Introduction and Purpose

In undertaking this research project, my original intention was to investigate the operational techniques of ritual power underlying the yet extremely curious—though seemingly nonsensical—strings of letters which pop up frequently throughout surviving magical handbooks from mid to late antiquity. This desire was born from a realization that, though there is exciting and novel scholarly work being done in the field today, academic consensus has tended historically towards dismissing what are often labeled nonsense/barbaric and voces magicae as only meaningful in their very meaningfulness: these words of power were regarded as utterances which primarily served to elevate the ceremonial gravitas and authority of their speaker by their very arcana-sounding incomprehensibility. My research, however, shows that while this explanation is still admissible for analysis as one aspect of the ritual efficacy afforded to such words, we would do better to explore the distinctly different forms that they embody consistently, and to begin to develop a more sophisticated conception of their purposes by unpacking their cultural/religious/linguistic contexts in which they are embedded.

Over the course of my research, it became apparent that the most accessible examples containing relevant texts, though highly varied in their apparent cultural background, belong to a class of texts, objects, and practices labeled today “magical”. I think it important to note here that while I will make use of the term “magic” in this presentation, it should not be taken as referring to any kind of distinct airtight tradition; nor should any pertinent textual sample be rejected from analysis for not being labeled as such. It is also important to emphasize that people and practices said to be magical, for the ancient world as well as much of the world today, carry complex and often distinctly negative connotations. The Latin word magica, in areas under Roman rule, can be understood fairly as denoting unsanctioned ritual practices. With this being said, there was clearly a number of people milling about the Near East and North Africa during the beginning of our current era and the end of the previous, professing to work miracles, in various religious contexts. In this sense, it seems valid to talk about magic in late antiquity as an eric term analytically defining a group of traditions associated with specific practices and attitudes distinct from what we would associate today with orthodox religious practice at the time. The scribes and practitioners of the our texts, however, would likely not identify their traditions as “magic”. We must remember to keep in mind the highly syncratic and cosmopolitan nature of the historical scene in which they were composed. We must also consider that magic as described above refers to a collection of texts and objects which were collected anachronistically and pulled from a variety of clearly different sources and traditions.

My purpose in this presentation is to convey that the voices found so often in ancient religious and magical texts are in fact highly meaningful. I do so by providing a typology and structure with which to analyze them. Upon a close consideration, it becomes clear that the variety and specificity of the usage of certain words and names is very much purposeful, complex, and intimately tied to a melting pot of religious traditions.

How Nomina Barbara function in different spells

Methods of classifying words and word strings

Animal mimicy and abnormal utterance

- Speaking directly to a deity
- Cosmic ascent passwords
- Harmonics, rhythm, and poetic speech
- Written incantations and characters

Etyymology

- Synthetic
- Palindromes
- Vowel Strings
- Rhythmic barbarous names
- Isopsephic (alphaneumerically significant)

Types of words and phrases

- Passwords and codes
- Calling upon a name to do something
- Natural
- Other/uncertain

Passwodrs and codes

- Magical name/word
- Etymology
- Animal mimicy and abnormal utterance
- Calling upon a name to do something
- Written charms

Methods

My research process consisted largely of becoming familiar with and comparing collections of ancient source texts initially in translation such as the PGM, curse tablets, Coptic Magical papyri, and magical gems/amulets. After developing an idea of the scope of my project, I then went back through the text I surveyed with my mentors, and determined which deserved the special treatments of personal translation and deeper study. This period of more textual analysis allowed me to distinguish and codify a typology of the words as well as survey a wide variety of contemporary scholarship on relevant subjects. I translated sections of a number of texts, primarily from the PGM, and tried to compare what I found to relevant “non-magical” materials such as the Hellenistic period poems (techospongiai), classical depictions of magical ritual, and similar formulae in earlier literature.

Conclusion and explanation of argument

My primary argument is that to show the unusual words of power in ancient magical texts are not meaningless. They are often dismissed as only highly corrupted Greek or Hebrew divine names, or words which give their power from their very lack of semantic value and difficulty to pronounce. While these are significant factors in analyzing the words of ancient magical texts, I hope to contextualize these words as essential and agentive in effecting the goal of the ritual. Through a comprehensive investigation of the primary source spells texts, classical and late antique theory of ritual, and comparative investigation across geo-political and linguistic spheres, I believe the true importance of these words can be revealed though perhaps not fully explained. As such I thought it best to organize the fruits of my research as a typology of magical names: this typology serves to bolster my primary argument by delineating clear formal conventions and usage histories of different classes of names which emphasize their centrality and specificity of purpose in ritual. It should be noted that these classes are not mutually exclusive nor are they comprehensive. They are a tool for demonstrating the diversity and depth of meaning present in difficult words. I make no attempt to explain how any of these words work in the context of their execution, rather only to indicate the presence of complex and varied metaphysics of language, spelling, and number underlying their systematic compositions.

Cbd-387: mummy image, hiero and small historiola

Cbd-569: vowel string

Cbd-1056: obverse: anguished reverse: ABRASAX + characters