

Dowsing from the Late Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century: The Practices, Uses and Interpretations of an Element of European Magic

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Abstract

Dowsing was an element of European folk magic. With the help of simple wooden rods persons with special magical abilities were supposed to be able to find hidden objects, from buried treasures to subterranean springs. The rise of dowsing can be traced to its use in the emerging mining centres of Central Europe around 1500. However, dowsers soon claimed nearly universal magical knowledge. Even though dowsing encountered strong scepticism, a number of early modern scholars and scientists tried to explain the alleged efficacy of the rod in a number of different ways, ranging from demonological arguments to the atom theory, and the idea of an all-encompassing world spirit. From the eighteenth century onwards, scientific mining techniques marginalized dowsing. However, the practice lingers on to the present day, mostly in the forms of water-witching and pseudo-medicinal diagnostics. The key to the continued popularity of dowsing is its cheapness and its simplicity. Insofar as it promises quick success without formal education, it is the very opposite of science. Dowsing is an example of the successful adaptation of magic with medieval roots to the esotericism that flourishes on the margins of Europe's supposedly rational worldview.

Keywords

Dowsing, mining, magic, treasure, water-witching

If you check any of the countless regional newspapers that crowd the European market for media, you are likely to find advertisements of dowsers. Dowsing, so these unobtrusive little texts proclaim, will help you to find hidden springs or

underground watercourses. Even though the access to water is as a rule no problem for European agriculture, it might be worthwhile for someone wanting to buy a piece of land or build a new house to find out about subterranean water. However, not all dowzers are water-witchers. The bolder ones advertise to offer their help as healers. A good dowser, many Europeans evidently think, will be able to find the reason for any ailment and will be competent to suggest a cure. As a matter of fact, there is a huge and flourishing market for pseudo-medicine and quackery that rivals the science-dominated system of health care. In the course of a number of lectures on the history of dowsing in Germany, Britain and Denmark, which he has given to international European audiences, the present author has learnt that the belief in dowsing is still widespread.

Even though every dowser probably has his/her own special technique, there are some basic patterns that seem not to have changed since the early modern period. Dowsing could be defined as the systematic search for hidden objects with a help of instruments that are—according to the standards of science—unsuitable for that task. The divining rod or dowsing rod (German: *Wünschelrute*; Italian: *bacchetta da rabadomante*; Spanish: *varilla de zahorí*; French: *baguette divinatoire/baguette de sourcier*) is the most important instrument of dowzers. A dowser (or diviner) might claim to be able to find a hidden spring with a simple Y-shaped stick cut from some tree. The diviner would hold the two short ends of the rod in both hands and move about with it. When the long end of the rod began to tremble or bend down—supposedly on its own accord—it indicated where hidden items could be found.¹ Earlier, dowzers claimed to be able to find water, minerals or buried treasures that way. However, a more ‘sophisticated’ modern dowser might use a metal rod and claim to be able to find cancer cells in the body of a patient with it. Others who like to call themselves radiesthesiatists are allegedly able to detect so-called ‘earth rays’ with the help of simple sticks or metal rods. These earth rays are supposed to make anyone who happens to come under their influence seriously ill. Nevertheless, the essential modus operandi of dowzers has remained the same for at least half a millennium. As newspaper advertisements, as well as numerous seminars on dowsing and a wide variety of practical do-it-yourself manuals for would-be dowzers prove, dowsing is a rather profitable trade in today’s post-modern European society.²

This article sketches the history of European dowsing from the high Middle Ages to the first half of the twentieth century. After a reconstruction of the earliest beginnings of dowsing, the article describes the many uses of the divining rod.

¹ Margarethe Ruff, *Zauberpraktiken als Lebenshilfe: Magie im Alltag vom Mittelalter bis heute* (Frankfurt a. Maine: Campus, 2003), 264–65.

² Otto Prokop and Wolf Wimmer, *Wünschelrute, Erdstrahlen, Radiästhesie*, 3rd edn (Stuttgart: Enke, 1985); Hubert Knoblauch, *Die Welt der Wünschelrutengänger und Pendler: Erkundungen einer verborgenen Wirklichkeit* (Frankfurt a. Maine: Campus, 1991); <http://www.randi.org/library/dowsing/>, James Randi Educational Foundation. An Educational Resource on the Paranormal, Pseudoscientific and the Supernatural (accessed 14 February 2013).

It gives a short survey of the various arguments mostly early modern authors employed in order to explain the alleged effectiveness of the rod. In addition, the article tries to explain why this magical implement still enjoys a certain popularity. It goes without saying that a text as short as this can only give the bare outlines of the development of dowsing over the centuries. However, as dowsing is a seriously understudied area in historical research, a short overview might help to attract more scholarly attention to the magic of dowsers. The background of this article is the extensive new research on European magic. The historiography of European magic focuses on the witch-hunts of the early modern period. The fascination with witches largely eclipsed the other fields of European magic. Historiography has just begun to investigate the huge area of European magic, using its own sets of questions and theories as well as those developed by anthropologists, ethnographers and folklorists. A varied and complex field of unspectacular but all-pervasive magical thinking and magical practices in the everyday life of early modern Europe begins to emerge. This article hopes to contribute to this new research on European popular magic.

The origins of the divining rod have long been a matter of dispute. Since the thirteenth century various authors have pointed to a Biblical episode: Moses beat his staff on the rock to bring forth the water the Israelites in the desert needed desperately.³ In seventeenth-century England, the divining rod was also known as the 'Mosaical rod'. However, the Biblical story was not at all about water-witching. The text stated quite clearly that God himself worked a miracle and created a well under the prophet's staff in the moment it touched the ground. The staff itself indicated or found nothing at all.⁴ The thirteenth-century German theologian Konrad of Würzburg made a similar point when he compared the Virgin Mary, who is according to Christian teaching the mother of the god-man Jesus, to a divining rod, 'dar mit zu einem steine wazzher wart geslagen' (which brings water from a stone). Konrad certainly did not want to say that the Virgin had somehow found Jesus. She had given birth to him; that is, she had in a way brought him forth. Thus, for Konrad the divining rod was still not about searching.⁵

At the root of the tradition of the divining rod was certainly the cultural imagery of the magic staff. Staffs as symbols of power—political and religious, as well as magical—seem to belong to the bedrock at least of Western culture. The king's sceptre, the bishop's crosier, the judge's gavel, the maces used in parliamentary or academic ceremonies and the magician's wand are just the best known forms the staff as a symbol of power took.⁶ However, these magical staffs were

³ See Bible, Book Numeri, Chapter 20, Verses 1–13.

⁴ Karl-Heinz Ludwig, 'Wünschelrute', in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, Vol. 9, ed. Gernot Gierz (Stuttgart: DTV, 1980/1999), cols 368–69; E.E. Trotman, 'Seventeenth-Century Treasure-Seeking at Bridgwater', *Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset* 27 (1961): 220–21.

⁵ Ruff, *Zauberpraktiken als Lebenshilfe*, 263.

⁶ Ferdinand Waele, *The Magic Staff or Rod in Graeco-Italian Antiquity* (Ghent: Erasmus, 1927); Knoblauch, *Die Welt der Wünschelrutengänger*, 72–74.

apparently not used like divining rods: that is, they were not supposed to find hidden objects. The Roman politician and philosopher Cicero referred to stories about the *virgula divina* (literally, divine rod, not divining rod), which would help its owner to every good he might desire.⁷ Cicero did not say that this *virgula divina* would help its owner to find things. He explained that people believed that this instrument would somehow provide its owner with everything he wanted. The *virgula divina* was clearly a magical staff but no divining rod in the modern sense of the word. Accordingly, Cicero did not mention it in his work on divination. In the source materials from Greek and Roman antiquity, we encounter numerous magical staffs but there are not even allusions to divining rods that help to find hidden or lost objects.⁸

The same holds true for the medieval sources, at least until the fifteenth century.⁹ Interestingly, the medieval ecclesiastical polemics against the ‘superstition’ of the common folk did not mention the divining rod.¹⁰ The *Lay of the Nibelungen*, a German epic written around 1200, mentioned a magical staff or rod. It belonged to the fabulous treasure of the mythic hero Siegfried. This rod, the author explained, would enable a knowledgeable person to rule the world. The *Lay of the Nibelungen* calls this rod ‘wunsch’, which might mean ‘fate’ or ‘good fortune’ but also ‘god’. However, for German readers a rod (‘rute’), called ‘wunsch’, suggests the term ‘Wünschelrute’, that is, a divining rod. A divining rod that in the hands of an expert magician finds hidden treasures or ore might arguably make this magician very powerful, and may enable him to rule the world.¹¹ However, the *Lay of the Nibelungen* did not say that the golden rod was supposed to find anything. All speculations aside, it seems best to interpret the golden rod as just another symbol of power.¹²

When and where exactly did the rather unspecific magical staff turn into a divining rod used to locate lost or hidden items? Some authors referred to an elusive fourteenth-century manuscript that supposedly mentioned the use of the divining rod. This manuscript was almost certainly a fake of the late sixteenth/early seventeenth century.¹³ The earliest source appears to be Johannes von Tepl’s ‘Ackermann aus Böhmen’ (‘Peasant from Bohemia’), a poem about a fight

⁷ ‘Quodsi omnia nobis, quae ad victum cultumque pertinent, quasi virgula divina, ut aiunt, suppeditantur, tum optimo quisque ingenio negotiis omnibus omissis totum se in cognitione et scientia collocaret’. Cicero, *De officiis*, Book 1, Chapter 158, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/cicero/off1.shtml#158> (accessed 14 February 2013).

⁸ Waele, *The Magic Staff*, especially 205; Knoblauch, *Die Welt der Wünschelrutengänger*, 285.

⁹ Knoblauch, *Die Welt der Wünschelrutengänger*, 73–74, 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹ Karl Bartsch and Helmut De Boor, *Das Nibelungenlied* (Mannheim, 1988) 184; Claude Lecouteux, ‘Der Nibelungenhort. Überlegungen zum mythischen Hintergrund’, *Euphorion* 87 (1993): 172–86.

¹² Lecouteux, ‘Der Nibelungenhort’, 172–86.

¹³ Daniel Georg Morhof, *Polyhistor literarius, philosophicus et practicus*, 3 vols (Lübeck: Böckmann, 1747), Vol. 2, 403; An uncritical account is William Barrett and Theodore Besterman, *The Divining Rod* (London: Methuen, 1926), 7.

between a ploughman and death personified as the Grim Reaper, written around 1400. Tepl mentioned in this text a 'warsagende Wünschelrute' (soothsaying divining rod). Even though Tepl used this expression as a metaphor for a person, it is quite clear that he thought a divining rod could be used to gain knowledge in a magical way.¹⁴ This is a new motif we do not find in earlier sources, which might indicate that the 'knowledgeable' rod was supposed to be able to point out hidden objects. Swabian magical spells dating back to the second half of the fifteenth century provide the earliest example of the actual use of divining rods by people who searched for something:

Ich beschwer uch vier haselrutten by den uier ewangelisten ... das jr vns wiset uff den rechtten schatz, des wir hoffend sind. Jch beschwer uch by den hailgen dryen kungen ... das sie vns also recht wissen uff den rechten verborgen schatz, als sie gewiset warund von dem stern, der jn vor gieng zue der warhen kinthait ... Jhesu Christi (I conjure thee, four hazel rods, in the name of the four evangelists ... so that you show us to the real treasure we hope to find. I conjure thee in the name of the three holy magi [an allusion to a Biblical episode in which three magicians or star-gazers find the newborn Jesus] ... that they [the rods] show us the real hidden treasure as they [the magi] were shown to the true child Jesus Christ by the star that went ahead of them).¹⁵

It is not before the beginning of the sixteenth century that the sources speak more clearly about divining rods. At that time, however, German authors wrote at some length about people using rods in order to find ore and metal veins hidden in the earth. The divining rod clearly belonged to the nascent mining industry of eastern Germany. Georg Agricola, one of the fathers of scientific mining, mentioned the rod in 1530 in his work *Bermannus*. He criticized its use rather sharply in *De re Metallica* in 1556.¹⁶ In both texts, Agricola seemed to assume that his readers were familiar with the divining rod and its use by miners. Thus, we might safely assume that dowsing for minerals had become a well established practice in eastern Germany by the beginning of the sixteenth century.

The early sixteenth century witnessed a major boom in mining in Germany. The territorial princes issued permits to private mining ventures on an unprecedented

¹⁴ Johann von Tepl, *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen* (manuscript around 1400), http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/germanica/Chronologie/15Jh/Tepl/tep_tod.html (accessed 14 February 2013). For early sources on dowsing see also Ruff, *Zauberpraktiken als Lebenshilfe*, 263. More sceptical is Knoblauch, *Die Welt der Wünschelrutengänger*, 74, 77. Knoblauch mentioned an even older image of a divining rod but was too vague about his source and did not actually reproduce the illustration. See *ibid.*, 74. Knoblauch referred to divining rods in the magical books of the Venetian sorcerers who supposedly roamed eastern Germany but again he did not give any reliable source. The only monograph which to my knowledge dealt with the Venetian magicians gave no hint to divining rods in early magical writings: Rudolf Schramm and Helmut Wilsdorf, 'Fundweisungen aus Walenbüchern', in *Venetianersagen von geheimnisvollen Schatzsuchern*, ed. Rudolf Schramm (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Grundstoffindustrie, 1985), 257–81.

¹⁵ Gerhard Eis, *Altdeutsche Zaubersprüche* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1964), 146–49.

¹⁶ Knoblauch, *Die Welt der Wünschelrutengänger*, 74–77; Barrett and Besterman, *The Divining Rod*, 6–9.

scale. The search for mineral ore became a very lucrative business. Pioneer mining entrepreneurs and investors like Franz von Sickingen and Hans Luder, Martin Luther's father, made their fortunes in the early years of the sixteenth century. The economic interest in mining confronted the most formidable technical problems. Among other difficulties, it was notoriously hard to find profitable mineral veins. The inadequate prospecting techniques hampered economic development.¹⁷ The divining rod was one of the means employed to overcome these difficulties. This does not mean that magic was just a substitute for technology. Rather, adapting an anthropological argument by John Beattie, we might say that the magic of the divining rod was a symbolic and ritualistic expression of a pressing concern. A differentiation between expressivity and effectiveness remained largely alien to the contemporaries.¹⁸ Social, economic and technical change—concretely, the rise of proto-industrial mining—created a crisis, a new urgent concern. Part and parcel of the reaction to this crisis was a new form of magic that was well suited to express the new concern. This new form of magic was the divining rod: a new variety of the old magical staff that was supposed to be able to locate objects hidden in the ground. The miners used the rod not simply to find buried treasure anymore, as the magicians of the fifteenth century had done, but to prospect ore. The divining rod was a magical innovation. The old magical staff of rather unspecified purpose turned into a new tool that catered mostly to the needs of the rising mining business.

Two problems bedevilled the use of the divining rod throughout the early modern period. Even today some people still consider them open questions. First, was the divining rod effective? Second, was the use of the divining rod allowed: that is, was the divining rod merely a technical tool or was it a magical instrument?

Agricola already knew that those who advocated the use of the rod attributed its effectiveness to some form of magnetism. This suggestion was of course hardly a valid explanation. An author who called himself Basilius Valentinus provided a more elaborate theory of the divining rod. Basilius Valentinus, supposedly a German alchemist monk of the fifteenth century, was a fictional person to whom magical writings produced in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were attributed.¹⁹ It seems probable that Johann Thoele, an expert in saltern

¹⁷ Otfried Wagenbreth, 'Zur Herausbildung der Montanwissenschaften in Sachsen im 16. Jahrhundert', *Sächsische Heimatblätter* 32 (1986): 65–93; Thomas Sokoll, *Bergbau im Übergang zur Neuzeit* (Idstein: Schulz-Kirchner, 1994); Warren Dym, *Divining Science. Treasure Hunting and Earth Science in Early Modern Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 1–10; Christoph Bartels and Markus Denzel, *Konjunkturen im europäischen Bergbau in vorindustrieller Zeit* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2000).

¹⁸ Malinowski suggested considering magic as a substitute for technology: Bronislaw Malinowski, 'Magic, Science and Religion', in *Science, Religion and Reality* ed. Joseph Needham (London: Sheldon, 1925), 19–84; cf. the symbolic interpretation advocated by John Beattie, *Other Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁹ Claus Priesner, 'Johann Thoele und die Schriften des Basilius Valentinus', in *Die Alchemie in der europäischen Kultur- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, ed. Christoph Meckel (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1986), 107–18.

technology from the late sixteenth century, really authored the book on dowsing. Basilius—as we will call the author for simplicity’s sake—claimed that the divining rod had fallen into disuse. At the same time he repudiated those who ignored the natural laws of dowsing and tainted it with ‘novelties’. Even though these statements contradicted each other indirectly, they suggest that Basilius wanted to present dowsing as a very old art.²⁰ Basilius based his teaching on the assumptions that metals breathed and that the breath could be detected even if the metal veins were deep down in the ground. Basilius thus formulated the basic idea that is at the bottom of dowsing till the present day. Some kind of emanation from minerals, metals, water or treasure rises out of the earth to the surface and somehow attracts the dowsing rod. The nature of that emanation—fumes, rays, electrical currents, magnetic forces—is a matter of taste and changes in the course of time and from author to author. In any case, the basic idea of an emanation—‘breath’—of the minerals and ores has remained more or less the same. Basilius classified divining rods according to their reaction to the emanations from the minerals. On the ‘glowing rod’ the diviner affixed a bit of heat-sensitive material that would smother when the supposedly hot breath of metal hit it. If a piece of marcasite, according to Basilius a substance that purified and attracted metals, was put on the rod it would violently move—hence ‘leaping rod’—because the emanation from the metal supposedly attracted the marcasite. The marcasite of gold, so Basilius explained, was lapis lazuli; the marcasite of iron was lodestone. He insisted that this had been tested in practice in the mines.²¹ The analogy with magnetism was a standard feature of the debate about the divining rod. However, most authors claimed that the rod itself was subject to a quasi-magnetic attraction of minerals, metals or water.

Basilius’ book seems to have enjoyed some success in the academic community. However, it had practically no influence on mining or the actual practice of dowsing. Nobody appears to have been interested in the complicated and rather costly rods Basilius described. Generally speaking, divining rods remained very simple and very cheap instruments that were readily available to virtually anybody. They were indeed mostly simple sticks or Y-shape twigs. The diviner held the rod in both hands or balanced it on the back of his hand or held it somewhat precariously between his forefingers or between the balls of his thumbs. Some dowsers used a T-shape variety in which one stick was attached to another stick with a bit of twine, keeping equilibrium rather like a part of a children’s mobile. It hardly mattered what wood the rod was cut from. Some suggested rods made from metal.²²

²⁰ Basilius Valentinus, *His Last Will and Testament* (London: Davis, 1658), 46–47.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 48–49.

²² Ruff, *Zauberpraktiken als Lebenshilfe*, 264–65; Gabriel Plattes, *A Discovery of Subterranean Treasure* (London: Emery, 1639), 12; Athanasius Kircher, *De arte magnetica* (Rome: Deuersin & Masotti, 1654), 500–02, and illustrations; Barrett and Besterman, *The Divining Rod*, 16 and illustrations 7, 19, 259; Gasper Schott, *Magia universalis naturae et artis*, 4 vols (Würzburg: Schönwetter, 1657–59), Vol. 4, illustration facing 420; Pierre LeBrun, *Brieffe oder Send-Schreiben vornehmer und*

In 1700, the German scientist Johann Gottfried Zeidler published a book on dowsing that could boast a foreword written by his mentor Christian Thomasius, the great opponent of witch trials and an early champion of the German Enlightenment. Zeidler examined the variety of divining rods in use. He concluded that neither the form nor the material of the rod mattered. Therefore, there could be no connection between the divining rod and the object searched for. Rather, the somewhat awkward way the diviner was supposed to hold the rod caused the muscles in the diviner's arm to tremble involuntarily. Thus, the movement of the rod had a simple anatomical reason. As Zeidler remarked acrimoniously, you might as well use a sausage as a divining rod: 'If you hold a Knackwurst [Frankfurter] the right way it makes a perfect divining rod and moves so strongly in your hand that it might break.'²³ In that case the diviner could celebrate his lucky find with a snack, provided he had some bread and mustard with him.

Dowsing was not as unproblematic as Basilius and Zeidler suggested. The German physician and alchemist Paracelsus had simply brushed the divining rod aside as unreliable and too sensitive. It found, he claimed, lost pennies.²⁴ Luther, however, rejected the use of the divining rod as magic.²⁵ Even though the advocates of dowsing liked to point out that Agricola was familiar with that technique, they often chose not to quote what he actually had to say about it. Agricola certainly did not recommend the use of the divining rod. First, he explained, it was not reliable. Mines dug after a divining expedition proved invariably unprofitable. Second, Agricola said very clearly that divining did not belong to the 'modis naturaliter venae possunt inveniri' (natural ways in which you can find a mineral vein): that is, divining was magic. Agricola had even heard certain incantations used by diviners although he could not—and would not—remember the exact words. Given the fact that the wizards of Pharaoh—at least according to the Bible—and the sorcerers of Ancient Greece and Rome had used magical rods, Agricola regarded the divining rod as coming 'ex incantatorum impuris fontibus' (out of the impure wells of conjurers). Thus, divining was simply below the dignity of an honest miner.²⁶

gelehrter Leute, welche die Verspottung der Wünschel-Rute vorstellen, trans. by Johann Leonhard Martini (Frankfurt a. Main: Oehrling, 1700), 226 and illustration facing 122, 130; Johann Gottfried Zeidler, *Pantomysterium oder das Neue vom Jahre in der Wünschelruthe* (Halle: Renger, 1700), illustrations 40–46; N.I., *La Verge de Jacob* (Lyon: Baritel, 1693), frontispiece.

²³ Zeidler, *Pantomysterium*, 40–48. Of course, it was still possible that a fraudulent diviner moved the rod voluntarily, *ibid.* 354–56.

²⁴ Theophrastus Paracelsus, 'De occulta philosophia', in *Theophrast von Hohenheim genannt Paracelsus: Sämtliche Werke*, 14 vols, ed. Karl Sudhoff (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1933), 513–42, Vol. 14, 530.

²⁵ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luther Werke, 120 volumes* (Weimar: Böhlau 1883–2009) Vol. 1, p. 520; Vol. 10 I/1, pp. 590–591; cf. Jörg Hausteine, *Martin Luthers Stellung zum Zaubrer- und Hexenwesen* (Stuttgart, 1990), 91–94, 98–100.

²⁶ Georg Agricola, *De re metallica*, eds, Paolo Macini and Ezio Mesini (Bologna: Clueb, 1556/2003), 26–28.

Nevertheless, demonology had little to say about dowsing. The first compendium of the witchcraft doctrine, *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), was not yet familiar with the use of the divining rod. The influential demonologist Delrio dealt in his encyclopaedic overview with all kinds of magic, including, briefly, rhabdomancy (the use of the divining rod). He condemned it, as one might expect of a demonologist, as just another form of divination based on an implicit pact with the devil.²⁷ The demonologist authors who focused on the witch trials were not really interested in dowsing, as dowsers did not figure prominently in the list of victims of the witch-hunts.²⁸ Other authors, however, were. They established a small but rather distinct demonological discourse on dowsing. Among these authors we find the respected Oratorian theologian and philosopher Nicolas Malebranche as well as one of his correspondents, the Grenoble canon LeBrun, who conducted experiments designed to prove dowsing a demonic art.²⁹ The most outspoken adversaries of the divining rod seem to have been German Protestants, for example, Sperling and Albinus. This might simply have been due to the fact that the German mining areas in which many people used the rod belonged to the Protestant parts of the denominationally mixed German Empire.³⁰ Of all the explanations that tried to prove the efficacy of the rod only the strictly demonological has disappeared. It broke down when the delegitimization of the witch-hunts questioned the validity of demonology as such.

Far from condemning dowsing as witchcraft, some people just did not take it seriously. A German book on mining rhymed in 1570: 'Der Ruthengänger geht durch Feld und betrügt die Leut um Geld' (The dowser walks across the field and cheats the people with his fee).³¹ In 1676, an anonymous English author even included the use of the divining rod in his collection of tricks and games 'for the recreation of Youth, especially School-boys'. He presented his work under the quasi-enlightened motto, 'There's no Hobgoblin here for to affright ye, but innocence and mirth that will delight ye.'³²

Whereas some authors condemned the divining rod and others ridiculed it, still others recommended its use under certain conditions. The fact that a number of miners used the divining rod was enough to convince some authors that divining

²⁷ Martin Delrio, *Investigations into Magic*, ed. by Peter Maxwell-Stuart (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1599/2000), 162.

²⁸ Dym, *Divining Science*, 65–66; cf. Dillinger, *Hexen und Magie. Einführung in die historische Hexenforschung* (Frankfurt a. Maine: Campus, 2007), 51–54.

²⁹ LeBrun, *Brieffe oder Send-Schreiben*, 147–48.

³⁰ Johann Sperling, *An virgula mercurialis agat ex occulta qualitate* (Wittenberg: Röhner, 1668); Theophil Albinus, *Das entlarvte Idolum der Wünschel-Rute* (Dresden, 1704); also cf. Adam von Lebenwaldt, *Von deß Teuffels List und Betrug* (Salzburg: Mayr, 1682); cf. Dym, *Divining Science*, 61–65.

³¹ Quoted in Knoblauch, *Die Welt der Wünschelrutengänger*, 79.

³² Anonymous (J.M.), *Sports and Pastime: or, Sport for the City, and Pastime for the Country, with a Touch of Hocus Pocus, or Leger-Demain* (London: Clark, 1676), 3, 19–20.

was not only lawful but also that it actually worked.³³ Gabriel Plattes, an English author on mining, suggested a combination of what we might call science and magic to find mineral veins. Plattes explained that any prospector should at first check the springs for mineral residue; after that he should examine the vegetation for any anomalies that might hint at the composition of the soil; and then he needed to check carefully the stones visible at the surface. Only when all of these procedures suggested that there might be a mineral vein, Plattes recommended the use of the divining rod to find the best place to dig. Plattes claimed to have practical experience with the rod:

About Midsomer, in a calme morning, I cut up a rod of Hasell, of the same springs growth, almost a yard long, then I tyed it to my staffe, in the middle, with a strong thred, so that it did hang even, like a Beame of a Balance [that is, a pair of scales]. Thus I carried it up and downe the Mountaines where Lead growed, and before Noone it guided mee to the Orifice of a Lead mine ... Within two houres we found a veine of Lead Oare within lesse than a foot of the Grasse ... The signes that it shethe is to bow down the root end towards the earth as though it would grow there, neare unto the Orifice of a Mine, when you see it doe so, you must carry it round about the place, to see that it turneth in the string still to the place on which site Soever you stand.

Plattes speculated that some form of magnetism caused the movement of the divining rod; he strongly rejected the idea that ‘any coniuration’ should be used. He recommended the use of the divining rod to find mines in the American colonies which could ‘yield more gaine in one yeare, than their [the colonists’] Tobacco and such trifles would yield in their whole lives’. Maybe Plattes was no objective observer: as he claimed that his expertise of the divining rod was based on ‘more experience of that kind than any man in England’ the use of the divining rod might have meant an attractive business opportunity for him.³⁴

Whoever was then (or is today) willing to advocate the use of the divining rod should have been able to explain how exactly it was supposed to work. Aside from the demonological arguments and the emanation theory suggested by Basilius and others, there was a third explanation. The rod did not really do anything at all. It was simply a means the dowser used to focus his attention. Dowsing was about the sensibility of the dowser, not about the rod he might or might not use. The rod was not able to react to the emanations from hidden objects, but the dowser himself was. A skilful dowser was a person who was sensitive enough to feel these emanations. This explanation drew some strength from the widespread idea that not all people were able to work with the divining rod. Agricola was already familiar with the notion that a certain individual talent was needed in order to

³³ Wiguläus von Kreittmayr, *Anmerkungen über den Codicem Maximilianum Bavaricum civilem*, 5 vols (München, 1844), Vol. 2, 307; Anonymous, ‘Schatz’, in *Universal-Lexicon*, 64 vols, ed. Johann Heinrich Zedler (Halle and Leipzig, 1731–54), Vol. 34, 980–85.

³⁴ Plattes, *A Discovery*, 9–14.

become a successful dowser.³⁵ A German handbook for dowsers from 1668 made this point very clear: ‘Gott hat nicht die Krafft dem Holtzen sondern dem Menschen zu geeignet’ (God gave the power not to the wood but to the man).³⁶

LeLorrain de Vallemont, a priest and doctor of divinity, made this explanation of dowsing the very centre of his book on Jacques Aymar, arguably the most renowned diviner of the early modern period. Aymar was a well-to-do peasant from the parish of S. Marcellin in the Dauphiné. He was supposedly not only able to find water, mineral veins and hidden treasures with his divining rod, but was also a pre-modern psychic detective. If he had the chance to visit the scene of the crime to get ‘son impression’ (his impression) his rod would lead him to the criminals. On 5 July 1692, a wine merchant and his wife were found murdered in the cellar of their shop in Lyon. There were no witnesses. A neighbour suggested that Aymar be called. The Lieutenant Criminel and Monsieur Le Procureur du Roy i.e., the head of the local law enforcement agency out the public prosecutor allowed Aymar to see the cellar at night. This might suggest that the authorities were less than convinced of Aymar’s abilities and did not want to attract too much attention to their somewhat desperate attempt to find the murderers. At any rate, Aymar’s rod reacted. It led him out of the town to the river Rhone. He deduced that the criminals had escaped with a boat. Together with the lieutenant’s guards Aymar followed them. Led by the divining rod the crime fighters left their ship in every river port and went to the taverns where the murderers had stayed overnight. Aymar was able to point out not only the bed they had slept in but even the bottles they had drunk from. The way down the Rhone must have been a triumph for the diviner. It is hard to imagine better publicity for him and his alleged abilities. It became apparent that there had been three murderers. In Beaucaire, deep in the Languedoc, 45 French miles from the scene of the crime, Aymar finally found the first murderer. The rod led him to the prison and there it pointed out one man in a group of fourteen prisoners. The man, a certain Bossu, had only been arrested for petty theft an hour ago. At first, he denied everything and even questioned the reliability of Aymar’s rod: ‘Sa baguette mentoit’ (His rod lies). However, witnesses recognized Bossu. He broke down and admitted to having helped his missing accomplices commit the double murder. Aymar returned together with Bossu to Lyon. After that, he went back the same way—now of course with the great news of his success—to follow the two other murderers. They had—or so the movements of Aymar’s divining rod suggested—gone to Toulon and taken a ship to Genoa. Even though Aymar still followed them for a while, it became apparent that they had left the sphere of influence of the French authorities. Later on, Aymar failed the tests the Duke of Condé had devised for him. Canon LeBrun suspected him of witchcraft.³⁷

³⁵ Agricola, *De re metallica*, 27.

³⁶ Dym, *Divining Science*, 57.

³⁷ Pierre Le Lorrain de Vallemont, *La Physique Occulte ou Traité de la Baguette Divinatoire* (Amsterdam; Braakman, 1693), 28–40; James Young and Robert Robertson, *The Divining Rod. Its*

Aymar owes much of his renown to the theologian Vallemont who published a lengthy treatise on dowsing in general and on Aymar in particular in 1693. Vallemont argued vehemently that certain particles rose from subterranean water as well as from hidden treasures, which caused the movement of the divining rod. Vallemont explained that these particles were ‘les atomes’, which had been described by the ancient Greek philosophers and later by Boyle. The particles entered through the pores into human bodies. Contagious disease spread in the same way, Vallemont wrote. Atoms also emanated from human bodies. Thus, everybody left a kind of trail in the air. Vallemont claimed that sensitive persons—such as Aymar—could feel the emanating atoms. Thus, Aymar could follow the criminals from the scene of the crime. The divining rod only helped him to concentrate. Aymar was therefore right when he said that it did not matter from what wood or at what time he cut his rod. Aymar’s body was said to react quite violently to the influence of the particle emanation. When he used the divining rod he seemed to suffer from a fever and soon complained that his heart hurt. Of course, Vallemont stressed, it was easy to unbalance sensitive persons. Even the best diviners failed when they were under stress, in fear or in an emotional crisis. Thus, Vallemont could explain away some blunders Aymar had made. Needless to say, Vallemont took pains to stress that divining had nothing to do with demonism and thus contradicted Malebranche and LeBrun.³⁸ Alexander von Humboldt, the great naturalist and explorer, declared that the divining rod did not work in his hands. ‘Maybe I belong to the kind of people who are by nature so inferior that precious metals cannot excite them,’ he joked, poking fun at the notion that successful diviners needed special sensitivity.³⁹

Zeidler was more serious when he criticized Vallemont. Even though Zeidler had ridiculed the divining rod, he still believed in dowsing. Zeidler rejected the Cartesianism that formed the base of Vallemont’s argument. He accepted neither the mechanistic philosophy nor the nascent atom theory. Simplifying the ideas of Thomasius, Zeidler postulated the existence of an all-encompassing world spirit. This world spirit was the reason and source of all physical movement. It connected all things with each other. According to Zeidler, the real talent of the dowser was his ability to feel the workings of the world spirit. The dowser could thus enter into virtual contact with all beings and all objects. He could in a way feel them by immersing his mind into the world spirit. Thus, he was able to find objects hidden in the ground.⁴⁰ However, the search for ore or treasure troves was,

History—with Full Instructions for Finding Subterranean Springs, and other Useful Information (Clifton: Baker, 1894), 5; Charles Beard, *Romance of Treasure Trove* (London: Sampson Low, 1933), 65; Arthur Ellis, *The Divining Rod. A History of Water Witching* (Washington: Gov.Print.Off., 1917); Hermann Sökeland, ‘Die Wünschelrute’, *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde* 13, (1903): 280–87, especially 285.

³⁸ Vallemont, *La Physique Occulte*, especially 248–345, 401–20.

³⁹ Alexander von Humboldt, *Versuche über die gereizte Muskel- und Nervenfasern* (Posen: Decker, 1797), quoted in Sökeland, ‘Die Wünschelrute’, 283.

⁴⁰ Zeidler, *Pantomysterium*; cf. Dym, *Divining Science*, 154–56.

according to Zeidler, just a tiny fraction of all the possibilities dowsing offered—and arguably relatively harmless one. Dowsing could be used to answer many questions. Therefore it was desperately easy to abuse. Some questions, Zeidler warned, should not be answered. A dowser could, for example, find out if spouses were faithful, or he could locate refugees hiding from a tyrant. Other questions, Zeidler continued, should not even be asked. Dowsers might be tempted to try to find out whether a dead person had gone to Heaven or even when Judgment Day and the end of the world would come.⁴¹ The real danger of dowsing, Zeidler stressed, was blasphemy: It tempted humans to try to become omniscient like God. Thomasius deigned to write a foreword for Zeidler's book in which he politely but clearly stated that he thought Zeidler's arguments were extravagant and rather obscure.⁴²

Zeidler's account mirrored the development of dowsing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The divining rod was supposed to be able to find ore and hidden treasures. However, it was used for a variety of other purposes, too. Water-witching was one of these purposes. Dowsing for water is a comparatively young kind of magic. Besson, who wrote at some length about the techniques employed to find hidden springs in 1569, did not yet mention the divining rod.⁴³ The demonologist Delrio mentioned Spanish diviners called 'Zahuri'—in modern Spanish *zahori* means water-diviner—who could see objects hidden in the earth, including treasures and water channels. The Zahori did not use divining rods. That they were said to have red eyes suggests simply that their gaze was supposed to be able to penetrate the ground.⁴⁴ So far, the scant scholarly literature on dowsing has suggested that the rod as the instrument of water-witchers was first mentioned in a short French tract on mining published in 1632.⁴⁵ However, I discovered recently a somewhat earlier text that alluded to persons who used the divining rod in order to find water. The Bavarian law against witchcraft and superstition of 1612 referred to superstitious practices associated with treasure hunting that were also commonly used by miners and by people who dug wells.⁴⁶ The law did not mention the divining rod explicitly but the rod would be the only magical implement used by treasure hunters, by miners and by people searching for hidden springs alike.

Dowsers dowsed not only for minerals, water or treasure troves. There were still more uses for the divining rod in early modern Europe. The rod was said to be able to find salt mines.⁴⁷ Dowsers claimed that with their rods they could find all lost

⁴¹ Zeidler, *Pantomysterium*, 534–46.

⁴² Thomasius in Zeidler, *Pantomysterium*, no page number.

⁴³ Jacques Besson, *L'Art et Science de Trouver les Eaux et Fontaines Cachées sous terre* (Orléans: Trepperel, 1569).

⁴⁴ Delrio, *Investigations into Magic*, 48–49; Barret and Besterman, *The Divining Rod*, 277–82.

⁴⁵ Martine Baronne de Beau-Soleil Berterau, *Véritable Déclaration faite au Roy* (n.p.p.s.l.) (1632).

⁴⁶ Wolfgang Behringer, *Mit dem Feuer vom Leben zum Tod* (München: Hugendubel, 1988), 178–79.

⁴⁷ Dym, *Divining Science*, 23–50.

goods. In the eighteenth century, they looked for forgotten boundary stones. They found suitable sites for building. They searched for game in the exploited hunting grounds of the nobility. They used the divining rod to find an unoccupied place in the churchyard. Dowsers could even find out if a woman was pregnant. When they themselves got lost, they could find the right way with their rods. They could even find mistakes in history books.⁴⁸ From the seventeenth century onwards, dowsing was not necessarily about searching and finding. The divining rod simply provided answers to all kinds of questions. Handbooks for dowsers suggested a simplified way of using the rod that resembled nineteenth-century spiritualist experiments with the Ouija board or with the planchette. All you had to do was to write 'yes', 'no' and 'maybe' on a piece of paper, ask a question that could be answered with these words and hold the dowsing rod over the paper. It would, the divining books affirmed, touch the appropriate answer.⁴⁹ In the early eighteenth century, an anonymous German author who claimed to be a mining expert glorified dowsing as a fire-proof shortcut to successful prospecting. It was not necessary to go out into the field to search for mineral veins anymore. A diviner had simply to hold the rod over a map and it would indicate the best spot to dig. Indeed, the divining rod would answer any questions concerning the depth and the direction of the mineral vein or its profitability if one held it over the piece of paper with numbers, a compass, and the words 'yes', 'moderate' or 'no' on it.⁵⁰

At the end of the seventeenth century at the latest, the divining rod had become the universal detecting implement of the magic culture of Old Europe. It was used to find virtually anything.⁵¹ The practically unlimited use of the rod does not contradict our suggestion to see the miners' use of the divining rod as part and parcel of a process of innovation mining ventures underwent in the early sixteenth century. If the rod was used to find ore, treasure troves or water, it does not mean that it could not be used for other purposes too. Proto-industrial mining demanded the use of the divining rod during a certain phase of its development, but it did not absorb it. On the contrary, the mere fact that a 'modern' and 'progressive' element of the economy like mining used the rod drew attention to this magical implement. This might even have suggested the use of the rod for other purposes. The old magical staff first turned into a divining rod used by treasure hunters and miners, and then quickly transformed into an all-purpose tool for divination.

⁴⁸ Albinus, *Das entlarvte Idolum*, 130–34, 494–99, 516–25.

⁴⁹ Dym, *Divining Science*, 57–58; Albinus, *Das entlarvte Idolum*, 531–62.

⁵⁰ Anonymous, *Eines Bergverständigen ungenannten Autoris newer bisher ungedruckter Unterricht vom rechten Gebrauch der Wünschelrute in Bergwerken* (Leipzig/Frankfurt: Renger, 1705).

⁵¹ Sökeland, 'Die Wünschelrute', 202–12, 280–287. The German poet Eichendorff understood this phenomenon and took it as the basis for his Romantic poem 'Wünschelrute': Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen./die da träumen fort und fort./Und die Welt hebt an zu singen,/triffst du nur das Zauberwort. (Sleeps a song in things abounding/That keep dreaming to be heard/Earthe's tunes will start resounding/ If you find the magic word).

This is how the divining rod has survived until the present day, even though its heyday in the mining industry ended in the late eighteenth century. Improvements and technical innovations in mining engineering marginalized the dowsing rod. Experience and the increasing specialization of mining technology, together with the rise of geology as an exact science, transformed the whole industry. The divining rod was no longer acceptable as a symbolic and ritualistic expression of the problems miners and prospectors had to face.⁵²

Thus, driven from its original field of activity, dowsing receded into esotericism, fringe science and the more private areas of hobbies, quirks and quackery. Under the influence of Mesmerism, dowsing began to play some part in fringe medicine in the early nineteenth century. Today, while water-witching for private individuals lingers on, the most lucrative part of dowsing seems to be the use of the rod as an instrument in pseudo-medicinal diagnosis. The failures and also the often impersonal nature of modern medicine provide a new and, apparently, very fertile breeding ground for magical cures and medicinal esotericism, including dowsing.⁵³

However, there were some exceptions that allowed dowsing to enjoy some short-lived public recognition. Around 1900, the English firm of John Mullins & Son specialized in water-dowsing as a commercial enterprise. Mullins, a Wiltshire man who had originally worked as a builder, became a dowsing entrepreneur and well digger. Mullins boasted a long list of patrons, among them several British aristocrats and successful entrepreneurs. Mullins & Sons explained that they relied entirely on the divining rod to find water. However, Mullins' business was not only about water. The firm also asserted that they had discovered veins of metallic ore in Cornwall and California, as well as mineral oil. John Mullins died in 1894. In a publication of 1917, John Mullins' children claimed that several of his sons and one of his daughters had inherited the 'natural gift' of dowsing. This implied that the Mullins' family business was certainly not based on science. Apparently, one needed to have a special talent to use the divining rod.⁵⁴

The dire straits of wartime economy in the early twentieth century allowed for some extraordinary developments. In Bismarck's German Empire, a 'Verband zur Klärung der Wünschelrutenfrage' (Association devoted to the Clarification of the Divining Rod Question) enjoyed some limited success. The association cooperated with the German Imperial Colonial Office and had diviners look for wells in Germany's African colonies. During the First World War, the association claimed that its major task was to find 'hidden stores of coins'. As a lack of resources, especially metal, hampered Germany's armament effort, the government confiscated all kinds of metal objects.⁵⁵ Dowsing for treasure enjoyed a short-lived

⁵² Dym, *Divining Science*, 167–97.

⁵³ Knoblauch, *Die Welt der Wünschelrutengänger*, 87–91.

⁵⁴ Johannes Dillinger, *Magical Treasure Hunting in Europe and North America. A History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), 182.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 181–82.

revival during the National Socialist dictatorship. The SS, the paramilitary force that saw itself as the 'elite' of the racist state, had its own department for history and folklore, the so-called Ahnenerbe (Ancestors' Heritage) unit. The alternative modernity that National Socialism envisaged and was about to create, apparently needed an alternative epistemology and a new definition of science. Part and parcel of this quest for alternative knowledge was a new interest in esotericism and fringe science. Heinrich Himmler, the supreme commander of the SS, wasted a lot of time and money on occultism. Among other things, he financed not research on dowsing but actual training units with the divining rod, as if the usefulness of this instrument was beyond doubt. Training sessions which were supposed to school a number of SS men as dowzers took place in the herb garden of Dachau concentration camp between 1942 and 1943. Himmler planned to use dowzers in order to find water in the Balkans, but also in order to locate explosives. However, the commander of the SS had further plans. Every team of SS geologists was to have its own dowser. Himmler envisaged a major search for iron mines, which was to be led by diviners. Most importantly, he hoped to find major deposits of gold ore in Germany. Himmler even gave some thought to a classical treasure hunt in the foothills of the Alps, where some particular mountain was rumoured to be a treasure site.⁵⁶

We might now summarize the development of dowsing. Beginning in the fifteenth century, mostly miners and treasure hunters used the rod in order to find minerals and buried treasures. In the eighteenth century, at the latest, dowzers claimed to be able to find virtually everything, not only concrete objects but even in a more abstract way answers to difficult questions. The rod became the universal tool of divination, and dowsing the ultimate way to gain knowledge by magic. The eighteenth century witnessed the zenith of dowsing. However, with the progress of scientific mining, dowsing lost its prominence in Europe's economic life. It receded into the socio-economic margins. Even extraordinary circumstances—like wars or societal crises—caused only its short-lived return into the public sphere. However, on the margins of societal life, in the private sphere, in small, specialized and rather questionable business ventures, and especially on the fringes of medicine, dowsing still flourishes. The notion that one needs some special talent to be a successful dowser never quite disappeared, even though the idea that you could train to become a dowser gained ground in the twentieth century. The very idea that the ability to dowse is a talent is attractive: if it is a talent one is simply born with, one does not have to worry about expert knowledge, disciplined training, or a demanding and costly education. As this talent lies necessarily hidden until one actually tries to use the rod, everybody is free to assume that he/she simply has the talent supposedly needed to be a good dowser.

The charms that the divining rod had, and still seems to have for some people, are obvious. The divining rod was cheap and simple. It was available to virtually

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 182–83.

anyone at any time. Even though it was especially attractive for the nascent mining industry of the early modern period, it could be used as a universal instrument of magical knowledge. The dowser needed neither the formal education of the scientist nor the complex magical knowledge of the alchemist. Dowsing seemed to fulfil the dilettante's dream: immediate success without schooling and research. The contrast between the simplicity of this tool and its universal use made the divining rod the very opposite of scientific instruments. The inconvenient question of how exactly dowsing was supposed to work was at the same time answered in a number of different ways, ranging from demonological arguments—the only ones to vanish in modern Europe—to the atom theory and the idea of an all-encompassing world spirit. The powers of the rod could always be explained as being really the powers of the dowser himself. The very lack of one dominant explanation for the supposed effectiveness of dowsing has helped it to survive until the present day.