

KNOT
MAGIC

BY

Tyfluan Penry

Knot Magic

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About Tylluan Penry

Tylluan Penry is a solitary pagan witch, independent scholar and the author of numerous books and magazine articles dealing with many aspects of magic and folklore.

She has also been a popular and regular speaker at various events including Witchfest International, The Artemis Gathering, Witchfest England and Witchfest Wales, together with talks for the Pagan Federation, and at independent, private events. Her articles have appeared in a variety of publications including *Witchcraft & Wicca*, *Myddle Earth* and *The Faerie Times*. She is regularly consulted by the media for advice in accurately portraying witchcraft and paganism.

Tylluan believes very strongly in trying to help other solitaires and those just beginning on their spiritual paths. To this end she set up The Wolfenhowle Press in 2011, with the intention of making beautiful, informative and inspiring books about paganism widely available and affordable.

In 2014, she set up her own YouTube Channel, *Tylluan Penry at the Wolfenhowle Press* which you can find here:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC48MN8sa7_lFsBX9v2ZAeAg/featured

Again, in keeping with the ethos of The Wolfenhowle Press, there is no advertising on these videos, just sensible advice and information, freely available to everyone.

Tylluan is married, has a large family, grandchildren, many pets, an overgrown garden and a gloriously ramshackle house where she lives and dreams with Mr Penry, her love of many lifetimes, in the South Wales Rhondda Valley.

*This book is dedicated with love and fond
memories to my Uncle Ken (Ding
Dong) who sailed the Seven Seas and
taught me so much about the magic of
knots*

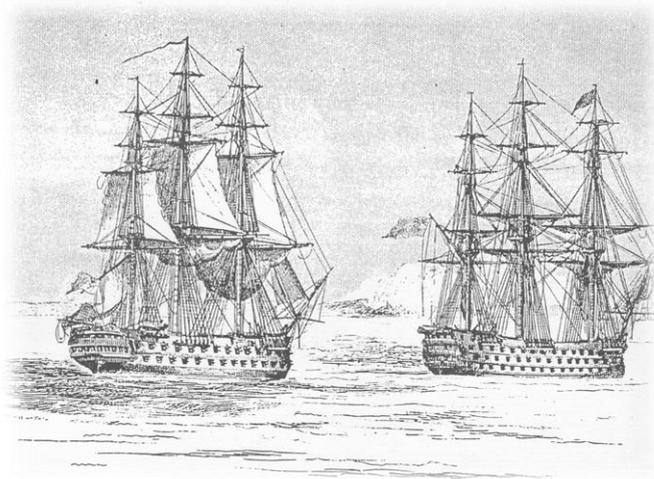


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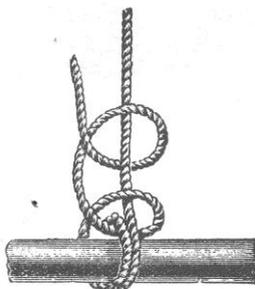
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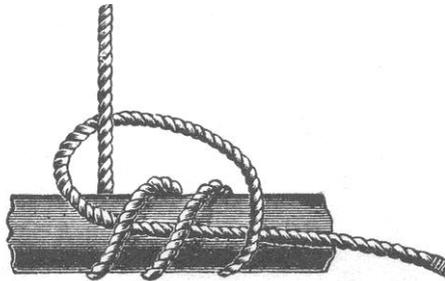


Note:

This book is about Knot Magic, and not about learning to tie elaborate knots. If you want to tie a specific knot, then there are plenty of very good knot books available and many instructional videos on knot-tying on YouTube.

A word about references....

References are placed within the text of this book using the Harvard style of referencing, i.e. Author, Year, and, where appropriate, page number. This is much neater and easier than struggling to find endnotes after each chapter. If you then wish to consult the referenced work for yourself, just go to the Bibliography at the end of this book and look up the name of the author; you will find the full details given there.



CHAPTER ONE

WHY KNOT?

It was inevitable I would be fascinated by knots from an early age. Quite apart from the fact that my uncle (to whom I've dedicated this book) was an old 'sea-dog' who kept the neighbourhood children entertained with his (tall!) tales of tall ships and exotic lands, ropes are in my blood. There have been rope-makers and boat builders in my family (on my father's side) going back for centuries.

Even now, the act of tying knots is enough to catapult me back into my childhood. There is something quite magical about the act of joining two lengths of string together and creating something that behaves like a single piece. Or conversely, taking a single length of string and making it behave as though it was made up of several lengths.

Strangely enough though, my own talent was not in tying knots, but in *untying* them. Whenever anything was knotted in our house – be that string, wool, ribbon or even a necklace chain – I was always the one who was asked to 'take a look' and try to undo it. And I did. It was very rare indeed for me to be unable to untie something, no matter how much it resembled a bad tempered bird's nest. Knots liked me.

And in a roundabout way this provided me with the first great lesson of Knot Magic. Never tie – or attempt to tie – something that cannot be undone. There may always come a time when we need to undo them, even if we don't believe this at the time we cast the original spell. And it's always more difficult to undo something than to tie it in the first place!

Knowing what we are doing is important not just in magic, but in most things in life. In fact, many knots are classified not just by the difficulty in tying them, but also by the difficulty in untying them, since even in the physical world, we never know when that may be necessary.

Of course, none of this is an excuse for us to tie bad knots. Knot tying is – like many things – a skill that must be learned. We may not want

to undo it, we may never be tempted to undo it, but the knot itself must always be capable of being undone – just in case. Because, as with any kind of magic, we never know what surprises life may have in store.

Unfortunately nowadays, many people tend to regard Knot Magic as rather childish, a bit beneath them. Yet years ago Knot Magic or *ligatura* as it was sometimes known, was considered such a danger that the early Church issued numerous edicts against it. Prosecutions and even executions of those who used *ligatura* continued quite late in our history, right into the eighteenth century in France and Scotland.

So why was Knot Magic be considered dangerous? Partly because it was so simple, which is ironic considering that its simplicity is one of the reasons that makes people view it as childish nowadays. Although some knots undoubtedly require great skill, almost anyone can tie a simple one in a piece of string. With practice, we can even tie them with one hand.

Knot Magic was also discreet, powerful and used easily obtainable materials. And that's important too. We don't need to visit special magical supply stores. A quick trip to the supermarket or local hardware shop can furnish us with everything we need i.e. a ball of string, although even that's not essential since knots can be tied in almost anything from ribbons and rags to bandages and strands of hair!

Complex or simple, knots are adept at creating illusions and deceiving us. They can make two pieces of string behave like a single length; they can appear secure yet come undone with a single tug. Some are so impossible to undo that all we can do is to cut them with scissors.

In fact 'cutting the cord' has become a euphemism for the moment of birth, when the cord (umbilical, not cotton or hemp!) that joins a mother to her new baby is cut. Knots can also end life (think of the hangman's noose) or preserve it (such as the knots used in climbing, sailing and in surgical stitches.) They have a curious and stirring language all their own, 'gammoning the bowsprit'; 'brailing up a spanker' or 'Standing Turk's eye.'

Most amazing of all, knots can even tie themselves! I'm sure almost anyone reading this will have come across jewellery chains that were put away neatly only to be found to have a knot in them! Embroidery threads and sewing cotton behave in much the same way, and my mother always knotted her tacking cotton by rubbing it between finger and thumb, i.e. she never actually tied a knot in it at all although it behaved just like a knot afterwards.

But the idea that yes, knots really can tie themselves came as a surprise to me, until I read about some research by two biophysicists, Dorian Raymer and Douglas Smith. These two scientists deliberately tumbled lengths of rope inside a box and discovered that even quite complex knots will form surprisingly fast and often, without any human interference whatsoever (Castelvecchi 2007:398).

Further research in 2006 by Jens Eggers and his colleagues at Bristol University found that ball chains (the type used with sink plugs) could form knots when they were individually set on a vibrating dish for an average of 30 seconds.

It's no wonder therefore that people have been believing that knots are charged with some inherent and mysterious magical power for thousands of years and in all corners of the world. After all, ropes and cables must be very cunning if they can tie knots in themselves! In old Hebrew literature such as The Old Testament (Deuteronomy 18, ii and Psalm 58), an enchanter was called *hober haber*, meaning quite literally a man who ties magic knots (Gandz 1930:192).

In ancient times it was even believed there was a knot up in the night sky. According to the ancient Greek poet-astronomer Aratus of Soli (c315-240 BCE) *α Piscium*, a star in the zodiacal sign of Pisces, was 'a beautiful and great star, Which is called the Knot of the Heavens' (de Callatay 1996:1).

Usually, when we tie a knot it is intended to keep something safe or in place, to stop it moving about freely. Transferring this idea to a magical mindset, we can see how tying a knot can be used in spells intended to hinder or prevent the actions of other persons, animals or

even things. This is in fact where our English word 'spellbound' comes from - to hold or bind a person or thing as though by magic. Tying a knot can also bind us to a specific course of action by tying the person, thing and/or action together.

Conversely, to untie a knot or loosen it will remove or slacken the binding or obstruction, and therefore free the subject of the knot. This is particularly useful whenever we want to ensure there is nothing to hinder a particular event or course of action and may explain why garments and shoes were often symbolically untied before couples married or women gave birth.

Magically, this operates on the basis of 'like curing like', or *similia similibus curantur*. This is often referred to as the 'Just as... so may' formula, linking a physical action to a magical intention. For example, 'Just as I remove the knots in these shoelaces, so may all obstructions to the birth be undone and removed.'

This is a very old magical method and keeps within the spirit of the 'As above, so below,' maxim found in old magical text known as 'The Emerald Tablet' of Hermes Trismegistus. There are several different translations of this text, but in each you will find that point number two is very similar.

However, we must not rush ahead of ourselves here. If we want to perform spells, we first need to get used to the idea of really thinking for ourselves about what we're doing. It is no use just parroting 'received wisdom' without questioning it. Indeed when I was young I would end up in all sorts of trouble because I rarely did as I was told without arguing! If I understood the reasoning behind what I was being told to do then fair enough, otherwise I could be (and probably still am) really awkward.

My father summed it up very well when he advised me, 'You either have to accept authority from other people, or you have to impose the discipline on yourself. There's really no other way. Obedience or self discipline.' He knew even before he spoke, that I would accept self

discipline over and above other peoples' rules any day. It's just the way I am.

However, my father's words also taught me another important magical lesson. If we want to strike out on our own, which is essentially what magic enables us to do, then we need a strong sense of self discipline and an enquiring mind. Otherwise all we are doing is following the herd, and since there is no one-size-fits-all in magic, our work is never going to achieve its full potential.

It is also important to learn to be agile in our thinking, otherwise we become confused with apparent contradictions. For example, there has been a longstanding tradition in many parts of Europe that the bride and groom at a wedding should not wear anything that requires knots to be tied, such as shoelaces etc.

However, there is also a tradition of 'wedding knots,' a type of wedding favour that was deliberately attached to clothing and intended to bring good luck. In the seventeenth century, many brides traditionally sewed knots of coloured ribbons (known as bride favours or bride lace) onto their dresses (Monger 1975:53).

Now it can be difficult to make sense of such inconsistency but it is always worth making an effort. Possibly the wedding knots were intended to confront the fear of hexing (which was known to use knots) by using knots that were created only in order to bring good luck. Thus instead of creating fear, wedding knots were put to good use and made to work for benign intentions.

And this supports a basic tenet of all magic: it is never good or bad, black or white as such, but is coloured by the intention behind it. Only the intention can have – or lack – goodness, not the magic. Magic – of itself – is entirely neutral.

Knot Magic is very ancient, but since it was so often tied in perishable material such as wool or even bark, most examples will have perished and anything that has survived is unlikely to be recognised for what it once was. However, a host of words connected with knots have not

only survived but have entered and made themselves fully at home within the English language.

For example, the word 'knot' derives from the Old English word *cnotta*, which in turn may come from an Indo European root *gen-* meaning 'to compress into a ball.' This does make sense, since knots are generally rounded and ball shaped (Schwartzman 1996). Related native English words include knob, knuckle, knoll, knit and knotty.

Knots and knot tying have entered our language and consciousness in other subtle ways too. For example, a knotty problem is something difficult to solve (or unravel!). Then there is the spot where a branch joins the main trunk creates an extra strong, circular body of wood – a knot. We talk about heartstrings, tying the knot, tying somebody up in knots and when we're fed up we might even tell someone to 'get knotted'!

The act of tying a knot has likewise entered our everyday language. If we are in difficulties we might claim to be 'in a bind'. Someone found guilty in Court may be 'bound over' to keep the peace. The binding is not literal, but the link is clear. A vow to behave has been made, and must be kept. Originally no doubt, such promises were accompanied by the tying of a knot. Now all that remains is the promise – and that rather curious turn of phrase to remind us of its true origins.

Once we start looking we can find many examples of the words to bind and to loosen in the sense of to prohibit and to allow respectively. For example, in the Old Testament (Numbers Chapter 20) it states, 'If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond...' which may not sound connected with knots, yet a more literal translation of this passage is '...to tie a knot against himself' (Gandz 1930:193).

Best of all though, in my opinion, are the words 'spellbound' and 'spell-binding.' If ever we needed proof that magic and knots are bound together (the pun is intended), then there we have it!

There is also the phrase ‘The bitter end’, usually meaning to stay or work together long past what most people would think of as reasonable. Yet this saying actually derives from tying knots, since the bitter end is the end of the rope that is being tied, sometimes also known as the working end. (The other end, the one that isn’t being used is called the standing end.)

Even ropes and cords have entered our language with curious persistence. Knowing the ropes means we know what’s what, and newcomers (in jobs, groups, situations etc.) often have to learn this. It almost certainly started out as a seafaring term, where learning to tie the right knot and choose the right rope for the job was essential.

Ending up on the ropes however was not considered good and is a common term in boxing, suggesting that the fighter is in trouble. Being at the end of one’s rope, or the end of one’s tether denotes being utterly exhausted and/or out of options. The rope is the lifeline, and to come to its end means we can only fall.

Working with three or more ends

The possibilities of knotting cords together are endless. For example, we can tie a short piece of cord in the middle of a single longer piece in order to give the appearance of three pieces being joined together, rather like the effect of a triskele, which is a shape where three arms, legs or spokes radiate from a central point.



This shape in various forms is a common theme right across the northern hemisphere. The three spokes can interlock (as in the Norse *valknut*) or appear relatively lifelike, as in some Celtic and Anglo-Saxon art, on Lycian coins from the Middle East and even in the three legged

figure of the Isle of Man (Brown 1966:124). It may also be the basis for the images of the triple hare which occurs in many different times and places, from sixth century China to thirteenth century churches near Dartmoor.



Sketch of triple hare motif from Wissembourg, France c.1300 CE

Here the three hares are apparently chasing each other, but closer inspection shows visual trickery, something totally in keeping with what we know of knots! For example, although hares have two ears, the triple hare motif shows only three instead of the expected six. These are arranged in a triangle shape so they leave an empty triangular gap at the centre. Unless the viewer is unusually observant, the missing ears tend to be overlooked and accepted as visually correct.

At this point I should mention that people sometimes claim such imagery was only ever intended for decoration. This is not true particularly when they occur in churches, where every Green Man, Triple Hare and Triform Face (to mention just a few) formed part of the 'iconography of place'. Medieval churches were built at a time when very few people could read or write, they had no way to access the scriptures, which were only available in Latin.

Therefore all these the wall paintings, sculptures and carvings provided an important visual frame of reference for sermons and religious teaching. Everything that decorated a church building had an

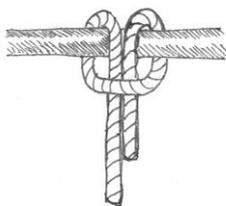
important part to play, but this is easily overlooked nowadays with our increasing reliance on the written word rather than visual images.

It may be no coincidence that hares rather than any other animal were chosen for such an image since they were once widely regarded as magical creatures; one even turns up in the story of Boudicca (Cassius Dio LXII:6). The triple hare motif turns up all over the world, including the Far East. And of course the number three appears in all types of magic, including Knot Magic.

Similar visual trickery can also be noticed when we manipulate two cords. Knotting them together at one end produces something that looks and behaves like a single cord with two ends. However if we add one cord to the centre of the other, then we can end up with three or even four ends.

The implication of this in magical terms is that we are moving from the two dimensional world to the three dimensional. The third (or fourth) end creates balance, just as the third leg does on a tripod.

So how do we create that 'third end'? One method is to use a hitched knot over the original line. For most magical purposes, a simple cow hitch or lark's head will do.



Cow hitch knot

Now it must be said that this type of knot is much despised amongst serious tiers of knots; it isn't especially strong for heavy loads and can slip easily. So if we feel that 'as above, so below' should apply to the type of knot we use, then perhaps we should investigate something a little more challenging (but still doable) such as a clove hitch.

Whatever type of hitch we use however, will almost always result in adding *two* extra lines, so these will need to be twisted, bound or even sewn together afterwards if we need only three cords in total. If we are aiming for all three lines to look more or less the same, we should use a much thinner cord for the hitch, so that when it is bound together it will look like the cord over which it has been tied. If the extra cord is the same width as the cord it crosses then it will look *twice* as thick when the two cords are bound together.

This third cord gives us two important possibilities in terms of shape. Firstly it can be made to resemble the triskele shape by laying it on a flat surface and curling each end of the three cords. Secondly, if we stretched them out on a flat surface, then the new shape will be something like a letter T or the Greek *tau*:

T τ

Now the *tau* shape is an extremely old symbol. In Ancient Egypt, after Set had dismembered Osiris and scattered his body, Isis managed to find them all apart from his penis. Subsequently Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris, is sometimes shown carrying the *tau* cross to symbolise his father's missing penis.

Both the Egyptians and Persians used the *tau* symbol on their banners, as did Moses and although early Christians often regarded it as a Jewish symbol of creation and regeneration, later they would adopt it for themselves. In the Norse tradition, a shape resembling the tau cross can also be seen in Thor's hammer, Mjolnir. And in surprising echoes of Ancient Egypt, sometimes this form features the handle shaped like a penis, hence the *tau*'s association with masculinity (Healey 1977:289). These associations would make the three ended cord very useful in spells associated with any particularly male problems, or indeed with any specific male.

Because of the way the third end acts as a balance, the three ended cord opens up all sorts of magical possibilities of working with Other Worlds. It allows us not only to work here and now in the present, but also to project up to the sky or down into the earth if we wish.

Another interesting observation about the *tau* is that if we add a loop to the top it becomes the *ankh*, giving us yet another link with ancient Egypt. One theory is that the loop represents the rising sun while the crossbar represents the earth and the straight vertical part represents the path the sun takes as it rises up to become visible above the horizon. Yet another example of crossing between worlds.



The Ankh

Of course, such crossings do not always involve a vertical line. If we placed our emphasis instead on a horizontal crossing then this could symbolise working with triform or triple faced gods or entities. The *trivium* was a Latin word for crossroad, literally a place where three roads met. This was always regarded as a magical and sometimes even uncanny place. Of course, crossroads may vary in appearance. A 'Y' shaped fork in the road is still a place where three roads meet, and we could even make a case for a T junction fulfilling the same function.

In the past - and perhaps even now - people would visit crossroads in order to perform all sorts of magical rites. For example, in the late tenth/early eleventh century, pagans sometimes tied knots in bandages in order to heal their own livestock (or hex those belonging to someone else), before throwing the rags into the centre of a crossroads or hiding them in trees (McNeil 1933: paragraph 54). Although the early Christian Church did its best to discourage and prohibit such practices, they still continued for centuries.

Nowadays however, the problem is not so much avoiding Church disapproval as finding a crossroad that is reasonably quiet. Unless we have access to a country lane, a knot spell using an extra cord in order to produce a third working end could be a useful alternative, and we would simply need to visualise our cord as a crossroad.

Magic is nothing if not inventive!

