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ABRACADABRA

[Q] *From Speranza Spiratos*: Can you shed some magical clarity on the word *abracadabra* please?

[A] Let me wave my wand ... Ah, a brief sputter, then nothing. It seems the origin isn't known for certain.

These days it's just a joking conjuror's incantation with no force behind it, like *hocus pocus* and other meaningless phrases. But the word is extremely ancient and originally was thought to be a powerful invocation with mystical powers.

What we know for sure is that it was first recorded in a Latin medical poem, *De medicina praecepta*, by the Roman physician Quintus Serenus Sammonicus in the second century AD. It's believed to have come into English via French and Latin from a Greek word *abrasadabra* (the change from *s* to *c* seems to have been through a confused transliteration of the Greek). Serenus Sammonicus said that to get well a sick person should wear an amulet around the neck, a piece of parchment inscribed with a triangular formula derived from the word, which acts like a funnel to drive the sickness out of the body:

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A B R A C A D A B R A
A B R A C A D A B R
A B R A C A D A B
A B R A C A D A
A B R A C A D
A B R A C A
A B R A C
A B R A
A B R
A B
A
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However, it seems likely that *abracadabra* is older and that it derives from one of the Semitic languages, though nobody can say for sure, because there is no written record before Serenus Sammonicus. For what it's worth, here are some theories:

- It's from the Aramaic phrase *avra kehdabra*, meaning "I will create as I speak".
- The source is three Hebrew words, *ab* (father), *ben* (son), and *ruach acadosch* (holy spirit).
- It's from the Chaldean *abbada ke dabra*, meaning "perish like the word".
- It originated with a Gnostic sect in Alexandria called the Basilidians and was probably based on *Abrasax*, the name of their supreme deity (*Abraxas* in Latin sources).

Fans of the Harry Potter books will know the killing curse, *Avada Kedavra*, in which J K Rowling seems to have combined the supposed Aramaic source of *abracadabra* with the Latin *cadaver*, a dead body.