

TRANSMISSION OF MAGICAL KNOWLEDGE: MAGICAL HANDBOOKS ON PAPYRUS

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When we first applied for project funding at the *Neubauer Collegium* at the University of Chicago in 2015 we were sure of two things: that the magical papyri deserved renewed attention, and that it would be an arduous task. Ever since then, as the two general editors of the project *Transmission of Magical Knowledge: Magical Handbooks on Papyrus*, we have led a group of international scholars in the task of reediting, translating, and studying the magical handbooks from Egypt that have been preserved on papyrus. We understand a clear difference between formularies or handbooks and applied texts. Formularies typically contain one or more prescriptions (i.e., instructions for magical rituals), often present titles, or subtitles (rubrics), and use a generic marker (δεῖνα or *mn*, “NN”) to indicate the name of the client or victim. In contradistinction, the applied texts (amulets, curses) were created for specific rituals, often contain personal names, are often folded, and show signs of use.

Thanks to the climatological conditions and scribal practices of Greco-Roman Egypt, several handbooks from that region have reached us. These handbooks are precious witnesses to practices and processes of cultural transmission, that is, the creation, communication, transformation, and preservation of knowledge, both in text and image, across history. Among these handbooks some of the most numerous concern magical knowledge, a field of extraordinary diffusion and interest, from Mesopotamia to the present. These ancient magical handbooks provide a unique entry into a corpus of knowledge at a particular period in a very long history that is otherwise lightly documented, as well as into the practices by which that field of knowledge was taught and transmitted. More than eighty such handbooks survive, some of them in a fragmentary state. Our project’s first aim was to reedit and retranslate these handbooks and carry out their first large-scale study as material objects and media of cultural transmission.

The first edition of the papyrus magical handbooks from antiquity—the first two volumes of *Papyri Graecae magicae*, by K. Preisendanz—was finished between the World Wars, that is, between 1928 and 1931. Referred to as *PGM*, this work has since that time been used as one of the most important sources for the study of Greek magic. This 1928–31 edition was once lightly revised in 1974 by A. Henrichs and today presents several substantial problems that need to be addressed. The edition needed a thorough revision and the original papyri needed to be checked and reedited. Preisendanz did a very good job for his time, but he did not have access to good images, he followed editing practices that have since been much improved, and he ignored many aspects of the manuscripts, including non-Greek text, lectional signs, and images. The 1990s edition of the corpus known as *Supplementum Magicum* (by R. Daniel and F. Maltomini) has set an example for us as far as papyrological techniques. Moreover, in the last decades new fragments have come to light that need to be added to the corpus and that affect the reading of the other texts.

The *PGM* provides texts for only those papyri that are in Greek and ignores spells and recipes in other, usually Egyptian languages. This omission creates the false impression that these texts originated in a monolingual environment when, in fact, they are interesting precisely because of the diversity they represent. Our corpus and new edition include the texts in the three languages

(Greek, Demotic, and Coptic). In many ways, this initiative follows in the footsteps of the famous Chicago translation of the Greek magical papyri, spearheaded by H. D. Betz in the 1980s, which for the first time presented translations of all of these languages in a single volume.

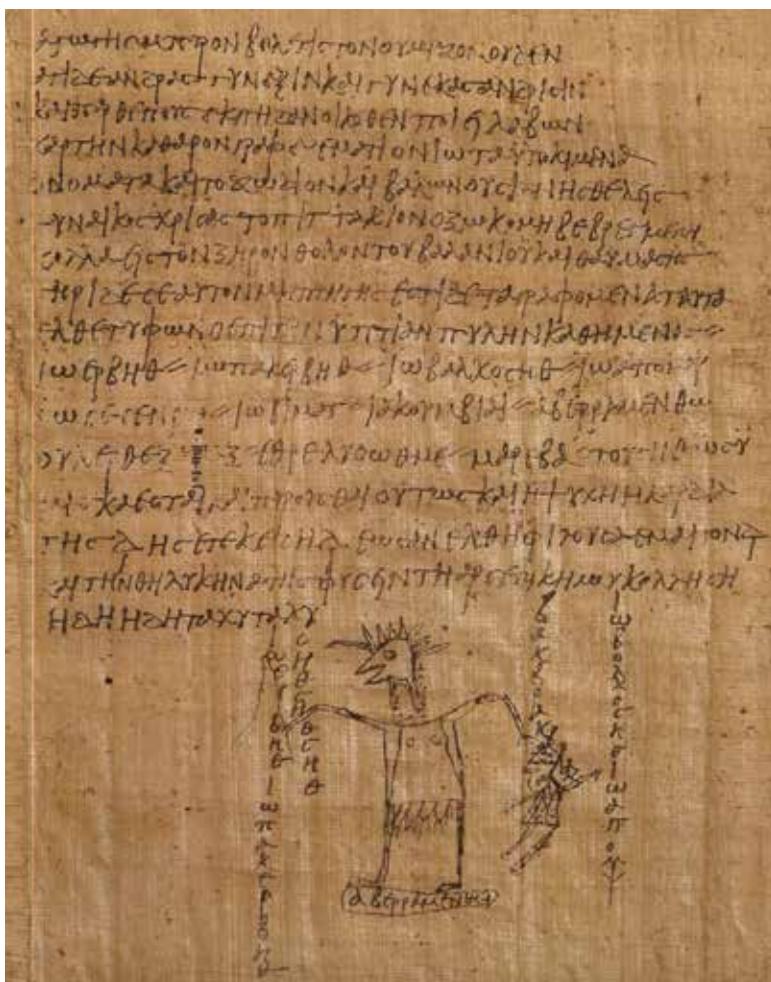
Among our collaborators is Prof. Janet Johnson, who famously edited the text of some of the bilingual formularies (Demotic-Greek) included in our corpus: they are PDM/PGM XII, PDM/PGM XIV, PDM/PGM LXI, and PDM Suppl. (*GEMF* 15–18). We have chosen to limit ourselves to these four items since there is currently a project led by Joachim Quack in Heidelberg that will include all magical texts, formularies, and applied texts in Demotic. The four handbooks we have included are much more than just a sampling—they are the longest and best preserved of all known Demotic or Greek-Demotic formularies.

The material dimension of these handbooks has generally been neglected. Too often the texts of these handbooks were studied without taking into account the material on which they were written. Scholars often treat them as having the same origin even though it is clear that they were produced independently and often betray several layers of recension, which date to different historical periods. They probably also derive from different traditions and reflect a variety of different practices. Our edition includes individual bibliological studies of each of these *handbooks* focusing on their idiosyncrasies and attending to details of palaeography, codicology,

Figure 1: P.Oslo 1, courtesy of the University of Oslo papyrus collection.

and lectional marks, details that will help both individuate them and establish typologies for different kinds of magical codices—also a desideratum in the broader field of study we term *history of the ancient book*.

From the first five years of the project, the tangible results are the first volume, containing editions of fifty-four magical handbooks—a work of about five hundred pages, all produced following a guideline, revised by our board of editors, and including a large number of commentaries and analysis of both the textual and material dimensions of this corpus. It will be published under the title *Greco-Egyptian Magical Formularies*. The second volume will contain



the remaining thirty-four handbooks. It is in preparation, and we expect to complete the manuscript by the summer of 2022.

The systematic revision of the material characteristics of these books, together with the assessment of the paleography, has helped reorganize chronologically this invaluable corpus of ancient magical knowledge. This kind of reorganization, which is new for this corpus, helps us better understand the transmission of magical knowledge and the influence of some texts on others. New dates assigned to some pieces have also changed the perception of book formats and scribal practices. These observations have led a few of our collaborators to produce a book of essays containing studies on the materiality of the magical handbooks as books: *Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies: Libraries, Books, Recipes* will come out at the end of 2021 in the series *New Texts* (University of Michigan Press).

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