



MagEIA

Magic between Entanglement, Interaction, and Analogy
KFG 42 – Centre for the Study of Magical Text Traditions
of West Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean in Antiquity

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2nd MagEIA Symposium

Mechanics and Materials of Magic
12 – 14 November 2025

Wednesday 12 November, 18:15
Public Keynote Lecture

Daniel Schwemer
Die Modellierung der Welt:
Zur materiellen Kultur
unheilabweisender Rituale aus
dem alten Mesopotamien

Speakers

Gaby Abou Samra (Beirut), Sophia Alkhou-
ry (Chicago), Jonathan Beltz (Tübingen),
Gideon Bohak (Tel Aviv), Korshi Dosoo
(Würzburg), Christopher Faraone (Chicago),
Krisztina Hevesi (Venedig), Dan Levene,
Mersha Mengistie (Würzburg), Markéta Prei-
ninger (Würzburg), Bill Rebiger (Halle-Wit-
tenberg), Charlotte Rose (Würzburg), Celia
Sánchez Nataliás (Zaragoza), Panagiota Sa-
rischouli (Thessaloniki), Daniel Schwemer
(Würzburg), Sofia Torallas Tovar (Princeton),
Esme Winter-Froemel (Würzburg)

Disciplines

Ancient History, Ancient Near Eastern
Studies, Classics, Comparative Philology,
Egyptology, History of Religion, Jewish
Studies, Semitic Studies, Theology

Location

At the conference centre
Burkardushaus in Würzburg

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Registration and Programme



For a full programme of
the Symposium go to
www.phil.uni-wuerzburg.de/mageia/veranstaltungen/symposium-ii-2025

There is no participation fee, but prior
registration is required; online
participation is possible.



—Magical Rite of a Deities, original statue in Cairo (JE 609.1), cast from
the Egypt Centre Museum, Swansea (05.02.20)

The Symbolism, Antecedents, and Parallels for a Jewish Ritual for Safety on the Road

Gideon Bohak (Tel Aviv University)

In the Cairo Genizah there are several copies, and several different versions, of instructions for a ritual to be performed before travelling. The ritual involves taking seven clods of earth, or pebbles, throwing four in the four cardinal directions, taking the other three with you, and burying them in the ground once you have reached your destination. This practice is paralleled in the Islamic world, and antecedents for the practice of throwing four balls, or figurines, in the four cardinal directions as a means of assuring an all-round protection are attested both in ancient Egypt and in ancient Mesopotamia. These rituals therefore raise the question of whether such cross-cultural similarities point to contact and mutual influence, or whether they are due to basic structures of the human mind that are common to much of humanity regardless of specific cultural contexts. In my paper, I will adduce the relevant texts from the Cairo Genizah – which are attested both in Aramaic and in Judaeo-Arabic – examine some of the parallels and antecedents to this widely attested ritual and its underlying symbolism, and speculate on the significance of such cross-cultural parallels.

Aramaic and Syriac Magic: Ritual, Instructions and Materials

Gaby Abou Samra (Lebanese University, Beirut)

My paper will deal with the rituals, instructions and materials employed in Aramaic and Syriac magical texts (Magical bowls, Geniza documents, Syriac amulets...). I will present the interaction between the magician and the instructions which he must follow and materials which he must use to perform the magical act. The manner in which the ritual is carried out, depends on disease or difficult situation, which needs to be dealt with. The instructions are guidelines on how the materials, are to be used in accordance with a precise ritual, in which prayer, medicine and superstition are all combined. In addition, it is necessary to choose the appropriate time for the magical act! This ritual follows a standard formula, along the following lines: “if you want to heal someone... say this... do this... and he will be healed”.

Finger Rings as Amulets and the Principle of Proximity in the Placement of Amulets of the Human Body

Christopher A. Faraone (University of Chicago)

Archaeological and iconographical evidence suggests that in the classical and Hellenistic periods women wore amulets on their necks and thighs and that children wore them diagonally across their chests, but their purpose is difficult to assess. In the Roman and Late-Antique periods, however, we have much better information, because magical and medical handbooks show us clearly that curative amulets were worn all over the human body, usually as close as possible to the area of pain or disfunction, for example, gout amulets tied to the ankles or kidney amulets to the hip. This general rule of proximity is, however, repeatedly violated in the case of finger-rings used as amulets. A ring worn on an extremity of the body makes sense, of course, for an amulet used to prevent snake- or scorpion-bite, because the hands or feet are more likely to be attacked. How, then, can a ring worn on the finger protect one from a stomachache, when much evidence suggests that curative amulets of this type were generally worn close to the diseased limb or internal organ? I will argue that many of amulets worn as rings were used to heal diseases or complaints of the lower abdomen, because while sitting down or lying on one's back, the hands are instinctively and easily used to rub the painful or swollen belly and thereby bring the amulet into close proximity. I begin by illustrating the principle of proximity

in the placement of amulets for various other diseases of the body and then show that instead of being limited to diseases of the hand, like arthritis, rings -- first simple metal bands with inscriptions and then those set with gemstones – were regularly used to control diseases of abdomen, both digestive and (in the case of women) uterine.

Materializing Rituals and Ritualizing Materials in Graeco-Egyptian Magic: Actions and Objects in GEMF 15/PGM XII

Panagiota Sarischouli (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki)

This paper explores the dynamic interplay between ritual actions, gestures, and material elements in Graeco-Egyptian magical practices, focusing on their role in validating and enhancing the efficacy of rituals found in GEMF 15 (= PGM/PDM XII). By examining a diverse repertoire of ritual performances—including invocations, prayers, commands, offerings, and physical gestures such as the drowning of animals, prostration, or orienting the body toward cardinal directions—the study investigates how such embodied actions were believed to activate and empower the ritual process. Special attention is given to the interaction between these gestures and the material components involved: are certain gestures intrinsically linked to particular substances, and how do the distinctive properties of these materials—such as origin, colour, texture, scent, or shape—amplify the ritual's impact? Through a close reading of this bilingual magical handbook, which integrates Greek and Egyptian traditions, the paper aims to uncover how sensory experience and symbolic resonance reinforced the persuasive force of magical practice. Furthermore, it considers how the mechanics of these rituals reflect underlying connections to Egyptian priestly traditions, offering insight into the broader cultural and theological

frameworks that shaped the construction and transmission of magical knowledge in Late Antiquity.

Writing materials in Greco-Egyptian magical procedures

Sofia Torallas-Tovar (Chicago/Princeton)

This paper examines the writing materials and techniques prescribed in the Greco-Egyptian Magical Formularies (GEMF). By exploring the types of writing media—primarily papyrus, but also parchment, lead tablets, and ostraca—alongside the inks, and eventually references to specific tools I aim at comparing and contextualizing their use in the contemporary scribal practice. Material choices can reflect both practical and symbolic considerations, including on the one side availability and training background, but also purity and efficiency in ritual terms.

Rolling, folding and/or nailing curse tablets in Roman North Africa

Celia Sánchez Natalías (Universit t Zaragoza)

As is well known, after the writing of the defixio, the individual who wrote it used to roll it up, fold it, and/or nail it. Traditional historiography has explained these ritual actions in different ways. While rolling and/or folding the tablet would help to hide the text (which had to remain invisible to human eyes), nailing it down would symbolically materialize the intended effect of the curse (since the name of the victim would be permanently fixed to the physical support and, in this way, linked to the incantation). However, in my opinion, these ritual actions were not always used to lend validity or to increase the persuasiveness of the practice. On the contrary, at times, these mechanisms could be conditioned and subordinated by the practical characteristics of the place where the defixiones were to be deposited for their definitive activation. This paper explores the various performances carried out by practitioners in Roman North Africa, regardless of their level of magical competence. The research includes a study of all the curse tablets known so far (both published and unpublished; and written in Punic, Greek, and/or Latin) and draws on the different data collected during fieldwork in the National Museum of Carthage, the Mus e Bargoin (ClermontFerrand) and the collection of the University of Georgia (Athens, USA). Additionally, the data drawn from North Africa will also be put in

relation within the wider context of cursing practices in the Roman West.

Identifying “Activated Texts” Among the Cuneiform Sources

Jon Beltz (University of Tübingen)

Within many branches of the study of ancient magic—the Greco-Roman, Coptic, and Aramaic traditions, among others—there is a basic distinction between text manuscripts which are considered “formularies” and those called “activated texts.” Formularies are those manuscripts which contain the ritual descriptions and verbal recitations necessary to carry out a magic act, while activated texts are written objects created as part of a magic act, thought to have some efficacious power in and of themselves—such as amulets and curse texts. In the cuneiform tradition, most of the research attention has gone towards the commonly circulated formulary texts: the large ritual texts such as *Maqlû* and *Šurpu* or compendia such as *Udug-hul*. However, the various text types that could be placed in the category of activated texts have received less attention. Although certain types of amulets have been well-studied, the full extent of the category of activated text in the cuneiform tradition remains to be tested. This paper will explore the limits of this category within the cuneiform world. It will overview some of the clear types of activated texts, such as inscribed amulets, before examining some less clear-cut examples, in particular some of the single incantation tablets from the early second millennium BCE. Fleshing out a more comprehensive category of “activated texts” within the cuneiform tradition creates a more holistic picture of the role of incantation

and ritual texts in ancient Mesopotamia and will allow Assyriology to participate more effectively in the comparative study of magic in the ancient world.

Cats Out of the Bag: Use of Living Animals in Ancient Egyptian Healing Rituals

Charlotte Rose (Universtität Würzburg)

Whereas the use and symbolism of animal ingredients in medical-magical texts is well known, there has so far been little examination of the role of live animals in ancient Egyptian healing practices. These customs can range from amulets being placed upon them, enacting destruction rituals, or having illnesses transferred out of the patient to them. Which animals were used? How were they employed? What was the underlying religious significance of these creatures in those spells? Initial results indicate that factors such as an animal's symbolism, the medical condition to be treated, and size considerations influenced the use of live animals in healing practices.

“A snake is summer’s treason, and guile is where it goes.” (Emily Dickinson). Incantations and Recipes to Ward Off Snakes in Ethiopian Manuscripts

Dan Levene (University of Southampton)

Venomous snakes are a problem in some parts of Ethiopia and do regularly claim the lives of some of its inhabitants. It is, therefore, no surprise to find a variety of means to have been developed to deal with this very real threat. Additionally, as in other cultures, the snake has become a symbol that has attracted a rich set of associations that go beyond what ensues when it strikes; despite the fact that if not disturbed, the types of snakes that exist in Ethiopia are rather secretive, often nocturnal, animals that have little, if any, interest in humans. I will be looking at means of defence against their bites that appear in a number of types of materials: incantations added to codices in portions of parchment left blank, a recipe including a list of *materia medica* with instructions of use that were also inserted (randomly ?) into a manuscript, a magic scroll dedicated wholly to protect its client from snakes, and recipes found in magico-medical texts.

Ritual Objects and Materials in Ethiopian Magic: Symbolism, Function, and Interpretation

Mersha A. Mengistie (Addis Ababa University)

This paper explores the critical role of ritual objects and materials in Ethiopian magical practices, examining how their symbolism, function, and interpretation shape the dynamics of ritual performance. In Ethiopian magic, materials such as herbs, stones, animal parts, and liquids are not merely tools but possess intrinsic properties that imbue the rituals with transformative power. By analyzing ancient magical texts and contemporary ritual practices, this study investigates how these materials are selected based on qualities such as color, texture, scent, and provenance, and how these attributes inform their use in ritual contexts. Furthermore, the paper delves into the metaphors embedded in the use of these materials, exploring how they represent connections to the divine, the natural world, and the unseen forces that govern human existence. Drawing from both historical texts and ethnographic data, the paper also addresses how ritual objects and materials contribute to the persuasiveness and legitimacy of magical performances. Additionally, it evaluates the continuing relevance of traditional heuristic concepts, such as substitution and analogy, in the analysis of magical rituals, and discusses how these ideas must be modified to account for the complex, material-based nature of Ethiopian magic. Ultimately, this paper aims to offer a deeper understanding of the intersection between materiality and ritual

in Ethiopian magical traditions, shedding light on how the objects and substances used in these rituals function as both symbols and agents of change.

Making Sense of Rituals in the Coptic Magical Tradition

Markéta Preininger (University of Würzburg)

The Coptic magical tradition provides a rich source for the study of ancient Christian magic in Egypt between the fourth and eleventh centuries CE. The proposed paper has two focal points. Firstly, a discussion of the findings and planned work of the Coptic Magical Papyri & Coptic Magical Formularies projects based at the Egyptology department in Würzburg. The second focus is on ways in which the project proposes to study rituals within the field of Digital Humanities, in particular on how to decode rituals to make their large scale study possible. The Coptic Magical Formularies project is building ways to create a deeper analysis concerning the connections between specific ritual actions, ingredients, and genres of magical texts. In practice, this analysis identifies key actions (burning objects, burying objects, pouring liquids, etc.), key ritual objects (myrrh, menstrual blood, animal fat, etc.), and ritual actors (human practitioner, human patient, divine beings such as angels). The implications of this approach and its results will be discussed in the proposed paper.

Deadly Curses: The Mechanics of Curses Involving Burial and Substances from Burial Sphere

Krisztina Hevesi (Freie Universität Berlin)

Copts continued to live at or near the ancient settlements, often on the ruins of their ancestors and reused their cultic buildings and tombs for various purposes. Their relation to these facilities, their ancestors and their religious traditions varied, most often from hostile to practical. They had access to ancient burial equipment and bodies and certainly used these for different purposes. The fact that in Coptic magical texts, substances coming from the sphere of cemeteries occur rarely, makes these attestations all the more meaningful and marked. Embalming salt, body parts of corpses, water/liquid from a corpse, tomb gum and burial shroud have been attested in Coptic magical texts so far, outlining an obvious pattern that these distinguished elements mostly kept part of the ritual instructions of violent spells. Associated with the chthonic sphere, substances connected to ancient and contemporary cemeteries transfer the ritual to otherworldly realms and endow the spells with a strong aggressive power. This association with destructive nature is likewise present in those curses in which the burial of ritual objects is required, most often, at liminal spaces (cemeteries, crossroads, near water, etc.) or near the victim. Burial as a final ritual step that activates the buried object and/or texts is known from several texts. The ritual object enters into interplay with the target person by its constant, but invisible presence at the

spot where it was buried, either through physical closeness (e.g., a place where the victim passes by) or the power of liminal spaces. In my presentation, I seek for answers for the questions how these violent ingredients and acts were formulated in ritual instructions and what kind of ritual mechanics operated behind these concepts with regards to the required materials and the involved locations.

Framing as hidden magic?

Esme Winter-Froemel (University of Würzburg)

Framing can be understood as the construction of a certain mental representation which is based on a specific selection of conceptual frames conveyed to talk about a particular topic (cf. Fillmore 1975, Ziem 2008). Previous research has highlighted the possibility of strategic uses of framing to influence the addressees' emotions, attitudes or convictions, e.g., in contemporary (anti-)environmental discourse. Taking these observations as a starting point, this paper aims to reflect on the possible relationship of framing to magical practices and traditions, and more specifically, to discuss the question whether framing can be interpreted as a mechanism or a "mechanics" of magic. Such a link has not been established up to now, and it needs to be acknowledged that framing presents some characteristics that make it clearly different from magical rituals, above all the fact that strategic framing ideally functions as a practice that goes unnoticed by the intended addressees. Furthermore, it can be argued that a specific feature of framing that is absent from traditional magical practices is the fact that it is based on onomasiological ambiguity, i.e., an existence of alternative conceptualisations of a certain referential entity (Winter-Froemel 2019). At the same time, however, the deliberate choice of particular wording to manipulate the addressees' state of mind represents an act of conscious influence on reality. Moreover, strategic framing can be

accompanied by the choice of wordings that exhibit certain structural features such as alliterations and can thus be compared to magic formulas. Finally, the notion of salience will allow us to compare specific aspects of framing and magical practices from a cognitive and interactional perspective.

References

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Gestures in Late Antique and Medieval Jewish Magical Texts

Bill Rebiger (University of Halle)

Despite the mention of bodily gestures in Jewish magical instruction texts from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, this subject has not yet been the focus of scholarly discussion within the field of Jewish studies. When considered as a medium of non-verbal communication, these gestures encompass a variety of forms, such as symbolic, iconic, mimetic, and deictic gestures. In most cases, gestures are accompanied by performative speech acts. In my paper, a selection of Jewish magical texts will be presented that attest to various gestures, defined as the movement of the entire body or distinct body parts. I would like to examine the potential significance and function of gestures as well as their relationship to other ritual or symbolic systems, such as cult and liturgy. A subsequent topic to be explored is that of gestures and their relation to performative haptic acts. The central question guiding this inquiry is whether gestures serve as catalysts for physical contact or if they function as symbolic substitutes for it.

“To Bring in the Gods by Force”: Coercive Offerings in the *Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies*

Sophia Alkhoury (University of Chicago)

Throughout the *Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies* (formerly known as the *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, or the *PGM*), reciprocal relationships based on mutual *charis* are established between the magical practitioner and the gods by means of material offerings, hymns, purity regulations, and more. However, in a limited number of cases, the practitioner chooses methods of approach that are not governed by a sense of *charis*, but which are intended to coerce the gods, rather than delight them. For example, offerings that are explicitly labelled as coercive may be prescribed as a second alternative for a practitioner to try if their more beneficent offerings have failed thus far. In this paper, I examine instances in which the magical practitioner chooses to use objectionable materials as coercive offerings in order to evoke the presence of the gods and to harness their powers. I survey the substances that appear in coercive contexts in the formularies, point out patterns in the procedures that include objectionable offerings, and offer insight into the rationale behind certain choices. Considerations from the world of late-antique Dionysian mystery cults as well as the writings of the roughly contemporary Neoplatonic theurgists help to answer the question of why certain ingredients were objectionable to the gods, and why such coercive offerings appear in the magical formularies.

Σκεύη τῶν μάγων: Notes on tools in Magical Papyri from Roman Egypt

Korshi Dosoo (University of Würzburg)

In an intriguing passage of the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris (GEMF 57/PGM IV) we find reference to the σκεύη (“tools” or “materials” of “the magicians”, ll. 2081-2082); in the best-known presentation of this text in the edition of Hans Dieter Betz (1986), a note suggests that this refers to “magical kits” of the type found in Pergamum, Apamea, and Sardis, consisting of bronze objects – disks, rings, nails, and triangular bases decorated with images of Hekate. But the purpose of these kits is unclear, and they never seem to be explicitly mentioned in the magical papyri from Egypt. So what were the “tools of magicians”? This paper will explore the question from several angles, beginning with modern stereotypes of wizard’s stags or wands and the development of standard ritual toolkits in mediaeval and early modern magic, before deconstructing these later developments to ask what were, concretely, the tools used by magical practitioners in Roman Egypt, and attempt to identify the material remains of such tools. As we will see, “the chief ritual activity within the Greek Magical Papyri appears to be the act of writing itself” (Smith, “Trading Places” (1995)), and the recurrent tools reflect this scribal focus.