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MAIDENS, MATRONS, AND MAGICIANS:
WOMEN AND PERSONAL RITUAL POWER IN LATE ANTIQUE EGYPT

By

Meghan Paalz McGinnis
B.A., Art History and Studio Art, 2009

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Arts

Hite Art Institute
Department of Art History
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May, 2012

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A Thesis Approved on

January 13, 2012

by the following Thesis Committee:

Thesis Director

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the family, friends, teachers, and colleagues

who have supported and encouraged me always,

especially Mom and Dad,

Karen,

Oskar,

and Jen.

ABSTRACT

Maidens, Matrons, and Magicians: Women and Personal Ritual Power in Late Antique Egypt

Meghan Paalz McGinnis, B.A.

January 13, 2012

Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach to a variety of material, textual, and literary evidence, the aim of this thesis is to shed light on the realities –rather than stereotypes- of an important aspect of late ancient women’s experience: the use of ritual power. Patterns of gender differentiation in late antique Egyptian magic are investigated and shown to be connected to the particular aims to which numinous powers were employed, aims which were in turn bound up with the social roles expected of each sex. The majority of this study consists of a series of case studies of different types of women’s rituals of power, which emphasize examples of significant trends in ritual iconography, praxis, and context, both those which were typical of late antique Egyptian magic as a whole, and those which were uniquely female in character. The fact that female practitioners came from a wide array of socio-economic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds is also addressed.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A girl worries that her lover's eye might wander. A mother wants to ensure the health of her child in every way possible. A businesswoman wishes for success in her newest venture. A new bride hopes for a harmonious marriage. A female scholar works to compose her latest treatise. Though over a thousand years separate the lives of these late antique Egyptian women from today's world, their concerns are hardly ones which would be unfamiliar to many of their contemporary counterparts. But whereas the twenty-first century woman (or man) may look to things such as the wonders of modern medicine, or the omnipresent--if not always helpful--vastness of advice, how-tos, and other kinds of information to be found a mere keystroke away online, for assistance, women (and men) in the late antique world often sought to solve problems by tapping into numinous forces.

Whether one was an 'orthodox' Christian, a heretic, a follower of traditional religious cults, a Jew, or a member of a Gnostic sect, the existence of the intangible presences of gods, angels, daemons, and souls presiding over everyday life was taken as a given.¹ It was the belief that both lay men and women and various kinds of "specialists" could access this unseen realm and enlist its power on their own behalf for a great variety of practical purposes through ritual means.² These personal rituals of power - though not always condemned- generally fell outside the provenance of the canon and control of the religious establishment. The majority of these practices are what has, often disparagingly,

¹ Miller, Patricia Cox. *Dreams in Late Antiquity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, pg. 39.

² Meyer, Marvin W. and Richard Smith. *Ancient Christian Magic*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, pg. 6.

been termed “magic.”³ Though rituals of power were performed by both sexes, there has always been, both in the popular culture of the late antique Mediterranean itself and later scholarship right up to the present day, a particularly strong association drawn between magical praxis and women, an association that was not just a matter of polemics and fabrications. In fact, a variety of rituals of power formed an important aspect of the everyday lives of women across the social and religious spectrum in late antique Egypt, and one that was closely tied to their social roles and identity.

Modern scholarship on ancient magic –beginning in earnest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century- was focused initially on the field of anthropology, beginning with Frazer and Tylor’s theories of magic as false sciences, and Malinowski’s discussions of magic as technology for problems where technology was insufficient, and the instrumental quality of magical activity.⁴ Most of this classic anthropological work centered on contrasting “primitive” magic with “evolved” religion, and regarded magic as pseudoscience.

Historians began to engage with the topic through the examination of references to magic in the works of classical authors and law codes. This trend has continued in more recent scholarship with books like Dickie’s *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, which investigates the literary evidence for the identities of professional practitioners of ancient magic,⁵ and Stratton’s *Naming the Witch*, which examines the ideological motivations behind portrayals of male and female magicians in ancient and

³ This issue of the problematics involved in magic terminology will be discussed at length later in this paper.

⁴ Collins, Derek. *Magic in the Ancient Greek World*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2008. These and other early anthropological approaches to magic are discussed in chapter 1.

⁵ Dickie, Matthew W. *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

late ancient literature.⁶ Many of these historical treatments of magic discuss the use of magic as a rhetorical trope employed to help define negative stereotypes of *the other* and their beliefs.⁷

With the growing number of translations of significant bodies of material relating to late antique magic, such as Hans Dieter Betz's translation of the Greek Magical Papyri⁸ and the Coptic Magical Text Project,⁹ as well as work on the inscriptions on lamellae and magic bowls, cultural and religious historians have been able to study more specific aspects of ritual praxis in late antiquity. Both Gideon Bohaks's *Ancient Jewish Magic*¹⁰ and Meyer and Smith's *Ancient Christian Magic*¹¹ investigate the magical beliefs and practices within the parameters of certain religions, as well as the often contentious relation between 'orthodox' religious expressions and the popular culture of ritual power. David Frankfurter's¹² and Robert Ritner's extensive works on magic in Egypt,¹³ Trzcionka's *Magic and the Supernatural in Fourth Century Syria*¹⁴, and writings by Naomi Janowitz and many others on magic in the Roman world address the issue by tracing how rituals of power functioned in different cultural milieux.¹⁵ Other

⁶ Stratton, Kimberly B. *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

⁷ Janowitz, Naomi. *Magic in the Roman World: Pagans, Jews and Christians*. New York: Routledge, 2001, pg. 3.

⁸ Betz, Hans Dieter. *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation: Including the Demotic Spells*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1997.

⁹ See <http://iac.cgu.edu/research/copticmagic.html> for information on the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity's Coptic Magical Texts Project, led by Marvin Meyer.

¹⁰ Bohak, Gideon. *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

¹¹ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*.

¹² Works like *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*. (Leiden: Brill, 1998), "The Perils of Love: Magic and Countermagic in Coptic Egypt". (*Journal of the History of Sexuality*. 10 (3, 2001): 480), "Fetus Magic and Sorcery Fears in Roman Egypt" (*Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*. 46 (1, 2006): 37), and "Where the Spirits Dwell: Possession, Christianization, and Saints' Shrines in Late Antiquity." (*The Harvard Theological Review*. 103, No. 1 (2010): 27-46).

¹³ Ritner, Robert Kriech. *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1993.

¹⁴ Trzcionka, Silke. *Magic and the Supernatural in Fourth Century Syria*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

¹⁵ For example Janowitz's *Magic in the Roman World: Pagans, Jews and Christians*, and

scholars have chosen to examine specific kinds of ritual, such as Christopher Faraone's studies of Greek love spells,¹⁶ Daniel Ogden's books on witchcraft and necromancy,¹⁷ Sarah Iles Johnston's discussions of forms of divination and theurgy,¹⁸ and John Scarborough's investigations into the role of herbs in ancient medicine and magic.¹⁹

Art historical research on the material culture associated with ritual power in the ancient and late ancient Mediterranean has come to encompass both iconographical and stylistic surveys of groups of magic objects, and social art historical studies. One of the most widely read examples of the former, Campbell Bonner's *Studies in Magical Amulets, chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*²⁰ (as well as various articles and books by Jeffrey Spier²¹) discusses types of gems and other works of "minor" art with magic symbolism. Molded lamps with defixiones²² have occasionally received the same treatment.²³ Much of Eunice Dauterman and Henry Maguire's scholarship seeks to explicate the magical meanings of popular designs from the early Byzantine world, and to contextualize ritually powerful images at court, religious centers, and the home.²⁴

Petropoulos, J. C. B. *Greek magic: ancient, medieval and modern*. London: Routledge, 2008.

¹⁶ Faraone, Christopher A. *Ancient Greek Love Magic*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2001.

¹⁷ Ogden, Daniel. *Greek and Roman Necromancy*. Princeton University Press, 2004, *Magic and Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*. Oxford University Press, 2009

¹⁸ Like her *Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), and *Ancient Greek Divination* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

¹⁹ Scarborough, John. "Early Byzantine Pharmacology." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*. 38 (1984): 213-232.

²⁰ Bonner, Campbell. *Studies in Magical Amulets, chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950.

²¹ For example "Medieval Byzantine magical amulets and their tradition" (*Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. 56 (1993): 25-62) and *Late Antique and Early Christian Gems* (Reichert, 2007)

²² Inscriptions of binding spells, as will be discussed later in this paper.

²³ As in Mastrocinque, Attilio's "Late Antique Lamps with Defixiones". *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*. 47 (2007): 87-99.

²⁴ Like Eunice Dauterman Maguire, Henry Maguire and Maggie J. Duncan-Flowers's *Art and holy powers in the early Christian house* (University of Illinois Press, 1989), Maguire's "Garments Pleasing to God: The Significance of Domestic Textile Designs in the Early Byzantine Period." (*Dumbarton Oaks Papers*. 44 (1990): 215-224), *Rhetoric, nature and magic in Byzantine art* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), and Maguire and Dauterman's *Other icons: art and power in Byzantine secular culture* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

Brady's thesis, *The iconography of magical objects used by women in the early Byzantine Empire*, also connects domestic objects and amuletic jewelry with the social function of magic.²⁵ Gary Vikan discusses subjects like the efficacious qualities of Byzantine marriage art, the relationship between art, magic, and medicine, and eulogia and other objects by which pilgrims sought to harness ritual power.²⁶ While this thesis draws on all the aforementioned trends in magical scholarship to some degree, it is mostly informed by context-oriented social art history, using examples of material culture to reconstruct the beliefs and rituals performed by those who made and used them.

The definition of magic has been, and continues to be, a subject of constant debate amongst scholars. Recently the traditional tendency of defining magic as an irrational view of causality, delineated primarily by contrasting it with more “evolved” post-Enlightenment modes of religion and science, has been discarded by most of the academic community. Contemporary discussions of what counts as ‘magic’ can mostly be divided into two camps. The first argues that magic can only be properly defined through emic terminology which shifts according to cultural context, the boundaries of the term set by whatever culture being studied considers to be magic in a certain period and/or region.²⁷ The second asserts that the term “magic” should be discarded all together and replaced by new less biased terminology, in that way discarding the often paternalistic scholarship of the past.²⁸

Both of these approaches have their pros and cons. While emic terminology is invaluable for investigating how magic was discussed in late antiquity, the terms

²⁵ Brady, Catherine. *The iconography of magical objects used by women in the early Byzantine Empire*. Thesis (Departmental honors in Art History)--Norton, MA: Wheaton College, 1999.

²⁶ Vikan, Gary. *Sacred images and sacred power in Byzantium*. Aldershot, Hampshire, Great Britain: Ashgate, 2003; Vikan, Gary. *Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*. Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982.

²⁷ Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, pg. 7.

²⁸ Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, pg. 8.

connoting “magic” were almost always deployed as labels of opprobrium against others’ rituals and rarely used as terms of self-definition, making a consistent definition difficult to come by.²⁹ What was called magic by one group might not be by another. A practice might be magic in one century, but not at a later period. Variations may exist among different regions, even those populated by the same group at the same time. This lack of a consistent definition can pose many difficulties in scholarship. As H.S. Versnel argues, it is difficult to do cultural research without the aid of broad, archetypical definitions.³⁰ On the other hand, the obvious problem with throwing “magic” out comes in finding a suitable replacement for a term that, while imperfect in many ways, remains the most recognizable moniker for an elusive category of human behavior.

For the purpose of this study, I have employed emic definitions³¹ primarily when discussing how perceptions of women’s “magic” could affect their social standing and identities, and how these definitions might affect how the practitioners themselves viewed their actions. A broad etic definition of magic became necessary when choosing which practices, and therefore which associated objects, should fall within the purview of this paper. Despite all the disagreement, “magic” as a (albeit controversial) concept clearly existed in the late antique imagination. As a result of this, certain practices were – frequently- called ‘magical’ by all late antique groups, such as binding spells and curse tablets and the use of amulets and some forms of divination. Obviously, these practices would be included in any paper involving late antique magic.

²⁹ Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg. 3.

³⁰ Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, pg. 9.

³¹ Such as those which equate to the Egyptian *Heka* or *hekau* (the sometimes personified and deified concept of ritual power), the Greek *magoi* and *goetes* (both which can have connotations of not only secret skill and knowledge but charlatanism as well), the Latin *veneficus* and the decidedly more critical *maleficium* (which equates most closely to the early modern notion of malevolent and usually feminine witchcraft), and the Hebrew *mekhashef* (sorcery; can also be translated as witchcraft with a particular connection to women).

However, in my opinion other practices from the period³² that are usually not termed “magic”, like certain pilgrimage practices,³³ are so close in their form, function, and involvement of personal agency to what is more classically defined as such that absenting them from the discussion would constitute an unnecessary perpetuation of a falsely rigid delineation between religion and magic; a delineation which is particularly moot in late antiquity.³⁴ With all this in mind, my definition of “magic” has come to center on the issue of ritual power. In the introduction to *Ancient Christian Magic*, Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith argue for discarding the loaded term “magic” in favor of “ritual power.” They discuss how the Coptic magical texts they include in their volume are all characterized by being, “...ritual texts. They direct the user to engage in activities that are marked off from normal activity by framing behavior through rules, repetitions, and other formalities;”³⁵ through such rituals the practitioner manipulates spiritual powers and forces to their benefit. Meyer and Smith note that this kind of ritual power can be invoked publically, for example during the consecration of the Eucharist at mass.³⁶

But while the invocation of ritual power by a member of an accepted social body, like a clergy man or woman (whether Christian or of a traditional Egyptian temple) might be seen as legitimate, its use by a private individual was often considered more

³² For the purposes of this paper I am defining late antiquity as the period between when the Edict of Milan proclaimed toleration of Christianity in the Roman/Byzantine empire, and the Islamic takeover of much of Byzantine territory during the 7th century. By this period many trends in religion and magic which began in the Hellenistic period had solidified and become more popular. I have included material from before and after the late antique period in my study when I consider it relevant because characteristics of popular religion and magic do not shift in accordance with generally accepted historical periodization; in fact, in my research I found very little change in the basic methodology of rituals of power directly before, during and after the late antique period (other than an expected increase in Christian language and imagery accompanying the legalization of the faith).

³³ For example healing using images, dust, and water from pilgrimage shrines.

³⁴ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 7.

³⁵ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 4. This can be extended to include images which are repeatedly set apart as having an efficacious quality.

³⁶ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 14.

problematic and thus frequently labeled disparagingly as “magic.”³⁷ Women, already always the ‘other’ in the patriarchal world of late antique society, were even more prone than men to having their rituals labeled as magic rather than “proper” religious observance.³⁸ In my thesis “magic” refers to *personal ritual power*: the exercise of personal agency to access supernatural powers that mostly fell outside the regulation of the established late antique religious organizations.³⁹

My approach to the subject of personal ritual power as exercised by women in late antique Egypt is highly interdisciplinary. In my opinion, this is demanded by the sheer diversity of evidence pertinent to the topic. The sources for late antique magic, and for late antique women, are varied. Papyri caches of spells and letters, references in literature ranging from moral and religious polemic to poetry and narrative fiction, inscriptions on buildings and tombs, shrines, amulets and objects of personal adornment, clothing, household furnishings, and ritual equipment are all relevant.

To neglect the full scope of this evidence would be to paint an incomplete and deceptively narrow picture of the topic. This variety of sources also demands a variety of scholarly techniques to deal with them. Art historical, archaeological, and textual evidence gives testimony on what rituals were being practiced using what implements and images, and what contemporary attitudes were to these practices and the women practicing them, while anthropological and feminist approaches assist in explaining the social discourses and functions at play.⁴⁰

It is exactly this great variety of surviving material, with the possibilities it offers

³⁷ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 14.

³⁸ Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, pg. 24-25.

³⁹ Though such praxis was in itself merely the personal end of a broad spectrum of public and private ritual activities that drew on relatively universal late antique metaphysical beliefs.

⁴⁰ Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, pg. 25.

for a wide range of investigative avenues, which makes late antique Egypt particularly fertile ground for studying personal ritual power exercised by women. Extensive evidence for magic done by women survives from Egypt, with the arid climate preserving types of objects that do not survive well elsewhere, such as clothing,⁴¹ wooden home furnishings, and papyri. Women in Egypt seem to have enjoyed greater freedom and participation in public life compared to most women elsewhere in the late antique Mediterranean (particularly Greece),⁴² due to a variety of factors such as greater legal rights and a long tradition inherited from both Pharaonic and Roman Egypt of female visibility and influence. All this suggests that they had the need (and opportunity) to employ rituals of power for a greater number of purposes.⁴³

Along with the traditional association of *women* with magic,⁴⁴ *Egypt* was also strongly associated with the magical arts. Ancient Egyptian temple priests had a reputation throughout the Mediterranean world as the most skilled ritualists,⁴⁵ a reputation that was transferred to Alexandrian intellectual circles and desert holy men later on. Greco-Roman authors wrote of Egypt as “the land of wonders.”⁴⁶ The region’s occult credentials were considered so great that manufacturers of amulets elsewhere claimed that their products were made in Egypt,⁴⁷ and itinerant magic workers who had never set foot in the land of the Nile claimed to be Egyptian. In the ancient and late

⁴¹ Like the clothing decorated with apotropaic images which Maguire discusses in “Garments Pleasing to God”.

⁴² As discussed throughout T.G. Wilfong’s *Women of Jeme: Lives in a Coptic Town in Late Antique Egypt*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002).

⁴³ The participation of late antique Egyptian women in public life as evidenced by numerous legal, literary, and epigraphic sources has been (and thankfully continues to be) a subject of much recent historical research by scholars such as Bagnall, Wilfong, and Westerfeld.

⁴⁴ In Greco-Roman literature and traditional religion, Judeo-Christian texts, and folklore.

⁴⁵ Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, pg. 203.

⁴⁶ Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, pg. 213-215.

⁴⁷ Sfameni, Carla. “Magic in Late Antiquity: Evidence of Magical Gems” in Gwynn, David M., Susanne Bangert and Luke Lavan eds. *Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010, pg. 444.

ancient world this cachet meant that ritual praxis from Egypt had influence throughout the Mediterranean region,⁴⁸ and even farther afield.⁴⁹

Late antiquity saw greater outside influence on native Egyptian magical practices, as well.⁵⁰ Late antique Egyptian magic is a highly syncretic mixture born from the turbulent changes of the period. Greek, Roman, and Byzantine rule, the heritage of many religious groups, and native pharaonic tradition all combined in the rituals of power practiced in the region.⁵¹ Magical praxis and belief were important factors in the lives of all the many religious and ethnic groups and social classes making up the multicultural society of Egypt in late antiquity. All these factors combine to make the study of the exercise of personal ritual power in late antique Egypt a particularly rich, but complex, field of research.

In this paper I have chosen to approach the intricacies presented by investigating the women who sought to exercise ritual power on their own behalf in this multi-faceted cultural milieu, what they were doing, and what they were doing it with, through applying an interdisciplinary methodology to material, documentary, and literary evidence. This collection of information has been gathered from both secondary sources and translations of primary texts. These sources are associated with a variety of different late antique Egyptian socio-economic and religious groups. Though the concept of “magic” as unregulated, misused, or false sacred power played an undeniably crucial role in late antique discourses articulating boundaries between religious groups and regulating social mores, the fact remains that most aspects of the actual *practice* of personal rituals

⁴⁸ Sfameni, Carla. “Magic in Late Antiquity, pg. 455.

⁴⁹ Some Coptic practices traveled all the way to Britain and Ireland with missionary monks in the early middle ages as Ritner and other scholars have noted.

⁵⁰ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, xlv.

⁵¹ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, xlv.

of power show marked similarities across confessional⁵² lines. Whether or not a devout Christian woman would have wanted to view her personal devotions as anything like the “heathen” rites practiced by her pagan neighbor (and vice versa), in terms of ritual methods and the metaphysical ideas underpinning them⁵³...they were. For this reason I have chosen to include material from all late antique Egyptian traditions indiscriminately in this paper. Through an examination of the objects associated with personal rituals of power performed by women examples of papyri containing written invocations and instructions for spells, literary accounts of female practitioners and opinions on women’s magic, I seek in this thesis to explore and contextualize the variety of “magical” beliefs and practices which formed an integral part of the reality of the experiences of women of all faiths and walks of life in late ancient Egypt.

The first chapter of this essay focuses on issues of gendering late antique Egyptian ritual, such as which kinds of magic were performed by men and which were performed by women, and which were shared by both sexes. The second is a series of case studies of the different types of rituals of power that Egyptian women practiced in late antiquity. The final chapter investigates how personal ritual power was exercised by women of all walks of life in late ancient Egypt.

I hope that this thesis will contribute to the broader discourse on the subject of women and ritual power in late antiquity by offering a more culturally holistic approach to the topic than has often been taken. By avoiding a project restricted to one religious group or section of the late antique social strata, I seek to produce a study that reflects the truly syncretic and widespread nature of the practices under discussion, and the

⁵²And economic lines for that matter, as is addressed in the fourth chapter of this paper.

⁵³ For example, the ubiquity of belief in intermediary spirits, the efficacy of “sympatheia”, correspondences between aspects of the physical and spiritual realms, etc.

importance of the religious koine in late antique Egypt, rather than presenting a falsely fragmented picture with rigid lines drawn where fluid cultural interactions actually took place.

I also see grounding this study in the evidence of the material and documentary culture to be a corrective to the often obscure and/or biased portrayal of female rituals presented in the contemporaneous literature,⁵⁴ and to scholarly trends that refuse to look past these biases. While studying the many implications of late ancient “othering” is important, I believe that the great deal of attention that has been lavished on questions of “witchcraft” as polemic against women has often regrettably tended to obscure investigating what personal rituals of power were *actually* being practiced by women and men in late antiquity, and why. Therefore, I believe an important contribution made by my project comes in not limiting my discussion of women and ritual power primarily to the realm of critique and investigation of ancient discourses of polemics and gender stereotypes, but rather focusing on attempting to reconstruct *the reality* of what was different about rituals of power for men and women, what rituals women were doing, and which women were doing such rituals, not merely how these practices were ignored or misrepresented in their own time or by later generations.

⁵⁴ Stratton, pg. 24-25, and elsewhere.

II. MEN, WOMEN, AND MAGIC: GENDERING RITUALS OF POWER

There are a number of issues that make gendering ancient and late ancient magical praxis complicated. First, there is the well known problem of the frequent use of magic as a literary trope that casts women as the Other-ed foil against which masculine ideals of behavior and civility are constructed.⁵⁵ As Kimberley Stratton notes,

Even where men are represented as magicians, magic conveys connotations of gender: conceived as an illegitimate and effeminate source of power, accusations of magic can delegitimize men by associating them with women and women's wily ways.⁵⁶

All this combines to make using ancient literary representations of magic in attempts to reconstruct ritual praxis and the attitudes of actual practitioners difficult. Despite these difficulties, late ancient literature, when read carefully, can still provide useful information when literary descriptions can be found to be reasonably supported by material and documentary culture, especially when one considers that polemical writings, to be effective, must have had some, however stereotyped and tenuous, foundation in actual practices and activities.⁵⁷ Religious and political leaders would hardly have complained so frequently about cultural trends if they had not actually been occurring. In

⁵⁵ Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, pg. 24.

⁵⁶ Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, pg. 25. It also worth noting that feminine characteristics could not only be imparted to male figures polemically, but could also simply function as a sign of their magically powerful nature. For example, late antique depictions of Christ in the role of magician and healer often have feminine aspects, as Tom Matthews explicates in his seminal work *Clash of the Gods* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁵⁷ The scholarly debate over the methodological issues inherent in the use of literary (especially hagiographic) sources in attempting to reconstruct the facts of late antique life is heated and ongoing. For the arguments in favor see David Frankfurter's "Hagiography and the Reconstruction of Local Religion in Late Antique Egypt," in Dijkstra and Van Dijk, *The Encroaching Desert*; the opposite side is represented by Roger Bagnall, "Models and Evidence in the Study of Religion in Late Roman Egypt," in Hahn, Emmel, and Gotter, *From Temple to Church*.

this case the reality was the fact that “the magic arts” were widely practiced by women, and engaged in by men too.

It is also worth noting that, unlike the classical Greek and Roman sources which Stratton and other scholars tend to use as the core evidence for their conclusions, late ancient Egyptian society seems to a certain extent to have preserved a more favorable inclination towards “magic” born out of the classical Egyptian past in which rituals of power practiced publically and officially by priests held an influential place in society; Egypt’s reputation as the paramount center of ritualistic power; and a continuous interest in intellectual and religious circles in ritual power as a means to higher learning and gaining expressions of divine favor.⁵⁸ More often than not, these more positive portrayals of the practice of personal rituals of power usually (if not exclusively) involved male figures, highlighting once again the issues of gender and power inherent in late ancient discourses on magic.

Textual and material evidence brings into sharper focus an important fact that the murky world of literary polemic and trope can obscure: that men practiced personal rituals of power just as much as women.⁵⁹ The Greek Magical Papyri and other caches of spells, amuletic drawings and writings include material that explicitly references male and female practitioners.⁶⁰ They also contain sets of ritual instructions that give no hint of their user’s gender, and could easily be applied to either sex.⁶¹ This highlights another difficulty in attempting to gender late ancient rituals of power. The mechanics of magical

⁵⁸ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 14-16

⁵⁹ Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, pg. 24.

⁶⁰ For example, some magical papyri include instructions that “he” or “she” is to speak certain words, while others are written in the first person with the female or male writer (or who the spell is being written for) identifying themselves (or being identified) by name.

⁶¹ Not to mention that there is no reason to assume that, just because a certain preserved example of a particular spell mentions a male or female client, it could never have been altered for use by the other sex.

praxis nearly always operate the same, regardless of the sex of the practitioner. Popular ritual methods, such as the making of defixios, binding, the inscribing of magical characters, and the invocation of spirits through chants and offerings (to name only a few), were utilized by both women and men.⁶² It was the same for the objects frequently used in these rituals. For example, amuletic gems and other items of personal adornment, magical equipment like special bowls and the mysterious iynx,⁶³ and a wide range of herbs, minerals, liquids, bodily fluids, and other natural materials were viewed as imbued with supernatural significance.

Issues of gender and magic are further confused by the fact that rituals of power could be performed by practitioners for their own benefit or on behalf of others. Ritual specialists of both genders existed in the late antique Mediterranean region, and served both male and female clients.⁶⁴ For example, collections of magical recipes, like those found in Coptic manuscript Heidelberg Kopt.686 (“The Praise of Michael the Archangel”)⁶⁵ and the hoard of spells now at the University of Michigan,⁶⁶ appear to be intended as ritual quick reference guides in which a magical expert could look up the appropriate magic treatments for a client’s particular affliction. Ritualists of either gender could have owned such magic cookbooks, which include cures for both distinctly masculine ailments,⁶⁷ and singularly female concerns.⁶⁸ This suggests that the social landscape of late antique Egypt encompassed all sorts of permutations of gender relations

⁶² As magical papyri and literary accounts attest.

⁶³ A magic top referenced in many literary accounts of rituals of power.

⁶⁴ As Matthew Dickie details in his *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*.

⁶⁵ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 323-341.

⁶⁶ Michigan 593 (Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 304-310).

⁶⁷ For example, Heidelberg Kopt.686 includes instruction for curing a man who has been magically bound to be unable to have sex with his wife (Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 339).

⁶⁸ Like the remedy in Michigan 593 for a ‘woman whose milk does not flow’ (Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 307).

within magical praxis; women and men performing rituals of power for themselves, for members of the same sex or for members of the opposite, or both. In other words, men and women sometimes performed rituals that were essentially unrelated to their own gender. It is also well documented that, while some magical documents were written by the ritualist in question themselves, illiterate/semi-literate individuals (or those merely wishing for a more skilled touch) of both sexes frequently employed professional scribes—the majority of whom were men—to copy out their formularies for them.

But even if one only considers those rituals of power that practitioners engaged with on their own or solicited from/performed for practitioners of their own sex, all the similarities and ambiguities just discussed still present the question: if the methods and materials by which men and women in late antique Egypt were performing rituals of power were the same, what--if anything--about magic during that period can in fact be securely gendered?⁶⁹ The answer is found in examining the differences in aims, contexts, and iconography. While female and male practitioners may have done many of the same things, they did not always do them for the same ends, in the same places, or used the same images in the same ways.

Some common concerns of Egyptian practices of ritual power were shared by men and women and enacted in similar contexts using similar imagery and methods. Among these were rituals of love magic. In *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, Christopher Faraone argues that men and women performed different types of love spells.⁷⁰ The *agoge* spell, in which the magician calls down powers, like deities of sexual love and restless spirits, to goad the victim with uncontrollable pain and passion (often with the aid

⁶⁹ Aside from the aforementioned issues of the disproportionate attribution of the magic arts to women in ancient discourse.

⁷⁰ Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, throughout.

of pierced and bound figurines (fig. 1)) until they come to the practitioner was the province of men.⁷¹ On the other hand, the use of *philia*, spells to induce love and affection often effected through potions or powders dusted on clothing were practiced by women, particularly on husbands whose affections were prone to wandering.⁷² While Faraone argues persuasively for the existence of this differentiation in the classical Greco-Roman milieu, this does not seem to have been the case in late antique Egypt.

While the majority of surviving late ancient Egyptian love spells that indicate specific practitioners are for men to be directed at women, a notable number of examples exist in which women performed love magic directed at men, as well as at least two cases of a woman trying to attract the erotic attention of another female.⁷³ In these exemplars in which women act as the aggressive parties, the language and ritual actions employed are identical to the masculine examples.⁷⁴ Further emphasizing that the practice of love magic operated the same for women and men is the evidence of spells, such as the popular Isis love spell,⁷⁵ that include instructions for performing the same ritual on behalf of a woman *or* a man. Amulets intended to make the wearer more attractive, like gems depicting Aphrodite (fig. 2), were also worn by both sexes.⁷⁶

Female and male practitioners bent on erotic enchantment would have also enacted their rituals of power in similar contexts. These settings could be of a private kind, like invocations done at home or at numinously charged but often rather deserted locations such as crossroads, cemeteries and small shrines, or part of the public sphere of

⁷¹ Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, pg. 88.

⁷² Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, pg.119.

⁷³ Such as PGM XXXII.1-19 (Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri...*, pg.266).

⁷⁴ Generally that of an Egyptian agoge-esque ritual, occasionally something ‘for mutual love’ more similar to a Greek *philia* spell.

⁷⁵ PGM IV.94-153(Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri...*, pg.39-40), Other variants exist.

⁷⁶ As testified to by variations in jewelry settings (some types of jewelry being exclusive to one gender or other, smaller pieces probably being worn by women), etc.

baths, markets, and religious festivals,⁷⁷ not to mention the ever popular method of leaving one's defixiones next to, or under, the threshold of the beloved's residence.⁷⁸ The ubiquity of, and relative gender equality in, the practice of late antique Egyptian love magic is probably a reflection of the greater degree of agency women in the region enjoyed in matters of love and marriage.⁷⁹

What was true in calling down magically induced passion on another individual was also the case for bringing down wrath and misfortune. Curses were used for a great number of reasons by members of both sexes, and used frequently at that. Both women and men employed traditional Egyptian rhetorical techniques and practical mechanics that had been updated to reflect contemporary syncretic tastes.⁸⁰ Male and female practitioners relied on ritual staples, such as calling on the vengeful nature of angry ghosts by leaving curse tablets in graves, sometimes even writing their curses on the bones of dead humans or animals enlisted to their cause,⁸¹ the use of execration figurines (fig. 3 and 4) and broken pots,⁸² and using their enemies' personal effects or "relics" (like hair) against them.⁸³ Both sexes employed cursing for a great number of reasons, ranging from family disputes, rivalry in love or business, protection, to appeals to their god(s) to punish one who had committed a crime against them.⁸⁴

All in all, extant evidence shows that cursing, perhaps even more than love magic, was a truly equal opportunity form of ritual power, used by women against men as well

⁷⁷ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 147.

⁷⁸ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 148.

⁷⁹ Especially when compared to the classical Athenian women of Faraone's study.

⁸⁰ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 185.

⁸¹ For example, Florence 5645 is a curse written in red ink on a human rib (Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 203-204).

⁸² Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, pg 144-147.

⁸³ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 186.

⁸⁴ Usually couched in judicial language.

as other women, and men against both women and other men. And though curses and erotic charms were two of the most widely practiced forms of relatively gender neutral rituals of power, they were not the only ones. Most forms of divinations also did not alter in their means of (and reasons for) being used⁸⁵ based on the sex of the practitioner.

Other popular ways of harnessing ritual power manifested themselves in practices that were, for the most part, utilized in similar fashions by both sexes, but include discernible strains gendered by variations in the ends to which they were employed. Some examples of these variants can be noted in examining trends in apotropaic magic. In the late antique view of the world, invisible dangers from evil spirits or the magical actions of one's enemies were an ever present concern.⁸⁶ Therefore, both sexes made extensive use of the great array of protective spells, symbols, and gestures that were ubiquitous at all levels of society.⁸⁷

One of the most popular images used for warding off evil forces in Egypt (and other areas of the Mediterranean and Near East) was most often called the Holy Rider. This heroic mounted figure could be identified with warrior saints, angels, gods, and Christ himself, and likely derived in part from earlier Egyptian images of Horus spearing Seth in his crocodile form.⁸⁸ The wise Solomon was frequently depicted in this guise, seated on horseback and piercing a fallen demonic figure with a lance (fig. 5). The demon being vanquished by the Hebrew king was typically a bound female figure. This particular incarnation of Solomon as Holy Rider was a reference to a passage from the widely circulated Judeo-Christian magical/mystical text *The Testament of Solomon*, in

⁸⁵ As will be discussed at greater length later in this paper.

⁸⁶ Miller, Patricia Cox, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*, pg. 39.

⁸⁷ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 105.

⁸⁸ As Ritner discusses in several articles.

which the eponymous monarch and master sorcerer binds a series of demons into service to build his temple, forcing them to confess their true names and the ways in which they can be defeated.⁸⁹ Among the devils defeated by Solomon is a female entity known as Abyzou (among other names), a Lilith type fiend who attacks children.⁹⁰

Given this historiola,⁹¹ that Solomon as Holy Rider defeating Abyzou was one of the preeminent apotropaic images put on children's amulets is only logical. It also figures in an excellent example of a gendered use of apotropaic magic. Contemporary sources indicate that it was primarily mothers who took charge of ritually protecting their children.⁹² Therefore, it can be assumed that a certain percentage of objects bearing this particular type of Holy Rider imagery were used by women, either for their own protection or for that of their offspring. This assertion in no way diminishes the polyvalency of the meanings and uses associated with Holy Rider imagery, which were certainly frequently used for both apotropaic and healing purposes not only by women and children but by men as well. It is however illustrative of wider trends: whereas both men and women engaged in apotropaic rituals of power, women tended to use these and other magical practices *both* on their own behalf *and* on behalf of their relatives more than their male counterparts;⁹³ and while certain images and practices were generally utilized by both sexes, the same images and/or practices were also sometimes employed in more gender specific ways.

The same scenario, of a popular magical symbol and/or attendant ritual being used by both sexes, but also in a more specifically gendered way by female practitioners,

⁸⁹ Spier, "Byzantine Amulets", pg. 34-35.

⁹⁰ Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, pg. 180.

⁹¹ A fragment of narrative which related to and enhanced the power of a spell it prefaced.

⁹² Such as John Chrysostom's invective against mothers and "old women" performing protective rituals on their babies. (Trzcionka, *Magic and the Supernatural in Fourth Century Syria*, pg. 107-108).

⁹³ As is born out by documentary sources, such as those from Jeme.

occurs within the category of the numerous rituals of power done for healing purposes.⁹⁴

For example, in late antique Egypt, medico-magical prescriptions existed for almost every ailment imaginable.⁹⁵ Among this body of lore an inordinately large number of ritualistic cures were remedies for abdominal issues.⁹⁶ A symbol considered especially efficacious for this purpose was the image of the lion-headed serpent Chnoubis (fig. 6). While abdominal issues in general obviously troubled Egyptians of either gender, Chnoubis's power was also habitually invoked more specifically in regards to control of the womb.⁹⁷ This kind of use was naturally more the province of women,⁹⁸ as was invoking healing powers on behalf of their children.⁹⁹

Much like female use of healing magic diverged from male practice according to what health issues were or were not of concern to the particular gender in question, some rituals of power were *only* practiced by or on behalf of women¹⁰⁰ because they only applied to the female experience. Rituals of power that were focused exclusively on the female body were the domain of female practitioners (or if performed by a male practitioner, done so only on behalf of a woman). One of the most important categories of magic that was generally practiced only by or for women was that which was meant to

⁹⁴ There was of course a good deal of overlap between apotropaic and healing practices.

⁹⁵ As Gary Vikan discusses at length in "Art, Medicine, and Magic in Early Byzantium" (Dumbarton Oaks Papers, Vol. 38, Symposium on Byzantine Medicine (1984), pp. 65-86).

⁹⁶ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 18.

⁹⁷ Brady, *The iconography of magical objects used by women...*, pg. 27.

⁹⁸ Though oddly, not exclusively, occasionally *hystera* charms seem to have been employed to help with male abdominal discomfort.

⁹⁹ Wilfong, *Women of Jeme*, pg. 103.

¹⁰⁰ Which is how I am essentially defining "women's magic" for the purposes of this paper, rituals of power that women were somehow involved in, either by practicing them themselves, having them practiced on them/for them, or both. I have included in this paper both rituals which were typically only done by/for women, or practices that both sexes participated in; in short, any kind of magic late antique Egyptian women frequently employed. While performing a ritual one's self involves a different level of agency than going to someone else (whether of your same sex or the other) to have a ritual done for you, both are examples of a late antique individual utilizing magic in their life. Also, it is often impossible to tell if a text written in the first person was actually written by that individual or for them by an intermediary, or if an amulet was given to a certain individual or acquired on their own volition, etc.

enhance female fertility. One of the ritual uses of the many enigmatic clay figurines, possibly representing goddesses, found at sites all over late antique Egyptian sites (fig. 7) was the enhancement of fertility.¹⁰¹ Archaeological evidence suggests that these figures were frequently used as household votives by women, decorated with flowers and other offerings to invoke the favor of female higher powers for fertility and other blessings.¹⁰²

The same level of gender exclusivity was attached to practices concerned with pregnancy, such as spells and tokens intended to protect the fetus and mother, like a spell found written on the back of a papyrus letter entreating,

+++ / + O god of St. Leontius! / If I stay at this house where I am and remain inside with [my] mother, my heart will be at rest and shall bear a living child....
(two remaining lines are obscure)¹⁰³

Rituals meant to ensure just the opposite of fertility and a safe pregnancy, that is contraceptive and abortive practices, were also women's magic.¹⁰⁴ The many traditions centered on childbirth, with all the dangers it entailed in the late antique world,¹⁰⁵ were another extremely important arena in which female practitioners of magic had the monopoly.

Throughout all of these varied typologies, the gendering of rituals of power in late antique Egypt generally followed a consistent pattern, one that relates to the socio-cultural roles attributed to their practitioners. Desires for love, vengeance, and insight

¹⁰¹ And sites dating to earlier periods as well.

¹⁰² Wilfong, *Women of Jeme*, pg. 114-116. Some of these figurines have also been found in monastic contexts indicating that while they may have been more popular with women men also utilized these "goddess" figures at times; another example of how magical praxis was often not gender exclusive in late antique Egypt.

¹⁰³ Rylands 100 (Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 125). Dr. Westerfeld pointed out to me that this text could also be a question being put to the saint's oracle as to how the mother can best protect her child. If so, this would be another type of ritual power (divination) being invoked to assist in pregnancy.

¹⁰⁴ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 126.

¹⁰⁵ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 106.

into one's future were not restricted to one gender; therefore, rituals of power with erotic, execrative, or divinatory aims were practiced in the same way. Whereas both men and women felt the need to protect themselves from hostile forces and took care of their health through magical means, women also took on the responsibility of supernaturally shielding and healing their children as part of their motherly duties.¹⁰⁶ Other practices tied to motherhood, female reproduction, and a woman's status as caretaker of the household, were performed by (or for) women alone; these facets of life fell within feminine spheres in Egyptian late antiquity; consequently, the rituals of power that related to them were performed by female practitioners and/or for female clients.

In short, uses of personal ritual power that were shared between the sexes related to functions that both genders performed in society, while uniquely feminine or masculine magic was concerned with issues that applied only to men or to women. This is only reasonable when one considers just how deeply and ubiquitously magical belief and praxis were woven into the fabric of the late antique Egyptian popular consciousness. The esoteric was present in the everyday, so men's and women's magical practices aligned with the concerns of their daily lives.

¹⁰⁶ For a discussion of the social implications of motherhood, see Ioli Kalavrezou's exhibition catalog *Byzantine Women and Their World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Figure 1

Clay figurine used in erotic spell
2nd century CE
(Louvre inv.E27145)

Figure 2

Aphrodite engraved on cornelian
Hellenistic period
Oxford 376 (1892.1515)

Figure 3

Ancient Egyptian clay execration figure
(Brussels Musees Royaux d'Art et Histoire
E.7491)

Figure 4

Two Hellenistic *kolossoi* (ritual poppets) from Delos bound for use in execration

Figure 5

Haematite amulet depicting Solomon as Holy Rider (Kelsey Museum 26092)

Figure 6

Chnoubis with 7 eggs, serpentine intaglio, 1st-6th c. CE (Kelsey 26118)

Figure 7

Female statuette found at the shrine of St. Menas at Abu Mina, circa 6th c. CE?
(AN 1872.402, ca. 1:1, clay) Ashmolean Museum

III. “AN EXACT METHOD FOR EVERYTHING:”¹⁰⁷

A CASEBOOK OF WOMEN’S RITUALS OF POWER

Late antique women, in Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean at large, inhabited a cultural milieu which provided a large and widely varying array of magical practices from which to choose when addressing their personal and familial needs. To thoroughly detail *all* aspects of the extensive magical culture that were current in the dynamically mixed world of Egyptian late antiquity would be far beyond the scope of any one paper. This chapter does not attempt that monumental task but rather seeks to present a series of examples of different ways in which women practitioners exercised ritual power. By discussing a selection of exemplary cases drawn from the material and documentary records of the period, I hope to preserve a sense of the breadth of female use of magic in late ancient Egyptian culture, while also highlighting some important typologies and trends in imagery and praxis which these examples illustrate.

Apotropaic Magic: *Hear me today, by your holy and blessed name. Let all things be subject to me, those of heaven and those of earth, and those that are beneath the earth. I am Mary, I am Miriam, I am the mother of the life of the whole world, I am Mary. Let the stone [break], let the darkness break before me. [Let] the earth break. Let the iron dissolve. Let the demons retreat before me. Let the [...] appear to me. Let the archangels and angels come and speak with me until the Holy Spirit clears my path. Let the doors that are shut and fastened open for me. For your holy name shall become a*

¹⁰⁷ A declaration of efficacy, as prefaces many magical papyri; this example from PGM XII 144-152 (Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, pg. 158).

*helper for me, whether by day or by night. Adonel Ermarum Chobaoth Baracha Latem Chael Saphon, O true hidden god, hear me today. The one who sits upon his exalted throne-- every spirit of heaven and earth trembles before [him]. They fear [his holy name, which] is Yao Sabaoth Adonai Elo[i], who, by his power, releases everyone who is a prisoner, You must destroy every spirit and every power of the devil... ”*¹⁰⁸

[The practitioner then goes on to adjure the heavenly powers of Jesus, the archangels and the cherubim, and inscribe holy vowels,¹⁰⁹ in an auspicious triangular arrangement (fig 8). Above them, anthropomorphic figures and their accompanying ring signs (fig 9), are drawn using ink made from the blood of white dove mixed with myrtle, white wine, and charcoal made from the burning of white wood.¹¹⁰ The practitioner is also instructed to leave offerings besides a lamp: a censer of frankincense, fine linen, a small silver flask, and a pair of sandals. Next to the offerings pots of water and olive oil might be placed, onto which the blessings invoked by the spell were to be drawn down.]

This spell from London Oriental Ms. 6796¹¹¹ is just one of many powerfully apotropaic rituals of power from late antiquity in which the ritualist sought to call down the protective blessings of the almighty through the intercessory power of the Theotokos.¹¹² Though the particular example whose prayers, ritual instruction, and amuletic drawings are cited above, makes reference to their use by the definitively male Severus, son of Joanna,¹¹³ the magico-religious traditions of invoking the power of the

¹⁰⁸ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 283.

¹⁰⁹ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg 231. The seven vowels of the Greek alphabet were considered to be endowed with sacred power in late antique magical tradition.

¹¹⁰ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 289.

¹¹¹ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 283- 289.

¹¹² The most extensively articulated example of this tradition can be found in *P. Heid Inv. Kopt.* 685, “The Magical Book of Mary and the Angels”.

¹¹³ I have chosen to cite this example because it contains one of the most complete sets of ritual instructions as well as prayers for a Marian spell; though this particular papyrus is dedicated by a male, the language

Virgin Mary to break barriers and dispel demonic spirits was the property of both sexes.¹¹⁴ Though the depth of male devotion to Mary (which was also extensive) should in no way be discounted, it is not hard to imagine that in a cultural milieu in which the mother of God was held up as the epitome of what Christian women should seek to emulate, many female practitioners must have felt a particular affinity for Marian magic.¹¹⁵ The special attachment of women in the late Eastern Mediterranean to Mary as a source of numinous power even sometimes manifested itself in rituals that were exclusively a female domain, such as the tradition practiced by late antique Thracian and Arabian women of making special cakes in the name of Mary, gathering together to offer them to her, and “in her name functioning as priests for women.”¹¹⁶

It must have also seemed a particularly powerful thing for a *woman* to speak the words “I am Mary.” This kind of ritual in which practitioners identify themselves as, and thus play the role of “being for that duration and purpose an embodiment of”¹¹⁷ the divine being they are seeking to get in touch with is an important aspect of Egyptian magical praxis which originated in the ancient period and continued into Coptic usage.¹¹⁸ Taking on the very role of Mary during the ritual would have been seen as greatly increasing the exorcistic efficacy of the process.

Exorcistic language in which evil is commanded to flee before the words and

and actions used are very similar to other more fragmentary texts ascribed to females.

¹¹⁴ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 344.

¹¹⁵ Corrington, Gail Paterson. *Her Image of Salvation: Female Saviors and Formative Christianity*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1992, pg. 172.

¹¹⁶ Corrington, Gail Paterson. *Her Image of Salvation*, pg. 171-172. As described by the horrified Epiphanius. Corrington says this practice essentially offers Mary the same adulation traditionally given to Middle Eastern mother goddesses, making it likely that something similar—considering the assimilation of much of late antique Isis cult into Marian cult- probably went on among Egyptian women as well. Perhaps an offering of such a cake to Mary may have even been considered a proper accompaniment to a spell like the one under discussion in this section.

¹¹⁷ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 17.

¹¹⁸ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 17-18.

images being summoned by the speaker is another frequent trope in late ancient Egyptian apotropaia, as well as the healing magic (since often the demons being dispelled are noted as being disease causing) into which it often blended. The invocation of the names of God¹¹⁹ has a long history in Judeo-Christian magic traditions as well, in addition to parallels in pagan texts in which the secret names of Isis and other deities are noted as being full of secret ritual power.¹²⁰

The demon-dispelling force of this apotropaic ritual was not only concentrated in the verbal invocations made by the rituals but in the material products which were charged with power during the speaking of the spell. God is entreated to stretch out his “...invisible, exalted arm, and bless this water and this oil, and seal them,”¹²¹ with which the speaker will later wash and anoint her/himself¹²² to gain favor and protection. After the ritual was done, its power would remain in the water and oil, which could then be kept ready at hand for cleansing and warding off evil spirits as the need might arise. In effect, the ritual amounted to a kind of “do it yourself” method for producing spiritually efficacious liquids, like those which were collected as eulogia at pilgrimage centers.¹²³

The silver flask prescribed in the list of offerings to be made for the Marian ritual was likely intended to later hold the blessed water or oil, again much in the manner of water and oil taken from pilgrim shrines, brought home in ampullae for later ritual use by devotees. In some versions of the ritual, the silver flask was supposed to already be full of dust. The dust in question would most likely be dust taken from some spiritually significant location, meaning that this variation may be a reference to actually offering a

¹¹⁹ As well as the names of Mary.

¹²⁰ For example Schmidt 1, an erotic spell in which Isis speaks of the power of her names.

¹²¹ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 287.

¹²² Him in the case of the original London manuscript of course.

¹²³ And this is not the only example of Coptic spells for imbuing oil or water with spiritual power.

pilgrimage ampulla as an especially holy and fitting votive gift, instead of making the flask into one.

Ampullae could be made of fine material like silver--or other silver-colored metals such as pewter (fig. 10)—or more commonly clay such as the collection of flasks found at the popular Egyptian pilgrimage shrine of St. Menas at Abu Mina, some of which bear the image of St. Thecla (fig. 11), a saint that some scholars identify as particularly popular with women.¹²⁴ As Gary Vikan discusses in *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, ampullae themselves were considered to be of great amuletic value, to the point that examples exist that probably never contained any liquid at all but served as protective amulets for the bearer simply because of the powerfully apotropaic and healing associations their shapes connoted.¹²⁵

The other protective material created during the ritual appears to be a papyrus amulet (fig. 9). Examples of protective papyri amulets are extremely common in late ancient Egyptian contexts, and the one being fashioned in this spell tradition displays many popular motifs. First, there is the magical use of geometric arrangements of words and letters, here an example of the auspicious magic triangle arrangement,¹²⁶ a tradition which probably has its roots in Greco-Roman philosophies of the spiritual properties of geometry as expounded by Pythagoras and his admirers. Second, there are the magical characters known as “ring signs” (fig. 12), geometric figures which bear a certain resemblance to letters without actually having any phonetic meaning, characterized by

¹²⁴ Davis, Stephen J. *The cult of St. Thecla: a tradition of women's piety in late antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 discusses this theory at length.

¹²⁵ Vikan, Gary. *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art (Revised Edition)*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2010, pg.70.

¹²⁶ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 37.

small circles attached to the ends of their lines.¹²⁷ They are ubiquitous in amuletic contexts from all over the late antique Mediterranean world. Third, there are the bizarre anthropomorphic haloed(?) figures, which may possibly represent angelic beings. Fourth, there is the name of Jesus Christ, written above an alpha and omega.¹²⁸ This combination of magically arranged letters and words with protective images constitutes a typical arrangement for amuletic papyri.

The efficacy of the words and images is further enhanced not only by the invocations accompanying their inscription but by the magical ink used to write them out as well. The ingredients for this ink comprised a quintessentially exotic collection of animal, mineral, and plant materials, typical of traditions attributing magical and/or medicinal properties to naturally occurring “simples”¹²⁹ that existed both in ancient Egyptian and Greco-Roman cultures. The magical associations given to an ingredient were often based on the substance in question being considered a favorite of some particular deity, or on the logic of the doctrine of signatures¹³⁰ or wordplay (as was commonly used in earlier Egyptian magic)¹³¹. It could be that the blood of a white dove

¹²⁷ Karivieri, Arja. “Magic and Syncretic Religious Culture in the East” in Gwynn, David M., Susanne Bangert and Luke Lavan eds. *Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010, pg. 406.

¹²⁸ The significance of these signs for amuletic purposes relate to their reference to Christ’s power for all eternity.

¹²⁹ Scarborough, John. “Early Byzantine Pharmacology,” pg. 214.

¹³⁰ The doctrine of signatures held that visual resemblance between a plant and a body part meant that plant would be effective in treating ailments of that organ.

¹³¹ The issue of wordplay, and of the writing of magic papyri in general, raises important issues about women’s literacy in late antiquity, many of which are outside the scope of this paper. Suffice to say that women’s letters and legal records from the period make it clear that some women of the upper and middle classes were possessed of literary skills at a level that would easily allow them to transcribe magic spells themselves. Literacy was overall very low in late antiquity, especially amongst women (even in Egypt), so many magically papyri citing female (and male) clients must have been written by professional scribes (or perhaps merely literate acquaintances who weren’t professionals in some cases) rather than the practitioners themselves. However, in most cases it is impossible to tell whether the person mentioned in the papyri or a scribe wrote the document in question!

figures in the ink recipe in this ritual because the bird, seen as a symbol of purity,¹³² was considered especially fitting for use in a spell in which the ritualist takes on the role of the holy Virgin. The pot in which the blessed water is held is also anointed with a special blend of magical ingredients before the ritual.¹³³

The amuletic papyri inscribed during the ritual would have likely later been tied for wearing as a phylactery, as so many Coptic magical papyri were.¹³⁴ A folded papyrus could be simply stashed somewhere in the devotee's clothing, especially in places where it could be in contact with the skin and thus transfer its protective power more directly to its bearer. Or the papyrus could be rolled and secreted in a protective metal tube-casing hung from a chain (fig. 13). This kind of phylactery necklace was popular throughout the late antique Mediterranean, with some users even wearing them to their graves.¹³⁵

In short, the use of a ritual of power belonging to the distinctive Coptic tradition of what might be termed "Marian magic" would have been a powerfully attractive form of apotropaic magic for late antique Egyptian women. It was wholly in keeping with common practices for verbally exorcising demons, enhanced by self-identification with holy powers. It also offered a way to ground the power to ward off evil in material objects on one's own, in the culturally significant and popular forms of papyri amulets and flasks of blessed liquid.

Healing Magic: *I invoke you, great Isis, ruling in the perfect blackness, mistress of the gods of heaven from birth, Atherneklesia Athernebouni Labisachthi Chomochoochi Isi Souse Mounte Tntoreo Iobast Bastai Ribat Chribat Oeresibat Chamarei Churithibath*

¹³² In fact, offerings to Mary sometimes took the form of objects shaped like or decorated with doves in this period.

¹³³ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 288.

¹³⁴ Meyer and Smith's *Ancient Christian Magic* includes many examples of rolled papyri phylacteries.

¹³⁵ Phylactery necklaces have been found in tombs from Egypt, Syria, and other provinces of the Byzantine near east.

*Souere Thartha Thabaaththa Thath Bathath Lathai Achra Abathai Ae. Make the womb of
attain the condition from god and be without inflammation, without danger, always
 without pain, now, two times, at once, two times!*

*[Write it on a piece of silver when the moon is waning, and repeat it while you pour
 warm sea water over it. Then take a tuft of white wool and dip it in the water, and tuck it
 under the silver for forty-four days.]*¹³⁶

This invocation and its accompanying ritual instructions, found in a small Coptic book now known as Michigan 136, must have been a staple in the repertoire of healers catering to female clients, many of whom were themselves women.¹³⁷ This manuscript belongs to the tradition of late antique magical “recipe books” which provided ritual remedies for a wide array of common complaints,¹³⁸ handily collected into a kind of all purpose reference guide for the doctor/magician. In addition to this cure for inflammation of the uterus, Michigan 136 also provides cures for gout, eye disease, teething pains, fevers, pregnancy and childbirth, crying babies, abdominal problems, malignancies, skin diseases, headache, toothache, earache, hemorrhoids and other sores, constipation, foot disease, mental illness, and infestations of vermin.

Since this and several other spells in the manuscript are concerned with ailments of the womb and other feminine complaints, the late ancient Egyptian occult cookbook testifies to the great preoccupation with uterine health in late antiquity which can be seen prominently in its magic,¹³⁹ especially given the number of magical gems that were engraved with symbols and invocations intended to protect the womb and keep it in its

¹³⁶ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 84.

¹³⁷ Older women who acted as healers are referenced in late antique texts, as will be discussed later in this paper.

¹³⁸ Most are medical but sometimes they address psychological complaints and the social ills of everyday life.

¹³⁹ Namely, in the numerous amulets and spells that address uterine issues.

proper place. The uterine iconography perhaps most discussed among scholars of art history,¹⁴⁰ the hybrid creature Chnoubis, appears on amulets not only in isolation but also in frequent conjunction with schematized representations of the womb itself and Egyptian deities, such as Isis, associated with the governance of fertility. A haematite amulet from the Kelsey Museum's collection (fig. 14)¹⁴¹ is an excellent example of this type. On the obverse of this gem an Ouroboros (a mystic symbol consisting of a snake eating its own tail and thus forming a continuous circle) encloses a symbolic representation of the uterus locked by a key, with the god Khnoum touching the knob of it, indicating the deity's ability to control the opening (fertility) or locking (contraception, protection from diseases), of the womb.¹⁴² Above the womb, Isis and Nephthys flank the jackal headed Anubis and an unidentified figure, and lines are inscribed that include the Judeo-Christian name Sabaoth.¹⁴³ On the reverse is another inscription, magical charakteres (magical pseudo-lettering), and Chnoubis.

Not only were such gems endowed with ritual power because of their iconography, but the stones they were engraved on were also believed to carry inherently medico-magical powers.¹⁴⁴ Haematite was considered especially efficacious for controlling the blood, so its use in healing the womb, with menstruation and unwanted issues of blood from miscarriage being great concerns, is understandably popular.¹⁴⁵ Blood jasper (green jasper mottled with red) and red jasper had a similar cachet and were also used for uterine amulets, including another type, under the sacred patronage of the ancient Egyptian mistress of magic and fertility, carved stone versions of the Isis Knot

¹⁴⁰ Almost every text which touches on gendered iconography in late antique magic discusses Chnoubis.

¹⁴¹ Bohak, Gideon. *Traditions of magic in late antiquity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1996, pg. 19.

¹⁴² This iconography of a magic key locking and unlocking the uterus is common at this period.

¹⁴³ This is another prime example of just how syncretic late antique Egyptian magic truly was.

¹⁴⁴ Sfameni, Carla. "Magic in Late Antiquity: Evidence of Magical Gems," pg. 441.

¹⁴⁵ Sfameni, Carla. "Magic in Late Antiquity: Evidence of Magical Gems," pg. 451.

(fig 15).¹⁴⁶ So called “vulva stones” were apparently also seen as highly efficacious, prescribed to women in Coptic medico-magical texts, but the specifics of their materiality (or really most specifics about them) remain obscure.¹⁴⁷

The Michigan 136 spell for curing inflammation of the uterus instructs that its invocation of the secret names of Isis be inscribed on silver,¹⁴⁸ silver being another material believed to have great numinous power. In late antiquity silver was connected with the moon, and deities with lunar associations are regularly invoked in late antique rituals of power, as their recurrence throughout the Greek and Demotic magic papyri and on amulets attests.¹⁴⁹ Women “drawing down the moon” to harness its power for ritual purposes was a cultural trope in the Mediterranean in the late antique period, with roots going back at least to classical antiquity, if not before,¹⁵⁰ appearing in literature and depicted on vases (fig 16). The tarnishing of silver was linked with the phases of the moon and thus connected to the menstrual cycle, so the use of silver in an essentially uterine spell is logical.¹⁵¹

Due to all of these associations, silver was a favored metal for fashioning women’s amulets of all sorts. The finest examples of armbands combining cycles of locus sancti iconography and inscriptions from Psalm 90¹⁵² with magical symbols like the Holy Rider and Chnoubis—a type of amuletic jewelry favored by female devotees which has

¹⁴⁶ Corrington, *Her Image of Salvation* pg. 95.

¹⁴⁷ As they are referred to in a number of magical healing recipes.

¹⁴⁸ The format of the list in which the spell under discussion in this section appears makes it somewhat debatable whether this instruction is meant to be attached to the following formula for uterine inflammation or not. However, given the association of silver with uterine health in other sources from the region, I believe it is.

¹⁴⁹ Deities such as Artemis, Selene, Khonsu, and goddesses also associated with the underworld, just to name a few.

¹⁵⁰ Daniel, Ogden. *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts*, pg. 236. Though the image of “drawing down the moon” is a Greco-Roman tradition, women also have associations with drawing on lunar energy for magical purposes in Egypt and Mesopotamia.

¹⁵¹ Vikan, Gary. “Art, Medicine, and Magic in Early Byzantium,” pg. 78.

¹⁵² “He That Dwells in the Help of the Most High”.

garnered a good deal of scholarly attention— are fashioned of silver (fig 17). As Gary Vikan notes, the cycles of Christological (and/or Marian) scenes on these armbands can be read as verses in a “visual aretalogy.”¹⁵³ Late antique aretalogical hymns, like the Kyme Aretalogy in praise of Isis,¹⁵⁴ extolled the virtues of a deity and recited his or her most glorious deeds.¹⁵⁵ By depicting the most important incidents from the life of Christ, the armbands did through images what the hymns did in words. The silver locus sancti armbands and the uterine spell from Michigan 136 both utilize the same powerful combination of methods for employing ritual power to ensure the health of the practitioner. Both drew on the powers of spiritually charged materials along with the invocation of a “wonderful and exceedingly glorious” sacred name.¹⁵⁶

Fertility Rituals: There is no explicit record of the exact purpose of the many clay female statuettes –typically (though not exclusively) in the pose of orants- (fig. 7) and pierced with holes to which jewelry and wreaths of braided leaves and flowers may have been attached,¹⁵⁷ discovered in the western Theban area of Egypt during early twentieth century and in recent excavations, but they undoubtedly served in many a woman’s private ritual in homes in Coptic towns like Jeme (fig. 18),¹⁵⁸ and at shrines (fig. 19).¹⁵⁹ It is likely that one purpose they served was acting as fertility figures.¹⁶⁰ This

¹⁵³ Vikan, Gary. *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, pg. 70.

¹⁵⁴ Kraemer, Ross Shepard ed. *Women’s Religions in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, pg. 456-458. Mentioning (amongst other things) her great magical powers and protection of women.

¹⁵⁵ Vikan, Gary. *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, pg. 69.

¹⁵⁶ Vikan, Gary. *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, pg. 69.

¹⁵⁷ Susanne Bangert discusses this type of fertility figurine in “The Archaeology of Pilgrimage: Abu Mina and Beyond” (In Gwynn, David M., Susanne Bangert and Luke Lavan eds. *Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity*).

¹⁵⁸ Wilfong, *Women of Jeme*, pg. 115-116.

¹⁵⁹ Bangert, “The Archaeology of Pilgrimage,” pg. 302-304. Such as the shrines adjacent to Jeme itself.

¹⁶⁰ Wilfong, *Women of Jeme*, pg. 116. It seems clear this was not their only purpose, they also have been found in contexts (such as men’s monasteries) where they must have performed votive functions unrelated to increasing reproductive power, nor would they have necessarily always been used for fertility in

popular scholarly view is supported by the resemblance between the orants with their elaborately painted triangular headdresses, patterned garments, and necklaces¹⁶¹ and earlier Graeco-Roman clay figures dedicated to fertility aspects of the cult of Isis (fig. 20). The orants are probably also a late antique reincarnation of pharaonic “concubine” figures (fig. 21),¹⁶² which may have also been used to enhance female reproductive power.

Whether the figurines were meant to depict divine female figures themselves or worshippers standing before them is debated.¹⁶³ Supplicants in late antique art are often depicted as orants, but divine females also appear performing the gesture of prayer. For example, there are many late antique images of Mary as an orant (fig. 22). The elaborate headgear and clothing represented on the figurines also suggest an exalted status that was typical in depictions of goddesses from the Hellenistic period onwards.

Whether the orants can be termed “pagan” or “Christian” is also a complex issue. Likely they could be either, or both.¹⁶⁴ Like so much of late antique material culture, they display a distinctly syncretic mien; resembling pagan goddesses but often with crosses hanging from their necklaces.¹⁶⁵ In this way they bear many similarities to other late antique iconographical puzzles like the eulogia mold from Mamre (fig. 23), which depicts an elaborately dressed female figure which may be a goddess, or Mary garbed as one, or some conflation of the two.¹⁶⁶

domestic contexts. Most likely they were viewed as being able to enhance any kind of request that might typically be directed to a female deity or saint.

¹⁶¹ Wilfong, *Women of Jeme* pg. 115. Some also bear painted décor on the wrists, possibly representing tattoos.

¹⁶² Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, pg. 225.

¹⁶³ It may be that they were interpreted both ways.

¹⁶⁴ As would not be unusual with the late antique love for polyvalent symbolism.

¹⁶⁵ Wilfong, *Women of Jeme*, pg. 115.

¹⁶⁶ Margaret English Frazer discusses this interesting find in “A Syncretistic Pilgrim's Mould from Mamre ”

Some of the figurines are found in domestic contexts, where they were likely once the focal point of household shrines. Such worship spaces were a feature of many “pagan,” Christian, and Jewish homes.¹⁶⁷ Though their contents might vary slightly with the confessional preferences of the homeowners --with icons of Christ, the Theotokos and various saints for a Christian, whereas a proponent of earlier traditional faiths would have statuettes of favorite deities and offerings to ancestral spirits, and a Jewish householder might prefer angelic seals and pictures of the prophets¹⁶⁸--their function as centers for private rituals of power entreating the divine was universal. One type of figurine favored in domestic worship was the Isis Lactans (fig. 24); while the goddess was revered by both sexes, this overtly motherly incarnation of the deity was invoked mostly by her female devotees, just as the orants were “a uniquely female component of religious practice”¹⁶⁹ in the home. By making offerings to images representing beings of feminine ritual power, practitioners hoped that the representations would act as intermediaries making their prayers all the more potent.¹⁷⁰

Late ancient Egyptian women did not only seek to enhance their reproductive abilities in the privacy of their own homes, but also traveled to numinously powerful sites to do so. In addition to examples from domestic contexts, clay orants have been excavated at the large Egyptian pilgrimage center honoring St. Menas at Abu Mina.¹⁷¹ At

(in *Papers Related to Objects in the Exhibition "Age of Spirituality,"* The Metropolitan Museum of Art (November 1977-February 1978) (1979), pp. 137-145).

¹⁶⁷ Though this latter has only lately received attention from scholars.

¹⁶⁸ And many late antique Egyptian households preferred to hedge their bets and utilize an eclectic collection of ritually powerful objects from all sorts of traditions.

¹⁶⁹ Wilfong, *Women of Jeme*, pg. 116.

¹⁷⁰ Judging by the proliferation of such images in domestic archaeological sites inhabited by people of a variety of confessional associations from both late antiquity and earlier in the ancient world, it does seem that belief in the intercessory powers of “household idols”, icons, and other votive figurines and pictures was fairly universal.

¹⁷¹ Bangert, “The Archaeology of Pilgrimage,” pg. 301.

this pilgrimage shrine female statuettes (fig. 19), as well as the horse-riders figurines they are often found with (fig. 25),¹⁷² were most likely left as votive offerings.¹⁷³ Presenting votives at shrines, either as a thank offering or as a gift to entreat the holy power of the shrine to show favor to the suppliant and grant their request (for healing, fertility, etc.), was a practice common to all antique and late antique religious traditions.

In addition to bringing offerings to shrines, Egyptian women also brought back materials from ritually significant places to help in the conception of children. The pillars of the great sanctuary of Isis at Philae bear grooves worn into the stone from the finger nails of generations of worshippers scraping away dust from the columns (fig. 26), and many of these supplicants must have been women seeking aid in conceiving, as the very stone of the Temple was believed to assist fertility if ingested.¹⁷⁴ Water from sacred wells was often credited with similar powers, wells both on the premises of popular shrines and natural springs famous through folk tradition.¹⁷⁵ Late antique literature (especially hagiographies) is filled with accounts of childless women and couples coming to holy men and women, or to places where their relics were held, for help, and, of course, miraculously finally conceiving afterwards,¹⁷⁶ a picture which is supported by the material evidence of votive offerings left at the shrines of saints who were revered as particularly efficacious at assisting conception and childbearing.¹⁷⁷ This attests to both the great value placed on feminine fertility, and how turning to sources of spiritual power,

¹⁷² Bangert, "The Archaeology of Pilgrimage," pg. 301.

¹⁷³ Bangert, "The Archaeology of Pilgrimage," pg. 303.

¹⁷⁴ Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, pg. 110. And even after many other ancient Egyptian sanctuaries and the large festivals held at them became defunct as Christianity became more prevalent in Egypt, pilgrimage to Philae continued, meaning that this practice likely continued well into the latter part of the late antique period.

¹⁷⁵ Even prehistoric petroglyphs carved on desert rocks could be sites of pilgrimage for women wishing to become pregnant.

¹⁷⁶ Frankfurter, "The Perils of Love," pg. 497. Votive offering left at the shrines of Saints

¹⁷⁷ Such as at the aforementioned shrines of St. Menas in Egypt.

whether invoked by an intermediary figure such as a living saint or on one's own through a personal ritual of power, was seen as the best (and often the only) resort.

The Greek historian Herodotus wrote an extensive account of Egyptian festivals like those dedicated to Isis-Demeter at Busiris, Bastet-Artemis at Boubastis, Athene-Neith at Sais, and Leto-Wadjet at Buto, and noted the participation of women in festival processions and rituals.¹⁷⁸ A few festivals, like that honoring Isis at Philae, survived more or less intact into the late antique period, while other annual ceremonies were re-dedicated to Christian saints.¹⁷⁹ Many of these festivals (even after being Christianized) were believed to be essential for ensuring the continued fertility of the land. Agricultural fertility, particularly the flooding of the Nile,¹⁸⁰ was viewed as connected to the fertility of humans, so participation in such a festival was another ritual method by which ancient and late ancient Egyptian women believed they could bolster their own fecundity.

In fact, contemporary writers noted that women on festival barges drifting on the Nile would lift up their dresses towards spectators on the banks, a gesture specifically meant to increase fertility.¹⁸¹ This gesture is also depicted in late antique Egyptian figurines of Isis (fig. 27).¹⁸² Rituals of power were performed by women who wanted to ensure that they were able to bear children in both the most private and most public of contexts, and comprised an area of practice that highlights just how impossible (and fruitless) it can be to attempt to separate the “magical” from the formally “religious” in late antique Egyptian culture.

¹⁷⁸ Rutherford, Ian. "Downstream to the Cat-Goddess: Herodotus on Egyptian Pilgrimage" in Jaś Elsner and Ian Rutherford eds. *Seeing the Gods: Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, pg. 131-149.

¹⁷⁹ For example, St. Michael the Archangel became associated with the annual rising of the Nile, which had previously been the province of Mercury during the Roman period.

¹⁸⁰ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers's, *Art and holy powers in the early Christian house*, pg. 14-15

¹⁸¹ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 150.

¹⁸² Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 150. The type known as Isis Anasurmene.

Magic used in Pregnancy and Childbearing: *I adjure you by your name and your power and your figure and your amulet of salvation and the places where you dwell and your light-wand in your right hand and light-shield in your left hand and your great powers standing before you. Do not hold back and do not ignore, until you find it worth your while to descend upon your figure and your amulet of salvation.*

Watch and protect the four sides of the body and the soul and the spirit and the entire house of Sura daughter of Pelca¹⁸³ and her child who is in her womb as well as every child born to her. Bring them to life yearly without any disease. Cast forth from her every evil force. Never allow them to approach her or any of her children until she bears them. Cast forth from her every doom and every devil and every Apalaf and every Aberselia and every power of darkness and every evil eye and every eye-shutter and every chill and every fever and every trembling. Restrain them all. Cast them away from her and away from all her children until she bears them, and away from all her dwellings, immediately and quickly! Do not permit them ever to visit her or the child with whom she is pregnant for approximately two hundred miles around. Yea, yea, now, now, at once, at once!

[The papyrus then goes on to list the sacred names of God and adjure all the heavenly powers standing before him, the angels, the twenty-four elders, the three youths from the fiery furnace, and the seven archangels] Michael, the peace, Gabriel, the grace, Raphael the power, Suriel, the will, Raguel, the truth, Anael, the glory, Saraphuel, the doctoring and the healing. [Inscribed alongside wings formations,¹⁸⁴ vowels, crosses, magical

¹⁸³ In late antique Egyptian magic, subjects always identified themselves (and/or their victims) through formulas emphasizing maternal lineage.

¹⁸⁴ The “wing formation” was another geometric arrangement for words or letters commonly used in magical papyri.

*nonsense words, and sacred numbers]*¹⁸⁵

In this exorcistic spell found in London Oriental Manuscript 5525, the female petitioner named Sura calls upon Yao Sabbaoth (“Lord of Hosts”, an appellation of the Judeo-Christian god) through the deity’s many names and aspects to protect the child she is carrying and any children she may bear in the future.¹⁸⁶ In seeking to do so, she invokes familiar late antique magical techniques such as the invocation of sacred names, magical words and the seven Greek vowels written in auspicious geometric configurations, and the ritualized repetition of her request for protection.¹⁸⁷ But the central technique of the ritual of power is the insistence that Yao Sabbaoth himself descend and invest his blessing upon the drawn figure (fig. 28) which accompanies the text.¹⁸⁸ The image was discovered tightly folded, indicating that Sura wore it on her person as a charm.¹⁸⁹

Examples of this type of humanoid figure, characterized by anatomy schematized into geometric shapes and the incorporation of patterns, including ring signs, into the body, accompany many Egyptian magical texts for both amuletic and aggressive purposes.¹⁹⁰ The figures seem to represent numinous beings such as angels or daemonic creatures, but in the case of this manuscript the text makes clear that the figure depicted is that of the god-head himself. The unusual anthropomorphic representation of the Judeo-Christian deity holds in its hands the implements referenced in the amuletic text; a cross-shape exuding rays of light and a shining shield. This particular equipment of the

¹⁸⁵ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 120-124.

¹⁸⁶ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 120.

¹⁸⁷ The repetition of a motif—whether a phrase or image-- was always believed to increase its magical potency.

¹⁸⁸ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 120.

¹⁸⁹ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 120.

¹⁹⁰ Another example of a figure of this type can be found in Rossi’s “Gnostic” tractate against the powers of evil, currently in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Turin.

Almighty may harken back to a now lost apocryphal tradition or be an expression of themes present in Jewish hekhalot literature.¹⁹¹ Whatever its source, the light-wand must certainly be intended to represent the power to drive out the demonic powers, and the light-shield to represent the protection Sura entreats.¹⁹² That a supplicant would make so forceful an adjuration of the highest of powers might seem to be at odds with the ideals of late-antique religious ideology, but is in fact in line with a particularly Egyptian tradition in which such vigorous language, and even outright threatening holy powers, was a fairly common trope in magical discourse from the ancient period onwards.¹⁹³

In addition to the consecration of an image of Yao Sabbaoth, Sura's ritual of power revolved around the invocation of those that "stand before" the deity. Chief among these are seven archangels, invoked by name and their virtues. "Seven" was considered to be the numeral signifying heavenly perfection, so it naturally appears frequently in late antique magic;¹⁹⁴ here, the number of the highest ranking angels emphasizes and reinforces their power. Angelology enjoyed great popularity in late antiquity.¹⁹⁵ Though only two archangels, Michael and Gabriel, are named in what became the canon of accepted scripture, Raphael accrued an extensive reputation in narratives such as the apocryphal Book of Tobit, and the names and attributes of others were built up in oral traditions. All were wildly popular as magico-religious aides and messengers, making appearances in texts and imagery (fig. 29).

In the spell Sura not only asks for the banishment of male and female demons of

¹⁹¹ Jewish texts for mystical ascent, which are discussed in more depth later in this paper.

¹⁹² The light shield is here depicted as analogous to a mirror, and mirrors were believed to be able to deflect evil influences in the same way they deflected light (Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers's, *Art and holy powers in the early Christian house*, pg. 7).

¹⁹³ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 185.

¹⁹⁴ And later periods, even up to the present day.

¹⁹⁵ Miller, Patricia Cox, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*, pg. 39.

unknown names and provenance but refers to two specific types of creature as well. It is probable that the “Apalaf” and the “Aberselia” came from folk traditions that must have been well known to Sura, the latter perhaps being another kind of female child-killing demon.¹⁹⁶ London Oriental Manuscript 5525 also implores protection from that most long-lived source of misfortune, the evil eye,¹⁹⁷ doing through words what appears in images such as the numerous late antique amulets which show it being attacked by weapons and creatures (fig. 30).

Just as fetuses were viewed as extremely vulnerable to hostile influences, protecting newborn children after birth was also a great concern. John Chrysostom and other writers describe (usually in exasperatedly polemic language) how women hung amulets and bells-- such as those found at Anemurium (fig. 31)-- around babies and their cradles for luck; put inscriptions on the heads of infants after birth; tied red ribbons and Gospel text amulets onto them; and marked childrens’ faces with mud while bathing them to avert the ever-present threat of the evil eye.¹⁹⁸ Ash and salt’s protective and exorcistic powers were also employed by concerned mothers.¹⁹⁹

Documentary, literary, and material evidence from late ancient Egypt all express the existence of a well developed tradition of women’s rituals of power meant to assist in carrying pregnancies safely to term, easing delivery, and ensuring the safety of young children. With all the looming dangers of devilish entities and malevolent gazes, as well as the more concrete threat of myriad illnesses that might afflict both mother and child, it is hardly surprising that women such as Sura, daughter of Pelca, would wish to enlist the

¹⁹⁶ Of the type of the Lilith like beings frequently depicted being vanquished by the Holy Rider.

¹⁹⁷ Ensuring protection against the evil eye is still a matter of great concern throughout much of the world today.

¹⁹⁸ Trzcionka, *Magic and the Supernatural in Fourth Century Syria*, pg. 107-108.

¹⁹⁹ Trzcionka, *Magic and the Supernatural in Fourth Century Syria*, pg. 107.

most powerful magic forces available in late antique Egyptian culture to safeguard the times of life in which they felt they were at their spiritually and physically most vulnerable.

Love Magic: *As Typhon is the adversary of Helios so also inflame the soul of Eutyches whom Zosime bore, for her, Erieta whom Ercheelio bore; ABRASAX, inflame the soul and heart of him, Eutyches for him/ Eutyches whom Zosime bore, now, quickly, quickly, in this same hour and on this same day. ADONAI, inflame the soul/ and heart of Eutyches, for her Erieta whom Ercheelio bore, now, quickly, quickly, in this same hour/ and on this same day.*²⁰⁰

These lines from Papyri Graecae Magica LXIII are a quintessential example of the erotic magic that both sexes freely employed in late antiquity. The casting of love spells was a common, everyday occurrence in the social and sexual landscape of late antiquity, “a kind of sneak attack, waged in the normal warfare of Mediterranean social life.”²⁰¹ While the women of late antique Egypt were in the main less rigidly sequestered from public life than some of their counterparts in other areas and periods,²⁰² both women and men could still face many obstacles in fulfilling their erotic desires, like social mores, customs, expectations, and family entanglements, as well as simple human nature and emotions. Love magic was, therefore, a way to circumvent these difficulties.²⁰³

In her ritual of power, the Greco-Egyptian woman Erieta seeks to capture the heart of one Eutyches using a *defixio*, or binding spell, the most common ritual formula used in erotic magic. A binding spell seeks to constrain the actions of the victim to a certain

²⁰⁰ PGM LXVIII. 1-20 (Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, pg. 297).

²⁰¹ Winkler, John J. *The constraints of desire: the anthropology of sex and gender in ancient Greece*. New York: Routledge, 1990, pg. 233.

²⁰² Wilfong, *Women of Jeme*, pg. 22.

²⁰³ Frankfurter, “The Perils of Love,” pg. 484.

course specified by the practitioner. The trope of inflaming or burning the victim appears in Erixa's *defixio* and many other surviving examples in Greco-Roman and Egyptian erotic magic.²⁰⁴ Often *defixiones* explicitly curse the victim to suffer burning pain and incurable yearning until he/she succumbs to the practitioner's will.²⁰⁵

Deities and demons²⁰⁶ are frequently enlisted to drag or goad the beloved out of the house and to the dwelling of the one desiring him/her. PGM LXVIII invokes the help of the Judeo-Christian/Gnostic entity Abrasax, the Hebrew divine name Adonai, and the monstrous Greek entity Typhon (fig. 32), who in late antique culture is frequently conflated with the Egyptian god of chaos and slayer of Osiris, Seth (fig. 33). By both names the deity is often invoked in word and image in late antique Egyptian love magic,²⁰⁷ perhaps because his entropic nature was seen as especially fitting for effecting changes of mind and state.

While Erixa's spell does not explicitly state the need for being written in the blood of an ass, other Egyptian love spells do,²⁰⁸ ass's blood being considered a particularly fitting medium for such rituals; particularly if they invoke Seth (and/or Typhon), as the ass is an animal associated with the chaotic Egyptian god. Animals in general figure prominently in Egyptian erotic magic as symbols of lust, with practitioners imploring that their victims be made like animals in heat.²⁰⁹ Female sexuality, particularly its procreative aspect, was expressed using animal metaphors, and "ritual bestiality" was connected with the fertility of both women and the land on materials such as an eulogia

²⁰⁴ Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, pg. 85.

²⁰⁵ Dickie, Matthew W. "Who Practised Love-Magic in Classical Antiquity and in the Late Roman World?" *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 50, No. 2 (2000), pgs. 563-583, pg. 566.

²⁰⁶ And sometimes ghosts, as will be discussed later in this paper.

²⁰⁷ And magic in general.

²⁰⁸ Such as several found in the Greek Magical Papyri.

²⁰⁹ Frankfurter, "The Perils of Love," pg. 486.

mold associated with the cult of Mendes (fig. 34) which shows a woman copulating with a goat.²¹⁰

In view of this cultural association of women's sexuality with that of animals, most spells ask that a *woman* be made as lustful as a beast and there are examples in which formularies for spells calling for ass's blood specifically state that the ritual will be efficacious for a man *or* a woman.²¹¹ There are also instances in which *men* speak of longing for the desired woman "with a longing which a she-cat feels for a tom-cat, a longing which a she-wolf feels for a wolf, a longing which a bitch feels for a dog."²¹² Horses and asses especially were considered "the very image of phallic lust" (fig 35).²¹³ Therefore, a woman employing ass's blood in a *defixio* aimed at a man would essentially be attempting to invoke in the victim a lust for her equal to that attributed to the animal. The ass, it should be noted, was an animal sacred to Seth, so the employment of ass's blood in a spell calling on that deity²¹⁴ would be fitting.²¹⁵ Images of deities who presided over the erotic realm were, of course, also extremely popular in love magic, as evidenced in amulets, papyri, and literary sources. For example, an account in the *Life of Porphyry* describes women kindling lamps and burning incense at a nude statue of Aphrodite which stood at a major intersection in Gaza in the hopes of securing harmonious marital relations.²¹⁶

In late antique magical praxis perhaps the most important element in making an erotic ritual of power effective was putting the spell in contact with the person it was

²¹⁰ Frankfurter, "The Perils of Love," pg. 489-490.

²¹¹ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, pg. 270.

²¹² Demotic Egyptian spell 3rd or 4th cent, London/Leiden, verso, col. XII.4-6, 8-9 = PGM XIV. 1029-31, 1033-34, translated by Janet.

²¹³ Frankfurter, "The Perils of Love," pg. 491.

²¹⁴ Such as PGM XXXVI 69-101 (Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, pg. 270-271).

²¹⁵ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, pg. 270.

²¹⁶ Sivan, Hagith. *Palestine in Late Antiquity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pg. 333.

being cast on. This was accomplished primarily in two ways. First, an object belonging to the intended victim of the spell, either some bodily relic (hair was popular for this purpose) or an article of clothing, could be used in the erotic ritual. This would be viewed as effecting sympathetic magic whereby the spell put on the object would be transferred to its owner.²¹⁷ A ritual practice that was believed to employ this sympathetic connection to especially great effect was using the personal relic or effect in company with, or actually molding it into, a clay or wax doll (fig. 36). The doll would then be bound, and/or pierced with needles to reinforce the torments invoked in the binding spell it accompanied, as was the case in the famous erotic magic assemblage now in the Louvre (fig. 37).²¹⁸

Secondly, the spell itself could be put into bodily contact with the intended victim. This was usually accomplished by taking the medium on which the spell was inscribed (often with the relic/clothing and/or doll in accompaniment) and secreting it in a place where the desired individual was sure to pass. One of the most time-honored methods was burying the charm nearby or under the threshold of the beloved's door, where it would 'activate' when he/she stepped over it. Bath houses, where the object of the *defixio*'s power would be naked and vulnerable, were also a favored location to deposit the ritually charged equipment.²¹⁹ The erotic spell could also be brought into contact with an item the victim would be induced to touch. An example of this method is a popular variety of love spells in which the invocation was said over a piece of fruit, which would then be set out temptingly in the marketplace or given as a gift to the object

²¹⁷ Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, pg. 120.

²¹⁸ Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, pg. 112-113. A female doll pierced with needles, hair, and a lamella inscribed with an erotic *defixio* buried together in a sealed clay jar.

²¹⁹ Trzcionka, *Magic and the Supernatural in Fourth Century Syria*, pg. 103.

of the practitioner's interest.²²⁰ Or a magic potion could be concocted and spilled over a doorstep, food, or piece of clothing.²²¹ Or, a really desperate lover might take a more direct route, following the advice of spells which instruct the practitioner to simply throw the magical paper at the clothing of the one desired. Alternatively, the ritualist could cast the spell upon her/himself, making her/him irresistibly attractive to the victim, as in the formulary which consists of anointing the face with myrrh while invoking it as the myrrh with which Isis anointed herself when she went to the bosom of Osiris.²²²

The large variety of means and opportunities available to the late antique Egyptian²²³ woman wishing to enact love magic on men or other women had its drawbacks; in just as many ways, they themselves might become unwitting victims of others erotic sabotage. So, a large body of counter-magic also developed. A particularly fine example (from Syria, but typical of counter-magic all over the eastern Mediterranean) comes from a silver lamella encased in a bronze phylactery found in a tomb, whose bearer adjures against the use of harmful magic against her, especially that which might damage her sexual honor:²²⁴

protect Alexandra whom Zoe bore from demons and sorceries and dizziness and from all passion and from all frenzy. I adjure you by...that all male demons and frightening demons and all binding-spells flee from Alexandra whom Zoe bore, to beneath the founts and the Abyss of Mareoth, lest you harm or defile her, or use magic drugs on her, either by a kiss, or from an embrace, or a greeting; either with food or drink; either in bed or intercourse; either by the evil eye or a piece of clothing; as she prays, either on the street or abroad; or while river-bathing or a bath.

Holy and mighty and powerful names, protect Alexandra from every daimon, male and female,

²²⁰ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 148.

²²¹ Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, pg. 119-120.

²²² Dickie, "Who Practised Love-Magic," pg. 567. Historiolae concerning the love of Isis and Osiris were often used in late antique Egyptian erotic magic.

²²³ Dickie, "Who Practised Love-Magic," pg. 568.

²²⁴ Trzcionka, *Magic and the Supernatural in Fourth Century Syria*, pg. 104.

and from every disturbance of demons of the night and of the day.²²⁵

Magic for Law and Business: *I swear by the holy place that I have received a dress from the woman Trakote, for which I paid four tremisses.*

O.Medin.HabuCopt.88, a papyrus manuscript from which the above words come, is part of the archive of the Holy Church of the Coptic town of Jeme. It is a representative example of the most common legal activity which took place in churches and monasteries²²⁶ in late antique Egypt. In any transaction in which a payment or receipt of goods was involved, it was customary to swear by a holy site that the money or goods had been received.²²⁷ Such an oath might accompany the commencement of any important contract, not only those involving financial transactions, but also marriage agreements, and the swearing of something akin to oaths of fealty. Caches of documents from Jeme and other Egyptian sources²²⁸ testify to the fact that a great number of these numinously enhanced oaths were sworn by women who actively participated in the world of business as well as legal matters of a domestic nature.²²⁹

The invocation of a locus of spiritual power invested a legal contract with the added dimension of a ritual bond. Numinous power sanctified the agreement and meant that breaking it would constitute a sinful act with the possibility of supernaturally inflicted consequences. Frequently, the binding power of an oath would be further enhanced not only by swearing it within a sacred space, but on a sacred object too. Reliquaries, like those of the distinctly Coptic pillar form (fig. 38), were frequently used

²²⁵ Trzcionka, *Magic and the Supernatural in Fourth Century Syria*, pg. 103.

²²⁶ And temples as well.

²²⁷ Wilfong, *Women of Jeme*, pg. 116.

²²⁸ Such as many cited in Bagnall, Roger S. Bagnall, Raffaella Cribiore, and Evie Ahtaridis's *Women's letters from ancient Egypt, 300 BC-AD 800* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

²²⁹ For example, there is an extensive archive belonging to a woman money lender named Koloje which is discussed in detail in chapter five of Wilfong's *Women of Jeme*.

in oath-swearing.²³⁰ A similar practice must have also gone on in Egyptian synagogues, likely with the participant swearing before the Torah ark (fig. 39).²³¹ Women not only swore oaths before their god, but *to* god (or several gods). Magical contracts with a deity usually included the promise of a service or offering in exchange for a specified favor. Some especially poignant examples of this kind of oath are the records of mothers (and fathers) promising a sick child to a monastery, in exchange for the healing of the child from a severe illness.²³²

Late antique/early Byzantine octagonal marriage rings (fig. 40), in addition to their associations with the protection and fertility of the women who wore them,²³³ can also be viewed in light of the ritualistic aspects of oath-taking. These bands of precious metal would have been seen as having several functions. They acted as advertisements of a wearer's married state, as amulets meant to ensure harmonious partnerships,²³⁴ and as physical embodiments of the magic force of the marriage contract. In this latter function, it was likely believed that wearing the ring itself helped bind the married woman to her vows.²³⁵

Other rituals of power also had their place in the world of law and financial

²³⁰ Weitzmann, Kurt ed. *Age of spirituality : late antique and early Christian art, third to seventh century : catalogue of the exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, November 19, 1977, through February 12, 1978*. New York: The Museum, 1979, pg. 636-637.

²³¹ Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, pg.320-322. Egyptian Torah shrines at this period probably closely resembled the famous example discovered at Dura Europos.

²³² For example, P.KRU 86, in which Tachel promises her infant son to the monastery of Phoibammon to ensure his life, then does not give him up, and upon the child falling ill keeps her promise after all, P. KRU79 in which Kalisthene describes the donation of her son Merkoure to the monastery, and P.KRU 81 where Staurou, daughter of Peshate, takes her sick child Andreas to the same monastery and promises his service in return for his recovery (Wilfong, *Women of Jeme*, pg. 100-104).

²³³ Vikan, Gary. "Early Christian and Byzantine Rings in the Zucker Family Collection." *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, Vol. 45 (1987), pg. 32-43, pg. 39.

²³⁴ Vikan, Gary. "Art and Marriage in Early Byzantium." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 44 (1990), pg 145-163, pg. 153.

²³⁵ Christian marriage was viewed as a binding spell in the name of God in late antiquity (Brady, *The iconography of magical objects used by women in the early Byzantine Empire*, pg. 51).

transactions in late antique Egypt. Many examples of spells exist that were intended to encourage the acquisition of wealth,²³⁶ and the growth of a business through the attraction of more customers; both were usually accomplished through entreaties and offerings to holy powers.²³⁷ London Hay 10122, a spell written on a large piece of leather, is typical of this kind of magic.²³⁸ In the spell --that (this part of the manuscript is not particularly well preserved) apparently calls for the blood of white camels, a “gathering of doves,” and a nest to help facilitate it-- nine angelic powers are invoked and implored to gather people, presumably to send them to the supplicant’s business.²³⁹ This is accomplished by word, ring letters and ring signs, and figures representing the powers called on (fig. 41). Just as men and women used rituals of power to enact desirable changes in their personal lives, they did the same in the economic and legal realms.

Curses: *I, the miserable, wretched sinner, call unto the lord god almighty, that you perform my judgment against Thoute, who has separated my son from me so that he scorns me. You must not listen to her, O god, if she calls up to you. You must make her without hope in this world. You must strike her womb and make her barren. You must make her consume the fruit of her womb. You must make a demon descend upon her, who will cast her into troublesome illness and great affliction. You must bring a fever upon her, and a chill and a numbness of heart and an itching. Bring upon her the twelve, a worm and blood to flow out of her all the days of her life take them. She must not live; she comes to death. You must cause her mouth to err.*

O you who sits upon the chariot, O cherubim and seraphim, perform my judgment

²³⁶ Such as Moen 3 (Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 233-237).

²³⁷ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 233-244.

²³⁸ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 171-174.

²³⁹ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 171.

*against Tnoute. Michael, you must perform my judgment. Gabriel, Tremuel, Abraxiel, Emmanuel, perform my judgment against Tnoute, quickly! O twenty-four elders and the four creatures who support the throne of the father, perform my judgment. O you who performs judgment for the mistreated, perform my judgment, quickly!*²⁴⁰

These words are those of an unnamed Coptic woman who either wrote, or had written for her,²⁴¹ the curse papyrus now known as London Oriental Manuscript 6172 against her son's female companion.²⁴² This vicious invocation is exemplary of hundreds of such spells written on papyri or lamellae made of lead (fig. 42)²⁴³ and other metals, recovered from ancient and late ancient contexts all around the Mediterranean. Members of pharaonic Egyptian society in particular used a wide array of formal cursing techniques to direct harm against both state and personal enemies.²⁴⁴ This history, along with that coming from Greco-Roman lands,²⁴⁵ as well as canonical precedents from Old Testament texts,²⁴⁶ ensured that cursing practices thrived into the late antique period and well beyond.²⁴⁷

This mother's curse against her son's lover (perhaps wife) displays many features typical of hostile rituals of power from late antiquity. Practitioners appealed to numinously powerful entities --in this case the Christian god and his angels--to exact judgment against their victims. These entities included divine figures, demons, and angry

²⁴⁰ London Oriental Ms. 6172 (Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 196-197).

²⁴¹ Evidence suggests that late antique Egyptians of both sexes had spells written for them and wrote them on their own.

²⁴² Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 196.

²⁴³ Lead was the traditionally preferred material for curse tablets.

²⁴⁴ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 183.

²⁴⁵ As Daniel Ogden touches on throughout his *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts...*

²⁴⁶ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 184.

²⁴⁷ Even into the world of the present-day Mediterranean, and elsewhere.

ghosts.²⁴⁸ Improperly buried or untended corpses and those who had died prematurely or through foul play were believed to be responsible for much of disease and domestic troubles.²⁴⁹ These vengeful dead were, therefore, thought to be particularly well suited to carrying out curses. They were usually invoked by depositing the written and/or material components of an execration ritual in an abandoned graveyard, “effectively handing over the intended victim to the disgruntled ghost, who was further compelled to serve by oaths.”²⁵⁰

In appealing to higher powers, those using hostile rituals of power tended to present themselves as humble, injured victims who had suffered great injustice at the hands of those they wish to curse.²⁵¹ One variant of this which appears to have been considered especially potent are curses delivered by widows who emphasize their bereaved status.²⁵² These widows and other “miserable and wretched”²⁵³ often expressed their complaints through juridical language, the supplicants, whether pagan, Jewish, or Christian,²⁵⁴ appealing their case to a supernal court.

The powers implored to give (or threatened into giving²⁵⁵) judgment are then instructed as to the punishments that the magician wishes to have inflicted on the accursed. Frequently these demands take the form of excruciatingly detailed lists of bodily and spiritual tortures, as in the case of London Oriental Manuscript 6172. As well

²⁴⁸ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 184.

²⁴⁹ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 184.

²⁵⁰ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 184.

²⁵¹ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 185.

²⁵² For example the widow’s curse against Shenoute, from Munich Coptic Papyrus 5 (Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 188-190). The tradition of a “widow’s curse” occurs in other contexts far removed from the Mediterranean region as well, such as in Celtic traditions.

²⁵³ As practitioners often termed themselves.

²⁵⁴ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 185. A technique also anticipated in the pharaonic practice of directing letters of judicial complaint to the gods and blessed dead (Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* pg. 180-183).

²⁵⁵ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 185.

as asking for afflictions like fever, parasites, issues of blood, and ultimately death, the woman ritualist strikes against the feminine reproductive powers of her female victim, cursing her to be infertile. She also curses her son's girlfriend to act as though she was one of the child-killing female demons so feared in late antiquity and devour her own young. These same demons were sometimes explicitly invoked to attack victims on curse tablets, and many incantation bowls are inscribed with spells meant to protect against hostile enemies employing just such demonic services (fig. 43).

Like other rituals of power, cursing in late antique Egypt was facilitated by action as much as by word. As with love magic, the manipulation of images representing the victim figured prominently. Both figures scratched directly into tablets--like those the ritualist is instructed to make in Heidelberg Kopt. 679 (fig. 44)²⁵⁶-- and execration figurines made of stone, wax, wood, clay (fig. 3), or metal (fig. 45)²⁵⁷ were used in curse practices. Two-dimensional figures were typically bent and defaced. Statuettes were most often ritually "killed" by being pierced through with nails, beheaded, or trampled.²⁵⁸ They were frequently also burned, bloodied,²⁵⁹ "embalmed," and buried.²⁶⁰ By enacting ritual violence on the doll, the practitioner sought to have the same done to the individual she was cursing. Just as in erotic rituals, a personal effect or relic belonging to the victim might be included within or near the figure to heighten the magical connection.

²⁵⁶ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 222-224. This spell instructs the practitioner to draw the figures on a metal sheet to be buried by their enemies' door, and to then draw them again and put them in a doll made of wax which is also to be put at the door and pierced with a nail.

²⁵⁷ Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, pg. 110. Another practice from pharaonic times.

²⁵⁸ Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, pg.112-113.

²⁵⁹ Often with menstrual blood, as is discussed later in this paper.

²⁶⁰ As Ritner details in the chapter "Images and Intermediaries" in *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*.

The breaking of objects, particularly pots,²⁶¹ may have played a role in late antique cursing as it did in earlier Egyptian practice, with the pot standing in for the object of the practitioner's wrath. The color red also played an important role in hostile rituals. In ancient Egypt red was traditionally the color for figures of Seth and Apophis, and the favored color for writing the names of enemies and invoking demonic entities.²⁶² These traditions translated into late ancient execration rites, in which figurines and clay vessels were frequently painted red and inscriptions written in red ink.²⁶³ Spitting was viewed as activating a curse as it crossed the lips.²⁶⁴ It was also seen as a transmitter of impurity and a sign of eminent disrespect, and thus fit for cursing.²⁶⁵

Late antique Egyptian women and men laid curses for a truly wide variety of reasons. In addition to using aggressive magic as a means to justice, revenge, and the settling of domestic quarrels, execration rites were leveled against competitors in love, business, and sports.²⁶⁶ Curses could also serve a protective function, letting those who would harm sacred sites²⁶⁷ or a ritualist's person, property, or burial place²⁶⁸ in for supernatural consequences. Hostile rituals of power represented a kind of all purpose magic for the practitioner to further personal goals that, if approached in any other fashion, might be impossible or downright illegal.

²⁶¹ Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, pg. 144.

²⁶² Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, pg. 147.

²⁶³ Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, pg. 147-148.

²⁶⁴ Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, pg. 89.

²⁶⁵ Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, pg. 90.

²⁶⁶ Such as the thriving tradition of curses invoked by circus athletes against each other.

²⁶⁷ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 186.

²⁶⁸ Such as that inscribed in the 5th or 6th century CE on the wall of the church of Agios Athanasios protecting the sepulcher of "Euphemia the intendent, a young woman of 45 years, prudent and having her hand to ready for beneficence according to her ability..." from anyone else being buried in it. (Karivieri, "Magic and Syncretic Religious Culture in the East," pg. 413).

Necromancy: In 370 CE Athanasius of Alexandria complained of an unsanctioned practice gaining popularity at martyrs' shrines in the Egyptian countryside.²⁶⁹ A little less than a century later, the bombastic abbot Shenoute of Atripe spoke against the same tradition, aiming a sermon against the establishment of "illegitimate" *topoi* (literally "places") for relics near sanctuaries, where men and women came to engage in rituals of necromantic divination and possession. The monk describes accounts of miraculous lights, supplicants sleeping in the sacred tombs in order to gain dream visions of the dead saints and to question them about the living, and individuals becoming mediumistically possessed by spirits and uttering divinatory revelations. Both Athanasius and Shenoute doubted whether this could be the work of anything but demons, but make it clear that those engaging in the rituals were convinced that the spirits being invoked were those of the dead saints.²⁷⁰

The practitioners these two late antique writers spoke out against were performing a Christianized variation on customs of long standing in ancient Mediterranean cultures. By calling up the spirits of dead holy figures²⁷¹ for consultation and trance work, visitors were using martyrs' shrines like traditional Greco-Roman nekromanteia (fig. 46), oracular shrines where the dead and underworld deities were worshiped and contacted.²⁷² Ancient Egyptian magic lore also included many rituals of power in which gods of the dead like Anubis and deceased personages, both hostile²⁷³ and beneficent, were invoked

²⁶⁹Frankfurter, "Where the Spirits Dwell," pg. 31.

²⁷⁰Frankfurter, "Where the Spirits Dwell," pg. 31.

²⁷¹ The spirits of ordinary men and women were also frequently conjured at this period, at both shrines and tombs.

²⁷² Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, 69. One of the most famous of these, Avernus (and probably many others), continued its traditional operations at least into the late fourth century CE.

²⁷³ See the discussion of vengeful ghosts in the preceding section.

to perform a variety of actions on behalf of the ritualist.²⁷⁴ Egypt developed a reputation as a land of magicians especially proficient in necromantic arts. In the Greco-Roman literary tradition Egyptian necromancers were even credited with the ability to resurrect the dead.²⁷⁵

In late antique Egypt, oracles were one of the most popular uses for necromantic rituals of power, as exemplified by the controversial activity at sites of relic veneration. Shades of the deceased were considered to be a source of unquestionable wisdom in many Mediterranean traditions. They were believed to be compelled always to tell the truth when called upon,²⁷⁶ whether speaking directly through dream visions, through the channeling of a medium, or by influencing the outcome of a number of more indirect divinatory methods.²⁷⁷

PGM IV, “the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris,” includes a set of necromantic spells attributed to a magician named Pitys. The spells give instructions for deriving prophecies through rituals performed on entire corpses and/or skulls.²⁷⁸ The use of an actual dead body itself, or at least part of a skeleton like a skull (fig. 47) or rib,²⁷⁹ was naturally an important feature in many (but not all) rituals for drawing on the powers of the dead. This is often the case in necromantic curses.²⁸⁰ For example, in Munich Coptic Papyrus 5, the widow formulating her curse against a man named Shenoute places the magical papyrus on an embalmed body in its grave and demands that, “The mummy on

²⁷⁴Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, pg. 181.

²⁷⁵ Indeed, much Greco-Roman literature portrays Egyptian necromancers as even able to resurrect the dead.

²⁷⁶Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, pg. 242.

²⁷⁷ One could, for example, perform necromantic lecanomancy and necromantic divination through lots at the sites of oracles of the dead.

²⁷⁸ PGM IV.1928-2125. These are followed by an interesting spell (PGM IV.2125-39) for restraining skulls that are not suitable for use in divinatory necromancy (Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, pg. 72-75).

²⁷⁹ As mentioned early in this paper, curses were sometimes actually written directly on human bones.

²⁸⁰ As discussed in the preceding section.

which this papyrus for vengeance is placed must appeal night and day to the lord, from its bed to the ground in which it is buried with all the other mummies lying around this grave, all of them calling out, together, what is in this papyrus...’’²⁸¹

Tablets with magic spells could be addressed to the dead by placing them directly in the place of entombment or by drawing on the chthonic powers of the underworld by being cast into a pit or well; both practices were popular all over the late antique world (fig. 48).²⁸² Most frequently, these tablets were execrative in intent, but a goodly number were intended to enforce the erotic torments of love magic. Necromantically powerful ingredients, such as graveyard dirt or bones, also played a part in many late antique Egyptian magical formularies.

The performance of necromancy in the late ancient world generally incorporated other ritual elements (mostly handed down from earlier periods) in association with proximity to the material remains--whether present during the ceremony as buried, disinterred, or only in piecemeal fashion- of human or animal²⁸³ remains. Necromantic rituals were almost without exception intended to be performed at night. Typically, practitioners would purify themselves before attempting to approach the other realm.²⁸⁴ Supernatural powers like deities, demons, or angels connected with the underworld and/or the judgment of souls were customarily invoked to compel the dead to hearken to the call of the ritualist. Then offerings to the dead intended for veneration and to help restore their faculties²⁸⁵ would be burned on a fire or poured into a pit.²⁸⁶ Of the latter

²⁸¹ Munich Coptic Papyrus 5 (Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 190).

²⁸² Necromantic tablets have been found in graves and wells as far afield as settlements in Roman Britain.

²⁸³ Such as asses’ skulls.

²⁸⁴ This was an important point of protocol in many other types of rituals of power as well.

²⁸⁵ Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, pg. 169-171 .

²⁸⁶ Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, pg. 168-174.

type blood and milk were especially favored.²⁸⁷ Sometimes, the area of the grave-site (or wherever else the ritual was being performed²⁸⁸) was circumambulated, this practice being a distinctly Egyptian component of necromantic ceremonies.²⁸⁹

Since ghosts were believed to be capable of inflicting great harm on the living, late ancient Egyptians —regardless of gender— felt the need for magical protection when engaged in necromancy. This protection might involve apotropaic magic or ritual techniques designed for managing the actions of the spirits.²⁹⁰ The latter seems to have at times included the use of branches as magic wands. Writings from the period also suggest that there was a brisk business for those who were considered proficient in “laying” ghosts; either exorcising them or ritually placating them so they no longer wished to harass the living.²⁹¹ One popular method for accomplishing this was fashioning dolls to act as substitute bodies for wandering spirits (fig 49).²⁹²

In the eastern Mediterranean, from the ancient period to modern times, women are the ones chiefly associated with the care of the dead. This is likely why women were so often associated with necromancy. Classical depictions of necromantic rites nearly always depict female practitioners (fig. 50).²⁹³ Necromancers in late ancient poetry and rhetoric are nearly always fearful hags, performing unspeakable human sacrifices to fuel their rites.²⁹⁴ The reality of female experience with magic involving the dead in late antique Egypt was not so unequivocally negative, and, of course, much less fantastical

²⁸⁷ As they were both seen as restorative fluids (Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, pg.169-174).

²⁸⁸ Battlefields were also sites of necromancy, as were natural sites identified as entrances to the underworld.

²⁸⁹ Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, pg. 178-179.

²⁹⁰ For example, threatening them with metal objects, and using “holding stones” (Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, pg.180-182).

²⁹¹ Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, pg. 98-99.

²⁹² Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, pg. 102-104.

²⁹³ Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, pg. 139.

²⁹⁴ Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, pg. 72.

than the literary sources of the period portray. However, the central place of women in funerary and commemorative rites ensured that they were, indeed, believed to be particularly endowed with a special facility to perform all sorts of necromantic rituals of power.

Divination: *[To be written after staying pure for seven days, on a white saucer in myrrh ink on its base and beneath the base, and then covered over with white wax. The practitioner is instructed to also write the incantation outside the rim, and speak it aloud three times, fill the vessel with untouched olive oil and clean river water, place it on the floor, and look intently at it.] I call upon you, the mother and mistress of nymphs, ilaouch obrie louch tlor; come in, holy light, and give answer, showing your lovely shape. [When the goddess appears, she is to be welcomed with] Hail, very glorious goddess, ilara ouch. And if you give me a response, extend your hand.*

This saucer ritual is one of many divination spells found in documents preserved from late ancient Egypt. This kind of evidence, along with material and literary sources from the region, testifies to how women and men all over the late antique Mediterranean regularly sought to gain insights about their present and future circumstances through divinatory rituals of power.²⁹⁵ Divination was viewed as an occult science that could be applied towards discovering everything from hidden truths about high philosophical ideals to helping disentangle the most mundane problems of everyday life. The basic late antique theory of how divination worked was founded on the idea of “cosmic sympathy,” the view that the universe is like an immense living organism whose parts are all interconnected, meaning that observing one part could lead to information about

²⁹⁵Miller, Patricia Cox, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*, pg. 12.

others.²⁹⁶ Therefore, it was only logical to believe that things like natural patterns or cosmological signs could give insight into personal conditions. As Patricia Cox Miller states in *Dreams in Late Antiquity*,

The questions that people brought to [practitioners of divination] tended largely to focus on such down-to-earth matters as love and marriage, health, and economic fortune. Given the earthiness of such concerns, it is not surprising that people turned to “earthy” images of their everyday surroundings—birds, stars, dreams—to gain insight into their own situations. Divination was solidly rooted in the ordinary; yet it was an ordinariness charged with a sense of the extraordinary.²⁹⁷

This was certainly the case in late antique Egypt,²⁹⁸ where the supernaturally charged syncretic cultural milieu full of gods, daemons, saints, and angels, offered the constant potential for numinous power, harm, or revelation to be present at every turn; naturally lending itself to the flourishing of myriad methods of divining.²⁹⁹

The contexts in which divination was performed were also diverse. Holy sites were loci of divinatory activity for members of all late antique faiths. In addition to the mediums and incubatory sessions touched on in the preceding section, questions were often put to the holy powers of a shrine in a less ecstatic fashion. A question about the future would be written twice on a piece of papyrus once in a negative and once in a positive formulation (if I will not...if I will). The papyrus would be snipped in half and both questions deposited next to the statue of the god (or saint, etc.) to whom it was addressed, with a response obtained by virtue of which question the god returned to the petitioner. A number of these papyri survive from Oxyrhynchus and other Egyptian

²⁹⁶ Miller, Patricia Cox, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*, pg. 7.

²⁹⁷ Miller, Patricia Cox, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*, pg. 8.

²⁹⁸ Frankfurter, “Where the Spirits Dwell,” pg. 32.

²⁹⁹ Much too numerous to all be listed in this small section.

sites.³⁰⁰

“Professional” divination services could be solicited at temples,³⁰¹ synagogues, and churches but were available in less sacred precincts as well. The public venues of late antique Egypt abounded with a diverse array of practitioners offering supernatural revelations gained through equally eclectic methodologies.³⁰² Among the exotic types mentioned in contemporary records are old women who divined through the use of barley corns.³⁰³ Astrologers were also available, astrology being one of the most assiduously studied occult sciences throughout late antiquity, as evidenced by the plethora of treatises written on the subject, the frequent appearance of astrological motifs in art (fig. 51), and a great number of cosmological/astrological diagrams in manuscripts (fig. 52).³⁰⁴ Many late antique writers complain vehemently about the unreliability of these marketplace specialists, but their popularity does not seem to have ever been substantially diminished by such polemics.

Divination could also be performed in the privacy of one’s own home, as the evidence of personal rituals of power like the saucer divination to Aphrodite attests.³⁰⁵ Divinatory formularies detail a variety of techniques, with oneiromancy chief among them. In late antiquity dreams were the most widespread means of establishing contact with numinous powers because the dream was considered “the paradigm of the open

³⁰⁰ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 52-55.

³⁰¹ Such as oracle priests, haruspices, clairvoyant monks, etc.

³⁰² Miller, Patricia Cox, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*, pg. 8. One could also do divination for one’s self out and about.

³⁰³ Fögen, Marie Theres. "Balsamon on Magic: From Roman Secular Law to Byzantine Canon Law." in Henry Maguire, ed. *Byzantine Magic*. Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2008, pg. 99-115, pg. 102

³⁰⁴ For a thorough discussion of ancient and late ancient astrology see Tamsyn Barton’s *Ancient Astrology* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

³⁰⁵ As discussed by Richard Gordon in “Reporting the Marvellous: Private Divination in the Greek Magical Papyri” (in Peter Schäfer and Hans G. Kippenberg eds. *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*. Leiden: Brill, 1997).

frontier: when a man was asleep and his bodily senses were stilled, the frontier lay wide open between himself and the gods.”³⁰⁶ Consequently, numerous rituals focused on stirring up dream visions.

Lychnomancy, divination by light, was another popular method. The practitioner would speak incantations before a specially prepared clay lamp (fig. 53) and discover answers in the shapes seen in the flame.³⁰⁷ Or, the lighting of the magic lamp was intended to call up a direct apparition of an entity--either a god or intermediary figure like an angel or daemon--who would impart the desired information.³⁰⁸ These direct visions were viewed as carrying great authority,³⁰⁹ so many rituals existed specifically to induce them. For example, the spell from PGM V.54-69 in which the ritualist is to incant over a bronze cup of oil and anoint the “right eye with water from a shipwreck and the left with Coptic eyepaint, with the same water. If you cannot find water from a shipwreck, then from a sunken skiff.”³¹⁰

Lots, dice, or knucklebones (fig. 54) frequently figured in private rituals for divination, typically in conjunction with sets of oracular statements.³¹¹ Lines of text were assigned numerical designations, the implements thrown and the answer was the line corresponding to the number which came up. A collection of oracles in Vatican Coptic Papyrus 1,³¹² and the miniature codex featured in the exhibit “Byzantine Women and their World” (fig. 55), functioned in this way. Judeo-Christian holy books and works of

³⁰⁶Brown, Peter. *The Making of Late Antiquity*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1993, pg. 65.

³⁰⁷Gordon, “Reporting the Marvellous,” pg. 83.

³⁰⁸Gordon, “Reporting the Marvellous,” pg. 83.

³⁰⁹Gordon, “Reporting the Marvellous,” pg. 83.

³¹⁰Eyepaint figures in many recipes for inducing direct vision, such as PGM V.54-69 (Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, pg. 102).

³¹¹Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 252.

³¹²Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 251-256.

classical literature such as Homer³¹³ and Vergil were often consulted in this fashion.

The saucer divination described at the beginning of this section is an example of another form of divination widely practiced in late antiquity, lecanomancy or divination by means of images seen in a bowl of liquid.³¹⁴ The lecanomantic ritual to Aphrodite calls for a white saucer; frequently vessels employed for lecanomancy would be made of inscribed clay (fig. 56), but they might also be of dark stone or metal. These latter lent the liquid employed a reflective quality, giving the process similarities to catoptromancy (divination by use of a mirror).³¹⁵ Lecanomancy, just like the other aforementioned ritual techniques, was accessible to all practitioners regardless of their gender. That late antique Egyptian women regularly engaged in divinatory rituals of power for themselves and on behalf of others is evidenced by literature and documents, such as the letter of Epheris in which she describes to her son how she consults oracles on his behalf every ten days.³¹⁶

Alchemy: According to the records of her life and works as compiled by her admirer Zosimos of Panopolis,³¹⁷ Maria the Jewess lived in Alexandria sometime during the second century CE. There, amidst the intellectual ferment of the great city, she wrote comprehensively on alchemical processes and the many innovations she had made on them. In addition to improving on earlier techniques, she invented new apparatus such as new types of glass stills, including a modified tribikos (fig. 57) with three glass arms for collecting vapor as the formerly base metal completed its transformation from the earthly to the heavenly state,³¹⁸ and devices for heating (fig. 58).³¹⁹ The surviving fragments of

³¹³ Like the Homeric oracle in PGM VII.1-148 (Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, pg. 112-119).

³¹⁴ Gordon, "Reporting the Marvellous," pg. 83.

³¹⁵ Gordon, "Reporting the Marvellous," pg. 83.

³¹⁶ Bagnall, Cribiore, and Ahtaridis, *Women's letters from ancient Egypt*, pg. 303.

³¹⁷ Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg. 61-62. Zosimos reportedly spent most of his life in Alexandria and wrote in the late third/early fourth century CE.

³¹⁸ Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg. 64-66.

her writings are much more extensive than those of male writers from the same period and, though her works have received little attention in modern scholarship, they wielded considerable influence in the late antique world.³²⁰

The term “alchemy” is in itself medieval; in late antiquity the enterprise of attempting to transmute base metals into gold was known as the “Sacred Art.” It emerged in the first centuries CE, fusing current religious and philosophical enterprises with state of the art metalworking and advances in natural science.³²¹ The central tenet of the sacred art was that human beings could use magical means to speed up inherent changes in the natural world. Every metal was believed to be on its way to becoming gold; the alchemist merely hastened the transformation. This was done by taking base metals through a series of color changes, with each color signifying how “inspired a metal is by revealing the spirit (pneuma) of the metal.”³²² The changes in color, therefore, indicated the inner change that the metals underwent as they worked their way from the most earthly (typically lead) to the most heavenly (gold). Maria made various refinements on this basic model and created new devices and instruments to facilitate them.³²³

Egypt held a special place in alchemical circles. Not only was the sacred art assiduously pursued in the schools of Alexandria and other Egyptian centers, but the Egyptian god Thoth was viewed as the father of alchemy and all other “high” esoteric pursuits. In late antiquity Thoth was frequently conflated with the Greek Hermes. Thoth-Hermes was especially important in the magical realm in his guise as Hermes

³¹⁹Some of her devices, like the “*balneum Mariae*” (a kind of double-boiler water bath used for slow heating chemicals, fig. 58), are still used today in laboratories (Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg.65).

³²⁰Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg. 61.

³²¹Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg. 60.

³²²Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg. 61.

³²³ Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg. 65.

Trismegistus (“thrice-great Hermes”), the great sage and “good mind.”³²⁴ Within the corpus of late antique hermetica—writings attributed to, addressed to, or espousing to be revelations from Hermes Trismegistus concerning a variety of magical pursuits—there are passages of a distinctly alchemical nature.³²⁵ Thoth (fig. 59) and Hermes (fig. 60) both appear frequently on late antique amulets. Symbols that may be alchemical in nature (such as certain geometric and astronomical designs) also appear on amulets from late antique Egypt, though this is sometimes difficult to determine, as practitioners of the sacred art employed their own secret nomenclature and symbolism.³²⁶

Members of the Jewish religion were also cast as central figures in the history of alchemy. Zosimos himself makes a point of discussing how both the ancient Egyptians and the Hebrews are sources of wisdom on the sacred art, stating that “the science and the wisdom of the best dominate both: they come from ancient centuries.”³²⁷ Jewish *women* in particular were connected with the sacred knowledge of metals, a popular late antique story holding that this wisdom came down to them from heaven by means of angels:

The ancient and divine books say that certain angels were taken by passion for women. They descended to earth and taught them all operations of nature. As a result...they fell and remained outside of heaven, because they taught men all that is wicked and of no profit to the soul. These Scriptures also say that from them the giants were born. Their initial transmission of the tradition about these arts came from Chemes. He called this book the Book of Chemes, whence the art is called “chemistry.”³²⁸

³²⁴Copenhaver, Brian P. *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a new English translation, with notes and introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pg. 58

³²⁵Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, xvi.

³²⁶Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg. 67.

³²⁷Zosimos, “The True book of Sophe the Egyptian and of the divine Lord of the Hebrews {and} of the powers of Sabaoth,” Ber 3.4/2.1 This attribution of especial efficacy to the practice and wisdom of the Hebrews was extended to Jewish magic in general in late antiquity, and age was always considered an important indicator of the magical efficacy of any practice or tradition.

³²⁸Synellus, *Ecloga Chronographia* 23.9-24.12. (trans Mosshammer). The fallen angels were frequently

With all this in mind, it is not as surprising as it might first seem that Maria, a woman, could rise to such a degree of prominence and authority within an occult field that has been viewed throughout most of history as a male domain.³²⁹ While many famous Medieval and Renaissance works on alchemy depict the practice of alchemy as an overwhelmingly masculine pursuit, this does not seem to have been the case in late antiquity. In fact, in the Late Antique and early Medieval periods the ‘Sacred Art’ was often referred to as the *opus mulierum*, “the great work of women.” Alchemical texts from late antique Egypt preserve many references to female practitioners; in addition to Maria the Jewess, there is Theosebia (who engaged in esoteric studies with Zosimos), Cleopatra, and the enigmatic Thesis the Virgin.³³⁰ In *Magic in the Roman World: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, Naomi Janowitz argues that these women may have found it difficult to be considered legitimate purveyors of esoteric knowledge of a *theoretical* kind. However, they were on the other hand viewed as especially gifted in magical knowledge of a *practical* nature.³³¹ Just as late antique Egyptian women compounded medico-magical potions, and were even credited with being able to work magic through everyday cooking,³³² they were deeply involved in the physical experimentation of alchemical rituals of power.

Rituals of Purification and Ascent: The Bruce Codex in Oxford’s Bodleian Library details a curious ritual, in which Jesus Christ himself is described performing a “fire baptism” on his apostles. They are dressed in linen robes and festooned with

credited with teaching women not just alchemy, but all magical knowledge.

³²⁹ Though there are some notable exceptions, such as Cleopatra being depicted as a skilled alchemist in later Arabic sources.

³³⁰ Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg. 61.

³³¹ Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg. 62.

³³² Stratton discusses this in detail in the fifth chapter of *Naming the Witch*, “Caution in the Kosher Kitchen” (pg.143-176).

grapevines, incense offered up made of juniper berries, myrrh, frankincense, mastic, nard, cassia flowers, turpentine, and oil of myrrh. A linen cloth is spread upon a table and bread and a chalice of wine placed on it. Each apostle is crowned with a wreath of pigeon grass, and doghead plant placed in their mouths. Each of them is given chrysanthemums and pebbles engraved with the “seven voces.” With knotgrass placed under their feet, and their feet together, they are then marked with sacred seals. First, with Thozaez (fig. 61), as the the sacred names of god are invoked and Zorokothora Melchisedek entreated to come secretly and bring the water of the baptism of the fire of the virgin of the light. Jesus prays for God to send the purifying virgin, and invokes her secret names as well. He implores her to forgive their sins. Once the sacred sign appears within the fire and incense, they can be “truly baptized,” and partake of the offerings. Finally, he marks their foreheads with the seal of the virgin of light herself (fig. 62), marking them as new members of the kingdom of light.³³³

This description of “fire baptism” numbers among the numerous religious and magical texts termed by modern scholarship as “Gnostic.” The question of how Gnosticism should be defined, and how much it should even be considered a coherent movement, is a matter of great debate.³³⁴ However, what is certain is that in the late antique period a number of sects with their doctrine centered (to one degree or other) on the idea of salvation and/or spiritual growth through the acquisition of secret knowledge (Gnosis) flourished in Egypt.

One of the aspects of these Gnostic groups which elicited great ire from more

³³³Bruce Codex, Bodleian Library, Oxford; page 108, line 23 to page 112, line 6 (Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 63-66).

³³⁴For a thorough treatment of these issues see Karen L. King’s *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

orthodox religious institutions was the fact that not only did they subscribe to teachings which were deemed heretical,³³⁵ but many also allowed women to rise to positions of great authority--perhaps even acting as priests--within their ranks. Gnostic mythologies included powerful feminine divine beings, such as Sophia the aeon of wisdom.³³⁶ They also considered biblical women like Eve and Mary Magdalene purveyors of their sacred Gnosis.³³⁷ And it is highly possible that women writers were involved in the composition of Gnostic gospels and treatises.³³⁸

Just like their male counterparts, Gnostic women engaged in rituals of power meant to aid in personal purification³³⁹ or to induce experiences of mystically ascending through the complex cosmology of the Gnostic heavens.³⁴⁰ These practices--believed to come from secret teaching passed down directly from Jesus and his close disciples--typically involved the recitation of sacred narratives and the use of sacred names and magic words to invoke the deity and the aeons.³⁴¹ The apostolic fire baptism in the Bruce Codex is presented not only as a sacred narrative but as a handbook for just such a ritual.

Geometric seals inscribed on stones would be held by Gnostic practitioners, the seals acting as passwords to accessing progressively higher levels of ascent,³⁴² as is described in this fire baptism ritual. A number of late antique amulets exist which are

³³⁵ Though ideas now characterized as "Gnostic" clearly had a great deal of influence on 'orthodox' late antique Egyptian Christianity, especially in the monastic realm. Where certain meditative and visionary practices performed by female and male ascetics bear a marked resemblance to the Gnostic ascent rituals discussed in this section.

³³⁶ And in many Gnostic gospels, a creatrix as well.

³³⁷ As discussed in several of the articles in Karen L. King ed's *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000.

³³⁸ Scopello, Madeleine. "Jewish and Greek Heroines in the Nag Hammadi Library." In Karen L. King ed. *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000, pg. 71-90, pg. 90

³³⁹ Freeing the soul from the confines of the carnal world being one of the central aims of most Gnostic groups.

³⁴⁰ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 66.

³⁴¹ Members of the pantheon of Gnostic sacred entities; often believed to dwell in the ascending spheres of the heavens.

³⁴² Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 66.

inscribed with geometric designs and/or enigmatic beings that are generally identified as examples of Gnostic symbolism (fig. 63).³⁴³

The use of plant materials in the Gnostic fire baptism described above is similar to the way natural substances were utilized in neo-platonic theurgy.³⁴⁴ Late antique theurgists believed that carefully performed rituals of power worked to link an individual practitioner to god.³⁴⁵ Sometimes these rituals took the form of purely mental contemplation, but they often involved the use of magical ‘simples’ (raw materials like plants, oils, gems, metals, incense, etc.). These were selected on the basis of doctrines of correspondence. Similar to popular principles of divination, neo-platonists believed earthly materials could reflect higher planes of existence. Therefore, when properly applied in magic, their use could bring one into closer contact with sacred powers.³⁴⁶ Specialized devices were also employed in theurgic rituals. Chief among these appears to have been a form of the iynx,³⁴⁷ or magic spinning top (fig. 64), known as the Hecatic. The Hecatic reportedly took the form of a gold ball engraved with characters and set with a sapphire in the middle,³⁴⁸ spun by means of a rawhide strap during invocations.³⁴⁹

This special iynx took its name from the goddess Hecate, who was associated

³⁴³ For a long time, almost all magic gems from this period that bore especially esoteric symbols were called ‘Gnostic,’ as “mainstream” Christian religious practitioners were not then believed to “indulge” in magic. Now, this erroneous picture has been corrected, and a smaller number of amulets and figures on papyri are more properly associated with Gnostic belief systems. However, solidly attributing gems as decidedly Gnostic is still difficult.

³⁴⁴ Which should not at all be surprising, given the influence of Neo-Platonism on the philosophies of Gnostic sects.

³⁴⁵ Johnston, Sarah Iles. *Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, part II: chapter VI (pg.77-89) Most theurgists were proponents of a form of “pagan monotheism,” which held that all the traditional polytheistic deities came forth from and were avatars of a supreme godhead.

³⁴⁶ Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, pg.78-79.

³⁴⁷ A term from which the English word ‘jinx’ originates.

³⁴⁸ Sapphire and gold both being substances with heavenly connotations.

³⁴⁹ As described by later Byzantine writer Michael Psellos (Duffy, John. "Reactions of Two Byzantine Intellectuals to the Theory and Practice of Magic: Michael Psellos and Michael Italikos." in Henry Maguire, ed. *Byzantine Magic*. Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2008, pg. 99-115, pg. 102).

with witchcraft and liminality in the Greco-Roman tradition. Given these connotations, she naturally appears regularly on objects of late antique material culture of magico-religious character (fig. 65). The goddess --traditionally pictured as a fearsome and at least partially chthonic entity-- became associated with the Cosmic Soul through whom the ritualist sought to unite with the divine in theurgic systems of thought like that expounded in the Chaldean Oracles.³⁵⁰ Theurgists believed that what distinguished their practice from those who performed what they termed “lower” magic was not their methodology but rather their *intent*; not to manipulate forces in the world around them, but to reach divine union. Much like the Gnostics, a core tenet of many theurgic schools was the belief that such union could only fully take place once the practitioner had been purified of an attachment to base earthly matters.

That women as well as men practiced theurgy in late antique Egypt is illustrated by the career of the famous (and ultimately ill-fated) female mathematician and Neo-Platonic philosopher, Hypatia. Among this great Alexandrian thinker’s areas of expertise was the knowledge of all kinds of esoteric,³⁵¹ which must have undoubtedly included theurgical rituals of power, as the study of theurgy was extremely popular in Neo-Platonic circles in the city (and the eastern Mediterranean as a whole) during this period. In nearby Syria, another mid-fourth female Neo-Platonist named Sosipatra was also known as an adept of “high” magic. She was reported to have been initiated into the Chaldean mysteries by beneficent daimons and to be able to predict the future, bi-locate, and ascend to the heavenly realms to observe the doings of the gods.³⁵² Women

³⁵⁰ Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, pg.49-70 .

³⁵¹ Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg. 95.

³⁵² Her life is recounted by Eunapius in his *Lives of the Philosophers*, in which Sosipatra is described as “equal to divinity” (Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg. 96).

subscribing to a wide array of faiths in late antique Egypt engaged not only in “practical” rituals of power but those that were considered of the “highest” order as well.

Magic for the Upkeep of the Household: The dry desert climate of Egypt has preserved numerous examples of textiles. Some were funerary in function, wrapped around the bodies of the dead to honor and protect them in the afterlife (fig. 67). But the majority had their place in the world of the living, draping the persons³⁵³ and dwellings of late antique Egyptians in layers of powerful symbolism.³⁵⁴ Among the most prevalent iconographical types depicted on household textiles (cushions, blankets, wall hangings and so on) are female figures bedecked in elaborate clothes and jewels, usually surrounded by animals, fruits, vines, water, and other signs of the bounty of the natural world (fig. 68). These figures personified powerful entities who symbolized abundance and prosperity.³⁵⁵ Foremost among them is *Ge*, the earth herself. *Tyche Kale*, the mistress of Good Fortune, also appears, as does *Hestia Polyolbos* (the Hearth Rich in Blessings). At times the identity of one of these personifications is made specific through an embroidered label. However, more often than not they appear without explicit explanation, thus conflating the blessings of *all* the aforementioned beneficent feminine entities into one single image, which would thus be all the more thoroughly charged with efficacious associations.³⁵⁶ The depictions of such figures in the home were not merely a decorative statement; they also served an important magical function. By imaging powerful beings associated with fertility and affluence, late antique householders in Egypt and all over the eastern Mediterranean believed they could bring those very

³⁵³ As discussed in the section in this chapter on apotropaia.

³⁵⁴ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers's, *Art and holy powers in the early Christian House*, pg. 2.

³⁵⁵ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers's, *Art and holy powers in the early Christian House*, pg. 13.

³⁵⁶ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers's, *Art and holy powers in the early Christian House*, pg. 14.

qualities into their home.³⁵⁷

Textiles portraying wealth-giving women were only one type of popular accoutrement which helped form a complex web of numinous associations that pervaded the late antique Egyptian home. As Eunice Dauterman Maguire, Henry P. Maguire and Maggie J. Duncan-Flowers discuss at length in *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House*,³⁵⁸ in late antiquity the private sphere was a realm deeply steeped in magic. The wooden frames of doors and window were frequently carved with protective knotwork or rosettes (fig. 69).³⁵⁹ Mirrors set into small shrine-like plaques of clay, plaster, metal, wood, or stone were displayed throughout dwellings to deflect malevolent energy (fig. 70).³⁶⁰ Even objects used in one's toilette could be charged with ritual power, such as wooden combs inscribed with concentric circles and dots, a geometric motif with a long history of magical associations (fig. 71).³⁶¹ In late antique Egypt (as in earlier periods), nearly every piece of furnishing within a home served not just a utilitarian or ornamental function but also worked to keep evil influences at bay and/or draw good influences in;³⁶² and this world of domestic ritual power was overwhelmingly in the charge of women.

Women would have played a major role in selecting, purchasing,³⁶³ and arranging the symbolically significant articles of furniture and décor within their homes and practiced ritualistic actions within their domestic space to assist in its spiritual upkeep.

³⁵⁷ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers's, *Art and holy powers in the early Christian House*, pg. 14.

³⁵⁸ Their book focuses on Christian houses, but the same held true for households that were Jewish, practiced traditional Greco-Roman and Egyptian religions, and those that were mixed in their religious affiliations (as was not at all unusual in late antiquity).

³⁵⁹ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers's, *Art and holy powers in the early Christian House*, pg. 55.

³⁶⁰ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers's, *Art and holy powers in the early Christian House*, pg. 6-7.

³⁶¹ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers's, *Art and holy powers in the early Christian House*, pg. 5.

³⁶² Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers's, *Art and holy powers in the early Christian House*, pg. 2.

³⁶³ As many women did wield economic power within late antique Egyptian families, as late antique Egyptian legal documents attest.

Late antique and early Byzantine writers note that--though icons in all their varied forms were utilized with equal avidity and frequency by both sexes³⁶⁴-- the care of household iconostases was considered one of the most important ritual duties performed by women.³⁶⁵ The same appears to have held true for the majority of domestic worship spaces connected with traditional Egyptian and Greco-Roman religious praxis. Women were charged with keeping the lamps (fig. 72) lit before sacred images, cleaning and adorning them, making daily offerings, and burning incense.³⁶⁶ The latter served not only for veneration and to enhance the prayers of the household but was also believed to work to cleanse the home from disease and other evils and help induce an atmosphere of tranquility.³⁶⁷

Ceremonies associated with the custodianship of household shrines were not the only rituals of power in which late antique Egyptian women engaged to assist in the proper upkeep of their homes. Jewish women facilitated the observation of proper dietary and food service laws within their households.³⁶⁸ Amuletic papyri and plaques--such as Oslo 1.5 in which Egyptian and Judeo-Christian deities are invoked by names and holy symbols to protect a house and the family within it from every manner of evil³⁶⁹-- which were nailed to or near the entrances of dwellings were probably written and affixed in place by women in at least some cases. The same probably holds true for deposits of

³⁶⁴ Contrary to the assumption made in much early modern scholarship that icons were mostly only used by women.

³⁶⁵ Brady, *The iconography of magical objects used by women in the early Byzantine Empire*, pg. 12.

³⁶⁶ All typical forms of household religious praxis, as discussed earlier in this paper.

³⁶⁷ Scarborough, "Early Byzantine Pharmacology," pg. 230. A process which could also be affected through the use of eulogia substances, as noted in the section on apotropaia earlier in this chapter.

³⁶⁸ Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, pg. 171-174.

³⁶⁹ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pg. 49-50.

ritual objects buried under hearths and house foundations.³⁷⁰ Women manufactured many of the magic objects used in domestic contexts as well, such as the wall hangings described at the beginning of this section. In fact, the act of weaving was in itself viewed as a form of conjuring; benevolent or harmful intent could be woven into the very fabric of a textile.³⁷¹

Female reputation in late antiquity hinged to a large degree on how a woman worked to enhance her family's honor, prestige and piety, and one of the most important roles women were expected to fulfill was keeping all the everyday operations of family-life running smoothly.³⁷² This was true all across the social spectrum, whether one was a peasant wife obligated to take care of every chore, a rich *domina* who supervised the activities of a huge estate,³⁷³ or the Ama (mother) of a female religious institution. This responsibility was not seen as limited to purely social and economic concerns, but extended to attending to spiritual matters.³⁷⁴ The domestic rites listed in this section³⁷⁵ differ in forms and methods, but all involved female practitioners acting as caretakers of their households' ritual well-being. Women in late antique Egypt were *expected* to perform these rituals of power for the good of their entire household. Educating their younger female relatives³⁷⁶ in magical maintenance (as well as the other kinds of magic detailed in this chapter) must have been considered essential too. Magic done by women in the home can be seen as a microcosmic reflection of what was true in late antique

³⁷⁰Such as those discovered in Anemurium. No doubt examples exist in Egypt, but are not as yet well published (Russell, James. "The Archaeological Context of Magic in the Early Byzantine Period," in Henry Maguire, ed. *Byzantine Magic*. Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2008, pg. 35-50, pg.44-50).

³⁷¹Brady, *The iconography of magical objects used by women in the early Byzantine Empire*, pg. 50.

³⁷²Britt, Karen C. "Fama et Memoria: Portraits of Female Patrons in Mosaic Pavements of Churches in Byzantine Palestine and Arabia." *Medieval Feminist Forum* 44, no. 2 (2008), pg. 119-143, pg. 123.

³⁷³Britt, "Fama et Memoria," pg. 141.

³⁷⁴Kalavrezou, Ioli. *Byzantine Women and Their World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, pg. 14.

³⁷⁵Which represent only a small fraction of domestic rituals of power.

³⁷⁶Or in the case of women monastics, female novices.

Egyptian culture as a whole: that women (and men) exercised personal rituals of powers in all their varied forms to shape all areas of their lives, from the most exalted philosophical pursuits to the most everyday aspects of household life.

Figure 8

A A A A A A A
 A A A A A A
 A A A A A
 A A A A
 A A A
 A A
 A

Triangle vowel arrangement
 (London Oriental Ms. 6796 [2], [3], [1])

Figure 9

Partial figure and rings signs (London Oriental Ms. 6796 [2], [3], [1])

Figure 10

Pewter ampulla depicting the Crucifixion and the women at the tomb on one side, the aedicule of the Holy Sepulchre on the other. Ca. 600 CE (Monza, treasury of the cathedral of St. John the Baptist, 13)

Figure 11

St. Thecla.
Terracotta ampulla with Sts. Menas and Thecla (British Museum, EA69839)

Figure 12

Syrian bronze amulet inscribed with ring signs (Kelsey Museum 26119)

Figure 13

Rolled silver phylactery and the remains of its bronze container (excavated at Anemurium)

Figure 14

Haematite Uterine Gem (Kelsey Museum 26067)

Figure 15

Isis Knot (Tit) amulet
Jasper, New Kingdom
(Met, 00.4.39)

Figure 16

Line drawing of lost Greek vase depicting naked witches
drawing down the moon. (Roscher 1884-'1937)

Figure 17

Amuletic armband with locus sancti scenes, Holy Rider, Heis Theos, pentalfa, Chnoubis, ring signs and Psalm 90. Silver, Egypt sixth-seventh century CE (Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Columbia, 77.246).

Figure 18

Complete female orant (negative 29422), and heads of several orants (14641, 14642, 15539) found at Jeme (Oriental Institute of Chicago)

Figure 19

Female statuettes from Abu Mina (after Kaufmann (1906) 91 fig. 42)

Figure 20

Painted terracotta figure of Isis-Aphrodite, Egypt 2nd century CE (Met, 1991.76)

Figure 21

A pottery “concubine” figure, New Kingdom?
(Egypt Centre, Canolfan Eifftaidd, EC447)

Figure 22

Reverse of haematite amulet, showing orant
Virgin (Met, 17.190.491)

Figure 23

One side of limestone eulogia mold from Mamre, depicting a goddess and/or Mary
(Dr. Lillian Malcove, New York)

Figure 24

Isis lactans (Isis nursing Horus)
(coll. Fouguet)

Figure 25

Horse rider (and other figures) from Abu Mina
(ca 1:3) (modified from Kaufmann (1906) 93 fig. 44)

Fig. 26

Finger marks on sandstone wall at the Philae Temple (Ancient World Image Bank (AWIB))

Figure 27

Replica of an Isis Anasurmene (original in private Collection, 2nd century BCE)

Figure 28

Drawing of Yao Sabbaoth (London Oriental Manuscript 5525)

Figure 29

Sardonyx cameo engraved with angels, Inscribed "exousiai," or "Powers" (Dumbarton Oaks, inv. 47.21)

Figure 30

The "Much Suffering Eye" (5th-6th century CE) (The Walters Art Museum)

Figure 31

Small bell (tintinnabulum) found at Anemurium

Figure 32

Figure of Typhon (PGM XXXVI. 69-101)

Figure 33

Seth (PDM xii.62-75 [PGM XII. 449-52])

Figure 34

Terracotta mold associated with Mendes cult (Roman period, Collection Michailidis)

Figure 35

Terracotta figurine of ithyphallic man on horse, Saqqara, Ptolemaic period. Height: 9 cm; length: 8 cm. Egyptian Museum, Cairo, JdE 92020.

Figure 36

Wax doll with human hair in its navel and papyrus scroll in its back.
(this figure was execratory in function, but the ritual logic is the same as erotic use of “relics” in dolls)
(100-200 CE, British Museum 1903.0615.22)

Figure 37

Clay figurine used for binding, and the erotic spell lamella buried together with it in a jar.
(Louvre inv.E27145)

Figure 38

Pillar with relic compartment, Wood, around 500 CE.
(Heidelberg, Sammlung des Agyptologischen
Instituts der Universität Heidelberg, 808)

Figure 39

Torah Ark. Synagogue, Dura-Europos
Fresco, ca. 250 CE
(Damascus, National Museum)

Figure 40

Octagonal Byzantine marriage ring (Dumbarton Oaks Collection, no.47.15)

Figure 41

LONDON HAY 10122 (recto),
upper part

LONDON HAY 10122 (verso),
upper part

Figure 42

Lead curse tablet naming more than 12 people, found in a pot with bones, First-third century CE, Phrygia (British Museum)

Figure 43

Persian incantation bowl with exorcism of Lilith (private collection)

Figure 44

Figures for use in cursing (Heidelberg Kopt. 679)

Figure 45

Lead exorcism figures, arms and legs bound.
Sinai, Egypt, 100-300 CE.

Figure 46

The "crypt" of Dakaris's Acheron *nekuomanteion*. © Hellenic Republic Ministry of Culture Archaeological Receipts Fund.

Figure 47

Moussaieff incantation skull. Skull inscribed with
necromantic spell in Aramaic, found in "case" made
of two earthenware bowls (3rd-7th century CE)

Figure 48

An unrolled curse tablet (*Tab. Sulis* no. 9a.) and some rolled curse tablets from Bath. Photograph © Mr. R. Wilkins, Institute of Archaeology, Oxford,

Figure 49

Buried kolossoi from the Ceramicus

Figure 50

A female necromancer with a *phiale* and a mirror, and a male ghost in a winding-sheet. Red-figure Cumaean bail *amphora*, Cumaean Painter, ca. 350–320 B.C. Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire 11588.
© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva.

Figure 51

Dendera Zodiac. Bas-relief from pronaos of chapel dedicated to Osiris,
Temple of Hathor, Dendera, 50 CE (Now in Louvre)

Figure 52

Horoscope by Rhetorius the Egyptian for the year 497 CE

Figure 53

Clay oil lamp decorated with a frog,
(Roman Egypt, Glencairn Museum)
A popular type in late antique Egypt, the
frog being a regenerative symbol.

Figure 54

A set of Greco-Roman knucklebones
(Pitt Rivers Museum, 1895.9.15-18)

Figure 55

Miniature Sahidic codex containing 38 Christian “instant oracles” under the title The Gospel of the Lots of Mary, the Mother of the Lord Jesus the Christ (Egypt, c. 6th century?)

Figure 56

Thin-walled ceramic bowl inscribed 'Christ the Magician,' and probably used for lecanomancy. Alexandria, first half 1st century CE (Alexandria Maritime Museum (C1_3557))

Figure 57

Greek diagram of the tribikos (three-armed still) of Maria the Jewess

Figure 58

Diagram of the Balneum-Mariae

Figure 59

Ptolemaic Thoth Amulet (Los Angeles County Museum of Art) (M.80.200.3)

Figure 60

Syncretic late antique cameo of Hermes (Bern, Merz Collection)

Figure 61

Seal called Thozaez
(Bruce Codex, Bodleian Library, pg. 108-12)

Figure 62

Seal of the virgin of the light
(Bruce Codex, Bodleian Library, pg. 108-12)

Figure 63

Amulet with lion-headed god and names of Gnostic archons.
Green jasper clouded with red.
(private collection of Joseph Brummer)

Figure 64

Diagram of a typical iynx

Figure 65

Hecate Chiaramonti
Roman copy of Hellenistic original
(Museo Chiaramonti,
Vatican Museums)

Figure 66

Mummy called 'the embroidress', Antinoopolis, fourth century AD, Brussels, Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire.

Figure 67

Earth and the Waters. Tapestry Weave (Chicago, Field Museum)

Figure 68

Window frame and screen. Wood 5th-6th CE
(Benaki Museum)

Figure 69

Wooden frame with doors covering mirror,
covered with figured paper.
364–476 CE (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 04.1965)

Figure 70

Double-tooth hair comb. Wood.
(Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 24966)

Figure 71

Lamp with branching handle and stand. Bronze, 5th-6th century CE
(University of Toronto, Malcove Collection, M82.437 a, b)

IV. “MOST WOMEN MUST BE SORCERESSES.”

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF FEMALE RITUAL POWER

For one investigating the practice of late antique Egyptian magic there is a wealth of evidence that provides testimony to the types of rituals performed by female practitioners.³⁷⁷ The identities of these women ritualists, however, can be elusive. This ambiguity is, of course, all too typical of the complexities encountered in attempting to form a properly balanced picture of almost any aspect of the life of the female population of the period. The biases and silences in the records of a patriarchal society make it difficult to avoid either over generalizing or over specifying from what limited accounts there are of particular historical individuals.³⁷⁸

Despite these difficulties, recent research has made great strides in reconstructing many facets of the everyday experience of late antique women. The demographics of female ritual power should be no exception; the same documentary, material, and literary records that make explicit *what* was being done also hint at *who* was doing it. The primary fact that examining late ancient female rituals of power in Egypt brings to light is the universality of women’s magic. Just as contemporary research has dispelled the notion that magic was practiced only by women, the evidence makes attributing the exercise of personal ritual power to any single group of women alone impossible.

The names which appear in magical papyri dedicated by specific female clients

³⁷⁷ As the information presented in the previous chapter attests.

³⁷⁸ Kalavrezou, *Byzantine Women and Their World*, pg. 13. Most of whom are either noble women or examples of unusual or bad behavior, not the norm.

(and/or directed at specific female victims) display a variety of ethnic origins in their etymologies. Some are native Egyptian in character, others Greek or Latinized. A few even point to Nubian or nomadic extraction. And given the multicultural character of the late antique Mediterranean world many, even most, practitioners would have been of mixed descent.³⁷⁹ This makes it clear that women of all the many ethnicities present in the melting pot that was late ancient Egypt engaged in magical rites. Nor was magical praxis restricted by women's religious affiliations. As has been stressed repeatedly throughout this paper, rituals of power in late antiquity tended to be unreservedly syncretic in their character.

Often magical objects and spells have aspects alluding to so many different traditions that it is hard to attribute their use to adherents of any one religion and, of those with imagery and language that do appear to fall squarely within a single camp, examples can be found from all the religions that were practiced in late antique Egypt.³⁸⁰ Given the frequent complaints of religious authorities concerning members of their congregations engaging in practices considered outside the boundaries of their particular faith,³⁸¹ it is likely that even these rituals originating "purely" from one group or other were often practiced more widely. In this late ancient Egyptian milieu where people of different religious affiliations lived in constant close contact with each other, and non-canonical ritual observances flowed with particular freedom between groups, it should not be surprising in the least that women of all religions sought to exercise personal ritual power.

Historically, one of the most persistent fallacies in scholarship on magic has been

³⁷⁹ As late antique marriage records attest.

³⁸⁰ Including, as has been noted earlier in this thesis, even more obscure sects.

³⁸¹ Such as the ever voluble John Chrysostom's complaints about Christians frequenting synagogues.

the view that “popular” religious traditions like rituals of power were expressions of “low” culture, restricted to non-elite economic and educational levels of societies. This is another assumption that does not hold true for women’s magic in late antique Egypt. Magical praxis crossed all class lines. The different aims to which women employed ritual power in themselves point to how magic was used by female practitioners of all different social stations. In papyri and ostraka women present themselves as everything from the poorest of widows seeking justice to successful business owners wishing to secure a contract. Some ritualists are obviously married matrons, seeking to ritually sway their husbands or heal their children. Others are single women performing erotic magic to find lovers and husbands. Some spells appear to have been put in action by courtesans wishing to attract and retain clients,³⁸² while an equal number are the pleas of maidens worried over protecting their virginity.³⁸³

Many among this varied array of female magic workers must have been illiterate and poorly educated, as this was the state of most of the late antique population in general. But many were also members of the most sophisticated elite circles, as the accounts of the involvement of women practitioners in academic circles (both secular and religious)³⁸⁴ and among the political elite make plain. For example, female leaders of religious communities and ladies of the imperial court were deeply involved with personal ritual power as manifested in the cults of saints and their relics.³⁸⁵ Michael Psellos tells of the Byzantine empress Zoe, her sister, and her servants concocting magical perfumes and using them in the veneration of a famous icon, which among its

³⁸² Dickie, “Who Practised Love-Magic,” pg. 575-576.

³⁸³ Trzcionka, *Magic and the Supernatural in Fourth Century Syria*, pg. 104.

³⁸⁴ Such as Hypatia and Sosipatra.

³⁸⁵ And not just in this. Emperresses are even credited with doing magic.

powers could help the empress predict future events.³⁸⁶ Still more female magic users would have been members of the late antique “middle class,”³⁸⁷ using rituals of power to address various concerns in perhaps fairly comfortable but not especially exceptional lives.³⁸⁸ That women of higher status would have been reluctant to openly engage in personal rituals of power due to the possibility of social and religious censure does not seem all that likely, not only due to the sheer commonness of magical practice --which probably translated into less disapproval “on the ground” than ecclesiastical and other official sources would suggest—but because some rituals of power could actually help enhance one’s reputation rather than harm it.³⁸⁹

The variety of the material culture associated with rituals of power reinforces the diversity of their female practitioners. Examples survive of objects used in magic rites in late antique Egypt made from both commonplace and prestige materials. Articles such as paper phylacteries, rough clay figurines and ampullae, and common herbs would have been available to women at all income levels. Amulets carved from rare gems, icon plaques fashioned of precious metals, costly imported oils and incenses, and other such luxury items would not have been. This class of magical equipment must have been manufactured for a specifically elite clientele. Therefore, it can be assumed that women with great wealth *and* those of more modest means all desired to possess ritually powerful objects.

³⁸⁶ Duffy, “Reactions of Two Byzantine Intellectuals to the Theory and Practice of Magic,” pg. 88-90.

³⁸⁷ A group notoriously hard to pinpoint in the historical record, as Britt discusses in “Fama et Memoria.”

³⁸⁸ Exceptional in the sense of great infamy or prestige.

³⁸⁹ As discussed in the previous chapter, some rituals of power were actually an expected part of women’s responsibilities. In addition to this, as Matthew Isner argued at this year’s Byzantine Studies Conference in Chicago, some magical practices, such as the wearing of certain kinds of amulets, may have actually served to advertise a woman’s piety and virtue and protect her from attacks on her honor. (Isner, Matthew S. “Magic in the Social Sphere: The Amuletic Image in Early Byzantium.” Abstracts of Papers from the Thirty-Seventh Annual Byzantine Studies Conference. Chicago: DePaul University, 2011. Pg 3-4).

While differences in medium can be tied to disparities in income, differences in iconography cannot be. Frequently the same imagery that decorates magic pieces crafted from modest materials appears on those made of expensive ones. For example, this is the case with two of the images most archetypically associated with magic done by women, the Holy Rider and Chnoubis, which appear on everything from poorly made lead seals to finely-crafted silver jewelry.³⁹⁰ Such commonalities in iconography reflect commonalities in practice and intent. By and large personal rituals of power addressed needs which were universal to the late antique female experience, so all types of women practiced them. Issues like health, love, and salvation were important whether one was a beggar or an empress.

Among the many different women who practiced personal rituals of power in late antique Egypt, women formally associated with religious life held special importance as purveyors of magical assistance. According to late antique records and literature, monks were regularly approached by supplicants wanting them to use their thaumaturgical skills to assist them with all manner of physical and spiritual problems.³⁹¹ The same must have been true for female ascetics. While not as many accounts survive concerning their careers, those that do credit the “desert mothers” and abbesses of Egypt with the same capacity for wisdom and miracles attributed to their male counterparts.³⁹² Male monks were considered especially skilled at lifting malevolent spells and demonic influences. Hagiographies---such as the account in which St. Irene (the abbess of Chrysobalanton) and her fellow sisters cured a young nun afflicted by hostile love magic through a ritual

³⁹⁰ Such as the silver armbands discussed earlier in this thesis.

³⁹¹ Frankfurter, “The Perils of Love,” pg. 497-500.

³⁹² An excellent source which discusses this is Susanna Elm’s *Virgins of God: the making of asceticism in late antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

of power that utilized the contents of a parcel of magical equipment thrown from the sky by Mary, St. Basil, and St. Anastasia³⁹³-- indicate that female monks were believed to be able to do the same.

Far from staying isolated from the outside world in their hermitages, many members of the great monastic foundations of Egypt³⁹⁴ (and solitary ascetics, as well) had regular social and economic interaction with the inhabitants of neighboring towns and villages. This interaction between “desert” and city included laity regularly availing themselves of the special ritual services that a monastic presence offered. Considering the highly gendered world of late antiquity, if some women were willing to approach male monastics for help (as hagiographies and documentary evidence testify)³⁹⁵ still more must have gone to ascetics of their sex. Women’s monasteries (at least according to their rules) did not usually allow visitation from males of the general population. Lay women, on the other hand, appear to have been allowed to come and go as they pleased.³⁹⁶ Therefore, Egyptian women would have had ample opportunity to go to their sisters living the religious life for magical assistance.

Though they are not as well documented in material from Egyptian late antiquity as their monastic counterparts, other women who held religious positions were also viewed as persons capable of exercising more than usual levels of ritual power. In traditional Greco-Roman and Egyptian religious traditions, priestesses were often credited with being able to draw on numinous powers of prophecy, fertility, execration,

³⁹³Kazhdan, Alexander. "Holy and Unholy Miracle Workers," in Henry Maguire, ed. *Byzantine Magic*. Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2008, pg. 73-82, pg.78. This is a story set outside of Egypt, but there is no reason to assume Egyptian nuns were not credited with the same ritual efficacy, especially when one considers how close a resemblance this story bears to that of the Egyptian monk Macarius healing a girl turned into a horse by love magic (Frankfurter, “The Perils of Love,” pg. 480-481).

³⁹⁴ Such as those of Pachomius and Shenoute.

³⁹⁵ Frankfurter, "The Perils of Love," pg. 483.

³⁹⁶ Kraemer ed., *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World*, pg. 98-99.

and healing. Though in literature these women generally appear exercising their skills in more formal religious settings,³⁹⁷ close readings of sources suggest that individuals also sought their help in personal matters that were ritual in nature.³⁹⁸ The level of authority exercised by prominent female members of “heretical” sects,³⁹⁹ and by women in positions that later fell out of favor in orthodox circles (deaconesses, leaders of house churches, etc), is a controversial subject in many ways.⁴⁰⁰ Nevertheless, many of these mysterious women must have been viewed as magically gifted individuals, as well.⁴⁰¹ Though late ancient Egyptian nuns, priestesses, and heretic prophetesses may seem to have little in common on a formal confessional level, they all would have been credited with especially great ritual potency for the same reasons. All were seen as having extraordinary access to sacred powers because of their special station and/or way of life.⁴⁰²

The evidence for women who acted as what might be termed professional magicians is murkier still. When they appear in the literary record, it is usually only in passing and often in writings peripherally or explicitly condemning their activities, such as polemics by disapproving church fathers denouncing unorthodox practices or moralist philosophers and satirists bemoaning the laxity of feminine moral character. Though

³⁹⁷ For example, official consultations at oracles like Delphi and participating in grand ceremonials at Philae and other important Egyptian temples.

³⁹⁸ For example, some Greco-Roman inscriptions preserve records of personal consultations at ‘official’ oracle shrines.

³⁹⁹ Such as the Gnostics and groups of women who acted as Marian priests (both of which have been touched on in this paper).

⁴⁰⁰ As is discussed throughout the essays in King’s *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, and in Kraemer’s sourcebook *Women’s Religions in the Greco-Roman World*.

⁴⁰¹ This was certainly the case for heretical groups outside of Egypt like the Montanists and Priscillianists whose female leaders and prophets are well-documented.

⁴⁰² For example, in monastic and Stoic philosophies living an ascetic life was believed to be able to enhance one’s numinous abilities. In Christian and Greco-Roman tradition virgins were also believed to be endowed with magic powers (albeit for different reasons).

these types of sources can be problematic,⁴⁰³ such scattered references nonetheless provide tantalizing clues to the existence of several kinds of female ritual specialists in late antiquity.⁴⁰⁴ The word *saga*, “wise woman,” appears in many late antique sources from Egypt and the Mediterranean area at large.⁴⁰⁵ *Saga* appears to be an all purpose title for women--both young and old-- who are skilled in rituals of power and whose magic expertise is available for hire. In Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses* several of the powerful sorcerous women the protagonist encounters during his exploits are designated by this title.⁴⁰⁶ Plutarch’s *Marius* describes a Syrian *saga* named Martha acting as kind of magician on call in the entourage of the titular great man.⁴⁰⁷ While the skills of *sagae* must have varied from woman to woman, erotic binding, hexes, medico-magical healing and oracles seem to have been their most profitable stock in trade.⁴⁰⁸

Female magic workers appear as antagonistic figures in the vitae of monks.⁴⁰⁹ In the *Life of Hypatius*, the superior of the monastery of Rufinianae near Chalcedon defeats a famous local female healer and magician.⁴¹⁰ Symeon Salos engages in spiritual combat with a woman named as a *mantissa*.⁴¹¹ This title is the feminine form of *mantis* (seer) and supports the idea that women figured among the many diviners who practiced their art in late antique Egyptian towns and rural areas.⁴¹² The latter could have been the special purview of the *agyrtria*, a type of elderly mendicant female magic worker, whom people

⁴⁰³ Given that their authors were of course primarily concerned with literary or moral effect rather than historical accuracy in the modern sense.

⁴⁰⁴ Despite their issues, presumably the archetypes they utilize have some basis in reality.

⁴⁰⁵ Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, pg. 15, 131-132, 166-167, 176, 183-192.

⁴⁰⁶ Such as Meroe and Pamphile.

⁴⁰⁷ Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, pg. 165.

⁴⁰⁸ And these of course, were several of the most popular kinds of late antique Egyptian magic.

⁴⁰⁹ And again, note that such an antagonist would not be effective in such a context if there was no basis in reality.

⁴¹⁰ Callinicus’s *Life of Hypatius* (Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, pg. 305).

⁴¹¹ Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, pg. 306-307. This is a Syrian story, but not dissimilar at all in form and content to Egyptian hagiographies of the same period.

⁴¹² Miller, Patricia Cox, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*, pg. 7-8.

consulted to cure their livestock through divination by means of sieves.⁴¹³ *Erbariae* were female experts in the magical qualities of plants, including those which could be worn as amulets.⁴¹⁴ The woman Symeon Salos confronts is also described as a maker of amulets, like those that Athanasius and other Egyptian bishops mention in their sermons.⁴¹⁵

Late antique clerics also spoke out against "hags who sing charms."⁴¹⁶ These references point to the continued popularity of *praecantrices*, singers of incantations—who seem to have operated both alone and in groups—who were consulted by other women to heal children, lay protective wards on houses, and assist with love magic in late antiquity.⁴¹⁷ The Hellenistic poet Theocritus's character Simaetha ---probably one of the most famous Greco-Roman literary examples of a female engaging in rituals of power-- goes to a woman who sings incantations to help her attract Delphis; this woman was probably a *praecantrix*.⁴¹⁸ The *dematricula* was another important type of professional woman magician, who appears to have been concerned with issues of the womb; perhaps as midwife or inducer of abortions, or both.⁴¹⁹ *Praecantrices* and *dematriculae* are usually described as elderly, and this connection of old women with magic appears repeatedly in sources from the ancient to late ancient periods. The performance of personal rituals of power on a 'professional' level was not the province of aged enchantresses solely, but they were considered especially suited to the role; not because of their experience and wisdom alone, but because their age in and of itself was

⁴¹³ Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, pg. 249. Referred to in Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*.

⁴¹⁴ Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, pg. 308.

⁴¹⁵ Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, pg. 305- 306.

⁴¹⁶ Fögen, "Balsamon on Magic," pg. 105.

⁴¹⁷ Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, pg. 165.

⁴¹⁸ Simaetha appears in Theocritus's *Second Idyll* (Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, pg. 108).

⁴¹⁹ Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, pg. 308-310.

viewed as linking them with the magically potent chthonic powers of the earth and underworld.⁴²⁰

Older women were not the only females who were believed to inherently possess an affinity for magic. A well known⁴²¹ statement by an anonymous rabbi expresses a prevailing late ancient sentiment: *rov nashim mitzuyot be-keshafim* (“Most women must be sorceresses”).⁴²² In the late antique Mediterranean women as an *entire sex* were believed to be both predisposed towards engaging in personal rituals of power and to possess magical powers as an indelible part of their feminine nature. Sources as diverse as Greco-Roman natural science treatises, Jewish mishnah, and church histories insist that the numinous potential held by women was so great that they had the ability to do everything from cast spells with a mere glance of their eyes, perform bindings by simply braiding their hair or knotting their garments, and change their shape like daimons.⁴²³ The consistent use of matrilineal formulas in Egyptian rituals of power is may be directly related to the attribution of numinous qualities to women.⁴²⁴

Magic power was viewed as intimately bound up with the female body, particularly in regards to those functions which were exclusively feminine. Female sexuality and reproductive power were viewed as mysterious and even threatening by men.⁴²⁵ Menstruation in particular was invested with magical significance in late antique culture. Purity regulations concerning menstruating women were common across late antique religious traditions and menstrual blood is often an ingredient in execration

⁴²⁰ Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, pg. 96.

⁴²¹ Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, pg. 154. And rather infamous, as it is frequently cited as one of the most revealing examples of rabbinic misogyny from this period.

⁴²² Or another translation, “most women engage in magic,” the spirit is the same in either case.

⁴²³ Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg. 94-95.

⁴²⁴ The invocation of the female line of an individual’s ancestry would thus give a practitioner access to what “magical heritage” they or/their victim would have inherited, for good or ill.

⁴²⁵ Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, pg. 175.

rituals; all this stems from a deeply rooted belief in the negative ritual effects women's bodily excretions could have.⁴²⁶ Menstrual blood and menstruating women were also credited with more positive magical properties, such as exorcism and the lifting of spells, helping with infested crops, and averting hail.⁴²⁷ Women--both their spirituality and physicality--were *other* in Egyptian late antiquity; magic--though practiced by all--was still 'other' in the cultural imagination. Thus, all late antique Egyptian women were magic, viewed as reservoirs of intriguing power and hidden wisdom perhaps not available through 'normal' (i.e. male) channels, and of danger.

⁴²⁶ Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg. 92-93.

⁴²⁷ Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pg. 92-93.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Careful examination of material, documentary, and literary evidence from late ancient Egypt and surrounding regions provides insight into the wide array of magical practices performed by late antique Egyptian women. Utilizing this full range of evidence can do much to move the study of late antique women and magic away from an exclusive concentration on the use of witchcraft as a trope in misogynist discourse and religious polemic toward increased consideration of the *realities* of female magical practice in late antiquity. Expanding the scholarly definition of “magic” to equate with the more inclusive and less loaded parameters of the term “ritual power” allows consideration not only of those practices which were explicitly named as such in contentious emic terminology of the period but *all* methods by which individuals exercised personal agency in seeking to enlist supernatural powers to their cause.

Personal rituals of power were a crucial aspect of the female experience. Women of all social classes, ages, ethnic backgrounds, and religious affiliations used them as a method of dealing with a variety of issues they encountered in their everyday lives. The exercise of ritual power was closely tied to feminine identity and the roles women played in late antique Egyptian society. Both sexes practiced magic and nearly always employed the same ritual methodologies--and frequently the same iconography also—in doing so. However, investigating the specific contexts in which rituals of power were employed elucidates gender differences within late antique Egyptian magical praxis and brings to light a fairly consistent social pattern. Namely, that those typologies of magical rites that

addressed concerns pertinent to both women and men, for example erotic and execratory binding and divination, were practiced by both genders, while practices meant to assist with an exclusively masculine or feminine issue (such as problems of pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, and the functions of women as caretakers of their households) were consequently performed only by one sex or the other. Other categories of ritual practice which applied to all individuals in general included variations in imagery and instructions that were gender specific. The most characteristic example of this can be found in the consideration of medico-magical rituals of power. Many were identical for members of both sex, but others were remedies for solely male or female ailments and thus included similarly differentiated iconography and language. The tendency of women to exercise personal ritual power on behalf of their relatives, as well as for their own sake on a more regular basis than their male counterparts, is another important aspect of gendering late antique Egyptian magic. This fact is a direct reflection of the importance placed on women as always acting in the interest of their families throughout the late antique Mediterranean. The high level of gender parity present in much of late antique Egyptian magical culture (especially when compared to other cultures and periods) is significant, and may be due to the Egyptian tradition of greater participation of women in public life, both civic and religious.

The visual, linguistic, and ritual culture of late ancient Egyptian magic was almost infinitely fluid and complex, as should only be expected in such a dynamic and multicultural society. While this consequently makes pinpointing consistencies in imagery and praxis difficult, combing the material and documentary records of the period for exemplary cases of women using magic brings to light significant practical and

iconographical trends and makes clear the breadth of female rituals of power. Apotropaic magic, healing magic, fertility rituals, magic used in pregnancy and childbearing, love magic, magic for law and business, curses, necromancy, divination, alchemy, rituals of purification and ascent, and magic for the upkeep of the household were all practiced by late antique Egyptian women.

The women who did magic in late antique Egypt were both elite and non-elite and they came from all walks of life and all faiths. Most were what could be termed ‘lay practitioners’ of magic, but some were viewed as specialists, either due to their religious position or to the fact that they performed rituals of power as a part or full time career. All of these female ritualists --whether they were maiden, matron, magician or perceived as belonging to some other late antique feminine archetype-- figured in the popular imagination of their society as not just practicing magic rituals but possessing magic power as an ineffable and ingrained facet of their identity as women. The historical traces of late antique Egyptian women and their practice of magic are diverse and enigmatic and offer a wealth of possibilities for a fuller understanding of late ancient womanhood and late antique culture as a whole. Studying their personal rituals of power provides insight into their lived experience, illuminates concerns that were both universal and profoundly personal, and gives an intimate glimpse into a world at once very different, yet still timelessly the same, as our own.

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