics of antiquity the occurrence of a name known as Basilidian on patristic authority has not unnaturally been taken as a sufficient mark of origin, and the early collectors and critics assumed this whole group to be the work of Gnostics. During the last three centuries attempts have been made to sift away successively those gems which had no claim to be considered in any sense Gnostic, or specially Basilidian, or connected with Abrasax. The subject is one which has exercised the ingenuity of many savants, but it may be said that all the engraved stones fall into three classes:

- *Abrasax*, or stones of Basilidian origin
- *Abrasaxtes*, or stones originating in ancient forms of worship, and adapted by the Gnostics
- *Abraxoïdes*, or stones absolutely unconnected with the doctrine of Basilides

While it would be rash to assert positively that no existing gems were the work of Gnostics, there is no valid reason for attributing any or all of them to such an origin. The fact that the name occurs on these gems in connection with representations of figures with the head of a cock, a lion, or an ass, and the tail of a serpent was formerly taken in the light of what Irenaeus says about the followers of Basilides:

These men, moreover, practise magic, and use images, incantations, invocations, and every

other kind of curious art. Coining also certain names as if they were those of the angels, they proclaim some of these as belonging to the first, and others to the second heaven; and then they strive to set forth the names, principles, angels, and powers of the 365 imagined heavens.

—*Adversus hæreses*, l. xxiv. 5; cf. Epiph. *Haer.* 69 D; Philastr. *Suer.* 32

Incantations by mystic names were characteristic of the hybrid Gnosticism planted in Spain and southern Gaul at the end of the fourth century and at the beginning of the fifth, which Jerome connects with Basilides, and which (according to his *Epist.*, lxxv.) used the name Abrasax.

It is therefore not unlikely that some Gnostics used amulets, though the confident assertions of modern writers to this effect rest on no authority. Isaac de Beausobre properly calls attention to the significant silence of Clement in the two passages in which he instructs the Christians of Alexandria on the right use of rings and gems, and the figures which may legitimately be engraved on them (*Paed.* 241 ff.; 287 ff.). But no attempt to identify the figures on existing gems with the personages of Gnostic mythology has had any success, and *Abrasax* is the only Gnostic term found in the accompanying legends which is not known to belong to other religions or mythologies. The present state of the evidence therefore suggests that their engravers and the Basilidians received the mystic name from a common source now unknown.

Having due regard to the magic papyri, in which many of the unintelligible names of the Abrasax-stones reappear, besides directions for making and using gems with similar figures and formulas for magical purposes, it can scarcely be doubted that many of these stones are pagan amulets and instruments of magic.

Etymology

Gaius Julius Hyginus (*Fab.* 183) gives *Abrax Aslo Therbeeo* as names of horses of the sun mentioned by 'Homerus.' The passage is miserably corrupt: but it may not be accidental that the first three syllables make Abraxas.

The proper form of the name is evidently *Abrasax*, as with the Greek writers, Hippolytus, Epiphanius, Didymus (*De Trin.* iii. 42), and Theodoret; also Augustine and 'Praedestinatus'; and in nearly all the legends on gems. By a probably euphonic inversion the translator of Irenaeus and the other Latin authors have *Abraxas*, which is found in the magical papyri, and even, though most sparingly, on engraved stones.

The attempts to discover a derivation for the name, Greek, Hebrew, Coptic, or other, have not been entirely successful:

Egyptian

- Claudius Salmasius thought it Egyptian, but never gave the proofs which he promised.
- Friedrich Münter separates it into two Coptic words signifying "new fangled title."
- J. J. Bellermann thinks it a compound of the Egyptian words *abrak* and *sax*, meaning

“the honorable and hallowed word,” or “the word is adorable.”

- Samuel Sharpe finds in it an Egyptian invocation to the Godhead, meaning “hurt me not.”

Hebrew

- Abraham Geiger sees in it a Grecized form of *ha-berakhah*, “the blessing,” a meaning which C.W. King declares philologically untenable.
- J. B. Passerius derives it from *abh*, “father,” *bara*, “to create,” and *a-* negative—“the uncreated Father.”
- Giuseppe Barzilai goes back for explanation to the first verse of the prayer attributed to Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Kanah, the literal rendering of which is “O [God], with thy mighty right hand deliver the unhappy [people],” forming from the initial and final letters of the words the word *Abrakd* (pronounced Abrakad), with the meaning “the host of the winged ones,” i.e., angels. But this extremely ingenious theory would at most explain only the mystic word *Abracadabra*, whose connection with Abrasax is by no means certain.

Greek

- Wendelin discovers a compound of the initial letters, amounting to 365 in numerical value, of four Hebrew and three Greek words, all written with Greek characters: *ab, ben, rouach, hakadōs; sōtēria apo xylou* (“Father, Son, Spirit, holy; salvation from the cross”).
- According to a note of Isaac de Beausobre’s, Jean Hardouin accepted the first three of these, taking the four others for the initials of the Greek *anthrōpoussōzōn hagiōi xylōi*, “saving mankind by the holy cross.”
- Isaac de Beausobre derives Abrasax from the Greek *habros* and *saō*, “the beautiful, the glorious Savior.”

Perhaps the word may be included among those mysterious expressions discussed by Adolf von Harnack,^[14] “which belong to no known speech, and by their singular collocation of vowels and consonants give evidence that they belong to some mystic dialect, or take their origin from some supposed divine inspiration.”

Yet we may with better reason suppose that it came originally from a foreign mythology, and that the accident of its numerical value in Greek merely caused it to be singled out at Alexandria for religious use. It is worth notice that ΜΕΙΘΡΑΣ and ΝΕΙΛΟΣ have the same value. The Egyptian author of the book *De Mysteriis* in reply to Porphyry (vii. 4) admits a preference of 'barbarous' to vernacular names in sacred things, urging a peculiar sanctity in the languages of certain nations, as the Egyptians and Assyrians; and Origen (*Contra Cels.* i. 24) refers to the 'potent names' used by Egyptian sages, Persian Magi, and Indian Brahmins, signifying deities in the several languages.

In modern culture

Carl Jung (Seven Sermons to the Dead)

Main article: Seven Sermons to the Dead

Abraxas is an important figure in *Seven Sermons*, a representation of the driving force of individuation (synthesis, maturity, oneness), referred with the figures for the driving forces of differentiation (emergence of consciousness and opposites), Helios God-the-Sun, and the Devil.^[15]

"There is a God about whom you know nothing, because men have forgotten him. We call him by his name: Abraxas. He is less definite than God or Devil....

"Abraxas is activity: nothing can resist him but the unreal.... Abraxas stands above the sun[-god] and above the devil.... If the Pleroma were capable of having a being, Abraxas would be its manifestation."

—2nd Sermon

"That which is spoken by God-the-Sun is life; that which is spoken by the Devil is death; Abraxas speaketh that hallowed and accursed word, which is life and death at the same time. Abraxas begetteth truth and lying, good and evil, light and darkness in the same word and in the same act. Wherefore is Abraxas terrible."

—3rd Sermon



Medieval Seal representing Abraxas

Aleister Crowley

Abrasax is invoked in the The Gnostic Mass of the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica:

IO IO IO IAO SABAO KURIE ABRASAX KURIE METHRAS KURIE PHALLE. IO PAN, IO PAN PAN IO ISCHUROS, IO ATHANATOS IO ABROTOS IO IAO. KAIRE PHALLE KAIRE PAMPHAGE KAIRE PANGENETOR. HAGIOS, HAGIOS, HAGIOS IAO.

Crowley's "Gnostic Mass" contains highly sexual material, as well as references to the author's modern religion of Thelema. This mass is mainly taken from Epiphanius' account of a Phibionite mass (*Haer.* 25, 26), from which Crowley borrowed liberally in writing this rite. The hostile accounts of heresiologists often attempted to characterize Gnostic rituals as orgiastic; many contemporary scholars only peripherally utilize the church fathers' accounts of the Gnostics, as primary sources such as the Nag Hammadi Library are now available.

Books

In the novel *Utopia* by Thomas More, the island with the same name of the novel once had the name "Abraxas".

Several references to the god Abraxas appear in Hermann Hesse's (a friend of Jung's)

novel, *Demian*, such as:

"The bird fights its way out of the egg. The egg is the world. Who would be born must destroy a world. The bird flies to God. That God's name is Abraxas."

—Max Demian

"... it appears that Abraxas has much deeper significance. We may conceive of the name as that of the godhead whose symbolic task is the uniting of godly and devilish elements."

—Dr. Follens

"Abraxas doesn't take exception to any of your thoughts or any of your dreams. Never forget that. But he will leave you once you become blameless and normal."

—Pistorius

In Hugo Pratt's story *Favola di Venezia - Sirat Al-Bunduqiyyah (Fable of Venice)*, Corto Maltese encounters several Abraxas in Venice.

In the German book "Die kleine Hexe" ("The Little Witch") by Otfried Preußler the witch's raven is called "Abraxas".

In *Small Gods* by Terry Pratchett 'Charcoal' Abraxas is a lightning-singed philosopher who claimed that 'The Gods like an atheist - it gives them something to aim at'

In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* it is revealed that Draco Malfoy's grandfather is named Abraxas.

Abraxas is a fictional cosmic entity from Marvel Comics that was introduced in *Galactus: The Devourer*.

In Alan Moore's series *Miracleman*, the word "abraxas" is shown to transform the titular character back to his original human form.

In Dan Simmon's science fiction novella "Muse of Fire", the setting is thousands of years in the future, and Abraxas is the predominant religion amongst humans, synonymous with God.

Television

The Abraxas passage in *Demian* is later adapted in the anime *Revolutionary Girl Utena* in a verse that is recited by Ohtori Academy Student Council members before meetings:

If the chick cannot break the shell of its egg, it will die without being born. We are the chick; the world is our egg. If we cannot break the world's shell, we will die without being born. Smash the world's shell—for the revolution of the world.

The name of the song that typically plays during this sequence is *Legend: That God's Name is Abraxas*.

Abraxas (played by Walter Phelan) appears as a demon in the second season premier of the TV series *Charmed*^[16]; the episode is entitled "Witch Trial"

In the television series, *Babylon 5*, "Abraxas79713" is Captain John Sheridan's password to arm the tactical nukes aboard his ship.

In the television series *The L Word*, Abraxas is referred as the demon of lies and deceit.

Music

The second album of the musical group Santana is entitled *Abraxas*. That album has the following quote from *Demian* on the album cover: "We stood before it and began to freeze inside from the exertion. We questioned the painting, berated it, made love to it, prayed to it: We called it mother, called it whore and slut, called it our beloved, called it Abraxas...."

The Swedish symphonic metal band Therion has a song named Abraxas.

The band Integrity also has a song called "Abraxas Annihilation" on their album "Humanity is the Devil," and a song titled "Seven Sermones Ad Mortuos" on their album "Seasons in the Size of Days."

The Anglo-German band, Seelenlicht, refer to Abraxas in their song "Demian" (Cold Spring Records, 2008). One verse runs: "Our god is Abraxas / Both God and Devil at the same time,"

Boyd Rice & Death in June also include references to Abraxas in their song, titled The Cruelty of the Heavens, from their 1996 album, titled Scorpion Wind.

Polish neo-progressive band - named Abraxas.

The album 'Hysterics' (Hassle Records, 2008) by Sheffield based band Rolo Tomassi features a song called 'Abraxas'.

Australian metal band Deströyer 666 released an EP entitled "Terror Abraxas" in 2003.

The Disco Biscuits wrote a song "Abraxas" and debuted it on April 14 2006 at Higher Ground in South Burlington Vermont.

Abraxas was also mentioned in the song, "Lead Posoning," off of Alkaline Trio's latest album, "This Addiction." (2010) In the chorus of the song, Matt Skiba sings "Lay my heavy head here down to sleep, and I pray to Abraxas, my soul to keep."

Other

Charles Manson referred to himself as "Abraxas", both God and the Devil, in his 1986 letter to his parole board.

In the 1970s, a group of Unitarian Universalists formed a group called the "Congregation of Abraxas."

The 1986 point-and-click adventure video game *Uninvited* features a set of spells that can be cast by the player, all of which end in the word "Abraxas".

In the *Shadowrun* role-playing game, the late great dragon Dunkelzahn leaves 100 million nuyen to Abraxas Industries, which is one of the few elements of his last will and testament to never receive mention in any other *Shadowrun* content.^[17]

In the computer video game *Sacrifice*, there is a supporting character within the campaign named Abraxas.^[18]

In Amsterdam, there is a coffee shop named "Abraxas."

In the East of Paris, Ricardo Bofill built a housing project named Les Espaces d'Abraxas.

Founded in 1977, Abraxas Petroleum Corporation is an independent San Antonio, Texas, energy company. (Oil and natural gas development and production in the U.S.) Listed on Nasdaq, symbol AXAS.

"Abraxas" is the name of a international journal of esoteric studies embracing art, essays and poetry.

External links

- Jewish encyclopedia entry (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=633&letter=A>)
- The complete texts of Carl Jung's "The Seven Sermons To The Dead" (<http://www.gnosis.org/library/7Sermons.htm>)

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5. ^ Lipsius 33 f. &c.
6. ^ Reuvens (1830). *Lett. à M. Letronne s. l. Pap. bilingues*, etc., Leyden
7. ^ Budge, E. A. Wallis (1930). *Amulets and Superstitions*. pp. 209-210.
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