

## Self-Identification with Deity and Voces Magicae in Ancient Egyptian and Greek Magic

by [Laurel Holmstrom](#)

Occultists and esotericists, such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn [1], have theorized that ancient Egyptian magic is a primary source for western magic practice and ideas. Since we know that the Hermetica and Neo-platonic theurgy have had a profound influence on later European magical traditions [2], an inquiry into possible relationships between Egyptian and Greek magical ideas would be useful in exploring the veracity of the occultists' claim. This paper focuses on one set of ancient texts, the Greek Magical Papyri, which offer considerable potential for investigating this relationship.

The PGM (Papryi Graecae Magicae) [3] is the name given to a cache of papryi of magical spells collected by Jean d'Anastaisi in early 1800's Egypt. Hans Deiter Betz, in his introduction to the newest English translation, speculates that these papyri may have been found in a tomb or temple library and the largest papyri may have been the collection of one man in Thebes.[4] However, the exact provenance for the PGM is unknown. Betz states that through literary sources it is known that quite a number of magical books of spells were collected in ancient times, most of which were destroyed.[5] Thus, the PGM are a very important source for first-hand information about magical practices in the ancient Mediterranean.

The PGM spells run the gamut of magical practices from initiatory rites for immortality to love spells and healing rites. Most of the papyri are in Greek and Demotic with glosses in Old Coptic and are dated between the 2nd century BC and the 5th century AD. The spells call upon Greek, Egyptian, Jewish, Gnostic and Christian deities.

Two of the most intriguing aspects of these texts are the practice of self-identification with deity and the use of *voces magicae* in performing magical rituals. In many of the spells, the practitioner is told to use "I am" with a specific deity name to empower or work the spell. PGM I 247-62, a spell for invisibility, states "I am Anubis, I am Osirphre, I am OSOT SORONOUIER, I am Osiris whom Seth destroyed. "[6] The use of specific magical language in these texts, the *voces magicae*, is abundant. Most of these words are considered "untranslatable" by the scholars working with the papyri [7]. Words of power in the incantations are composed of long strings of vowels, A EE EEE IIII OOOOO, YYYYYY, OOOOOO, alone or with special names of deities or daimons which are often palindromes and significantly lengthy as in IAEOBAPHRENEMOUNOTHILARIKRIPHIAEYEAIPIRKIRALITHONUOMENE RPHABOEAI. [8] The exact pronunciation of these *voces magicae* was key to the success of the spells.

Since Egyptian funerary texts clearly identify the deceased with deity and the power of words and language is a predominant feature of Egyptian magic, these notions found in the PGM appeared to provide a possible link between ancient Egyptian and Greek magic.

Throughout the funerary literature of ancient Egypt, from the Pyramid Texts to the Book of the Dead, there is abundant evidence that ancient Egyptians thought that

human beings could become deities. Deities were seen as possessing *heku*, magic, an aspect of the original creative power that formed the cosmos. [9] Thus, magic was perceived to be an intrinsic part of reality and the divine. [10] The Coffin Texts provide a guide book for the deceased to help her or him retain what magic they already possess and to gain more. Naming is extremely important in this experience and it is the ability to name all the gods and objects encountered that proves one has acquired enough magic to sit with the gods. [11] In these texts, the deceased is clearly identified with the god Osiris. By using historaloe the deceased will successfully navigate the journey to the afterlife as did Osiris. The use of historaloe in magical practice was common, particularly in healing rites. [12] By knowing the names of all encountered in the afterlife and establishing a link with a deity that had already been successful in this realm, the deceased was well prepared for the journey.

In the Pyramid texts, the initial Utterances appear to be a script directing the different Egyptian deities to recite specific formulas on the deceased king's behalf. Utterance 1 begins "recitation by Nut, the greatly beneficent", utterance 2, "recitation by Geb" and so forth. [13] Evidence that these utterances were spoken during funeral rites are the notes after the recitations which give directions saying, for example, "pour water"(ut 23) and "cold water and 2 pellets of natron"( ut 32). The priests and priestesses are taking the role of the deities in preparing the deceased to join the gods in the afterlife as well as the deceased being identified with Osiris. Self-identification with deity is an "authentically Egyptian trait". [14]

Language, and particularly naming, carries substantial magical power in Egyptian thought. The goddess Isis, once she learns Ra's true name, is then able to cure him of snake bite. [15] One of the oldest cosmologies of the Egyptians from Memphis (approx. 2700 BC) describes the god Ptah creating by his mind (heart) and word (tongue) [16]. Thus, words contain a primal substance and the act of speaking mirrors original creation. Speaking creates reality. Writing was given to humans by the god Thoth and the Egyptians called their language "words of the gods" and hieroglyphs "writing of the sacred words." [17]

The Pyramid Texts, Coffin Text and the Book of the Dead all exhibit the Egyptian belief in the power of language to affect the world. Words, spoken or written were not just symbols, but realities in themselves. [18] Hieroglyphs held particular resonance with magical power and most of the funerary texts were written in hieroglyphs. The Egyptians clearly believed that humans have energetic doubles in the world beyond the physical and it seems reasonable to suspect that the hieroglyphs were thought to have a similar existence since they were written on the *inside* of the pyramid tombs or coffins or on scrolls placed *inside* the coffins for the deceased to use. Further evidence of the reality of the images themselves comes from the practice of cutting particular hieroglyphs in half to diminish their potential effect. [19]

Vowel chanting is also found in Egyptian religious practice as reported by Demetrius in his Roman treatise, *De Eloutione*:

"in Egypt the priests, when singing hymns in praise of the gods, employ the 7 vowels which they utter in due succession and the sound of these letters is so euphonious that men listen to it in place of the flute and lyre" [20]

The distinction between religion and magic in scholarly discourse breaks down in the context of Egyptian religion and it is reasonable to suspect that vowel chanting could be used for more than hymns of praise by Egyptian priests.

Thus, self-identification with deity and use of a specific kind of magical language found in the PGM places Egyptian magical notions within a Greek magical context. The question then becomes, can evidence be found that Greek magic, prior to the PGM, included these practices and do they appear in later Greek magical material that we know to have influenced the European tradition.

Betz states in the Encyclopedia of Religion that "magic was an essential part of Greco-Roman culture and religion." [21] In classical Greece, Egypt and Thessaly were considered prime sources of magical knowledge, but by 323 BC magical material in Greece had increased considerably. Betz further states that it was "Hellenistic syncretism that produced the abundance of material available today." [22] Greek magical practitioners distinguished different types of magic; *goeteia* - lower magic, *mageia* - general magic and *theourgia* - higher magic. *Theourgia*, appears to be the most likely place to find self-identification with deity and the use of *voces magicae*.

Self-identification with deity in magical acts as part of ancient Greek magical practice prior to the PGM is not evident. The Greeks speculated that humans and gods "had the same mother", but a huge gap existed between them. From ancient times to the latest date of the PGM, Greek notions about the relationship between human existence and divine existence took a variety of forms [23,] but never followed the Egyptian pattern of the possibility of declarative divine identity. The ancient Greeks believed that communion with the gods was possible as in the Eleusian and Dionysian mysteries [24] and Empedocles declared he had the knowledge to make himself immortal. [25] But, the Greek idea of a divine spark within the human soul which can be activated, contemplated and re-united with the gods still assumes an other-ness of deity and validates the fundamental separateness of human existence from the divine.

For the Egyptians, the divine appears to be immanent in the world. The world of humans and gods were not seen as being decidedly different. Human activity continued after death and Gods, embodied as the Pharaoh, lived in human society. Magical practice was merely clarifying what already exists. For the Greeks, magic was a conduit for communication and communion with deity or a process whereby the soul could be purified through direct contact with the Divine. Egyptians had only to affirm a state of being through speech to create the sought reality. "Repeated commands or assertions that a desired state of affairs was already in being, are a common feature of Egyptian spells." [26]

However, there are references to the *voces magicae* in ancient Greek material aside from the PGM. Early, are the *Ephesia grammata*, ( ASKION, KATASKION, LIX, TETRAX, DAMNAMENEUS, AISIA ) mystic letters that were supposedly inscribed on the statue of Artemis at Ephesus used verbally and written to avert evil. A lead tablet inscribed with the *Ephesia grammata* dates to the 4th c BC and they were said to be used spoken as an apotropaic charm while walking in a circle around newlyweds. [27]

Peter Kingsley, writing of Empedocles' magical worldview, states "there is nothing that

is not vibrantly and knowingly alive. For him [Empedocles] - everything - even the words spoken by a man of understanding has an existence, intelligence and consciousness of its own." [28] This notion appears close to the Egyptian ideas that words are not symbols, but realities.

Orpheus healed human pathos with poems and the lyre, while Pythagoras could chant his disciples to sleep and heal body and soul through musical words. [29] Fox argues that the PGM are carrying forward this "shamantic" tradition of magical musical charms. For the actual author(s) of the PGM, the notion of the magical potency of language could have been very strong indeed coming out of both the Egyptian and Greek magical traditions.

The use of *voces magicae* continues into later Coptic texts. For a spell invoking a "thundering power to perform every wish" the practitioner should say: "I invoke you. . . who is addressed with the great secret name HAMOUZETH BETH ATHANABASSETONI ." [30] Vowel incantations are also found in these Coptic texts in figures typical of the PGM: [31]

AEEIOUO  
EEIOU  
EIO  
IO  
I

*Voces magicae* are also referred to in the Chaldean Oracles which are contemporary with the PGM and they appear to be an intrinsic part of the theurgist's ritual. What is intriguing, for this study, about the Chaldean Oracles, is the relationship between the *voces magicae* and the process of immortalization of the soul, which is the goal of theurgy. These texts provide the closest approximation to self-identification with deity in a non-Egyptian context. According to the Chaldeans, the soul, in its descent to the body gathers impure substances. Through theurgistic rites, the soul can re-ascend, encounter the Divine and be purified of these impure substances and attain immortality. The *voces magicae* invoke the assistant spirits that will help the soul to ascend without fear of being dragged down into Hades. [32] However, even though immortalization is the goal, self-identification with deity is not declared and only the soul can attain such a state.

The idea that the Egyptian language specifically held magical power is seen in the writings of people of the time. In the Hermetica (CH xvi) there is a passage which states that Greeks will not understand the Hermetica when translated into their language as Greek does not contain the power of Egyptian. [33] The Chaldean Oracles state "do not ever alter the foreign names (of the gods)". Lewy elaborates further, "It is impossible to translate the magical formula, because its power is not due to its external sense." [34] Iamblichus, describing the difficulty of translating the Hermetica from Egyptian to Greek says ". . . for the very quality of the sounds and the [intonation] of the Egyptian words contain in itself the force of things said." [35] Invocation of deities by their secret names is also characteristic of Egyptian magic prior to the PGM according to Pinch, but unfortunately she does not give examples. [36]

Scholars have identified other potential sources beside Egyptian for specific *voces*

*magicae*. The glossary in the Betz edition of the PGM speculates on a few of the *voces magicae*. Jewish and Greek origins are offered as well as Egyptian for the eight names considered. Betz finds a intricate syncretism of Greek, Egyptian and Jewish elements in the texts. [37] To tease out the various strands and definitively locate the origin of specific *voces magicae* is yet to be done and will be difficult. What we may be seeing in the *voces magicae* is a general and wide-spread ancient Mediterranean magical practice. It could be that ABRACADABRA is a cousin to the *voces magicae* in the PGM.

Further questions to be asked regarding the *voces magicae* are: what were the potential avenues of magical communication between Egypt and Greece in the 4th century BCE where the earliest evidence of specific magical words is found in the *Ephesia grammata*? Is there evidence of specific *voces magicae*, other than vowel chanting, in Egyptian magical practice prior to the PGM? If the specific form comes from Greek notions, why are the *voces magicae* in the PGM glossed into Old Coptic in many spells where the main body of the text is in Greek?

In conclusion, the claim that the roots of European magic can be traced to Egyptian magic appears highly suspect in regard to the notions discussed. Egyptian ideas and practices of self-identification with deity do not seem to be compatible with Greek notions of the relationship between the human and divine worlds. Through the *voces magicae* there is evidence of a generalized magical tradition in the ancient Mediterranean from which the European tradition may draw, but not specifically from Egypt.

## Endnotes

1. Flying Roll no. XVI "The History of the Rosicrucian Order" states "Know then, O Aspirant, that the Order of the Rose and Cross hath existed from time immemorial and that its mystic rites were practised and its hidden knowledge communicated in the initiations of the various races of Antiquity. Egypt, Eleusis, Samothrace, Persia, Chaldea and India alike cherished these mysteries, and thus handed down to posterity the Secret Wisdom of the Ancient Ages. . ." Flying Rolls were semi-official internal documents of the Order of an instructional and theoretical nature. see King, Frances. *Ritual Magic of the Golden Dawn*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1987 & 1997, p. 105. See also Ramacharaka. *The Kybalion: a study of the Hermetic philosophy of ancient Egypt and Greece*. Chicago:"The Yogi Publication Society.
2. see "Occultism" in The Encyclopedia of Religion, Mircea Elidae, ed.
3. I am using Betz, Hans Deiter. *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation including the Demotic spells*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. Papyri Graecae Magicae refers to the original title of the Preisendanz edition.
4. see Betz, Introduction to the PGM, p. xlii.
5. Ibid, p xli.
6. PGM I, 140, 195.
7. Betz, p. xliii.
8. Betz, p. 332
9. Pinch, p. 6.
10. In hieroglyphics, the word for magician uses the symbol for a god as the determinative. Personal communication with Dr. W. Poe, 11/24/97.
11. Brier, p. 125

12. Pinch, p. 23 and Kotansky, Roy. "Incantations and Prayers for Salvation on Inscribed Greek Amulets." in Faraone & Obbink, eds. *Magika Hiera*.
13. Faulkner, p.1, 4 and 6.
14. Fowden, p. 26.
15. Pinch p. 7.
16. Eliade, p. 89.
17. Personal communication with Dr. W. Poe, 11/24/97.
18. Barb, p. 155
19. Ibid
20. Fowden, p. 118.
21. see "MAGIC: Magic in Greco-Roman Antiquity" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*.
  
22. Ibid.
23. see Corrigan, K. "Body and Soul in Ancient Religious Experience" in Armstrong, A.H. ed. *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*.
24. Willoughby
25. Kingsley, p. 233-38.
26. Pinch, P. 72. For another perspective on this problem, I asked subscribers to ARCANIA, a listserv devoted to the scholarly study of the occult if they know of any examples of self-identification with deity in Western magical practice outside of theurgy. Aleister Crowley's works and the writings of the Golden Dawn were mentioned several times. One writer specifically wrote: "In all their initiatory rituals, the officers [of the Golden Dawn] took on the forms and powers of various Egyptian gods and directed that force at the initiate" (Benjamin Rowe, Oct 6, 1997 email correspondence, see also <http://w3.one.net/~browe>) He also suggested that John Dee's Enochian magic included self-identification with deity implicitly in it's "Angelic Calls". The significance of Dee's use of this particular magical practice is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is fascinating that the Golden Dawn associated Egyptian magical practice with divine self-identification. Exactly how this association was made is also not our topic, but it apparently did not come through the Greek magical tradition.
27. Kotansky, p. 111.
28. Kingsley, p. 230
29. see Fox, Patricia. "In Praise of Nonsense" in Armstrong, A.H. *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*.
30. Meyer & Smith, p. 239.
31. Ibid, p. 234 and PGM I, 15-20.
32. Lewy, p. 227-257.
33. see Fowden, chapter 1.
34. Lewy, p. 240.
35. Fowden, p. 30.
36. Pinch, p. 23.
37. Betz, p. xliii

## Works Cited

Armstrong, A.H., ed. *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek and Roman*. NY: Crossroads, 1980.

- Barb. A.A. "Mystery, Myth and Magic" in Harris, J.R. *The Legacy of Egypt*, 2nd edition, London: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Betz, H.D. *The Greek Magical Papyri in translation including the Demotic spells*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Brier, Bob. *Ancient Egyptian Magic*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1980.
- Eliade, Mircea. *A History of Religious Ideas*. vol. 1, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Eliade, Mircea, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. New York: Macmillan, 1987.
- Faraone, Christopher and Obbink, Dirk, eds. *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Faulkner, R. O., trans. *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*. London: University of Oxford, 1969.
- Fowden, Garth. *The Egyptian Hermes: a historical approach to the late pagan mind*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Kingsley, Peter. *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.
- Lewy, Hans. *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy: mysticism, magic and platonism in the later Roman empire*. Le Caire: Imprimerie De L'institut Francais D'Archeologie Orientale, 1956.
- Meyer, Marvin and Smith, Richard, eds. *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic texts of ritual power*. San Francisco: Harper, 1994.
- Pinch, Geraldine. *Magic in Ancient Egypt*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.
- Willoughby, Harold R. *Pagan Regeneration: a study of mystery initiations in the Graeco-Roman world*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929.

### **Other Works Consulted**

- Johnston, S.I. *Hekate Soteria: a study of Hekate's role in the Chaldean Oracles and related literature*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990.
- Majercik, Ruth. *The Chaldean Oracles: text, translation and commentary*. Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1989.
- Parrott, Douglas, ed. *Nag Hammadi Codices 5:2-6 and 6 with papyrus Beronliensis 8502, 1 and 4*. Leiden: Brill, 1979.
- Shaw, G. *Theurgy and the Soul: the neoplatonism of Iamblichus*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.

