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Creating Tools

By Artifex Mentis, November 2010

Creating magickal tools is a particular specialism of mine, so in this essay I will attempt to explain some of my thinking and approach behind the creation and use of magickal tools of various kinds.

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Why use a magickal tool?

At a fundamental level, there is no definitive reason why magickal tools are an absolute requirement. Nevertheless, they can be very useful as symbolic embodiments of particular powers, spirits or principles. The act of creation of a magickal tool is powerful magick in and of itself -- for anyone who has never attempted it, I can only highly recommend that they try it for themselves.

Creating a tool with specific intent binds that intent into the tool itself, making the tool a symbol of that intent. Wielding the tool as a magickal weapon therefore immediately invokes that principle, bringing it to bear on the working.

What is a magickal tool?

Fundamentally, a magickal tool can be anything -- it can be an elaborate construction, or as simple as a piece of found driftwood or a seal drawn on a piece of paper. The key is for the tool to align to the principle that it embodies. If the witch or magician is skilled in knowledge of correspondences, such as those found in Crowley's 777 or other tables of correspondences, that can be highly effective, but the important part is for the correspondence to be *personal*. It really doesn't matter whether the correspondence works for anyone else, unless the tool is specifically constructed for use by others (see below).

I personally have tools constructed by others, tools that were found items, and tools that I constructed myself. They vary hugely in method of construction and complexity, but generally speaking the more intent that went into their construction, the more powerful the tool tends to be in later use.

I often make special-purpose tools for a particular working that do not fit any of the usual categories. However, for clarity, I'll concentrate on the main kinds of magickal tool typically used in witchcraft. Other magickal traditions, particularly those derived from the Golden Dawn, have a huge number of weird and wonderful tools that don't fit the following categories, but the principles still hold.

Athames



In the Alexandrian tradition, a witch typically possesses two ritual knives, one with a black handle, the other with a white handle. The white-handled knife has a cutting edge and is used for chopping herbs or other substances for ritual use. The black-handled knife, often a double-edged dagger, need not have a sharpened edge and is only used for circle casting, never to physically cut anything. For myself, I don't generally bother with the distinction between the two knives. Since herb work is not my specialism (that would be *Dagda's* department), my athames are typically only used ritually.

The photo above shows a bronze dagger I made for *Dagda* that is now used in pretty much all of our rituals and also for initiations. Constructing knives isn't easy. It requires fairly advanced metalworking and often also woodworking skills, and as a consequence relatively few witches make their own athames, even though it can be greatly beneficial. I'm personally fairly experienced working in wood and metal, and have some fairly nontrivial tools. For reference, the method used for constructing the dagger shown above was as follows:

1. I started initially with an idea in my head for a flame-shaped blade with a deep, curvaceous fuller. Various pencil sketches followed the idea as I refined the look and feel to get it to balance visually.
2. Knives should feel right to the touch. Since my hands are somewhat larger than *Dagda's*, I took some clay and made what effectively constituted a 3D sketch of the handle design that I tweaked to get it to fit her hand comfortably.
3. Next, I took careful measurements both from my sketches and from the clay handle model, and used that to draw the outline of the blade and the handle in the CAM (Computer Aided Manufacturing) software that I use ([Vectric Aspire](#)). This required some further slight adjustment to get the handle and the blade to balance visually.
4. The guard shape came next, after a fair bit of experimentation, resulting in an outline that looked extremely curvy though perfectly visually balanced.
5. Next, I lofted the shapes in Aspire, sculpting them to create the 3D form of the dagger.
6. I then created a set of tool paths that first roughly hogged out material with a flat endmill to get close to the final shape, and then profiled the 3D surface with a 0.25" ball-nose endmill.
7. These toolpaths were then used to control my Sieg KX1 CNC milling machine to surface first one side of the knife, then the other, and finally to cut out the tool from the phosphor bronze bar I started with.
8. Next, I smoothed off a few places with a mounted stone and a small sanding disk with a Dremel
9. Then followed several hours of manual labour, working up through various grits of abrasive from 80 to 2000, carefully making sure that any remaining scratches were aligned longitudinally before moving on to the next grit.

10. Final polishing was done with a buffing wheel and jeweller's rouge.

It may be shocking to some that I'll happily use computers and computer-controlled machine tools in making magickal tools, but for me that's a fundamental part of the way that I work, and I am entirely unrepentant! Ultimately, I think my results stand for themselves.

Wands

Wands are generally more accessible as making projects for most people as a consequence of them typically being constructed from wood. Wand design has been affected significantly by the Harry Potter movies, to the extent that wands seen at the time of writing almost all resemble props from those films. I've no particular quarrel with this -- if such a design works for you, then go for it! My own wands tend to be rather fatter, more like a miniature staff, though this isn't really a conscious choice, they just always seem to turn out that way.

Traditionally, wands are constructed from found wood from a tree with appropriate magickal correspondences. There is no particular reason why the wood needs to be turned on a lathe, or even worked at all, if that is your wish, though there can be significant returns from doing so. As mentioned previously, working on the construction of a tool whilst holding the magickal intent that the tool is intended to embody is really what makes the tool's power tangible in later use. Here are a few ideas:

1. Take a found wand, strip the bark, sand and polish it to a high finish and then oil it
2. Inlay other woods, or silver, into the wood
3. Turn a piece of interesting wood on a wood lathe to a shape that suits you, then sand, polish and oil it

I have a 4th axis on my milling machine that lends itself well to wandmaking -- it's analogous to using a lathe, with the exception that I can do elaborate carving on the surface and am not restricted (as lathes are) to simply making a surface of revolution.

Materials

Wood

Finishing found wood

Found wood makes a great wand, but it often has problems with longevity. *Green* wood that is still moist from being part of a living tree is particularly tricky to work with. It's generally best to leave such wood to dry out naturally for several months before using it -- the thicker the piece, the longer you should leave it. If you're unsure how long you need to wait, using an accurate balance (which reads to something like 0.1g resolution) can be an effective trick. Write down the weight of the piece every few days. You'll find that the weight will gradually reduce over time as the water gradually evaporates. When the weight stops changing, the wood is stable enough to use.

Driftwood often has the opposite problem -- its time in the sea, followed by its time on the beach, often leaves it exceptionally dry to the point of sponginess. This can be very effectively cured by oiling the wood with Tung oil. *Dagda* has a beautiful found-driftwood staff that is covered in natural carving from termites that was treated by her with several applications of Tung oil, with stunning results. If you intend to use a found wood wand long-term, even if you don't intend to finish it at all, I'd strongly recommend, after letting it dry naturally, a few coats of Tung oil.


General wood finishing

The techniques here work equally well for found wood or machined pieces.

If you want to remove the bark at this point, this is generally easier because it will tend to flake off later unless you do something about it. The wood can then be smoothed with successive grades of abrasives. I like to use sandpaper through all of the grits, starting from 80 if the wood is very rough or 120 or 220 if I

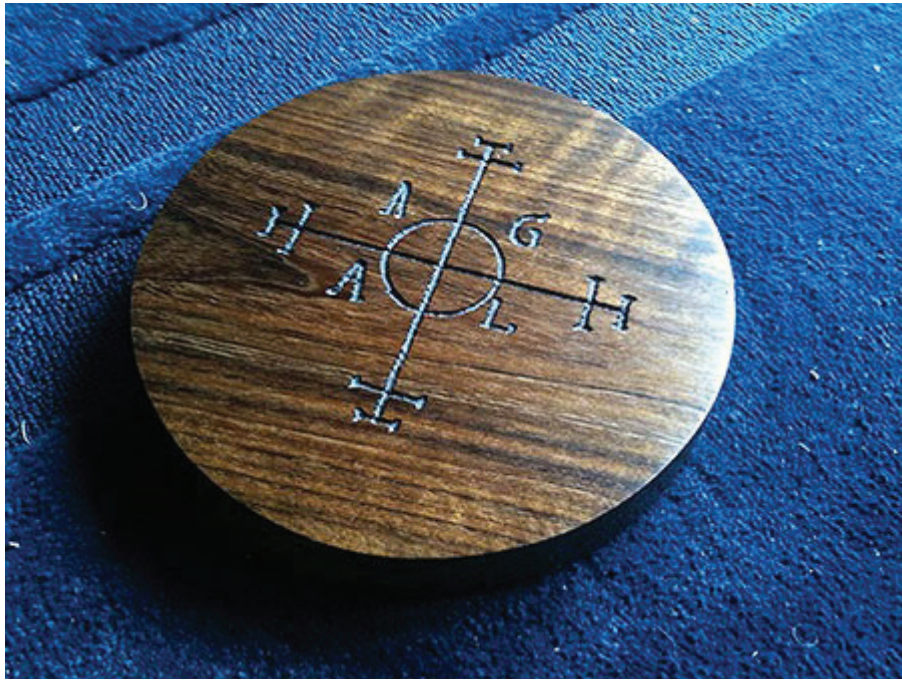
don't want to reshape it significantly. I'll then sand it until the particular grit stops making much difference, and then move on to the next one. After a few hours, I'll be at 2000 grit, and the wood will be almost shiny. It's then generally a good idea to protect the wood. Some like to use varnish, but I'm less keen on that personally because it effectively coats the wood in a thin layer of plastic, insulating it from my touch. I like to touch the fibre of the actual wood when I'm working, so my preference is generally to use an oil finish. My favourite is Tung oil, which has been used in China for thousands of years in furniture making. The simplest approach is to liberally coat the wood in as much oil as it will absorb, then leave it for a day or so to dry off, then sand off the excess with 000 grit synthetic wire wool until you get a shine, then do it again. After about four or five coats, you end up with a hard, mostly waterproof finish that will last for years and that can be easily retouched by applying an extra coat and repolishing. Note that Tung oil will make the wood feel sticky when it isn't fully dry -- don't worry about this, it will go away after a few days' drying time. I like to apply a final coat of Lemon Oil (not actually anything to do with lemons -- don't use actual lemon oil, because it will be disastrous! -- it's just called that because the smell is somewhat reminiscent of lemon, whereas it's actually a mineral oil mixture). If you wish to use magickal oils with particular alignments, it's best to mix them with the Tung oil in the first coat or two -- the later coats will seal them in, and also reduce any undesirable effects (from a purely woodworking, rather than magickal, point of view).

I have recently been experimenting with more sophisticated techniques for wood stabilization. The idea here is to, as far as possible, remove as much moisture from the wood as possible, and then replace it and also any air present in voids in the wood with a resin. This has the effect of making the wood denser, easier to machine, far more waterproof, and far less likely to have problems with cracking due to differential expansion and contraction due to ambient moisture in the air. The technique involves using resin dissolved in light solvents, under a fairly hard vacuum. The idea is to keep the wood submerged in the solvent, inside a vacuum chamber, then pump the chamber down to at least 20" of mercury. At that pressure, the air in the wood literally fizzes out like Alka Seltzer -- when the vacuum is removed, the ambient air pressure forces the solvent into the wood. After 2 or 3 cycles, the wood stops outgassing, and can then be taken out and left to dry. The same vacuum chamber can be used without any solvent to rapidly dry the wood before treating -- filling the chamber with wood, pumping it down and then leaving the vacuum in place for a few days will very effectively dry nearly anything. I've not yet had chance to use vacuum treated wood for a magickal tool, but initial experiments bode well. Treated wood is denser, feels better to the touch, is far easier to machine and polish, much harder, and less likely to flake or come apart during machining. It tends to have a deeper colour, with more chattoyance (the near-iridescent look that some woods exhibit due to diffraction effects in the first few microns of their surface).

Tung oil, Lemon oil and sandpaper can be obtained from any decent hardware store. Fine grits of sandpaper can be difficult to find, though I'd actually recommend (of all places) [\[1\]](#)  for the harder to find materials.

Exotic Woods

I personally rather like to work with exotic woods due to their extraordinary feel and appearance. I'm particularly fond of shedua, a fairly open grained hardwood with incredible chattoyance, and of purpleheart, an extremely dense rosewood-like hardwood that has a distinct purple colour.





The above images are a Sigilum Dei Aemeth based on Dee's original artwork (with corrections by myself) carved in a thick slab of shedua that was then polished to a near-mirror finish. Though SDAs are traditionally made in beeswax, that material didn't work for me, but wood (very much) did.

Metals

Metals are typically harder to work with than wood, though the principles are basically the same. Metals can be drilled, milled, sanded and polished in pretty much the same way as wood and with most of the same tools, but it typically takes a fair bit longer. It's generally necessary to use specialised drill bits or milling cutters for metal -- cutters that work well with aluminium, for example, will not necessarily work well for stainless steel or vice-versa.

If you have access to a forge, it becomes possible to make specialised metals, including Damascus steels. This is a highly specialised kind of metal working that needs a fair bit of study, so is beyond the scope of this essay.



Silverworking can be highly rewarding, though it's fairly tricky and the materials are painfully expensive. The above sword pendant is approximately 1.5" long, and currently lives on one end of our handfasting cord. It was constructed in a manner very similar to the full-size bronze dagger described above, though with very small milling cutters (0.005" radius endmills). It took a whole day of machining time, because it's impossible to go quickly with such tiny tools without breaking them. Even then, I got through about \$100 worth of tungsten carbide cutters.

Plastics

Yes, plastics. Really.



Large etched acrylic plate dedicated to Melek Ta'us

Plastics, particularly acrylics, are easy to work. If you happen to have access to a laser cutter, it is very easy to cut and etch plastics in pretty much any shape and with any artwork you can come up with. I've made quite a few special-purpose tools with acrylics, including several wands, to good effect.

Toolmaking as an Initiatory Act

One lesser known, though extremely important, aspect of toolmaking is that it is an initiatory act in and of itself. Making a tool dedicated to a particular energy, or a particular tradition, can cause initiation into that current, pretty much regardless of the intentions of the maker. Though this isn't so much an issue when crafting traditional witches tools, making certain tools can have extremely profound effects. Of particular note is constructing seals in wood, metal, stone or even on paper -- doing so can have a strongly initiatory effect, to the extent that it can't be taken back once you've done it. Enochian work typically begins with constructing the tools -- this act in and of itself *is* the initiation. Constructing certain Enochian tools, particularly the elemental tablets, can get very weird indeed, and I'm by no means the only person to have noticed that. Constructing Goetic seals is similarly extremely powerful, and not to be carried out lightly.



Seal of Buer in rosewood



Jupiter Wand, in amethyst, ebony, purpleheart, hard maple, copper and tin

Some time ago I constructed a wand dedicated to Jupiter on behalf of a magickal order that I was working with at the time. The wand was quite elaborate -- the centre section was made from hard maple, carved with a relief map of the storm systems in the atmosphere of planet Jupiter, surrounded by rings of copper and purpleheart, with gabon ebony end caps and an amethyst crystal. It was to form the centrepiece of an elaborate Jupiter invocation and ritual -- this was by far the hardest tool build I've ever undertaken. The tool really *wanted* to be made a particular way, and any attempt I made to impose anything else on it was met by equipment breakdowns, or in a couple of scary moments with pieces of wood being flung at my face at high speed. Nevertheless, it became an outstandingly powerful wand, which worked wonderfully for the ritual it was constructed for. However, what I'd not quite bargained for was just how strongly bound to me that it turned out to be -- when anyone else touched it, I could feel the sensation bodily. It now sits on my altar wrapped carefully in blue silk, though sometimes I feel that a lead box might be safer!

Sharing tools

Sharing tools with others should only be done carefully, or not at all. When a tool is strongly bound to you, someone else using it can feel very unpleasant and have unintended side effects. Giving old tools to people can similarly be a bad idea -- I've heard some rather nasty stories of the effects of second-user Enochian tools particularly. Generally, it's best to construct your tool, consecrate it, and then never let anyone else use it or even touch it.

Constructing tools for others is difficult, and not something I do lightly. The act of construction tends to bind the tool to me as its maker, so I very strongly and specifically hand over ownership irrevocably to its new owner ritually. Still, I often end up feeling like I was run over by a truck for a day or so afterwards, which is why I so seldom agree to make tools for others.



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