

Writing Reimagined in Greco-Roman Magic

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In many areas, the technology of writing functions as a handmaiden to speech. Aristotle stresses this when he remarks how “things spoken are symbols of experiences in the soul, and things written are symbols of things spoken” (Arist. *Int.* 1.16a3-4). In this paper, I argue that when the invention of writing begins to be incorporated into ancient magical rituals, the purpose and value of the technology are radically reimagined. From the earliest known curse tablets in Sicily and Athens, we find creative (mis)uses of script patterns – writing from right to left, in spirals, or in zig-zag patterns. As time goes on, these graphical innovations become increasingly elaborate and unreadable. We find, for instance, lists of nonsense words (*voces magicae*) sometimes taking the form of long palindromes, complex shapes and patterns composed of letters (calligrams), smatterings of invented letter symbols (*charaktêres*), and, in addition to this, the strange material manipulation or ritual destruction of the *materia graphica* itself (ink, stylus, *Textträger*). As one scholar has suggested, these techniques seem, at their limit, “to transcend the limitations of (mere) text” (Gordon 2015: 166).

In this paper, I make a two-tiered argument: (1) I argue that magical practitioners make extraordinary claims to power and are always on the hunt for rhetorical and symbolic reinforcement. The technology of writing provides these practitioners with an additional medium through which they might generate new and ‘efficacious’ networks of significance. Moreover, since these magical texts aim to influence *otherworldly* powers, their communicative context is not strictly bound to normal lexical conventions or even human intelligibility. This relative freedom combined with the overriding incentive to augment the perceived efficacy of the magical script led practitioners to experiment with the non-linguistic features of writing, the *textures* of the text. (2) This spirit of graphic innovation is accompanied by latent anchoring practices that allow practitioners to justify (to themselves as well as others) their non-normative approach to writing. These anchoring practices most often take the form of explicit or implicit analogy (i.e., just as I do X to the text, so too may Y occur in the world) or redefinition (i.e., text object X *is now* an efficacious Y or *is now* the calling card of otherworldly agent Z). All in all, the practices of magic provide a domain that favors radical innovations in the practice of writing, and, as in other domains, these innovations find their conceptual justification in subtle anchoring practices.

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