

MAGIC AND MEDICINE IN THE ROMAN IMPERIAL PERIOD: TWO CASE STUDIES

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Introduction

Until fairly recently scholars were accustomed to think, from their post-Enlightenment perspective, that superstition and science, magic and medicine are historically transcendent and absolute categories. Although few would take such a stand nowadays, this assumption still, in my view, lurks behind some scholarly treatments of professional magicians, who are sometimes imagined as uneducated, lower-class foreigners, in stark contrast to the elite and educated doctors. There has been much discussion, for example, about how during the Roman Empire these groups competed in the marketplace of cures, but this competition is still sometimes seen as a clash of different worldviews and approaches; we often fail to see how the doctors and sorcerers were probably drawn from the same circles of literate elites and might borrow from one another or share new ideas in the conceptualization and treatment of human disease.

This study treats two case studies, drawing heavily on a series of recently published magical texts. The first involves the diagnosis and treatment of the wandering womb and the second a complicated Greek amulet from the northern coast of the Black Sea that aims at healing various diseases of the head. In both cases, although the magicians include in their texts outlandish symbols and magical names or invoke non-Greek gods, it is clear that they share a number of important ideas, images and formats with the medical writers of the same period.

CASE I: The Wandering Womb

The strange idea that a woman's womb could wander about her body causing grave illnesses first appears in the classical period. Plato, in a famous passage in the *Timaeus*, suggests that the womb, like a "living animal," is driven by "desires" to move about a woman's body,

interrupting her breathing and causing various kinds of illnesses.¹ The Hippocratic doctors writing in roughly the same period seem to know a similar pathological condition, which they call “uterine suffocation” and which they assimilate to epilepsy, because the victim loses consciousness, grinds her teeth and has difficulty breathing.² Their strange “odor-therapies,” moreover, presuppose a sentient womb that could move freely about the female body in reaction to stimuli.³ The advent of human dissection in Greek medicine about fifty years after Plato’s death, however, challenged this theory of the mobile womb, for it proved what Aristotle had already surmised correctly on the analogy of the anatomy of other mammals that he had dissected, namely that the womb was firmly anchored in place by ligaments.⁴ By the end of the imperial period, most doctors take up a modified medical view that although the womb was incapable of free movement, it could flex and push against parts of the abdomen and in this way still cause the disease known as “uterine suffocation.”

A series of magical amulets addressed to the womb illustrates the popularity of the wandering womb among another group of healers in this same period. In the past, scholars have suggested that these amulets point to a tension or a struggle between popular superstition

¹ Plato, *Timaeus* 91b–e: “Indeed, on account of this, the disobedience and self-rule characteristic of the genitals of men came into being—a sort of living animal (*hoion zôion*) that pays no heed to reason and tries to rule (i.e., the whole body) because of its stinging desires (*oistrôdeis epithumias*). So, too, in turn the wombs and the so-called uteruses in women—there being in them a living animal (*zôion*) desirous of childbearing (*epithumêtikon paidopoiias*), whenever it is fruitless for a long time beyond its due season, being distressed it carries on with difficulty and by wandering (*planômenon*) in every direction throughout the body, by fencing off the passages of breath, and by not allowing [the body] to catch its breath (*anapnein*), it throws it [the body] into the extremes of helplessness and provokes all other kinds of diseases.”

² The Hippocratic *Diseases of Women* 2.201 (trans. Hanson [1975], ad loc.): “If the uterus seems to sit under the diaphragm, the woman suddenly becomes speechless...and she experiences suffocation; she grinds her teeth and, when called, does not respond...When the womb strikes the liver or abdomen...the woman turns up the whites of her eyes and becomes chilled; some women are livid. She grinds her teeth and saliva flows out of her mouth. These women resemble those who suffer from Heracles’ disease (i.e., epilepsy). If the womb lingers near the liver or abdomen, the woman dies of suffocation.”

³ The fumigation treatments that they recommend clearly imagine a sentient womb that can smell pleasant and foul odors and move itself accordingly; e.g. *ibid.*: “You should fumigate her under her nose, burning some wool and adding to the fire some asphalt, castoreum, sulfur and pitch. Rub her groin and the interior of her thighs with a very sweet-smelling unguent.”

⁴ Aristotle *GA* 720a12–14; see Dean-Jones (1996) 76 for discussion.

and scientific knowledge during the Roman Empire,⁵ but the evidence does not, in fact, bear this out—at least not in the case of the wandering womb. Indeed, careful study of these magical texts reveals that in the imperial period, at least, the professional magicians who inscribed and sold amulets for the wandering womb apparently held the same modified diagnosis as their medical counterparts, imagined the shape and orientation of the womb in the same way, and used similar language to describe the motion of the womb and the symptoms it produces. These magicians, however, based their therapies on an entirely different theory, that the womb needed to be exorcized as a kind of indwelling demon.

Let's begin with the doctors of the imperial period. Our best information about medical attitudes toward the wandering womb comes from the two most famous medical writers of the period. Soranus of Ephesus studied medicine in Alexandria, Egypt, where the advent of Greek human dissection many centuries earlier had revolutionized medical understanding of female anatomy. Soranus rejected the idea of the wandering womb, but his view was a minority one in the second century CE.⁶

But the majority of the ancients and nearly all of the followers of other sects (i.e., medical schools) employ ill-smelling odors (such as burnt hair, extinguished lamp wicks, charred deer's horn, burnt wool, burnt flock, skins and rags, castoreum—with which they anoint the nose and ears—pitch, cedar resin, bitumen, squashed bed bugs and all substances that are supposed to have an oppressive smell) as though the uterus flees from evil smells. As a result they have also fumigated with sweet-smelling substances from below and have approved of suppositories made with spikenard [and] storax, so that the uterus fleeing the former, but pursuing the latter, might transfer from the upper to the lower parts of the body.

Soranus goes on to criticize other kinds of contemporary treatments (e.g. massages, blowing air into the vagina, and subjecting the patients to loud sounds), but at the very end of his harangue he returns one more time to the fumigation therapies: "We, however, censure all of these men...for the uterus does not issue forth like a wild animal

⁵ Aubert (1989) 421–22, for example, speaks generally about "uterine magic", which in his view "originated in Near Eastern and Egyptian cultures" and was "scarcely affected by developments in Greek science."

⁶ *Gynecology* 3.29 as translated by Hanson (1998), 84, with my additions to the list of fumigated items that she elided.

(*thêrion*) from its lair, delighted by fragrant odors and fleeing bad odors; rather it is drawn together because of the stricture caused by inflammation.”⁷

Despite his rejection of the idea of a fully mobile womb, Soranus never abandons the diagnosis of uterine suffocation. Indeed, elsewhere in his corpus he puts forth a modified theory that although the mouth of the uterus was held in place by ligaments, it could nevertheless still shift about in a limited manner and cause the seizures and suffocation noted by earlier writers. His understanding of the womb is nicely summarized by a 9th-century illustration of the uterus found in a Soranus manuscript (Figure 1), where it appears as an upside-down jug of sorts, an idea that appears already in Hippocratic texts at the level of metaphor.⁸ With his modified view, then, Soranus was able to maintain that the uterus was held in place by the ligaments discovered by human autopsy, but that it could nevertheless still shift about in a limited manner and cause the seizures and suffocation noted by earlier writers. Galen, another important Greek doctor in this period, provides a long commentary on the passage from Plato’s *Timaeus*,⁹ and concludes (like Soranus) that: “The womb certainly does not move from one place to another like a wandering animal, but it is pulled back by the tension (i.e. of the ligaments).”¹⁰ Thus during the Roman Empire it seems that most doctors continued using the Hippocratic fumigation techniques and other traditional regimes to control a mobile womb, and that even the best medical thinkers continued to diagnose a condition called “uterine suffocation,” which had symptoms similar to those of epilepsy and was thought to be caused by the flexing or swelling of a womb that was firmly anchored in the abdomen by ligaments.

There is growing evidence that the idea of the wandering or dislodged womb was also popular among healers outside the medical schools—healers who believed that certain kinds of spasmodic

⁷ *Gynecology* 3.29, as translated by Temkin (1955) ad loc. Like Aretaeus, Soranus clearly connects Platonic theory and Hippocratic practice; see Hanson (1998) 83–84.

⁸ Hanson (1995), 286.

⁹ *On the Affected Parts* 6.5 (= Kühn 8.425–26): “These were Plato’s words. But some (i.e., the Hippocratics and their followers) added that whenever the wombs, while wandering through the body, encounter the diaphragm, they interfere with [the patient’s] breathing. Others deny that the uterus wanders like an animal, but [they say] that when it is dried up by the suppression of the menstrual flow, it moves up (*anatreschein*) toward the internal organs because it desires (*pothousan*) to be moistened.” This translation is heavily dependent on the one by King (1998) 223.

¹⁰ *On the Affected Parts* 6.5 (= Kühn 8.430).

illnesses such as epilepsy, strokes or violent fevers were caused by the attacks of gods, demons and other supernatural forces that could enter the human body.¹¹ This new diagnosis generates a new therapy: ritual healers now claim to be able to force demons out of the body by using a special rite called exorcism. Lucian, a Greek author of Syrian birth, speaks of this kind of practitioner as a well-known type in the second century CE (*The Lover of Lies* 16):

Everyone knows about the Syrian from Palestine, the expert in this technique, how many he takes in hand, who fall down in the moonlight, rolling their eyes and foaming at the mouth.... He, nevertheless, stands them up and sends them away sound of mind, after having delivered them from their difficulties for a large fee. For whenever he stands near them as they lie on the ground and asks, "How came you into this body (*eis to sôma*)?," the sick man himself is silent, but the demon answers, either in Greek or in the barbarian tongue whence he came, saying how and whence he came into the person.

Many more anecdotes like these—most famously in the New Testament—confirm that during the Roman Empire peripatetic exorcists claimed to use the secret names of powerful gods to force evil demons out of sick people.

This idea of the indwelling demon has important ramifications for the history of the wandering womb, because these same exorcists also begin to treat the disease known to the doctors as "uterine suffocation." The apparent extension of exorcism into the realm of gynecology is not as odd as it seems, especially when we recall that a woman experiencing uterine suffocation was thought to exhibit symptoms very much like epilepsy and other spasmodic diseases—that is, the types of conditions usually treated by exorcists. Our earliest evidence is inscribed in Greek on a small gold sheet found near Beirut (GMA no. 51): "I adjure (*exhorkizo*) you, womb of Ipsa, whom Ipsa bore, in order that you never abandon your place, in the name of the lord god, the living, the unconquerable: remain in your spot." This sheet was found rolled up inside a cylindrical amulet case, and it was undoubtedly carried about by a woman to prevent her womb from moving. The text can be dated by the handwriting to the first century BCE or CE, and one oddity reveals that it was probably copied out of a handbook and thus preserves an even earlier tradition: the repetition of the word *Ipsa*

¹¹ Kotansky (1995), 243–46.

(Latin for “herself”) suggests that the scribe neglected to insert the name of the female patient and her mother at the appropriate point in his model. Note, also, that the differences between this exorcist and the majority of medical schools (that is, those criticized by Soranus) is not so great: most of the doctors believed that they could force a displaced womb back into place, because the sentient womb could smell and thus be repelled by foul odors, while the sorcerers aimed at the same result by threatening a sentient womb, which could comprehend what the exorcist was saying.

A series of hematite gemstones are also concerned with the movement or swelling of the womb (see Figure 2).¹² On the reverse of all of them is the traditional image of a womb as an inverted jug that strongly resembles the medical drawing of the womb in Figure 1. It has even been suggested that the engraver depicts the Fallopian tubes or ligaments on the top.¹³ The reverse side has a series of magical names followed by a brief Greek command: “Stop, womb!” (*BM* no. 351: στάθητι μήτρα). The second gemstone has a longer command: “Contract womb, lest Typhon grab hold of you!” (*SMA* no. 140: στάλητι μήτρα μή σε Τυφῶν καταλάβῃ). Here the command to stop swelling is backed up with a threat that recurs in different ways in all the wandering-womb spells of the Roman imperial period: if the womb does not stop moving or swelling, some powerful god (in the second example Seth-Typhon) will punish it.¹⁴ Both types of incantations

¹² For discussion see Delatte (1914), 76 and 80, Bonner (1950), 83–84 and Barb (1959), 370–71. All of these incantations occur on hematite gemstones, except for the two gems from Athens published by Delatte (1914) and described as “black jasper,” perhaps in error as hematite has many shades of color and densities; see Hanson (1995) 290–92. Hematite (literally: “bloodstone”) was believed to have the power to stop the flow of blood, and it is understandable, therefore, that it was frequently used for amulets concerned with menorrhea; see Barb (1952), 279–80 and Hanson (1995), 290–91.

¹³ Delatte (1914), 6 and Bonner (1950), 85: “The vessel shown on these amulets is a conventional representation of the uterus, and the lines proceeding from its top represent the Fallopian tubes, the others the ligaments that hold the organ in place.”

¹⁴ It is unclear who the divine ally is on the gemstones that do not mention Typhon. The magical names that accompany most of the commands show strong Jewish influence, but this is true for a large proportion of magic texts from the Roman period. The iconography, on the other hand, often depicts an Egyptian god sitting or standing on top of the inverted-jug womb, who seems to be holding the womb in place: Barry (1906), no. 3 (Seth on top; inscription: στάλητι μήτρα μή σε Τυφῶν καταλάβῃ); Delatte (1914), nos. 33 (Isis in center on top; inscription: στάλητι μήτρα) and 34 (Seth on top; inscription: στάλητι); *SMA* no. 140 (Chnoubis in center of triad on one side, scarab on other; inscription: στάλητι μήτρα μή σε Τυφῶν καταλάβῃ); Philipp (1986)

imply, moreover, that the womb is already on the move or swelling up and needs to be stopped, unlike the gold tablet from Beirut, for example, which orders the womb to never abandon its spot and to remain where it is. They would seem, in short, to be curative amulets, whereas the Beirut charm is a preventative one. The Beirut amulet, moreover, threatens the womb in a much more complicated way: it adjures the problematic womb “by the name of the living and unconquerable lord god,” an unmistakable reference to the god of the Jews, who is, as we saw earlier, frequently invoked in Roman-period exorcisms.¹⁵

In 1997 another incantation against the womb came to light in Britain, this one inscribed in Latin on a lead sheet, which was then rolled up like an amulet (4th century CE):¹⁶

Womb, I say to you, stay in your place, [which X] gave to you. I adjure you by Iaô and by Sabaô and by Adônai so that you do not hold onto the side, but stay in your place, and not hurt Cleuomedes, daughter of A[....

The use of the Greek letter *omega* instead of the Latin “o” in the spelling of the three Jewish names Iaô, Sabaô and Adônai clearly suggests that this spell belongs to the same Greek tradition. We should also note that unlike the author of the gold tablet from Beirut, who can imagine the possibility that the womb might wander away from its normal place, this lead amulet seems to reflect the modified medical view of Soranus and others that the womb is anchored in the lower abdomen and can only move in a tightly restricted way: the command to stay in place and “not to hold onto the side” is quite similar to the modified medical explanation of uterine suffocation discussed earlier.

Our fullest view of the exorcism of the womb appears in a short recipe from a Greek magical handbook discovered in upper Egypt and

no. 184 (Chnoubis in center of triad; inscription: στάλητι μήτρα); BM no. 351 (no god on top, but Jahweh's name (Iaô) is inscribed on the uterus itself; inscription: στάλητι μήτρα) and the fragmentary BM no. 379 (Seth on top on one side, Chnoubis on top on the other; inscription: σ[τάλη[τι μήτρα μή σε Τ]υφῶν καταλάβη). Seth thus appears on two of the three gemstones that address the command to Typhon, suggesting that there is an equation here: Seth = Typhon, a commonplace one in later antiquity.

¹⁵ Jahweh's popularity on amulets for the wandering womb is clearly connected to his role as a creator god, who in the beginning placed the womb in its “proper place” in a woman's body and who is consequently invoked to make sure the womb returns to its appointed spot. See Betz (1997), 51 and 53, who gives a thorough and learned discussion of the “creation theology” that informs the PGM VII exorcism and the Aramaic one from the Cairo Genizah (both quoted and discussed below).

¹⁶ Tomlin (1997) with the slight changes suggested by Faraone (2003).

dating to the third or fourth century of the common era (PGM VII 260–71):

For the ascent (anadromê) of the womb:

I adjure you, womb, [by the] one established over the abyss, before heaven, earth, sea, light or darkness came to be, who created the angels, foremost of whom is AMICHAMCHOU and CHOUCHAÔ CHERÔEI OUEIACHÔ ODOU PROSEIOGGÊES, and who sits over the Cherubim, who bears his own throne: return again to your seat and do not lean into the right part of the ribs nor the left part of the ribs, nor bite into the heart, like a dog, but stop and remain in your proper place without chewing as long as I adjure you by the one who in the beginning made heaven and earth and all that is therein. Hallelujah! Amen!

This version spells out clearly that which is implicit in the charms from Lebanon and England: Jahweh is the god invoked here in his role as the god who created the universe:¹⁷ if the womb moves outside the space that Jahweh gave it at the time when he created the world, it needs to answer directly to him.

The editors of a recently published Aramaic recipe from the Cairo Genizah have shown that it is a loose translation or adaptation of a Greek recipe in the same tradition as the one just discussed,¹⁸ but there are some significant differences in the commands given to the womb:¹⁹

I adjure you,
that you move to your place,
you, womb of NN, daughter of NN,
and that you do not deviate,
not to the right and not to the left side,
and that you do not swell like a dog(?)
and strangle the heart of NN, daughter of NN.
Stay in your place and
remain calm at your location.
I adjure you

¹⁷ For the creation theology reflected in these womb amulets, see Veltri (1996) and Betz (1997).

¹⁸ The Aramaic text borrows the Greek word μήτρα (“womb”) at line 12; and, because it begins with a series of *voces magicae*, which are quite similar to the consonants (repeated two and half times) of the key word ἀναδρομή in the rubric of the Greek spell: Πρὸς μήτρας ἀναδρομήν. Schäfer and Shaked (1994), ad loc. suggest that the Aramaic translator did not understand the rubric and mistook it for a divine or magical name. See Bohak (1999), 40–43 for full discussion.

¹⁹ For text see Schäfer and Shaked (1994), 112–14; for this translation, Betz (1997).

by the one who created you:
 Remain at your place,
 at which you were created.

In a recent article I suggested that, despite its much later date, the Genizah text probably preserves a Greek version of the recipe that is earlier than the 4th-century Greek papyrus.²⁰ This is especially clear when we focus on one key difference between the commands to the womb in the Greek and Aramaic texts:

P: μηδὲ ἀποδήξῃς εἰς τὴν καρδίαν ὡς κύων,
 (“nor bite into the heart, like a dog”)

G: “and that you do not swell(?) like a dog and strangle the heart”

Here the references to “biting” and “chewing” in the *PGM* recipe seem to be part of a later Byzantine development in which the womb is imagined as a demon that maliciously bites and stings the internal organs of a woman.²¹ In the Genizah recipe, however, the two actions described—“swelling” and “strangulation”—both fit easily within the revised Greek medical understanding of the womb in the Imperial period, as does, of course, the command not to deviate to one side or the other.

A historian of medicine might dismiss all of these amulets and recipes as evidence of superstition that is antithetical to the traditions of Greek medicine, but in fact these amulets share a number of features with contemporary medical texts that discuss the causes of uterine suffocation. With the possible exception of the earliest text from Beirut, they do not employ the older model of the classical period, in which the womb travels freely throughout the body; here the movements of the womb seem limited to the abdomen or the lower chest and are thus in harmony with the revised theory of Soranus and Galen that the womb was firmly anchored at its mouth by ligaments, but could nevertheless cause medical problems by flexing to one side or the other or by swelling up. It is, moreover, instructive to note that the rubric to the *PGM* recipe, “For the Ascent of the Womb (πρὸς μήτρας ἀναδρομήν),” is similar to the one that we find at the end of the title of Soranus’s chapter on treatments for the dislodged womb, “On the Flexion, Bending and Ascent of the Uterus (ἀναδρομῆς μήτρας).” Likewise, the image of the womb on the hematite gemstone that we saw in Figure 2 suggests a similar point

²⁰ Faraone (2003), ad loc.

²¹ Spier (1993), 25–62 and Faraone (2007).

of contact: like the illustration in the Soranus manuscript (Figure 1), the womb appears as an inverted jug and on some of the gems the engraver may have even tried to show the ligaments that hold the womb in place. Contact between the two traditions is also suggested by the command on one of the gemstones telling the womb to contract itself, which likewise seems to share the revised medical view in the Imperial period that the womb could swell up and stifle a woman's breathing, without leaving its place in her lower abdomen. The exorcists who created these amulets, in short, seem to be literate persons, who share with their medical rivals a number of key ideas and strategies.

CASE II: Head Healing and the Agate Gemstone from Anapa

We see similar signs of medical influence in the text inscribed on the reverse side of an agate gemstone found in the environs of Anapa,²² a Russian city on the north coast of the Black Sea, about fifty miles east of the entrance to the Sea of Azov. Despite the unusual spherical shape of the stone, Neverov saw that the inscriptions could be divided sensibly into two coherent groups each twelve lines long, that for convenience he labeled Obverse and Reverse.²³

OBVERSE:

πρὸς φαρμάκων ἀποπομπάς
 φραμφερεινλελαμε
 δαμναμενεύς
 αμναμενεύς
 5 μναμενεύς
 ναμενεύς
 αμενεύς

²² Inv. 835. The gem is 3.5 cm in diameter. See Neverov (1978), no. 50, plate clxxvi. He dates the text to 2nd–3rd century CE, the conventional date for all magical gemstones found without an archeological context. The gem was discovered in 1950 near Anapa, presumably in or close to the nearby ruins of ancient Gorgippia, a city founded in the 6th century BCE as a Greek emporium, which grew to a prosperous city by the 3rd century BCE, and was then destroyed by the Goths in the 3rd century CE.

²³ Since I have not been able to examine the stone itself, I give Neverov's text with a few modifications indicated in the *apparatus criticus*. One of these (πολύπου in line 22) can be verified by his photograph. The form πολύπου (and not πολύποδος) is listed in some lexica as a "poetic" form. For lines 16–24, I have inserted a vertical space to indicate the division between two columns of text. On the stone, however, these columns are differentiated only by a change in the direction of the writing. For a detailed discussion of the text see Faraone (2010).

10 μενεύς
 ενεύς
 νεύς
 εύς
 ύς

REVERSE:

 κύριε δέομαί σου πο<ί>η{ι}σο[ν]
 τήμ μάθην ἄκην ὕγείηγ
15 περὶ τῆς κορυφῆς. ἐνκεφάλ[ου] [5 MAGICAL SYMBOLS]
 ᾧτων [6 MAGICAL SYMBOLS]
 μήνινγος [4 MAGICAL SYMBOLS]
 σταφύλη[ς] [3 MAGICAL SYMBOLS] πρμηρυμα
 τραχήλου λαχμαληλ
20 μετώπου λαροιμαια
 μυκτῆρος κηρεα
 πολύπου σαη ηι
 ὀδόντων [MAGICAL SYMBOL]
 στόματος
3 τοῦ κορυφησεν κεφαλ[αίου] Neveron 22 πολύπον Neveron

OBVERSE:

 For the escortings-away of *pharmaka*:
 phramphereinlelame
 Damnameneus
 amnameneus
5 mnameneus
 nameneus
 ameneus
 meneus
 eneus
10 neus
 eus
 us

REVERSE:

 Lord, I beg of you, grant
 the knowledge, healing, health,
15 concerning the head. Of the brain [5 MAGICAL SYMBOLS]
 of the ears [6 MAGICAL SYMBOLS]
 of the eardrum [4 MAGICAL SYMBOLS]
 of the uvula [3 MAGICAL SYMBOLS] for the thread(?)
 of the throat Lachmalêl
20 of the forehead Laroimaia
 of the nostril Kêrea
 of the polyp Saê êi
 of the teeth [1 MAGICAL SYMBOL]
 of the mouth

The reverse of the stone is our main interest here, but we shall begin briefly with the obverse, because it supplies some important clues to the use and focus of the whole amulet.

The first line is a rubric, mistakenly copied from a magical handbook, a kind of scribal error that is common on gemstones, amulets and other kinds of applied magic.²⁴ It informs us that the gem is concerned with combating or curing *pharmaka*, a word that in this context can mean either “poisons” or “hostile incantations,” and we do, in fact, have evidence that the Greeks used amulets to protect themselves against both.²⁵ The second line seems to preserve a single nonsensical magical name that begins with *Phra*, a word that is very close to *Phre*, the Greek way of rendering the name of the Egyptian sun god Re.²⁶ A “wing-formation” of the word Damnameneus takes up the rest of the obverse of the gem. In the archaic and classical periods Damnameneus seems to have been some kind of underworld demon or deity, who (as his name “Subduer” suggests) controlled or bound the dead in the underworld.²⁷ This triangular formation is a fairly common device on magical amulets, generated by spelling a name or word fully and then repeating the process continually, but each time leaving off the first letter, until the name disappears entirely.²⁸ When decipherable Greek words like Damnameneus appear in this disappearing format on amulets, they are almost always the names of hostile demons or diseases, who are forced to vanish as their name vanishes one letter at a time.²⁹

²⁴ Jordan (2002), 61–68 discusses another Russian gem (this one round and flat) which also begins with instructions copied mistakenly from a handbook (“This is the *logos*”) and he cites another example in the Louvre: Bonner and Youtie (1953).

²⁵ See, e.g., *GMA* 36:15–16 and 52:12, with Kotansky’s comments *ad loc.*

²⁶ See Faraone (2010) for a detailed discussion of this and other options.

²⁷ In the Roman period he continues in this role, but adds (by virtue of his assimilation with the eastern sun-gods Re and Shamash) a new identity as a cosmic solar deity who “subdues” the entire cosmos. See Faraone (2010) for a much more detailed discussion.

²⁸ Here the name seems to be shrinking from both sides at once, but this is an illusion created by the scribe, who removes only the first letter from each line, but at the same time shifts the right triangle (that would normally result) to the right, so that it looks like an isosceles triangle. If the text in Neverov (1978) is correct, the reduction does not proceed as far as possible, because the word could be reduced one more time to a single *sigma*.

²⁹ It is a long-standing hypothesis that disappearing names are a form of simile magic, a *deletio morbis* that aims at reducing the disease by reducing its name. See the comments on Heim no. 97, Dornseiff (1925), 63–67, and Michel (1997), 149–51. There have been some dissenting voices, see, for example, Gordon (2005), 87 n. 68, who summarizes and dismisses the traditional view without argument: “It is commonly, though

Damnameneus, in fact, appears on another recipe preserved in an Aramaic magical handbook from the Cairo Genizah. Like the wandering womb recipe, this one is also borrowed from the Greek magical tradition.³⁰

	amanamenus
	manamenus
[3 MAGICAL SYMBOLS]	anamenus
	namenus
You holy symbols	amenus
and holy <i>charaktêres</i>	menus
by the mercy of the Father of Mercy	enus
heal the head of such-and-such	nus
	us
	s

It is unclear whether or why the scribe forgot to copy the first line of the disappearing name, but since this recipe is borrowed from the Greek tradition, I agree with the editors of the *editio princeps* that this must be the same Damnameneus who appears on the Anapa agate.

It is especially interesting that this Aramaic spell was used to heal the head of a sick person, because the reverse side of the Anapa gemstone begins with three lines of deferential prayer: “Lord I beg of you: grant knowledge, healing and health concerning the head.” The second half of line 3 and then the remaining nine lines divide down the middle, with a different part of the head named in the genitive case on the left side and then magical symbols or magical names on the right (in the final line the word *stomatos* apparently lacks its corresponding symbols or word). This part of the inscription seems to be some sort of key or code, that tells us which magical name or symbol we must use to cure a pain or problem in the corresponding body part. Thus, for example, if we have a patient with a sore throat, we run our finger down the left side until we reach “throat” and then we discover that

mistakenly, thought that the “heart” [i.e. “heart-shaped name”] is intended to denote the disappearance of the fever, disease, etc. At best this is a secondary evolution....”

³⁰ Naveh and Shaked (1993), 192 (text), 199 (English translation quoted here) with Plate 18 (= no. 18. 9. 6–13a). The layout and content of this brief Genizah spell clearly seem drawn from the same Greek tradition as a papyrus amulet from Egypt (SM 21, 4th–5th century CE): it illustrates three *charaktêres* (albeit different from the ones on SM 21) and the prayer, “You holy symbols and *charaktêres*... heal the head,” employs the Greek word *charaktêres* and seems, in part, to translate the request for Tiron: “Holy *charaktêres* heal Tiron! (ἅγιοι χαρακτῆρες θεραπεύσατε Τείρονα).”

the appropriate magical word is “Lachmalêl”.³¹ The magical names that appear in the right column are, however, rare or unknown in other magical texts.³²

The order in which these ten parts of the head are listed, however, is a bit odd, and therefore significant:

- | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1: brain | |
| 2: ears | (orifice) |
| 3: eardrum | (smaller part within) |
| 4: “grape-cluster” | (smaller [pathological] part within) |
| 5: throat | (orifice) |
| 6: forehead | |
| 7: nostril | (orifice) |
| 8: “octopus” | (smaller [pathological] part within) |
| 9: teeth | (smaller parts within) |
| 10: mouth | (orifice) |

The list is apparently composed of two parallel sequences of five items, each beginning at a position on the upper part of the head (nos. 1 and 6) and then moving downward to include two pairs of body-parts. Note also that the author of this text repeatedly pairs an orifice (ear, throat, mouth and nose) with one of its internal parts (eardrum, “grape-cluster,” “octopus” and teeth), and that two of these smaller internal parts have metaphorical names that refer solely to pathological conditions. The word “grape cluster” (*staphylê*) in no. 4 refers to the uvula, which when it is swollen from infection during a sore throat resembles a tiny purple grape-cluster at the back of the throat. Likewise, the word “octopus” (*polypos*) in no. 8 describes a malignant growth in the nostril.

We sometimes get similar lists of body parts on curse tablets, which specify—often in great detail—the extent of the binding or paralysis intended for the victim.³³ None of the extant examples, however, seem to follow the pattern found on this gemstone. Three come close, but their differences are as telling as the similarities. A first-century BCE Latin curse, for example, lists the “neck, mouth, cheek, teeth, lips, chin, eyes, forehead and eyebrows” (DT 135a) and another the “head,

³¹ See Faraone (2010) for the argument that this gemstone was not used as an amulet at all, but rather it was a miniature handbook of some sort.

³² See Faraone (2010).

³³ For a thorough survey, see Versnel (1998).

forehead, eyebrows, eyelids, pupils, nostrils, lips, ears, nose, tongue and teeth.” An earlier, second-century BCE Greek curse likewise has an eclectic list: “hair, face, forehead, eyebrows, eyes, eyelids, nostrils, mouth, teeth, ears, throat and shoulders.” None of these three examples, however, offer a good parallel for the Russian amulet, and the prominence of the eyes or parts of the eyes on all three highlights the fact that our gemstone neglects the eyes entirely.

There is, however, a list with fairly close parallels in the Hippocratic treatise *De affectionibus*, which offers an eclectic survey of the parts of the human body and suggestions about what to do if the patient feels pain in a particular part or if that part swells up.³⁴ It functions, in short, just like the Russian gemstone, except that it offers brief medical explanations (based on Hippocratic humoral theory) and advice for treatment, instead of magical symbols or names. The treatise begins with a chapter on the head (2–5), which is divided into seven sections, each devoted to a different part of the head or face. Each section begins with a somewhat formulaic conditional sentence, for example: “If pains fall upon part X, it is beneficial to do Y.” The chapter is organized as follows (I give the protasis of the first sentence of each section in the chapter):³⁵

ἢν ἐς τὴν κεφαλὴν ὀδύναι ἐμπέσωσι...

(If pains befall the head...)

ἢν ἐς τὰ ὦτα ὀδύνη ἐμπέσῃ...

(If pain befalls the ears...)

ἢν ἐς τὰ παρὰ τὴν φάρυγγα φλεγμαίνῃ...

(If the area along the throat swells up...)

ἢν δὲ τὰ οὖλα ἢ τῶν ὑπὸ τὴν γλῶσσαν φλεγμαίνῃ...

(If the gums or any of the places beneath the tongue swell up...)

ἢν δὲ ἡ σταφυλὴ κατακρεμασθῇ καὶ πνίγῃ...

(If the inflamed uvula hangs down and chokes [i.e. the patient]...)

ὅσα δὲ περὶ ὀδόντας γίνεται ἀλήματα...

(However many pains there are around the teeth...)

ἢν δὲ ἐν τῇ ῥινὶ πώλυπος γένηται...

(If a polyp forms in the nose...)

³⁴ Potter (1988), 4–5.

³⁵ Many thanks to Lesley Dean-Jones for bringing this text to my attention.

ταῦτα μὲν ὅσα ἀπὸ τῆς κεφαλῆς φύεται νοσήματα, πλὴν ὀφθαλμῶν.
ταῦτα δὲ χωρὶς γεγράφεται.

(These are the diseases that arise from the head, except those of the eyes, which will be described separately.)

The parallels between the Hippocratic list and the magical one are significant. Both, for example, generally focus on the parts of the head that may be subjected to a pathology, but both break this pattern by listing the same two terms for pathological growths in the throat and nose: the “grape-cluster” and the “octopus.”

Both lists, moreover, seem interested in healing the same areas and start out, at least, in a similar order:

Gemstone:

- 1: brain
- 2: ears and eardrum
- 3: “grape-cluster” and throat
- 4: forehead
- 5: nostril and “octopus”
- 6: teeth and mouth

De affectionibus 2–5:

- 1: head
- 2: ears
- 3: throat
- 4: gums and tongue
- 5: “grape-cluster”
- 6: teeth
- 7: “octopus” in nose

The list on the gemstone, as we saw, makes one trip down the sides of the head, and then returns to the top again (forehead) for a second descent down the middle of the face ending with the mouth. The list in *De affectionibus* 2–5, on the other hand, makes an identical first trip down the sides of the head, but then reverses direction and goes up the middle of the face and stops at the nose. Both, moreover, ignore the eyes entirely, a lapse that makes sense once we read the final line of the chapter on the head in the *De affectionibus*, which explains that the diseases of the eyes will be described separately.³⁶

³⁶ Galen, in his *De compositione medicamentorum*, sets aside all of chapter two for the eyes, because of the special care that must be taken in medicating the eyes, so that the treatment does not add pain through being too caustic. I am grateful to Ann Hanson for the reference to this text and to most of the material that follows in the next paragraph.

It is unlikely that the author of the text on the Anapa gem actually read a copy of the Hippocratic *De affectionibus*, because as far as we can tell hardly anyone in Antiquity refers or alludes to it, except Galen.³⁷ Other kinds of popular medical handbooks were, however, organized generally in a similar head-to-toe format and sometimes also dedicated separate chapters for the head and then the eyes. Galen's *De compositione medicamentorum*, a handbook on beneficial medicines for various parts of the body, begins at the top with a chapter on the diseases of the head, and then has individual chapters on headaches (Chapter 2), ears, tonsils and nose (3) and then eyes, eyebrows and eyelids (4). In each he briefly describes a series of pathologies, each followed by a recommended ointment or drug. Other medical writers use a similar format for the so-called "medical catechisms," like the pseudo-Soranian *Quaestiones medicinales*, which begin with a question ("What is disease X?") followed by a description of the symptoms and suggestions for treatments.³⁸ Even shorter forms, like the pseudo-Galenic *Definitiones medicae* (19.346–462 Kühn), dispense with the questions altogether, and the sands of Egypt have turned up sixteen fragments of both types (and some hybrids), suggesting that they were very popular in the Imperial Period.³⁹ All of these handbooks seem to have been organized in head-to-toe fashion and work, like the Anapa gemstone, as a kind of key, whereby the user looks up the affected body-part and then finds the necessary information, be it a definition of a pathology or the name of a useful drug or regime to combat it.

Conclusion

When scholars (myself included) discern such close parallels between magical texts and religious or medical ones, we sometimes assume that their relationship is a parasitic one, in which the culturally low magician borrows and inevitably degenerates knowledge from a morally or educationally higher cultural realm. This kind of approach, however, vastly oversimplifies the contexts in which these texts circulated and were used. The man who inscribed the agate gemstone and the one who composed the *Peri Pathôn* are both clearly educated and literate

³⁷ Potter (1988), 2.

³⁸ For text, see Rose (1870), 243–274.

³⁹ Hanson (2004).

individuals, who have produced complicated keys for treating diseases: for each part of the head and face they supply the appropriate treatment. Indeed, the *De affectionibus*, although originally written for doctors, seems to have been repackaged at some point as a self-help manual for a wider and more popular audience than was first intended.⁴⁰ The main difference between the medical and magical texts, moreover, is that the Hippocratic doctor recommends dietetic regimes based on the theory of the humors, and the sorcerer provides secret magical names and symbols based on ideas of sympathetic magic or powerful names. Neither approach, I should point out, would be acceptable medical practice in this day and age, as each embraces complicated systematic theories based more on fantasy than on any real empirical research.

There are also clear signs in both of the cases presented here that deeper folk beliefs may lie behind the shared magical and medical knowledge. We have seen, for example, that both traditions imagine the womb as an inverted jug that might “run up” from its normal position in the lower abdomen. Might it be the case that both ideas were borrowed from midwives or other traditional healers? Indeed, scholars generally believe that the Hippocratic fumigation techniques for manipulating the wandering womb were borrowed from such popular healers. And who is to say whether the use of evocative names like “grape-cluster” and “octopus” for diseased conditions does not begin with the same healers or—for that matter—the orderly cataloging of the parts of the head? We must remember that in pre-literate cultures catalogues are a crucial means of orally preserving and transmitting vital knowledge for the community.

Traditional scholarly prejudices have, in fact, infected the very manner in which I have in this essay presented two clearly distinct groups: the magicians and the doctors. Such a clear dichotomy is achieved only by setting (as I have) Soranus and Galen on the one side, and authors of the magical papyri on the other. But, as we have seen, the medical views of Soranus and Galen are not typical of the views held by most doctors in the Roman Empire. Soranus tells us clearly that “almost all” of the other medical schools in his day continued to believe in

⁴⁰ The book begins with the following exhortation: “It is necessary for any man, who is intelligent (συνετός) . . . , to know from personal knowledge how to help himself in sickness, to know and judge the things that are being said and administered to his own body by the doctors, and to know each of these things to a degree reasonable for a layman (ἐς ὅσον εἰκὸς ἰδιώτην).”

the wandering womb and continued to use Hippocratic fumigation-techniques to cure it. Moreover, the medical handbooks that map the human head in the same manner as the Russian gemstone seem to be part of a popular tradition of texts that simplify medical knowledge for personnel who do not have full medical training or for those who wish to treat themselves.

Finally there seems to be no obstacle to supposing that the same individual could have used both elite medical and magical handbooks in his practice, depending on the expectations of the patient. Galen, for example, criticizes a doctor named Xenocrates, because his medical treatises were filled with incantations and Egyptian mumbo-jumbo. And elsewhere we discover that Roman-period doctors were well acquainted with the use of amulets and even approved of them in some cases as a placebo—for instance, Soranus's famous tolerance toward the use of amulets by women experiencing uterine hemorrhages.⁴¹ Soranus, of course, does not believe in their efficacy, but he was one of the most brilliant medical thinkers of his generation and we must try to imagine what other doctors might have been doing in various corners of the Roman empire—for example, in Beirut or in West Deeping, England, two far-flung places where wandering-womb amulets have been found. All this suggests that the scribe who created the Anapa gem and the exorcists who treated the wandering womb could very well have been educated and literate men, who were conversant with both medical treatises and magical handbooks, and who may have themselves received, at one point or another, formal instruction in both traditions.⁴² Indeed, we have a good example of just such a person living in Egypt in the Imperial period, a certain Thessalus, who has left us a brief biographical account of how he attended medical school in Alexandria for a few years, before he became disenchanted with his education and traveled up the Nile to learn the arcane healing secrets of Egyptian magic.⁴³ Regardless of how we understand his encounter with the Egyptian priests at the end of his tale or the knowledge he obtained by it, he presents us with a credible example of an

⁴¹ *Gynecology* 3.42.3. For discussion and other examples, see Hanson (1995), 289–90.

⁴² Hanson (2004), 199, for instance, suggests that the “catechisms” were “able to introduce aspiring practitioners to a store of medical knowledge and professional terminology and [that] established doctors could also employ them as reference tools.”

⁴³ For recent treatments of the various Thessali, that also review past scholarship, see Flemming (2000), 144–47 and Moyer (2003), 219–38.

educated man in the Roman Empire, who claims to have had formal training in academic medicine as well as in the equally elite magical spells of Roman Egypt.

From a larger cultural perspective, then, the sorcerers and the majority of doctors practicing in Soranus's day were literate elites armed with handbooks and curative regimes that share similar formats (for example: the map of the human head), similar diagnoses (for example: the *anadrome* of the womb) and similarly schematic visualizations of the internal organs (for example: the womb as an upside-down jug). The healing regimes for these two competing camps were indeed radically different, but in the end it is not clear to me that the Hippocratic fumigations of the womb and the dietary prescriptions based on the theory of the humors were any more effective than the exorcism of the womb or the use of magical names and symbols to cure the diseases of the head. My goal here is not, of course, to denigrate the doctors of the Roman imperial period, but rather it is to rehabilitate the sorcerers as fellow elites, who likewise depended on technical handbooks and theorized the human body and its diseases in similar ways.⁴⁴

Abbreviations

- GMA R. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, Vol. 1, *Papyrologica Coloniensia* 22.1 (Opladen 1994).
- Heim R. Heim, *Incantamenta Magica Graeca-Latina*, *Jahrbücher für classische Philologie* Suppl. 10 (Leipzig 1892).
- BM S. Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum*, 2 vols. (London 2001).
- D&D A. Delatte and P. Derchain, *Les intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes de la Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris 1964).
- DMG S. Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen: Eine Studie zu Zauberformeln und magischen Bildern auf geschnitten Steinen der Antike und Neuzeit* (Berlin 2004).
- PGM K. Preisendanz [and A. Henrichs], *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri*², 2 vols. (Stuttgart 1973–1974).
- SM R. Daniel and F. Maltomini, *Supplementum Magicum*, 2 vols., *Papyrologica Coloniensia* 16.1 and 2 (Opladen 1990 and 1991).
- SMA C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*, *University of Michigan Studies, Humanistic Series* 4 (Ann Arbor 1950).

⁴⁴ I presented different versions of this paper at The Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University, University of Southern California, Columbia University, William and Clark University, Bryn Mawr College, Stanford University and University of California at San Diego and I am grateful to my various audiences for their comments and questions. All of the flaws that remain are, of course, my own.

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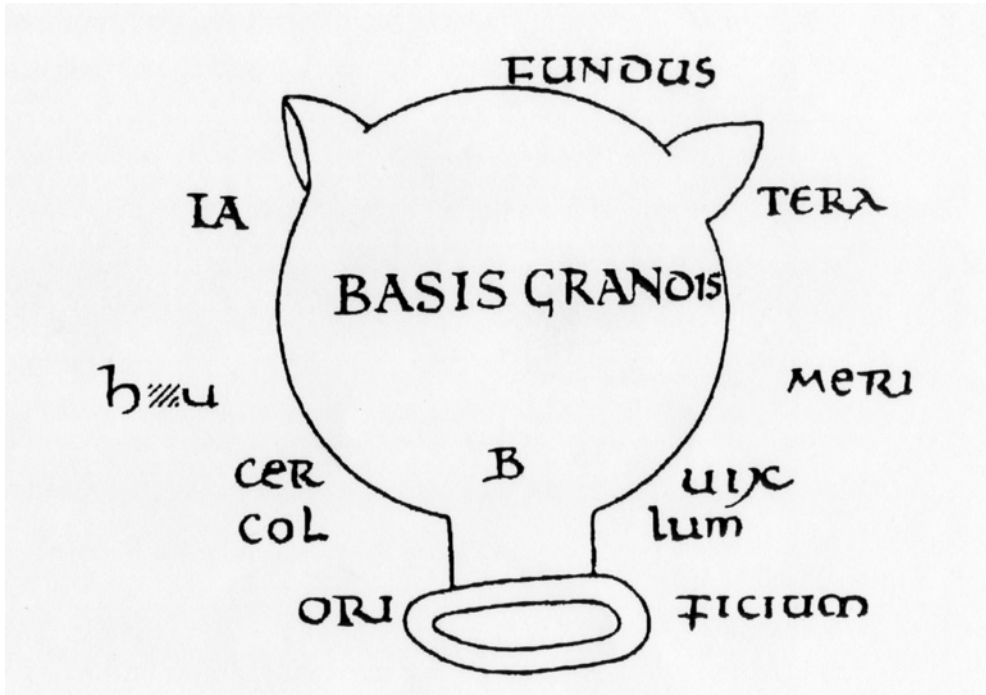


Figure 1. Ninth-Century Illustration from a Soranus Manuscript (Brussels MS 3714)



Figure 2. Inscribed Hematite Gem in the British Museum (Michel [2004] no. 351)

