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Close Reading of the Praxis *Ritual of the Cat* (PGM III 1-164/GEMF 55)

Barbara Takács

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Abstract This article examines the *Ritual of the Cat* on Papyrus Mimaout, a complex curse centred on the ritual use of a cat. I argue that the extant version preserves clear traces of editorial reworking, especially in the illustration and invocation to Seth-Typhon on the third *lamella* and in the second solar prayer. These passages show that the text developed in layers, as a more general curse ritual against enemies was reshaped for a specific anti-charioteer purpose. A close reading of the layout, scribal signs, and the relation between text and image helps to reconstruct this process of recomposition.

Keywords Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri. Charioteers. Curse ritual. Solar cat. Seth-figure. Scribal signs. Compositional layers.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Overview of the Ritual. – 3 Instructions for the *Lamellae*. – 3.1 Illustrations. – 3.2 Identity of the Figures. – 3.3 The Invocation Below the Figures. – 4 The Two Solar Prayers. – 5 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

The *Ritual of the Cat*, preserved on Papyrus Mimaut (PGM III¹/GEMF 55;² Louvre inv. 2391), is a Greek-language curse of the third-fourth century AD,³ written on the *recto*, coll. 1-5, ll. 1-164.⁴ It is presented primarily as a curse against charioteers,⁵ but is also said to work for dream-sending, erotic attraction, separation, and enmity. These applications belong to the broader sphere of aggressive magic and show that the same ritual could be adapted to different purposes. While the exact provenance and archaeological context of the papyrus within Egypt are unknown, its content shows a strong familiarity with Egyptian religious concepts, suggesting a priestly background. At the same time, its main aim against charioteers reflects the influence of Roman-style chariot races, which became increasingly popular in North Africa from the second century AD onward, especially in Hadrumetum and Carthage, where numerous curses against charioteers have been found.⁶

The recipe can be divided into six parts, though not in the actual order of execution: (1) the drowning of the cat and the first invocation; (2) the preparation of the burial and of the ritual tools; (3) the burial of the animal and the invocation of its spirit; (4) the sprinkling of

This article develops and substantially revises arguments first presented in a longer Hungarian study, which also included a Hungarian translation of the ritual text (Takács 2025).

1 PGM stands for *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, the title given to the first edition of the Greek-language portion of the corpus of magical papyri from Graeco-Roman Egypt (Preisendanz, Henrichs 1973-74).

2 GEMF is the abbreviation of *Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies: Text and Translation*, a new edition of the magical papyri. So far, only the first volume has been published, containing texts up to number 54.

3 The dating is based on the most recent examination of the papyrus, see Dosoo, Torallas Tovar 2022, 58.

4 The line and column numbering follows Preisendanz, Henrichs 1973-74. A new arrangement of the papyrus fragments has been proposed by Martín Hernández and Torallas Tovar (2025), which reassigns the columns of the recipe to 5-10. The precise new line numbering will be published in GEMF vol. 2, which will no doubt refine the papyrus's textual and visual elements. My argument, however, rests chiefly on features visible at the level of layout, spacing, repetition, and scribal marking. Even where future editorial work improves the text, the basic claim advanced here should remain secure: the extant version of the recipe is layered and bears signs of purposeful recomposition.

5 On agonistic curses, as a starting point, see Gager 1992, 42-77 and Tremel 2004; for the latest study, see Sánchez Natalías 2022, 56-8. On agonistic magic in general, see Heintz 1999. On circus curses with a special focus on their archaeological contexts, see Heintz 1998.

6 On curse tablets from North-Africa, see Sichet 2000. R. Gordon and C. Sánchez Natalías both assert that the curse tablets of imperial North Africa were produced by professional practitioners who adapted Egyptian rituals to meet the demands of a new clientele (Gordon 2012; Sánchez Natalías 2022, 67).

the water with further invocation; (5) the inscription of the *lamellae* (metal sheets) with *voces magicae* and drawings; (6) and the two solar prayers, each describing the use of the cat's whiskers as a phylactery.

This study focuses on the parts of the text that preserve the clearest signs of editorial intervention: the illustrated third *lamella* (§ 3.1), the invocation to Seth-Typhon beneath the figures (§ 3.3), and the second solar prayer (§ 4). I argue that these are secondary additions to an earlier version of the ritual. They show how a ritual expert could reshape the basic material, combine elements from different sources, and adapt an older aggressive ritual for a more specific purpose.

The following sections briefly survey the individual parts of the ritual, with particular attention to the drawing and to the compositional choices visible in the text.

2 The Overview of the Ritual

The ritual begins with the drowning of a cat – thereby elevating the animal to a deified state (*hesiēs*)⁷ – and with an accusation directed against the practitioner's enemies. In the accompanying prayer, the cat is associated with the solar god in cat form,⁸ and the enemies are accused of killing the god's sacred animal.⁹

Although the cat-faced deity in this ritual is often identified with Bastet,¹⁰ the text itself does not support this interpretation,

7 On the word, see Leitz 2002, 474-7. A comprehensive analysis of possible meanings of *hesiēs* across different periods and contexts, including the magical papyri, see Dosoo 2022, esp. 377 (for a list of texts mentioning deified animals in the magical papyri and in the *Kyranides*, see 342-4). On 'deified humans', see von Lieven 2010b. The most famous of these individuals, worshipped as a god after his death in the Nile, is Antinous. See Dosoo 2022, 397-400 with further literature.

8 It is invoked with the phrase [ὁ ἐ]πὶ τῆς μορφῆς[ς] τῆς τοῦ ἡλίου, ὁ αἰ[λουρ]ο[πρ] ὁσώπος θεός (the form of the Sun, cat-faced god, ll. 4-5). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author. The term ἡλίος (*helios*, sun) is usually translated as Helios, the Greek sun god, but this is not always appropriate. At the beginning of PGM III 1-164/GEMF 55, it clearly refers to the Egyptian sun god Re. By the end of the text, however, the solar deity incorporates elements from multiple cultures. Since this kind of blending is a fundamental feature of the magical papyri, distinguishing between different sun gods in each recipe is neither practical nor necessary. For this reason, I refer to the deity simply as the Sun wherever possible.

9 Although the killing of sacred animals was generally not accepted in Egypt (and was sanctioned to varying degrees across different regions), examination of animal mummies reveals that many were intentionally and prematurely killed, likely for religious purposes by priests. For the mass scale production of animal mummies, see Koenig 2017, 81; Dosoo 2022, 382-95 with further literature. On the animal cult in Egypt, see Fitzenreiter 2013.

10 Scholars who identify the cat-faced god as the Egyptian goddess Bastet, mainly do so on the basis of a footnote in the English translation (Betz 1986, 18 fn. 1).

since it refers to the figure consistently in the masculine. The cat is better understood as a form of Re, since the sun god could appear in different forms at different hours, one of them being the cat.¹¹ This is well attested both in earlier Egyptian sources¹² and in the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri.¹³ The cat's role as defender of the solar barque against the serpent Apep (Apophis) also belongs to Egyptian tradition and is explicitly mentioned in our recipe (ll. 83).¹⁴

The next stage instructs the practitioner to prepare three *lamellae* and a papyrus written in cinnabar. The papyrus, bearing drawings and names connected with chariots, charioteers, chariot boards, and racehorses, is wrapped around the cat's body.¹⁵ The three *lamellae*, whose detailed instructions are given later in the recipe, are also placed inside the animal. The body is then buried in a grave or in the stadium while an invocation to the rising sun is recited. This invocation calls upon an *angelos*, and may also refer to "the *daimōn* of the place", an expression that appears again later in the recipe; it also mentions the running of horses. The *angelos* most likely refers to the spirit of the cat, whose names were inscribed on one of the *lamellae* and invoked to act against the enemies (ll. 71-6).

By this point, the cat has already been described as *hesiēs* (deified), the *morphē* (form) of the Sun, *theos* (god), *hieron pneuma* (sacred spirit), *angelos*, and later *daimōn*. The text thus presents the animal in a series of overlapping divine and intermediary roles.¹⁶

The water used for drowning the cat is then sprinkled in the stadium or in a ritual space, again with an accompanying invocation. This prayer mentions several deities, including Meliouchos,¹⁷ the "*daimōn* of the place", and "the *daimōn* of the spirit-endowed

11 See von Lieven 2010a, 33-4 and Quack 2007, with many examples.

12 *Litany of Re* § 56 (Piankoff 1964, 10-43; Hornung 1975-76); *Book of the Dead*, Spell 17a (Allen 1974, 30, § S 15).

13 PGM III 507-8/GEMF 55; PGM IV 1649-50/GEMF 57; PGM XXXVIII 18/GEMF 69.

14 [αἰλ]ουροπ[ρόσω]πος μέγας, οἷα κα κρατῶν [θεοῦ] (great cat-faced one, who holds control over the tiller [of the god]). Cf. ll. 81-2, also ll. 98-9 and 102-3, which are parts of the oral invocation to the Sun.

15 Wrapping the body in papyrus is reminiscent of animal mummification. See Ikram 2005 and Dosoo 2022.

16 While these terms may at first seem to denote distinct positions within the divine hierarchy, they are often used interchangeably in the magical papyri to describe the same entity. It has been suggested that the lack of clear differentiation among intermediate beings, especially in the role of a messenger, may stem from the absence of distinct lexical terms within Egyptian terminology. This implies that a clearly defined concept for these beings did not exist. The magical papyri also reflect a range of religious ideas, which could further explain the inconsistencies. See Schipper 2007.

17 So far, the precise meaning of the word has not been determined. On the term, see Brashear 1995, 3592 and Pachoumi 2017, 186. For a comprehensive analysis, see Harrauer 1987.

cat” (ll. 43-51). Whether the “*daimōn* of the place” is understood as a dead competitor, a chthonic power attached to the site, or a spirit of the burial place,¹⁸ the ritual logic remains the same: the dead and violently transformed cat serves as a medium through which further underworld powers can be invoked. The ritual use of water rests on the idea that an animal sacred to a god shares in the deity’s potency, which can be transmitted to another medium at the moment of death. In our recipe, the power of the solar god, embodied in the cat, passes into the water through the animal’s death, allowing the liquid to become an instrument of conjuration.¹⁹

Up to this point, the structure of the recipe is coherent: the cat is killed, transformed, equipped with ritual tools, buried, and activated as an agent of curse. The following sections, however, show signs of editorial layering, most clearly in the detailed instructions for the *lamellae* and the two concluding solar prayers.

3 Instructions for the *Lamellae*

This section first considers the visual and textual instructions connected with the three *lamellae*, before turning to the identity of the figures and to the invocation written beneath them.

3.1 Illustrations

The section²⁰ on the three *lamellae* provides the clearest evidence that the extant version of the recipe has undergone editorial reworking. Earlier in the text the *lamellae* are mentioned only briefly; here, they are described in detail. Two of them are to be inscribed with magical words (ιαεω *logos* and αβλαναθαααλβα), while the third combines *logoi*, arrangement signs, a drawing of figures, and an invocation beneath the image. This is the point where the papyrus most clearly exposes the gap between the written template (*Vorlage*) of the recipe and its execution in our copy.

The instructions for the two *lamellae* are located at the end of col. 2, where two signs indicate the intended layout of the writing.

18 The most common places to hide curses were underground water sources (wells, drains) and burial sites, due to their believed proximity to the underworld and its creatures (Ogden 1999, 15-23). For an overview of deposition sites, see Sánchez Natalías 2022, 37-52. Circus curses were mostly buried within the circus itself or in nearby cemeteries (Heintz 1998).

19 For more on this concept, see Dosoo, Galoppin 2022, 233-4 and 241-2.

20 Drawings of coll. 2 and 3 can be found in Eitrem 1923, 54 and 56: <https://www.archive.org/details/lespapyrusmagiqu00eitruoft/page/n53/mode/2up>.

The sign on the right marks the required ‘grape formation’ (V), while the damaged sign on the left seems to indicate a square (*plinthion*)²¹ arrangement. The sign for the grape formation reappears in col. 3 in the description of the third *lamella*, together with an instruction within the centre of the formation sign, approximately two lines below the αβεραμενθω palindrome: καρδιακῶς, ὡς βότρυς (heart-shaped, like a bunch of grapes; l. 69).

These annotations clearly unveil the authors’ intentions, who were well-versed in the techniques associated with Graeco-Egyptian ritual practices and saw no need to waste space or time by meticulously documenting every detail. The editor of the recipe likely noted these instructions for himself or for another experienced practitioner, who would have understood from these markings how the engraving on the *lamella* was meant to look.

Following the instruction, three figures are depicted with magical words and a longer invocation beneath them [fig. 1]. On the right, there is an animal-headed figure, wearing a chiton and a mantle hung over the left shoulder. It holds a whip in its right hand and a long staff in its left, the top of which is not preserved on the papyrus. The figure is significantly larger than the other two. On the left stands a fully human figure, while the central figure has a human body but lacks its head because of damage to the papyrus. Both also hold whips in their right hands, mirroring that of the animal-headed figure. The whip of the left figure touches an unidentified square object.²² Above this figure, a writing reads in two lines: σκελετὸς | δεξιός (right skeleton). Similarly, there is a fragmented text above the central figure in two lines: ζ | ερος which is understood as [σκελετὸς] | [ἀριστ]ερός (left skeleton). Below the left figure appears the ιωερβηθ *logos*,²³ written in noticeably smaller letters than the rest of the recipe, alongside the ‘skeleton’ labels.

21 On the formations, see Faraone 2012; 2023.

22 Faraone proposes that the object may be an “oversized crown(?)” (2024, 276). I found that the object’s shape and placement in the arrangement are similar to the ‘Osiris in sarcophagus’ motif that appears on curse tablets (e.g., DTAud 155, 159, 167 = Wunsch 1898, nos 16, 20, 29). On the other hand, the object also resembles the structure of the turning point (*meta*) for charioteers in circus races (e.g., on a third-century mosaic from Carthage, now housed in the Bardo Museum in Tunis, inv. A 341, see Aounallah, Ayachi, Baratte 2016, 282-3).

23 Also known as Sethian/Typhonic *logos*. It is typically associated with the god Seth and is used in aggressive magic. For more on the *logos*, see Martín Hernández (2019), who observed that the *logos* almost always appears in Greek, even in the bilingual Greek-Demotic recipes, where the rest of the text is written in Demotic (190-1).

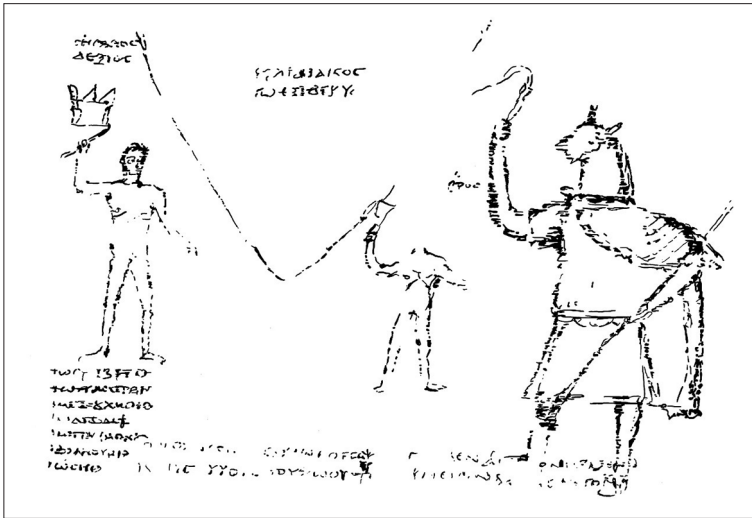


Figure 1 Figures on the third *lamella*. 2025. Digital drawing after Papyrus Mimaout, PGM III 1-164/GEMF 55, Louvre, Paris, inv. E 2391. © Krisztina Hevesi, reproduced with permission

K. Preisendanz interpreted the writing above the figures ("right skeleton" above the left figure and presumably "left skeleton" above the central figure) as instructions to interchange the figures when creating the *lamella* (1973-74, 37). However, since the left and middle figures are drawn in a similar style, this interchanging does not seem particularly meaningful to me. In my view, a more plausible interpretation is that the inscriptions indicate the intended positions of the figures relative to the larger animal-headed figure. In this case, the central figure, labelled as "left skeleton", would already be in the correct position to the left of the animal-headed figure. Meanwhile, the left figure, labelled as "right skeleton", should be positioned on the right side of the animal-headed figure.

The execution of the three figures raises a compositional problem. While the arrangement signs and magical words above them are carefully designed, the drawing below does not show the same structural coherence. The figures and accompanying textual elements do not fit into the surrounding context with the same degree of planning as the other visual instructions in the recipe. This discrepancy suggests that the image was not conceived as an integral part of the recipe, but introduced at a later stage of transmission. The third *lamella* therefore offers the clearest material evidence in the papyrus for editorial reworking.

Several arguments suggest that the drawing was added later.²⁴ The large animal-headed figure does not fit the available space, since its legs extend into the invocation below and partly into the right margin. The figure on the left, together with the ἰωεϛβῆθ *logos* beneath it, is completely relegated to the left margin, with the *logos* reaching into the invocation. This is the only place in the recipe where the compositional elements overlap with the surrounding text. By contrast, the visual guides for arranging the ἀβεραμενθω palindrome and two other *logoi* remain within the boundaries of the column and reflect deliberate planning. In the case of the figures, the execution looks improvised. The scribe of the main text did not leave enough room between the notation for the arrangement of the palindrome and the invocation below, forcing the illustrator to adapt. The two outer figures were then fitted into whatever space remained. The right figure's leg is shortened, and the foot is incompletely drawn, likely to preserve the readability of the invocation. The ἰωεϛβῆθ *logos* and the 'labels' above the left and middle figures are written in the same noticeably smaller script. The lines of the ἰωεϛβῆθ *logos* are also misaligned with those of the invocation; some lines of the *logos* fall between the much larger lines of the invocation.

These details suggest that at least part of the illustration – especially the two outer figures and the accompanying labels – was added after the main text had already been copied. The limited space, uneven composition, and displacement of several elements into the margins do not suggest the careful execution of a template. Rather, they indicate that the scribe did not yet have the final pattern of the illustration before him and that the drawing was added only at a later stage.

It was common practice in the production of magical handbooks to leave space for drawings to be completed later, often by a different individual. Such practices sometimes resulted in illustrations that were incorrect or poorly positioned, and in some cases, images were never inserted at all.²⁵

24 Scholars had already questioned the unity of text and image in this section. C. Harrauer (1987, 24) suggested that the right-hand figure and the ἰωεϛβῆθ *logos* were later additions, judging from their differing pen-strokes. K. Preisendanz (1973-74, 36) likewise considered the left-hand figure to be by another hand. More recently, R. Martín Hernández and S. Torallas Tovar (2025, 20 fn. 19) have also argued that the drawings were inserted afterwards to fill space left blank by the first scribe, noting in particular the incomplete feet of the animal-headed figure.

25 See, e.g., PGM VII 467-77, 862-918/GEMF 74 (missing figure); PGM VII 579-90/GEMF 74 and PGM XXXVI 178-87/GEMF 68 (image differs from the description). R. Gordon and R. Martín Hernández offer an example where two papyri, PGM VIII/GEMF 72 and PGM IX/GEMF 73, were copied by the same scribe, yet the illustrations on each belong to two different hands (2022, 307-8).

3.2 Identity of the Figures

The interpretation of the three figures is particularly challenging and has given rise to diverse scholarly opinions. The left figure has been identified as the sun god, Isis-Hekate-Ereschigal; or a contestant;²⁶ the middle figure as Isis-Hekate-Ereschigal, the headless Osiris, the sun god, or the cat-faced *daimōn*.²⁷

The animal-headed figure has been interpreted as the cat,²⁸ a horse-headed entity, or the god Seth.²⁹ It falls into the category of ‘Sethian figures’, a term coined by R. Wünsch for representations with horse or donkey heads, often linked to Seth (1898). These figures commonly appear in curses and are typically seen as either a horse-headed demon or Seth.³⁰ They are usually accompanied by the *λοεββηθ* *logos*, associated with Seth, along with words linked to Osiris (Eulamo, Osiris, Mnevi) and the depiction of the mummy-Osiris.³¹ The argument for identifying the Sethian figure as a horse-headed entity rather than Seth was largely based on the shape of its ears³² and a presumed connection to racehorses (Gager 1992, 68; Tremel 2004, 46-7). This interpretation, however, is contradicted by its appearance in other forms of aggressive magic.

26 For the left figure as the sun god, see Preisendanz, Henrichs 1973-74, 37 (with question mark); Harrauer 1987, 25 (Helios-Re); as Isis-Hekate-Ereschigal, see Delatte 1914, 232; as a contestant, see Nowitzki 2021, 153 fn. 124.

27 For the middle figure as Isis-Hekate-Ereschigal, see Preisendanz, Henrichs 1973-74, 37 (with question mark); as the headless Osiris, see Delatte 1914, 232: “Ce personnage est évidemment le dieu solaire acéphale que nous connaissons, Osiris, que Seth menace du fouet”; as the sun god, see Nowitzki 2021, 153 fn. 124; as the cat-faced *daimōn*, see Harrauer 1987, 25.

28 Martín Hernández 2012, 493; Nowitzki 2021, 153 fn. 124. According to C. Faraone, the animal-headed figure represents the cat, whose identity has merged with that of the *daimōn* of the place: “The whip in the hand of this larger figure suggests that he is the ghost of the charioteer ‘in this place’, who is assimilated with the cat-faced *daimōn* as the agent of the curse” (2024, 277).

29 Wünsch 1898 (Gnostic Seth); Audollent 1904; Delatte 1914, 231; Hopfner 1921, 107-8; Preisendanz, Henrichs 1973-74, 36; Harrauer 1987, 23-4 (who identifies the figure as Seth but with a horse-head); Koenig 2017, 81; Martín Hernández 2019, 197; 2022, 43-5; Love 2022 (a detailed analysis of an animal-headed figure that shares morphological features with the donkey-headed Seth and its development over 900 years, from Egyptian to Coptic sources).

30 For the interpretation as a horse-headed demon, see Preisendanz 1927, 35-7; 1972, 17-18; Gager 1992, 68 fn. 85; Németh 2013; for the identification with Seth, see Wünsch 1898, 86-114 (Gnostic Seth); Martín Hernández 2022.

31 For a comprehensive analysis of the Sethian figure and its associated elements, including Osiris and the *λοεββηθ* *logos*, see Martín Hernández 2022. For the development and variations of an animal-headed figure with similar morphological features to the Sethian figure, see Love 2022.

32 See Bonner 1950, 114; Harrauer 1987, 25; Németh 2013; Martín Hernández 2012, 493 (but contra in 2022, 43-4).

In my view, the left and middle figures are best considered together rather than identified separately. Their common label, “skeleton”, suggests that they were conceived as belonging to the same category, regardless of their exact identity. Two main interpretations have been proposed. R. Martín Hernández cautiously suggests that they are the two *paredroi*³³ who accompany the Sethian figure on curse tablets (2022, 44), whereas C. Faraone understands them as the targets of the spell (2024, 277). I do not attempt to resolve the question here. It is worth noting, however, that both figures wear straps across their chests, also mentioned by Martín Hernández (2022, 44), which correspond to the usual iconography of charioteers (Grosser 2021). This detail fits well if the figures are understood either as the targeted charioteers³⁴ themselves or as the spirits of dead charioteers invoked to carry out the curse. The designation “skeleton” perhaps speaks more strongly for the former, since the victims of curses are often depicted in corpse-like or mummy-like form.³⁵ In any case, the two smaller figures were clearly conceived as a subordinate pair in relation to the animal-headed figure.

The large figure is best understood as Seth. Martín Hernández (2022, 43-5) also argues for this identification and shows that the evidence points in this direction despite certain iconographic difficulties. In particular, the presence of the $\iota\omega\epsilon\rho\beta\eta\theta$ /Sethian *logos*,³⁶ on the third *lamella*, together with the $\alpha\beta\epsilon\rho\alpha\mu\epsilon\nu\theta\omega$ palindrome, and their repetition in the first solar hymn (ll. 116-19), strongly supports this reading. To this may be added the invocation below the figures, which places the animal-headed figure in close relation to the spirit of the cat. The link between the two is best explained by their shared mythological role in Egyptian tradition, where both Seth and the cat can appear as defenders of the solar barque against Apophis.³⁷

33 For the pairing of two smaller figures with a larger one in curse tablets, see, e.g., DTAud 151, 155A, 159B, 167A = Wünsch 1898, nos 12, 16A, 20B, 29A.

34 On DTAud 238 and 239, two target-charioteers are depicted holding whips in their right hands, with their names inscribed above them, closely resembling the design of the present image.

35 E.g., DTAud 155, 156, 159 = Wünsch 1898, nos 16, 17, 20. A subjugating spell in PGM IX/GEMF 73 may also depict the curse’s target as a skeletal figure.

36 These are typically curses and love spells invoking Seth. More on the *logos*, see Suppl.Mag. II 95, commentary to ll. 8-12; Martín Hernández 2019. For a complete list of occurrences of the *logos*, see Martín Hernández, Torallas Tovar 2014. On Seth in the magical papyri, see Dieleman 2005, 130-8.

37 On Seth as the protector of the solar barque, see Dieleman 2005, 134; te Velde 1967, 99-108. The idea of the fusion is also mentioned in Koenig 2017, 81 and Dosoo 2022, 359 fn. 89 (who highlights two articles exploring the possible connection between the cat and Seth, partly based on the depiction of the Apophis-slaying cat with prominent donkey ears).

3.3 The Invocation Below the Figures

The invocation below the figures preserves another clear sign of editorial reworking. In its present form, the passage consists of an invocation to the cat-faced being (1/a), an inserted invocation to Seth-Typhon (2), and a resumed command to the cat (1/b). The structure is significant, because the Seth section interrupts an already complete invocation and is followed by wording that restores the earlier flow of the passage.

The sequence can be described briefly as follows: in ll. 82-6, the first invocation addresses the cat-faced god and ends with the expected request formula (“fulfil such-and-such deed for me”) together with a closing mark. The next line begins a new invocation to Seth-Typhon, introduced by a *coronis*, although much of the previous line remains empty.³⁸ After this, the text returns to the cat-faced god and repeats the request that it should accomplish the petitioner’s aim (ll. 90-3).

The text runs as follows:

Invocation 1/a:

[ἐγέ]ι[ρ]όν μοι σεαυτόν
αἰλ]ουροπ[ρόσω]πος μέγας, οἵακα κρατῶν [θεοῦ], ποιή-
σ[ο]ν τὸ δεῖνα [π]ρᾶγμα κοινά ἀπὸ τῆς σήμερο[ν] ἡμέρας
ἤδη ἤδη, τ]αχὺ συντέλῃς μοι τὸ δεῖνα πρᾶγμα,
κοινά ὅσα θέλεις. [closing mark]

Invocation 2:

[*coronis*] [κρ]αταῖ Σ[η]θ Τυφῶν, καὶ ἀνόμησον τῷ σθέν-
[ει σ]ου καὶ [κα]τάστρεψον τὸ δεῖνα πρᾶγμα ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τοῦ[τω]
[...] τιῶρι, ὥς ἂν κελεύσω τῷ εἰδῶλῳ σου,
ὅτι ὁρ[κί]ζω σε Μασκελλί Μασκελλῶ λόγος. [συν-

Invocation 1/b:

τ]έλῃς[ο]ν μοι τοῦτο τὸ δεῖνα πρᾶγμα ἐπὶ τῇ μορφῇ σου,
[αἰ]λουρ[οπ]ρόσωπος ἄγγελος, συντέλῃς μοι τὸ
δεῖνα πρᾶγμα, κοινά καὶ τὰ ἐξῆς γραφόμενα εἰς ἄλ-
[λα]ς χρεῖα[ς].

Invocation 1/a:

Rouse yourself for me,
great cat-faced one, who holds control over the tiller [of the god]. Do
such-and-such deed (usual) from today
immediately, immediately, quickly, quickly. Fulfil such-and-such
[deed for me
(usual, as what you wish). [closing mark]

38 The presence of the *spatium* was also noted by Love 2017, 181 fn. 49.

Invocation 2:

[*coronis*] Mighty Seth Typhon, act unlawfully with your power
and subvert such-and-such deed in this place
[...], however I command your image (τῷ εἰδώλῳ σου)
because I conjure you Maskelli Maskellō *logos*.

Invocation 1/b:

Fulfil
such-and-such deed for me in your form,
cat-faced *angelos*, fulfil
such-and-such deed for me (usual), and the following written
things for other purposes.
(ll. 82-93)

The layout strongly suggests that the Seth invocation is secondary. The end of 1/a is marked not only by the standard closing formula, but also by the scribal signs and by the beginning of a new textual unit on the following line.³⁹ This formatting choice always signifies a distinct separation in the text, suggesting either a shift to a new process within the ritual or the beginning of a new ritual altogether. In our case, this indicates that a section has been inserted that does not appear in the text from which it was copied.

This conclusion also helps explain the relation between text and image. The Seth invocation refers to Seth's *eidōlon* (l. 89), which likely understood as the animal-headed figure on the *lamella*. The insertion therefore seems to belong to the same phase of reworking as the illustration: the text invokes the figure that the *lamella* presents visually.

The placement of the three *lamellae* inside the cat, inscribed with the invocation and request, recalls ritual practices in which magical objects are deposited in the mouth or grave of the dead in order to get help from their spirit. In the *Ritual of the Cat*, however, the dead body is not simply used, but produced for this purpose. It is also not a typical corpse: the cat is identified as the form of the Sun, and it was therefore likely understood as more powerful than that of an ordinary *nekydaimōn* (spirit of the dead). The curse is thus deposited in a violently killed sacred animal whose efficacy rests on both its death and its solar-divine character. The cat's body also serves as a medium through which further assistance from the netherworld can be invoked.

39 The same signs appear in the next section, in col. 5, ll. 9-10, separating the two solar hymns.

4 The Two Solar Prayers

The end of the recipe provides another clear case of layering. Two prayers to the Sun appear in succession, each preceded by instructions to hold cat's whiskers as a phylactery. Their wording is almost identical, with one key difference: the first prayer is to be recited at sunset, while the second at sunrise:

ἐλθὼν πρὸς κατὰδυσιν τοῦ ἡλίου λέγε [κρ]ατῶν τὰς τρίχας τοῦ αἰλούρου τὰς ἐκ δεξιῶν [κ]αὶ ἐξ εὐωνύμων τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ ὥσει φυλακτήριον. διάνυσσον τῷ ἡλίῳ λέγων τὸν λόγον. λόγος.

Turn toward the sunset and recite the following while holding the whiskers of the cat from the right and left sides of its mouth as a phylactery. Finish by saying this prayer to the Sun. The prayer. (ll. 94-8)

ἐλθὼν δὲ ἐν τῷ τόπῳ, ἐν ᾧ πράσσεις, ἔχων τὰς μεγάλας τρίχας τοῦ [αἰλο]ύρου τὰς ἐκ δεξιῶν [κ]αὶ ἐξ εὐωνύμων τοῦ [στό]ματος αὐτοῦ ὥσει φυλακτήριον. διάνυσσον [τῷ ἡλίῳ] ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ λέγων τὸν λόγον. λόγος.

Go to the place where you are performing the ritual, while holding the whiskers of the cat from the right and left sides of its mouth as a phylactery. Finish by saying this prayer [to the Sun] at sunrise. The prayer. (ll. 124-8)

The two prayers are clearly separated. Although the second begins on the same line on which the first ends (col. 5, l. 9), a distinct *spatium* separates them, accompanied by the same closing mark and *coronis* that earlier in the recipe indicate textual division (col. 4, ll. 4-5). The closing signs suggest that the distinction is not merely a division of ritual phases but pointing to an editorial modification to an earlier recipe. It is likely that the second prayer was inserted from a different source, and the editor intended to mark this distinction.

Their content supports this conclusion. The first prayer remains closely tied to the rest of the recipe: it recalls the enemy's offence against the god, includes the idea of halting the solar barque, and repeats *voces magicæ* already used earlier in the text. The second prayer, however, is entirely different: its focus is on various creation myths from Egyptian cosmology, such as the birth of the sun god from an egg or as a child, as well as his self-creation from the primordial ocean. It also incorporates elements from other cultures, including expressions familiar from Greek descriptions of Apollo-Helios ("you who love divination", "golden-faced", "golden-rayed") and names

associated with Jewish tradition, such as Iaō and the names of archangels.⁴⁰

In both cases, the prayer is accompanied by the same temporary protective device: whiskers taken from the right and left sides of the cat's mouth and held as a phylactery.⁴¹ This shared ritual gesture places both prayers within the same ritual framework, even though the second seems to be a later addition.

5 Conclusion

The *Ritual of the Cat* draws on traditional Egyptian religious concepts and techniques, such as *hesiēs*, the various forms of Re, and animal mummification, while adapting them to a new cultural setting and a different audience. The spread of Roman chariot racing created a new context for curses of this kind, and the recipe shows how an older ritual could be reshaped for that purpose. At the same time, the text contains surprisingly few direct references to charioteers. Apart from the illustration on the third *lamella*, only the papyrus wrapped around the cat includes drawings and inscriptions connected with them, whereas the prayers themselves usually speak more generally of enemies. I therefore argue that the recipe preserves a more general curse ritual that was adapted for competition-related purposes while retaining its basic structure. The central elements of the rite – the use of the cat, the accusation against the enemies, and the prayers – remain unchanged, while only certain sections, referred to as “such-and-such deed”, were adjusted to fit the intended aim. This structure also allows for the substitution of other targets or purposes, making the curse easily adaptable for other harmful magical acts, a list of which is provided at the end of the recipe.

My analysis also suggests that the extant form of the recipe is the result of editorial reworking. The arrangement of the figures on the third *lamella* – with two of them pushed into the margins and overlapping with the text – together with the added notes concerning the skeletal figures, strongly suggests that the illustration did not belong to the version of the recipe from which the text was copied. It is better understood as a newly created composition assembled from different source(s) by a ritual expert. The same applies to the inserted invocation to Seth-Typhon and to the second solar prayer,

40 The incorporation of hymns inspired by various cultures, often with distinct tones compared to the rest of the recipe, is a common feature of the magical papyri. On the ‘religious plurality’ of the hymns in the magical papyri, see Bortolani 2016.

41 For an analysis of the object type, see Takács 2024 with further literature. For a shorter list of recipes possibly describing such amulets, see Dosoo 2015, 390-2 and Faraone 2018, Appendix A: 263-5.

both of which preserve visible signs of secondary addition. The origin of the editorial markings, such as the closing sign and the *coronis*, remains uncertain: they may have been introduced by the scribe of the present manuscript, but they may also go back to a previous stage of transmission. In either case, the papyrus preserves clear traces of a process in which earlier material was supplemented, rearranged, and adapted.

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Abbreviations

DTAud = Audollent, A. (1904). *Defixionum tabellae quotquot innotuerunt tam in Graecis Orientis, quam in totius Occidentis partibus praeter Atticas, in Corpore Inscriptionum Atticarum editas*. Paris: A. Fontemoing.

GEMF = Faraone, C.A.; Torallas Tovar, S. (eds) (2022). *Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies: Text and Translation*, vol. 1. Berkeley: California Classical Studies. California Classical Studies 9. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9650x69r>.

PGM = Preisendanz, K.; Henrichs, A. (Hrsgg) (1973-74). *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*. 2 Bde. Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner.

Suppl.Mag. = Daniel, R.W.; Maltomini, F. (Hrsgg) (1990-92). *Supplementum Magicum*. 2 Bde. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag. Abhandlungen der Rheinisch-Westphälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 16. Sonderreihe Papyrologica Coloniensis.

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Ritual Paraphernalia Toward a Modular Approach to Coptic Magic

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Abstract This article explores the redactional strategies through which ritual experts in late antique and early medieval Egypt articulated their textual products. It adopts what is here heuristically termed a ‘modular approach’, which treats magical texts as *assemblages* of discrete textual segments that could be extracted, recombined, and adapted to different redactional agendas. Drawing on selected case studies from Coptic ritual manuscripts, the article offers a new model for understanding scribal practice and the transmission of ritual knowledge.

Keywords Magic. Late antiquity. Redaction criticism. Oral-written transmission. Coptic papyri.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Redaction Criticism and the Modular Composition of Jewish and Christian Ritual Texts. – 3 Ritual Paraphernalia: A Meta-Analysis of Ritual Texts. – 4 Leiden, MS AMS 9: A Manual for Ritual Specialists? – 5 From Performance to Text: The Interface Between the Oral and the Written in Ancient Magical Practice. – 6 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

The surviving corpus of Coptic magical manuscripts from late antique and early medieval Egypt invites us into a world of ritual creativity. Ritual products – whether in the form of applied amulets or larger ritual handbooks – do not appear as rigid compositions, fixed once and for all by a monolithic authoritative tradition.¹ Rather, they reveal the handiwork of ritual experts who worked with shared ritual materials arranged in flexible and inventive ways. Formulae, invocations, and narrative vignettes recur across manuscripts, yet rarely in identical arrangements. What confronts us is not a stable literary form but a repertoire of ritual paraphernalia, continuously reconfigured to meet the demands of shifting ritual aims and clientele.

This paper develops a new analytical framework for approaching this fluid textual landscape, which I term ‘modular approach’. This heuristic model approaches magical texts as *assemblages* of discrete modular units – here referred to as ‘frame units’ – that ritual specialists could differently manipulate (e.g., combine, juxtapose, expand, shrink) to articulate their own brand of ritual products. These frame units form the textual building blocks of a ritual text and can range from compact and recurring brief sequences of names (e.g., the Bêth- series, the couplet Ōrphamiêl/Ō(r)pha) and scriptural excerpts (e.g., the Gospel *Incipits*), to longer and more complex invocations (e.g., the *Adjuration of the Nine Guardians*, the *Invocation of Baktiotha*) and refrain formulae (e.g., the *Binding of the Sky* refrain) – all of which will be discussed in greater detail below. I here heuristically posit that these modular units exhibit a spectrum of variation that may be grouped under two broad categories: ‘intertextual development’ and ‘idiolectic variation’. The former encompasses textual divergences that arise on a structural level – through processes of expansion, contraction, or repositioning of textual sequences – while the latter accounts for lexical or stylistic alterations, reflecting the personal repertoires and preferences of individual ritual experts.

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their incisive feedback and to Joseph Sanzo, Raʿanan Boustán, and Dylan Burns for their insightful comments at various stages in the development of the article and on earlier versions of the manuscript. This article develops and substantially revises material originally presented in the Author’s doctoral dissertation, *Ecclesiastical Magic: The Emergence of a Christian Ritual Discourse in Late Antiquity* (Ca’ Foscari University, 2026). The categories employed throughout it are offered as heuristic instruments rather than definitive propositions and are presented in the hope that they may stimulate further discussion and refinement. This said, *errata, si quae occurrent, benevolus lector*.

1 For the purposes of this study, ‘magic’ and ‘ritual’ are used interchangeably, without prejudice to the broader theoretical debates surrounding these categories.

The modular approach draws theoretical support from biblical redaction criticism, particularly from the analytical insight that the study of redactional strategies in scriptural traditions requires approaching texts as organized in discrete unit-based segments, the *pericopae*. At the same time, the modular approach builds upon more recent scholarly discourse on late antique ritual texts, including Sanzo's engagement with the Gospel *Incipits* tradition, Schäfer's modular configuration of the Hekhalot corpus into redactional units labeled 'macroforms' and 'microforms', and Shaked's differentiation between 'formula' and 'spell' in the Aramaic incantation bowls – to which I will return in the discussion below. These approaches to textual sources, though developed for different literary corpora, share the assumption that texts are organized into clusters of modular units that can be easily extracted and recombined with other sections. By analyzing the ways in which textual modules have been arranged, combined, and juxtaposed, a modular approach may illuminate dynamics of redaction and transmission in magical manuscripts. When examined both diachronically and synchronically, frame units indeed reveal a spectrum of variability that is indicative of their strategic deployment to suit diverse spell formats and ritual objectives. Through close analysis of selected case studies, I here argue that ritual practitioners, operating as 'cut-and-paste' redactors, organized their texts by assembling, modeling, and adapting a vast range of frame units that constituted the ritual paraphernalia of a shared cultural world.² Far from being simple copyists, their operative crafting logic shows that the 'cutting' was oriented by the hand of distinct authoritative traditions and the 'paste' was tailored to produce distinct ritual effects.

On a broader level, these compositional logics further invite us to speculate that the scribal world in which ritual experts moved was one where ritual texts emerged through a performative process that combined oral strategies of memorization with the adaptation of pre-selected texts stored in template-style archives. One crucial piece of evidence in this respect is Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, MS AMS 9 (=PCM I 11; KYP M 171), a sixth-to-eighth-century Coptic papyrus codex whose contents, format, and layout suggest its use by ritual experts as a working manual for storing and copying relevant ritual frame units. Ultimately, the mixed model advanced here offers a novel perspective on late antique and early medieval magic as a performative genre situated at the intersection of oral and written modes of transmission.

2 The rubric 'ritual paraphernalia' is employed here in a metaphorical sense to designate the repertoire of textual resources available to ritual specialists. Much as physical paraphernalia furnish the material means by which an activity is carried out, these textual resources – preserved in the form of frame units – could be selected, adapted, and recombined in the production of ritual texts.

2 Redaction Criticism and the Modular Composition of Jewish and Christian Ritual Texts

What I here designate as the ‘modular approach’ draws much of its analytical capacity from biblical redaction criticism.³ Like this latter scholarly approach, it seeks to reconstruct the logics that orient redactional activity by observing how ritual practitioners select, arrange, and adapt a shared repertoire of textual materials organized into textual segments – conventionally labeled *pericopae* in this scholarly tradition. In this particular case, redaction is understood as an interpretive act rather than as a purely mechanical process of transmission. At the same time, however, the modular approach diverges in important ways from classical redaction criticism as traditionally practiced in Old and New Testament studies. Redaction criticism has often been guided – explicitly or implicitly – by philological concerns oriented toward the reconstruction of earlier textual strata and, in some cases, toward the retrieval of an ‘original’ or least contaminated version of a literary unit. Even when emphasizing theological creativity, redaction-critical analyses generally operate on the assumption that redactional activity takes place upon relatively discrete textual traditions or source materials. The ritual sources examined in this article, however, sit uneasily with these assumptions. Both synchronic and diachronic analysis reveals that ritual practitioners were generally less concerned with preserving fixed textual forms than with actively recombining circulating materials in response to shifting ritual aims. Textual variants and the repositioning of textual modules, rather than signaling corruption or degeneration, appear to have been constitutive of ritual creativity.

With specific reference to magical sources, a view of these materials as organized into module-based texts has already been alluded to by scholars of ancient magic. For instance, Sanzo has engineered a meaningful theoretical approach for analyzing scriptural *pericopae* featuring in late antique ritual amulets (Sanzo 2014). Sanzo’s model operates on the working hypothesis that the extant amuletic evidence from late antique Egypt shows an approach to Scriptures (i.e., the Bible and the Gospels) based on meronymic relations between the wholes and their respective parts (Sanzo 2014, 24-53). As Sanzo has further detailed, this part-whole relation is organized around a partonomic structure that moves from the general to the specific. Accordingly, the Bible occupies the apex of the hierarchy as the encompassing whole, while its constituent sub-corpora (e.g., the Gospels and Psalms) appear at subordinate

³ For a general overview on redaction criticism, see for instance Barton 1992; Collins 2011.

levels. Down this hierarchy are the sections of each biblical book and, yet at a lower level, selected chapters, paragraphs, and sentences from a biblical work. Sanzo has meaningfully illustrated the extent to which this taxonomic structure becomes instrumental in approaching scriptural *incipits* in amulets from late antique Egypt. Scriptural *incipits* in Egyptian amulets are consistent with the fact that, in Late Antiquity, many individuals encountered the Bible through formats such as incipient forms of lectionaries and other collections of scriptural excerpts intended for liturgical performance; that is, compilations of portions of scriptural texts (e.g., portions sourced from the Gospels, from the Old Testament, from the Prophets, or from individual Psalms) collected and organized around a common theme (Sanzo 2014, 30-2). The way Gospel *Incipits* are employed in amulets thus presupposes a textual architecture built from thematic units designed to be extracted and arranged alongside other sections:

I contend that in late antique Egypt the scriptural ‘wholes’ containing ritual power were limited to individual thematic units. These units could range partonomically from entire psalms or narrative/apophthegmatic items to single verses or phrases and could be ‘tapped’ in various ways, from direct citation to visual depiction to creed-like summaries. (Sanzo 2014, 26)

Sanzo’s extensive examination of the occurrences of MT PS 91:1 (LXX Ps 90:1) along with the *incipits* of the Gospels in magical sources lends support to this view, thereby illuminating how these scriptural passages were extensively employed in a range of different combinations by ritual specialists (Sanzo 2014, 47-52). At a more general level, Sanzo’s analysis attests to how a module-based view of Scriptures betrays a specific bent of the mind of late antique ritual specialists (Sanzo 2014, 70-2).

Looking outside Egypt, Schäfer’s modular approach to the Hekhalot – a post-Talmudic corpus of adjuration and visionary materials revolving around the depiction of the divine chariot (*merkavah*) as portrayed in Ezekiel’s vision by the Chebar river (Ezek. 1) – has highlighted the need for an investigative model grounded in a partonomic view of textual composition, structured into larger and smaller redactional units named ‘macroforms’ and ‘microforms’ (Schäfer 1983).⁴ Schäfer’s model emerged from the recognition that the deep divergences among surviving textual witnesses of this tradition resist reconstruction of a single *Urtext*, instead pointing to a compositional logic oriented toward creative recombination. More recently, Swartz has sharpened this insight

⁴ For a general overview on Hekhalot, see for instance Boustán 2007.

by fostering broader reflections relative to the logics that drive the performance of scribal profiles behind such practices, characterizing Hekhalot scribes as ‘cut-and-paste’ redactors who continually extracted and rearranged textual materials that amounted to the formation of a shared cultural world (Swartz 2018, 200-20). Swartz’s formulation thus extends Schäfer’s corpus-specific model into a broader scribal habitus that resonates strongly with recent scholarly work on the Aramaic incantation bowls, where a comparable concern with the organization of ritual texts into discrete textual units may already be observed in Shaked’s analysis:

The text of a bowl will be called an *incantation*. An incantation may consist of one or more segments (which we shall call ‘spells’), and these can turn up on occasion in other incantations as well. A spell reflects, with greater or lesser fidelity, what I should like to call a *formula*. This term denotes an *ideal structure of a text* which the practitioner aims at reproducing. A formula may be envisioned as the text that could have been placed in a carefully written model book of spells, even though no such composition is known to have existed. (Shaked 2011, 188)

Although framed in different nomenclature (spells, formulas, and incantations), Shaked’s configuration of bowl texts exhibits a logic broadly compatible with the modular approach. Particularly significant is his distinction between individual spells and the larger incantations into which they are incorporated, a relationship that similarly presupposes the circulation and recombination of discrete textual units. Further in this vein, Shaked captures the significance of this part-whole logic when he says:

A formula is thus a construct, not a concrete text. Borrowing an idea from linguistics, a formula would represent the *langue*, while a spell, which constitutes the performance of a formula, corresponds to the *parole* of the text. (Shaked 2011, 189)

By invoking the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole*, Shaked operates on the assumption that ritual products originate from the creative configuration of materials drawn from a shared textual repertoire – namely, the *langue* in Saussure’s discourse. This latter point comes into sharper focus in Gross’s and Manekin-Bamberger’s recent analysis of modularity in the bowl incantations (Gross, Manekin-Bamberger 2022). In a recent joint study, the two scholars have introduced the category ‘cluster bowls’ to designate a subset of incantation formulae that avoid invocations of foreign deities or formulations resistant to clear Jewish identification. Instead, these bowls string together clusters of texts sourced from rabbinic and

para-rabbinic materials, including liturgical formulae, halakhic discourse, and mystical traditions. This compositional strategy is not haphazard. Rather, it reflects a deliberate attempt to harness the authoritative power of specific textual clusters in order to augment the ritual potency of the bowl. Let's consider, for instance, the text of Moussaieff 164:

(1) Bound and sealed are you who are the Lilith, the evil tormentor. Making for your name. So, for your name I am making [this magical act]. May there be healing from (2) heaven for the house of Abandad son of Batgada. At your right Uziel, at your left Susiel, in front of you Michael, behind you Hananel, above you (3) the presence of God [...] (4) In the name of YHWH YHWH the God of Israel whom thousands upon thousands (5) will serve before him and myriads upon myriads will attend before him [...] (6) In the name of Zahuvari YHWH the God of Israel and in the name of Zabudiel YHWH the God of Israel, and in the name of Metatron the Prince of the Countenance. For the name of the servant is similar to the name of his master, (7) for it is said: "for my name is within him" [...] If you appear as a pig I adjure and put you under oath by means of (9) YHW YHW. If you appear as a ram I adjure and put you under oath "'By *Alef-Daleth*' or 'by *Yod-He*' or 'by *Shaddai*' or 'by *Sabaoth*' or 'by the Merciful and Gracious' or 'by him that is long suffering and of great kindness', and by any substituted name". If you appear as a dog I adjure (10) and put you under oath by means of "I am that I am" [...] (12) And if you do not flee and go out from the house of Abandad son of Batgada and from the dwelling of Sami daughter of Parsita his wife, you demons and afflictions and satans and shadows, you shall all be under the ban of Rabbi Joshua bar Peraḥia, amen amen selah. (Gross, Manekin-Bamberger 2022, 8-9)

As the two scholars have detailed, the bowl incorporates textual clusters from different sources, including a quasi-verbatim quotation from the Talmud (bSan 38b) and the Mishnah (mShev 4:13), along with the above-mentioned ban of Joshua bar Peraḥia, which is here severed from its usual formulaic context and stitched into the bowl's cluster structure. Notably, while Gross and Manekin-Bamberger do not foreground the modularity of these clusters as a primary analytical category, their study nonetheless underscores how the act of 'clustering' served as an operative logic of ritual composition.

In dialogue with these scholarly insights, this section has attempted to situate the heuristic designation 'modular approach' within the broader scholarly discourse on late antique Jewish and Christian texts. The present model is therefore not intended to replace the approaches developed by Sanzo, Schäfer, Shaked, and others, but to

provide a common heuristic vocabulary for describing comparable compositional dynamics across ritual corpora. While these scholars have identified analogous phenomena within particular traditions, the modular approach seeks to articulate a broader framework for analyzing the extraction, recombination, and adaptation of ritual materials. As I will show below, magical literature emerges less as a fixed textual tradition than as a flexible *assemblage* of materials drawn from a shared ritual repertoire. These recurring textual building blocks will be here designated as ‘frame units’, a term whose rationale and analytical significance will be developed in the following section, which turns to materials drawn from the expansive corpus of Coptic ritual texts.

3 Ritual Paraphernalia: A Meta-Analysis of Ritual Texts

My investigation into the range of redactional strategies deployed by ritual experts now requires us to grapple with the notion of ‘frame unit’ as applied to magical sources. Within the context of the present study, the term frame unit designates a recognizable textual configuration that circulates as a reusable segment within ritual literature and is subject to processes of redactional manipulation. Frame units may operate at different textual scales, ranging from recurring sequences of names (e.g., the Bêth- series) to extended invocations or scriptural excerpts. Frame units should therefore be understood as heuristic categories whose boundaries may remain fluid. What distinguishes such units is their capacity to recur across different artifacts and textual contexts while retaining a recognizable structure, even as they undergo variation in length, wording, or placement within a spell. In more practical terms, a frame unit can therefore be identified whenever a cluster of textual materials appears in multiple ritual sources in comparable form and is capable of being extracted, rearranged, or recombined with other textual segments. The main advantage of this definition lies in its ability to describe the constituent parts of a ritual text without relying on narrower categories such as formula, spell, *historiola*, or adjuration. Given the frequent overlap between these rubrics, identifying a single term capable of designating a specific portion of ritual discourse is often difficult. The category of frame unit therefore encompasses a wide range of textual materials, including invocations such as the *Adjuration of the Nine Guardians* (see below) and the *Invocation to Baktiotha* (see below), refrains such as the *Binding of the Sky* (see below), as well as scriptural and apocryphal passages such as the *Jesus-Abgar Correspondence*, Ps 90 (91), and the Gospel *Incipits*. This working definition of frame unit builds on Foley’s analysis of the Serbian healing-charm tradition known

as *basma* (see Foley 1995, 136-81; Foley, Halpern 1978) – a ritual performance that was preserved and passed down by the female part of the classical Serbian extended families, the *zadruga*. As Foley illustrates, frame units constitute the discrete textual sections that, arranged together, compose the structure of the ritual performance uttered by the female ritual specialist, the *bajalice*. Frame units exhibit variability contingent upon the performer's discretion in arranging and deploying his repertoire of formulae. Their variability manifests in dimensions of length and placement, in prosodic and semantic nuance, and in the shifting ritual functions they assume within the spell. The concept of frame unit employed here extends this insight to the study of Coptic ritual texts.

Armed with this definition of frame unit, I now turn to the principles governing its variation. For heuristic purposes, these variations may be grouped under two broad categories: 'intertextual development' and 'idiolectic variation'. Starting from the first rubric, 'intertextual development' designates variations that arise through the rearrangement, expansion, contraction, or conflation of frame units. These redactional strategies may be observed in my first case study, the abovementioned *Adjuration of the Nine Guardians*. This ritual invocation features both in London, British Museum, EA 10391 (=Hay 1; KYP M 302) – an eighth-to-ninth-century magical formulary from Upper Egypt (Thebes?) – and in the later (tenth century CE) magical handbook P. Heid. Kopt. 685 (=PCM I 25; KYP M 186) from the Heidelberg Magical Library, where it appears after a version of the *Prayer of Mary 'at Bartos'*.⁵ The Nine Guardians are invoked for protecting the Holy Trinity, with each triad overseeing a distinct person – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. According to their representation in P. Heid. Kopt. 685, the guardians hold crosses in their hands, and their semblance is adapted to the guarded component of the Trinity: anthropomorphic figures protect the Father and the Son, whereas bird-like figures defend the Holy Spirit – likely echoing its appearance as a dove. In the synopsis below, I discuss the two versions of this ritual invocation:

⁵ On the Heidelberg Magical Library, see Gardner, Johnston 2023, 51-63; Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 259-63. For a general overview on the *Prayer of Mary 'at Bartos'*, see Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 287-9.

Hay 1

‘Amanou, Phourat, Phourani, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the almighty; Bêth, Bêth, Bêthai, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the beloved son, Abiout, Karnabot, Karnabiël, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the holy spirit. (O’Connell 2022, 87, ll. 1-5; underlining added)

P. Heid. Kopt. 685

Manix, Phourat, Phouranei, O Three Guardians who protect the body <of> the Father Almighty, may you (s.) protect my body, me, Iōsēph, son <of> Paraseu! Abiouth, Garnabiouth, Garnabiël, O Three Guardians who protect the body of Jesus Christ, the son <of> God, may you (s.) protect my body, me, NN, child of NN! Bêth, Bêthaf, Bêthaei, O Three Guardians who protect the body of the Holy Spirit, may you (s.) protect <my> body, me, Iōsēph, son <of> Paraseu, yea, yea! (Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 313, ll. 1-10; underlining added)

Notably, the two textual units present the invocation to the Nine Guardians in a different order, as Hay 1 follows the series: “Amanou, Phourat, Phourani, Bêth, Bêth, Bêthai, Abiout, Karnabot, Karnabiël”. By contrast, P. Heid. Kopt. 685 invokes them in a different sequence: “Manix, Phourat, Phouranei, Abiouth, Garnabiouth, Garnabiël, Bêth, Bêthaf, Bêthaei”.⁶ Furthermore, it is noteworthy to highlight how the two redactional units amalgamate and organize the entreaty to the Nine Guardians with other identifiable frame units. Specifically, Hay 1 combines the angelic adjuration with a liturgical-style invocation, creating a seamless and cohesive continuum:

Amanou, Phourat, Phourani, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the almighty; Bêth, Bêth, Bêthai, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the beloved son, Abiout, Karnabot, Karnabiël, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the holy spirit and the remnant that lies on the holy table of the son and the sign of the lamb, I beg and I entreat you and your names and your powers and your images and your amulets, that you leave every place where you are and come to me, to the place where I am, I, NN, and you come upon my offering, this one that lies before me, NN, yes, yes, quickly, quickly! (O’Connell 2022, 87, ll. 1-10; underlining added)

By contrast, the same adjuration in P. Heid. Kopt. 685 figures in a larger and more sophisticated format, centered around a crucifixion

⁶ On the series Bêth, Bêth, Bêthai, see the commentary in Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 311.

scene and a description of God's gargantuan body, interspersed with other identifiable frame units:

I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the first labour pang that Mary suffered until she gave birth to Christ, the Son of God that you (s.) protect NN, child of NN, yea, quickly! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the suffering that the son of God experienced upon the wood <of> the cross that you (s.) protect the body <of> NN, the son <of> NN, yea, yea, quickly! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the five nails which pierced the hands and feet of Jesus Christ, the Son of God – whose names are Sôtôr, Aretô, Tenêt, Ôtera, Rôtas – that you (s.) watch over the body of NN, child of NN, yea, quickly! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, <by> the vinegar and the gall that Jesus, the Son of God, tasted when he was upon the cross, that you (s.) protect NN, child of NN, yea, yea! I adjure you, Nine Guardians, by the three sounds that Jesus cried out until <he> gave the spirit <into> the hands of the good Father, that you (s.) watch over NN, child of NN, yea! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the wound <from> the spear which was thrust in the right side of Jesus, the Son of God, when he was upon the cross – water and blood poured out – that you (s.) protect NN, child of NN, yea! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the three teardrops which came from the eyes of the good Father upon the head of his son, Jesus, when he was upon the cross, that <you> watch over NN, child of NN, yea, quickly! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the holy remains that were placed upon them, the body and the blood of Jesus, the Son of God, in the Church of <the> Firstborn in the heavens, that you protect <NN>! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by Ôpha, the body of the Father, and Ôrphamiël, the great finger on the right hand of the Father, and Abrasax, who measures the right hand of the Father, that you (s.) protect the body <of> NN, child of NN, yea, yea, quickly! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the two hands of the Father Almighty, whose names are Andramiël, which is his right, Drakhaël, which is his left, that you watch over NN, child of NN, yea! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the two feet of the Father Almighty, whose names are Thaôth, which is his right, Thaôtha, which is his left, that <you> watch over NN, child of NN, yea, quickly! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the four pillars that bear heaven, whose names are Sêt, Sêntas, Sêntalalas, Sêntalalia, that you protect the body <of> NN, child of NN, yea! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by these blessed names, which are on the right side of the altar of the Father, which are Sabaoth, Mêthêmôn, Soumithion, Perikhê, Akramata, Taektôr, Fmiël, Santalalia, may you protect NN, child of NN, yea! (Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 313-17; underlining added)

The observed redactional interventions strongly indicate that the copyists of the spells purposefully stylized their materials to accommodate the ritual format of their compositions. This adaptation serves the dual purpose of fitting the prescribed ritual structure and effectively conveying a distinct ritual thrust. Notably, the redactors of P. Heid. Kopt. 685 created their own brand of the *Adjuration of the Nine Guardians* on behalf of a certain Iôsêph son of Paraseu.⁷ The subsequent crucifixion scene and depiction of God's gargantuan body emerges as a balanced and negotiated conflation of ritual materials - including the widespread satôr formula and the couplet Ōrphamiêl/Ō(r)pha⁸ - skillfully adapted into a coherent continuum. In the case of Hay 1, which persists as an anonymous formulary, the copyist appears to have reconfigured the ritual position of this text by incorporating a liturgical-style invocation into the coda of the appeal to the Nine Guardians. This addition is introduced by the recurring connective formula, "I beg and I entreat you and your names and your powers and your images and your amulets".⁹ This sequence is particularly noteworthy as it often appears in crucial junctures of ritual manuscripts, suggesting its use as a form of refrain aimed at amalgamating two discrete frame units. With regards to Hay 1, for instance, the refrain sequence appears to sew into a coherent continuum the *Adjuration of the Nine Guardians* with the subsequent liturgical invocation:

Amanou, Phourat, Phourani, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the almighty; Bêth, Bêth, Bêthai, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the beloved son, Abiout, Karnabot, Karnabiêl, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the holy spirit and the remnant that lies on the holy table of the son and the sign of the lamb, I beg and I entreat you and your names and your powers and your images and your amulets, that you leave every place where you are and come to me, to the place where I am, I, NN, and you come upon my offering, this one that lies before me, NN, yes, yes, quickly, quickly! (O'Connell 2022, 87, ll. 1-10; underlining added)

⁷ On this personal name, see Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 313.

⁸ On the couplet Ōrphamiêl/Ō(r)pha, see the commentary in Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 205.

⁹ The recurrence of this connective phrase across multiple ritual contexts strongly suggests that it functioned as a linking sequence signaling the introduction of a new invocation. Dosoo has aptly described this type of connective formula with the term *horkômos* (Dosoo 2022, 131).

Another significant instance in which this refrain sequence appears to serve this use is found in an amulet preserved in the private collection of the antiquities dealer Robert Nahman (=ACM 62; KYP M 529).¹⁰ Notably, the refrain sequence here sews together the Gospel *Incipits* with a form of liturgical invocation directed to God's throne and his angelic retinue:

The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. Since many have taken in hand. The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I adjure you by your powers, your names, your holy potencies.
I adjure you by Orphamiel, the great finger of the Father.
I adjure you by the throne of the Father.
I adjure you by Orpha, the entire body of God.
I adjure you by the chariots of the sun.
I adjure you by the entire host of angels on high.
I adjure you by the seven curtains that are drawn over the face
[of God.
I adjure you by the seven cherubim who fan the face of God.
I adjure you by the great cherub of fire, whose name no one knows.
I adjure you by the great name of God, whose name no one
[knows except the camel.
I adjure you by the seven archangels.
I adjure you by the three words that Jesus spoke on the cross:
Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani – that is, *My God, my God, why have*
[you forsaken me?
(Meyer, Smith 1999, 115-16, ll. 14-34; underlining added)

Further evidence for the modular manipulation of ritual texts is provided by scribal markers that appear to signal points of insertion or personalization. For instance, Dosoo and Preininger have stressed how the frequent appearance of the Greek markers κοινά (usual) and ἀπολογία (request) may signal the juncture where the practitioner should personalize the text (Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 34). An illustrative case in point is the so-called 'Rossi's Tractate' (=P. Biblioteca Nazionale Turin, a.IV.27; PCM I 12; KYP M 283), a seventh-to-eighth-century Coptic papyrus codex wherein the marker ἀπολογία likely served as the placeholder signaling where the text is to be personalized by the ritual expert:

¹⁰ Edition in Drescher 1950.

Adōnaēl, the one who is over the coming in of the Father and his coming out! - request (ἀπὸλο) - so that you will come to me. (Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 183, ll. 5-7)¹¹

More explanatory in this respect may result P. Heid. Kopt. 683 (=PCM I 24; KYP M 312), an early medieval Coptic formulary part of the Heidelberg Magical Library. Notably, the marker $\overline{\pi\omicron}$ (for ἀπολογία) closes the previous frame unit plausibly indicating an insertion point to be adapted by the ritual expert to meet his client's specific needs:

I entreat and I invoke you again today, Salathiel, the Ethiopian of the Four Powers - whose names are these: Arax, Barax, Sax, Thax - the one who went to Eve when she was within the enclosure and deceived her mind so that she ate from the tree, and she stripped naked! Thus again I entreat you today that you go to NN, child of NN, and trouble her mind so that she walks on her feet and goes to <the> door of the house of NN, child of NN, and he puts his male lust into her female lust with a shameless face - request ($\overline{\pi\omicron}$) - yea, yea, quickly, quickly! (Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 285, ll. 26-36)

If intertextual development concerns the arrangement, recombination, or insertion of frame units, a second dimension of variation is what Foley has termed 'idiolectic variation' (Foley 1990, chs 5, 8). This rubric denotes the diverse solutions negotiated by individual ritual experts that draw on a shared lexical and performative repertoire yet enact it according to their own ritual idiom. A compelling case of idiolectic variation discussed by Foley involves the Slavic epic singers Mujo Kukurozović and Halil Bajgorić (Foley 1995, 155-6). In portraying the epic motif of the 'crying prisoner', the two poets diverge as they rely on different arsenals of formulaic expressions. While Kukurozović usually employs the two expressions "He cried out for a period of time" or "How he cried out, it was misfortune", Bajgorić propends for the formula "[name] cried out in prison". In turn, when they want to voice the length of the prisoner's sufferance, Kukurozović can either say "For three white days" or "A little week of day", while Bajgorić usually says "For two white days". As Foley points out, although the sentences share a number of features, they are framed according to the author's own arsenal of formulaic expressions. By analogy, idiolectic variation in the Coptic ritual corpus may be observed whenever different ritual specialists draw

11 On the Turin magical papyri see Vassallo, Carlig, Dosoo 2025.

on a shared linguistic and ritual tradition while expressing it through distinct formulaic preferences.

I will now illustrate how the principle of idiolectic variation as formulated by Foley can fruitfully be applied as an analytical tool to illuminate the variations of formulaic expressions in the frame units composing magical texts. For instance, let us examine the spectrum of idiolectic variation apparent in the *incipits* of the following magical manuscripts:¹²

P. Macquarie I 1

I give thanks to you
and I call upon you, the
Baktiotha: The great one,
who is very trustworthy;
the one who is lord over
the forty and the nine
kinds of serpents, they
all being servants to him,
namely, the ones who are
in the abyss and under (?)
the air, the deaf and the
blind, those who can hear
and (those) who can see.
It is your fear which is over
them all.
(Choat, Gardner 2014, 45,
ll. 1-10)

Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987

I invoke you today,
Baktiotha, the great one
above who is trustworthy,
who is trustworthy
over the ninth kinds of
serpents.
(Choat, Gardner 2014,
107-14, ll. 1-5)

P. Berlin 5527

I call upon you,
Bakthiouthah, the great
one who is trustworthy,
the one who is set over
the forty-nine races (and)
kinds, and all who are
servants to you; namely,
the deaf and the blind and
those who are in the air,
the ones that we know
and the ones we know
not: The lord over them
all.
(Choat, Gardner 2014,
115-17, ll. 1-5)

The three manuscripts here under scrutiny open with an invocation directed to an otherworldly being named Baktiotha.¹³ They exhibit cases of idiolectic variation as their copyists, despite relying on a very similar group of stock phrases, negotiated their own version of the invocation to the supernal being through diverse formulaic expressions, emphasis, and narrative coloring. By way of example, over the opening formula of P. Macquarie I 1, “I give thanks to you and I call upon you” (τιωμοτ ντοοκ λγω τιωω ερρι εροκ), Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987 and P. Berlin 5527 preserve the slightly differing variants “I invoke you today” (†επικαλει ἡμοκ ποου) and “I call upon you” (τιωω εληῖ οὔνη), which appear to have been adapted from each copyist’s own repertoire of expressions. In a similar vein, the epithets

12 P. Macquarie I 1 (=P. Macq. Inv. 375; KYP M 167) is a seventh-to-eighth-century Coptic parchment codex now housed in the Museum of Ancient Cultures at Macquarie University, Sydney. Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987 (=ACM 70; KYP M 282) is a Coptic papyrus roll dated between 501 and 650 CE. P. Berlin 5527 (=KYP M 194) is a sixth-to-seventh-century loose-leaf Coptic papyrus held in Berlin (Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung).

13 On this supernal being, see Dosoo 2016, 1237-44.

accompanying the angelic being Baktiotha are differently negotiated according to each copyist's own repertoires of formulaic expressions:

P. Macquarie I 1

ΠΝΟΘ ΕΤΝΖΟΤ ΕΜΑΤΕ ΠΕΤΟΝΧΟΕΙΣ ΕΖΡΑΙ
ΕΧΕΝ ΠΙΣΜΕ ΜΗ ΠΨΙC ΚΕΝΕC ΝΖΟΟΒ
ΕΥΟ ΝΝΖΕΜΑΛ ΝΑΒ ΤΗΡΟΥ ΒΙΝΕΤΥΟΟΠ
ΖΝΠΠΟΥΝ ΜΕΔΠΑΗΡ ΝΚΟΥΦΟC ΜΝΕΒΕΛΕ
ΝΕΤCΩΤΜ ΜΕΤΝΔΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΚΤΕΚΖΟΤΕ
ΤΕΤΖΙΧΩΟΥ ΤΗΡΟΥ

The great one, who is very trustworthy;
the one who is lord over the forty and
the nine kinds of serpents they all being
servants to him, namely, the ones who
are in the abyss and under (?) the air, the
deaf and the blind, those who can hear
and (those) who can see. It is your fear
which is over them all.
(Choat, Gardner 2014, 45, ll. 3-10)

Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987

ΠΙΝΟΘ ΕΤΖΝΖΟΤ ΝΤΠΕ ΕΤΝΖΟΤ ΕΖΡΑΙ ΕΧΝ
ΠΙΜΕΖΨΙC ΝΓΕΝΟC ΝΖΟΥ

The great one above who is trustworthy,
who is trustworthy over the ninth kinds
of serpents.
(Choat, Gardner 2014, 111, ll. 1-5)

P. Berlin 5527

ΠΙΝΑΘ ΕΤΑΙΝΑΖΤΙ ΠΗΖΕΤΚΗΖ ΕΖΛΗΪ ΕΙΧΕ
ΤΗΜΘ ΦΗΛΗ ΓΕΝΟC ΜΝΝΤΕΥΕ ΝΖΕΜΖΕΛ
ΛΕΚ ΤΗΛΟΥ ΒΙΝΙΚΟΥΧ ΜΕΝΙΒΛΗΟΥ
ΜΝΝΕΚΕΚΔΥΝΙ ΕΘΕΠΑΕΡ ΝΕΤΕΝCΔΥΝ
ΕΜΔΥ ΜΝΝΕΤΕΝCΔΥΝ ΕΜΔΥ ΕΝ ΠΘC
ΧΙΧΩΟΥ ΤΗΛΟΥ

The great one who is trustworthy, the
one who is set over the forty-nine races
(and) kinds and all who are servants to
you; namely, the deaf and the blind and
those who are in the air, the ones that
we know and the ones we know not: The
lord over them all.
(Choat, Gardner 2014, 116, ll. 1-5)

Alongside cases of idiolectic adaptations, the three manuscripts under scrutiny display further divergences that suggest their copyist were adapting the text under the pressure of diverse redactional agendas. P. Berlin 5527, for instance, preserves a markedly shorter version of the invocation. This abbreviation was most likely dictated by the physical constraints of the writing surface, since the text was copied on a loose-leaf papyrus sheet that originally carried a Greek receipt or list (Stern 1885). The copyist appears to have deliberately stylized the invocation so that it would fit within the limited space available. In this respect, P. Berlin 5527 provides valuable evidence for the circulation of the *Invocation of Baktiotha* as a portable textual unit that could be adjusted to the material circumstances of individual manuscripts. This flexibility becomes even more apparent in the subsequent frame unit preserved in P. Berlin 5527, which contains a shortened version of an invocation directed to Jesus Christ. Parallel forms of this invocation appear in both P. Macquarie I 1 and Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987, but there they survive in a considerably more elaborate form:

P. Macquarie I 1

the living Christ in heaven, the one who was begotten at the right side of the father; the Barbelo, the living wisdom (sophia) who was filled from the loins of the father and has begotten for us a perfect living Man. He was sent for us to the world; he gave his blood on behalf of the living and the dead, that he would redeem us from our sins.
(Choat, Gardner 2014, 45, ll. 10-22)

Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987

The one who was begotten within the father, until born for us a perfect Man through the angels and archangels; and he was sent to us upon the earth, and have his body and his blood for us all and raised the dead. Reach out and listen to us today: Sabaoth.
(Choat, Gardner 2014, 111, ll. 5-11)

P. Berlin 5527

lord, God: The one who begot the perfect Man. He gave his blood for every person, so that whoever ... has life. This one: May you give your blood upon NN ... NN.
(Choat, Gardner 2014, 116, ll. 5-12)

The comparison of these passages suggests the presence of a second layer of redactional activity, this time shaped by differing theological agendas. In P. Macquarie I 1, the birth of Christ is framed in language that bears a distinctly Sethian coloring. This is indicated by the reference to Barbelo (ⲃⲁⲣⲃⲉⲗⲱ) and to the ‘living wisdom’ (σοφία ἐστὼς), together with the phrase “who was filled from the loins of the Father” (ντⲁⲥⲙⲟϥⲥ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ϩⲏⲧⲕⲉⲥⲧⲉ ϣⲏⲧⲉ ⲙⲡⲱⲧ),¹⁴ which correlates with Sethian theological discourse (see Choat, Gardner 2014, 31-5).¹⁵ By contrast, the copyist of Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987 appears to have reshaped the invocation to align it with a different theological orientation. Here Christ is described as “begotten within the Father” (ⲡⲏⲧⲁϥⲉⲃⲟⲓ ⲏⲥⲁⲁⲟϥⲏ ⲏⲡⲱⲧ), a formulation that resonates more closely with Nicene Christological language and implicitly distances the text from the Sethian Barbelo-Sophia genealogy. A close comparable formulation is found, for instance, in the version of the Coptic Nicene creed found in MS M 574 (ninth century CE) from the Pierpont Morgan Library, which similarly designates Christ as “begotten within the father” (ⲡⲉϭⲡⲟ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ϩⲏⲡⲱⲧ) (Quecke 1970, 437, l. 13).¹⁶ In a similar vein, the copyist of P. Berlin 5527 appears to have rejected any Sethian coloring, likewise aligning the text to a theologically neutral account of the generation of Christ. Regardless of the precise theological stance governing the logics of these interventions, the

¹⁴ Cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I 30.2.

¹⁵ On Sethian gnosticism, see the fundamental study of Schenke 1974. See also Burns 2014. For a more general overview on the rubric ‘gnosticism’, see King 2003.

¹⁶ For a more general overview on the Nicene creed in the Coptic traditions, see Dossetti 1967, 123-31.

manuscripts together bring into sharper focus how the redactional activity of ritual specialists appears to have been oriented by diverse redactional agendas.

Another compelling case study that displays both instances of intertextual development and idiolectal variation is the refrain sequence which I here conventionally label the *Binding of the Sky*. Notably, this frame unit appears in both P. Heid. Kopt. 682 (=PCM I 23; KYP M 291) – a tenth-century Coptic curse part of the so-called Heidelberg Magical Library – and Chicago OIM E13767 (=ACM 85; KYP M 7),¹⁷ a tenth-to-eleventh-century paper amulet:

P. Heid. Kopt. 682

Binding of the sky
Binding of the earth
The binding of the mountain
The binding of the water

The binding of the finger-ring of the Father
The binding of the axe that is in the hand of flesh

The binding by which the Christ was bound upon the tree of the cross
(You will bind the virginity of NN. NN will not release her virginity until the virginity of the holy Virgin is released!)

The binding of the speech that Elias the prophet spoke upon the holy mountain; their names are these:
Chakouri Chabnei Chabna Shōrani Shouiona

May this be the binding that comes about upon the male organ of NN inside NN:
It will not be able to release the virginity of NN;
it will not become hard;
it will not be erect;
it will not ejaculate.
(Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 276-9, ll. 21-44)

Chicago OIM E13767

The binding of the sky
The binding of the earth
The binding of the air
The binding of the firmament
The binding of the Pleiades
The binding of the sun
The binding of the moon
The binding of the birds

The binding of the finger-ring of the Father

The binding by which Jesus the Christ was bound upon the tree of the cross

The binding of the seven words that Iliseoos (Elias?) spoke upon the head of the holy ones; their names are these:
Psuchou Ithouni Anashns Shourani Shouranai

May that binding come about upon the male organ of Pharaouō and his flesh, and you (pl.) dry it like a twig (?) and make it like a rag upon a dunghill:
His penis will not become hard;
it will not be erect;
it will not ejaculate.
(Meyer, Smith 1999, 178-9)

¹⁷ Coptic text in Stefanski 1939, 305-7.

As the two texts lay bare, at the heart of their internal affinities lies a pool of textual materials that form a quite identifiable frame unit. Notably, while it comprises the whole textual structure of the Chicago amulet, P. Heid. Kopt. 682 amalgamates it with other frame units and ritual instructions, thereby indicating that this open formula circulated as a pre-set textual module amenable to suit different adaptations. Notably, the Chicago manuscript served as an applied amulet crafted against a designated target – Pharaouō – while P. Heid. Kopt. 682 persists as an anonymous formulary. Following the logics of the principle of intertextual development, it is noteworthy to underscore how both texts display a slightly divergent list of ‘binding motifs’, which is notably expanded in the Chicago amulet:

P. Heid. Kopt. 682

Binding of the sky
Binding of the earth
The binding of the mountain
The binding of the water

The binding of the finger-ring of the Father
The binding of the axe that is in the hand of flesh
The binding by which the Christ was bound upon the tree of the cross.
(Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 277; underlining added)

Chicago OIM E13767

The binding of the sky
The binding of the earth
The binding of the air
The binding of the firmament
The binding of the Pleiades
The binding of the sun
The binding of the moon
The binding of the birds

The binding of the finger-ring of the Father
The binding by which Jesus the Christ was bound upon the tree of the cross.
(Meyer, Smith 1999, 178; underlining added)

At the same time, both texts slightly rearrange the binding motifs according to the principle of idiolectic variation. In this vein, a major difference in terms of repertoire of sentences can be seen in the second block, which presents divergent expressions, including differing *voces magicae*:

The binding of the speech that Elias the prophet spoke upon the holy mountain; their names are these: Chakouri Chabnei Chabna Shōrani Shouiona.
(Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 279; underlining added)

The binding of the seven words that Iliseoos (Elias?) spoke upon the head of the holy ones (sic); their names are these: Psuchou Ithouni Anashns Shourani Shouranai.
(Meyer, Smith 1999, 178; underlining added)

Finally, an additional adaptation of *Binding of the Sky* frame unit surfaces in Strasbourg Bibliothèque nationale P. K 135 (=ACM 87; KYP M 474) dated between the seventh and the ninth centuries CE.¹⁸ Similarly to the Chicago exemplar, this papyrus served as an applied curse targeting a certain Shinte, the son of Tanhēu:

It is upon Shinte, the son of Tanhēu, that I shall work in a binding procedure. Keuentious, Patilos, Kous, Makous, he who fell from his invisible chariot (?) and cast himself into the outer darkness; bind, make fast the flesh of Shinte, the son of Tanhēu! Bar, Bare, Apakēntōr, Methalai; bind, make fast the flesh of Shinte, the son of Tanhēu, unable to rise, unable to harden, unable to ejaculate. Shinte, the son of Tanhēu, let him become like a dead person, lying in a grave, and like a torn rag lying on the dungheap. He will not be able to have intercourse nor will he be able to release the virginity of Seine, the daughter of Moune, yea, yea, quickly, quickly! (KYP M 474; underlining added)

Notably, this specimen preserves a limited range of stock phrases, including the refrain rubric *μογρ* (bind), the sequence “unable to rise, unable to harden, unable to ejaculate”, and the sequence “let him become like a dead person, lying in a grave, and like a torn rag lying on the dungheap. He will not be able to have intercourse nor will he be able to release the virginity”. On a more general level, Strasbourg Bibliothèque nationale P. K 135 further attests to the portability of the *Binding of the Sky* frame unit and to the extraction and reuse of some of its constituent phrases in other ritual texts. Once again, the flexible redactional status of this frame unit bears witness to the creative intertextual and idiolectic adaptations negotiated by ritual experts in articulating their own brands of ritual products.

In order to recapitulate, this section has focused on the rubric ‘frame unit’ and its heuristic capacity to interpret both lexical and positional variations of segments of ritual discourse within Coptic ritual spells. These frame units display a spectrum of variability that can be organized into two broad categories of redactional intervention: intertextual development and idiolectic variation. The former refers to the structural logic that governed a ritual scribe’s arrangement and positioning of frame units within a given composition, while the latter designates the lexical modifications negotiated through individual repertoires of formulae and stock phrases. Taken together, these categories are aimed at capturing the fluid processes through which ritual specialists shaped, reconfigured, and transmitted their

18 Edition in Crum 1922, 541-2.

textual materials, thereby illuminating apparent modular logics of composition of Coptic magical spells.

4 **Leiden, MS AMS 9: A Manual for Ritual Specialists?**

In light of these developments, questions now arise as to what kinds of writing-supported media may have facilitated storage and transmission of frame units among groups of ritual scribes operating across the Nile Valley. One quite famous explanatory model emerges from the so-called *Letter of Oualēs to Psais* (=P. Kell. V Copt. 35; PCM I 1; KYP M 176), which instructs us on the exchange of magical materials between a member of the Manichaean community of Kellis, Psais, and his correspondent, Oualēs, whom scholars have speculated to have been attached to the Manichaean monastic and clerical group known as the Elects (Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 48). Notably, the letter permits to infer that Oualēs copied for Psais a magical separation recipe, while requesting in return to copy a set of “quaternions” (ⲛⲓⲧⲉⲧⲣⲁⲥ), understood – following Dosoo and Preininger (2023, 53) – as a small four-bifolio codex that often served as a notebook. Now, while evidence does not justify assuming that this ostensible notebook contained magical texts, it nonetheless gestures toward a milieu in which modular textual units – such as the single-sheet separation recipe referenced in the letter – may have been produced, exchanged, and archived through similar writing-supported media. As Faraone has already observed, this model of transmission is prefigured in Galen’s *Peri Alupias*, where the physician recounts the loss of his treatise *On the Composition of Drugs according to Kind* (Faraone 2022, 422-3). There, Galen narrates how he had purchased the recipes forming that tractate from a certain Eumenes, a physician from Pergamum, who had gathered an extensive collection of loose-leaf recipes into two “notebooks of parchment” (ⲉⲓⲡⲉⲣⲁⲥ), compiled over years of travel across the Mediterranean basin. Building upon Galen’s account, Faraone has proposed two complementary scenarios to explain the circulation of magical recipes in Graeco-Roman Egypt. The first envisions a ‘centrifugal’ process, in which individual recipes were extracted from larger handbooks and sold to clients or shared among practitioners. The second envisions a ‘centripetal’ movement, whereby local single-sheet recipes were copied and incorporated into more extensive compilations (e.g., notebooks and working manuals). With regards to Coptic magic, a similar dynamic may underlie Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, MS AMS 9 (=KYP M 171), a sixth-to-eighth-century Coptic magical codex from the Theban region. Much like Galen’s notebooks, this manuscript appears to have served as a writing-supported repository – a working manual in which

ritual specialists stored modular ritual materials for later adaptation into specific spell formats. This hypothesis rests on the composite nature of the text, whose content, following the division established by Dosoo and Preininger, comprises (Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 109):

1. p. 1 l. 1 – p. 14 l. 13: Prayer of Gregory¹⁹
2. p. 14 l. 14 – p. 20 l. 5: Prayer for protection
3. p. 20 l. 6 – p. 23 l. 26: Letter of Abgar to Jesus²⁰
4. p. 24 l. 1 – p. 25 l. 23: Letter of Jesus to Abgar
5. p. 25 l. 24 – p. 28 l. 21: Prayer of Judas Cyriacus²¹
6. p. 28 ll. 22-7: Names of Seven Sleepers of Ephesus²²
7. p. 29 ll. 1-22: Names of Forty Martyrs of Sebaste²³
8. p. 29 l. 23 – p. 30 l. 28: *Incipits* of the canonical Gospels and Ps 90 (91)

Most notably, each of the textual units found in Leiden, MS AMS 9 represents widely known tactics in the arsenal of ritual specialists from late antique Egypt that appear across Coptic and Greek magical texts. Yet, what distinguishes Leiden, MS AMS 9 is the juxtaposition of these materials. Rather than forming a single coherent composition, the codex assembles a miscellany of ritual frame units, which were likely extracted and adapted by ritual specialists to suit the textual structure of their products.²⁴ This working hypothesis finds a suggestive parallel in a seventh-century monastic grotto from Faras (Nubia) (KYP M 91), whose painted inscriptions bring together a similar constellation of texts, including the Gospel *Incipits*, the *Jesus-Abgar Correspondence*, the *Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*, and the *Seven Sleepers of Ephesus*.²⁵ What interests me here is the copyist's deliberate decision to cluster together the Gospel *Incipits*, the *Jesus-Abgar Correspondence*, the *Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*, and the *Seven Sleepers of Ephesus*. The deliberate aggregation of these frame units strengthens the hypothesis that Leiden, MS AMS 9 may have functioned in an analogous way – as a practical handbook for storing

19 On the *Prayer of Gregory*, see Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 109-72. See also Sanzo 2019. For a Greek parallel of this textual tradition, see Strittmatter 1930; 1932.

20 On the *Jesus-Abgar Correspondence* in magical texts, see references in Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 151. On its widespread circulation in monastic settings, see Bélanger Sarrazin, unpublished.

21 On the *Prayer of Judas Cyriacus* in magical texts, see the commentary in Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 161.

22 On the occurrences of the *Seven Sleepers of Ephesus* as magical names see Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 167.

23 On the *Forty Martyrs of Sebaste* in magical texts, see Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 169.

24 For Leiden, MS AMS 9 as a miscellaneous codex see for instance Petrucci 1995, 10; de Bruyn 2017, 87; Sanzo 2014, 61-4.

25 For the *editio princeps*, see Griffith 1927.

modular ritual units. Francis Griffith's description of the Faras grotto is striking in this respect:

But the most interesting memorial that the hermit has left us is the series of Coptic texts which he painted upon the whitewashed walls in square compartments like the *pages of a book* greatly magnified. (Griffith 1927, 82)

Griffith's impression captures more than the aesthetic on display; it indeed encourages us to conjure the scenario in which the anchorite living there was copying his texts by mimicking the layout of a written exemplar. Though admittedly speculative, this possibility underscores a broader point. The redactional patterns observed throughout this study encourage us to view magical texts not as fixed compositions but as *assemblages* of frame units selectively extracted, adapted, and recombined by ritual experts drawing upon a shared repository of ritual paraphernalia. In this sense, Leiden, MS AMS 9 may be seen as a working manual for the production of ritual texts. On a broader level, recognizing this module-based logic not only clarifies the redactional processes that shaped these texts but also sheds light on the intellectual labor of those who produced them.

5 From Performance to Text: The Interface Between the Oral and the Written in Ancient Magical Practice

The redactional strategies examined thus far invite a final shift in focus toward the scribal milieu in which ritual specialists operated. The modular approach advanced in this study has sought to demonstrate, on the one hand, that Coptic ritual texts circulated in the format of discrete frame units that appear under different instantiations (e.g., length, placement, narrative coloring). On the other hand, it has brought into focus a range of textual variations that go beyond the more common visual errors committed by copyists, such as haplography, dittography, skipped lines, or misinterpreted letters. They indeed exhibit more substantial textual modifications, alterations, and readaptations that open a new window into the world of ritual scribes.

In a recent and stimulating contribution, Dosoo and Blumell have advanced the hypothesis of an oral-written continuum as a model for the transmission of magical manuscripts in Coptic Egypt (see Blumell, Dosoo 2018). Building on David Carr's influential analysis of the compositional processes underlying the biblical *Book of Proverbs* (Carr 2011), the authors propose that the textual fluidity observable in the so-called 'Schmidt Magical Dossier' (=PCM I 6

[=KYP M 120], 7 [=KYP M 121], and 8 [=KYP M 129]), together with related exempla, attests to a spectrum of transmission dynamics in which ritual knowledge circulated across both oral and written registers. Specifically, Dosoo and Blumell have pinpointed sets of textual variations – including abbreviation or expansion of a textual sequence, presence/absence of optional prepositions, spelling and word-order variation, or replacement of terms with slightly different rubrics – which bear the marks of the scribe’s attempt to bridge an oral-derived tradition with a written *Vorlage*. While their argument is not without merit, it nonetheless presupposes a conception of scribal practice oriented toward the transmission of an original textual form – a putative *Urtext* whose recovery anchors their analytical framework. By contrast, the evidence examined in this study suggests a more performative dimension to scribal activity. On the basis of the analyzed case studies, ritual specialists appear to have deliberately reconfigured textual modules – here designated as frame units – in ways that challenge the logic of mere replication. Extending Dosoo’s and Blumell’s insights, I postulate that the nature of the textual variations detected in the above-surveyed materials can be best interpreted as the result of the author’s active ‘performance’.²⁶ The benefit of embracing the concept of performance rests on the assumption that ancient magic was less interested in transmitting than in creating always new configurations of the same redactional units. In consideration of the concepts intertextual development and idiolectic variation explored in this study, we are prompted to interpret textual discrepancies as deliberate redactional interventions negotiated by ritual experts in the course of crafting their products. Within this framework, the term performance is construed as the deliberate utilization of a shared repository of ritual materials preserved in the form of textual modules, resulting in the creation of novel iterations of the same ‘virtual texts’. My notion of performance finds broader theoretical grounding and analytical support from Lundhaug’s recent work on the fluid transmission of apocryphal materials across diverse strata of Coptic literature in Late Antiquity (Lundhaug 2020).²⁷ Lundhaug has shown that the intrinsic instability of apocryphal narrative cycles – most notably the so-called ‘angelic investitures’ – demands an interpretive framework that acknowledges their nature as dynamic systems, marked by what Stephen Nichols has aptly termed ‘mutable stability’ (Nichols 2016). These narratives, he observes, operate through modular yet flexible configurations of motifs – such as the creation of Adam or the fall

26 For a particularly illuminating application of this rubric to the dynamics of oral-written transmission, see Foley 1995, 1-28.

27 See also Lied, Lundhaug 2017, 1-16.

of Satan – which serve as conceptual blueprints for the continual generation of new textual iterations, each adapted to the different audiences.

If Lundhaug illuminates the textual logic underlying the continual generation of new iterations, Smallwood (Smallwood 2004) offers fresh insights for understanding the performative practices through which such variations could emerge in the course of transmission. In particular, Smallwood has likewise argued for a mixed oral-written interpretative model to account for the diverse strategies of transmission adopted by copyists of ritual texts in medieval England. Smallwood's argument presupposes an ostensive metric of categorization by which oral and written modalities of transmission can be deduced on the ground of contents and format of the spells. As such, a short, loose-leaf spell could be indicative of an oral milieu of transmission, while longer spells appearing in different versions across diverse manuscripts could be well have been subjected to written transmission. Yet, Smallwood concedes that the two poles of this spectrum can intersect in different ways. As Smallwood details, one can find cases in which different versions of a putative written charm exhibit variations inexplicable as mere scribal error. To the contrary, Smallwood registers other cases in which scribes, as part of their performative engagement with the text, purposefully altered sequences of words in order to produce an impact on the readers:

And one or two charms in Middle English are so long and factually detailed that it is hard to think of them as often memorised. Nevertheless, this is written transmission with a difference. It is selective copying, and perhaps not always straightforward copying at all, since what was read in the exemplar might have had to compete with knowledge of a charm already carried in the head. The form of most charm-copies in Middle English accords very well with transmission of this sort. Textually they seem in most cases to have been treated with little respect; the compiler/copyist seems to have felt entitled to rework them as he thought fit. This might involve finding fresh rhymes for old ideas. (Smallwood 2004, 18)

The model described by Smallwood resonates closely with the dynamics I have traced for late antique and early medieval Egypt, particularly with the idea that, for ritual specialists, textual transmission was less an act of faithful reproduction than one of creative reconfiguration.

Against this background, the *Invocation of Baktiotha* examined above offers a particularly illuminating example. The three manuscripts preserving this frame unit draw upon a closely related pool of formulaic expressions, yet each arranges this shared material according to its own repertoire of formulae and stylistic preferences.

The performative nature of scribal intervention becomes especially evident in the way the copyists adapted the unit to distinct redactional programmes and ritual aims. The scribe responsible for P. Berlin 5527, for instance, copied the invocation on a relatively small loose-leaf papyrus sheet. By contrast, P. Macquarie I 1 and Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987 preserve considerably longer parallel invocations that appear to have been adapted to markedly different redactional agendas and formats. P. Macquarie I 1, in particular, forms part of an extended ritual handbook that includes a drawing and more elaborate ritual instructions. Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987, on the other hand, presents a shorter composition whose ritual instructions appear to serve somewhat different aims. On this reading, the manuscripts bring into sharper relief how their copyists, in articulating their own brand of ritual products, operated at the intersection of oral techniques of memorization, re-adaptation, and the copying of written *Vorlagen*. Scribal practice thus emerges not merely as an act of reproduction but as a creative process in which ritual specialists actively reshaped inherited materials in order to produce new and contextually meaningful ritual texts.

Viewed through the critical perspective opened by both Lundhaug and Smallwood, magical sources may be well understood as inhabiting the liminal zone between the oral and the written, as Dosoo and Blumell have also suggested; yet they occupy this fertile terrain of creation by deftly amalgamating techniques drawn from both spheres in order to articulate their own, tailored brand of ritual products.

6 Conclusion

Drawing on insights from biblical redaction criticism and more recent scholarly discourse on Jewish and Christian magical texts, this article has developed a ‘modular approach’ to interpret the redactional strategies employed by ritual experts in crafting their products. According to this theoretical framework, ritual sources are amenable to be organized into discrete modular units, here referred to as ‘frame units’. These frame units form blocks of redactional materials that are strategically manipulated by ritual experts (e.g., combined, expanded, shrunk, adjusted) to accommodate various formats and performative needs. Moreover, I have argued that frame units vary according to two main principles, here labeled ‘intertextual development’ and ‘idiolectic variation’. These two rubrics have been designed to illustrate different ranges of textual variations across closely aligned frame units found in magical materials. Through my analysis of selected case studies, I have shown how the two principles can serve as a valuable analytical toolbox for illuminating the redactional interventions implemented

by ritual specialists in shaping their magical materials. At the same time, this investigative approach has opened a new window onto the scribal world of ritual specialists. Their adroit capacity in negotiating new versions of circulating frame units is informed by the logics of ritual performance. The notion of ‘performance’ adopted in this study has prompted us to approach redactional interventions operated by ritual specialists as indicative of an operative logic that combined oral techniques of storytelling and invocation with pre-selected texts stored in designated archives. In this respect, I have argued that Leiden, MS AMS 9 offers a particularly suggestive example of how a working manual for ritual specialists may have functioned. The nature of this Coptic codex’s contents indeed exemplifies the kind of writing-supported material media in which frame units could have been stored and transmitted among groups of ritual specialists. On a more general level, by developing a modular analytical framework for reading Coptic ritual texts, this study has sought, on the one hand, to make the field more cognizant of the logics that oriented the composition of ritual texts, and, on the other, it hopes thereby to equip scholarship on ancient magic with a more robust model that draws on recent scholarly discourse to illuminate the creative scribal culture in which ritual specialists operated.

Abbreviations

ACM = Meyer, M.; Smith, R. (eds) (1994). *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
KYP M = Dosoo, K.; Love, E.O.D.; Preininger, M. (eds) (s.d.). *Kyprianos Database of Ancient Ritual Texts and Objects*. Würzburg: University of Würzburg. <https://www.coptic-magic.phil.uni-wuerzburg.de/index.php/texts-search/>.
PCM = Dosoo, K.; Preininger, M. (2023). *Papyri Copticae Magicae. Coptic Magical Texts*. Vol. 1, *Formularies*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

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Narratives of Power A Typology of Syriac *Historiolae* with a Case Study of Charms Against the ‘Child-Stealing Witch’

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Abstract This article examines the *historiola* in Syriac magic across medieval and modern manuscripts. Section 2 proposes a working typology of Syriac *historiolae* and tests the applicability of David Frankfurter’s scheme to this material. Section 3 surveys narrative charms as a specific class of *historiolae* analyzing them thematically and structurally. Section 4 focuses on Syriac narrative charms that preserve a specific motif – the St. Sisinnius Legend. It serves as a case study, examining three Syriac narrative charms in which this motif is attested and revealing their connections to other magical traditions of the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

Keywords Syriac magic. *Historiola*. Encounter charm. St. Sisinnius Legend. Christian amulets.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Typology of Syriac *Historiolae*. – 2.1 Clausal *Historiolae*. – 2.2 *Historiolae* Proper. – 2.3 Transitional Forms. – 2.4 The Place of *Historiolae* Among the Means of Ritual Power. – 3 Syriac Narrative Charms. – 3.1 Encounter Charms Without Confrontation. – 3.2 Encounter with an Evil Force. – 4 The Syriac Version of the St. Sisinnius Legend. – 4.1 The St. Sisinnius Legend: Introduction. – 4.2 The St. Sisinnius Legend in Syriac Charms. – 5 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Syriac magical texts first appear in Late Antiquity, inscribed on clay incantation bowls and on metal or leather amulets. The richest evidence still comes from manuscripts dated to the eighteenth-twentieth centuries. These survive in two main formats: (1) codices that usually contain several dozen recipes of different genres for a wide variety of purposes, and (2) amuletic scrolls, so-called ‘finished products’ that assemble several incantations selected to meet the needs of specific clients (Bohak 2019, 400-1).

Although early scholarship on modern Syriac magical manuscripts already argued for links with the late antique tradition,¹ the picture long remained fragmented by the absence of medieval evidence. However, recent finds from South Lebanon and from the vicinity of Turfan (China) show that some of the best-known Syriac charms in modern manuscripts were already in wide circulation by the thirteenth century, attested in amulets and presumably also in codices (Hunter 2018).

Even in this small and fragmentary medieval Syriac corpus, several well-known *historiolae* are attested. One striking case is a thirteenth-century amulet from Hadath Grotto, South Lebanon, that narrates the anchorite ‘Aḥdīšō’s encounter with the female demon called Teb’ā, who combines the traits of a *succubus* and a child-strangler (Abousamra 2013). She attempts to seduce the saint, but ultimately submits to him and discloses her secret names. As discussed below, in Section 4 of this article, this narrative motif can be traced back to at least Late Antiquity. Similarly, the Turfan fragment containing *The Charm of Cyprian* preserves an ‘autobiographical’ tale told by the powerful magician about his magical activities performed before and after he turned Christian (Hunter 2018). This

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1 Montgomery 1914; Al-Jeloo 2012; Moriggi 2016; Bhayro 2022; Abousamra 2022; Pearson 2022.

story is also known from much earlier Christian sources.² These examples show that several *historiolae* known from early modern Syriac magical manuscripts ultimately go back to Late Antiquity. They constitute a fruitful object of study, even independently of the specific compositions and manuscript contexts in which they are transmitted.

The published corpus of Syriac charms contains dozens of examples of embedded narratives (*historiolae* proper) and many more instances of allusions to well-known mythical precedents (clausal *historiolae*).³ The most extensive source so far – *The Book of Protection* published by Hermann Gollancz (1912) – edits three codices containing more than 100 recipes. Among these, at least 20 unique narrative *historiolae* can be identified. In what follows, I examine Syriac *historiolae* from several angles. Section 2 outlines a typology of *historiolae* and addresses the distinction between *historiolae* proper and clausal *historiolae*. Section 3 analyzes narrative charms, with particular attention to encounter charms. Section 4 focuses on encounter charms against the ‘child-stealing witch’ and includes an edition of a hitherto unpublished charm.

2 The Typology of Syriac *Historiolae*

In this part, I attempt to adapt Frankfurter’s (1995) typology to the Syriac material. My aim is not only to evaluate how Syriac examples fit the paradigm and where they challenge it, but also to refine the description of individual types by highlighting transitional cases and potentially problematic instances that complicate neat classification.

Despite a growing scholarly interest in modern Syriac magical manuscripts, they remain only marginally represented in comparative research. For this reason, in addition to the goals of clarity and exemplification, I have chosen to provide a substantial selection of examples, in the hope of making the richness and internal diversity of Syriac charms more visible for scholars of other magical traditions.

Following Frankfurter’s analysis, it is reasonable to approach *historiolae* in Syriac magic as falling into two broad types:⁴

2 For a recent account of Coptic magical texts related to Cyprian, their early Christian context and further references, see Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 369-97. See also Sowers 2017.

3 Our primary focus here is on works that edit whole codices: Gollancz 1912; Chamurlieva 2009; Nurullina 2012; Pearson 2022. Occasionally, other publications will be referred to as well.

4 Bozóký (2003, 39-40), in her typology of medieval European apotropaic charms, unites the two under the term “actualisation”: the linking of a present situation with a favorable event of the past, either through simple comparison or through brief narration.

1. *similia similibus* constructions, or ‘clausal *historiolae*’: formulaic appeals to biblical or parabiblical precedents, typically structured as analogies rather than full narratives;
2. ‘*historiolae* proper’: short stories recounting a mythic or hagiographic event, often with dramatic features such as dialogue and confrontation.

2.1 Clausal *Historiolae*

Frankfurter includes *similia similibus* constructions (or clausal *historiolae*) in his scheme because they retain a narrative link; an authoritative precedent is evoked in the form of *allusion* to the narrative. On the other hand, he questions their status as *historiolae*, since the narrative here merely licenses the directive: “the *historiola*, if we can still call it that, works as a guarantee or rationale” (Frankfurter 1995, 469).

Within the Syriac material examined here, a further distinction may be drawn between two subtypes: comparative formulas and invocative formulas.

Comparative formulas follow the basic pattern ‘as X, so Y’, where the allusion to a precedent is syntactically subordinate to the main directive (cf. Ohrt 1935-36, 1591-2 on *Vergleichsformen*). For example, in a charm *For Children not to Cry*, we read:⁵

as those seven brothers who slept the sleep (of) 377 years, so may A.,
the son of B., be at rest and sleep. (Gollancz 1912, liv [Cod. A § 50])

Likewise, a charm *Before the Authorities* invokes biblical precedents through parallel clauses:

As the beauty of Moses shone upon the children of Israel, so may
the beauty of the one who carrieth (these) writs shine forth before
kings, rulers, commanders, and chiefs. As the crown of Pharaoh
before Joseph, so may there bow down to him the rich and the poor.
(Gollancz 1912, xxix [Cod. A § 7])

Both examples illustrate that such *historiolae* serve primarily to invoke a precedent, syntactically tied to a directive utterance.

⁵ Throughout the article, italics are added to highlight the elements discussed in each section. Unless otherwise noted, translations follow the published editions. Translations from Gollancz (1912) are reproduced from the edition without modernization, with its archaic English retained.

Unlike comparative formulas, invocative formulas introduce the authoritative precedent not through comparative clauses, but via instrumental or invocative constructions, introduced with *b-* ‘by/through’ or, more rarely, *b-šem* ‘in the name of’. Although these lack the ‘as X, so Y’ structure, functionally they operate with the same logic. The precedent, often expressed by naming a figure and what he once did, authorizes the desired outcome, and the instrumental/invocative clause is syntactically subordinate to the directive utterance.

For example, the previously mentioned charm *Before the Authorities* reads:

By that power which was with Joseph in the land of Egypt, may the beauty of the one who beareth these writs shine before kings and rulers. (Gollancz 1912, xxix [Cod. A § 7])

A further example is found in *Binding the Arrows, Daggers, Swords and All Implements of War*, which invokes Elijah’s name, together with the precedential biblical narrative:

may they [i.e., the weapons – A.C.] be bound by me through Elijah, the prophet, son of Eliezer the priest, who bound the heavens for three years and six months, so that no rain came down upon the earth. (Gollancz 1912, xxx [Cod. A § 9])

Two examples of invocative structures introduced with *b-šem* can be given. *For the Riches (or Sustenance) of Man* reads:

in the name of those angels who came to the house of Abraham, and blessed him, and increased the riches of his house; so, by the command of God, in their name, may everything be blessed which is, and which will be unto him who beareth these writs. Amen! (Gollancz 1912, xxxv [Cod. A § 15])

Similarly, a charm *For Trade and Business* reads:

in the name of the seventy-seven angels who surrounded Cyprian and hngrws, the two sorcerers, in the name of that angel whose name is not revealed to humans, may favor and love enter the hearts of all people toward the one who carries this charm. (Kaz4, fol. 41r; ed. in Nurullina 2012, 76; Author’s transl.)

As these examples show, there is no structural or functional difference between the instrumental and invocative types of clausal *historiolae*. The latter construction, which appears much more rarely than the former, introduced with *b-* ‘by, through’, needs to be distinguished

from simple invocations of authoritative names. Although both structures may be introduced with *b-šem* ‘in the name of...’, they are not functionally identical.

In simple invocations, the name(s) invoked serve primarily to authorize or empower the petition, without reference to a concrete precedent. In contrast, invocative *historiolae* invoke a name or figure in association with a precise well-known mythical act performed by the figure in the past. Thus, unlike ordinary invocations, such structures retain a (compressed) *historiola*-like element.

The following example from the charm *For Pain in the Head* illustrates a simple invocation, where the text merely enumerates a long list of divine and angelic names without alluding to specific past acts that could function as a precedent:

by the name I Am That I Am, Almighty God, Adonai, Lord of Hosts, and *by the name* Gannus and Snoonous, men of fire, and *by the name* Gabriel and Michael, by the prayers of Mar Simon Peter, we bind and anathemize all evil aches from the head, and from the eyes [...] of the person who carries these formulae. Amen! (Gollancz 1912, xxxiii [Cod. A § 13])

Occasionally, even less common types of clausal *historiolae* can be identified. For instance, in the core of a Syriac love charm we find the structure: *hāw d-* ‘the One who...’ which is repeated several times until it is resolved in a demand: *hāw nšalheb* ‘let that One inflame...’:

Another [charm]: for a man who hates his wife or for a woman whose husband hates her. *The One who* inflamed Abraham with his love for Sarah, *the One who* inflamed Isaac with his love for Rebekah, *the One who* inflamed Jacob with his love for Rachel, *the One who* inflamed David with his love for the wife of Uriah, *let that One inflame* so-and-so son of so-and-so with love to so-and-so daughter of so-and-so. (Cherkashina, Lyavdansky 2022, 33 [CaH156, fol. 42r-v])

2.2 *Historiolae* Proper

Narrative *historiolae* (Frankfurter's '*historiolae* proper') are usually defined as abbreviated narratives incorporated into the text of charms. According to Frankfurter's more recent definition, a *historiola* "is a brief or protracted narrative recited (often in past tense) in the course of ritual (e.g., for healing, cursing, protecting, empowering), to bring into being a potency in the mythic narrative that can be applied to the situation at hand" (Frankfurter 2019, 611).⁶

Modern Syriac manuscripts offer multiple cases where a mythic precedent is related in only a few words. In this section, I focus on such short narrative *historiolae* and on their distinction from clausal *historiolae*, before moving on to the more elaborate forms (including encounter charms).

A well-known case can be found in Syriac charms against nose bleeding, studied by A. Barb (1948). In one recension, the efficacy is drawn from the story of Zechariah's killing; see Barb's discussion of the sources of this motif:⁷

Zechariah had his throat cut, and the fountain of waters was stopped. So may the blood of A., the son of B., be stopped. Amen! (Gollancz 1912, liv [Cod. A § 49])

The other Syriac version, also tied to Zechariah, uses the Cana narrative, where 'the waters dried up', as a precedent to authorizing the cessation of the client's nosebleed.

Zechariah came to Cana; the waters dried up, and the blood dried up. Thus may the blood of A., the son of B., dry up from the nostril, Amen, Amen! (Gollancz 1912, lxxxiii [Cod. C § 20])

Two further examples can be given:

Christ suffered, Christ was crucified, Christ died, Christ rose. May there be cut off and expelled from the body and soul of A., the son of B, the hot and cold fever. (Gollancz 1912, xlii [Cod. A § 28, *Binding the Fever*])⁸

Jannes and Jambres practiced the magical arts; but they were unable to stand against Moses the prophet. So may there be

⁶ Cf. Heim 1892, 491; Waller 2015; van der Vliet 2019; Sowers 2017; Johnston 2015.

⁷ In what follows I put short *historiolae* in italics.

⁸ For a much more ancient predecessor of this charm against fever in the Greek papyri, see Sanzo 2014, 66.

annulled divination and the bonds of magic from off A., the son of B. So be it. Amen! Amen! (Gollancz 1912, lv [Cod. A § 51, *For the Man Upon Whom Sorcery Had Been Practiced*])

As shown by Alexey Lyavdansky (2024), among short narrative *historiolae* are instances where the *historiola* acquires a poetic form, featuring rhyming and rhythmic structure. Below I give the transcription of each charm, together with its translation.⁹

*‘Adam kalba qrak | wa-mšīḥa neskor pumak | šliba bet li w-lak | kad
‘al maran l-orišlem | kipe mallel | w-kalbe la nḥaḥ.*

Adam called you ‘dog’ | let Christ shut your mouth | the Cross
is between you and me | When our Lord entered Jerusalem | the
stones spoke | but the dogs did not bark. (Lyavdansky 2024, 417
[*Binding of Dogs*])

*Maryam yeldat la-mšīḥa paroqan | w-la-kyane kulhon kulhon | šatteq
‘ennon marya šatteq ‘ennon.*

Mary bore Christ our savior, | And each and every creatures | The
Lord silenced them, he silenced them. (Lyavdansky 2024, 417
[*Of Dogs*])

All of these cases briefly recount an episode from the realm of biblical or parabiblical mythology, establishing a mythic precedent or paradigm for the desired outcome in the present (Frankfurter 1995, 465-6). In both brevity and function, such short narrative *historiolae* stand close to the clausal *historiolae* discussed above. However, several features distinguish the two types [tab. 1].

Table 1 Features of short narrative *historiolae* and clausal *historiolae*

Feature	Short narrative <i>historiolae</i>	Clausal <i>historiolae</i>
Syntactic frame	Independent sentences (self-standing narrative unit)	Dependent clauses introduced with ‘as X...’ or ‘by X who/that...’
Position in the charm	Open the charm (stands before the request)	No fixed position in the charm; occurs before or within the request

⁹ Transcription and translation are cited according to the source: Lyavdansky 2024. The article offers more examples of short *historiolae*, including more charms against dogs that feature stories about Mary and Christ.

Feature	Short narrative <i>historiolae</i>	Clausal <i>historiolae</i>
Multiplicity	Single narrative unit	Often occur in chains (several comparative/invocative clauses in sequence)

The first distinctive feature has been treated above. The remaining two, position in the charm and multiplicity, require brief elaboration:

- Position in the charm. Clausal *historiolae* have no fixed position. Although preceded by the title, they do not have to appear at the beginning of the text; often they follow a narrative *historiola* (short or elaborate) or other formulas. By contrast, short narrative *historiolae* consistently open the charm, appearing immediately after the title.
- Multiplicity. Narrative *historiolae* (in Frankfurter's terms, *historiolae proper*) occur singly; to my knowledge, they never form sequences. This suggests that the difference between the two phenomena goes beyond structural or syntactic formality: even a one-sentence narrative *historiola* is recognized by the tradition as the narrative core of the charm – and a charm evidently cannot have more than one core. Clausal *historiolae*, on the other hand, regularly form chains.

An illustrative sequence of at least seven elements is found in a long charm called *The Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Preaching of John*, a small relevant piece of which is cited here:¹⁰

By that Divine power which healed the mother-in-law of Simon Peter of the fever-horror, and cast the devil out of the governor, and by that Will and glorious command that commanded the fish and it spewed out Jonah, and drove Adam out of Paradise: (by that voice) that cried out on the Cross, by that Power that stopped the sun, and caused the moon to stand still, and by those who cry out night and day, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord, God All-powerful, heaven and earth are full of his glory'. By the prayers, too, of Hezekiah, and by the prayers of my Lady, the blessed Mary, and of Mar John, the forerunner of Christ, may he who bears on his person these writs be helped and healed. Amen! (Gollancz 1912, lxii [Cod. B § 4])

¹⁰ In a form of clausal *historiola*, the fragment alludes to the following episodes: (1) the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law (Mk 1:29-31; Mt 8:14-15; Lk 4:38-9); (2) the exorcism of a devil from the governor (source unclear); (3) the fish spewing out Jonah (Jonah 2:10); (4) Adam being driven out of Paradise (Gen 3:23-4); (5) the voice crying out on the cross (Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46); (6) the sun and the moon stopping (Josh 10:12-13), as well as possibly (7) the vision of Isaiah (Is 6:3); (8) the prayers of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20; Is 38:1-8).

In addition to these formal distinctions, the difference between clausal *historiolae* and *historiolae* proper is also semantic and pragmatic. Clausal *historiolae* function as *allusions*: they compress an authoritative episode into a clause and therefore presuppose a narrative that is already shared and recognizable to the community, most often scriptural, but sometimes hagiographical (e.g., Cyprian, the Seven Sleepers).¹¹

Historiolae proper, by contrast, do not necessarily rely on an already-known story. Featuring authoritative figures (Adam, Moses, Jesus, Mary), they may relate episodes of uncertain or non-canonical origin and thus display a greater capacity for generating new narratives tailored to current ritual needs. Scholarship has alternately interpreted such narratives as traces of otherwise lost traditions or as *ad hoc* compositions created for specific rites; I return to this question below in connection with encounter charms.

2.3 Transitional Forms

Before turning to the next category, elaborate narrative charms, I would like to draw attention to a small group of problematic cases that defy the binary scheme outlined above and can be considered transitional or hybrid forms.

On the one hand, the syntax of these transitional forms aligns them with clausal *historiolae*; they are often introduced through ‘as X, so Y’ constructions or by instrumental formulas (‘by X...’). On the other hand, in most other respects they behave like *historiolae* proper; they stand at the opening of the charm, occur alone rather than in a chain, and consist of several clauses that together evoke a short narrative. The examples below thus belong to a transitional zone between simple *similia*-based constructions and narrative *historiolae*.

Below I provide two examples, both belonging to charms designed to secure success in the hunt:

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. *In the same manner as* God commanded the just and righteous Noah, (saying): ‘Make unto thee an ark of wood, and gather therein all creeping things, all the winged fowl of heaven’, so may there be gathered the birds and winged creatures of the air in front of him who bears these

¹¹ See Korsvoll 2022, who argues that biblical and parabiblical narratives in magical texts should not be understood as deriving directly from scriptural authority, but rather as drawing on a broader *storied universe* of authoritative narratives shared across religious contexts.

writs. (Gollancz 1912, lxxxiv [Cod. C § 24, *Loosening the Chase*])¹²

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As Simon (Peter) and Andrew and John threw the nets into the sea, raising the nets with a goodly and abundant catch of plenty of fish, so do I loosen the game of so-and-so, for his dog, and for his company. (Lyavdansky 2024, 419 [*Loosening of Game*])¹³

Notably, when different variants or manuscript witnesses of the first charm are taken into account, some lack the comparative construction and open instead as a typical *historiola* (Lyavdansky 2024), reinforcing the impression that these examples occupy a fluid, intermediary position.

2.4 The Place of *Historiolae* Among the Means of Ritual Power

Having outlined the internal typology of *historiolae* (narrative vs. clausal) and discussed transitional cases, it is now possible to situate *historiolae* within the broader repertoire of devices that convey, channel, or authorize ritual power in Syriac charms.

Following Frankfurter, the scheme [chart 1] situates the typology of Syriac *historiolae* within the broader family of ‘forms of religious speech’. Notably, it does not aim to provide an exhaustive catalogue of magical tools (e.g., *voces magicae*, the incantations themselves, divine names and epithets), but rather to distinguish *historiolae* from other seemingly similar devices, such as scriptural citations or images that likewise carry narrative content.¹⁴

¹² For a recent edition and discussion of this and similar charms, see Lyavdansky 2024.

¹³ Cf. Gollancz 1912, xxxiv [Cod. A § 14].

¹⁴ Alternatively, Joseph Sanzo treats scriptural citations (including Gospel incipits) within “a sub-class of ancient *historiolae*”, arguing that “the scriptures were thought to have ‘worked’ against illness and/or demons because of the precedent or paradigm established by specific prior actions of the divine. In other words, particular episodes from the scriptures provided assurance for protection and/or healing in the present context” (Sanzo 2014, 65-9).

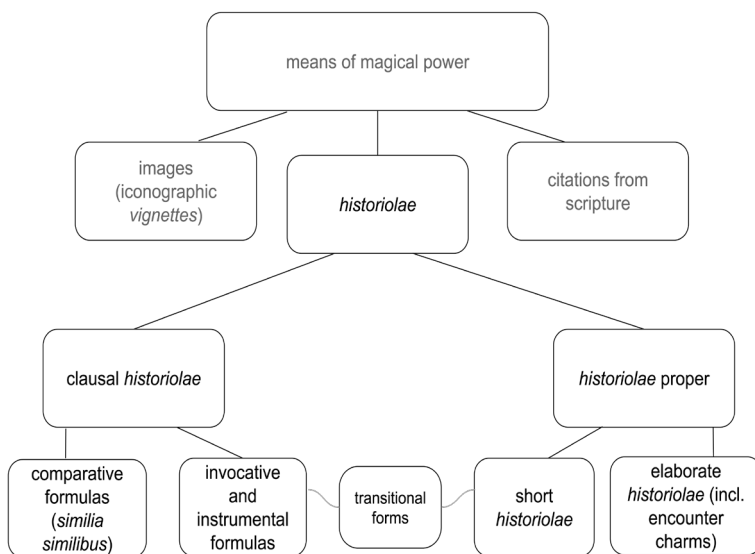


Chart 1 Typology of *historiolae*

3 Syriac Narrative Charms

After the shorter forms of *historiolae*, this section turns to charms that display more elaborate narratives. These charms differ in their structure and are designed to resolve different issues, such as healing a sickness, driving an evil force away from a human and/or protecting cattle from the Evil Eye or plague. The key elements of narrative charms are (a) characters; (b) the critical situation in which they interact, often in a dialogue; and (c) application of the precedent to the present (Ohrt 1935-36).

Most of the Syriac narrative charms can be attributed to encounter charms (*Begegnungssegen*) in Ohrt's (1935-36) definition. He identifies two subcategories within these: (A) encounter between a saint and an afflicted person *or* another saint (helper); (B) encounter between a saint and an evil spirit (cf. Ohrt 1936).¹⁵

¹⁵ Ohrt 1936 offers not only a typological discussion of *Begegnungssegen*, but also a brief historical and comparative study of the form. He traces encounter charms across Western Latin and Germanic, Greco-Egyptian, Byzantine Greek, Slavic, and Semitic traditions, arguing that Christian forms preserve and adapt earlier narrative patterns.

3.1 Encounter Charms Without Confrontation

In Syriac magic, encounter between a saint and another saint is, to my knowledge, credibly exemplified only by *The Charm of Lady Mary*. The *historiola* of the charm relates the encounter between Mary and Jesus, during which Mary asks for help and protection on behalf of the afflicted. The charm will be addressed in Section 4.

The other subcategory, encounter between a saint and an afflicted person, is likewise represented by a single charm, *Concerning the Wind That Seizes the Belly*, though its structure appears more complicated than what would be expected of this subcategory:

Our Lord and his disciples were walking on the road, and they heard the sound of crying out, and our Lord said: “What is this voice?” His disciples said to him: “It is that of so-and-so, son of so-and-so. Wind has gripped his belly and all his limbs, such that I thought teeth would be knocked from the mouth, and a child would fall from its mother”. (Jesus:) “Go into the garden of our Lord and pluck three shoots and tie three knots, one in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and another in the name of Mary and another in the name of Gabriel chief of the angels”. I am the one who blesses, O Lord, heal him by your right hand.¹⁶

Several features deserve attention here. Technically speaking, no physical encounter takes place: the crisis is perceived and reported, and Jesus intervenes by providing instructions rather than by direct healing. Despite these deviations, the charm overall fits Ohrt’s rather flexible definition of an encounter charm, since his category of *Begegnungssegen* operates with a broad understanding of ‘encounter’.

However, the *historiola* in another Syriac healing charm departs from the encounter pattern even more clearly. The charm against lumbago recalls the story about the construction of the Temple, but here Solomon is building it by his own hands. When lifting a heavy stone, he hurts his back and cries out loudly. From this point, the textual witnesses fall into two subtypes [tab. 2].¹⁷

¹⁶ The translation is based on Zellmann-Rohrer 2022, 114, with minor changes due to a different interpretation of the text. Initially, the charm was edited by Gollancz (1912, xxxviii-xxxix [Cod. A § 20]).

¹⁷ The edition and analysis of these charms can be found in Cherkashina, forthcoming. Previous editions include Gollancz 1912, xxxi [Cod. A § 10]; Chamurlieva 2009, 91-2; Zellmann-Rohrer 2022, 112; Pearson 2022, 66-7.

Table 2 Subtypes (A) and (B) of the charm against lumbago

Subtype A	Subtype B
<i>Jesus asks his disciples who is crying.</i>	<i>An angel asks Solomon whether he has ever mistreated a widow or an orphan.</i>
<i>The disciples respond that it is Solomon, who received a stone from the Holy Spirit, bent to lift it, and hurt his back.</i>	<i>Solomon responds that he has never mistreated a widow or an orphan.</i>
<i>Jesus instructs the disciples to go to the Garden of Eden and cut there three branches.</i>	<i>The angel goes to the Garden of Eden and cuts there three branches.</i>

Both groups of witnesses then relate how the three branches are used to heal the client's pain. As Michael Zellmann-Rohrer (2022) notes,¹⁸ this charm realizes two motifs widely attested in Mediterranean magic: the suffering saint and the disturbed universe.

From a typological point of view, the charm lacks both the motif of traveling and a scene of encounter. Nevertheless, it preserves several basic elements shared with encounter charms: an exposition that presents a crisis experienced by a saint, a dialogue, and an application that is incorporated within the story by aligning Solomon's treatment with that of the client. In this respect, it is comparable to the charm *Concerning the Wind That Seizes the Belly*; in both texts, a holy figure intervenes by prescribing a remedy and the narrative is applied to the present.

As will be shown in the next section, encounter charms of the second type – those that narrate the encounter between a protagonist and an evil force – are driven by different motifs: encounter and confrontation between protagonist and antagonist, interrogation of the latter by the former, and defeat or magical binding of an antagonistic evil figure.

To sum up, Syriac narrative charms that do not turn on confrontation with an antagonistic evil figure are rare. Within the small group discussed here, only *The Charm of Lady Mary* clearly fits the saint-saint encounter subtype, while *Concerning the Wind That Seizes the Belly* and the lumbago charm featuring Solomon represent healing narratives that employ an elaborate *historiola* without any encounter episode. It is therefore difficult to justify attributing these two charms to encounter charms: beyond general narrative elements (characters, exposition, dialogue, application), they lack the encounter scene that underlies encounter charms in the strict sense.

¹⁸ See also van der Vliet 2019, 345-6.

3.2 Encounter with an Evil Force

Unlike the previous category, encounter charms of this type are well attested across Syriac magical codices. Although the total number of distinct texts known at present is not large, hardly exceeding ten, several charms occur with remarkable frequency, being found in nearly every codex and on numerous amulets. Among these is *The Charm of the Angel Gabriel Against the Evil Eye*, which is found in all three codices edited by Hermann Gollancz.¹⁹

The *historiola* of this charm recounts how the Evil Eye that came out of the rock encountered the archangel Gabriel. The angel addresses the Evil Eye as ‘doomed one’ (*baʿt ʿabdānā*), cf. the Syriac epithet of the Antichrist, *bar ʿabdānā* conventionally rendered in English Bible translations as ‘son of perdition’. I cite the text with certain long incantatory formulas omitted, but preserving the overall structure relevant to the analysis.

Against the Evil Eye. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Evil Eye came out of a hard stone and met the angel Gabriel. He asked it: “Where are you going, you doomed one?” It answers him: “I am going to harm men and women, boys and girls, the souls of cattle and the birds of heaven”. The angel Gabriel says to it: “You will not enter paradise and you will not see God” [...] “In His name I bind you, O Evil, Envious Eye, green eye, blue eye and black, eye-flame, the eye that strikes and knows no pity, the eye of the seven evil neighbors – all kinds of eyes – from the body and soul (of the bearer of these letters), from his house, from his sons and daughters, from everything that he has and that he will have, (from) the bearer of these writs”. In the name of *ʾahiyah ʾašarhiyah, ʾelšaddāy, ʾadōnāy*, the Lord *Šbāʾūt*.²⁰ I write and God, mercifully takes care, so be it, amen. (Kaz4, foll. 53r-54r; ed. in Nurullina 2012, 87-8; Author’s transl.)

On the basis of this charm, Chart 2 presents the main components of the encounter charm as they appear in this example. The scheme is not meant to suggest that every Syriac encounter charm contains all these elements in exactly the same order, but rather to provide a working model for describing the recurrent narrative and ritual structure of this type.

¹⁹ Gollancz 1912, xlvi–xlix [Cod. A § 23], lxx–lxxi [Cod. B § 9], lxxxii [Cod. C § 19].

²⁰ For the Jewish origins of this common magical formula, that made its way into Christian, as well as Muslim magic, see Bohak 2008, 305-7.

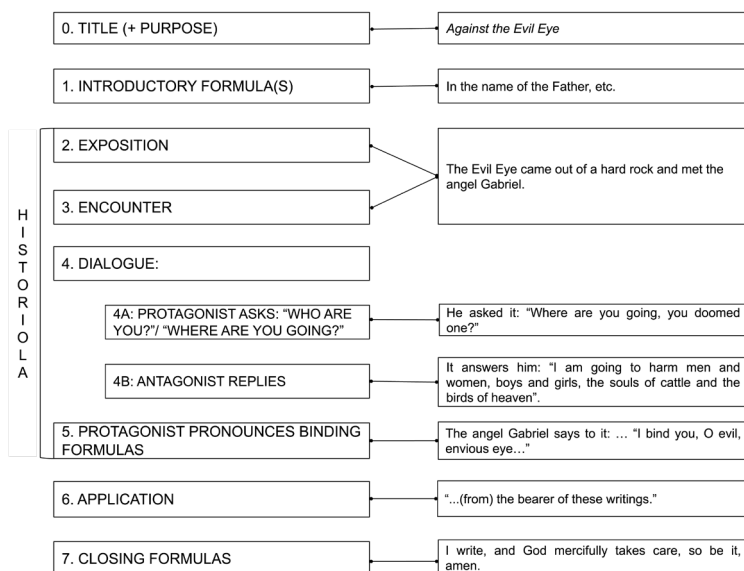


Chart 2 Structure of an encounter charm

Returning to a point raised in the section on clausal *historiolae* versus *historiola* proper, I suggested there that the difference is not only formal but also pragmatic. Whereas clausal *historiolae* function as compressed allusions and therefore tend to presuppose a recognizable narrative, *historiola* proper, including those embedded in encounter charms, do not always appear to depend on the audience's prior knowledge of a specific mythic narrative. Rather, the source of their authority may lie within the ritual itself.²¹ The narrated precedent of Syriac encounter charms is staged as a ritual scenario in which an authoritative protagonist confronts and overcomes an antagonistic force, and the application explicitly relocates that precedent to the client's here-and-now. In this respect, the template of the encounter charm in Chart 2 can be read not merely as a descriptive scheme but as a reusable structural pattern. While particular narrative details vary, the stable sequence of components (encounter, interrogation, self-disclosure, binding speech, and application) gives the charm its ritual force by presenting the hostile power as first identified, then questioned, and finally bound or expelled from the client.

²¹ For an analysis of an elaborate *historiola* attested in three Jewish Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowls, in which the narration becomes ritually effective through its inscription or recitation, see Shaked 2011, 199-201.

This perspective also bears on the question of origins, especially for *historiolae* that narrate a precedent not otherwise attested outside the magical text; do such episodes preserve a now-lost tradition or are they the product of ritual creativity, composed for a specific ritual purpose?²² Van der Vliet (1995, 401) explicitly raises the possibility of an *ad hoc* mythology, yet, in his Coptic material related to the narrative about the fall of Satan, he concludes that practitioners “invented very little”, explaining most apparent innovations as adaptations of motifs shaped by ritual micro-structure and rhetorical aims. In contrast, Frankfurter (2019, 611) is more open to the idea that *historiolae* treat the scriptural and inherited material creatively, with some narratives potentially “invented *ad hoc*” and nevertheless recited “as though canonical” (Frankfurter 1995, 463) precisely because he sees *historiolae* as ritual speech acts: their recitation creates and recognizes a mythic situation and mediate potency into the present performance through the recitation itself and the deployment of names and ritual objects (Frankfurter 2019, 612).

Returning to the template, in the example of our charm, the *protagonist* is the archangel Gabriel, whereas the *antagonist* is the Evil Eye. The exposition is typically extremely brief, yet other encounter charms, such as *The Charm of Mar ‘Aḏdišo’*, occasionally contain a more elaborate introduction:

The prayer, request, petition, and supplication of Mar ‘Abd-īshō’, the monk and hermit of God, who was among the dumb beasts on the Friday, which is the Passion (sc. day) of our Lord and Redeemer, at the time when the evil spirit, in the likeness of a hateful woman of dark appearance, was coming down from the Mount of Eden, and she appeared unto him, and called him by name, ‘Abd-īshō’. (Gollancz 1912, lxviii [Cod. B § 7, *The Anathema of Mar ‘Abd-īshō’, the Monk and Hermit*])

Here, the *historiola* of the saint’s confrontation with the ‘child-stealing witch’ is preceded by a customary introductory section characteristic of charms of the anathema genre. In the charms of this genre, a Christian saint speaks; each text opens with a brief *historiola* recalling the moment when the figure uttered the prayer that follows. The prayer itself then functions as the incantation, often framed as being pronounced immediately before the saint’s martyrdom (Hunter 1987; 1990; Cherkashina, forthcoming). This scheme is very common and underlies a number of widely circulating Syriac

22 This issue has been addressed from different angles in Frankfurter 1995, 463-4; van der Vliet 1995, 401; Versnel 2002, 122-6; Waller 2015, 267-74.

charms attributed to St. George,²³ Mār Tamsīs,²⁴ Rabbān Hurmīzd,²⁵ Daniel,²⁶ Mār Shallīṭā,²⁷ St. Paul (Nurullina 2012, 94-6), and Cyprian (Nurullina 2012, 48-53; Hunter 2018).

Returning to our representative encounter charm *Against the Evil Eye*, we see that, at the end of Gabriel's speech, there occurs an *application*, that is, the textual element that transfers the effect of the narrated precedent from the mythical realm into the present ritual moment and, more concretely, to the client.²⁸ Rather than standing as a separate unit, the application here is embedded in the binding formulae pronounced by the angel Gabriel. A similar pattern is found in other Syriac encounter charms; the application is commonly incorporated into the protagonist's direct speech, rather than formulated independently.

Most of the Syriac encounter charms – *Against the Evil Eye* (Jesus-version), *The Charm of Mar 'Aḏīšo'*, *The Charm of Simon Cephas*, *Binding of Scorpions and Snakes*, and *The Charm of King Solomon*²⁹ – follow this general template. The last (*The Charm of King Solomon*), however, departs from the pattern; it incorporates a narrative reminiscent of the opening chapters of the *Testament of Solomon*, so that the narrative segment is markedly longer and more complex than is typical for encounter charms.³⁰

Several more encounter charms incorporate some of the elements of the outlined structure, but deviate from the scheme in one way or another:

1. *Against the Pestilence of Small Cattle* (Nurullina 2012, 84-5, 178). Moses is tending his flock when it is struck by pestilence (*šhīn*). He utters a prayer that binds and expels the disease. The charm does not contain dialogue, and the antagonist is not personified.

23 Gollancz 1912, xxvi-xxvii [Cod. A § 5], lxx [Cod. B § 8], lxxiv [Cod. C § 2].

24 Gollancz 1912, xxxii [Cod. A § 12]; Hunter 2018.

25 Gollancz 1912, xlii [Cod. A § 27].

26 Gollancz 1912, xlvi [Cod. A § 35], lxxx [Cod. C § 14].

27 Gollancz 1912, lii [Cod. A § 46].

28 See also Frankfurter (1995, 462-3). This is defined as “the collapse of mythic/present time” by Blumell, Dosoo (2018, 222).

29 Editions: *The Charm of Mār 'Aḏīšo'* and *The Charm of Simon Cephas* see the next section in this article; *Binding of Scorpions and Snakes*: Nurullina 2012, 73-4, 157-60; Zellmann-Rohrer 2022, 121-2. The charm *Against the Evil Eye*, preserved in the same manuscript as our exemplary charm (Kaz4), features Jesus as the protagonist. Riding a donkey through the streets of Jerusalem, he meets the Evil Eye, asks where it is going, and, upon hearing the reply, pronounces the incantation (Nurullina 2012, 97-9). A brief analysis of the charm is also found in Cherkashina, forthcoming.

30 Edited in Russian in Cherkashina 2021, the English edition of the charm will appear in Cherkashina, forthcoming.

2. *Binding the Evil Apparition* (Gollancz 1912, xxxix-xl [Cod. A § 22]). Moses is tending sheep between seven mountains when he beholds three evil apparitions: a man, a lion, and an eagle. An incantation follows, banishing these figures. The charm contains no dialogue, and it is unclear whether the incantation is voiced by Moses or by an anonymous practitioner.
3. *[Ban for] the Fold of Cattle* (Gollancz 1912, lxxi [Cod. B § 10]). The charm opens with a dialogue:
“Seven accursed brothers, accursed sons, destructive ones, sons of men of destruction! Why do you creep along on your knees and move upon your hands?” and they replied: “We go on our hands, so that we may eat flesh, and we crawl along upon our hands, so that we may drink blood”.

A binding spell, spoken by an anonymous protagonist, follows. The *historiola*, however, lacks exposition and there is no narrative description of the encounter.

4 The Syriac Version of the St. Sisinnius Legend

This final section uses the St. Sisinnius Legend as a case study for the analysis of *historiolae* in the Syriac magical tradition. It first introduces the wider transmission of this narrative tradition and its two main types, and then examines three Syriac charms in which related motifs are preserved: *The Charm of Mār ‘Abdīšo’*, *The Charm of the Blessed Lady Mary*, and *The Charm of Simon Cephas*. Particular attention is paid to narrative structure, textual transmission, and the function of illustrations.

4.1 The St. Sisinnius Legend: Introduction

The St. Sisinnius Legend (hereafter SL) is an umbrella designation for a wide range of individual charms, hagiographic legends, prayers, and amulets that attest to a shared narrative pattern: a protagonist (or protagonists) confronts an evil being that targets pregnant women and young children. Versions of this legend are attested in Christian, Muslim, Jewish and pagan magical traditions of the Middle East, the Mediterranean, Europe and the Caucasus.³¹ In

³¹ The following key works provide comparative analysis of sources from different traditions: Gaster 1900; Greenfield 1989; Badalanova Geller 2015. See also the further references cited below in connection with individual traditions, which frequently draw on comparative material.

Byzantine magic, Sisinnius or the Archangel Michael opposes Gullou (Gaster 1900; Greenfield 1989; Chekha 2017). In Arabic magic, the narrative is associated with Solomon (Sulaymān), who confronts a demon called Qarīna, Tābi'ah, or 'Umm aṣ-Ṣibyān (Winkler 1931). In Jewish magic, the legend is attested through two key narratives: the Smamit story and the prophet Elijah's confrontation with Lilith.³² The deeper roots of the child-stealing demon or demons can be traced back to Mesopotamia, above all to the figure of Lamaštu, who primarily targets babies and young children and is the object of a rich tradition of rituals, amulets, and incantations (Scurlock 1991; Wiggermann 2000; Farber 2014). Some of these texts refer to her as having seven names (Wiggermann 2000, 242; Farber 2014, 144-5).

In 1900, Moses Gaster published a pioneering comparative study that traced the history of the 'child-stealing witch' motif from *The Testament of Solomon* to modern charms from Romania, South Russia, and Kurdistan (Gaster 1900). His survey examined a wide range of versions, including Greek, Romanian, Slavic, Hebrew, and Syriac texts. The Syriac example he used was *The Charm of Mār 'Aḇdīšo' Against Teb'ā*, based on Gollancz's earlier edition (1898).

More recently, the legend has been studied within the framework of a project entitled *St. Sisinnius' Legend in Folklore and Written Traditions of the Near East, Balkans, and Eastern Europe*, headed by Prof. Andrey Toporkov, Institute of World Literature, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow (Toporkov 2019).

Gaster identified two primary plots in SL, attested over one and a half millennia. Following Greenfield (1989), they are usually referred to as the 'Michael-type' and the 'Sisinnius/Melitene-type'.

The Michael-type of text is typically an encounter charm, which describes a saint, often Michael, Elijah, or Sisinnius, who encounters a witch or demoness while he is traveling. He asks where she is going, and she replies that she intends to harm a woman in labor or a newborn child. The saint then demands that she reveal her secret names – often arranged in fixed numbers, such as 9, 12, or 40 – and then compels her to swear an oath that she will not harm anyone in any place where her names, or the names of the angels, are written or pronounced. To this type (among others) belong Jewish charms with the *historiola* of Elijah the Prophet confronting Lilith, Arabic charms featuring Sulaymān vs. Qarīna, Romanian charms against Avestitza, and the Syriac *Charm of Mār 'Aḇdīšo' Against Teb'ā* (Toporkov 2019).

The Sisinnius/Melitene-type of text narrates the story of a demoness who kills the children of a woman (called Melitene in the Greek tradition). The protagonist(s) – typically Sisinnius (or he and

32 Naveh, Shaked 1998, 104-8, 111-22; Ford 2016; Elitzur-Leiman 2016; Harari 2017, 136, 210-11; Lyavdansky 2017; Kaspina 2017.

his brothers) – pursue her, overtake her, and force her to bring the children back alive. At the end of the encounter, she reveals all her names and promises not to harm those who invoke them or who call upon the name(s) of the protagonist(s). Although charms that belong to this type do contain an episode of encounter between the protagonist and the antagonist, they usually incorporate a more complex narrative, only part of which is represented by this confrontation. To this type belong the late antique Jewish story of Smamit, found on incantation bowls, the Ethiopian legend of St. Sisinnius, and the *Syriac Charm of Simon Cephas Against Teb'ā*.

4.2 The St. Sisinnius Legend in Syriac Charms

The St. Sisinnius Legend is used in this section as a case study for the analysis of *historiolae* in the Syriac magical tradition. The legend functions here not as a single text, but as a narrative motif that connects the *historiolae* embedded in three different Syriac charms. The section first offers a brief introduction to the study of this legend across different magical traditions, and then turns to a sequential analysis of the three Syriac charms.

The aim is to show how this ancient and widely transmitted motif is realized in the form of a *historiola* in different Syriac texts. In doing so, the section also considers aspects of *historiolae* beyond their basic structure: the motifs they preserve, the ways in which they are incorporated into the broader composition of the charm, and the ways in which the textual narrative is supported visually through illustrations.

Three Syriac charms incorporate *historiolae* that contain the motifs outlined above: *The Charm of Mār 'Aḇdīšo'*, *The Charm of the Blessed Lady Mary*, and *The Charm of Simon Cephas*. In what follows, each charm is presented in the form of a catalogue entry which lists its textual witnesses, provides a brief description, and notes parallels and references. Unlike the first two charms, the third charm, which features Simon Cephas, has not previously been translated into English in one of its redactions. Therefore, its text and translation are reproduced at the end of this section.

4.2.1 *The Charm of Mār 'Aḇdīšo' Against Teb'ā*

Introduction This encounter charm is attested in most of the known Syriac codices and amulets. The earliest copy – discovered in Hadath Grotto, Lebanon – can be dated to the thirteenth century (Abousamra 2013). The charm belongs to the Michael-type of SL.

The two lists of secret names which the demoness reveals to the saint, containing 4 and 12 names respectively, include names

well known from Aramaic magical texts, such as *Lēlītā* ('Lilith') and *Malwītā* ('the accompanying demon'), alongside names of Greek (*Gullōs*, cf. Gr. Γελλώ), Arabic (*Teb'ā*, cf. Arb. *tābi'a*), Iranian (*Zardūk*, cf. MP *Zārdūxt*), and Sumerian (*Dōmos*, *Dyarbā*, cf. Sum. *dumu-zi* and *dili-bad*) origin.³³ Taken together with numerous parallels from Mediterranean cultures and beyond, this onomastic mixture suggests a long and layered history of transmission involving complex interactions with neighboring magical traditions.

The *historiola* of the charm may best be understood as the result of a blending of hagiographic and magical traditions. While the scene recalls well-known hagiographic narratives of the temptation of saints, the demoness's expressed intention to become the saint's wife may tentatively reflect a Christianized elaboration of the Jewish *geṭ*-motif known from Aramaic incantation bowls against demons. In this magical framework, the *geṭ* is effective precisely because sexual interaction between a human and a demon was considered possible and because such interaction was understood to entail "some sort of obligation akin to that which accompanies the marital status" (Levene 2003, 19; cf. Folmer 2016).

Titles *The Charm of Mār 'Aḥdīšo' Against Teb'ā; The Charm of Mār 'Aḥdīšo' Against Teb'ā of Women; The Charm of Mār 'Aḥdīšo' Against Teb'ā, the Killer of Women and Children.*

Manuscripts The charm appears *passim* in Syriac magical manuscripts. In view of its ubiquity, an exhaustive list of witnesses is not provided here; representative manuscripts can be consulted in the editions cited below.

Editions Hazard 1893; Gollancz 1898; Gollancz 1912 (Cod. B § 7, Cod. C § 25); Hunter 1999; Nurullina 2012, 53-6; Abousamra 2013; Abousamra, Schmidt 2014; Lyavdansky, Nurullina 2017; Talay, Rudolf, Kouriyhe 2020; Schmidt 2021; Pearson 2022, 59-64.

Function Protection of women and children against attacks by a demoness associated with miscarriages and infant death.

Agents Protagonist = Mār 'Aḥdīšo'; antagonist = Teb'ā.

Story On Good Friday at the ninth hour, the ascetic 'Aḥdīšo', who has spent forty years in the wilderness, is approached by a demonic woman who has come in order 'to become his wife'. He demands that

³³ Comparative and etymological analysis of the lists of the names across different Syriac manuscripts can be found in Lyavdansky, Nurullina 2017.

she reveal her identity. The demoness discloses two sets of names: a short list of 4 names, and an extended list of 12. She swears an oath never to enter any home or harm anyone who wears the amulet inscribed with these names. 'Aḥdišo' then binds her by pronouncing an incantation.

Iconography The images [figs 1-2] depict the confrontation of the saint with a demon using two basic variations; the saint is either on horseback, replicating the so-called 'holy rider',³⁴ or he is standing.



Figure 1
MS StPS1. Inscriptions:
"Aḥdišo" (upper margin);
"Th(is is) Lēlītā" (lower
margin). Photo by Alexey
Lyavdansky, © The Private
Collection of the late Mikhail
Sado



Figure 2
MS StPS5b, fol. 48r.
No inscriptions.
Photo by Alexey Lyavdansky,
© The Private Collection
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Further Bibliography Gaster 1900; Krämer 1924; Krämer 1928; Winkler 1931; Naveh, Shaked 1998; Hunter 1987; 1990.

34 'Aḥdišo' is portrayed this way in Hunter 1999; Schmidt 2021. As Ewa Balicka-Witakowska (2008, 789) notes, "Although, according to his *vita*, only St. George should have been portrayed as an equestrian, the ability to conquer ascribed to other protectors allowed them to be represented within the iconographical scheme normally reserved for equestrian saints". See the discussion below in relation to Lady Mary.

reflexes of the names of additional protagonists in the Jewish versions of the legend. More tentatively, *sssnwr* and *snqlws/sm'lws* in this charm likely represent permutations of *snsnwy* and *smnglwp* respectively. If this identification is correct, the latter name in particular would point to the Jewish Palestinian version of the legend, whereas the Babylonian sources have *s-n-g-r* rather than *s-n-g-l* at the base of this name (Lyavdansky 2017, 59). At the same time, the evidential value of this so-far isolated Syriac attestation is difficult to assess. These garbled forms of the protagonists of the Jewish version of the SL are currently found only in Lo5281. Nonetheless, they seem to point to influence from the Jewish tradition of the SL, although this indication remains tentative and awaits clarification from future discoveries.

Titles *The Anathema of My Lady, the Blessed Mary, which is of Avail for Sick Persons; The Charm of the Blessed Mary for Women Whose Children Do not Survive; The Charm of the Blessed Mary Against Any Pain and Sickness; The Charm of the Blessed Mary Against Any Demon and Satan.*

Manuscripts G. B (Gollancz Cod. B) § 6; CaH159; NY2941/4; Kaz4, foll. 30r-34v; StPS5b, foll. 58r-61v; LoA16; StPSnd1; AynCDM18, foll. 18r-24r; Mo417, fol. 21v; LoA15; Ye72a; Ye72b; BeZ; StPS1.

Editions Gollancz 1912 (Cod. B § 6); Nurullina 2012, 65-8; Assad 2015; Lyavdansky, Nurullina 2017; Talay, Rudolf, Kouriyhe 2020; Schmidt 2021.

Function Fertility and safe childbirth, demonic protection, healing of any sickness.

Agents Mary and Jesus.

Story Mary comes from the mount of Eden to meet Jesus, who has just entered Jerusalem and is being welcomed by the crowds. Jesus asks her, "Where are you going?" She replies that she has come to ask him one request. Jesus promises to grant it. Mary implores him to protect women and children from a shape-shifting demoness known by many names (Zardoḳ, Mīdoḳ, Lēlītā, etc.). This demoness deceives both men and women and strangles unborn and newborn children. Mary prays that the sick will be healed, the barren will conceive, and birthing mothers will deliver without pain. She also asks that anyone who wears or invokes the written charm be freed from all demonic and magical harm.

Iconography The iconography associated with this charm typically depicts either Jesus entering Jerusalem or Lady Mary with the young Jesus [figs 3-4].³⁷ The former is a well-known motif, attested in the Syriac manuscripts of the Gospels.³⁸ The latter image is apparently not directly related to the narrative of the charm, but still conveys power, since the parental relationship between Jesus and Mary forms the basis of her plea. The third type of image associated with this charm depicts Lady Mary on horseback; see Cod. B § 6 (Gollancz 1912, 60).



Figure 3
MS StPSnd1. Mary and Jesus.
No inscriptions.
Photo by Alexey Lyavdansky,
© The Private Collection
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³⁷ For images depicting Mary with Jesus in a cradle, see also Schmidt 2021, 19, and Assad 2015, 46.

³⁸ See, for instance, MS Borg. sir. 169 in the Vatican library (fol. 64r), as well as Schapiro 1973, regarding the same motif in the manuscript of the *Diatessaron*.



Figure 4

MS NY2941/4, New York Public Library.
Inscriptions: "This is Jesus entering
Jerusalem" (upper left corner);
"This is a donkey" (center);
"These are the children of Israel in
whose hands there is hosanna" (lower
margin, between the figures).
Photo by Alexey Lyavdansky,
manuscript in the public domain

4.2.3 *The Charm of Simon Cephas Against Teb'ā*

Introduction This charm appears to be the rarest of the three charms in the Syriac tradition that incorporate motifs from SL. One of the redactions of the charm (A) blends the two types of SL narratives: the Sisinnius/Melitene-type - with the narrative of a woman whose children have died due to demonic intervention - and the Michael-type - with the encounter scene that relates how Simon Cephas interrogates the demon and learns her names. Although the text functions as a charm, its elaborate narrative structure strongly resembles a hagiographical legend, portraying St. Peter (Simon Cephas) performing a miracle and converting "the city of Asia" to Christianity.

Titles *The Charm of Simon Cephas for Women Whose Children Do not Survive Because of the Demon; The Charm of Simon Cephas for Women; The Charm of Simon Cephas Against Teb'ā of Women.*

Manuscripts NY2941/4; Kaz4, foll. 34v-37r; Ye72b; StPSnd1; StPS5b, foll. 62r-63r (preserved in part).

Editions Nurullina 2012, 68-70; Lyavdansky, Nurullina 2017; Schmidt 2021.

Function Fertility and safe childbirth, demonic protection.

Agents Protagonist = Simon Cephas (St. Peter); antagonist = Teb'ā; afflicted person = woman in labor (Story B: king's wife).

Story Two versions of the narrative are found across the four manuscripts that preserve the charm.

- Story A (Kaz4, NY2941/4, StPSnd1, StPS5b, edited below):
While traveling through the city of Asia, Simon Cephas encounters a woman in the midst of childbirth, surrounded by people with cymbals and drums. A demon appears, intending to kill the newborn. At the very moment the child is born, it dies. The mother sends word to Simon, who tells them the child will live if baptized. The mother agrees, and Simon resurrects the child through prayer. Simon then confronts the demon, asking for her name. The demon replies with a list. Simon binds the demon using divine names.
- Story B (Ye72b):
After Pentecost, Simon travels and reaches the city of Asia. There he meets the king and asks whom the people of the city worship. Finding out that they practice idolatry, Simon reproaches the king. The king's wife has by that time lost seven newborn children. When she gives birth again, musicians with different instruments gather to protect her from demonic attacks, but the newborn child dies. Simon offers to resurrect the child, if the king promises to believe in Christ. The king agrees. Simon prays and revives the child, converting the whole city. The saint asks the demon why he kills children. The demon confesses that he kills unborn children to prevent humans from praising God, admitting that his power extends until the child reaches seven years of age. Simon then banishes the demon, declaring that in any place where the names of Jesus and Simon Cephas are invoked, the demon will no longer have power.

Iconography The two images [figs 5-6] employ markedly different iconographic schemes. Figure 6 represents a common mode of depicting a saint's victory over a demon: Simon Cephas is shown mounted on a white horse, striking with a spear a standing black demon with long hair. The element in the upper right corner cannot be securely identified. Figure 5, by contrast, preserves a scene that appears to be very rare in Syriac magical manuscripts and includes four figures. From left to right, Simon Cephas is shown grasping the demon by the hair. The demon's body is represented in profile, while its face is shown frontally; its hands and feet terminate in what appear to be hooves. The demon reaches toward a child, whose smaller scale in comparison with the adult figures is achieved mainly by the absence of legs. To the right of the child stands his mother, whose outstretched right hand touches the child's head.



Figure 5 MS NY2941/4, New York Public Library. Inscriptions (from left to right): "This is Simon Cephas"; "This is the demon *prwn*"; "This is a child"; "This is the mother of the child".
Photo by Alexey Lyavdansky, manuscript in the public domain



Figure 6
MS StPSnd1. Inscriptions:
"Teb'ā" (on the left); "Mār
Šem'on (Simon Cephas)"
(on both sides of the figure).
Photo by Alexey Lyavdansky,
© The Private Collection
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4.2.3.1 Text and Translation

This section edits and translates into English a previously unpublished redaction of the charm, preserved in four witnesses: Kaz4 (foll. 34v-37r), StPSnd1, StPS5b (foll. 62r-63r) and NY2941/4 (amulet). Like the amulet from the Matenadaran edited by Schmidt (2021), NY2941/4 contains all three charms related to the Syriac version of SL, selected to assist a female client with fertility and childbirth.

The narrative section of the charm presents a complex plot that can be divided into the following episodes:

1. Exposition. Simon travels and arrives in the city of Asia. He encounters a woman in labor, surrounded by a crowd attempting to ward off a demon by means of musical instruments. Simon does not initially intervene or interact with the woman. She gives birth to a boy, whom the demon kills.
2. First dialogue. Simon learns that the demon has killed the child. He offers to restore the boy to life on the condition that he be baptized. The woman replies that, if he does so, the entire city will convert to Christianity. Simon revives the child.
3. Second dialogue. After pronouncing the binding formulae, Simon interrogates the demon, asking for its name and its occupation. The demon reveals four names and an epithet. Simon then binds it again.

The *historiola* thus combines both narrative patterns associated with the two types of encounter charms discussed above: that with an afflicted person and that with an evil spirit. Each pattern is structured around its own dialogue. Notably, however, the interaction with the

child's mother takes the form of an explicit transaction between the saint and the bereaved woman.

A comparison with the other redaction of the charm, found in Ye72b, reveals several major discrepancies. First, the Ye72b redaction preserves a more fully developed exposition, which includes an additional dialogue between Simon and the king of Asia. From this conversation we learn that the city worships idols and that the demon has previously killed seven children of the same woman, who is identified as the king's wife. Simon reproaches the king for his idolatry; the episode as a whole results in a narrative that is more expansive and more similar to a hagiographical composition. Another noteworthy distinction is that, in the Ye72 redaction, the demon does not reveal any secret names. This absence, together with the details provided in the exposition, aligns the narrative more consistently with the Sisinnius/Melitene-type, in which the focus lies on the pursuit of the child-killing demon and the restoration of the killed children, rather than on the interrogation of the demon about its secret names. The Ye72b redaction may therefore be regarded as a comparatively 'pure' representative of the Sisinnius/Melitene-type.

By contrast, the text and translation presented below appear to be an abbreviated yet hybrid form of the SL narrative. While it preserves the Melitene-type structure of loss of children and restitution, it simultaneously incorporates an interrogation of the demon about its secret names, a feature characteristic of the Michael-type encounter charms.

Only one of the names in the redaction below corresponds to the tradition of demonic names attested in *The Charm of Mār 'Aḫdīšo'* and *The Charm of Lady Mary*, namely *Mḥa* 'altā, which is best understood as a distorted variant of the widely attested Aramaic demonic name *Mḥakkaltā*. Notably, *Bzom* (ܒܙܡ), another name of the demon, may reflect the influence of the Byzantine tradition, where *Βυζοῦ* and *Βηξοῦν* appear as variants of the more well-known name of the 'child-stealing witch', *Αβυζοῦ* 'Abyzouth'.

The text is based on Kaz4, with occasional significant readings from the other witnesses noted in the footnotes. Kaz4, StPSnd1, and StPS5b (preserved only in part) show almost no textual discrepancies, whereas the fourth witness, NY2941/4, diverges somewhat and contains a larger number of differences. Nevertheless, all four manuscripts transmit a very similar text, especially in the narrative section. Among the variants in NY2941/4, particularly noteworthy is an additional demon name, *ܦܪܘܢ* (*prwn*), for which NY2941/4 appears to be the only witness.

39 The epithet of Teb'ā is added on the margin of Kaz4, while NY2941/4 says only **בנות**. StPSnd1 says **בנות** 'of women'.

40 NY2941/4 says: **הַתְּפִלָּה וְהַבְּקָשָׁה וְהַחֲפָצָה**: 'The prayer, supplication and request of Mar Simon Cephas, who was walking...'.¹

41 NY2941/4 adds: **בֶּן** 'son'.

42 NY2941/4 has ~~an~~ 'one' instead.

43 NY2941/4 has 𐤒𐤕 '(was) standing' instead.

44 NY2941/4 adds: **𐤊𐤍𐤁𐤏** 'to your God'.

45 NY2941/4 adds: 𐤁𐤏𐤍 'evil'.

46 Omitted in NY2941/4.

47 NY2941/4 reads: 'מִן הַגִּידִים מִן הַזְּרָעִים מִן הַבְּטָן מִן הַחֲסִים מִן הַנֶּפֶשׁ מִן הַחַיִּים' 'from the body and the soul, from the offspring and the womb and all limbs of the bearer of these writs'. StPSnd1 agrees with Kaz4, except that StPSnd1 lacks the crossed-out word מִן הַחֲסִים.

48 NY2941/4 adds: ܐܕܡܐ ܕܐܪܥܐ 'on the earth'.

49 NY2941/4 adds: 'and *prwn*'. Compare the captions to the image from this MS above.

50 The scribe inserted ههههه 'lines' above the line. NY2941/4 has: م م فلهههه م م ودهههه with the female client's name following, which means 'from the body and the offspring of PN'.

51 NY2941/4 has a different rather peculiar formula: **بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ** 'on her name, as Rome (was sealed) by Peter and Paul, and as Byzantine (was sealed) by the cross, from now and unto ages of ages, truly, amen'.

Translation

The Charm of Simon Cephas against Teb'ā, the she-killer of women and children. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Once when Simon Cephas was traveling, passing through the city of Asia, he found a certain woman who was lying in pain. Around her stood many women, and (there were) men with cymbals, and she was seized by pain, because she was about to give birth. Behold, before her appeared a cursed demon, in order that, as soon as the child was born, he might kill him. Simon Cephas, then, was proclaiming and teaching the glory of baptism for the remission of sins. At that moment, the woman who lay in pain gave birth to a son, and while Simon was asking to see⁵² what the fate of the boy would be, she sent to him to say that the child had died. Simon Cephas said to them: "If you wish that the child should live, let him become a Christian". The mother of the child answered: "If the boy lives, the whole city will turn to the faith which you proclaim". Simon rushed to the child,⁵³ brought him back to life, and handed him to his mother, and she received him with great joy. Simon Cephas said to that demon: "I bind you and I adjure you by the name of 'ahiyah 'ašarhiyah, 'ešaddāy, 'adōnāy, the Lord Šbā'ūt, from the bodies and from all the limbs of the bearers of these writs, from their sons and daughters, so let it be, amen". Simon Cephas said to her: "What is your name, and what is your occupation?" That demon answered: "Know, O Simon, that I have many names by which I am called: Le'zta, Saggitā, Mba'alta, and Bzōm, the strangler of children". Simon said to that demon: "I bind you and I adjure you by the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, from the bodies and limbs of the bearers of these writs, from their sons and daughters, from now and unto ages of ages, amen". This charm is sealed and confirmed by the living sign of the victorious Cross, now and always, and unto ages of ages.

5 Conclusion

The phenomenon of *historiolae* within the corpus of Christian Syriac magical texts (preserved predominantly in codices and amulets from the eighteenth-twentieth centuries) is not new to academia. However, a working typology of Syriac *historiolae* found in this material which is relevant to existing theoretical models (in particular David Frankfurter's influential scheme) has been a desideratum up to

⁵² It remains unclear whether Simon was asking those present about the child's fate or praying to God to learn what had happened.

⁵³ Cf. Acts 20:10.

now. By distinguishing between clausal *historiolae*, brief narrative *historiolae*, and more elaborate narrative forms, including encounter charms, this article has sought to provide a framework for describing the diversity of Syriac charms that employ embedded narratives.

The majority of more elaborate narrative *historiolae* can be classified as encounter charms. A general structural scheme of the encounter charm, based on the charm *Against the Evil Eye*, identifies the component parts of such a charm.

The article concludes with a case study of Syriac charms connected to the St. Sisinnius Legend, including the first English translation of one redaction of *The Charm of Simon Cephas*.

Although most of the surviving Syriac magical manuscripts are relatively late, the tradition they preserve is demonstrably older. Nevertheless, Syriac magic has so far remained marginal within broader discussions of *historiolae*. The richness of the Syriac material, illustrated here by multiple examples, together with the typology proposed in this article, demonstrates that Syriac magical texts constitute an important body of evidence for future typological and comparative studies of *historiolae*.

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Liturgical and Traditional Prayers in the Armenian Amulet Rolls

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Abstract This paper centers on the liturgical and traditional prayers found in Armenian amulet rolls (*hmayil/hamayil*) extant between the fifteenth to twentieth centuries, which present a window into the folk piety of the Armenian Christian tradition. Particular attention is paid to the prayers of St. Nersēs Šnorhali and St. Gregory of Narek found in the scrolls, with an explication of their contents and an explanation for their inclusion. Other liturgical and traditional prayers include the Our Father, the Creed, the Hail Mary as well as those to other saints and angels in the Christian tradition.

Keywords Armenian. Amulet roll. Scroll. Hmayil. Hamayil. Nersēs Šnorhali (of Klay). Gregory of Narek. Liturgical prayers. Traditional prayers. Armenian folk piety.

Summary 1 Introduction: Armenian Amulet Scrolls. – 1.1 Acquirers of Armenian Amulet Scrolls. – 1.2 Makers of Armenian Amulet Scrolls. – 2 Liturgical and Traditional Prayers in the Amulet Rolls. – 2.1 *With Faith I Confess*: The Prayer of 24 Stanzas by St. Nersēs Šnorhali. – 2.2 *The Book of Lamentation* of St. Gregory of Narek. – 2.3 Other Traditional and Liturgical Prayers in the Amulet Rolls.



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1 Introduction: Armenian Amulet Scrolls

Armenian amulet scrolls, called *hmayil* (հմայիլ) or more often *hamayil* (հաւմայիլ), are among the first texts in the Armenian literary tradition to be popular among the common people, as opposed to clerics, monastics, or members of the upper nobility, who had been the primary audience for most literary works before the early modern period.¹ Extant examples – about 1,000 in total (Ghazaryan, Sargsyan 2016, 15) – ranging between the fifteenth to twentieth century and measuring a few inches in width and extending in length for many feet, sometimes up to fifty or more, contain sacred and sometimes magical texts and images.²

1.1 Acquirers of Armenian Amulet Scrolls

Hmayils were popular across nearly the whole spectrum of early modern Armenian society, evident through an examination of the colophons that mention the position or profession of the commissioner or acquirer of the scroll. A recent study that examined the colophons of scrolls to extract information on their makers and acquirers found mention of the following monikers beside the name of the acquirer: bishop (եպիսկոպոս; 1 time); priest (տէր, երէց, քահանայ; 9 times); monk (աբեղայ; 1 time); *tirats'u*³ (տիրացուն; 10 times); *dpir*⁴ (դպիր; 1 time); *Ā'alapi*⁵ (Չալապի; 1 time); *Paron* (Պարոն; 1 time); *mahtesi*⁶ (մահեստի; 5 times); *haci*⁷ (հաճի; 1 time); *Āēs*⁸ (Աէս; 2 times); *hoja*⁹ (խօջայ/խոջա; 7 times); *hēk'im*¹⁰ (հէքիմ; 1 time); goldsmith (նսկէրիչ;

1 While the etymology of the Armenian term is not certain, it is thought to be a borrowing from Arabic *ḥamā'il*, the plural of *ḥimālah*, from the root *Ḥ-M-L* ('carrying, bearing'). On this term and others that were used to designate these amulet scrolls, see Arlen 2024, 10-12.

2 For their contents, see Feydit 1986 and Sarkisian 2024.

3 A member of the minor orders authorized with certain diaconal functions, such as reading, chanting, and exorcism; often refers to an advanced candidate for the priesthood.

4 Cantor, lector.

5 Cf. Turkish *Çelebi*, an Ottoman honorific, meaning 'gentleman', 'learned', or 'master'.

6 Cf. Arabic *maqdisi*. In the Armenian context, this refers to one who has made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

7 Cf. Arabic *Hajji*/Turkish *Hacı*. Like *mahtesi*, in a Christian context, this is used to refer to a Christian that has made pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

8 Village chief.

9 Merchant.

10 Doctor. Cf. Turkish *hekim* from Arabic *Ḥakīm*/Ḥākim.

1 time); *tōtramaci*¹¹ (տօռթամաճի; 1 time); baker (հացթուխ; 1 time) (Arlen 2024, 17-19). In one instance an adolescent (սպասմի) was mentioned as the recipient (Harut'iwn K'iwrtean hmayil no. 2 in Tēr-Vardanean 2013, 68). Although less often than men, women were also frequently mentioned as the acquirers of hmayils, either alone or along with their husbands – sometimes preceding their husband's name as the principal acquirer, more often following them (Arlen 2024, 18-19). Evidently, amulet scrolls were acquired by most members of early modern Armenian society: priests, monks, community and village leaders, pilgrims, merchants, doctors, and members of the artisanal middle class, such as goldsmiths, carpenters, and bakers, as well as women and youth. Peasants and laborers are not found among the owners, since they were likely too poor to acquire such an object.

1.2 Makers of Armenian Amulet Scrolls

Contrary perhaps to expectations, amulet rolls in the Armenian tradition contain not only the kinds of magical and binding texts and talismans that are common to other traditions of the Near East and Mediterranean, but also liturgical and traditional prayers found in the official services of the church. This is perhaps because the majority of the extant Armenian scrolls were made by members of the ordained ecclesiastical hierarchy (Arlen 2024, 15-17).

While investigating the available colophons of hmayils, scrolls were found to be made by persons bearing the following monikers (beside which is indicated the number of times this moniker was found among the colophons examined and the percentage of times this moniker was used out of the total times a moniker was used in the colophons examined that included a named scribe with a moniker (92): priest (եղբ, տէր, քահանայ; 41 times – 45%); *dpir* (դպիր; 11 times – 12%); scribe (գրիչ, գրող; 11 times – 12%); *tirats'u* (տիրացու; 8 times – 9%); deacon (սարկաւազ; 7 times – 8%); *mahtesi* (մահտեսի; 5 times – 5%); monk (աբեղայ; 2 times – 2%); bishop (եպիսկոպոս; 2 times – 2%); illuminator (ծաղկարար; 2 times – 2%); drawer/artist (գծող; 1 time – 1%); *vardapet* (վարդապետ; 1 time – 1%); secretary (քարտուղար; 1 time – 1%) (Arlen 2024, 15-17). This data makes it clear that most makers of hmayils were ordained members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, most commonly priests. In fact, there seems to have been a concerted effort on the part of clergy involved in the creation and dissemination of the scrolls to produce and promote 'sanitized' versions of the scrolls that suppressed the magical elements typically found in such amulets, replacing them

11 Woodworker, carpenter.

with authorized and orthodox texts, prayers, and images. The various editions of printed scrolls produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries seem to be part of this larger effort on the part of church authorities to produce authorized versions of the scrolls, since they too are stripped of most magical and talismanic elements.¹²

One handwritten amulet scroll, made by a scribe Yovhannēs in 1777 (Matenadaran scroll no. 424), indicates the scribe’s own effort to do just that:

Now (I) wrote this holy writing of protection, which is called *Hēmayēl*, which is a certain unsuitable name that they ignorantly name *Hēmayēl*, because a sorcerer is recognized by his saying *Hem*, and the text they make is called *Hemeayel*, i.e., created or written by *Hem*. Now this [hmayil] is not like that but is pure and clear of all sorcerous things. Instead, [it contains] the supplications and prayers of our holy and blessed and spiritual *vardapets*, that is, St. Gregory of Narek the angelic *vardapet*, as well as St. Nersēs of Klay, the graceful and blessed patriarch, in whose prayers we took refuge as we created this writing of protection, which expels demons and disperses all pains.¹³

As indicated by the above colophon, scribes like Yovhannēs sought to purge the amulets they made of “all sorcerous things” (յաւենայն կախարթական յիրաց). Of course, this attests at the same time to the fact that many of the Armenian amulets did contain such sorcerous or magical elements, as are indeed present in some of the extant manuscript rolls. Yet, in my investigations, far more often do we find scrolls filled, as Yovhannēs says here, with “the implorations and prayers of our holy and blessed and spiritual *vardapets*” (մաղթանք եւ աղօթք սուրբ եւ երջանիկ եւ հոգիացեալ վարդապետացն մերոց). Such prayers were so diffuse that they are usually found even in the

12 Printed scrolls were made in nineteen separate print runs by five different printers between 1659-1731. See Arlen 2024, 8. A typical example, and one readily available to view online, is Armenian prayer scroll number 1 from the Library of Congress, published in Constantinople in 1727 by Astuatsatur of Constantinople (<https://www.loc.gov/item/2014373044/>). A facsimile edition of this scroll has been recently published, along with transcription, translation, annotation, and commentary in Sarkisian 2024.

13 “Արդ գրեցաւ այս սուրբ գիրս պահպանութեան, որ կոչի Հեմայէլ, որ է անպատեհ, իմն անուռ տգիտաբար անուանեն Հեմայէլ, վասն զի Հեմ ասելն կախարդ իմանի, եւ նոցա արարեալ գիրն ասի Հեմեայել, այսինքն Հեմայի արած կամ գրած: Արդ ոչ է սա այնպէս, այլ գուտ եւ մաքուր յամենայն կախարթական յիրաց: Այլ մաղթանք եւ աղօթք սուրբ եւ երջանիկ եւ հոգիացեալ վարդապետացն մերոց, այսինքն սրբոյն Գրիգորի Նարեկացւոյ հրեշտակակրօն վարդապետի, նաեւ սրբոյն Ներսէսի Կլայեցւոյ շնորհալի եւ երջանիկ հայրապետին, որոյ աղօթք ապաւինելով արարուք գիրս պահպանութեան եւ դիւստալած եւ փարատիչ ամենայն ցաւոց” (Ghazaryan 2013, 8-9; unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author). For another translation, see Sarkisian 2024, xxii-xxiii.

scrolls containing the kinds of magical and sorcerous elements that would be looked upon askance by scribes and clergymen such as Yovhannēs.¹⁴

2 Liturgical and Traditional Prayers in the Amulet Rolls

What then were the liturgical and traditional prayers found in the scrolls? The most frequent and prominent were those by St. Nersēs of Klay (Šnorhali) and St. Gregory of Narek, already indicated by the scribe Yovhannēs in the colophon quoted above.

2.1 *With Faith I Confess: The Prayer of 24 Stanzas* by St. Nersēs Šnorhali

Among the texts found in Armenian amulet rolls, the prayer of 24 stanzas by twelfth-century catholicos and saint Nersēs Šnorhali holds a prominent place (for the prayer, see Text 1 in the Appendix).¹⁵ Among most hmayils I have examined, including both printed and manuscript scrolls, this text tends to be either the first textual unit found in the scroll or the second, following healing pericopes from the Four Gospels [figs 1-2].

In distinction to many prayers in the Armenian tradition, which are often anonymous or the circumstance of their composition is hazy or unknown, we have very specific information surrounding the reason for which this prayer was written, thanks to an explanatory preface that St. Nersēs wrote to accompany the prayer.¹⁶

St. Nersēs composed the prayer while he was a bishop serving as an assistant to his older brother, the catholicos Grigor III Pahlawuni (Գրիգոր Գ. Պաղաւաւունի). St. Nersēs begins the preface to his prayer by specifying that it was intended not for monks or other clergy but “for common Christians – old and young, men and women – which all should learn and teach to one another” (հասարակաց քրիստոնէից մեծաց եւ փոքունց, արանց եւ կանանց, զոր պարտին ուսանիլ ամենեքեան, եւ ուսուցանել զմիմեանս; Awetisean 2018a, 1204.1). He goes on to specify how and when he intended the prayer to be recited. He says that people should pray with it “five times a day, with twelve kneelings: in the morning hour, at mealtime, at midday, in the evening, and at rest” (չինգ անգամ աւուրն, առաւաւտոյն ժամոյն, ճաշոյն, հասարակ աւուրն, երեկոյին, հանգստեանն;

¹⁴ See, for example, Krikor and Clara Zohrab Information Center Hmayil no. 1.

¹⁵ A recent edition and commentary on this prayer may be found in Crimella 2021.

¹⁶ For a full translation of the preface, see Arlen 2021, 192-3.

Awetisean 2018a, 1204.2). Of course, praying at multiple, set times per day was a common religious practice. The Bible mentions that Daniel prayed three times per day (Dan 6:10), which became the standard Jewish practice up until modern times. Elsewhere, the Psalmist mentions offering praise seven times per day (Ps 119:164), a verse that became a model for monks in monasteries. In Nersēs' day, most monastic communities probably gathered around five to seven times per day to perform the communal prayer services of the *Book of Hours* (Ժամագիրք), which was undergoing a period of expansion in Nersēs' own day, largely due to the saint's own efforts, who composed many hymns and texts to enhance the celebration of the hours.¹⁷ We don't have detailed information on precisely how or how often the services were performed in a given monastery, but we can surmise that each service probably lasted between a half hour to an hour, depending on whether one chanted the psalms and hymns and said the litanies and prayers in a more complete or abbreviated fashion.

Of course, laymen could not be expected to spend so much time in prayer and thus Nersēs composed this prayer as a more practical tool with which to approach God multiple times per day. Nersēs' directive to pray specifically five times per day with kneelings brings to mind the Muslim practice of praying five times per day with prostration. Armenians had been part of the Islamicate world since the seventh century, and St. Nersēs takes Muslim piety as a foil with which he contrasts the lack of piety among his own people. Referring to Muslim prayer practices, he goes on to say:

Even in battle they do not forgo the prayers [Muhammad] taught them, let alone at a peaceful hour. Whereas our people when outside the place of prayer do not even remember the name of God, since they do not care about the order of prayer as do the pious,¹⁸ but love empty talk more than prayer.¹⁹

17 By one estimate, “more than 20% of the liturgical texts of the Night Office alone are from the pen of [Nersēs]” (Findikyan 2004, 515). It would be unlikely that monks gathered less than five times per day to pray, since one can't imagine Nersēs recommending laypeople to pray more times per day than monks.

18 A reference to monks who perform the Liturgy of the Hours in monasteries.

19 “Չաղալթս զոր ուսոյց նոցա, ի պատերազմունս անգամ ոչ խափանեն թող թէ ի խաղաղ ժամու: Իսկ մեր ժողովուրդք արտաքոյ աղալթից տեղոյ բնաւ ոչ յիշեն զանուն Աստուծոյ, զի ոչ ունին զփոյթ ի կարգ աղալթից որպէս զաստուածապաշտս, այլ սիրեն զդատարկաբանութիւն քան զաղալթսն” (Awetisean 2018a, 1205.6-7).



Figure 1
St. Nersēs Šnorhali, opening of prayer *With Faith / Confess*. Krikor and Clara Zohrab Information Center Hmayil no. 1, Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern), New York (NY). Image by the Author



Figure 2
St. Nersēs Šnorhali, opening of prayer *With Faith / Confess*. Krikor and Clara Zohrab Information Center Hmayil no. 2, Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern), New York (NY). Image by the Author

St. Nersēs further bemoans the lack of engagement on the part of the people in the services, saying:

And even when some do come to priests to pray, they either stand with mouth closed or engage in dialogue with one another, for they neither know the words of the prayers nor listen attentively to the psalms and services of the priests.²⁰

Part of the inability or lack of desire on the part of the laypeople to pay attention to the liturgical services was surely due in part to the gap between the spoken vernacular and the older form of the language in which the services were performed, making the meaning of much of the service not readily intelligible to the average layperson of the twelfth century. St. Nersēs hoped partially to remedy this unfortunate situation by composing this very prayer. He writes, “For this reason, we composed this prayer in simple and clear language, so as to be easily grasped by the unlearned” (Վասն այսր պատճառի արարաք զաղաթս զայս պարզ եւ յստակ բանիւ, վասն ախմարաց դիւրսիսս լինելոյ; Awetisean 2018a, 1205.9), meaning those who did not receive a monastic education during which time the older, literary form of the language was learned. He continues:

[This prayer] is brief in words with twenty-four stanzas in accordance with the hours of day and night and in accordance with the books of the holy prophets. It is powerful in meaning, since it contains in itself much more than the like of our usual requests to God. And we gave it to our people to study so that every Christian would memorize it, so that wherever one might happen to be at the hour of prayer, one might speak with God through it – whether at church or at home, whether in the field or some workplace or on the road. And they who learn and pray it sincerely – with fervent heart and tears – all the requests which are written in it will be fulfilled for them in life and after death.²¹

20 “Եւ թէ ուրեմն զան ոմանք յաղաթել առ քահանայսն կամ փակեալ բերանով կանգնին, կամ զրուցատրութիւնս առնեն ընդ միմեանս, զի ոչ ինքեանք զիտեն զբանս աղաթիս, եւ ոչ քահանայիցն միտ դնեն սաղմոսաց կամ պաշտամանց” (Awetisean 2018a, 1205.8).

21 “Որ է սակաւ ըստ բանից՝ տունս քսան եւ չորս ըստ ժամուոց տուրնջեան եւ գիշերոյ եւ ըստ տառից սրբոց մարգարէից, եւ զարաւոր ըստ մտաց, զի զյոյովագոյն պէտ խնդրուածոց մերոց ունի յինքեան: Եւ տուաք ժողովրդեան մերոյ յուսումն, զի ամենայն անձն քրիստոնէի ուսցի զսայ, եւ ուր հանդիպեսցի ի ժամու աղաթիցն՝ խուսեսցին սովաւ ընդ Աստուծոյ՝ թէ յեկեղեցի, թէ ի տան, թէ յանդատանի, թէ ի գործ ինչ, թէ ի ճանապարհի: Եւ որք ուսանին զսայ եւ աղաթեսցեն մտադիւրութեամբ ջերմեռանդն սրտիւ եւ արտասուաւք, ամենայն խնդրուածք, որ ի սմայ կատարեսցին ի կենդանութեան եւ յետ մահու” (Awetisean 2018a, 1205.10-12).

One sees in this description that in addition to the brevity of the prayer – an important factor in making it practical for the common people of his day – it was also composed with an eye to making it a complete or all-encompassing guide for the average layman, who was unable to participate in the lengthy liturgical services performed in monasteries. Instead, St. Nersēs intended for them to be able to make use of this prayer wherever they might be and for it to cover all their needs, while also serving as a didactic guide to theology and spirituality. The completeness or all-encompassing nature of the prayer is symbolically represented in its twenty-four stanzas, a number that, as indicated above, represents both the hours of day and night, i.e. covering all times; and the books of the twenty-four prophets, i.e. encompassing the totality of Scriptural revelation and theology.²² People were expected to memorize it in order to use it, both because most were unable to read and could not afford manuscripts, which were much more costly in the premodern period to produce – even short texts like the above prayer – before the advent of the printing press.

All of the above made this prayer eminently suitable for inclusion in the prayer scrolls, directed as they were primarily to laypeople. The text of the prayer is highly structured, with overarching division perceptible in three major parts (stanzas nos 1-5, 6-18, 19-24).²³ The first grouping, nos 1-5, contains orthodox doctrine concerning the divine being, specifically the nature of the Trinity. It is obvious how important this would have been in the Armenian environment of the Middle Ages and early modern period, as Armenian Christians were largely under Islamic rule, with conversion to Islam not just a constant possibility but a persistent reality. The second major portion of the prayer concerns the life of faith, with portions devoted to the major stages in the spiritual life: purification (nos 6-8), illumination (nos 9-11), and perfection (nos 12-13). Other sections are devoted to divine protection and provision (nos 14-16), of particular relevance for the amulet scrolls given their preoccupation with such themes, and the need for perpetual repentance (nos 17-18). The last section of the prayer concerns individual death and the last things: meeting God at death and the journey of the soul to heaven (nos 19-21) and judgement before Christ, with a powerful plea for mercy and the intercession of the saints (nos 22-4). All of this is written not in the

22 The twenty-four prophets are Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Elijah, Elisha, David, Nathan, Samuel, Job, Joshua, and Moses, along with the twelve minor prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. See, e.g., Narinean 1825-26, 5.

23 I thank Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan for his insightful analysis of the structure of the prayer, which will be presented in greater detail in a forthcoming co-authored commentary on the prayer by Bishop Mesrop and the present Author.

abstract language of formal theology, but in the intimate language of prayer, in first- and second-person dialogue between the individual and the divine being, making it both accessible and edifying no matter the level of education of the one using it.

This prayer has been incorporated into the Rest Hour (Հաճախեալ ժամ) of the *Book of Hours* of the Armenian Church, the last of the services to be said by monks before retiring for the night (Ջamagirk՝ 1895, 568-74). In contemporary usage, the Rest Hour is often performed in parishes on Wednesday or Friday evenings during Great Lent, and so most churchgoers are very familiar with the prayer to this day. Indeed, it has remained one of the most popular and widely known prayers in the Armenian tradition. Up until today, it has remained common practice for the entire prayer to be memorized. For example, Fr. T'oros Têr-Isahakean encouraged the Armenian faithful of Manchester to do exactly that, in a pastoral letter written and published in 1899, while he was serving as priest of that community. We can end our discussion of the prayer with a quotation from Fr. T'oros that demonstrates the popularity and prized place it has held in the hearts of Armenian Christians up until the modern period:

The pious Christian must also be able at times to himself stand freely and pray without a prayerbook, expressing his thoughts simply to his Creator according to the prompting of his heart and mind and the occasion. As important, and sometimes even more important, than praying without a text is to learn by heart a few of the prayers used in the everyday services of our Church: 'We thank you' (Գոհաւնալք զքէն), 'Listen to our voices' (Լնր ձայնից մերոց), 'Blessed are You Lord Who Dwell' (Օրհնէալ Տէր որ բնակեալն), etc. so that we are able as needed to recite them, pondering each word as if it were our own. It is amazing what manifold and complex thoughts these old prayers bring forth when they are uttered by heart and with great attention. At a young age I learned by heart St. Nersês of immortal memory Šnorhali's prayer of twenty-four stanzas, *With Faith I Confess* (Հաւատով խոստովանիմ). In the most inconsolable times of my life, when reading had become impossible due to pain in my eyes and an illness had so weakened my body and mind that thinking about something new seemed to me a weighty burden, in that inconsolable state, the prayer *With Faith I Confess* offered me consolation. Its every stanza, without fail, brought me all manner of beautiful and consoling thoughts. Each stanza for me, in those pitiable days, was an amusing and gripping book. Eight or nine years ago I stood at the death bed of a suffering old man, who was a God-loving *vardapet* in Holy Jerusalem. The angel of death had already come to take and bear away its consignment. Doctors had

given up hope and left. The sweat of death was flowing, neither bodily nor mental faculty remained for the sick man. Yet all the weightiness of illness could not erase from that holy man's memory that prayer which had furnished him with material for spiritual rumination all his life. He began *With Faith I Confess* and with gentile and halting voice recited it to the end without making a mistake. It was a moving thing to behold the animation of the agonizing *vardapet* who in the final moment of his earthly life bade farewell to the world with all his heart by reciting: "True Light, Christ, make my soul worthy to behold with joy the light of your glory, and to repose in the hope of good in the lodgings of the just until the day of your great Coming".²⁴

24 "Բարեպաշտ քրիստոնեայն պետք է նաեւ կարող լինի երբեմն ինքզինքն աղօթագիրքէ ազատ կացուցանել, իւր միտքն պարզապէս իւր Արարչին յայտնելով՝ իւր սրտի ու մտաց եւ ժամանակի թելադրութեամբն: Անգիր աղօթելու չափ կարելու եւ երբեմն դեռ անելի կարելու է մեր Եկեղեցւոյ աղօթից առօրեայ գործածուածներէն մի քանիսն-ինչպէս Գոհանամք զքնն, Լուր ձայնից մերոց, Օրհնեալ Տէր որ բնակեալդ եւայլն, բոլորովին գոց սերտել, որպէս զի կարենամք ի ստիպել հարկին անգիր արտասանել՝ իւրաքանչիւր բառի վերայ խորհելով իբր թէ մեր իսկ բառեր լինէին: Չարմանի՜ է թէ այս հին աղօթքներ ի՛նչքան բազմադիմի եւ բաղադրեալ խորհուրդներ յառաջ կը բերեն, երբ անգիր այլ ծանր ուշադրութեամբ կ'արտասանուին: Ի մանկական հասակի անգիր սովորած էի Ս. Ներսէս Շնորհալոյ անմահական յիշատակ Հաւատով խոստովանիմ քսանեւէորս տուն աղօթքն: Իմ կենաց ամենէն անմխիթար ժամերուն մէջ, երբ աչաց ցաւի պատճառաւ կարդալն անհնարին դարձած էր, եւ հիւանդութիւնը մարմինս ու միտքս այն աստիճան տկարացուցեր էր որ մի նոր բան մտածելն՝ ինձ մի ծանր բեռ կը թուէր, իմ այդ անմխիթար դրութեան մէջ մխիթարութիւն պարգեւողն Հաւատով խոստովանիմ աղօթքն էր. նորա իւրաքանչիւր տուն, առանց դժուարութեան, բազմապատիկ գեղեցիկ եւ մխիթարական խորհուրդներ կը բերեր ինձ. իւրաքանչիւր տուն ինձ համար, այդ թշուար օրերուն մէջ, յոյժ զուարճացուցիչ եւ հետաքրքիր մի մատեան էր: Ութ ինն տարիներ յառաջ մահուան անկողնոյ մէջ տառապող մի ծերունի եւ աստուածասէր վարդապետի մօտ կեցած էի ի Ս. Երուսաղէմ: Մահուան հրեշտակն արդէն եկած էր իւր աւանդն առնել տանիլ. բժիշկներ յոյսերնին կտրած մեկնած էին. մահուան քրտինքը կը հոսէր, ոչ մարմնոց եւ ոչ մնաց կարողութիւն մնացած էր հիւանդի վերայ: Սակայն հիւանդութեան բոլոր ծանրութիւնը չէր կրցած ջնջել այդ սուրբ մարդու յիշողութենէն այն աղօթքն որ իւր ամբողջ կենաց մէջ հոգեւոր որոճման նիւթ մատակարարած էր: Հաւատով խոստովանիմը սկսաւ, եւ մեղմ ու շնչահատ ձայնիւ անվերայ արտասանեց մինչեւ վերջն: Յուզիչ էր հոգեվարք վարդապետի ոգեւորութիւն երբ իւր երկրաւոր կենաց վերջին վայրկեանն աշխարհէս ի բոլոր սրտէ հրաժեշտ առնելով՝ կ'արտասանէր. «Լոյս ճշմարիտ Քրիստոս, արժանաւորեա զհոգի իմ ուրախութեամբ տեսանել զլոյս փառաց քոց եւ հանգչել յուսով բարեաց յօրեանս արդարոց մինչեւ յօր մեծի գալստեան քո» (Tér-Isahakean 1899, 16-18).

2.2 The Book of Lamentation of St. Gregory of Narek

Armenian popular religion and folk tradition has attributed healing powers to the prayerbook of St. Gregory of Narek, with its prayer discourses (քանք) considered to be medicine and remedies for diverse maladies of soul and body.²⁵ Certain manuscript and print copies of the Narek contain lists prescribing certain prayers for various occasions as well as different diseases or dangers (Drost-Abgarjan 2006). It is thus unsurprising that excerpts from the prayer book have been included for use in many hmayils.

Most often found are the latter half of Prayer 12, Ընկալ քաղցրութեամբ (Kindly accept) and the entirety of Prayer 41, Որդի Աստուծոյ կենդանւոյ (Son of the living God) [figs 3-4] (for the texts of the prayers, see Text 2, Selections 1 and 2 in the Appendix).²⁶



Figure 3

St. Gregory of Narek, opening of Prayer 12 of the *Book of Lamentation*. Krikor and Clara Zohrab Information Center Hmayil no. 1, Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern), New York (NY). Image by the Author

²⁵ On this, see Mahé, Mahé 2000, 4-5; Drost-Abgarjan 2006. For a recent English translation of the prayer book, see Terian 2021.

²⁶ See, e.g. Sarkisian 2024, 50-5.

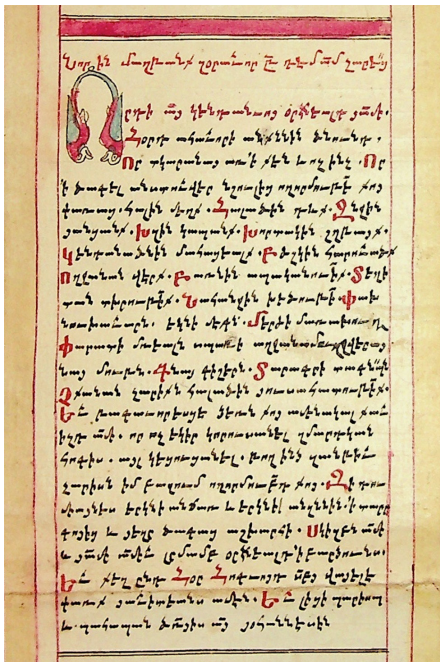


Figure 4
St. Gregory of Narek, Prayer 41
from the *Book of Lamentation*. Krikor
and Clara Zohrab Information Center
Hmayil no. 1, Diocese of the Armenian
Church of America (Eastern), New York (NY).
Image by the Author

Like the prayer of St. Nersēs Šnorhali, these prayers also have been incorporated into the Rest Hour of the *Book of Hours* (*Žamagirkʻ* 1895, 564-7). The latter half of Prayer 12 begins with twenty parallel poetic lines of verse. The first five lines request the Lord to accept the speaker's petitions, dispel his sadness, and remove his sinful habits. The next five petitions request protection from the evil one, called in respective lines the 'deceiver' (խաբրող), 'fraudster' (մոլխմ), 'destroyer' (կորուսիչ), 'snatcher' (ըմբռնող), and 'attacker' (մարտող). Employing the language and imagery of Passover, the next lines ask the Lord to seal the entrance and exit of the speaker's chamber by the name and blood of the Lord and the poetic portion of the prayer concludes with a request for God's heavenly host to guard against the legion of demons. The remaining portion of the prayer, which returns to poetic prose, asks for peaceful sleep, free from torment, nightmares, and anxieties. In some copies of the Narek, this prayer is indicated as a "prayer of night" (աղոթք գիշերայնոյ).²⁷

Prayer 41 is addressed to the Son of God and indicates his power to dispel all evil, sin, and gloom, as well as his healing power. The end of the prayer meditates on his transcendence and immanence,

²⁷ See, e.g. the list at the outset of Narek 1933.

present at the same time above and beyond the universe and in every element of creation. This prayer is also prescribed for the night in popular tradition.²⁸

Though slightly less frequently than the above two prayers, Prayer 94, Աստուած յաւիտեանս (Eternal God) is also found in many hmayils, as well as among the prayers in the service of the Rest Hour (for the text of the prayer, see Text 2, Selection 3 in the Appendix).²⁹ Like the above, this prayer too is prescribed for the night.³⁰ The speaker meditates on God as creator of light over whom darkness holds no power, then beseeches Christ to protect the speaker from the terror of the night and demons, asking for Satan to be confounded, his snares thwarted, and his forces defeated.

Not found in the service of the Rest Hour but found in some hmayils, though less frequently than the above three prayers, is the latter part of Prayer 28, Արդ, այսքանեացս անբաւից հրաշից հաւնէրձիչ (Now, performer of such boundless wonders) (for the text of the prayer, see Text 2, Selection 4 in the Appendix).³¹ This prayer meditates on the Father's creative and miraculous powers, with a list of his attributes and characteristics, followed by a request that the Father rebuke and dispel "the heat of this tormenting and demonic fever" (տազնապող եւ դիւական տենիս ջերմութեան) that assails the speaker. It then asks for Satan to be shamed before the Lord's creative powers and vanquished by the same suffering and passion endured by the Son. It concludes with confession and praise of the Holy Trinity.

Rarely, though also found in some amulet scrolls, is Prayer 89, the shortest in the prayer book, Աստուած եւ Տէր, Կեանք եւ Արարիչ (God and Lord, Life and Creator) (for the text of the prayer, see Text 2, Selection 5 in the Appendix).³² This prayer is specified in some lists for work in the fields.³³ It consists primarily of a list of names and attributes for God and concludes with a doxology.

While the language of the Narek can at times be difficult to understand, the words themselves, with their powerful poetic features such as alliteration and their constant use of the language of Scripture, made people attribute miraculous, healing power to the phonetic quality in the sounds of the words spoken, irrespective of the ability of the one speaking or hearing them to understand them. As such, they were a natural fit for amulet scrolls, believed to impart healing power to the one carrying the words or chanting

28 See, e.g. the list at the outset of Narek 1933.

29 Feydit 1986, 12; see e.g. Feydit 1986, no. II (V ms. 3021).

30 See, e.g. the list at the outset of Narek 1933.

31 Feydit 1986, 12; see e.g. Feydit 1986, no. XXIV (V ms. 3064).

32 See e.g. Feydit 1986, no. VII (V ms. 3030).

33 See, e.g. the list at the outset of Narek 1933.

them aloud. That being said, the selections chosen for inclusion in the scrolls are not among the most difficult or challenging passages to comprehend in the prayer book. In fact, many are quite easy to follow, marked by simple grammatical structure with ample parallelism (e.g. Prayer 12.3-4).

2.3 Other Traditional and Liturgical Prayers in the Amulet Rolls

In addition to the above prayers by St. Nersēs Šnorhali and St. Gregory of Narek, some amulet scrolls contain some of the most common prayers of the Christian tradition: the Our Father (Հայր մեր), the Creed (Հաւատամք) and the Ave Maria/Hail Mary (Ողջոյն քեզ Մարիամ).

The Our Father is sometimes found at the very end of the hmayils as a concluding prayer, sometimes following even the scribe's colophon, in which case only the opening line is given (with the presumption that all readers would have the rest memorized).³⁴ This also matches the standard way to end a ritual service of the Armenian church, which typically begins and ends with a recitation of the Lord's prayer.

The Creed is infrequently found, for example, only once among the texts studied by Feydit (comprising all the scrolls in the Venice Mekhitarist manuscript collection).³⁵ In that scroll (V ms. 3042) it also includes the anathema Իսկ որք ասենն (As for those who say) and injunction Իսկ մեր փառաւորեցուք (While we shall glorify) which follow the creed in the common text of the divine liturgy in use today.³⁶ Following the creed in that hmayil is a phrase in which the creed is referred to as the prayer of the holy patriarchs (i.e., those assembled at the first ecumenical councils who are credited with codifying it): “Մուրք հայրապետաց աղօթքը օգնական եւ պահապան եղիցի ծառայիս Աստուծոյ” (May the prayer of the Holy Patriarchs be a helper and protector of this servant of God).

The Hail Mary is somewhat more frequently found.³⁷ Where it occurs in the scrolls, it is typically among the first texts found near the beginning of the scroll. Another prayer popular in the Armenian

34 See, e.g. Krikor and Clara Zohrab Information Center Hmayil no. 1 and no. 3; Feydit 1986, no. VIII (V ms. 3042); no. XXIII (V ms. 3032).

35 Feydit 1986, no. VIII (V ms. 3042).

36 For text and translation of the form of the creed in use today in the Armenian tradition, see Nersoyan 1950, 46-9.

37 See, e.g. Sarkisian 2024, 5, 8-9; Feydit 1986, no. VI (V ms. 3024); no. XXIII (V ms. 3032).

tradition, found in many prayer books,³⁸ Ո՛վ ամենասարբուհի Աստուածածին՝ պարծանք կուսութեան (O all-holy Mother of God, glory of virginity) is very often found in the amulet scrolls, along with other prayers and petitions for intercession directed to the Holy Mother of God.³⁹

In addition to the above traditional and liturgical prayers, there are also prayers for help and protection addressed to the persons of the Trinity, the most popular saints and angels of the Christian tradition (the Mother of God, St. John the Baptist, the Twelve Apostles, St. Stephen the Protomartyr, St. Gregory the Illuminator, angels, including some specifically to the archangel Gabriel and the Seraphim and Cherubim, the warrior saints George and Sargis, among others) as well as the various elements in the divine economy of Salvation and the symbols of Christ (the Chalice, the Holy Sepulcher, the Crucifixion, the Lamb of God, the Holy Cross, etc.).⁴⁰ For example, one prayer addressed to Christ in the chalice, often accompanied by an image of the same, reads:

Christ within the Chalice of the Sacrifice, who will take away the sins of the world. And now, Holy Body and Blood of the Lord, I beseech you, save this servant of yours (*name*) from sins. Amen.⁴¹

Such prayers are not typically found in the official liturgical services of the church but rather are common in prayerbooks meant for laypeople and represent the popular piety of the Armenian people.

38 See, e.g. *Burvar' alôt'ic'* 1831, 139-42.

39 See, e.g., Feydit 1986, no. II (V ms. 3021); no. IV (V ms. 3026).

40 For the texts and translations of these prayers, one may consult Feydit 1986 and Sarkisian 2024.

41 “Քրիստոս ի մէջ Սկիին Պատարագի, որ բառնայցէ զմեզս աշխարհի: Եւ արդ՝ Սուրբ մարմին եւ արիւն տեառն. աղաչեմ զքեզ փրկիչ լեր ի մեղաց զծառայս քո (*անուն*) ամեն”.

For text and translation along with a typical image, see Sarkisian 2024, 14.

Appendix: Texts and Translations

Text 1: St. Nersēs Šnorhali’s prayer of 24 stanzas *With Faith I Confess* (Հաւատով խոստովանիմ). Armenian text in Awetisean 2018b, 1207-14. English translation by the Author

I

Հաւատով խոստովանիմ եւ երկիր պագանեմ քեզ, Հայր եւ Որդի եւ Սուրբ Հոգի, անեղ եւ անմահ բնութիւն, արարիչ հրեշտակաց եւ մարդկան եւ ամենայն եղելոց. ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

With faith I confess and bow down to You, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, uncreated and immortal nature, creator of angels, humans, and all that exists. Have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.⁴²

II

Հաւատով խոստովանիմ եւ երկիր պագանեմ քեզ, լոյս, անբաժանելի, միասնական Սուրբ Երրորդութիւն եւ մի Աստուածութիւն, արարիչ լուսոյ եւ հալածիչ խաւարի. հալածեա ի հոգւոյ իմմէ զխաւար մեղաց եւ անգիտութեան, եւ լուսաւորեա զմիտս իմ ի ժամուս յայսմիկ աղօթել քեզ ի հաճոյս, եւ ընդունել ի քէն զինդրուածս իմ. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

42 The manuscripts display variety in the final line here and in the subsequent stanzas. Some witnesses have only the first half “have mercy on your creatures”, while others have only the second half “have mercy on me, a great sinner”. One early copy from Rome in the thirteenth century has for the first stanza “Have mercy on me your creature, a sinner” (Ողորմեա քո արարածոյս՝ ինձ մեղաւորիս) and for the subsequent stanzas has “And have mercy on me, a sinner” (ողորմեա ինձ մեղաւորիս). One suspects that the singular and personalized version is original, with the plural variants (“... on us your creatures”) developed due to communal performance of the prayer. The plural version is the received version found in copies of the Book of Hours and scrolls, and thus is the one given here. See further Awetisean 2018b, 1207-14; Sirinian 2023, 189-97; Sarkisian 2024, 1-12; *Zamagirk* 1895, 568-74.

With faith I confess and bow down to you, light, indivisible,⁴³ consubstantial Holy Trinity and one Deity, creator of light and dispeller of darkness. Dispel from my soul the darkness of sin and ignorance, and enlighten my mind at this hour to pray to You in a way that pleases You and to receive from You my requests. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

III

Հայր երկնաւոր, Աստուած ճշմարիտ, որ առաքեցեր զորդիդ քո սիրելի ի խնդիր մոլորեալ ոչխարին. մեղայ յերկինս եւ առաջի քո. ընկալ զիս որպէս զանառակ որդին, եւ զգեցո ինձ զպատմութեանս զառաջին, զոր մերկացայ մեղօք. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Heavenly Father, true God, who sent Your beloved Son in search of the lost sheep. I have sinned against heaven and before You. Receive me as the prodigal son, and clothe me with that former robe, which I stripped off by sinning. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

IV

Որդի Աստուծոյ, Աստուած ճշմարիտ, որ խոնարհեցար ի հայրական ծոցոյ եւ առեր մարմին ի սրբոյ կուսէն Մարիամայ վասն մերոյ փրկութեան. խաչեցար, թաղեցար, յարեար ի մեռելոց, եւ համբարձար փառօք առ հայր. մեղայ յերկինս եւ առաջի քո: Յիշեա զիս որպէս զաւագակն յորժամ զաս արքայութեամբ քով. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Son of God, true God, who humbled Yourself from the bosom of the Father, and took a body from the holy virgin Mary for our salvation. You were crucified, buried, rose from the dead, and ascended to the Father in heaven. I have sinned against heaven and before You. Remember me like the robber when You come in Your reign. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

43 In distinction to most manuscripts and printed editions, which read անբաժանելի լոյս, 'indivisible light', I follow Matenadaran ms. 592 (1385AD), in the above reading, where 'indivisible' comes after 'light' and modifies 'Holy Trinity and One Deity' (Լոյս, անբաժանելի, միասնական Սուրբ Երրորդութիւն եւ մի Աստուածութիւն). I could find no patristic usage for անբաժանելի 'indivisible' as a modifier of լոյս 'light', whereas it is regularly used as a modifier of Աստուածութիւն 'Deity, Godhead' or Սուրբ Երրորդութիւն 'Holy Trinity' in both Armenian and its Greek equivalent (ἀδιαιρέτος). See *NBHL*, s.v. անբաժանելի and Lampe 1961, s.v. ἀδιαιρέτος. St. Gregory of Narek (in Prayer 48.6) and St. Nersēs himself elsewhere employ it in this way, as do various prayers of the *Divine Liturgy* (Սուրբ Պատարագ) and the *Book of Hours* (Ժամագիրք). In the last stanza of the hymn 'Light' composed by St. Nersēs for the Sunrise (Արեւագայ) service, the first phrase bears striking resemblance to this one, again with անբաժանելի 'indivisible' modifying Սուրբ Երրորդութիւն 'Holy Trinity': Լոյս, երրեակ եւ մի անբաժանելի Սուրբ Երրորդութիւն, 'Light, triune and one indivisible Holy Trinity'. See *Žamagirk* 1895, 327.

V

Հոգի Աստուծոյ, Աստուած ճշմարիտ, որ իջեր ի Յորդանան եւ ի վերնատունն, եւ լուսաւորեցեր զիս մկրտութեամբ սուրբ աւագանին. մեղայ յերկինս եւ առաջի քո: Մաքրեա զիս վերստին աստուածային հրով քո՝ որպէս հրեղէն լեզուօք սուրբ զառաքեալսն, եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Spirit of God, true God, who came down upon the Jordan and the Upper Room and illuminated me through baptism in the Holy Font. I have sinned against heaven and before You. Purify me anew with Your divine fire, as (you purified) the apostles with fiery tongues. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

VI

Անեղ բնութիւն, մեղայ քեզ մտօք իմովք, հոգւով եւ մարմնով իմով: Մի յիշեր զմեղս իմ զառաջինս վասն անուանդ քում սրբոյ. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Uncreated nature, I have sinned against You in my mind, in my spirit, and in my body. Do not remember my previous sins, for the sake of Your holy name. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

VII

Տեսող ամենայնի, մեղայ քեզ խորհրդով, բանիւ եւ գործով: Ջնջեա զձեռագիր յանցանաց իմոց, եւ գրեա զանուն իմ ի դպրութիւն կենաց. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Seer of all, I have sinned by thought, by word, and by deed. Expunge the manuscript of my transgressions and write my name into the Book of Life. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

VIII

Քննող գաղտնեաց, մեղայ քեզ կամաւ եւ ակամայ, գիտութեամբ եւ անգիտութեամբ: Թողութիւն շնորհեա մեղաւորիս, զի ի ծննդենէ սուրբ աւագանին մինչեւ ցայսօր, մեղուցեալ եմ առաջի Աստուածութեանդ քո զգայարանօք իմովք, եւ ամենայն անդամօք մարմնոյս. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Searcher of secrets, I have sinned against You willingly and unwillingly, knowingly and unknowingly. Grant forgiveness to me, a sinner. For from my birth in the Holy Font until today, I have sinned before Your Divinity, with my senses and with all the parts of my body. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

IX

Ամենախնամ Տէր, դիր պահապան աչաց իմոց գերկիւղ քո սուրբ ոչ եւս հայիլ յայրատ, եւ ականջաց իմոց՝ ոչ ախորժել լսել զբանս չարութեան, եւ բերանոյ իմոյ՝ ոչ խօսել զսուտութիւն, եւ սրտի իմոյ՝ ոչ խորհել զչարութիւն, եւ ձեռաց իմոց՝ ոչ գործել զանիրաւութիւն, եւ ոտից իմոց՝ ոչ գնալ ի ճանապարհս անօրէնութեան, այլ ուղղեալ զշարժումն սոցա լինել միշտ ըստ պատուիրանաց քոց յամենայնի. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

O Lord Who cares for all, place holy reverence of You as guardian of my eyes, no more to gaze lewdly; and of my ears, no more to listen eagerly to evil speech; and of my mouth, no more to speak falsehood; and of my heart, no longer to devise evil; and of my hands, no more to do iniquity; and of my feet, no longer to walk in the ways of iniquity. But direct their movements to be ever in accordance with Your commandments in everything. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

X

Հուր կենդանի, Զրիստոս, զիւր սիրոյ քո զոր արկեր յերկիր, բորբոքեա յանձն իմ, զի այրեսցէ զաղտ հոգւոյ իմոյ եւ սրբեսցէ զխիղճ մտաց իմոց եւ մաքրեսցէ զմեղս մարմնոյ իմոյ, եւ վառեսցէ զլոյս գիտութեան քո ի սրտի իմում. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Living Fire, Christ, enkindle in my soul the fire of Your love, which You cast to earth, that it may burn up the impurity of my spirit, purify the conscience of my mind, cleanse the sins of my body, and ignite the light of Your knowledge in my heart. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

XI

Իմաստութիւն հօր, Յիսուս, տուր ինձ իմաստութիւն, զբարիս խորհել եւ խօսել եւ գործել առաջի քո յամենայն ժամ. ի չար խորհրդոց, ի բաւկոց եւ ի գործոց փրկեա զիս. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Wisdom of the Father, Jesus, give me wisdom, to think, speak, and do good before You in every moment, and save me from evil thoughts, words, and deeds. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

XII

Կամեցող բարեաց, Տէր կամարար, մի թողուր զիս ի կամս անձին իմոյ գնալ, այլ առաջնորդեա ինձ լինել միշտ ըստ կամաց քոց բարեսիրաց. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Willer of the good, sovereign and obliging Lord, do not allow me to walk according to my individual will, but lead me to be always in accordance with your will that loves the good. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

XIII

Արքայ երկնաւոր, տուր ինձ զարքայութիւն քո զոր խոստացար սիրելեաց քոց, եւ զօրացո զսիրտ իմ ատել ըզմեղս, եւ սիրել զքեզ միայն, եւ առնել զկամս քո. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Heavenly King, grant me Your kingdom, which You promised to those who love You, and strengthen my heart to hate sin, to love You alone, and to do Your will. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

XIV

Խնամող արարածոց, պահեա նշանաւ խաչի քո զհոգի եւ զմարմին իմ ի պատրասաց մեղաց, ի փորձութեանց դիւաց, ի մարդոց անիրաւաց, եւ յամենայն վտանգից հոգւոյ եւ մարմնոյ. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Caretaker of creatures, by the sign of Your cross, protect my soul and body from the deceptions of sin, from the temptations of demons, from unjust men, and from all perils to soul and body. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

XV

Պահապան ամենայնի, աչ քո հովանի լիցի ի վերայ իմ, ի տուէ եւ ի գիշերի, ի նստիլ ի տան եւ ի գնալ ի ճանապարհ, ի ննջել եւ ի յառնել, զի մի երբեք սասանեցայց. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Guardian of all, may Your right hand be a shield over me, by day and by night, while sitting at home and while walking on the road, when sleeping and when rising, so that I will never be shaken. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

XVI

Աստուած իմ, որ բանաս զձեռն քո, եւ լուս զամենայն արարածս ողորմութեամբ քով: Քեզ յանձն առնեմ զանձն իմ: Դու հոգա եւ պատրաստեա զպէտս հոգւոյ եւ մարմնոյ իմոյ յայսլմիտէ միևեւր յաւիտեան. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

My God, you open Your hand and fill all of us creatures with Your mercy. I commit my life to you; take care of me and provide what is needed for my soul and body from this time forth to the end of the Age. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

XVII

Դարձուցիչ մոլորելոց, դարձո զիս ի չար սովորութեանց ի բարի սովորութիւնս, եւ բեւեռեա ի հոգի իմ զսոսկալի օր մահուն, եւ զերկիւղ գեհենոյն, եւ զսէր արքայութեանն, զի զղջացայց ի մեղաց իմոց, եւ գործեցից զարդարութիւն. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Converter of the wayward, convert me from evil habits to good habits, and nail into my soul the dreadful day of death, the fear of Gehenna, and love for the kingdom, so that I repent of my sins and work righteousness. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

XVIII

Աղբիւր բարութեան, աղբերացո ի սրտէ իմմէ զարտասուս ապաշխարութեան որպէս պոռնկին, զի լուացից զմեղս անձին իմոյ յառաջ քան զելանելն իմ յաշխարհես. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Source of goodness, make tears of repentance gush from my heart like the prostitute, so that I wash away the sins of my soul before departing this world. And have mercy on us your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

XIX

Պարգեւիչ ողորմութեանց, պարգեւեա ինձ ուղղափառ հաւատով եւ բարի գործովք, եւ սուրբ մարմնոյ եւ արեան քո հաղորդութեամբ զալ առ քեզ. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Bestower of mercies, grant that I may come to You in orthodox faith, with good deeds, and in communion with Your holy body and blood. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

XX

Բարերար Տէր, հրեշտակի բարւոյ յանձն արասցես զիս քաղցրութեամբ աւանդել զհոգի իմ, եւ անխռով անցուցանել ընդ չարութեան այսոցն, որ են ի ներքոյ երկնից. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոց եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Doer of good, Lord, entrust me to a good angel to commit my spirit gently, and to pass undisturbed through the evil spirits that are below heaven. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

XXI

Լոյս ճշմարիտ, արժանաւորեա գիոգի իմ ուրախութեամբ տեսանել զլոյս փառաց քոց ի կոչման աւուրն, եւ հանգչել յուսով բարեաց յօթեւանս արդարոց մինչեւ յօր մեծի գալստեան քո. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

True Light, make my spirit worthy to behold with joy the light of Your glory on the day of summoning, and to repose with the hope of good in the lodgings of the just, until the day of Your great coming. And have mercy on us your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

XXII

Դատաւոր արդար, յորժամ գաս փառօք հօր դատել զկենդանիս եւ զմեռեալս, մի մտաներ ի դատաստան ընդ ծառայի քում, այլ փրկեա զիս ի յաւիտենական հրոյն, եւ լսելի արա ինձ գերանաւետ կոչումն արդարոց յերկնից արքայութիւնդ. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

Just Judge, when You come in the glory of the Father to judge the living and the dead, do not enter into judgement against Your servant, but save me from the eternal fire, and let me hear the blissful summoning of the just into Your kingdom of heaven. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

XXIII

Ամենողորմ Տէր, ողորմեա ամենայն հաւատացելոցս ի քեզ, իմոց եւ օտարաց, ծանօթից եւ անծանօթից, կենդանեաց եւ մեռելոց. շնորհեա եւ թշնամեաց իմոց եւ ատելեաց զթողութիւն յանցանաց, եւ դարձո զնոսա ի չարեացն զոր ունին վասն իմ, զի ողորմութեան քում արժանի եղիցին. եւ ողորմեա քո արարածոցս եւ ինձ բազմամեղիս:

All-merciful Lord, have mercy on all we who trust in You, my own and foreigners, those I know and those unknown to me, the living and the dead. Grant forgiveness of transgressions also to my enemies and those who hate me and turn them from the malice they bear against me, so that they may become worthy of Your mercy. And have mercy on us Your creatures and on me, a great sinner.

XXIV

Փառաւորեալ տէր, ընկալ զաղաչանս ծառայիս քո, եւ կատարեա ի բարի զինդորուածս իմ, բարեխօսութեամբ սրբուհւոյ Աստուածածնին եւ Յովհաննու կարապետին, սրբոյն Ստեփանոսի Նախավկային, եւ սրբոյն Գրիգորի մերոյ յուսաւորչին, եւ սրբոց քոց առաքելոց, մարգարեից, վարդապետաց, մարտիրոսաց, հայրապետաց, ճգնաւորաց, կուսանաց, եւ ամենայն սրբոց

երկնաւորաց եւ երկրաւորաց: Եւ քեզ փառք եւ երկրպագութիւն, անբաժանելի սուրբ երրորդութեանդ, յաւիտեանս յաւիտենից. ամեն:

Glorified Lord, accept the petitions of Your servant and fulfill my requests for good, through the intercession of the holy Mother of God and John the forerunner, Saint Stephen the first martyr and Saint Gregory our illuminator, and your holy apostles, prophets, *vardapets*, martyrs, patriarchs, ascetics, virgins, and all the saints, in heaven and on earth. And to you, indivisible Holy Trinity, glory, honor, and worship unto ages of ages. Amen.

Text 2: Selections from the prayerbook of St. Gregory of Narek called the *Book of Lamentation* (Մատեան ողբերգութեան)

Selection 1: Prayer (բալ) 12.3-4. Armenian text in Xaç'atryan, Łazinyan 2011, 114-16. English translation by the Author

12.3

Ընկալ՝ քաղցրութեամբ, տեր աստուած հօր, զդառնացողիս զաղաչանս,
Մատի՛ր գթութեամբ առ պատկառեալս դիմօք,
Փարատեա՛, ամենապարգեւ, զամօթական տխրութիւնս,
Բա՛րձ յինէն, ողորմած, զանբերելի ծանրութիւնս,
Անջրպետեա՛, հնարաւոր, զմահացու կրթութիւնս,
Աւարեա՛, միշտ յաղթող, զխաբողին հաճութիւնս,
Բացադրեա՛, վերնային, զմոլելոյն մառախուղ,
Կնքեա՛, կեցուցիչ, զկորուսչին ընթացմունս,
Տրուեա՛, ծածկատես, զըմբռնողին չար գտմունս,
Խորտակեա՛, անքնին, զմարտողին դիմեցմունս:
Տեառնագրեա՛ քո անուամբդ զլուսանցոյց երդ յարկիս,
Պարփակեա՛ քո ձեռամբդ զառաստաղ տաճարիս,
Գծագրեա՛ քո արեամբդ զմուտ սեմոց սենեկիս,
Կերպացո՛ զքո նշանդ ի հետս ելից մաղթողիս,
Ամրացո՛ քո աջովդ զհանգստեանս խշտի,
Մաքրեսցեն ի խաղբից զծածկարան անկողնոյս,
Պահեսցեն ի կամօքդ զտառապեալ անձն ոգւոյս,
Անխարդա՛խ արացես զքո շնորհեալ շունչ մարմնոյս,
Կացուցեն շրջափակ զպար զօրուդ երկնայնոյ,
Կարգեսցեն ի դիտի ընդդէմ դիւացն դասու:

Kindly accept, Lord mighty God, the petitions of my embittered self.
Approach with compassion my shameful countenance.
Dispel, Giver of all gifts, my disgraceful despondency.
Lift off me, merciful One, my unbearable burdens.
Cut off, powerful One, my deadly habits.

Ruin, ever victorious One, my acquiescence to the deceiver.
Dispel, lofty One, the fraudster's fog.
Seal, Savior, the destroyer's courses.
Scatter, Seer of hidden things, the snatcher's traps.
Crush, inscrutable One, the attacker's advances.
Write your name on the skylight of my dwelling.
Encircle the ceiling of my temple with your hands.
Mark the entrance to the threshold of my chamber with your blood.
Fashion your sign on the exit path of this suppliant.
Fortify with your right hand the bedframe where I rest.
Cleanse my bedcover from defilement.
Protect my afflicted soul by your will.
Keep pure the breath you gave to my body.
Appoint an encircling band of your heavenly host.
Array (them) as sentinels against the legion of demons.

12.4

Տո՛ւր հանգիստ բերկրութեան մահահանգոյնս նիրհման ի խորութեան
գիշերիս՝ բարեխօսութեամբ հայցուածոց Սրբոյ Աստուածածնիդ եւ ամենայն
ընտրելոց: Ամփոփեալ պարուրեա՛ զպատուհան տեսութեանց զգայարանացս
իմաստից՝ անգարիւրելի զետեղմամբ ի ծփական խռովութեանց,
կենցաղական զբաղմանց, անրջական երազոց, խօլականաց ցնորից՝
յիշատակաւ քո յուսոյդ անվնասելի պաշտպանեալ:

Եւ սթափեալ վերստին ի ննջմանէ ծանրութեան, ամենազգաստ
արթնութեամբ, հոգեւորոգ զուարթութեամբ ի քեզ արծանացեալ, զայս
ծայն մաղթանաց բուրմամբ հաւատոց քեզ, ամենօրինեալ թագաւոր
փառաց անճառից, փառաբանողաց երկնագումար խմբից երգակցեալ՝
յերկինս առաքել: Չի դու փառաւորեալ ես յամենայն արարածոց յաւիտեանս
յաւիտենից: Ամէն:

Grant me joyful rest of death-like slumber in the depth of this night, through the
intercessory prayers of the Holy Mother of God and all the elect. Enclose and shut
up the window to visions, my sentient faculties of perception, by fortifying them
fearlessly from wavering disturbances, worldly occupations, nightmarish dreams,
and foolish delusions, protected from harm through the remembrance of hope in you.

And upon waking anew from heavy sleep in most alert wakefulness and with
spirit refreshed standing vigilantly before you, I will send up to heaven this voice of
supplication fragrant with faith in you, most blessed King of ineffable glory, chanting
together with the heavenly choirs that glorify you. For you are glorified by all creation
unto ages of ages. Amen.

Selection 2: Prayer (բան) 41. Armenian text in Xač'atryan,
Łazinyan 2011, 276-7. English translation by the Author

41.1

Որդի Աստուծոյ կենդանւոյ, օրհնեալ յամենայնի, Հօրդ ահաւորի անքնին ծնունդ, որ տկարանայ առ ի քէն եւ ոչ ինչ, որ ի ծագել անստուեր Նշողից ողորմութեան քո փառաց հալիս մեղք, հալածին դեւք, ջնջին յանցանք, խզին կապանք, խորտակին շղթայք, կենդանածնին մահացեալք, բժշկին հարուածք, ողջանան վերք, բառնին ապականութիւնք, տեղի տան տխրութիւնք, նահանջին հեծութիւնք, փախնու խաւարն, մեկնի մեզն, մերժի մառախուղն, փարատի մռայլն, սպառի աղջամուղջն, վերանայ մութն, գնայ գիշերն, տարագրի տագնապն, չքանան չարիքն, հալածին յուսահատութիւնքն, եւ թագաւորէ ծեռն քո ամենակար, քաւիչդ ամենայնի:

Son of the living God, blessed in every way, inscrutable generation of your awesome Father, for whom nothing is impossible. At the dawning of the shadowless rays of your glorious mercy, sins melt away, demons are driven off, transgressions are erased, bonds are broken, chains are shattered, the dead come to life, cuts are cured, wounds become whole, corruption ceases, sadness gives way, sighs retreat, darkness departs, mist dissipates, fog flees, gloom is dispelled, obscurity vanishes, the dark is removed, night goes away, anguish is expelled, evil comes to naught, hopelessness is driven away and your almighty hand reigns, Atoner of all.

41.2

Որ ոչ եկիր կորուսանել գմարդկան ոգիս, այլ կեցուցանել, թո՛ղ ինձ զանթիւ չարիսն իմ բազում ողորմութեամբդ, զի դու միայն ես յերկնի անճառ եւ յերկրի անզնին, ի տարր գոյի եւ յեզրս ծագաց աշխարհի, սկիզբն ամենայնի եւ յամենայնի ամենայն լրմամբ, օրհնեալ ի բարձունս: Եւ քեզ ընդ Հօր եւ Հոգւոյդ Սրբոյ փառք յաւիտեանս: Ամեն:

You came not to destroy human souls but to give life. Forgive my countless evils by your manifold mercy, for you alone are ineffable in heaven and inscrutable on earth, in the (smallest) element of existence and at the outer ends of the cosmos, the beginning of all and at every completion of everything, blessed in the heights. And to you with the Father and the Holy Spirit, glory unto ages. Amen.

Selection 3: Prayer (բան) 94. Armenian text in Xaç'atryan,
Łazinyan 2011, 599-600. English translation by the Author

94.1

Աստուած յաւիտեանական, բարերար եւ ամենակալ, ստեղծիչ լուսոյ եւ յօրինիչ գիշերոյ, կեանք՝ ի մահու եւ լոյս՝ ի խաւարի, յոյս ակնունդաց եւ երկայնմտութիւն տարակուսելոց, որ ամենարուեստ իմաստութեամբ քո դարձուցանես յայգ զստուերս մահու: Աննուագ ծագումն եւ անմուտ արեգակն, քանզի ոչ զօրէ ծածկել զփառս տերութեան քոյ խաւար գիշերոյ, որում կրկնի ծուր երկրպագութեան ամենայն եղելոց՝ երկնաւորաց եւ երկրաւորաց սանդարամետականաց:

Որ լսես զհեծութիւն կապելոց եւ հայիս յաղօթս խոնարհաց եւ ընդունիս զխնդրուածս նոցա, Աստուած իմ եւ թագաւոր իմ, կեանք իմ եւ ապաւէն իմ, յոյս իմ եւ վստահութիւն իմ, Յիսուս Քրիստոս, Աստուածդ ամենայնի, Սուրբդ, հանգուցեալ ի հոգիս սրբոց, միսիթարութիւն վշտաց եւ քաւարան մեղուցելոց, որ գիտես զամենայն յառաջ, քան զիկնել նոցա, առաքեալ՝ զպահպանողական զօրութիւն աջոյ քոյ եւ փրկեալ՝ զիս յերկիւղէ գիշերի եւ ի դիւէ չարէ, որպէս զի գիշատակ սոսկալի եւ սուրբ քո անուանդ, միշտ համբուրեալ շրթամբք հոգւոյ ըղծութեան շնչոյ, կեցից՝ պահպանեալ ընդ այնոսիկ, որ կարդան զքեզ ի բոլոր սրտէ:

Eternal God, benefactor and omnipotent, creator of light and fashioner of night, life in death and light in darkness, hope for the expectant and forbearance for doubters, who in your most skillful wisdom turn the shadows of death into dawn. Undiminishing dawning, sun that does not set, because the darkness of night is not powerful (enough) to conceal the glory of your lordship, to whom the knees of all beings bow in obeisance, those in heaven and on earth and in the underworld.

You listen to the groaning of the enchained and attend to the prayers of the humble, and you accept their requests, my God and my King, my Life and my Refuge, my Hope and my Surety, Jesus Christ, God of all. Holy One, residing in the souls of the saints, consolation for the afflicted and atonement for sinners, you know all before it happens. Send me the protective strength of your right hand and save me from the dread of night and the evil demon, so that by the remembrance of your awesome and holy name, ever kissed by the lips of my soul and the longing of my breath, I might live protected by you, along with those who call upon you with their whole heart.

94.2

Եւ ի դրոշմէ խաչի քոյոյ նշանիդ, զոր աստուածային արեամբ քո ներկեալ նորոգեցեր եւ ի նոյն շնորի որդեգրութեան զմեզ մկրտեցեր եւ ի փառս պատկերի քոյ նկարեալ յօրինեցեր, այսու պարգեւօք աստուածականօք ամաչեսցէ՝ սատանայ, քակտեսցի՝ն մեքենայքն, բարձցի՝ն որոգայթքն, պարտեսցի՝ն մարտուցեալքն, պակասեսցի՝ն զէնքն սայրասուրբ, մերժեսցի՝ մեզն, փարատեսցի՝ խաւարն, մեկնեսցի՝ մառախուղն, բազուկ քո հովանասցի, եւ աջ քո կնքեսցէ, վասն զի գթած ես եւ ողորմած, եւ անուն քո կոչեցեալ է ի

վերայ ծառայից քոց: Եւ քեզ ընդ Հօր, Հոգւովդ Սրբով փա՛ռք եւ իշխանութի՛նս
յաւիտեանս յաւիտենից: Ամէն:

By the seal of the sign of your cross, which you restored by drenching it with your divine blood, you baptized us into the grace of adoption and fashioned us who were formed in the glory of your image. By those divine gifts may Satan be put to shame, may his machinations be thwarted, his snares removed, his fighters defeated, his sharp weapons blunted, his haze lifted, his darkness dispelled, his fog removed. May your arm shield me and your right hand seal me, for you are compassionate and merciful, and your name is called over all your servants. And to you with the Father and the Holy Spirit, glory and sovereignty unto ages of ages. Amen.

Selection 4: Prayer (բա՛ն) 28.7-9. Armenian text in Xač‘atryan,
Łazinyan 2011, 203-5. English translation by the Author

28.7

Արդ, այսքանեացս անբաւից հրաշից հանդերձիչ, Հայր ամենաստեղծ, անուղղ ահաւոր, ծայն սարսափելի, կոչումն ընտանի, բան համբուրելի, ազդումն սքանչելի, հրաման սոսկալի, Էութիւն անքննելի, գոյութիւն անճառելի, իսկութիւն անբաւելի, զօրութիւն անզննելի, կամք ամենաբարի, տէրութիւն անսահմանելի, մեծութիւն անչափելի, բարձրութիւն անբովանդակելի, որքանութիւն անկշռելի, առաւելութիւն անհասանելի, պատճառ Որդւոյ հայրութեամբ, այլ ոչ նախադրութեամբ:

Քեւ եւ ի ձեռն քոյդ անպարագիր զօրութեանդ սաստեա՛ տազնապող եւ դիւական տենդիս ջերմութեան, որ սպրդեալ մուծաւ ընդ մեղաց, զի փախիցե՛ ի մարդոյս՝ զարհուրեալ ի սխրալի եւ յանբաւելի արեան վտակի գառինդ երկնաւորի, որով սրսկեալ միանգամ՝ ի մշտնջենաւորս համայն մաքրեցաք:

Now, performer of such boundless wonders, all creating Father, awesome name, frightful voice, familiar calling, kissable word, marvelous proclamation, dreadful command, inscrutable essence, ineffable existence, reality uncontainable, power unsearchable, most good will, dominion without boundary, immeasurable greatness, uncontainable exaltation, unweighable quantity, unattainable supremacy, cause of the Son through fatherhood but not through priority.

Through you and your uncircumscribable power, rebuke the heat of this tormenting and demonic fever, which made its entrance through sin, so that it be banished from man, frightened by the heavenly Lamb's wondrous and never ending river of blood, with which being sprinkled a single time, we become thoroughly cleansed forever.

28.8

Եւ արդ, յայս պատկառելի խոնարհութենէ արարչակերտս խորհրդոյ ամաչեսցէ՝ սատանայ ի գործս չարեաց իւրոցն հրեշտակաց, տանջեսցի՝ եւ հալածեսցի՝ հեռացեալ եւ արտաքս առաքեալ ի շինուածոյ խորանէ քումդ բնակութեան յարտաքին խաւարն: Եւ ջնջեալ մաքրեա՝ զարտասուս ողբոցս ի դիմաց մերոց, եւ զհառաչումն ձայնիս հեծութեան՝ ի սրտից մերոց: Եւ յիշատակաւ հարման հեղուսիցն քստմնափուշ, տաժանատեսիլ ոգեպահանջից, որով պնդեցաւ միածինդ քո յաշտարակ խաչին, ցաւեսցի՝ չարին: Եւ ի կողահերձ, սայրասուր սլաքէ ուժգին բախմանէ, որով զվերն մեծ ընկալաւ, իսպա՛ռ սատակեսցի սկզբնարար մահուն: Եւ զի խոնարհեցոյց զգովեալն գլուխ յաւանդել զհոգին ի ծոց քո, բարձրեալ, ապստամբութիւն անբարի բարուցն Բելիարայ ի կոր կործանեսցի՝՝ ամենայնիւ հերքեալ ի կորուստ: Եւ զի դողեալ ծածկեցաւ անմահն իսկութիւն յորովայնի երկրի, այսու ամբարձեալն հպարտութիւն կարծեալ գոռոզին ի յատակս մահու դժոխաց մթին ստուերին յառեալ դիտեսցէ՝ եւ յիշեսցէ՝ զառաջին հարուածն անբժշկական, որով մահացու դիմամարտութիւն թունից վիշապին կենարարն կրիւք ամենազօրին:

And now, in ignoble abasement before the mystery of your creative activity, may Satan be shamed for the evil deeds of his angels. May he be tortured, persecuted, and banished from the edifice of the tabernacle of your dwelling into the outer darkness. And wipe away the tears of these laments from our faces and the sobbing of our sighing voices from our hearts. And at the remembrance of the horrifying blows of the nails, soul-wrenching and painful to behold, by which your Only Begotten was fastened to the tower of the cross, may the evil one feel pain. And for the fierce blow with the sharp spear that pierced His side, which received the large wound, may the initiator of death drop dead forever. And since He lowered His praised head to give up His spirit into your exalted bosom, may the rebellion of the evil ways of Beliar be brought to ruin, utterly repelled to extinction. And since the truly Immortal One was hidden and covered in the earth's womb, by this may the tyrant in his haughty arrogance be fastened to the pit of death in the shadowy darkness of hell. And may he behold and remember the initial, incurable blow, by which the Life-Giver, by the passion of the Almighty, (confounded) the dragon's deadly poison.

28.9

Վասն զի ի փառս քո, Հայր ողորմութեան, իբր ի գովեստ Որդւոյ քոյ, Հոգւովդ Սրբով զայս խոստովանիմ. քանզի ոչ պիտակ ինչ սոսկ զօրութեանն ունի զմիւսմէն առ մի խորհրդականն խորութեան, այլ զանսկիզբն Բանդ անձնաւոր ընդ անժամանակդ Հօր փառաւորեմք: Եւ քեզ միայնոյ՝ Սուրբ Երրորդութեանդ, հաւասարապատիւ տէրութեանդ, համաբուն, անբաժին ինքնութեանդ օրինաբանութիւն, գոհութիւն, զօրեղութիւն եւ անճառ վայելչութիւն մեծութեան, բարեվիճակ հարթութեան, զուգակշիռ հաւասարութեան յաւիտեանս: Ամէն:

Because it is for your glory, Father of mercy, in praise of your Son, and through the Holy Spirit that I confess this. For one does not have any need of power from the other in the deep mystery, but we glorify the hypostatic word without beginning with the Father out of time. And to you alone, Holy Trinity, dominion of equal honor, consubstantial, to your indivisible essence, blessing, thanksgiving, strength, and the ineffable splendor of majesty, of fortunate parity, and of just equality, unto ages. Amen.

Selection 5: Prayer (բան) 89. Armenian text in Xač'atryan, Łazinyan 2011, 538. English translation by the Author

89.1

Աստուած եւ տէր, կեանք եւ արարիչ, ողորմած, գթած, լոյս, երկայնամիտ, անոխակալ, մարդասէր, ամենագութ, պարգեւատու, փրկիչ, օրհնեալ, գովեալ, բարեբանեալ, Դարան ամրութեան, պատսպարան վստահութեան, առանց նենգութեան բարի, առանց խաւարի ճառագայթ, քաւիչ մեղաց, ողջացուցիչ վիրաց, անհասանելեաց հնարք, անմատչելեաց հպաւոր, անյուսութեան ելք, անուն քո խոստովանեալ Աստուծոյ Որդի, եւ Հօր քոյ ընդ քեզ հօգորի եւ ահաւորի եւ Հոգւոյդ ամենակալի եւ ընդ քեզ երկրպագելոյ փա՛ռք եւ պաշտօն գոհաբանութեան յաւիտեանս: Ամէն:

God and Lord, Life and Creator, merciful, compassionate, Light, longsuffering, who does not hold a grudge, lover of mankind, all-compassionate, Giver of gifts, Savior, blessed, praised, magnified, strong Fortress, reliable Refuge, Good without fraud, Ray without darkness, Atoner of sin, Healer of wounds, Means of the impossible, Tangible of the inaccessible, Way out for hopelessness, your confessed name (is) Son of God, and to your Father with you, mighty and awesome, and your omnipotent Spirit, worshipped with you, glory and service with thanksgiving, unto ages. Amen.

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Max Ernst's Mythopoeic Ecocriticism: Beyond *Histoire naturelle*

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Abstract Pioneering various so-called chance techniques, Max Ernst embraced frottage for the realisation of *Histoire naturelle*, a compilation of 34 folios that unfold as a mythopoeic tale bringing together flora, fauna and humans. By this, Max Ernst sought to propose a narrative of creation differing from the Bible to illustrate an alternative account of interconnectedness between the actors. In a nod to multi-species ethics, the paper traces Max Ernst's explorations of intertwined existences across an oeuvre whose creative force led him not only 'beyond painting', but furthermore towards a vision of mutual entanglement across diverse forms of being.

Keywords Multi-species. *Histoire naturelle*. Surrealism. Max Ernst. Entanglement.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Ecocriticism as a Material(ity) in the Arts. – 3 First Hybridisations. – 4 Max Ernst's *Histoire naturelle*. – 5 Cosmologies of Interconnectedness: Max Ernst's Painted Mythopoeisis. – 6 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Among all the surrealists, it was perhaps Max Ernst who most fervently embraced André Breton's paradigm of the unspeakable nature of flora and fauna (Noheden 2022, 54). As a pioneer of the movement, his paintings establish a new vision of coexistence between different forms of life, by ruling out a rigid classification derived from an anthropocentrism as *tertium comparationis*. Fascinated by the forest since his early childhood,¹ Max Ernst refers to nature in his painted as well as sculpted work. His world, by this, is born from a very personal mythology where human beings and animals live in symbiosis.² The presence of his avian alter ego 'Loplop' dates from the 1920s, thereby coinciding with the creation of the 34 folios of *Histoire naturelle*. In this compilation of individual drawings made through the use of his frottage technique, Max Ernst sought to propose a narrative of creation that differs from that of the Bible to illustrate an alternative account of an equal co-existence and interconnectedness, shared between the different actors that populate the stage of life. An interest, he continued to pursue in later suites such as *The Nymph Echo* (1936) or *The Joy of Life* (1936) where characters and personae of various type inhabit jungle-like thickets of undergrowth.

Throughout his prolific career, the German painter worked in cycles, with the aim of formulating a cosmology guided by the ethos of analogy ('as above, so below')³. This *modus operandi* particularly formed the heart of the canvases executed in the early 1930s, a phase of great creativity. By isolating the constituent elements of one series and integrating them into another, he created links and meta-dialogues between his compositions, weaving an increasingly denser pattern of references. From *The Nymph Echo* (1936) to *The Joy of Living* (1936), Max Ernst crafted a universe of coexistence where the protagonists emerge as the emblem of a connected world. By tracing the narrative of mutual entanglement that rests at the heart of Max Ernst's art, the paper attempts a re-evaluation of his work

1 Max Ernst later noted that "almost everything he rubbed or scraped automatically became a forest". See Christie's Lot Essay Live Auction 23807. Lot 37 A. Max Ernst, *Simplicité* (1960). <https://www.christies.com.cn/en/lot/lot-6553795>.

2 In 1959, Max Ernst remarked that despite the lack of concrete depictions of man in his paintings, "tout est anthropomorphique: oiseaux, arbres" (Charbonnier 1959, 40) thus alluding to the shape-shifting quality of his chimerical characters while simultaneously hinting at the doppelgänger function his alter ego Loplop came to serve for.

3 Taken from the second verse of the *Emerald Tablet* (a short Hermetic text that first appeared in the late eighth or early ninth century), 'as above, so below' is a paraphrase of the Latin version from the original Arabic meant to reference the supposed effects of celestial mechanics upon terrestrial events. In a further interpretative bend, the verse also alludes to the similarities between the macrocosm and the microcosm that work in analogy.

from an ecological point of view by highlighting the creative force of paintings that speak to a cosmology of interconnectedness beyond man at the centre of the universe. In so doing, it shall be seen how ecocriticism can act as a material(ity) in the arts to rethink humanity's relationship with the more-than-human worlds as the creative gesture lends visual shape to the otherwise invisible to spark a dialogue that operates via imagery by virtue of a re-'present'-ation of the spiritual. From an anthropocentric view to a vision of multi-species ethics, the shift towards an inclusive stance will thus be traced as a defining feature of Max Ernst's mythopoeic anthology of images in a nod to entangled forms of life *ante litteram*.

2 Ecocriticism as a Material(ity) in the Arts

Originating in the field of literature studies, ecocriticism has been embraced by scholars to engage with environmental concerns through the lens of narrative-written output in a broad range of texts. From a focus on Nature or natural things in literature, the paradigm gradually got expanded to equally encompass art as a field to creatively address pressing issues related to forms of coexistence. As an effort to "reorient and widen the scope of cultural studies by emphasizing the ways in which human creativity [...] unfolds within a specific environment or set of environments" (Braddock 2009, 26), ecocriticism in the arts allows for a more pointed visual analysis that pays "close attention to the embeddedness of culture" in a larger eco-ethical setting (27).

In her article "The Ecological Imperative", Donna Roberts traces the peculiar concern with the integrative relations between man and environment, driven by a "radical epistemological shift" in order to "reassimilate connective analogical and poetic thinking into the processes of knowledge" (Roberts 2016, 217). Citing Roger Caillois, who affirmed that "L'homme ne s'oppose pas à la nature, il est lui-même nature" (Caillois 2008, 822) she iterates the continuities of an anthropological condition that extends to and originates from Nature as propagated by the Surrealists (Roberts 2016, 218). The assumed dichotomy of nature and civilisation – largely propagated by Enlightenment sources such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau – accordingly moved to the centre of critique, juxtaposed with an 'ecopoetry' and countered by a Romantic lyricism for an "imaginative reunification of mind and nature" (Bate 2000, 245). Concerned with a so-called 'ecopoeisis', the Surrealists sought to overcome a binary and hierarchical stance rooted in human exceptionalism. Distinguishing between 'anthropos' and Nature, Margot Norris explored biocentrism in Max Ernst's work where she discerned a striking tendency which she framed as "an interrogation of anthropocentric assumptions"

(Norris 1985, 21). The underlying 'environmental consciousness', as labelled by Kristoffer Noheden, acted as a unifying trope among the Surrealists as they questioned "views of nature as an emblem of backwardness, a resource to be exploited, and a realm for humans to lord over" – a stance permeating colonialist and capitalist ethe (Noheden 2022, 53).

Against the long-prevailing, dominant paradigm of (hu)man as the sole actor within a cosmological edifice that in line with the Biblical account placed them at the top of creation, an approach to the therefrom derived anthropocentrism through Max Ernst's work can offer a productive lens towards a re-writing of hierarchies. In their mutual entanglement, the individual actors of his pictorial worlds are characterised by their togetherness which destabilises an allegedly objective 'order to things'⁴ in favour of a symbiotic existence as in Diane Waldman's terms "[t]here is a frightening confusion between plant and animal life" (Waldman 1975, 53). While Max Ernst laid the foundation for a reconsideration of the dominant narrative with *Histoire naturelle*, it was with the later series of *The Entire City*, *The Nymph Echo* or *The Joy of Living* that the gradual blurring between human and animal, flora and fauna, man and nature unravelled its ideological thrust in an eradication of boundaries across different forms of life.

In a visionary gesture *ante litteram* – or in his case *ante imago* – the German Surrealist conjoined the diverse protagonists beyond a classificatory matrix that plots one against the other. Anthropocentric accounts get rectified while furthermore putting a patriarchal society in question as it is *Eve, the Only One Left to Us* who ultimately remains in a conjectural pre-enactment of the deluvian story of Noah's Ark (Gen 6:13-22). The alternative twists and turns of the narrative Max Ernst thusly anticipates find expression in the evolution of the 33 folios that culminate in the final one where woman appears as the saving grace. Projected as a non-sequitur through folio 34, Max Ernst's re-interpretation of the original account by this extends and anticipates the due course of events, formulating and conceiving a denouement of rather unexpected swerve instead, whose implications bear on a rewriting of the common origin account.

⁴ Allusion is made here to Michel Foucault's eponymous work.

3 First Hybridisations

From his early childhood, Max Ernst fostered a deep fascination with the forest and Nature. Frequent walks with his father in the woods of his native Rhineland introduced him to a world of fabled power and marvellous allure which from the 1920s onwards began to translate into his distinct oeuvre (Wilhelm 2020, 12). With a background in psychology, literature and philosophy (Trier 1979, 31), he constantly endeavoured to incorporate various scientific strands into his compositions, in search of new forms of expression 'beyond painting'.⁵

The first forays may in this regard be found in his collage oeuvre. Werner Spies has highlighted how the *modus operandi* served to create images whose semantic clout moved them past a literal translation of the individual elements towards a synthesis of newly coded constituents (Spies 2019). In its technical-iconographic ambition, collage allowed for a poignant commentary through a masterfully exercised 'alienating effect' (*Verfremdungseffekt*) of known imagery for a novel perspective – literal and proverbial – on given structures. By collating and integrating diverse references, Max Ernst formulated a visual inventory whose underlying ethos responded to the notion of cross-pollination.

Through the act of cutting and pasting, collage simultaneously originated in a gesture imbued with the zest of hybridisation, a 'breeding' of tokens and elements for a systematic construction of pictures. The final outcome of the hybrid image, on these grounds, proved pre-conditioned by the technique as multi-referentiality marked the very origin of the process itself.

From the first experiments with his collage technique, Max Ernst exploited its affordances in increasingly more complex compositions. While individual sheets had determined his early essays, starting from the late 1920s the cut and pasted images appeared in narrative cycles. While *Fiat modes pereat art* (*Let There Be Fashion, Down with Art*) (1920) constituted the first set of works in a portfolio tradition, the plates were still rooted in precise line drawing rather than a construction of pictorial worlds through the (re-)arrangement of source material. The collaged image correspondingly only appeared later in a chronological suite. Of distinct progression, *La Femme 100 têtes* (1929), *Rêve d'une petite fille qui voulut entrer au Carmel* (1930) and *Une semaine de bonté* (1934) all share an interest in a morphology of the picture whose shape-shifting nature harbours a

⁵ 'Beyond Painting' recalls the eponymous autobiographic account by the German artist in which he explores forms of creating art other than by the application of paint on canvas using a brush.

concern with a subverting gesture that originates in the question of the 'stable' image.

Crossovers between different species – women with dragon wings, men with lion heads – feature in the folios, a constant play with forms of life that blur and merge. The hybrid, by this, surfaced as a prototype for a genesis of species that come together on the stages Max Ernst conjured *au-delà de la peinture*. Through the use of collage, the sourced and scavenged images were glued together in a pro-creative act, a collating of elements into forms of life.

The creative technique then emerged as a generative act whose results speak to a fabrication of the final image gleaned from the pool of pictorial tokens.

4 **Max Ernst's *Histoire naturelle***

In a similar gesture, the principle of the sourced and collated image equally informed a panoply of subsequently developed 'chance' techniques. It was during Max Ernst's stay in a hotel room in Pornic on the French Atlantic coast in 1925, when intrigued by the pattern of the wooden floorboards he conceived a new technique that came to be known as 'frottage' by means of which he found a way of transferring the Surrealist principle of 'automatism'⁶ to painting and by extension art.⁷ In line with André Breton's dictum of "thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern" (Breton 1969, 26), this technique allowed to harness the chance effects achieved by rubbing a soft pencil over a textured surface in order to transpose a specific pattern to paper.⁸ "It is not a matter of drawing, but simply of tracing", André Breton had stipulated in his First Manifesto of Surrealism a year before (Spies 1991c, 128). A dictum, Max Ernst promptly responded to with his revolutionary technique. The thusly gained results, as poignantly formulated by Werner Spies, introduced a novel 'objectivity' (*Gegenständlichkeit*) to Max Ernst's oeuvre for conferring two disjointed planes of reality (*Wirklichkeitsebenen*) by virtue of combining an a priori structure with a pictorial object (*Bildgegenstand*) that proved semantically unrelated (Spies 2008, 203). The underlying iconographic concept opened up to a multiplicity of meaning as theme and execution

6 Born as a literary movement around the beginning of the 1920s, Surrealism only became an art movement with the First Manifesto penned in 1924, growing out of Dada by virtue of applying the dictum of the illogical, irrational and automatic to visual imagery.

7 Max Ernst describes this discovery of the frottage technique in his essay "Au-delà de la peinture" which he dates to August 10, 1925 (Spies 1991b, 21).

8 Ralph Ubl speaks of the hallucinatory effect created by these images (Ubl 2013, 126).

appeared in a novel relationship that no longer operated along a bi-lateral or mutual referentiality of a directly correlated Saussurean signifier and signified.⁹ On the contrary, by turning to frottage, Max Ernst was able to exploit and harness texture and patterns to synthesise images of autonomous nature. No longer tied to a figurative *re*-presentation, he subsequently embraced the technique to let himself be guided in the construction of his pictorial worlds. The explainable and rational (Spies 2008, 203) impetus as the driving forces of an enlightened Modernity thus came into question, thereby tipping a 'natural history' beyond its due course.

Inspired by the outcome, Max Ernst set about to use frottage to create his own *Histoire naturelle*, a cycle of 34 folios that recounts the history of Biblical beginnings. In this series dating from 1926 (Pech 2022, 142), he renewed his interest in natural phenomena which – through his creative gesture – were “transformed into images of potent cosmological forces” (Waldman 1975, 39). By this, the German Surrealist provided a savvy spin on the creation of Nature through the use of Nature while simultaneously questioning the surface of things via the material structures and patterns underlying the individual sheets. Seemingly disjointed at first glance, the compositions are unified by a narrative charge that comes to the fore through the deliberate choice of titles such as *Wheel of Light* or *Flood*, *Seismic Plants* which address and respond to the Biblical account of creation albeit in an enigmatic, elusive sense (Pech 2022, 144). The elements and constituents cited re-enact the origin story, arranged and presented as semantic units that operate by virtue of repetition, variation and exchange across a relational system to weave the folios into a non-linear, non-narrative sequence (Spies 2008, 207).

Comprising images of geological structures, evolving landscapes, sprouting vegetation and cavorting animals, the cycle unfolds as a witty commentary on the story in Genesis as Max Ernst reverted an established order of things. His transmutations of the automatically produced textures into a visual language of depiction, in Werner Spies' terms, “negated the linear course of human history, opposing it to a ‘histoire naturelle’” (Spies 1991b, 21). The implied allusion to Pliny the Elder and his eponymous tractate of ‘Natural History’ as the single largest work to have survived from the Roman Empire further expanded Max Ernst's interest in juxtaposing an allegedly objective structure of the natural world towards reality as an artefact (i.e. ‘artistically fabricated and made’) beyond mere classification.

Through his shrewd use of the textural constants, the German artist thus managed to break with established notions of a factual status quo, while arriving instead at a cosmogony that recurs to

⁹ For the Saussurean signifier and signified see Stawarska 2015.

the recombinant matrix of absolute structures which constituted his arsenal for a recreation of the world. Rather than a singular act of creation, Max Ernst's genesis of structures aligned with the Surrealists' "belief in a continuing process of re-creation" (Hubert 1972, 163). Five thematic groups may – broadly speaking – be made out, which upon closer inspection however reveal blurry. Among them range natural forces, vegetal landscapes as opposed to fossil spaces, contrasted with the animal kingdom. The visionary eye stars as a further framework, syncopated by *Eve, the Only One Left to Us*, as the ultimate culmination – an emancipated Eve freed from Adam (Pech 2022, 144). The folios rather convey the sensation of everything being in a state of metamorphosis and flux as the vegetal transforms into the animal while chimeras appear among other creatures.

In his typical gesture, Max Ernst poignantly re-synthesised semantic references in a cunning exploitation of surface appearances. From collage as an act of collating, conjoining and compiling different source materials he subsequently proceeded to frottage as the defining principle, thus moving from the cut-and-pasted images to the combining of textures-as-concepts. Recurring to the chance technique which Jürgen Pech poignantly described as a "filologia visuale" (Pech 2022, 142) the German Surrealist then coupled the Biblical account of creation with Pliny's 'natural history'. By synthetically re-integrating both, Max Ernst crafted a meta-narrative and commentary where both were overturned in favour of a vision that proceeded from a cosmos in flux whose 'Linnaean'¹⁰ boundaries got dissolved.

Faithful to his *modus operandi*, Max Ernst further exploited and extended the notion of hybridisation in a subtle (con)juncture of word and image. Keenly attuned to the charge of language, he regarded the act of 'baptising' his compositions as a way of freeing them from their visual or physical boundaries. By this, the Surrealist creed of chance procedures informed the process of naming: "Jamais je n'impose un titre à un tableau: j'attends que le titre s'impose à moi", he asserted, hinting at the appearance of the title "comme par magie" (Ernst 1970, 336).

Most of the titles in *Histoire naturelle*, on these grounds, read as a promise and a premise, highly evocative strings of words whose allusive – and elusive – force pushes the associative realm beyond a literal reading of both the written and the painted. Rather

10 A Swedish biologist and physician active in the eighteenth century, Carl Linnaeus (also known as Carl von Linné following his ennoblement) formalised the modern system of naming organisms in his binary nomenclature which earned him the sobriquet of 'father of taxonomy'.

than describing the visual counterpart, they operate by virtue of association and semantic activation, thereby extending the field of meaning in a nod to the Surrealist dictum of “psychic automatism in its pure state [...] Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern” (Breton 1969, 26). With its punning clout, the free wordplay derides any dogmatic reading of the account in Genesis whose narrative requires a corrective lens.

Titles such as *Caesar's Palette*, *The Lime Tree is Docile* or *The Habit of Leaves* correspondingly forge links between semantically disjointed planes while endowing the often non-human protagonists with anthropomorphic traits. Flora and fauna, the vegetal and the animal merge and blur in Max Ernst's cosmogony while he infuses his compositions with a (literal) substrata of geological references in a cunning crafting – and creation – of an alternative universe. The thusly exercised world-building operates via constant vacillations beyond the rigid confines of a known or established order, wedding otherwise contradictory and exclusive elements in a savvy pun on the act of categorisation.

The resulting hybridisations interweave word, material and image such as in *The Fugitive (L'Évadé)* where the grill-like surface of a seascape serves as the backdrop for a bi(o)-morphic creature whose fish-shaped body shifts into the head of a bird. Of granular appearance, the chimera's rugged skin was likely obtained from rough linen (Pech 2022, 144) in a savvy application of the frottage technique. The natural texture of the underlying source materials constitutes the point of departure for Max Ernst's visual meditation on the interconnectedness of life forms as peculiar plants and bizarre animals are imbued with a mythopoeic ‘*élan vital*’.¹¹

5 Cosmologies of Interconnectedness: Max Ernst's Painted Mythopoesis

As poignantly formulated by Werner Spies, “Max Ernst's oeuvre[,] transcend[s] the historical man-made world” (Spies 1991b, 48). Amorphous apparitions of mineral shapes, crystalline solidifications of form and ever-changing vegetal structures characterise his pictorial universe where the lines between the vegetal, the animal and the human are faded and obscured in a constant re-writing and re-painting of forms of coexistence. His acute sense of natural history

11 Coined by French philosopher Henri Bergson in his 1907 book *Creative Evolution*, the term denotes the vital impulse and force of life, a creative principle that proceeds from the spontaneous morphogenesis and self-organisation of matter.

envisions modes of interconnectedness in a post-anthropocentric world where the individual actors emerge in constellations of mutual entanglement.

From the 34 folios of *Histoire naturelle* of the mid-1920s, Max Ernst continued his artistic research into the mythopoeic power of the image throughout the following years whereby his sensibility led him to conceive two cycles whose lush scenes and exotic landscapes recall a prelapsarian state that only upon second glance reveals permeated by a peculiar coexistence of flora and fauna.

The *Nymph Echo* (1936) along with *The Joy of Living* (1936) mark both a caesura as well as a continuation in Max Ernst's oeuvre as he integrated some of the decisive elements from former cycles such as *Garden Airplane Trap* (1935-36) or *The Entire City* (1935-37) into his compositions. In both series, human presences can no longer be told apart from flora and fauna, for rather than constituting singular, isolated entities, they appear in a state of symbiosis where the vegetal transforms into the bestial while the thusly conjured chimeras bear semblance to the human. Bird-headed creatures emerge from the thicket of the surrounding jungle, their manly hands peeling their way through the maze of foliage. Camouflaged amidst the impenetrable greenery, female bodies shine through, recalling ancient civilisations and cultures. Here is a world of entanglement and coexistence that painted in the mid-1930s effectively predates the premises of ecocriticism as coined in the 1960s.¹²

The lines between the different actants – otherwise so rigidly kept and upheld – accordingly begin to blur, in a transgressive vision exercised in a cunning updating of Linnean classification. *The Joy of Living* and *The Nymph Echo* resonate with a (pro)creative zest that finds its continuation in subsequent cycles such as *The Entire City* while simultaneously harking back to series like *Garden Airplane Trap*.

Across the three series, human, animal and plant appear in tangles of existence, jointly inhabiting alluring spaces of ancient civilisations, abandoned plateaux or voracious jungles. Flora and fauna merge and blur, either swallowing their surroundings or ejecting it while architectural realms and machine scraps speak to

12 As the interdisciplinary study of the connections between literature and the environment, ecocriticism draws on various strands (such as anthropology, natural sciences and literary criticism) to examine the differences and gaps between nature and its cultural construction. The 'discipline' emerged with the formation of the environmental movement upon publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962. However, it only fully took off in the 1980s with a second wave occurring in the 1990s. From an initial concern with nature as a field of study, the interest shifted to investigating the act of writing as a meaningful practice to challenge dominant hierarchies and binary conceptions of nature vs human beings vs culture.

forms of life that come together across the otherwise dividing lines of classification. Rather than separate entities, they all appear in states of togetherness, hybrid creatures that meet on the planes Max Ernst projected.

One of the most pertinent explorations in line with the eradication of boundaries may furthermore be found in his so-called 'Hesperides' (Spies 2008, 375). In a bold move beyond binary traditions, Max Ernst conjured images of hybrid creatures that conjoin both sexes – such as in *Two Sexless Figures. Chimerae* (1933) – while hovering between plant, animal and human. By irreverently conceiving forms of coexistence across the classificatory matrix otherwise in place, the German surrealist undid the dominant narratives as he breathed life into novel breeds and pedigrees. Featuring both male and female sexual characteristics and displaying traits of flora and fauna, the respective protagonists of his compositions such as in *Figure humaine* (1931) are born from visions of interconnectedness across the lines of biological classification. The composite beings originate in a biomorphic distortion of life forms, based on a classificatory matrix he reshuffles (Spies 2008, 375).

Intrigued by the enduring power of storytelling as a universal human trait, Max Ernst imbued his paintings with an underlying narrative current that feeds into his own mythology and personal myth. By this, he crafted his paintings in cycles to gradually build an inventory of recurring images which jointly unfold along a sequence. In their shared thrust, the suites of pictures progress with keen attention to a greater overarching storyline. Multiple fonts of inspiration feed into the compositions as the German Surrealist rendered tableaux that echo the great questions of life. The anthropological constant of origin accounts thereby lies at the heart of a quest for the parameters that frame life.

Passed along multiple generations, mythologies anchor human existence in a storied past, thus establishing a link between the present and times immemorial. On these grounds, they act as meaningful nodes across periods and eras, in a perennial updating of the origins of the world. The vagaries and fleetingness of things are overcome, substituted with a forever-'truth' that operates outside of limiting frames of days, months or years. By providing symbolic explanations for natural phenomena as well as cultural traditions, mythologies offer templates to make sense of a surrounding world while reflecting systems of belief and shared customs. As routes to the supernatural, they powerfully extend the human existence towards the divine.

6 Conclusion

As can be seen in Max Ernst's work, the artist's struggle and juggle with depicted reality and its visual imagery of reproductions, illustrations and collages in drawing and painting proceeds from an investigation of the inventory of form and content towards a construction of something "nie zuvor gesehen" (Spies 1991a, 15). The generative force of the artistic endeavour accordingly offers a powerful – and thereby pictorially eloquent tool – to operate as a visual figure of speech, employed to craft alternative cosmologies. Flora, fauna and human are entangled, jointly inhabiting nature as the lines of classificatory matrices dissolve along hybrid forms of being.

In Max Ernst's compositions, the material – as well as the materiality – of the image becomes a point of departure for a mythopoeic ecocriticism where chance techniques give way to visual worlds to take shape. By embracing the generative force of the image-making process, the German Surrealist crafted alternative cosmologies of interconnectedness, carried by a narrative thrust that refutes a nature-culture-divide in favour of symbiotic worldviews that speak to patterns of mutual dependence and exchange. A look into his creative cosmos may thus become a revelatory experience to discern an ecology of togetherness 'beyond painting'.

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