

# Languages, Objects, and the Transmission of Rituals

An Interdisciplinary Analysis on Ritual Practices  
in the Graeco-Egyptian Papyri (*PGM*)

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## Heterogeneity and Rituals

### The Means of Transmission of Knowledge and Contacts between Cultures

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**Abstract** The international project *Multima. Languages, Objects, and the Transmission of Rituals. An interdisciplinary analysis of some unresearched ritual practices in the Greco-Egyptian papyri (PGM)* aims at exploring contacts between cultures, languages and rituals in Antiquity, starting from a composite material whose heterogeneity is analysed as a basic element and a bearer of meaning. The study of manuals of ritual practices, *summae* and encyclopaedias *ante litteram* of knowledge and skills allows to develop new and interdisciplinary suggestions for the history of ideas and the beginnings of scientific thought.

**Keywords** Rituals. Transmission of knowledge. PGM. History of religions. Antiquity. Greece and Egypt.

One of the crucial issues for Western culture – both in the historical and artistic fields and in the anthropological and historical-religious one – is to be found in the complex relationship between a number of areas of knowledge such as astrology, astronomy, “magic”, alchemy, divination, medicine and knowledge preserved and transmitted in particular according to the criteria of the European tradition.

Modern Western culture has given the name of knowledge to a particular way of knowing – namely to certain requirements of universality, consistency, and objectivity – developing a classification system as a neutral, cognitive and atemporal framework.

As shown in scholarship within the social sciences, it now seems necessary to deal with several crucial questions concerning the value and belief systems that are the products of societies. In particular, the possibility ought to be considered that different human contexts build ontologies, worlds, values and different ways of knowing, with their consistency and depth, without expecting to evaluate them with a single criterion.<sup>1</sup>

1 Consigliere 2014.

The concept of interdisciplinary research (project) *Multima. Languages, Objects, and the Transmission of Rituals. An interdisciplinary analysis of some unresearched ritual practices in the Greco-Egyptian papyri (PGM)* stems from the belief that it is possible to expose multiple contexts of knowledge and some of the principal means of transmission. Formal features and content, arising from the meeting of languages, cultures, traditions and different rituals, characterize these modes.

If a new scientific assessment of the therapeutic, technical and practical knowledge of ritual contexts has sparked a lively and fruitful debate within the studies of Medieval and Renaissance History,<sup>2</sup> the same cannot be said for the Ancient Mediterranean. Their numerous *corpora* were excluded from the purely scientific research, because of their uneven and complex nature.

Since we are the heirs of a World<sup>3</sup> that, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was the scene of a dramatic change in the interpretative categories of the world and established what might be called “scientific” and what not – perhaps, we could be tempted to consider some works and texts of antiquity as a mere *divertissement*.

The ritual contexts, as is well-known, constitute a privileged place for reflection on the different traditions of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> One need only think about the word-play used in the oracular field in various cultures or the prophetic schools that spread all kinds of knowledge (music, grammatical rules, even the different linguistic and phonetic uses) to appreciate this aspect.

For this reason, we propose an interdisciplinary study of the *PGM*<sup>5</sup> corpus, in order to contribute to the discussion on the multiplicity and preservation of knowledge. The *Greek Magical Papyri* – or rather, the Greek-Egyptian papyri<sup>6</sup> – depict an extremely complex *dossier*. This *corpus* consists of several papyri written in *koinē* Greek, Coptic and Demotic and is based on a Greco-Egyptian tradition, including “religious contributions” and the language of the entire ancient Mediterranean.

2 Crisciani, Paravicini Bagliani 2003; Meroi, Scapparone 2007; Newman, Grafton 2001.

3 Foucault 1966.

4 Cf. for instance Auroux 1998, 74-6.

5 *PGM* = Preisendanz, Karl (revised by A. Henrichs), *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, Stuttgart, Teubner, 1973-74 (original edition *Papyri Graecae Magicae, die griechischen Zauber Papyri*, Leipzig; Berlin: Teubner, 1928 (I), 1931 (II), 1941 (III). See also the translation Betz 1992.

6 More accurate Greek-Egyptian Papyri as already suggested in the Goodwin edition in his *Fragment of a Greek-Egyptian Work upon Magic*: Publication of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society, 2, Cambridge, 1852.

This “religious” and cultural syncretism<sup>7</sup> finds its clearest expression in two main features of multilingualism: on the one hand the *koinē* and on the other the bilingualism of the Greco-Egyptian tradition, in its many forms (Greco-Egyptian, Greco-Coptic, Demotic-Greek, etc.).

The complexity and heterogeneity of the form and content of the papyri have long prevented scientific studies.

The first editors claimed that “les papyrus magiques apportent nous des textes dont la composition échappe à tout ordre systématique, et les croyances here s’y manifestent paraissent inconséquentes et grotesques”. Dieterich considered these documents as vestiges of a primitive Greek religion or components of a popular religiosity/common religious practice and the first editor, Preisendanz, considered these texts as an “horrible pandemonium”, namely magic words without value and meaning.<sup>8</sup> Despite being catalogued among the Egyptian acquisitions by libraries and museums, Egyptologists ignored these texts until a few years ago, as they were written in another language. The lack of interest is easily understandable since in 1928 Preisendanz had erased the parts written in Demotic, even those on the same papyrus, in the same column and in the same line. Conversely, one of the previous editions (such as Hopfner 1921) was entitled Greek-Egyptian Papyri.

Written by erudite scribes of different languages and cultures, these texts are compilations from various sources, dating from the first century AD. The different forms were assembled and transcribed on papyrus. Once drafted, they were deposited in a temple or preserved by a priestly caste in archives or collections for theologians, princes, and alchemists.

“Cross-cultural texts” – according to the now famous definition of Jacco Dieleman<sup>9</sup> – *PGM* testify to a multicultural society in which the scribes of different languages develop new procedures<sup>10</sup> that allow for the introduction of original Greek or Roman traits, or else, give these texts a new look which enable the transmission of implicit knowledge and are suitable for the elite audience.<sup>11</sup>

Complexity and diversity require a healthy comparative, from a methodological point of view as illustrated by Philippe Borgeaud in his premise, which does not expect to compare large units or sets, but elements of different cultures, often in close proximity, through microanalysis of elements

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7 A recent debate on the category and the use of other ‘labels’ of anthropology in ancient contexts in the contributions is contained in the Acts of Congress: Fontana 2014.

8 Preisendanz 1935.

9 Dieleman 2005.

10 Gordon 2002, De Haro 2015.

11 Real manuals, encyclopedias written with ritualistic and therapeutic purposes, to convey the most diverse knowledge (philosophical, medical, botanical, alchemy, etc.).

that are present in complex and apparently contradictory texts.

Such terms as interactions, translations and translations, declined in all possible forms (including the subsequent changes and the emergence of new elements) are undoubtedly fundamental concepts for a historical-religious approach. They enable the opening of new avenues of approach to *corpora* which have long been underestimated on account of their difficulty and the indifference and rejection of scholars. These reactions, which are so frequent in the history of religions, have led to a refusal of the mixture of different elements such as provenance and context, and their apparent contradictions and complexities. This has favoured a division into a “block by block” approach to cultural areas as well as objects of study that are the result of exchanges and transformations of civilizations, languages, and specifically of different ritual traditions.

The first aim of our international project is, therefore, to offer a reflection on the problem of contacts between cultures, languages and rituals in Antiquity, starting from a composite material which has been hitherto anonymous and difficult. In this way we choose to avoid a single approach, not wanting to find one so-called authentic element, a ritual, a tradition, a lexeme: Egyptian, Greek, Jewish or otherwise.

As pointed out by De Haro in his contribution to this volume, it is not about finding solutions to the problems of each culture, but rather highlighting the co-existence, the interplay of materials, knowledge and languages that have traversed the Mediterranean for centuries and constitute one of the most relevant aspects which is of the greatest scientific interest and peculiar to the intercultural mosaic considered “immensity disturbing” by Y. Yoyotte.<sup>12</sup>

For this reason, the first and most immediate aim of the conference was to emphasize, through different perspectives and inquiry, objects brought by specialists from different fields, heterogeneity as a basic element and a bearer of meaning, in the hope of contributing to the study of the status of these texts and their way of transmitting different contents.

Since these magical papyri have long been regarded as a trivial repertoire of unclear and dubious origin, with ritual details or marginal divine aspects, our contributions highlight the value of these manuals, *summae*, encyclopedias *ante litteram*, of knowledge and skills, and, in particular, show that complexity and multiplicity are not only valuable but also spread scientific traditions and rituals at the same time. A *corpus* of written sources, therefore, a thesaurus of ritual practices of late antiquity, but also an example of a comprehensive ritualistic literature which is both pedagogical and “scientific”.

We believe that these sources deserve a proper assessment: their tax-

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12 Yoyotte 1969.

onomy should be rethought starting from the set of intellectual practices that have helped to establish these texts, as it has been for other compendiums of Late Antiquity whose purpose can be different.

Recipes and ritual instructions in the *PGM* suggest a co-presence of knowledge or they are more generally covered by different and effective knowledge. There are, in fact, several common traits present in both the medical texts of instrumental use and the alchemical sources. The recipes are not compiled as alphabetic lists or lexical dictionaries and do not even have symbolic and quality purposes as occurs in ancient alchemical texts.<sup>13</sup> The *PGM* are then inserted in a context of 'practical' common knowledge that circulates within texts with very different purposes and that differ, very probably, from today's classifications.

In an era of significant cultural and religious changes in particular between an Egyptian local tradition and a Greek-Egyptian-Roman "international" culture, a new and dynamic preservation of rituals and knowledge is probably at the origin of the complexity of modes of expression and linguistic codes that make up the distinguishing features of the texts of the *PGM*.

By conducting group research that is both open and experimental, we hope to introduce elements or new and interdisciplinary suggestions for the history of ideas and the beginnings of scientific thought in this report on ritual practices. Our starting point will be that extraordinary era of the Mediterranean which is Late Antiquity, an opportunity for exchanges, contacts, and conflicts between different traditions and languages.

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