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# Healing Traditions in Coptic Magical Texts

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**Abstract:** Within the ‘market of healing’ of Christian Egypt (here broadly considered as the fourth through twelfth centuries CE), ‘magical’ practitioners represent an elusive yet recurrent category. This article explores the evidence for magical healing from three perspectives – first, literary texts which situate ‘magicians’ in competition with medical and ecclesiastical healing; second, the papyrological evidence of Coptic-language magical texts, which provide evidence for concepts of disease, wellness, and their mediation; and finally confronting the question of how these healing traditions might be understood within the methodologically materialistic framework of academic history, using the concepts of placebo and healing as a performance.

**Keywords:** Placebo, healing, Coptic, magic, ritual

## Introduction

“Death came soon, and it came swiftly”, Roger Bagnall tells us in *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, “[u]nlike the modern belief (...) that most infections are either self-limiting or curable, the ancient expectation was that any illness might end in death without much warning”.<sup>1</sup> Healing magic often seems anodyne when compared to more violent and dramatic curses or love spells, but we should remember that it is a response to physical and mental pain and suffering, and the vulnerability of the human body faced with sickness and injury. The crises that led people to seek out or use healing magic would have frequently been more desperate, and more frightening, than the social conflicts or unfulfilled desires that lie behind other ritual types.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bagnall 1993, 185.

<sup>2</sup> I would like to offer my thanks to Ágnes T. Mihálykó and Nils H. Korsvoll for inviting me to take part in the seminar that led to this essay, as well as to Ayda Bouanga, Alberto Camplani, Jean-Charles Coulon, Siena de Ménonville, Anne Grons, Edward O.D. Love, Ágnes T. Mihálykó, Markéta Preininger Svobodová, Joachim Quack, Antonio Ricciardetto, and Panagiota Sarischouli

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This discussion will examine the evidence for Coptic-language ‘magical’ healing practices in the textual record of Christian Egypt, a term used here to refer to the period from approximately the fourth to twelfth centuries CE. While Egypt will be the focus of my discussion, it was at this time part of a series of larger political and cultural zones – the Roman empire, the Christian and Islamicate worlds – with the result that individuals, texts and ideas circulated freely across Egypt’s borders, and so I will at times use evidence from other regions where they seem to reflect similar social situations, as well as a more remote parallel, that of modern Ethiopian magic, which represents a well-documented and closely-related living tradition.<sup>3</sup>

In this article I use the term ‘magic’ in a sense which should be distinguished from modern attempts to theorise magic as a cross-cultural universal category. I rather take magical texts as evidence for a reasonably coherent body of ritual practices which existed in Christian Egypt and related cultures, which is also attested by contemporaneous sources such as legal codes, sermons, and literary texts. Its boundaries were certainly fluid, and outsider descriptions of it are almost without exception distorted, but I will attempt to demonstrate that this approach is nonetheless useful in attempting a reconstruction of this ‘magic’.

## Magic in the Market for Healing

If someone in Christian Egypt fell sick, what did they do? Literary sources tell us that at times they visited private ritual specialists, whom they refer to using a range of terms (discussed below) which I will translate generically as ‘magician’. But visiting a magician was only one option among many, and in order to understand their role within the ‘market for healing’, it is necessary to introduce some of the other players.

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for their assistance, thoughts and suggestions. The research which lies behind this essay was carried out as part of the project *The Coptic Magical Papyri: Vernacular Religion in Late Roman and Early Islamic Egypt* at the University of Würzburg. Throughout this article I provide approximate dates for Coptic literary texts in order to give a general idea of diachronic development; these are in most cases based on those found in the PATHs database (<http://paths.uniroma1.it>), but must be considered speculative.

<sup>3</sup> Parallels between Ethiopian and Coptic magic have been observed by, *inter alia*, Frankfurter 1998, 213, 216, 260; Frankfurter 2018, 196–197; Łajtar/van der Vliet, 128–142. On modern (19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> century) Ethiopian magic, see Rodinson 1967; Young 1975; Mercier 1988, esp. 461–467; de Ménonville 2018a.

Cross-cultural studies show that the majority of illnesses, perhaps 70–90 %, are dealt with within the home, and this was likely the case in Christian Egypt too.<sup>4</sup> Pliny records that, in second century BCE Rome, Cato the Elder forbade his son from making use of Greek doctors, instead using his own medical prescriptions to treat his household, and similar attitudes may have been common throughout the Mediterranean.<sup>5</sup> We have evidence from fourth-century Kellis in Egypt's Dakhla Oasis of a household which owned a Greek-language magical handbook, and used at least one of its prescriptions to create an amulet for a family member named Pamour.<sup>6</sup>

Among the specialists whom an individual might seek outside the family, most prominent is the doctor (Greek/Coptic *iatros*, Coptic *saein*, Latin *medicus*).<sup>7</sup> In Christian Egypt, a doctor was, archetypally, an individual trained in the Greek medical tradition of Hippocrates and Galen, who understood illness primarily as a physical disorder with natural causes, such as imbalances or disturbances within the body, and who treated them using techniques such as dietetics, surgery, bleeding, cauterisation, cupping, and the application of drugs made from plant, animal, and mineral substances.<sup>8</sup> The status of doctor was theoretically distinct from that of other types of healers, and in particular magicians, although there was no specific training which qualified one as a medical doctor.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, until the sixth century CE, doctors enjoyed privileges within the Roman empire, including immunity from certain categories of taxation and service, and so they could in principle be identified by authorities;<sup>10</sup> the jurist Ulpian, for example, excludes healers who use incantations from the category of doctor,<sup>11</sup> and doctors themselves formed professional guilds in order to regulate practice.<sup>12</sup>

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**4** Kleinman 1978, 86; cf. Draycott 2012, 40.

**5** Plin. *NH* 29.6–8.

**6** The amulet is *P. Kellis* I 87, which reproduces a formula from the handbook *P. Kellis* I 85a+b. The name of Pamour's mother, Lo, a shortened form of Tapollo, identifies him as 'Pamour III' according to the prosopography of Worp 1995, 214–217.

**7** Draycott 2012, 21; Richter 2018, 6.

**8** Crislip 2005, 28–38, 100; Hirt Raj 2006, 249–254; Draycott 2012, 21–32; Nutton 2013, 53–103, 236–278. For the dependence of Coptic-language medicine on earlier Greek (and later Arabic) practices, see Richter 2014, 154–155; Richter 2016.

**9** Nutton 1985, 26–28; Draycott 2012, 20; Nutton 2013, 254–272; cf. the discussion of apprenticeships in Hirt Raj 2006, 32–37.

**10** Nutton 1985, 30; Hirt Raj 2006, 221–231; Nutton 2013, 255–256.

**11** Justinian, *Dig.* 50.13.1.3, from the first third of the third century; cf. Draycott 2012, 77–78; Nutton 2013, 255.

**12** See e. g. the seventh-century example discussed in Crum 1925, 110; Buchheim 1960; cf. Richter 2016, 42–43; Richter 2018, 6.

Alongside doctors, a second major category of healing practitioners would have been the functionaries of the Christian Church.<sup>13</sup> Several biblical passages describe healing as a key part of the Church's mission,<sup>14</sup> and the omnipresence of clergy would perhaps have made them more regularly consulted than doctors. The *Canons of Athanasius* (IV/V CE) – authoritative within Egyptian orthodox Christianity – permit the sick to sleep and be cared for within church buildings, instruct bishops to visit the sick within their diocese, and allow priests to take the salvific power of the communion bread and wine to those unable to leave their homes.<sup>15</sup> A more formal institution, the hospital (*nosokomeion*, *xenodokheion*) was developed in Syria in the late fourth century, becoming a feature of the Christian world more broadly from the fifth century onwards.<sup>16</sup> These institutions provided nursing, and (albeit to a more limited extent) medical treatment, to any who needed it, and many are attested in Egyptian papyri from approximately the sixth through eighth centuries.<sup>17</sup>

A more direct approach to healing, though, may be found in the ecclesiastical rituals for the unction of the sick, a practice which drew directly upon the miraculous healing power transmitted by Jesus to his followers, and prescribed in the letter of James.<sup>18</sup> The earliest surviving liturgical prayers for the consecration of healing oil are in Greek, from fourth-century Egypt, and involve speaking a prayer over the oil, calling upon God to empower it against disease and demons.<sup>19</sup> The version attributed to Sarapion of Thmuis may also be spoken over bread, to be consumed by the patient, or water, used to wash them.<sup>20</sup>

A much more elaborate ritual was developed in the Byzantine Church around the tenth century CE, and was adopted by the Egyptian Church by the fourteenth century CE.<sup>21</sup> Intended to take place in the patient's private chapel, it assumes a wealthy clientele, and the long ritual – consisting of nearly forty separate prayers – involved seven priests, who would each light one candle, before

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13 For a more detailed discussion of these, see Mihálykó, this issue.

14 Matthew 10.1–8; Mark 6.13; Luke 9.1–6, 10.9; James 5.13–16; cf. Kranemann 2006, 919–922.

15 Canons 15, 36, 80 in Riedel/Crum 1904 26, 32–33, 49–50 (English translation); ٢٠, ٢٦, ٤٢ (Arabic text). On this text and its date, see Wipzycka 2019.

16 Crislip 2005, 102–103 *et passim*.

17 Crislip 2005, 102; van Minnen 1995.

18 Kranemann 2006, 919–963; Burmester 1967, 144, cf. Wion §§ 4–5. Cf. Mihálykó, this issue.

19 See Römer/Daniel/Worp 1997; Mihálykó 2019, 65–66; Johnson 1995, 22–44, 66–67; cf. Caseau 2005; Kranemann 2006, 947–949 *et passim*.

20 Johnson 1995, 66–67. For this ritual, cf. Panagopoulos 2013, 59–60; Mihálykó 2019, 65–66; Mihálykó, in this issue.

21 Burmester 1967, 144–151; Arranz 1996; Wion §§ 19–20. I would like to thank Ágnes T. Mihálykó for providing me with information concerning this ritual.

anointing the sick person with the sanctified oil, with the anointing repeated over the following seven days.<sup>22</sup> Simpler versions were likely available for those who lacked private chapels – the ritual could also be performed, for example, by a single priest, who spoke all seven parts.<sup>23</sup>

Alongside these practices, which we could call the Church's 'official healing ministry', we can identify a 'popular healing ministry', which was linked less directly to the Church hierarchy and sacraments.<sup>24</sup> From the fourth century onwards monks took on the role of miracle-worker which had previously belonged to confessors and martyrs. The sick, or their family, might visit or write to them to ask for their intercession through prayer and ritual; such practices are attested both by literary and documentary sources.<sup>25</sup> The fourth-century John of Lycopolis is a particularly well-documented healing anchorite, who responded to requests both through prayer, and by sending blessed oil which could be used to anoint the sick, just like that created through liturgical rituals in churches.<sup>26</sup> Alongside these living holy men and women, the power of dead saints could be channelled through their shrines and relics;<sup>27</sup> a sixth- or seventh-century text refers to the sending of part of the garment of Saint Shenoute in order to treat a woman afflicted by a demon,<sup>28</sup> while shrines such as those of Saint Menas and Saints Cyrus and John in Lower Egypt could attract visitors from all over the Christian world. Pilgrims would sleep in the shrines to receive healing directly from the saints, and take part of their healing power with them as they left in the form of holy oil or water carried in flasks sold in the shrine complexes, or small tokens known as blessings (*eulogia*).<sup>29</sup>

But alongside these responses to disease – licit, for the most part, in both the eyes of the secular authorities and the church – are the magicians. Their role in healing is particularly interesting, since magic is generally described in Christian literary texts in profoundly negative terms: magicians are figures who use the power of the Devil and his demons in order to harm human society – causing

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**22** For a brief discussion of the social context, see Arranz 1996, 349. An idea of the length of the ritual may be gained by consulting the full list of prayers on Tasbeha.org ([https://tasbeha.org/hymn\\_library/cat/236](https://tasbeha.org/hymn_library/cat/236)); the English version runs to over 10,000 words.

**23** Burmester 1967, 145.

**24** For this terminology, see Meinardus 1999, 100.

**25** Crislip 2005, 21–28.

**26** Sheridan 2015; cf. Caseau 2005.

**27** Papaconstantinou 2001; Caseau 2005; Papaconstantinou 2007, 361–364; Schenke 2016; cf. Brown 1981, 113–124 *et passim*.

**28** *P. Paramone* 14 (*TM* 78710).

**29** On the shrine of Menas, see Grossmann 1986; Grossmann 1998; Anderson 2007. For Cyrus and John, see Montserrat 1998; Gascou 2006. Cf. Vikan 1982; Caseau 2005; Kranemann 2006, 926–928.

disease, seducing innocent virgins, and so on.<sup>30</sup> The occasional mentions that they might offer services as apparently harmless as the healing of disease suggests, I think, that the authors of these texts are describing real figures, rather than simply deploying a literary trope of otherness.

## Searching for the ‘Magician’ in Christian Egypt

There are several terms which lie behind the category of ‘magician’ as I use it here. The most common of these, in both Greek and Coptic, is *magos*.<sup>31</sup> Closely associated is the *pharmakos*, a more ambiguous term which could refer in some contexts to pharmacist; I will generally translate it here as “sorcerer”.<sup>32</sup> Among native Coptic terms, the most common is *refmoute* (“enchanter”, literally “one who incants”).<sup>33</sup>

It is difficult to determine if the wide range of terminology used for ‘magicians’ reveals different categories of practitioner, or if we are dealing with synonyms for the same individuals. On the one hand, the fact that similar lists are found in literary and legal texts in Greek, Latin, and Coptic may imply that we are dealing with the mechanical reproduction of standard terms which are meant to collectively capture a set of practitioners without clearly distinguishing groups within this set.<sup>34</sup> On the other, John Dickie and Jacques van der Vliet have suggested that some terms may attempt distinguish, for example, between literate and illiterate practitioners.<sup>35</sup> A focus on magic as a literate phenomenon is found in several late antique literary texts,<sup>36</sup> while the *Sentences of Paul* (late III CE) provide Roman legal rulings that those who possess books of magic (*libros magicæ artis*) should be executed or exiled, according to their station.<sup>37</sup> Although the *Canons of Atha-*

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<sup>30</sup> For the trope of the magician in Christian literature, see Sanzo 2019, 209–213; van der Vliet 2019a, 269–274 *et passim*.

<sup>31</sup> For the term *magos* in Greek, ultimately derived from the Persian term for the caste of fire priests, see Nock 1972; Bremmer 1999; Graf 2019, 116–123. For Greek and Coptic terminology, see van der Vliet 2019a, 242–244; cf. Gordon 1995, 363 for categories of healers in the earlier Graeco-Roman world.

<sup>32</sup> For the sense of “pharmacist”, see, e. g., *P. Oxy.* XIV 1727 ll. 7, 32 (II–III CE; *TM* 29015); cf. Förster 2002, 847.

<sup>33</sup> Crum 1939, 192a.

<sup>34</sup> On such lists, see Sanzo 2019, 223–236.

<sup>35</sup> Dickie 2001, 260; van der Vliet 2019a, 248.

<sup>36</sup> See, e. g., Zacharias of Mytilene, *Life of Severos of Antioch* 74–102 (Kugener 1904, 57–75; Brock/Fitzgerald 2013, 64–74 [English translation]); *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* 38 (Dawes 1948, 114–115).

<sup>37</sup> 5.23.18.

*nasius* are unable to impose death penalties, they condemn “sons of priests” – a term either for the clergy, or their families – who have used books of magic (*jōōme m-magia*) are to be excommunicated and handed over to the secular authorities.<sup>38</sup> These canons also imply that the use of such books was associated particularly with the practitioners known as *magoi*; the penance of the *magos* is prescribed as consisting in the burning of his books, followed by three years of daily fasting.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, the next canon, dealing with other practitioners, such as astrologers (*refka ounou*) and enchanter (*refmoute*) prescribes only one year of penance.<sup>40</sup>

As a word used to translate *epaidos* (“singer, magician”) in the Coptic Bible, it is difficult to tell if the use of *refmoute* depends upon literary precedents, or if it referred to a social category which would have been identifiable to contemporaries. The *Martyrdom of Apa Til* (VII–VIII CE) describes a man going to an “exorcist-enchanter” (*exorgēstēs n-refmouti*) to try to help his daughter, suffering in childbirth.<sup>41</sup> Slightly more detailed is the reference in the *Panegyric of Macarius* (V–VI CE) to *refmoute* chanting (*moute*) to the sicknesses of the body.<sup>42</sup> The *Discourse of Apa John* (IV–VI CE)<sup>43</sup> and the *Canons of Apa Johannes* (VI–VII CE?)<sup>44</sup> imply that the *refmoute* had the role of a “snake-charmer”, both healing snakebites and controlling serpents with their voices; these last two references are somewhat suspect, since they are reminiscent of Biblical passages in which *refmoute* translates *epaidos*, but their gnomic character would seem to imply that they draw upon common contemporary wisdom rather than purely scriptural allusions.<sup>45</sup>

**38** Canon 71, in Riedel/Crum 1904, 108 (Coptic text), 135 (English translation of Coptic), ٣٩ – ٤٠ (Arabic text), 47 (English translation of Arabic).

**39** Canon 72 in Riedel/Crum 1904, 108 (Coptic text), 135–136 (English translation of Coptic), ٤١ (Arabic text), 47 (English translation of Arabic). Although the word *μαγος* is missing from the Coptic text, the Arabic *الساحر* (*as-sāḥir*) seems to translate it elsewhere, and it would be expected here, following on from Canon 71.

**40** Canon 73 in Riedel/Crum 1904 ٤٠ (Arabic text), 47 (English translation of Arabic), cf. 73–74. While the Coptic version does not survive, comparison with Canon 41 allows some of the underlying Coptic texts to be established.

**41** Balestri/Hyvernat 1908, text vol. 103 1.8–104 1.2 (Coptic text), trans. vol. 68 1. 25–69.3 (Latin translation) = CC0304.

**42** CC0134; in Amélineau 1888, 109 ll. 3–6 (Coptic text) ll. 5–7 (French translation).

**43** “It is not a serpent which has bitten me, that I should go to a *refmoute*” (Budge 1910, p. 17 ll. 22–23 (Coptic text), p. 163 ll. 10–11 (English translation) = CC0182).

**44** 99: “the wild serpent thus puts aside the wildness of his nature and he takes upon himself a tameness against his nature, and he comes to the hand that calls him in a great tameness because of a small word he has heard from the mouth of the *refmoute*”; Atanassova/Platte/Schroeder 2019).

**45** E. g. Ecclesiastes 10.11, Sirach 12.14; cf. Crum 1939, 192.

The *magos* and the *refmoute*, therefore, are the only ideal types of ‘magician’ for which some kind of description can be given – *magoi* are literate, using books of *mageia* which might include prescriptions for many types of rituals, while *refmoute* seem to have a primarily oral practice, and may focus on healing. Note, however, that this distinction is only attested by ‘outsider’ sources.

One of the most interesting pieces of evidence for the role of magicians in healing may be found in Coptic magical texts themselves. In these we regularly find the phrase “(n)either magician (n)or sorcerer” (*oute/eite magos oute/eite pharmakos*) – usually in healing or protective rituals – promising that “neither magician nor sorcerer” will be able to harm the patient, or that a sickness will be healed, “whether caused by magician or sorcerer”.<sup>46</sup> Yet curses use the same phrase in a different way: “neither magician nor sorcerer” will be able to heal the disease caused by the curse;<sup>47</sup> magicians and sorcerers were thus understood to use their powers both to harm and to heal.

Three literary sources are particularly important for our knowledge of healing magic. The earliest is a fragment of an untitled sermon by Shenoute (ca. 347–465 CE),<sup>48</sup> head of the White Monastery confederation at Achmim in Upper Egypt:<sup>49</sup>

... in the very moment of suffering, if they fall into poverty or a sickness, or indeed into other temptations, they renounce God and they rush to the feet of enchanter (*refmoute*) and oracles (*ma n-šine*) and do other deceitful deeds, just as I myself saw the head of a snake bound to the hands of certain men, and another with the tooth of a crocodile bound to his arm, another with the claws of a fox bound to his feet – and furthermore, it was a magistrate (*arkhōn*), who claimed to be wise! For indeed, when I reproached him, saying, “Is it the claws of a fox which will heal (*talkyo*) you?”, he said to me, “It was a great monk who gave them to me, saying, ‘Bind them to yourself and have relief’”. Listen to these impieties! Fox claws, snake heads, crocodile teeth, and so many other vanities in which men put their faith, saying that they will have relief because of them, while others are led astray by them. And again in this way they anoint (*tōhs*) themselves with oil, or they pour (*pōht*) water on themselves, having received it from enchanter or sorcerer (*refpahre*), together with every other type of deceitful relief. After they have said ... again, they pour water on themselves, and they anoint themselves with water from the priest of the church, or indeed some monks. [...] If it is the oracles of demons that are of profit to you, and enchanter and sorcerer

<sup>46</sup> For examples of such phrases, see AMS 9 3r ll. 24–25 (VI CE; TM 100023); P. Berlin 8315 l.23 (VII CE; TM 107296); P. Berlin 8315 l. 6 (VII–VIII CE; TM 107297); P. Heid. inv. Kopt. 686, 141–142 (X CE; TM 100022).

<sup>47</sup> For these, see P. Mich. inv. 1190 ll. 30–34 (V CE; TM 98058); P. CtYBR inv. 1800 qua ll. 15–16 (VIII CE; TM 99993).

<sup>48</sup> See Emmel 2004, I, 6–13.

<sup>49</sup> This is the work given the name Acephalous Work A14 in Emmel 2004, II, 692–693. For discussions of this passage see, *inter alia*, Frankfurter 1998, 215–216; Frankfurter 2017, 69–70; van der Vliet 2019a, 252–254.



ers and all the other things of this type that do lawless things, indeed, go to their feet so that you will receive a curse on the earth. But if it is the house of God which is of profit to you, the Church, indeed, go there.<sup>50</sup>

Shenoute here conflates a series of different practices – treatments given by ‘magicians’, oracles, and the wearing of animal body-parts. All of these, in his presentation, are acts of idolatry, incompatibly with true Christianity. They likely represent varied phenomena – the use of fox claws and crocodile teeth, the latter against fever, is known from Greek iatromagical literature, so that the monk he mentions may have been a learned reader of Hellenic literature rather than the inventive bricoleur using local materials we might be tempted to imagine.<sup>51</sup> The oracles referred to are unlikely to be ‘pagan’ – that is, connected to the cults of the traditional Egyptian gods – for which there is no clear evidence for Shenoute’s region at this period.<sup>52</sup> Rather, the reference is almost certainly to martyr shrines in which incubation, healings and exorcisms took place, criticised in two festal letters written by Athanasius of Alexandria, and in another of Shenoute’s sermons.<sup>53</sup> By contrast, the *refmoute* and *refpahre* are said to give people oil and water in order to anoint and wash themselves in order to be healed, a practice presented as parallel to, but clearly different from, the oil and water given by priests or monks.<sup>54</sup> Thus, while the first deceitful monk mentioned is suspect for Shenoute because of the content of his practices, the more clearly ‘magical’ practices resemble those of the church, but are carried out by enchanters and sorcerers.

Our second source is the *Canons of Saint Basil* (CC0090), composed in Greek in the sixth century CE, and translated into Coptic and thence Arabic.<sup>55</sup> Although written in Syria, they were normative in Egyptian Christianity, and their transla-

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50 White Monastery Codex XY, described in Emmel 2004, I, 338–340. For the edition, see Orlandi 1985, 18–21 §§ 255–262.

51 For fox claws see *Cyranides* 2.2.34–36 (Kaimakis 1976, 116; but here against womb pain); for crocodile teeth, see Plin. *HN* 28.108; *Cyranides* 2.22.8–11 (Kaimakis 1976, 150); Ricciardetto 2018, 56; cf. Frankfurter 2017, 69–70.

52 Smith 2017, 423–447.

53 Amélineau 1911, 212–221; Brakke 1998; van der Vliet 2006, 44–48; van der Vliet 2019a, 252–253.

54 This is clear from Shenoute’s characterisation of individuals who make use of the ‘magicians’ as “limping on two legs” (§ 260), a reference to 1 Kings 18.21 – those he criticises seek healing from *both* licit (priests, monks, the Church) and illicit (oracles, magicians) sources, and he commands them to make a choice between them.

55 For brief discussions of this text, see Wipszycka 31–33; van der Vliet 2019a, 249–251.

tion likely adapted them to an Egyptian context. I give here only a few key passages, translated from the recently discovered Coptic version:<sup>56</sup>

In the time that the Lord gave the Law to Moses he said to him thus: ... you shall not go to an enchanter ...<sup>57</sup> If a cleric goes to an enchanter to chant over blood, or spit upon it: if he is a priest, he is cast out for fifteen years. ... if he is a layperson, he is cast out for seven weeks and he will be taught not go again to an enchanter. If a layperson goes to an enchanter in order that he may take some oil ... let his time be halved. If it happens that one goes to an enchanter to receive a medicament (*pahre*) from him, it is appropriate that he is excommunicated for 25 years. ...

Wherefore should a Christian go to an enchanter when they have Jesus, and we have the catholic Church? Of what profit is it to us to anoint with oil of abomination when we have been anointed with the oil of grace? Of what profit is it to us to anoint ourselves with oil of impurity that we might become dwelling places for demons, when we have been made strangers to all this through the oil of exorcism and through the holy baptism? ... The one who is sick among you, let him call upon the presbyters of the church that they might pray over him and anoint him with some oil in the name of the Lord ...<sup>58</sup>

If a Christian pours water over himself from an enchanter, which he has enchanted (*moute*): if a cleric goes to the feet of a magician who works magic, receiving any instruction in things of this manner, let him be stripped of his rank among the clergy and be cut off also from the mysteries thus in the church. If a Christian listens to the contrived words said by a magician, for example, “wait until the sun is coming up and do such-and-such a thing”, or indeed, “the full moon”, or again, “when the sun stands still, place some water before it and wash (*jōkm*) the sick person”, or again, “when the sun is coming up pronounce an invocation (*taue-aš*) over the oil and anoint (*tōhs*) him”, or “bind (*mour*) phylacteries to him”, or “take iron for yourself as a protection, it will drive away demons, for demons are afraid of iron.” ... It is easier to forgive a catamite (*malakos*) than a magician. For this reason we command that if a Christian goes to an enchanter, none of the priests will pray for him in the church or anoint him again with the oil of the sick. For it is written that it is not possible to serve God and Mammon, or the holy oil of the altar and the polluted oil of the magicians, or the prayers of the priests and the invocations (*epiklēsis*) and the phylacteries (*phulaktērion*) of the magicians.

Like Shenoute, the author of the *Canons* notes a disquieting parallel between the practices of the Church and of the magicians; both centre on anointing with oil and washing with water. But the author provides some more information; the practices of the magicians include the wearing of phylacteries, including iron, to protect from demons, and involve the speaking of formulae over the oil and

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<sup>56</sup> I am very grateful to Alberto Camplani for sharing with me photographs of the unpublished codex, Coptic Museum *inv.* 13448. For a discussion of this codex, see Camplani/Contardi 2016. The section translated here corresponds to the Arabic translated in Riedel 1900, 253–254

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Deuteronomy 18.10.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. James 5–13–16.

the water, either by the magician or the client. These rituals are said to be timed according to the celestial bodies – at sunset or midday, and when the moon is up.

Our third source is a homily pseudonymously attributed to Athanasius of Alexandria, perhaps dating to the seventh or eighth century CE.<sup>59</sup> This text is the most complex of the three, but in it we find the same ideas repeated:

For they do these impieties, and worse things, as our brother bishops who have come with us in exile have told us, much afflicted in heart, for there are some performing these abominations in the cities and in the villages. For they say that some wash (*jōkm*) their children in putrid water and in water from the assembly of the theatre, and further they pour (*pōht*) over them water of incantation (*moute*), breaking clay vessels, saying “we cast out the evil eye”. Some bind (*mour*) phylacteries to their children, created by the craft of men, those who are dwelling places of demons. Others anoint (*tōhs*) them with oil, evil with incantations, and other things, binding them upon their heads and their necks. [...] I dare to say thus, that every man who takes his children to the feet of the enchanter (*refmoute*) is in no way different to the one who offers them to demons. Rather than taking your children to the feet of enchanter, take them to the martyria of the martyrs, and they will heal. Will you not listen to James the Apostle ...?<sup>60</sup> For you have seen that the help of those who go to the church is great, for not only does it heal the physical body, but also the sicknesses of the soul, which are our sins. The one who goes to one of the enchanter, he casts the help of God away from him.<sup>61</sup>

The focus of the writer is on those who use ‘magic’ rather than the practitioners who provide it; the use of water from the theatre, and breaking pots to avert the evil eye might have been carried out without professional mediation. The anointing with oil prepared by incantation, however, and even more so the wearing of phylacteries is linked by the author to specialists, however, once described as men in whom demons dwell, once less allusively as *refmoute*.

All three sources, though separated by hundreds of years, therefore present a similar picture of the healing activities of ‘magicians’ – they heal by anointing with oil and washing with water, preparing these liquids by using incantations, sometimes carried out according to the movements of the celestial bodies, and by offering phylacteries to be worn bound on the body. From an outsider perspective, these might seem to differ little from the healing activities of the Church, which themselves consisted of speaking formulae over liquids before applying them to the body, rituals which were carried out according to regular, albeit weekly or annual, cycles. It is precisely this similarity which causes the author of the *Canons* to insist upon the absolute difference between the “oil of grace” and the “oil of

<sup>59</sup> = CC0452. For discussions of this text, see Quack 2021 1.12; van der Vliet 2019a, 251–252; cf. Frankfurter 1998, 29; Frankfurter 2017, 18; Frankfurter 2018, 23.

<sup>60</sup> I.e. James 5.13–16.

<sup>61</sup> Lefort 1958, 36 1.3–39 1.19 (Coptic text), 226 1.22–229 1.24 (French translation).

uncleanness”, and yet this insistence would be unnecessary if the distinction was clear. We should note that none of the authors clearly describe the practices as ineffective; instead, the more sophisticated Christian authors argue that magic is dangerous even if it might appear to heal – Tertullian, for example, claimed that demons could undo diseases which they themselves had caused in order to lead Christians astray,<sup>62</sup> while John Chrysostom compares such demons to slavers who used sweets and toys in order to lure children to be kidnapped and sold.<sup>63</sup> Even if magic could heal, using it would undo the salvation granted by baptism; saving the body, it would destroy the soul.

Was the ‘magician’ a real category of practitioner, a figment of the ecclesiastical imagination, or a label used by the Church for healers of whom they disapproved? This is not an easy question to answer; certainly, the picture of magicians in the literary texts we have examined is highly polemic, yet it is also fairly coherent, and the practices it describes – the use of spoken formulae, washing, anointing, and the wearing of amulets – accord fairly closely with those found in the magical manuscripts from Christian Egypt. But even if we assume that the surviving magical manuscripts belonged to the literate figures whom the Church would have described as ‘magicians’, this does not straightforwardly answer the question of their identity, these manuscripts are almost without exception anonymous. Our evidence for the identity of magicians in Christian Egypt, is therefore frustratingly slight; my impression is that magic was widely known about, but not usually openly discussed.<sup>64</sup> Yet I would suggest that there were likely a range of practitioners, some literate, using rituals transmitted in magical formularies of the type which survive, others illiterate, using orally transmitted formulae. Some of the literate practitioners may have been members of the Christian clergy; others likely belonged to a broader range of individuals.<sup>65</sup> Given the hostility

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<sup>62</sup> Tert., *Apol.* 22; 46.

<sup>63</sup> Chrysostom, *Adv. Iud.* 1.710.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. de Ménonville 2018a, 106–108 for the reluctance of modern Ethiopians to discuss magic.

<sup>65</sup> For arguments that the ‘magicians’ were primarily monks, see Frankfurter 1998, 258–264; Frankfurter 2018, 193–211; cf. Viaud 1978, 39, who mentions that some (but not all) modern Coptic magicians are priests or monks, but cf. Henein/Bianquis 1975, x – xi, who note that one copy of the *Guide for the Blind*, an Arabic collection of magical rituals using the Psalms, belonged to a tailor from Akhmim, who functioned as a ‘magician’ in his local community. A group of tenth-century Coptic magical texts were written by an individual who identifies himself as a deacon (Gardner/Johnston 2019). ‘Magicians’ seem often (though, again, not always) to have been minor clergy in medieval Europe and modern Ethiopia – see Kieckhefer 2014, 153–156, 164; Levine 1965, 71, 87 n; Rodinson 1967; Young 1975; Milkias 1976, 82–84; Mercier 1988, 461–467; de Ménonville 2018b. Cf. Russell 2011, 8–9, who notes that the creators of amulets in the Armenian and Assyrian Churches were often unordained church functionaries. By contrast, Schiffman & Swartz 1992,

towards *magoi* in Christian discourse, it is perhaps unlikely that they would have used this term for themselves, although they cannot have been unaware that their practices at least overlapped with those which the Church considered *mageia*. This ‘double-consciousness’ seems to be reflected in magical texts which refer to practices similar to their own as ‘magic’.<sup>66</sup> If they had a self-designation, perhaps they preferred more descriptive, less negative, terms such as *refmoute*.

## Negotiating the Market for Healing

Once a sick person, or their carer, decided to seek professional healing, how did they choose between the different options? The possibilities – doctors, liturgical unctions, the intervention of monks, martyr shrines, magicians, enchanters – might seem overwhelming. Again, though, the careful use of literary sources suggests some possibilities. Shenoute complains that those who have first received healing oil and water from magicians then seek further oil from monks and priests, and indeed, this pattern – of first trying one option, and then going to another, and then another if it did not work, seems to be the norm. Not only does it accord with the experience of many people in the modern West, who might successively try different biomedical and/or alternative therapies, but we find similar patterns in other cultures.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the earliest such Christian story would seem

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49–51 and Manekin-Bamberger 2020 suggest that those who produced the Hebrew-Aramaic amulets from the Cairo Genizah and the Jewish Aramaic incantation bowls in Sasanian Babylonia were professional scribes. Non-monastic users of magic attested in late antique Egypt include the inhabitants of Kellis Area A House 3, traders and craftsmen (IV CE; Mirecki/Gardner/Alcock 1997; de Haro Sanchez 2008; Mirecki 2013), the tax collector Aurelios Philammon (IV CE; Poethke/Prignitz/Vaelske 2012, 113–137), and the notary Dioscorus of Aphrodito (VI CE; MacCoull 1987; Jordan 2001); cf. Dosoo/Torallas Tovar forthcoming a.

<sup>66</sup> See e.g. *P. Macq.* I 1 (VII–VIII CE; TM 113926), which contains a procedure to heal someone from the effects of ‘buried magic’ (οὐζικὴ βρωμῆς, p. 14 ll.22–24), almost certainly a reference to an illness caused by a buried curse tablet; a ritual of this type, called a “binding procedure” (κάτοχος) which is to be written on a potsherd and buried (τωμεῖς) at the victim’s door appears on the previous page (p. 13 ll. 20–21). The most striking example, however, is *P. Heid. inv. Kopt.* 686 (X CE; TM 100022), which contains the story of the famous magician Cyprian, who responds to the failure of his demonic love spell by becoming Christian and invoking Gabriel and God the Father for the same purpose; the author of this text therefore seems to understand their own practice as a kind of ‘Christianised magic’.

<sup>67</sup> See e.g. Kleinman/Sung 1979 for modern Taiwan; Slobin 1998 for modern Mali; Thornton 2010 for South Africa.

to be that of the woman with the issue of blood, who for twelve years unsuccessfully sought help from doctors, before finding and being healed by Jesus.<sup>68</sup>

In the *Martyrdom of Apa Til*, the man who sought the holy man's help for his daughter's labour-pains had already gone unsuccessfully to both doctors and an enchanter-exorcist,<sup>69</sup> while the collections of seventh-century miracle stories attached to the shrine of Artemios in Constantinople and Cyrus and John near Alexandria contain several stories in which men visit doctors, but unable to find relief for their often agonising, life-threatening and humiliating conditions, are saved by the intervention of the saints. Sometimes, the patients are themselves doctors, driving the point home even further.<sup>70</sup> The *Life of Saint George the Chozibite* describes a sixth-century wrestler, who had been ensorcelled (*epharmakeusan*) with a sickness which made him suffer.<sup>71</sup> When the oratories and monasteries to which he was taken by his friends failed to cure him, they resorted to *magoi*, who bound an evil spirit (*pneuma ponēron*) to him, curing him, and making him invincible for two years, after which his suffering returned, worse than before. Retiring, he eventually became a monk, saving his soul, but not his body; a monk tells him that having angered God by going to magicians, the demon, and its suffering, could not leave him while he lived. Among the miracles recounted in Augustine's *City of God* is one of a man who had undergone painful surgery for anal fistulae, only to find that one remained, and then went to several different doctors, seeking second opinions. Finally, he accepted that he would have to receive further surgery, of which he was terrified, being sure that he would die. On the night before his operation, he was miraculously healed by the combined and earnest prayers of Augustine and some visiting clerics.<sup>72</sup>

These stories, a small sample of a larger literary trope, are an interesting illustration both of the way in which individuals might successively seek out different avenues of treatment, and of the way in which authors could promote their own preferred option. By mentioning their rivals – doctors and magicians – authors writing on behalf of the Church in general, or specific shrines, seem to acknowledge that they are not the only potential source of healing. And yet the stories

<sup>68</sup> Matthew 9.20–22; Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8.43–48.

<sup>69</sup> See n. 41 above.

<sup>70</sup> For the *Miracles of Cyrus and John* see, e.g., PG 87.3, 3541–3548, 3625–3626, 3545 ll. 20–21 (Greek text); Gager 2005, 262–266, nos.165–166 (English translation); in *The Miracles of Artemios* see nos. 3, 4, 20, 22, 23, 25, 32, 36 (Crisafulli/Nesbitt 1997, 80–85, 130–141, 144–147, 164–175, 188–193).

<sup>71</sup> *Life of Saint George of Choziba* 15–19 (De Smedt et al. 1888, 114–119 [Greek text and Latin translation]; Vivian 1996, 83–86 [English translation]); cf. Magoulias 1967, 245–246.

<sup>72</sup> August., *De civ. D.* 22.8

generally insist on the insufficiency of these other sources – the sick go from doctor to doctor, but only receive healing at the shrines whose stories are being told. The exceptions prove the rule; the story of the wrestler shows the danger of going to magicians, while Augustine’s account acknowledges that doctors could operate on a fistula, but stresses the suffering of medical healing in comparison to the miraculous relief offered by the Church.

This leads us to the question of the reasons for which people might decide which avenues of healing to seek out, and in what order. Here, we must once again be highly speculative. As Augustine implies, doctors were feared by many sick people. The doctor who killed his patients was a commonplace in Roman literature;<sup>73</sup> three of Artemios’ miracles describe the doctors not only as failing to treat patients, but as worsening their condition.<sup>74</sup> Then, too, they were likely often very expensive. Again, *Artemios* is a highly explicit source, listing the fees as ranging from one third of a nomisma to twelve nomismata;<sup>75</sup> based on papyrological sources these treatments would be equivalent to between two days and two and half months of pay for a doctor, and thus seem realistic.<sup>76</sup> Yet they would represent a huge proportion of a typical annual income in Christian Egypt, which, for a labourer, soldier or shopkeeper seems to have been something like 3–10 nomismata. Only the wealthiest individuals, whose income would be measured in hundreds or thousands of nomismata could easily pay these sums.<sup>77</sup> By contrast, the healing services offered by the Church, both in its liturgical and popular manifestations, did not require payment,<sup>78</sup> although patients might be expected

73 Nutton 1985, 43–44 *et passim*; Draycott 2012, 42–25; Nutton 2013, 34.

74 Miracles 20, 22, 23 (Crisafulli/Nesbitt 1997, 122–125, 130–141). For Christian attitudes to doctors, see Nutton 1985, 49–50; Kee 1986, 65; Crislip 2005, 27.

75 Miracles 23 (22/24 nomisma), 32 (1/3 nomisma), and 36 (12 nomismata) (Crisafulli/Nesbitt 1997, 136–141, 164–175, 188–193).

76 For attested fees for doctors in early Roman Egypt, see Draycott 2012, 44–45; López 2013, 58–60. Cf. *P. Méd.* IFAO (IX–X CE; TM 108434) a Coptic-language medical text which advises its reader not to administer medicine before being paid (114, 226; cf. Richter 2016, 40, and Grons in this issue); cf. Hirt Ray, 79–88.

77 Note that although I use the term ‘nomisma’ here for convenience, this unit of currency was also known as the *solidus* or *holokottinos*. See Jones 1964, I, 447–448; Haldon 1999, 121, 126; Morrisson/Cheyne 2002, 859–860, 864 *et passim*; Hübner 2005, 222–225; Scheidel/Friesen 2009 (figures for II CE); Scheidel 2010, 446, 449; Brown 2012, 6, 16–17, 295, 325. While these figures can only be considered rough indications of the general order of magnitude of salaries, especially considering that this discussion covers a period of eight centuries, contemporary inflation was relatively low; see Morrisson/Cheyne 2002, 816.

78 Cf. Panagopoulos 2013, 54. In *Artemios* miracle 36 the saint tells the mother of a sick child, whose doctor had demanded 12 nomismata from her, that the only payment he asks is that she frequents the night vigil (Crisafulli/Nesbitt 1997, 188–193).

to give donations, and wealthy prospective donors likely received greater attention, of which the deluxe ritual for anointing the sick is an example.

It is unclear if, and how, magicians would have been paid. Jan Bremmer, in his discussion of the *Acts of Thomas* notes that the apostle seems to be distinguished by his contemporaries from magicians because of his refusal to accept money,<sup>79</sup> but there are very few sources which mention the cost of magic directly, and most of these concern love spells.<sup>80</sup> The *Miracles of Mercurius* describe a boy offering to pay 10 nomismata for a love spell – quite a significant payment – but he offers this unprompted, after the magician has already offered his services, and the story stresses his family’s fantastic wealth.<sup>81</sup> An interesting example of how payment for ritual services might have worked is found in the archive of Frange, the eighth-century Theban monk whose activities included the writing of amulets and the provision of efficacious prayers. Two letters by him mention requests to create amulets for livestock, to which he responds without any mention of payment.<sup>82</sup> By contrast, a third, to a different individual, notes angrily that he and his disciple prayed successfully for his correspondent to receive a son, but that now his ‘client’ refuses to return the favour by bringing them oil.<sup>83</sup> This implies a system of reciprocity common in many small communities, in which goods and services are given upon request without any explicit demand for payment, but with the expectation that a similar request will be granted in return at an unspecified time in the future.<sup>84</sup> It is unclear whether we should understand Frange’s behaviour here as typical of a ‘magician’. It is easy to imagine a small-scale, local practitioner, for whom healing was only part of their livelihood, offering such services free of charge, but receiving goods or even money in exchange from grateful

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**79** Bremmer 2003 54–55.

**80** For other stories mentioning the cost of magic, cf. Zellmann Rohrer 2016, 56–67, 158, who cites the fictional second-century CE cases of a Syrian woman who provides a love spell for 1 drachma and a loaf of bread (Lucian, *DMeretr.* 4), and a Hyperborean *magos* who expects 20 mina (=2000 drachmas) for a successful love spell (Lucian, *Philops.* 13–14; the annual wages of an unskilled worker might be 250–288 drachmas, see Scheidel 2010, 429–435), as well as the real case of Demetrios Chloros, a late fourteenth-century Byzantine notary whose services had apparently included providing a potion for abortion and an erotic spell, for both of which he had charged 5 hyperpyra, a later coin approximately equivalent to a nomisma. In the *Life of Andrew the Fool* 35 (VII–X CE) a magician charges a woman a 1/3 nomisma for a fidelity spell for her husband (Rydén 1995, II, 172–173).

**81** *Miracles of Mercurius* 44 (Orlandi 1976, 100–101).

**82** O. Frange 190 & 191 (*TM* 141112 & 141113); cf. Crum ST 18 (*TM* 111157), which seems to be an example of such an amulet; see Boud’hors/Heurtel 2010, 158–159.

**83** O. Frange 84 (*TM* 141006).

**84** Sahlins 1972, 149–183 *et passim*; 1992, 107–141; 216; Hann 2006; Graeber 2011, 94–126. I would like to offer my thanks to Susannah Crockford for introducing me to this idea.



clients. On the other hand, we might imagine practitioners in large cities, or travelling between settlements, demanding or expecting fees. Again, parallels from other societies can be readily cited.<sup>85</sup>

Ultimately, the choice of which sources of healing to seek out were likely influenced by many factors – availability, cost, reputation, and type of disease. While doctors might have been the most respected healing specialists, they were also the most expensive, and not only were their treatments likely far less pleasant than the unction and prayers of magical or ecclesiastical healing, their materialistic methods might leave them unable to deal not only with disease-causing demons, but even with certain physical maladies resistant to medical treatment, such as quartan fever.<sup>86</sup>

## Healing Rituals in Coptic Magical Texts

### Defining the Corpus

Texts related to healing would seem to constitute the largest category of rituals within the corpus of Coptic magical texts.<sup>87</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, I have put together a sub-corpus of 75 manuscripts dealing with healing – 36 amulets created for specific individuals, and 36 formularies, containing a total of

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<sup>85</sup> Rodinson 1967, 28–30 notes that some of the various healers around Gondar (Ethiopia) ca. 1932 took payment in kind, others in cash, and some healed for free, depending upon the individual. According to Kapaló 2011, 171, traditional healers (*illaççi* and *okuyucu*) in the Orthodox Christian Gagauz community of the Republic of Moldova must be paid “so that the cure will work”, although this is often a small and/or in-kind payment. Modern Italian healers working within what Puca 2019, 114, calls the *segnatore* tradition cannot ask for payment, but will accept cash or in-kind payments if offered; one Sicilian healer would immediately donate any money she received to a charitable cause through the Church. Kleinman/Sung 1979, 9–10 note that popular ideology holds that Taiwanese *tâng-ki* healers should make no money for their services, but that in reality they make often considerable sums of money from their practices.

<sup>86</sup> Panagopoulos 2013, 65–66 on the powerlessness of conventional medicine against sorcery-caused illness. See Plin. *HN* 30.30, who notes that clinical medicines (*medicina clinice*) were almost useless against quartan fever, and therefore instead discusses the remedies of the *magi*; cf. the similar comments of Till 1951, 40 for Christian Egypt.

<sup>87</sup> The *Kyprianos* database (<http://www.coptic-magic.phil.uni-wuerzburg.de/index.php/the-database/>, consulted 13/3/2021) contains 523 magical manuscripts containing Coptic-language text, of which 184 contain texts related to healing or protection; the next most common ritual type, cursing, is found in only 78 manuscripts; cf. Dosoo 2016.

121 prescriptions for healing rituals; a further three texts cannot readily be classified as either amulets or formularies.

It has been necessary here to sharply distinguish magical from medical texts, the subject of separate treatment in this issue, so I define as ‘medical’ texts which involve only physical manipulations of the body – the application of drugs, surgical interventions, and so on – while magical recipes are those which include the performance of other ritual actions, such as the speaking of formulae, the wearing of written texts, or the burning of incense as an offering. This definition finds some support in ancient evidence; the jurist Ulpian and the author of the *Letter of Abgar*, for example describe a distinction between the physical treatment of bodily diseases, and treatment using magico-religious ritual.<sup>88</sup> This distinction also seems to be partly borne out by papyrological evidence – manuscripts containing multiple magical or medical texts often contain only one of the two types – that is, they tend to contain either multiple rituals involving the treatment of disease using spoken formulae and other ritual actions, or for creating and applying drugs without any mention of such rituals.

Yet there was likely considerable overlap and many grey areas – many ‘magical’ rituals are nearly identical to medical procedures, involving the application of drugs, but adding spoken formulae,<sup>89</sup> and there are several manuscripts which contain both medical and magical prescriptions. *P. Mich.* 136, a fourth-century bilingual Coptic-Greek formulary, contains 32 prescriptions, ranging from the creation of a silver amulet to treat gout, to the creation of a plaster using barley flour, pig fat, vinegar, and salt.<sup>90</sup> Likewise, Bibliotheca Nazionale di Napoli I.B.14.06–07 (IX–XI CE) is a fragment from a beautifully written parchment codex, containing several dozen medical prescriptions for treating various skin diseases, as well as a single ‘magical’ adjuration of various angels to heal the pustular disease called in Coptic *paeiše*.<sup>91</sup> In fact, although medical writers, and presumably practicing doctors, generally distinguished their practices from magic, they do sometimes mention amulets and spoken formulae – Galen discusses his experiments with the wearing of amuletic gemstones, although he famously decided that the stone itself effected the healing, not the carving of a figure into it.<sup>92</sup> This was true

<sup>88</sup> For Ulpian, see Justinian, *Dig.* 50.13.1.3; for the *Letter of Abgar*, see *ACM* 134 10r l.26–10v l.1: “it is said that you perform great healings without medicines (*pahre*) or herbs (*botania*)”.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. the comments of Dieleman 2011, 92, 95–96, on earlier Egyptian magic.

<sup>90</sup> For these recipes see *P. Mich.* 136 (*TM* 92874) ll. 10–17, 34–38. For the fourth-century dating given here, see Love/Zellmann-Rohrer forthcoming.

<sup>91</sup> For this text, see Zoega 1810, 626–627 (Coptic text); Till 1950, 135 no. 2; For *pa(e)iše*, see Crum 1939, 278b; Till 1950, 33.

<sup>92</sup> Gal. 12.2071–10.

of other medical writers: Soranus (ca. 100 CE) permits the wearing of amulets, which might make patients more hopeful,<sup>93</sup> while Alexander of Tralles (fl. ca 565) is one of many medical authors who preserve instructions for amulets and invocations.<sup>94</sup> Such examples problematise not only the distinction between magical and medical recipes, but also between ‘doctors’ and ‘magicians’. While it is useful to consider these as ideal types, there were likely many individuals whose healing activities would not have respected such distinctions.<sup>95</sup> The distinction between magic and medicine, then, is not absolute, but its use here will allow us to focus on particular types of procedures.

Several authors, beginning perhaps with Jonathan Z. Smith, have proposed that the broad category of ‘magic’ should be abandoned in favour of more specific descriptions of ritual types and goals<sup>96</sup> – for example, here I might speak only of healing rituals rather than of magical healing. My impression is that this approach is not satisfactory, principally because the corpus of Coptic healing magic cannot be separated from the larger corpus of magical texts.<sup>97</sup> This is apparent when we consider magical formularies containing healing texts – if we take those which contain 5 or more recipes (Figure 1), we see that while a few are concerned only with healing, most contain other types of practices too, including curses, love spells, divinatory procedures, and so on. This relationship is also apparent in archives, in which healing spells are transmitted alongside these other types of magical rituals.<sup>98</sup>

That their shared transmission is not purely coincidental is indicated by their structure; all types of magical texts tend to display similar genre features, including certain verbal formulae, among them performative statements (“I invoke you”, “I adjure you”), identification with deities (“I am Mary”), final exhortations to hurry (“yea, yea, quickly, quickly”), and the use of *voces magicæ*, *kharaktêres*, and *figuræ magicæ*, respectively, language, writing, and images intended to convey the numinosity of the texts. For these reasons, it seems clear that the papyrological genre of magical texts describes a diverse, but definable, body of

<sup>93</sup> *Gyn.* 3.42; Faraone 2018, 22–23.

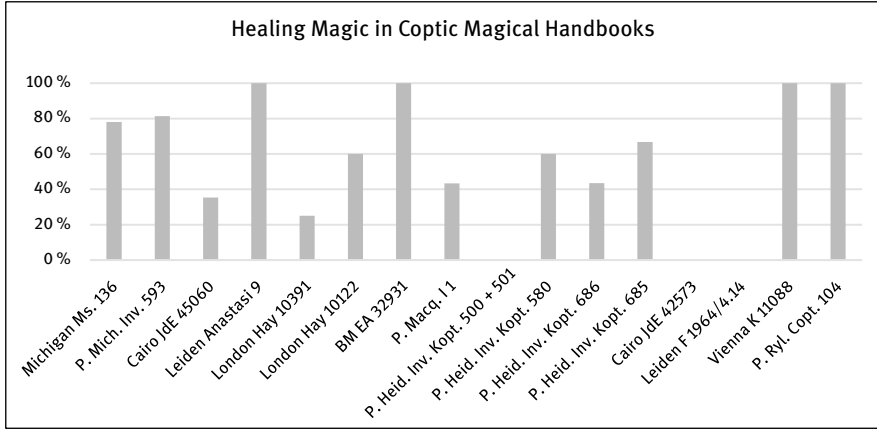
<sup>94</sup> See e.g. the prescriptions against gout in 2.579–585, cf. 2.474–475; cf. Gaillard-Seux 2014, 201–203; Bohak 2016, 367–369, 372.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Nutton 2013, 114.

<sup>96</sup> Smith 2001, 16–17; cf. Otto 2013, 319–323; Horsley 2015, 96–97.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Sanzo forthcoming. Note that this is also true for Greek and Demotic magic from the Graeco-Egyptian tradition. Compare the case of Ethiopian magicians, often a *däbtära*, who perform similar ranges of rituals (healing, cursing, divination, love spells) to those found in Coptic texts, and whose competence in one domain is considered evidence for competence in another; see Young 1975, 246–247, 252–253.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. n. 129 for the Berlin Library, and Dosoo/Torallas Tovar forthcoming b.



**Fig. 1:** Proportions of recipes concerned with healing in Coptic magical handbooks (formularies); this graph includes only examples with more than 5 recipes which are clearly preserved and classifiable.

written material attesting to particular traditions of ritual performance and transmission.

The label ‘magic’ also allows us to bring the papyrological genre into contact with the discourse of magic as reflected in literary texts. If magical texts do attest to a distinct range of ritual practices, it would be strange for contemporary writers to be unaware of them, and, as I have argued, it seems that the healing practices of literary ‘magicians’ do reflect those of the magical manuscripts. This does not mean that literary descriptions of magicians should be read naively – some, in particular those in stories of the apostles and of early martyrs, inspired by Simon Magus in the *Acts of Peter*, are clearly fantastic – and almost all are highly rhetorical;<sup>99</sup> rather, they may be used cautiously in order to partially reconstruct the otherwise lost social context of magical texts. The sermons and canons attempt to define behaviour in normative terms, but for them to do this, they must have referred to ideas which would have been shared by both the authors and their intended audience.

The last problem of definition is that of healing. There is a blurred line between disease prevention and healing, since both use the same language to describe conditions, and it seems likely that amulets created to heal a problem were worn subsequently to prevent recurrences. For this reason, I do not distinguish the two categories. Likewise, since demons were often seen as the cause of

<sup>99</sup> Cf. n. 30.

physical problems,<sup>100</sup> and there are some mentions in the manuscripts of what we might consider mental illness,<sup>101</sup> disease is considered here as encompassing physical and mental symptoms experienced as either originating from within the individual, or as the result of attacks from external forces, human, animal, or demonic, thus including what might in other contexts be considered exorcism or protection.

## The Traditions of Coptic Magic

Within the corpus of Coptic healing magic, we can observe the existence of multiple intersecting traditions, of which a few are worth discussing in detail. The first of these is what we might consider archetypal Coptic magical texts – those consisting of adjurations or invocations of the Christian God and other divine powers, calling upon him to send an angel, or healing power more vaguely conceived, upon a substance which will be used in healing. These often describe themselves as prayers (*proseukhē*, *šlēl*).<sup>102</sup> While these vary widely in length, and the details of their content, the longest examples often cover several codex pages, and would have taken a significant amount of time to read. Although David Frankfurter has suggested that these represent purely literary exercises,<sup>103</sup> they are often far shorter than contemporary liturgical formulae of the orthodox Church – such as the anaphoras – which we know were regularly performed. Several of the most elaborate of these invocations are attributed to Biblical or Patristic figures – the Archangel Michael, the Biblical Seth, the Virgin Mary, Gregory Thaumaturgos – and these often survive in multiple copies, spanning periods of hundreds of years.<sup>104</sup> The text of these invocations suggest that their

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**100** For the overlap, see e.g. *P. Macq.* I 1 p. 16 ll. 5–11 which contains an amulet (*phulaktērion*) which will work both for any disease (*šōne nim*) and those afflicted by demons; cf. n. 133 below.

**101** See e.g. *P. Mich.* 136 ll. 169–175, which describes the carving of a stone amulet for those “sick in their mind”, linking it to demonic attacks.

**102** See e.g. *Columbia inv.* 554 ll. 10, 13, 31 (VI–VIII CE; *TM* 102257); *AMS* 9 1v ll. 20, 28; *P. Lond. Copt.* 368 col. 5 l.1 (XI CE?; *TM* 108910) (*proseukhē*); *P. Heid. inv. Kopt.* 1030 l. 29 (XI CE; *TM* 113762); *P. Ryl. Copt.* 104 l. 8 (XI–XII CE; *TM* 98059) (*šlēl*).

**103** Frankfurter 2019, 608–625, referring to *P. Macq.* I 1. The length of this text is a little over 2000 words, (a typical size for the longer magical prayers) about a fifth of the length of the ritual for the unction of the sick discussed above (n. 22).

**104** For Michael, see *P. Heid. Kopt.* 686 (X CE; *TM* 100022), cf. Kropp 1966, Pezin 1983, 23–26; for Seth see, *P. MMA* 34.1.226 (V–VI CE); *P. Mich. inv.* 593 (V–VII CE; *TM* 100021), cf. Zellmann-Rohrer 2017, with an edition of the former; for the Virgin Mary see Meyer 1996; Meyer 2001; Meyer 2003;

original purpose was healing, although many have since been adapted to be used for all the typical rituals of Coptic magic – love and favour spells, curses, divination, good business, and so on.<sup>105</sup> While these often survive only in Coptic, a few of them are also attested in Greek, albeit in later copies, but since the direction of translation of literary texts is almost without exception Greek to Coptic, it seems likely that this was their original language, although their translation into Coptic must have happened very early, and displaced the original Greek-language tradition in Egypt. Since the earliest copies of ‘magical’ prayers of this type appear in the fourth to sixth centuries CE, this is perhaps the period in which they were composed,<sup>106</sup> as Christianity became the predominant religion, and as texts in the Graeco-Egyptian magical tradition begin to disappear.<sup>107</sup> While these long prayers are a minority among the surviving formularies, they may represent the models from which shorter invocations were developed, since these latter often reproduce their phraseology verbatim.<sup>108</sup> Coptic magical invocations show some continuity with the predominantly Greek-language magical papyri – the use of *kharaktēres* and *voces magicae* are among the most striking of these, and exact parallels can often be found in the two traditions – but they also show striking differences. While ecclesiastic writers associated magical texts with paganism, the surviving magical texts from post-fifth-century Egypt are overwhelmingly Christian in their inspiration, with deities such as Helios and Hermes, prominent in the Graeco-Egyptian texts, replaced by the Trinity, saints, and angels. The Christian trappings of these magical invocations likely made them acceptable to many Christians – the Greek copy of the *Prayer of Mary* was inscribed on the walls

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Łajtar/van der Vliet 2017, 126–202; for Gregory Thaumaturgos see *AMS* 9 1r l. 1–8r l. 12, cf. Łajtar/van der Vliet 2017, 135.

**105** See, e. g., *P. Heid. Kopt.* 686 43–44, 128–143, 168–170, 245–250, which imply the original purpose of this prayer was healing, even though its later sections (250–274) contain a wider range of rituals; the unpublished parallel from the Collège de France (Pezin 1983, 23–26), which lacks these additions, would seem to confirm this. Compare the prayer to the Bakthiotha in *P. Macq.* I 1; an originally exorcistic function is implied by, e. g., p. 3 ll. 4–10, confirmed again by the parallel texts in *BKU* I 23 (VI CE; *TM* 102254) and *P. Lond. Copt.* 1008 (VI–VII CE; 98061) which lack the additional recipes.

**106** Cf. Łajtar/van der Vliet 2017, 135. The earliest exemplar of the *Prayer of Mary* in Coptic is *AKZ J* (*TM* 100020), which may date to ca. 600 CE; *P. Iand. inv.* 9 (*TM* 102075) has previously been dated to V/VI CE, but this may be too early. The earliest version of the Prayer of Jacob, which parallels the prayer to Seth attested by *P. MMA* 34.1.226 and the unpublished Sorbonne *inv.* 2498 (both Coptic), is *PGM* XXIIb, dating to IV CE.

**107** For an overview of linguistic change in magical texts, see Dosoo/Torallas Tovar forthcoming b.

**108** See, for example, the references to “splitting stone and dissolving iron” discussed in Łajtar/van der Vliet 2017, 148–149.

of the tomb of the Archbishop Georgios of Dongola (d. 1113 CE)<sup>109</sup> – but others would have considered them as magical nonetheless. A list of proscribed books dating from the sixth century lists among them “all amulets which have been composed, not by angels, as they pretend, but by the magical arts of demons”, almost certainly references to prayers of the type discussed here.<sup>110</sup> One indication of the “magical” nature of such texts to outsiders might be their use of genre features such as *voces magicae*; while the presence of these secret divine names would be one index of the secret knowledge they contained for practitioners and their patients, they were also mentioned in patristic works as characteristic of magic and heresy, with many of the most common, such as Abrasax, mentioned by name.<sup>111</sup>

A second group of magical texts are those which I call ‘charms’, consisting primarily of brief narratives, often called *historiolae*, which are intended to provide a parallel to, and therefore a solution for, the problem which they are intended to treat.<sup>112</sup> A particularly well-known group among Coptic charms are those which recount the misadventures of Horus and his rescue by his mother Isis – most of the surviving examples are love spells, in which Horus descends to the underworld, falls in love with a woman, and calls out to Isis for help when the woman rejects him.<sup>113</sup> Nonetheless, these belong to a very long tradition of Egyptian charms, with parallels traceable back to the Middle Kingdom, and seem to represent adaptations of healing spells.<sup>114</sup> One of the longer Horus-Isis charms retains this original function, being intended to heal a stomach ache,<sup>115</sup> while another charm attested in a fourth-century codex, to help a woman in childbirth, mentions Isis alongside Amun and Thoth.<sup>116</sup> Many of the later charms replace the traditional Egyptian gods with Christian figures – in one example, a deer calls out to Jesus for help in childbirth,<sup>117</sup> while in another a man burned by fever encounters Jesus and Mary and asks them for help.<sup>118</sup> Even the versions which retain

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109 Łajtar/van der Vliet 2017, 80–202, no. 9.

110 *Decretum Gelasianum* 244–245.

111 For patristic knowledge of Abrasax, see, e. g., Irenaeus, *Cont. Haer.* 1.24.7; Ps.-Hippol., *Haer.* 7.14; cf. the comments of Origen, *Cels.* 6.32 that the some of the names used by Gnostics came from “magic”.

112 Cf. Blumell/Dosoo 2018, 221–222.

113 Blumell/Dosoo 2018, 221–250; cf. Frankfurter 2009; Hevesi 2019.

114 Blumell/Dosoo 2018, 241–243.

115 *P. Berlin* 8313 ro col. 2 + vo (VII–VIII CE; *TM* 98044).

116 *P. Mich.* 136 ll. 17–34; see Dosoo forthcoming a; Love/Zellmann-Rohrer forthcoming.

117 *Berlin P.* 8313 col. 1 ll. 1–18.

118 Naqlun N. 78/93 (X–XI CE), in van der Vliet 2019b, 345.

Horus and Isis show signs of Christianisation – the charm to heal a sore stomach, for example, ends with the phrase “it is Jesus who grants healing”.<sup>119</sup>

These Coptic charms can be fruitfully compared to similar charms known cross-culturally: the Horus-Isis healing spell shows phraseological parallels with a group of Latin charms,<sup>120</sup> demonstrating that the Egyptian tradition was part of a larger Mediterranean practice. Both the short, rhythmic nature of the Coptic charms, and these cross-cultural parallels, suggest that the charms were a primarily oral practice,<sup>121</sup> although it is difficult to say if they would have been widely known, or the preserve of specialists, such as the *refmoute*. Nonetheless, the examples that we have are by necessity written, and thus perhaps instances of such oral formulae being captured in writing, displaying adaptations to their new literary environment.<sup>122</sup>

The final tradition which I would like to highlight here is the copying and wearing of otherwise non-magical Christian texts as amulets. The best known of these is the use of incipits, primarily those of the Gospels and a few Psalms (in particular LXX 90),<sup>123</sup> but we also find references to the healings of Jesus – in particular that of the woman with the issue of blood as a prototype for the healing of menstrual problems, and of Peter’s mother-in-law for fevers<sup>124</sup> – as well as the use of the apocryphal correspondence of Jesus with King Abgar of Edessa (either in whole, or in part),<sup>125</sup> and lists of saints, such as the Martyrs of Sebaste.<sup>126</sup> Classifying these as magical highlights the problematic boundaries of the term: the Gospels and Psalms, at least were canonical, and authors such as Augustine and John Chrysostom, otherwise concerned about the use of magic, declare that the use of Biblical texts in healing processes was licit.<sup>127</sup> Yet, from an etic perspective, the wearing of folded texts as amulets surely represents a single practice,

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**119** *Berlin P.* 8313 vo l. 8.

**120** Blumell/Dosoo 2018, 244.

**121** Blumell/Dosoo 2018, 251–255; cf. Frankfurter 2009, 238–240.

**122** Blumell/Dosoo 2018, 254–255.

**123** Sanzo 2014.

**124** Matthew 8.14–15; Mark 1.29–31; Luke 4.38–39. For uses in magical texts, see e. g. *P. Moscow Copt.* 36 (VI–IX CE; Jernstedt 1959, 84–85); British Library MS Or 6948 (2) section D (VII–X CE; *TM* 100114); *P. Hermitage Copt.* 65 ll. 11–13 (X CE; *TM* 105607); cf. Sanzo 2014, 55; Arranz 1996, 302–303 for the use of this pericope in the later Byzantine rite.

**125** See Bélanger Sarrazin 2017, 377–378, with nn. 46, 47, 408 for a partial list of instances of the Jesus-Abgar correspondence.

**126** For the martyrs of Sebaste, see, e. g., O. Eleph. Wagner 322 (VI CE; *TM* 34326); *AMS* 9 15v ll. 1–22; *P. Berlin* 8317 (VII–VIII CE; *TM* 63026); *P. Berlin* 8318 ll. 40–41 (VII–VIII CE; *TM* 63027); *P. Berlin* 8332 (VII–VIII CE; *TM* 63027).

**127** John Chrys. *In 1 Cor. hom.* 16.9.7; Aug. *In Io. tra.* 7.12; see Sanzo 2014, 161–162; Calhoun 2019.



regardless of the canonical status of that texts, and an awareness of this similarity is present in texts which justify the prophylactic use of Biblical texts, proposing them as an alternative to magical amulets.<sup>128</sup> If these texts demonstrate few of the typical genre features of Christian magic, we should note that they do have a material relationship to other types; the Berlin Library, a collection of eighth century magical texts which seems to have been collected by a single individual, contains invocations to various Christian figures (including the Devil), charms containing stories of both Jesus and Horus, lists of the names of the Martyrs of Sebaste and the 24 Elders of the Apocalypse, and instructions for the use of the Psalms in healing.<sup>129</sup> Thus, while the use of such Christian texts is less clearly ‘magical’ than that of charms and invocations, they were among the tools used by the practitioners who drew upon these other traditions.

These three traditions – invocations, charms, and biblical texts – must again be taken as ideal types; while most Coptic magical texts are readily assigned to one of the three categories, there are several examples of overlap between them. Charms usually end with invocations spoken by the characters in their narratives, although these show much more variation than the stories themselves, perhaps suggesting the infiltration of elements from the invocation tradition in their written versions.<sup>130</sup> Likewise, amulets consisting of Biblical texts at times demonstrate features such as *kharaktēres*.<sup>131</sup>

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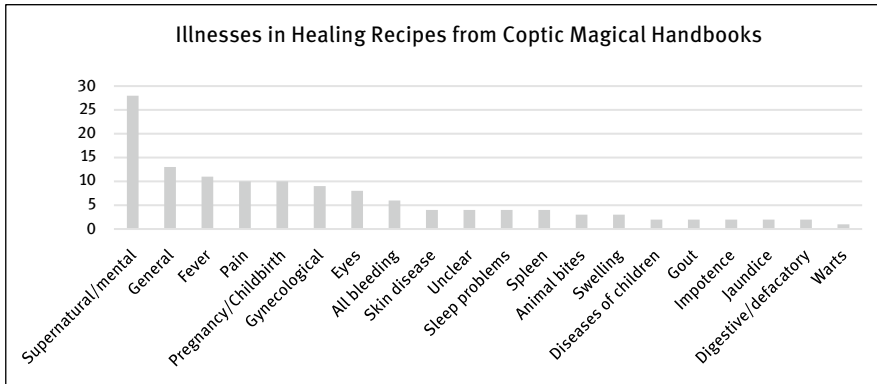
**128** Sanzo 2017, 234–239, discussing Aug. *In Io. tra.* 7.12.

**129** *P. Berlin* 8327 (TM 108886) contains the Prayer of Mary ‘in Bartos’, while *P. Berlin* 8320 (TM 105606) invokes the Devil. For the charms with Jesus and Horus, see *P. Berlin* 8313; for lists of the names of the Martyrs of Sebaste, see Berlin 8317, *P. Berlin* 8318 ll. 40–41, *P. Berlin* 8332, for the Elders of the Apocalypse, see *P. Berlin* 8330 (TM 108887). *P. Berlin* 8324 (TM 92891) includes the instructions for the use of *diapsalms* to heal various complaints. For this collection, see Dosoo forthcoming b.

**130** Blumell/Dosoo 2018, 254–255.

**131** E. g. *P. Köln* VIII 340 (V–VI CE; TM 61663); *P. Pintaudi* 11 (VI CE; TM 144552); *P. Mich. inv.* 1559 (VII–VIII; TM 102263).

## Disease in Coptic Magic



**Fig. 2:** Illnesses represented in recipes from Coptic magical handbooks. The vertical axis represents number of recipes represented. Since the number of recipes (121) is smaller than the number of illnesses (128), some recipes are intended to deal with more than one illness.

Among the diseases which magical texts were intended to deal with, there is a slight difference between the types of diseases mentioned in formularies and in amulets; in part this is likely to be a consequence of the fact that there are far more recipes (121) than amulets (36), but since amulets often list multiple maladies which they are intended to deal with, while recipes are often more specific, this was not a foregone conclusion. Of the 36 amulets, the gender of the person for whom they were created is clear in 27, of which 17 are male, and 10 are female, and it is notable that there seem to be no real differences in the maladies treated in women and in men, with the exception of amulets relating to pregnancy and gynaecological problems, restricted to women (Figure 3).

Most prominent in formularies, and present, but to a lesser extent, in the amulets, are diseases of supernatural or mental origin. Mental diseases are often expressed by their symptoms – crying (*rime*), fear (*hote*), disturbance (*štortr*) – or directly, as “madness” (*mania*) or “sickness of heart” (*šōne n-hēt*). The terms for supernatural attackers include “demon” (*daimōn*), “(unclean) spirit” (*pneuma (n-akatharton)*), “power” (*energeia*), “evil eye” (*eier boone*), “envy” (*phthonos*), “magic” (*mageia, pharmakeia, hik*), “sorcery” (*pharmakeia*), as well as the “plots of the adversary” (*epiboulē m-p-antikeimenos*) – a phrase drawn from the Christian liturgy.<sup>132</sup> Very little sense is given of the physical effects these agents have

<sup>132</sup> See, e. g., *Prayers of Sarapion* 17 ll. 12–13, in Johnson 1995, 66–67.

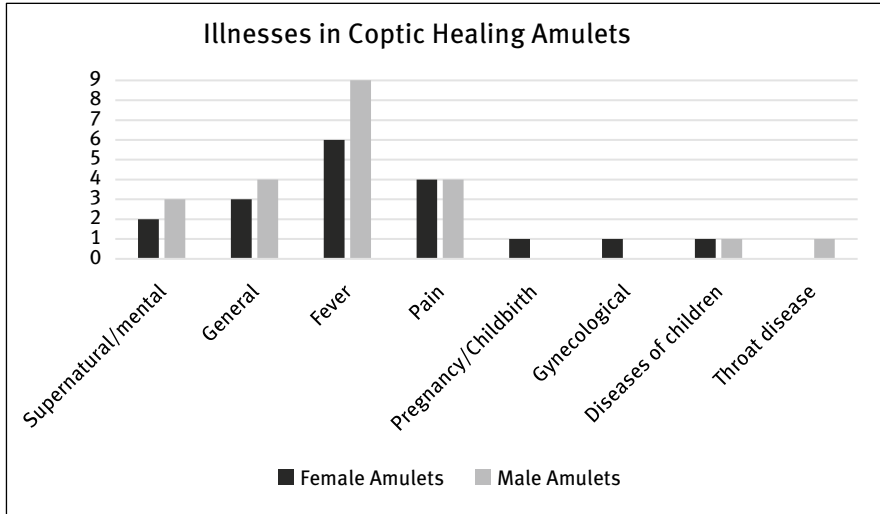


Fig. 3: Illnesses represented in Coptic healing amulets, divided according to gender.

on their victims, but literary mentions of the effects of demonic attacks, and the fact that they are routinely listed alongside physical diseases, suggests that these manifested in recognisable symptoms.<sup>133</sup> Occasionally, the magical texts suggests a glimpse into folk demonology – among hostile powers we find *entēr*, literally “gods”, a plural which had been lost in standard Coptic,<sup>134</sup> but which perhaps suggests some memory of the pre-Christian deities as malign spirits, while one late text (IX–XI CE) mentions beings called *apalaf* and *aberselia*.<sup>135</sup> The latter is perhaps a form of Alabasdria, a legendary princess who had become a child-killing demon of a type familiar cross-culturally in the Mediterranean, and the text is indeed intended to protect a pregnant woman and her future children.<sup>136</sup>

Next in frequency are more general terms for sickness and suffering – the most common of these is “disease” (*šōne*) which may be prefixed to other words to form the names of more specific maladies, and is often paired with “infirmity” (*lojlj*).<sup>137</sup> These often occur together, with texts promising to heal “every sickness

133 Cf. Crislip 2005, 17, 78; Young 1970, 5–7.

134 *P. Lond. Copt.* 524 (ll. 44–45) (TM 98056); Rossi’s ‘Gnostic’ Tractate p. 19 ll. 8–9 (TM 98062); Columbia Coptic Parchment 1 & 2 ll. 18–19 (VII–VIII CE; TM 102257); *P. Berlin* 11347 vo. ll. 8–9 (VII–IX CE; TM 98055); for this word see Crum 1939, 230b.

135 *P. Lond. Copt.* 524 ll. 22, 35, 43.

136 Van der Vliet 1991, 232–233.

137 Crum 1939, 150b – 151a.

and every infirmity” (*šōne nim mn lojlj nim*),<sup>138</sup> for example. This pairing translates the Greek pairs *nosos kai astheneia/malakia*, found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, as well as liturgical prayers for preparing the oil for the unction of the sick.<sup>139</sup> Similar, though less common, are description of diseases which focus on discomfort – “pain” (*tkas*), “suffering” (*hise*), “ache” (*mkah*), “aching” (?) (*klim-klim*), “throbbing” (*kōlh*), “strain” (*jlak*).

The most common specific complaint is fever – encountered regularly in formularies, and the most common type of amulet. The pre-eminence of fever accords with Greek-language amulets, as well as broader evidence for medical care in Egypt.<sup>140</sup> Modern biomedicine considers fever as a symptom rather than a disease, usually caused by the immune system in response to infection, which could result from a number of conditions ranging from malaria to physical injury.<sup>141</sup> As one of the most common conditions in Egypt, it has a rich vocabulary in Coptic; some terms, such as *asik*,<sup>142</sup> seem to be generic, while others capture its symptoms in greater detail, focusing on either the subjective experience of burning (*kauma*, *hmom*) or of being cold (*aroš*, *ermont* (?), *δκῶb*).

Greek terminology distinguished the different recurrent fevers caused by different species of mosquito-borne malaria<sup>143</sup> – tertian fever (*puretos tritaïos*), recurring in 48-hour cycles, caused by *Plasmodia ovale*, *P. vivax*, or *P. falciparum* (the most deadly); quartan fever (*puretos tertaïos*), with its 72-hour cycle, caused by *P. malaria* – as well as other kinds, perhaps unrelated to malaria: daily (*amphēmerinos*, *kathēmerinos*), diurnal (*hēmerinos*), and nocturnal (*nukterinos*).<sup>144</sup> Coptic magical texts preserve only a specific name for tertian fever, *šou met-šomnt*.<sup>145</sup> These terms are often used in long lists, intended to cover every possible type of suffering arising from fever, linking them to more general symptoms, such as pain: “take away fever, cold, shivering, chill, aching, ague, tertian fever, pain from

**138** E. g., in Vienna, Nationalbibliothek K 08635 Pap ll. 30–31 (V CE; *TM* 91417); Louvre E 32317 l. 5 (XII CE, in Bosson 1998).

**139** Matthew 4.23, 10.1, 9.35; Luke 4.40; cf. *Prayers of Sarapion* 17 ll. 17–18, in Johnson 1995, 66–67. For this pair and their use in magic, see de Bruyn 2008; Bélanger Sarrazin 2020. Compare the terminology from the later Byzantine ritual gathered by Arranz 1996, 300.

**140** De Haro Sanchez 2010, 132; Kotansky 2019, 547–548; Draycott 2012, 72–81; Nutton 2013, 32–33; Chronopolou, this issue.

**141** Evans et al. 2015; Draycott 2012, 72–76; Nutton 2013, 32; Hamlin 2014, 6.

**142** Till 1951, 40–41.

**143** Draycott 2012, 72–73; Kotansky 2019, 548.

**144** For these terms in Greek magical papyri, see de Haro Sanchez 2010, 132.

**145** See *P. Ryl.Copt.* 104 Section I.19; *Oxyrhynchus* 39 5B.125/A ll. 12–13, 53 (X–XII CE; *TM* 98045); for this term see Crum 1939, 566b.

the head and the body of Poulpehe the son of Zarra”,<sup>146</sup> reads one late amulet. These amulets against fever often make reference to the Three Hebrew Youths from the Book of Daniel, who were saved from being burned in a furnace by the intervention of an angel,<sup>147</sup> and are therefore invoked for salvation from the fire of fever.<sup>148</sup> One set of instructions for creating such an amulet includes a drawing of them to be copied, using their standard iconography – three men praying in orant position – surrounded by magical *kharaktēres*.<sup>149</sup> Unfortunately, none of the surviving fever amulets contain such a drawing.

A large number of texts are intended to deal with specifically female problems, related to menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth. Menstrual problems are encountered primarily in formularies, where a common heading is “a woman whose blood is under her” (*ou-s’hime ere-pe-snof haro-s*), an expression whose sense is clear from its usage in the Coptic New Testament to refer to the woman with the issue of blood.<sup>150</sup> The rituals, though diverse, often involve the creation of an amulet for the woman to wear, alongside the recitation of formulae, and occasionally the anointing of the woman’s genitals.<sup>151</sup>

A number of other formularies are intended to help with problems of conception, in one case specifically aimed at undoing infertility which might have been caused by a human or divine curse.<sup>152</sup> Another recipe prescribes an amulet for a woman who has miscarried in the past, to stop her children from dying,<sup>153</sup> while a late amulet aims to protect not only a woman, but her home, the child in her womb, and every child born to her, from a wide range of diseases and supernatural threats.<sup>154</sup> Still other recipes are intended to help women who are in childbirth – either the child is delayed in coming, or childbirth is made difficult by pain which might be understood to have an organic cause, such as a crooked

**146** Oxyrhynchus 39 5B.125/A ll. 49–56:  $\text{ⲕⲓ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲙⲓⲡⲟⲃⲉⲥ ⲙⲈⲚ ⲡⲓⲔⲁⲖⲒ ⲙⲈⲚ ⲡⲓⲔⲁⲣⲟⲩ ⲙⲈⲚ ⲒⲚⲙⲟⲛⲦ ⲙⲈⲚ ⲡⲓⲩⲟⲩ ⲙⲈⲚ ⲡⲓⲔⲓⲕⲔⲥ ⲉⲚ ⲧⲁⲡⲉ ⲙⲈⲚ ⲡⲥⲟⲙⲁ ⲛⲡⲟⲩⲗⲡⲉⲗⲉⲛⲧⲥ ⲛⲁⲗⲣⲣⲁ$ .

**147** For such amulets, see Brashear 1983, 106–107; Mihálykó 2018, 54–55.

**148** For the ‘magical’ names of the Three Hebrew Youths which appear in these texts, see Brashear 1983, 106–107; Van der Vliet 1991, 236–239.

**149** *P. Heid. inv. Copt.* 685, 18 ll. 1–14 (X CE; *TM* 102074); for a discussion of the image, see Dosoo forthcoming c.

**150** Matthew 9.20; Mark 5.25; Luke 8.43; for the use of this construction in older Demotic texts, see cf. Strasbourg D 1338 l. 1 (I–II CE; in Spiegelberg 1911, 35–36); *PDM* xiv.1197–1198 (II–III CE).

**151** For the use of amulets, see, e. g., *P. Heid. inv. Kopt.* 580 ll. 7–8 (IX–X CE; *TM* 102082); *Cologne inv.* 1850 (*TM* 704888); Vienna K 05520 Pap (*TM* 91401); for anointing of the woman’s genitals, see, e. g., *P. Mich.* 593 p. 9 ll. 3–7.

**152** *P. Morgan Copt.* 10 (VII CE; *TM* 99570).

**153** *P. Heid. inv. Copt.* 686, 271.

**154** *P. Lond. Copt.* 524.

birth canal.<sup>155</sup> Another is intended for a woman who is unable to express milk to feed her child.<sup>156</sup>

A small group offer protection from *jatfe*, a word which covers small crawling creatures – snakes, lizards, scorpions, and so on – which might injure through biting or stinging.<sup>157</sup> Other texts deal with skin disease (*paiše*), warts (*kion*), or jaundice (*šn-ikteros*, *šōne pa-p-noub*). Eye problems – very prominent in medical texts – are less common in magical material;<sup>158</sup> references to the healing of the blind (*bile*) may be found in generic enumerations of the powers of prayers, inspired by the healing ministry of Jesus, but specific eye complaints generally focus on either eye pain (*tkas n-bal*) or ‘darkening’ (*hlostn*, *skoteue*), this latter likely referring to the onset of blindness.<sup>159</sup> A few other body parts are the subject of special attention, including the throat, kidney, spleen, and stomach.<sup>160</sup> A group of texts concerning to gout (*podagra*), and to swelling (*šafe*), the latter perhaps referring to a range of problems which modern medicine might separate into inflammation, pleurisy, and tumours.<sup>161</sup> Finally, a few recipes seem to be intended to deal with insomnia – for those who cannot sleep (*ōbš*) or rest (*kyn-hrok*), or who are afraid of the night.<sup>162</sup>

## Healing in Coptic Magic

### Concepts of Disease and Healing

We may observe that despite the diversity of diseases mentioned in Coptic magical texts, the ritual responses are relatively restricted. Here I will propose three main

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**155** For delayed childbirth, see Vienna K 11088 ll. 2–5, B ll. 9–12 (X–XI CE; Hevesi 2015); for a crooked birth canal see *P. Berlin* 8313 col. 1 ll. 15–16.

**156** *P. Mich. inv.* 593 p. 1 ll. 8–12.

**157** E. g., *P. Kell. Copt.* 56 (IV CE; *TM* 128633); *P. Michigan* 593 p. 5 l. 19 – p. 6l. 2; *P. Ryl. Copt.* 104 ll. 8–18. For the concept of *jatfe* (older *ddf.t*), see Aufrère 2013–2014.

**158** For eye problems in medical texts, see Draycott 2012, 61–71; Nutton 2013, 31.

**159** For *tkas n-bal* see *P. Ryl. Copt.* 102 ro ll. 6–23 (VII–VIII CE; *TM* 108909); for *hlostn* see *London Hay* 10391 ro l. 60; BM EA 29528 vo 3 (VII CE; *TM* 82864); for *skoteue* see *P. Mich.* 593 p. 6 l. 16 – p. 7 l. 1.

**160** See e. g. *Latrones* 4 (VI–VII CE; Delattre 2014) (throat); *P. Mich.* 136 133–149 (kidney-stones); *P. Michigan* 593α ll. 15–18 (V–VI CE; *TM* 108813); *P. Macq.* I 1 p. 15 ll. 22–24; Vienna K 08303 ll. 9–11 (X–XI CE; *TM* 91443) (spleen); *P. Berlin* 8313 ro col. 2 & vo (stomach).

**161** Crum 1939, 610a-b; Till 1951, 37–38.

**162** *P. Mich.* 593 p. 7 ll. 1–3, 3–5; Vienna K 11088 ll. 6–10; *P. Heid. inv. Kopt.* 686, 263.

concepts of disease implicit in the texts – disease as process, disease as foreign entity, and disease as bodily disorder. The first of these, *disease as process* seems to be the most common, though least explicit. Diseases in Coptic are regularly expressed using the circumstantial conversion, describing an ongoing action being suffered by the patient or part of their body, while healing is described using words indicating the end of processes – the most common word for ‘heal’ is *lo*, literally ‘to stop’, while other diseases may be said to ‘desist’ (*kyō*).

The second, and most explicit model is *disease as foreign entity*. In this model, the disease is understood as being caused by an agent – a demonic entity, magic, a wind, a worm – which must be “cast out” (*nouje/site ebol*), “driven out” (*diōke*), “lifted off” (*fi ebol*), or forced to “come out” (*ei ebol, anakhōre*) of the body.<sup>163</sup> While we might imagine these to be metaphors, the collection of miracles surrounding the shrine of Saints Cyrus and John describes disease-causing worms leaving the bodies of sufferers through vomit or excrement,<sup>164</sup> and Maxime Rodinson records that in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Ethiopia, where similar models were present, healing was likewise often accompanied by the expulsion of the disease agent in the form of diarrhoea, or worms and other small creatures observed to exit the body.<sup>165</sup>

The third, and most complex model, is of *disease as bodily disorder*. In this conception, the disease is described as an unnatural state, which varies depending on the specific disease. In one text, childbirth is impeded by a crooked uterus, which must be straightened;<sup>166</sup> in another a sore throat is caused by the throat being out of its proper place, to which it must be restored.<sup>167</sup> Menstrual bleeding is usually likewise understood as the blood being out of place – ‘under’ the woman – and healing this problem is brought about by ‘gathering’ (*ōl*) the blood back into the body.<sup>168</sup> Fever – understood as a heat – may likewise be extinguished (*ōšm*).<sup>169</sup>

**163** *P. Moen Ro* ll. 1, 15 (IX–X CE; *TM* 98046) (*nouje ebol*); *P. Lond. Copt.* 524 ll. 18, 21, 35, 42, 124 (*site ebol*); *P. Strasbourg K* 201 l.6 (IX–X CE; Burns 2014) (*diōke*); *P. Berlin* 11347 vo l. 6; *Oxyrhynchus* 39 5B.125/A l. 49; *P. Lond. Copt.* 368 col. 11 l. 2 (*fi ebol*); *P. Berlin* 8109 ll. 15–16 (*ei ebol*); *P. Lond. Copt.* 368 col. 4 l. 8 (*anakhore*).

**164** *PG* 87.3, 3432, 3484.

**165** Rodinson 1967, 47–48.

**166** *P. Berlin* 8313 col. 1 ll. 15–16.

**167** *Latrones* 4 ll. 25–26.

**168** E. g., *P. Macq.* I 1 p. 16 l. 1; *Cologne inv.* 1850 ro col. 1 l. 3.

**169** E. g., *P. Heid. Kopt.* 685 p. 18 l. 4.

It is interesting to note that the idea of disease as imbalanced bodily humours – standard in Hippocratic medicine and its descendants – is not apparently to be found in the magical texts.<sup>170</sup>

## Ritual Processes

A ‘typical’ Coptic magical ritual seems to have consisted of three key acts – a spoken formula, the burning of an offering (usually incense), and the creation of an empowered object, often the formula itself in a written form, which served to give the temporally-bound ritual a permanent material form. This principal is explicit in Ethiopian magic, where a spoken formula (*dəgam*) must be spoken daily to be effective, whereas written ones are continually effective once the oral formula has been spoken over them, only needing to be renewed by burying once a year.<sup>171</sup> This basic ritual structure would then be adapted in order to accomplish the goal of the ritual – for a curse or love spell the empowered object would be placed in a grave, at a crossroads, or at the home of the victim. For a revelation spell, the object might be placed below the practitioner’s head while they slept. In the case of healing and protective magic, however, the object would usually be worn as an amulet, folded and either pierced with a thread or hung on a necklace or armband, which would then be bound to the patient. Although this outline gives a general impression of the structure of Coptic magical rituals, it does not do justice to their diversity, particularly in the case of healing practices.

The simplest element to discuss is the offering, which is almost always a fragrant resin – mastic (the most common), frankincense, storax, costus, myrrh – although occasionally other substances, such as calamus, bitumen, and gourd are specified.<sup>172</sup> These are the same incenses used in other types of magical procedures (love spells, curses, and so on), which appear in older Graeco-Egyptian magical recipes, and would have also been used in non-magical contexts, for example, in liturgical and funerary rituals, as well as in medical recipes.

The objects to be empowered are typically of two types – liquids and written amulets – although several recipes use both. The liquid is usually water, wine,

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**170** I would like to thank Ágnes T. Mihálykó for pointing out this absence.

**171** Young 1970, 162–163; Shelemay 1992, 250–251. We have no evidence of similar rituals of renewal of written Coptic amulets, but it is possible that they existed.

**172** Calamus (*opokalamon*): British Library MS Or 6796 2, 3 verso l. 103 (VI–VII CE; *TM* 100019); British Library MS Or 6796 (4) + MS Or 6796 l. 48 (VI–VII CE; *TM* 100020); bitumen (*asphaltion*): *P. Heid. inv. Kopt.* 686, 258; gourd (*koukourbita*): British Library MS Or 6796 (4) + MS Or 6796 l. 48.



oil, or some mixture of the three. This is often to be of a special type – fragrant rose-water, wine of the first fruits ((*ap*)*arkhē*), the type used for communion wine<sup>173</sup> – or Tobi water – the water blessed with healing power by the bishop during the feast of the Epiphany in the month of Tobi.<sup>174</sup> In the more complex rituals, which seem to derive from the complex invocation tradition of which the *Prayer of Mary in Bartos* is the most common example, the liquid is prepared in a ‘pot’ (*kylaht*, *khuthrinon*), into which seven branches or leaves from a range of plants (olive, myrtle, bay, mint, palm, Abraham wood, mary plant, etc.) are placed.<sup>175</sup> The less complex recipes still often involve some mixing of materials – laurel in water, cumin and pepper in wine.<sup>176</sup>

Written amulets may be inscribed on paper or parchment sheets, or, less often, ostraca, and written with blood (of a white dove, vulture, or camel).<sup>177</sup> As for their contents, they seem to have consisted of images – often stylised depictions of the angels to be invoked<sup>178</sup> – along with *kharaktēres* and, at least sometimes, the text of the spoken prayers.

The manner of speaking the formula varies: in a few cases, it is spoken over the patient, and specifically over the affected body part or wound.<sup>179</sup> More often, the formula is spoken over the liquid, amulet, or whatever other *materia* is to be empowered.<sup>180</sup> The act of empowerment is, where explicit, conceived of in highly Christian terms; these formulae are *epiklēseis*, in which a divine power – most often an angel – is called upon to descend upon the object, sealing the liquid, standing in protection over the patient, or resting upon the image which depicts them.<sup>181</sup> This conception directly mirrors the *epiklēsis* of the Christian anaphora,

173 See, e. g., *P. Mich. inv.* 593 p. 6 ll. 15 – p. 7 l. 1 (twice); *P. Berlin* 8313 ro col. 1 l. 13; London Hay 10391 ro l. 11. For the liturgical use of wine of the first fruits, see Canons of Basil § 99 (Riedel 1900, 277); Burmester 1967, 82. For a discussion of this word in documentary contexts, see Wipszycka 2009, 556–565. For the use of the wine of the first fruits (*hʿyt.t n pʿ ʾirp*) in earlier magic, see, e. g., *PDM* xiv.433.

174 See Drescher 1958, 60–61; Burmester 1967, 250–256. Cf. Arranz 1996, 339 for the use of the water blessed during the feast of the Theophany alongside wine and oil in the later Byzantine healing rite.

175 British Library MS Or 6796 2, 3 verso ll. 104–111; British Library MS Or 6796 (4) + MS Or 6796 ll. 49–52; *P. Heid. inv. Kopt.* 685 p. 9 ll. 1–7; Łajtar/van der Vliet 2017, 94–94, l. 39.

176 *P. Mich.* 593 p. 6 ll. 3–4; *P. Macq.* I 1 p. 15 ll. 3–4.

177 British Library MS Or 6796 2, 3 ll. 111–112 (white dove); London Hay 10122 ll. 4–6 (VI–VII CE; *TM* 99566) (camel blood with white of dove egg); *P. Heid. inv. Kopt.* 686, 254 (vulture blood). On the use of animal blood in Coptic magic, see Dosoo forthcoming d.

178 For Coptic magical images, see Dosoo forthcoming c.

179 E. g., *P. Lond. Copt.* 525 l. 21.

180 E. g., *P. Berlin* 11347 12–15; *P. Macq.* I 1 p. 13 ll. 26–27; *P. Michigan* 593 p. 11 ll. 8–12.

181 E. g., *P. Lond. Copt.* 524 ll. 9–10; *P. Lond. Copt.* 1007 ll. 6–7 (*TM* 98051).

the consecratory element of the eucharistic prayer, in which the Holy Spirit is invoked to descend upon the bread and wine, but the request for God to send the Spirit, and other powers, served as a more general ritual mechanism for the creation of empowered objects in other rituals, such as the creation of the oil used in baptism, or the anointing of the sick.<sup>182</sup> This indicates that this aspect of magical texts originated, at least in part, from private adaptations of liturgical processes.

Once the object had been empowered by the speaking of the formula, it could then be put to use. If the object was a liquid or otherwise edible, it might be consumed; otherwise it could be poured (*pōht*) over the patient, or used to wash (*jōkm*) or anoint (*tōhs*) them or their environment.<sup>183</sup> A strange reference to “breathing” or “blowing” (*nife*) a liquid was suggested by the original editors to refer to an inhalation,<sup>184</sup> but since it refers to wine used to treat a skin disease, a more promising solution may be to understand reference to the practitioner spitting it over a patient. Spitting (*nej taf*) is mentioned as a practice of enchanters in the Canons of Basil,<sup>185</sup> is known in Ethiopian magic, and would be appropriate for the verb, which refer to the action of a serpent spitting venom.<sup>186</sup> If the empowered object was an amulet, it would be bound (*mour*) to the body, where specified on the neck and/or forearm(s).<sup>187</sup>

Once again, these rituals correspond very closely to the descriptions found in the literary texts discussed above, and the terminology used for the key processes – pouring, anointing, washing, binding – is identical; although the astrological timings mentioned by the *Canons of Basil* are rare, we do find them.<sup>188</sup>

If the outlines of the rituals are clear, the precise relationship between their variants and the disease being treated is less so. In the more ‘medical’ texts not discussed here, we often find *materia* chosen according to culturally-attributed qualities, or practices such as the fumigation of the womb, intended to have a

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**182** For a discussion, see cf. Kropp 1930, III, 182–196.

**183** See, e. g., *P. Mich. inv.* 593 p. 8 ll. 4–6, p. 9 ll. 3–7; *P. Heid. inv. Kopt.* 686, 257 (pouring); *P. Mich.* 593 p. 6 ll. 3–4, p. 6 ll. 5–7; *P. Macq.* I 1 p. 15 ll. 3–7 (washing); *P. Mich.* 136 l.1; *P. Mich.* 593 p. 6 l. 16 – p. 7 l. 1; *P. Macq.* I 1 p.12 l. 19 (anointing).

**184** Worrell 1930, 259; Mirecki 1994, 446.

**185** See the translation above.

**186** *P. Mich.* 593 p. 7 ll. 10–12; for the verb *nife* see Crum 1939, 239a. For spitting in an Ethiopian therapeutic context, see Rodinson 1967, 46, 51.

**187** E. g., *P. Mich. inv.* 593 p. 6 ll. 7–9; *P. Heid. inv. Kopt.* 580, l.8 (IX–XI CE; *TM* 102082); Vienna K 07092 ll. 11–12 (IX–XI CE; *TM* 91410).

**188** In cases where specified, the ritual must be carried out at the full moon; see *P. Berlin* 8109 l. 18 (VII CE; *TM* 107296); London Hay 10391 ro 11; *P. Heid. inv. Kopt.* p. 9 ll. 5–6. Similar instructions are found in other rituals, such as curses; see e. g., the curse and love spell found in *P. Heid. inv. Kopt.* 683 ll. 18, 20 (X–XI CE; *TM* 100000).

physiological effect on the diseased body part.<sup>189</sup> In the ‘purely magical’ texts, however, this is less apparent. There are very weak associations between the acts of pouring liquids and treating bleeding<sup>190</sup> and washing and treating jaundice,<sup>191</sup> but all of these problems may be treated by other procedures, and these same treatments may be used for other complaints. Rather, the ritual procedures often seem to vary more according to the formularies, and hence perhaps the traditions, to which they belong – the recipes of *P. Mich.* 593 generally involve speaking a formula over a liquid which is used to anoint, and or rarely to wash, or is drunk; *P. Mich.* 136 more often applies *materia* directly to the body, while London Hay 10391 makes more extensive use of written amulets.

## Placebo and Magic in Christian Egypt

On the ninth of March 1932, a young Coptic woman living near el-Badari in Upper Egypt was stung on the chest by a scorpion. A healer named Butros Salib Girgis Bahum Biyush was called, who copied an amulet onto a piece of paper, depicting an image of a huge black scorpion, surrounded by Arabic and Coptic text calling upon God to overcome the power of the scorpion sting, making reference to the Biblical promise in Psalm LXX 90 that the Lord would tread upon scorpion and serpent and the power of the Adversary. The woman survived, and subsequently lived to an advanced age.<sup>192</sup>

Though about a thousand years later than the practices discussed here, this more recent ritual seems to represent a later variant of the same tradition.<sup>193</sup> It thus demonstrates that Coptic healing magic could indeed ‘work’ – a patient treated with it could recover. Indeed, the medical anthropologist Jean Benoist notes that it is almost banal to observe that, according to their patients and practitioners, *all* healing systems works, a fact abundantly attested by over a hundred years of studies.<sup>194</sup> And yet modern scholars usually work within the framework of scientific materialism, and therefore automatically reject the idea that a paper amulet might actually heal a scorpion sting. It is typical, and useful, to bracket

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**189** See, e. g., *P. Mich.* 136 ll. 161–165. For the Greek background of these practices, see Aubert 1989; Faraone 2011.

**190** *P. Mich.* 593 p. 8 ll. 4–6, p. 9 ll. 3–7.

**191** *P. Mich.* 593 p. 6 ll. 3–4, *P. Macq.* 11 p. 15 ll. 3–7.

**192** Schulz/Kolta 1998, 89.

**193** For images of scorpions on amulets, see Berkes 2019; Dosoo forthcoming d; for the use of Psalm LXX 90 see Sanzo 2014, 106–120.

**194** Benoist 2008; cf. Kleinman/Sung 1979, 24.

our own beliefs while discussing ancient magic – as I have tried to do above – but the problem of efficacy remains unaddressed, a problem that does not arise in the same way when talking about breadmaking or the construction of domes in late antique Egypt. Here I will try to explore this problem, using Benoist’s insights, alongside those of other scholars, to suggest some ways in which Coptic magical healing practices could be understood within the methodologically materialistic framework within which most academic history takes place. Note that the problem of efficacy, as posed here, arises from the translation of practices across paradigms, rather than being inherent to Coptic magic.<sup>195</sup>

The abandonment of the evolutionist approaches which dominated late nineteenth and early twentieth century approaches to ritual has necessitated more complex responses to the apparent conflict between materialism and non-medical healing, and attempts to focus on purely symbolic aspects of ritual, while often insightful, do not seem to fully do justice to healing which may be expected or experienced.<sup>196</sup> As a result, scholars have often long tried to understand non-biomedical healing through the materialist explanations available to them – psychic powers, psychotherapy, and, more recently, placebo. As Benoist observes, placebo is the term used by biomedical science for the ensemble of effects experienced as the healing or amelioration of symptoms which are *non-specific*, that is, they cannot be attributed to specific therapeutic effects of the treatment.<sup>197</sup> The concept of placebo, in a broad sense, therefore allows the materialist framework of biomedicine to take into account the observation that all healing practices can be experienced as effective, but we should note that placebo has two, somewhat different references in biomedical contexts.<sup>198</sup> In the randomised controlled trials intended to test new therapeutic interventions, placebo refers to a baseline of non-specific outcomes which treatments must outperform in order to be considered successful: Only statistically meaningful differences between groups assigned randomly to receive the treatment being tested (treatment group), or

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**195** This is not to say that late antique Christians simply accepted ‘magical’ healing; rather, the interpretative problems it posed were different; see, e. g., nn. 62–63 above. “‘Proof’ phrases” and statements of quality of the type discussed by Grons in this issue are occasionally found in the Coptic magical texts, but less often, it seems, than in the medical texts (or even in the earlier Greek magical papyri). Nonetheless, these should probably be understood as promising that the particular ritual is effective, whereas the problem of efficacy for modern researchers concerns the whole system rather than particular rituals.

**196** Cf. the discussion of symbolic, performative and emotional approaches to ritual in Sørensen 2007, 14–28; and the authors listed below at n. 208. For a discussion of older evolutionist approaches, see Tambiah 1990, 1–64.

**197** Benoist 2008.

**198** For this distinction, see Benoist 2008; Benedetti 2009, 4–11; cf. Finnis *et al.* 2010, 686.

no real intervention (control group), can demonstrate efficacy. Both the treatment and control groups are recognised as benefitting from non-specific ‘placebo effects’; if the treatment is effective, then the treatment group will demonstrate additional benefits due to the treatment.

The second type of placebo effect is found primarily in the clinical context. Placebo here refers to non-specific effects produced by the patient’s reactions to the therapeutic context, such as experiences of analgesia (pain relief) which may be caused by the release of brain chemicals, for example.<sup>199</sup> This effect, sometimes known as ‘true placebo’, has in turn been understood as evidence of the body’s capacity for self-healing, and has become the subject of clinical trials of its own that attempt to define it and understand its possibilities and limits.

As we explore the mechanisms by which Coptic magic might have worked, including placebo, we should acknowledge that some of the materials practitioners used may have had specific effects.<sup>200</sup> Washing a wound or sore with water, or applying oil to it might be understood as meaningful, if basic, therapeutic interventions within a biomedical framework, and more complex mechanisms may be at play in substances used in other procedures.<sup>201</sup> However, it is unlikely that this is the case in most rituals – the basic ritual process varies very little, and does not seem to be regularly tailored to specific disorders. Nonetheless, we may note that the rituals are far less intrusive than the bleeding, surgery, or prescription of drugs which might be called for by Hippocratic medicine.<sup>202</sup> In early modern Europe, so-called weapon salves were applied to weapons that had caused wounds, rather than the wounds themselves, which were expected to heal as a result of the sympathetic link that existed between the weapon and wound.<sup>203</sup> The fact that these salves often seemed to be effective has been hypothesised to result from the fact that the wounds were simply cleaned, rather than being treated with salves, which, before the development of modern hygiene, might themselves cause serious infections.<sup>204</sup> Likewise, Coptic magical rituals might have often healed simply by not causing harm.

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**199** On placebo in general, see Price/Finniss/Benedetti 2008; Finniss *et al.* 2010.

**200** But cf. Moerman 1979, 60, who notes that analyses of Native American healing suggest that specific pharmacological effects were not seen as “a more vital (...) portion of the healing process than song and dance”.

**201** For an exploration of some active ingredients in Greek magical rituals, see Sarischouli, this issue, as well as Grons, this issue, for a discussion of the problems of investigating these effects.

**202** Cf. Draycott 2012, 76, who suggests that the practice of bleeding may have contributed to the spread of disease.

**203** Debus 1964; Hendrick 2008.

**204** Debus 1964, 403 n. 68; Hendrick 2008, 161 n. 2.

This capacity for the body to heal itself given time is a second nonspecific factor which may have been relevant. While diseases in Christian Egypt were frequently more life-threatening than today, many would nonetheless be self-limiting, and have a natural course, with symptoms varying over time – generally becoming more serious before improving. If patients sought healing when their symptoms were acute, they would therefore often recover over time, even if the healing intervention had no specific effects; observational studies have noted that non-biomedical healing is most effective for self-limiting diseases.<sup>205</sup>

A third group of factors may be linked to individual and group psychological effects. The imprecision of memory, and the desire to justify the decision to take a particular course of action, such as seeing a healer, and to please that healer may result in an improvement in symptoms being perceived or reported where it has not really occurred.<sup>206</sup> Individuals may therefore remember symptoms being worse before treatment, or report them as being better after a treatment, not because it has had material effects, but simply because it has occurred. We may also include here the idea of symbolic healing, or the theory that sickness has both a physical component (disease) as well as a social one (illness),<sup>207</sup> which sees (some) diseases as arising from socio-psychological causes, which the symbolic process of ritual may resolve.<sup>208</sup> While this explanation is less popular now than in the mid-twentieth century heyday of psychoanalysis, it is likely that some psychosomatic illnesses would have been susceptible to treatment by the purely symbolic aspects of Coptic magic.<sup>209</sup>

Turning at last to the ‘true placebo’ effect, we should note that recent studies have shifted the focus from the effect of the inert placebo to a consideration of the wider psychosocial context in which the effect takes place – the interaction between doctor and patient in the therapeutic environment.<sup>210</sup> This effect is measurable: studies of pain have found that up to 55 % of the pain relief we receive even from active painkillers is due to placebo.<sup>211</sup> These effects are greater in studies which specifically look for the placebo effect – something which may seem at first surprising, but which is likely due to the fact that studies looking at

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**205** Welch 2003, 26; Finniss *et al.* 2010, 686; cf. Kleinman/Sung 1979, 9 on Taiwanese traditional healing, and Young 1975, 260 on Ethiopian magic.

**206** Cf. Price/Finniss/Benedetti 2008, 571.

**207** Kleinman 1978, 88–91; Kleinman/Sung 1979, 8.

**208** For symbolic approaches to healing, see Lévi-Strauss 1963; Turner 1967, 359–393; Moerman 1979; Kirkmayer 1993.

**209** Cf. Kleinman/Sung 1979, 9, 11–12, 16, who observed that many visitors to Taiwanese *tāng-ki* healers suffered from “somatization of psychological and interpersonal problems”.

**210** Welch 2003; Price/Finniss/Benedetti 2008, 567; Benedetti 2009, 32–34.

**211** Welch 2003, 28; Benedetti 2009, 53–83; Finniss *et al.* 2010, 687–691.

placebo place more stress on ‘ritual’ aspects of the healing process, amplifying the effects of the patient-client interaction.<sup>212</sup>

The mechanisms of the placebo effect are not fully understood: these may include anxiety reduction, somatic focus (attention paid to symptoms and their changes), classical conditioning effects resulting from the association of active medications with their therapeutic context, and the physiobiological effects of expectations resulting from verbal suggestions and treatment.<sup>213</sup> All of these (except perhaps classical conditioning) would clearly apply to magical rituals – the fact of undergoing treatment would reduce anxiety, the naming of symptoms may have triggered somatic focus, and the promise of healing, mediated by recognisable symbols such as oil, water, and incense, would create expectations of efficacy.

There are two problems in attributing Coptic magical healing too broadly to the placebo effect, however. One is a problem of sources – despite our best efforts, we know very little about its practitioners; they are almost invisible in our sources, with authority instead apparently residing in the rituals themselves, and the powers they invoke. There is thus very little specific we can say, based on this corpus, about the key ‘doctor’-patient relationship.

The second problem is that the magical texts do not seem to focus on particular categories of disease. Given the fact that analgesia is one of the best proven actions of the placebo effect, we might expect that pain management would play a major role in healing primarily based on placebo, yet pain is only one among many complaints. One of the most common categories, fever, often caused by malaria, seems an unlikely candidate for the placebo effect.<sup>214</sup> Menstrual problems might be more promising, since studies have shown that disordered menstruation has a psychological dimension, with perceptions of the volume and frequency of bleeding often depending more upon mental factors, such as depression, than on measurable factors such as volume of blood.<sup>215</sup> Nonetheless, given the prevalence and real danger of gynaecological problems, of which dysmenorrhoea may be one manifestation, this explanation can only be partial.<sup>216</sup>

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**212** Finniss *et al.* 2010, 689.

**213** Price/Finniss/Benedetti 2008, 570, 575–576, 578–580, 585; Benedetti 2008, 38–51; Finniss *et al.* 2010, 687–688.

**214** Although cf. n. 86 for Pliny’s observation that ‘clinical medicine’ was unable to effectively treat quartan fever, which may perhaps suggest one reason for its prominence in magic.

**215** Chen/Giudice 1998.

**216** Wasserheit 1989; Chen/Giudice 1998; Harlow/Campbell 2000; Livingstone/Fraser 2002. See Slobin 1998 for a rich account of the negotiation of the process of healing disordered menstruation in the life of a modern woman in rural Mali.

We therefore seem to find that we have too many possible explanations: the specific effects of ingredients, prevention of more harmful interventions, the body's natural capacity to heal and the self-limiting nature of most diseases, group psychological effects, and the 'true placebo effect'; no doubt many others could be added. How can we decide which of these would have been the most important, or relevant, in any particular 'magical' intervention?<sup>217</sup>

Here I would like to use once again the approach of Benoist, who warns that the concept of placebo risks concealing, or simply re-absorbing into the biomedical model, the complex social context within which healing may take place.<sup>218</sup> I propose instead to use Benoist's concept of healing as a performance,<sup>219</sup> a narrative which takes place in time according to a socially-given script,<sup>220</sup> something which we may be able to recover from the textual and discursive evidence which we have.

This is not to say that we should ignore the physical realities of disease which lie behind our sources; the individuals who sought out magical healings would have had real symptoms, which would have had causes, developments, and resolutions. Our problem is that these are lost to us; a final disease or injury killed all of these individuals, and the bodies which experienced them are gone, or at best separated from the texts which attempted to mediate their wellness. Benoist calls the disease a 'discourse on the symptom', and it is here that I think we can locate the link between textual discourses and physical realities.<sup>221</sup> To say that the disease is a discourse on the symptom means that bodily sensations are developed into culturally-specific concepts of disease, which might be understood, as we have seen, to have causes and resolutions entirely unrelated to those of modern biomedicine.

Understanding disease and healing discursively, we see that the performance of magical healing would begin when an individual who had experienced symptoms, or observed them in a someone close to them, sought out a practitioner. The healer would confirm that the person was sick, and presumably diagnose the complaint and perhaps its causes. The symptom would thus enter the framework of a culturally-comprehensible disease, within which any changes – positive or negative – could be understood. If, after the performance of healing, the symptoms receded, for any of the possible reasons listed above, the healing would be understood to have been effected by and within the framework of the magical healing

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**217** Cf. Benoist, in Moerman 1979, 66.

**218** In Moerman 1979, 66; cf. Benoist 2008.

**219** In Moerman 1979, 66.

**220** Compare the idea of 'event-frames' discussed in Sørensen 2007, 48–51.

**221** In Moerman 1979, 66.



process, and could be encoded in individual and interpersonal memory as a narrative of the type found in literary texts: Kosmiane had a fever, her mother Tapoustou had an amulet made for her, she wore it for five days, and on the fifth the fever was taken away from her through the amulet.<sup>222</sup> This approach sees Coptic healing magic not as a series of treatments which might be more or less effective based on their component parts, but as a process taking place within social system.

If this understanding of healing as a narrative performance allows us to bring together all of the different possible materialist explanations for healing, it does not mean that magical healing was always effective. Just as surely as every healing modality may be experienced as effective, all modalities fail. Healing narratives must be accepted by the patient; they must be experienced as resolving, or at least, explaining, the symptoms.<sup>223</sup> Certainly, the narrative frame of magical healing might hold even if the healing was experienced as ineffective; a fever might be believed to be too serious for treatment; perhaps it was divinely ordained, or perhaps fever was not the true illness, but rather some other and more serious cause, the action of a demon or magician more powerful than the practitioner. Perhaps the practitioner who had first been sought out was ineffective, or even a fraud, but this need not delegitimise the entire system.<sup>224</sup> The patient might seek out another magical practitioner, but, as we see in literary texts, they might also try other modalities – healing through the Church, through monastic intervention, through shrines, or through Hippocratic medicine. All of these would, within a materialist paradigm, be largely dependent for their functioning on the same conditions as magical healing, including placebo.<sup>225</sup> What they therefore offered were different narrative frames, within which symptoms might be experienced as resolving. Ecclesiastical literature is full of stories of sufferers who go to doctors and magicians without success, before being healed by sleeping in a martyr shrine or approaching a holy man. ‘Magicians’ had, perhaps, their own stories, passed on through word of mouth and never written, in which their study of secret prayers allowed them to call down angels and cast out demons for suffering mothers and feverish children unable to pay for doctors and unhealed by the Church.<sup>226</sup>

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**222** The names here are taken from *P. Berlin* 22192 (*TM* 243972).

**223** Cf. Crislip 2005, 35 on the failure of monastic healing, and Slobin 1998, 374–375 for an account of a rejection of a (modern biomedical) healing narrative; 378–379 for an example of acceptance of traditional healing, in which narrative and symptoms seem to coincide.

**224** Cf. Young 1975, 260 on Ethiopian magic.

**225** Cf. Nutton 2013, 35; Korsvoll, this issue, for the dependence of Hippocratic medicine on the placebo effect.

**226** An example of what these may have looked like can be found in Mercier 1988, the biography of Asrès, an Ethiopian ‘magician’ whose practice covered most of the twentieth century; an account of one of his early healings, of a woman suffering in childbirth, may be found on pages 72–73.

## Sigla and Abbreviations

ACM	<i>Ancient Christian Magic</i> = Meyer/Smith 1999.
AKZ	<i>Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte</i> = Kropp 1930–1931.
BKU	<i>Berliner Koptische Urkunden</i>
CC	<i>Clavis Coptica</i> ; see <a href="https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/">https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/</a>
PDM/PGM	<i>Papyri demoticae/graecae magicae</i> = Preisendanz/Henrichs 1973–1974 & Betz 1986.
SM	<i>Supplementum magicum</i> = Daniel/Maltomini 1990–1992.
TM	Trismegistos number, see <a href="https://www.trismegistos.org">https://www.trismegistos.org</a>

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