

# Compilers of Magic: Greco-Egyptian Magical Handbooks through the Eyes of Their Scribes<sup>1</sup>

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I am very pleased to be here today, sharing my research with such an erudite community. I am grateful to the American Philosophical Society for their kind invitation to participate in this gathering, with so many fascinating topics discussed yesterday and today. My own topic is ancient magic, which has an aura of mystery. But it can also be approached in a very practical way. I am going to talk today about how ancient magic was compiled and transmitted, and the methods we can apply to the texts we have preserved on papyrus.

Let me start by giving you the basic coordinates: our corpus is composed of almost ninety items.<sup>2</sup> All come from Egypt and were produced in the period ranging from the second century BCE to the sixth century CE.<sup>3</sup> The previous study of these documents has primarily focused on their textual and linguistic content. However, a focus on materiality offers new perspectives for the study of the circulation of magical books and the transmission of knowledge through the work of scribes in the production of books. By materiality I mean questions like, how were these books produced? Who produced them, and why were specific recipes and prescriptions collected in books? Who were their readers? This large and well-preserved corpus of papyri provides us with a fantastic laboratory to explore scribal experience and the materiality of ancient compilations. It offers, in other words, a window into the transmission of ancient technical knowledge, which may teach us something about magical texts but also about other fields, like medicine, pharmacology, liturgy, and even cuisine.

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1 Read before the American Philosophical Society 29 April 2023.

2 The project, “Transmission of Magical Knowledge: The Greco-Egyptian Magical Handbooks on Papyrus,” is funded by the Neubauer Collegium at the University of Chicago and aims to reprint eighty-eight magical forms, with a complete textual and material study. The first volume appeared in 2022 (Faraone and Torallas Tovar 2022a), as did a related volume of essays (Faraone and Torallas Tovar 2022b).

3 We cut artificially at this point, since the later material, although heir to our corpus, has a markedly different character. On the origin of many of these papyri, see Dosoo 2016. See also Dosoo and Torallas Tovar 2022a.

These papyri are a magnificent source of information for understanding the circulation of magical knowledge in antiquity. We are fortunate to have these materials, because information on early magic books and their use in Greco-Roman times through references in historical and literary texts is scarce.<sup>4</sup> One famous example comes from the second-century author Lucian of Samosata, who not only wrote the *Sorcerer's Apprentice* but also has a satiric episode in his work the *Lover of Lies* (*Philopseudes* 31) in which a magical handbook features prominently. In this episode, Lucian describes the exorcism of a haunted house, in which the Pythagorean character Arignotus, using his Egyptian magical books, drives the spirit away with an appalling adjuration and frees the house from its possession. We also have allusions to magical books connected to the ban and burning of books in Roman law, perhaps most famously Acts of the Apostles 19.17–19, in which some Christians in Ephesus renounced their magical practices and “brought their books together and burned them”—books said to be worth “fifty thousand pieces of silver.” A fifth-century hagiographical text (Zacharias Scholasticus's *Life of Severus*) describes a group of law students in Beirut who had acquired a great reputation for magic. Their leader, a student named John the Fuller, a native of Egyptian Thebes, hid under his chair his books of magic, books which, we are told, “contained drawings of *daimones*, *nomina barbarica* and unholy and unfulfillable promises.” These historical sources provide us just a general understanding of how magical knowledge was transmitted textually. They attest to the importance of books, but they say nothing about how those books were produced or used.

The corpus of Greco-Egyptian magical texts is generally divided into two major groups: *formularies* and artifacts or texts of *applied magic*.<sup>5</sup> The formularies contain instructions for rituals. Applied texts (curses, amulets, etc.) are ritual artifacts produced specifically for a particular user, practitioner, or victim. As such, they are personalized. They provide us with a rather messy mass of texts on different materials, usually brief and of varying quality. In this contribution, I will focus on the formularies or handbooks, a corpus with more structured materials, which help us to understand the complete performance of the rituals. They present simultaneously texts of different types: instructions, recipes and lists of ingredients, formulas, hymns and prayers, powerful words or *voces magicae* to be pronounced during a ritual, and drawings and sketches for the production of ritual artifacts.

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4 Faraone and Torallas Tovar 2023.

5 On the magical papyri, see among other publications Brashear 1995, 3380–684; Ritner 1995; Dieleman 2019. For the Greek texts, Preisendanz 1928–31; Daniel and Maltomini 1990–92; and more recently Faraone and Torallas Tovar 2022a.

They contain all kinds of procedures for dealing with everyday crises, including mantic techniques; initiatory practices for the magician; horoscopes and fortunes; healing and protective magic; practices to obtain favor, victory, and luck; and aggressive practices to subdue rivals in a competition or to attract the attention of a desired person. The combination of these contents in each of the manuals helps us to understand the concept of magic that the inhabitants of Egypt had. The mere fact that healing practices appear alongside aggressive procedures within the same book suggests that they were considered analogous parts of a common genre. Likewise, the more or less frequent presence of certain types of procedures, even the chronological evolution of these frequencies, also tells us what the trends were in each era.

But beyond their textual content, known since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and which has always been the focus of attention in the study of ancient magic, these handbooks or magical formularies were books of a specific materiality and particular scribal characteristics. The recent combined study of the textual content and its material vehicle has offered a considerable advance in the knowledge of ancient magic and its dissemination.<sup>6</sup> These observations of the books of magic, together with the arrangement of the texts on the page, the insertion of drawings or use of symbols and monograms, as well as other features, allows us a glimpse into the origin of their production and the training background of the scribe.

#### EDITING THE *PAPYRI GRAECAE MAGICAE*

Among the Greco-Egyptian papyri is the largest known collection of magical formularies from antiquity. These papyri were first published in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century and subsequently collected by Karl Preisendanz (1928–31) and his collaborators. Their edition has since been for a century the basis for the study of magic in antiquity and is usually referred to as *Papyri Graecae magicae*. Later findings were added to this collection in the *Supplementum magicum* by Robert Daniel and Franco Maltomini (1990–92).

For the past eight years, Christopher Faraone and I have been running a project called “Transmission of Magical Knowledge,” with the aim of reediting, translating, and studying the corpus again. As a result of the meticulous examination of the papyri and their texts, the project opened new windows into materiality, scribality, and compilation of magical knowledge through the observation of material and paratextual

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6 See the essays contained in Faraone and Torallas Tovar 2022b.

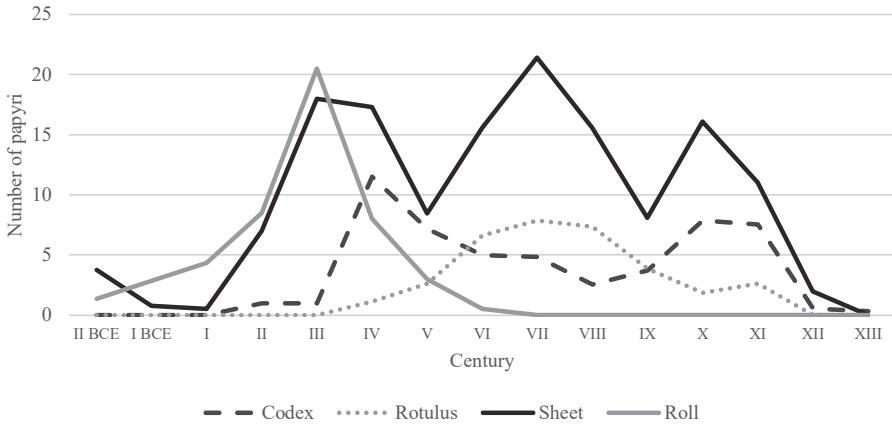


FIGURE 1. Main book formats for magical handbooks. Source: Dr. Korshi Dosoo.

uses in the corpus. Previous editions, mentioned above, were too keen on extracting the text and did not pay enough attention to material aspects that are so fascinating to us now.

One of our first discoveries was the alignment of magical handbooks with the general book production trends of their time. They are not special books with peculiar or arcane formats and shapes. The majority of our magic handbooks were produced precisely in an important transitional period in the history of book production, the transition from roll to codex. This major technological change developed gradually in the Roman period but was largely completed by the fourth century.<sup>7</sup> For the magical papyri we have all sorts of formats, and the key to compare them to contemporary book production was to date them properly. Paleographic analysis performed as part of our project allowed us to reassign dates to the handbooks, which had been dated incorrectly decades ago. Thanks to that, we now have a clearer idea of the position of the magical handbooks within the general book production of their times. The best-preserved exemplars of magical handbooks fit perfectly into the evolution of book production. As can be seen in the graph above (Fig. 1), the pattern is very similar to that of literary books. Rolls peak in the second and third centuries and are gradually replaced by codices, which are the main format in the fourth century. By the fifth century, vertical rolls, or *rotuli*, start being produced. This fits perfectly with what we know of books produced in those centuries. What is most interesting, and peculiar of this genre of books, is the fact that sheets are

<sup>7</sup> Bagnall 2009, 71.

conspicuously abundant throughout the centuries. Other genres, like liturgy and medicine, have this peculiarity in common with magic.

This first discovery opened new perspectives and led us to further studies on scribal practice regarding the process of copy and the comparative study of scribal practice in the context of contemporary trends. The magical handbooks on papyrus offer an excellent laboratory to understand the process of compilation of knowledge in antiquity, thanks to their excellent conditions of preservation.

### *E PLURIBUS UNUM*

Any text, in the process of being copied, can transfer peculiarities of its antigraph or original exemplar into the new copy. These peculiarities can be both textual and linguistic (special spellings and corruptions, for example). The analysis of this process in magical texts explores both features that they have in common with literary texts and features that are specific to magical texts. Among the former are paratextual marks, such as *paragraphoi* to divide and distribute the text, monograms, and abbreviations; and among the latter, special writing of magical words, drawings, symbols, and *charakteres*. The identification of the phenomena that appear in these texts can reveal a compilatory process. It is a matter of recomposing the scribes' sources for each part of the manuscript through the observation of the adoption of specific characteristics of the manuscripts from which they copy. We thus get a glimpse of the scribes' desks.

The individualization of sources from which the handbooks were copied is based on the hypothesis that scribes who compiled the texts into the handbooks copied almost automatically, without questioning, the paratextual apparatus, as well as the spellings they found in the antigraph. Thus, abbreviations, monograms, punctuation, and distribution and division of words are phenomena that accompany the text and that the scribe unconsciously included without any attempt at harmonizing. These are the "indicators," formal elements insignificant to the textual content that the scribe would take almost "without realizing" in the process of copying the different sections of the text. The exploration of this variation should be combined with a study of the overall structure of the textual content of these formularies.<sup>8</sup> When there is clear variation in the use of scribal features within a formulary, taken as a unit, this could indicate that each of the parts was copied from very different sources, which originally presented a diversity of graphic

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<sup>8</sup> For example, see the analysis of LiDonnici 2003, of PGM IV; or Martín Hernández 2015, of PGM VII.

features. This is a reconstruction of the pre-texts or the sources from which the formularies were copied. In the following pages, I will give some examples of these “unobtrusive indicators.”<sup>9</sup>

#### UNOBTRUSIVE INDICATORS

1. The format of the *voces magicae* gives us important clues, as it is an important and frequent constitutive element of the magical texts, which allows us to compare them. These magical words appear presented in different ways, although it is not clear whether the difference is indicative of a different pronunciation or declamation or may simply be due to varied graphic habits. They may appear as strings of names, without diacritics (a), or, separated by spaces, individualized (b), separated by one or two dots (c), marked supralinearly (d), or in abbreviation (e):

(a) GEMF 73 / PGM IX 4 βαζαβαχυσχμενεβαχυσχβαδηδοφωβαινωχωχ.

(b) GEMF 58 / PGM V 78-79 χαλ χακ χακ χαλ κουμ χιαμ χαρ | χρουμ  
ζβαρ βηρι ζβαρκομ χρη

(c) GEMF 72 / PGM VIII 82 λαμψουηρ: couμαρτα: βαριβας:  
δαρδαλαμ: βορβηξ

(d) GEMF 72 / PGM VIII 49  $\overline{\alpha\beta\rho\alpha\tau\alpha\xi}$  or in the same papyrus, l. 59  
 $\overline{\varphi\theta\omicron\rho\omicron\varphi\theta\iota\omicron\eta\theta\omega\theta}$ :

(e) GEMF 72 / PGM VIII 61 αβλαθ/ ακραμμαμαχ/ for αβλαναθαναλβα,  
and ακραμμαχαμαρι. (See Fig. 2, below)

2. Another important characteristic of magical texts is their frequent use of symbols. The most regular are ὄνομα  $\Xi$ , “name”; σελήνη  $\mathcal{C}$ , “moon”; ἥλιος  $\mathcal{S}$ , “sun”; and δεῖνα  $\Delta$ ,<sup>10</sup> “so-and-so,” but sometimes irregular and unattested symbols are found instead. The usual signs may appear with phonetic additions, for example, the use of -μα additional to the sign for ὄνομα in GEMF 72 / PGM VIII 21. Duplicate usage also serves to mark the plural, such as the two signs  $\Xi\Xi$ , for ὀνόματα, “names” in GEMF 31 / PGM I 233, an also uncommon feature.

<sup>9</sup> I use terminology by Gordon 2019, who applies the analysis to PGM VII. See also Torallas Tovar 2023, and in press.

<sup>10</sup> The use of this symbol is one of the unmistakable signs that the text is a formulary, as it does not present the personal names of the practitioners or victims involved, but a generic name marker, equivalent to “so and so.”

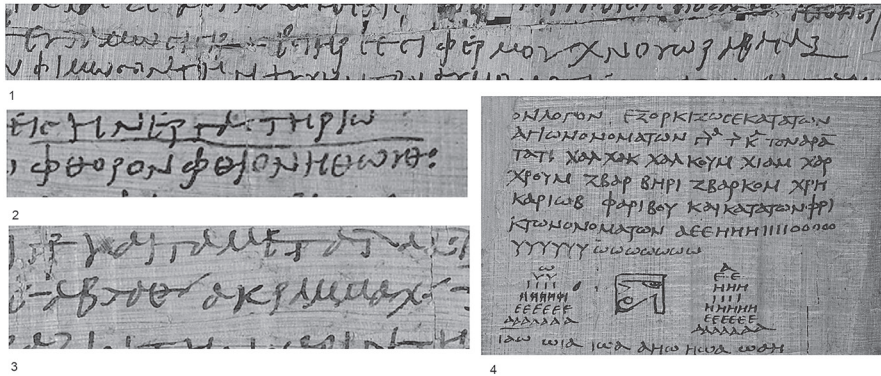


FIGURE 2. Written representation of *voces magicae*: 1(a) from GEMF 73/PGM IX, 2 (d) and 3 (e) from GEMF 72/PGM VIII, and 4 (b) from GEMF 58/PGM V. (Images courtesy of the British Library Collection, P.Lond. 123, 122 and 46.)

3. We find regular abbreviations or monograms in the magic recipes.<sup>11</sup> For example, the preposition  $\pi\rho(\acute{o}\varsigma)$  in GEMF 72 / PGM VIII 17 represented with a *pi* and *rho* superimposed:  $\rho\pi$ , or  $\gamma\rho(\acute{\alpha}\varphi\epsilon)$  “writes,” with a *gamma* and *rho* superimposed:  $\rho\gamma$ . We find the monogram for  $\omega\rho\alpha$   $\phi$ , especially in horoscopes. Very frequent and almost exclusively in magical texts, are the monograms for  $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\varsigma$   $\Delta$ , “formula,” and  $\zeta\mu\acute{\upsilon}\rho\eta\eta$   $\Phi$ , “myrrh,” used for the manufacture of ink. Monograms can be indicative of diverse scribal habits when they present different forms or when they are not in the list of common monograms. As an example of the first case, we have  $\zeta\mu\acute{\upsilon}\rho\eta\eta$   $\Phi$  with an additional  $\mu$  in GEMF 31 / PGM I 233, and as an example of the second case, we have  $\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\epsilon$  and  $\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  in GEMF 74.445 / PGM VII 359 and GEMF 74 534 / PGM VII 453 written with a monogram of *lambda* and *epsilon* superimposed.

4. Many expressions in magical texts present a repetition of terms, either in *voces magicae* or in commonly used expressions, such as  $\eta\delta\eta$ ,  $\eta\delta\eta$ ,  $\tau\alpha\chi\acute{\upsilon}$ ,  $\tau\alpha\chi\acute{\upsilon}$ , “now, now, quickly, quickly,” which very frequently closes magical formulae. To indicate repetition, the scribe either writes the term twice or alternatively uses a numeral (in this case  $\beta$  for 2). An example can be found in GEMF 72 / PGM VIII 52 and 84:  $\eta\delta\eta$   $\beta$   $\tau\alpha\chi\acute{\upsilon}$   $\beta$ . Another way of indicating the repetition is the use of a diagonal two-line mark, which basically means “double,” as, for example, in GEMF 58 / PGM V 484-485  $\beta\iota\omicron\upsilon\beta$   $\varsigma\varphi\eta\beta$   $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma\beta$   $\varsigma\iota\epsilon\theta\omicron\beta$ , whose value

<sup>11</sup> On abbreviations in the papyri, there is quite a lot of bibliography, but no detailed studies on their use. I refer to Dosoo 2021, with a fairly extensive bibliography.

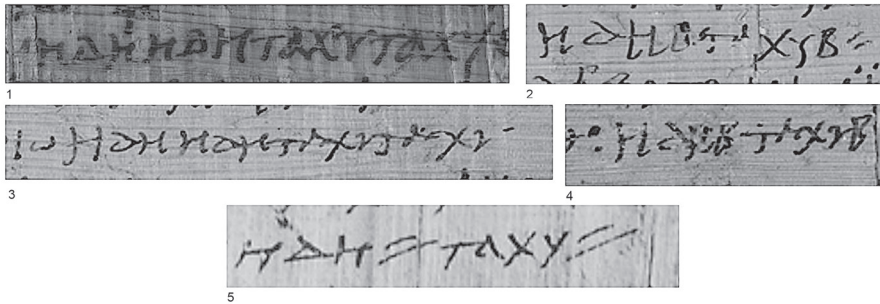


FIGURE 3. Written representation of ἡδη, ἡδη, ταχύ, ταχύ in 1) GEMF 31/PGM I, 2, 3 and 4) GEMF 72/PGM VIII and 5) GEMF 57/PGM IV. (Images courtesy of Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Scan: Berliner Papyrusdatenbank, P 5025 B; British Library Collection, P.Lond. 122; and Bibliothèque nationale de France, Suppl. Gr. 574.)

we identify thanks to the comparison with the full forms appearing, for example, in GEMF 15.130: βιβίου βιβιβίου, cφη cφη. (See Fig. 3, above)

The sample of indicators described here do not in themselves and in isolation provide a definitive condition of the different origins for each part of a handbook of magic. However, taken as cumulative indicators, they can offer at least a hypothetical reconstruction of the sources of our texts. On the one hand, if a particular section shows very distinctive scribal features when compared to the other sections, we can assume that the scribe may have taken it from a different manuscript. On the other hand, these indicators, when compared with scribal usage in papyri of other genres, can give us information on the background and even the training of the scribe. Many of our texts seem to have been copied by professional scribes, who used different graphic resources for copies of many literary or paraliterary genres.

## CONCLUSION

I hope to have provided an insight into how the new methods help to understand the scribal traditions and how they represent the compilation of magical knowledge. These practices can teach us much about the agents who produced these works and illuminate their techniques of compilation and transmission. What is true for magical papyri is also true for other types of formularies, medical texts, and many other genres. All traces of scribal practices have, for the most part, been erased by modern editing practices, which often sacrifice the information these artifacts can provide for the sake of establishing a standardized text.

Our project on the transmission of magic is therefore also a revision of our concept of editing an ancient text. A holistic understanding of the scribal practice in all its aspects requires that we make sense of many of the decisions the scribes took, from the choice of materials (inks, papyri), the choice of formats (codex, scroll; Dosoo and Torallas Tovar 2022b), the techniques applied, professional scripts (Nodar 2022), drawings, writing devices, the language chosen. The application of this type of analysis can lead us to general conclusions of great relevance for our understanding of the formation, transmission, and use of knowledge in the ancient world.

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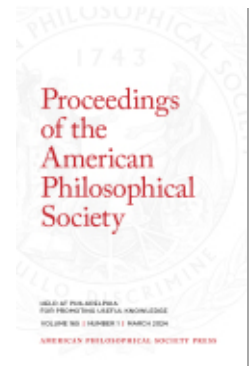
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