



Issue 26

Fall 2011

# Purification in the *Papyrae* *Graecae* *Magicae*

Jonathan Shen  
University of Waterloo

“[the Chaldaean magos], for 29 days, beginning with the new moon, took me down to the Euphrates in the morning, facing toward the sun, bathed me; after which he would make a long incantation ... he spoke rapidly and indistinctly, like he was invoking certain spirits... // we only ate nuts, drank milk, mead, and water, and slept out of doors on the grass.”

“ἐκάθηρεν τέ με καὶ ἀπέμαξε καὶ περιήγγισεν.”

“Thus, he [the Chaldaean magos] purged me, cleansed me and consecrated me.”

Lucian – *Menippus on Necromancy* 7-8

Ritual cleansing and consecration have been aspects of magic since the beginning of the Greek and Near Eastern magical tradition. There existed varying types of purification in Antiquity. Plato, in his *Republic*, wrote “πέιθοντες πόλεις, ὡς ἄρα λύσεις τε καὶ καθαρμοὶ ἀδικημάτων διὰ θυσιῶν καὶ παιδιᾶς ἡδονῶν εἰσι μὲν ἔτι ζῶσιν,” describing purification rites that absolved entire state-communities through games and sacrifices.<sup>1</sup> There also existed absolution purifications, performed by the likes of Apollonius of Tyana, to whom the descendents of the deceased would pay a fee to grant the dead person freedom from sins in the afterlife.<sup>2</sup> Other common instances of purification included common cleansing spells for ailments and plagues, and ritual purifications in mystery cult initiations. In addition to the above applications of purification, the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (*PGM*) feature many other spells with instructions for consecrations and cleansing. The *PGM* is perhaps the most complete extant collection of texts regarding the thought and practice of magic in

## Purification cont'd

antiquity. This paper aims to study all instances of purification that are found in the *PGM*, and to observe what correlations exist among the spells thereby included. This study is intended as a tool for further research and my formative remarks seek to give an idea of the difficulties that face an investigator in this field. Two axes of comparison will be used: 1) by type of deity invoked; and 2) by the aim or objective of the spell (e.g., love, knowledge, commercial success, divination, harm to another). One of the consistent observations that emerges from this study is the existence of a systematic hierarchy of spells in the minds of the authors responsible for Greek Magical Papyri. Moreover, this hierarchy, based on the need for purification, is also consistent with ancient views on the issues involved in the spells, such as the conceptual importance of the sun and moon and the relative moral status of divination as compared to love or the acquisition of wealth.

The nature of purification and cleansing makes it a necessary aspect of religious ceremony (e.g., specific rituals for cleansing), medicine (e.g., prescribed diets), and alchemy (e.g., the use of certain stones or objects in ritual). To this end, I have defined purification for the purposes of the paper in order to justify the inclusion and exclusion of what could be varying interpretations of purification in spells. According to my definition of purification, these spells are characterized by at least one of these three criteria: 1) *requirements for rituals of personal purification*, 2) *requirements of*

*pure and clean materials in spells*, and 3) *requirements for a pure or prescribed lifestyle for the operation of the spell*.

The premier criterion, *purifications by ritual*, requires that the practitioner to perform some sort of ritualistic cleansing. These purifying scenarios may vary significantly from simply bathing, to wearing specific consecrated garb, to smearing oneself with an occult mixture. The *ritualistic purification* condition is not limited by purification done unto the user, but also sanctification processes applied to objects and animals. The *pure materials used in spells* criterion overarches all forms of pure materials including clean textiles, pure myrrh ink, pure papyri, and consecrated objects. An important consideration in the *pure materials used in spells* qualification is that the spells explicitly call for “pure” materials. That is to say that “pure myrrh ink” does not represent essential purity, but that of an undiluted form which is required for the spell, as opposed to an olive branch, which is by necessity a pure olive branch, but for which the spell places no qualifier on its undiluted nature. Having made this distinction, the former qualifier (in which a spell calls explicitly for “pure myrrh ink”) would be included in this study, and the latter would be excluded. Lastly, *lifestyle prescriptions* are defined by restrictions on one’s lifestyle, such as abstention from sexual contact, and diets, such as a diet without fish or pork, or drinking water on an empty stomach.

One must distinguish between acts

that are only part of the magical rite, and are not purificatory in nature, and similar operations that adhere to the laid out criteria. Instructions in a spell that indicate how one should act depending on astrological signs are not purificatory in nature. They are simply part of the rite. The same can be said of a concoction made of magical material, plants, and animals, which require no explicitly *pure* quality. Ritual anointments that do not involve pure or holy materials also fall under this caution. For example, anointing one’s hands with the blood of a sacrificed animal is merely part of the rite and is not a purifying act. What sets, for example, a spell that requires sexual prohibition apart from the rest of the aforementioned spells is that the act of abstaining from sex is in pursuit of the elimination of corruption.

The methodology for collecting all cases of purification in the *PGM* began with a personal manual examination of the entire corpus of the *PGM*. This work was greatly complemented by the University of California, Irvine’s *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*<sup>3</sup> (*TLG*). Using the *TLG*, I was able to make keyword-queries of an electronic version of the Greek Magical Papyri.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the results should represent a practically exhaustive survey of this collection. However, the nature of having to discern whether each instance of cleansing is admissible as part of this study, according to the my definition of purification, does create the possibility for unintended human error.

The research has revealed that **cont'd on page 4**

# Notes and Queries

## Observations on Magic

This note aims to draw the attention of our readership to a series of weekly blog postings by John Michael Greer that raise a number of issues at the intersection of magic (as considered historically as well as in contemporary manifestations) and the series of converging environmental, financial, political and resource-scarcity crises facing the world today. They can be found at the URLs listed below, beginning with the 21 September 2011 posting entitled “Clarke’s Fallacy”, followed by “A Preparation for Philosophy (28 September), “Peak Oil Initiation” (5 October), “Pluto’s Republic” (12 October), “A Lesson in Practical Magic” (19 October), and “The Trouble with Binary Thinking” (26 October):

[http://thearchdruidreport.blogspot.com/2011\\_09\\_01\\_archive.html](http://thearchdruidreport.blogspot.com/2011_09_01_archive.html)

and

[http://thearchdruidreport.blogspot.com/2011\\_10\\_01\\_archive.html](http://thearchdruidreport.blogspot.com/2011_10_01_archive.html)

Greer examines everything from the practices of the ancient

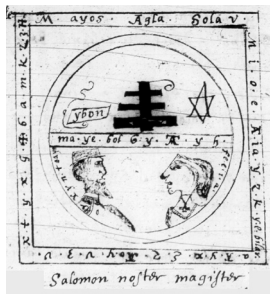
Neoplatonists to the writings of Joséphin Péladan during the decades on either side of 1900 to the murder of Ioan Culianu in 1991 and relates these to his own intensive study of the decline of societies in books such as *The Long Descent* (2008), *The Ecotechnic Future* (2009), and *The Wealth of Nature – Economics as if Survival Mattered* (2011). Along the way, he raises points that relate directly and indirectly to matters considered in Marco Pasi’s “Theses de Magia” in Issue 20 of this Newsletter and in the responses to that article which appeared in subsequent issues. Greer’s observations serve to emphasize the crucial importance and immediate relevance of the rigorous study of the Western magical tradition.

I invite reactions from our readership to these postings, which will be considered for publication in subsequent issues of this Newsletter, either as lead articles or contributions to the “Notes & Queries” section depending on the length and depth of the material submitted.

-David Porreca, editor

## The Societas Magica invites proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter.

We are looking for short essays (1500-2500 words) announcing new developments deriving from research in the study and teaching of magic and its related topics. We would be especially interested to see lead articles on modern magic, or periods other than medieval. We are also looking for smaller pieces for our notes and queries column. News about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries, or other such items are all welcomed.



Please contact David Porreca: [dporreca@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:dporreca@uwaterloo.ca)



[www.societasmagica.org](http://www.societasmagica.org)

## Purification cont'd

there are 45 spells in the *PGM* that contain instructions involving purification, as defined for this study. Of these 45 spells, 56% either invoke a deity associated with, and/or have astrological instructions that pertain to the sun or the moon (for references, see Table 1 below). These deities are Apollo,<sup>5</sup> Helios, Selene, Ra, and Isis. For the sake of comparison, the secondary and tertiary ranked correlations are spells involving Osiris, which total to 16%, and those involving Hermes and/or Thoth, 13% respectively. This high percentage of spells associated specifically with solar and lunar deities requiring purification suggests that there exists a systematic relation behind these spells. Since they predominate among the spells requiring some form of purification, deities associated with the sun and the moon may be assumed to be of a more sacred or holy nature. This widely-held opinion regarding the sun and the moon is echoed by many writers in antiquity. Both Plutarch and Plato speak of the sun as an image that is divine and blessed, which all nature yearns to reach.<sup>6</sup> There are also references to the sun and moon as beings of a higher, divine nature in the Hermetic cosmos: "all the bodies whose growth and decline have been charged to the sun and moon."<sup>7</sup> Ancient astronomers and philosophers believed very much that the universe was perfection outside of the earth and that spheres and circles were representations of this perfection. The sun and moon were thought to be perfectly spherical and moving around the Earth in perfectly crystalline

spheres. The prominence of the sun and the moon in such sources and the presence of deities, who are linked with these celestial bodies, suggests that the moon and sun as stellar beings were somehow "purer" in the ancient worldview. It would stand to reason that ancient magic practitioners would have wanted to present themselves as purely as possible when associating with the sun and moon.

The latter part of this paper will discuss purification in the spells of the *PGM*, as sorted by their aim or purpose. The results suggest that summoning and divination spells, as well as knowledge spells,<sup>8</sup> are correlated with purification requirements (see Table 2 below). Divination and knowledge spells make up 40% of the documented purification spells, while summoning spells comprise of 42% of the cleansing spells. There is significant overlap between the two types of spells; often, the magician needs to summon a divine spirit to aid in granting the powers of divination or knowledge. There appears to be no clear pattern with regard to the divine powers that these spells call upon. Deities of varying temperaments and natures are addressed, from the righteous Helios to the hateful Erinyes. Nonetheless, the thematic relation between these types of spells and purity might be explained by the fact that the spells require the conjuration of a divine figure or spirit. It would make sound sense that the magic practitioners would wish to present themselves in a pure and respectable state when trying to persuade any spirit to aid them, irrespective to its status or nature.

Other noteworthy observations include the absence of purification instructions in egocentric spells<sup>9</sup> such as erotic love spells, popularity spells, mercantile-prosperity spells, and hostile target-oriented spells. There are 86 instances of love and popularity spells in the *PGM*. Only four (5%) of them include purificatory instructions.<sup>10</sup> This extraordinarily low number is made all the more remarkable by the fact that the instructions in three of the four cases are hygiene related or ambiguous in their nature of the required purity. That is, *PGM* IV.1265-1274 and *PGM* VII.981-993 do not offer any details, save for the sole phrase of "keeping oneself pure." This phrase could be interpreted in many ways, including the simple idea of cleanliness. The love and popularity spell in *PGM* IV.2145-2240 is clear in its stipulation of purity: that one should keep oneself "clean (in a hygienic sense) at all times." There also appears to be no relationship between purity and whether the motive of the love spell is *φιλία* or *ἔρως* – love spells in general do not require ritual cleansing. Commercial prosperity and success spells follow a similar pattern to love spells, exhibiting a low percentage of purification instructions. There are only three instances of this type of spell that require purity,<sup>11</sup> two of which are omniscient ring spells, the other being for the acquisition of wealth. Finally, there is not a single case of hostile target-oriented spells which requires purification. This classification of hostile target-oriented spells incorporates all kinds of malignantly-intentioned spells, including slander spells,

## Purification cont'd

strangulatory spells, spells that induce insomnia, spells that inflict diseases, and spells that bring attacks via dream or demons.

Interestingly, even a Christian-influenced exorcism spell (*PGM* IV.1227-1264), which tries to expel a demon from someone's body, does not have requirements of purity.

At the risk of imprinting modern moralities on the observations of ancient moralities, I would like to point out that the lack of purificatory instructions in these spells might be attributed to the generic ancient viewpoint on love and these other egocentric pursuits. Nearly all ancient Greek sources describe love negatively as a disease.<sup>12</sup> In *Timaeus*, Plato discusses the madness and disease of love.<sup>13</sup> Love was thought of as base and the spirits governing it were perhaps seen to be less righteous by ancient magical practitioners than the ones related to the sun and the moon. Similarly, several thinkers in antiquity hold the opinion that the love of wealth was not a dignified aspiration in itself. While Aristotle and Plutarch do not condemn the act of acquiring wealth, they distinguish 'natural wealth,' which is only what is useful for the state and one's household, from 'non-natural wealth,' which consists of money and is unlimited.<sup>14</sup> The lack of purity requirements in wealth-acquisition spells suggests that these were considered as lowly in nature as love and popularity spells among ancient magical practitioners. Lastly, the remarkable result that not a single instance of hostile target-oriented

spells requires purification echoes the idea that they were viewed as the very bottom of the hierarchy of spells by the authors responsible for the *PGM*.

I hope that this study and my cursory observations provide some insight to scholars of this field; that we may find a correlation between particular aspects of magic in a corpus, if we compile data and isolate anomalies for study. All of the results shown above seem to be in agreement that there exists a correlation between a systematic hierarchy of spells and purification in the *PGM*. This hierarchy of spells corresponds quite readily to the Platonist and Neo-Platonist thought, of the likes of Plato, Plutarch, and the authors of the Hermetic corpus.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 2.364e-365a: "states/poleis believing that there are still purifications of their unjust deeds, by means of sacrifice and pleasant (sports) for the living."

<sup>2</sup> B. Ankarloo and S. Clark, eds., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe. Vol. 2: Ancient Greece and Rome* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 137.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tlg.uci.edu/>: the *TLG* is a searchable digital corpus of Greek literary texts from antiquity to the medieval era. It includes Preisendanz' and other critical editions of the *PGM*.

<sup>4</sup> The *TLG* offers wildcard searches, but the writer needed to compile a list of various keywords with differing etymological stems. List of purification keyword-stems queried, alongside translations: ἀγνίζ\* (to cleanse in relig. context), ἀπομακτ\* (to clean; hyg.), κάθαιρ\* (purify/cleanse – verb stem), κάθαρ\* (purify/cleanse – noun stem), περιμάζ\* (cleanse; ambig.), ἀκαθάρ\* (unclean), προαγνεύσ\* (purif. in ritual/mysteries context), ἰχθ\* (fish), χοίρει\* (pork/pig), ἀπεχ\* (to abstain).

<sup>5</sup> In the Hellenistic Era, Apollo became

associated with Helios, and thus the sun.

<sup>6</sup> Plutarch, *On the Face of the Moon*; Plato, *The Republic*, 6.507; 6.510.

<sup>7</sup> Hermes, *Asclepius* 3; 36.

<sup>8</sup> In this study, the classification of divination and foreknowledge includes dream oracles, "knowledge" spells (that is, spells that grant foreknowledge or advanced knowledge in a practice or skill), inquiry spells, and "revelation" spells (as classified by H. D. Betz in the table of contents of the *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells: Texts*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> That is, spells that focus on the manipulation of the external world for personal motives.

<sup>10</sup> See *PGM* IV.1265-1274, IV.2145-2240, VII.981-993, and XII.14-95 for the only love and popularity spells containing consecration rituals.

<sup>11</sup> See *PGM* XII.193-201, XII.201-269, and XII.270-350 for wealth acquisition and success spells with purificatory requirements.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 53-55.

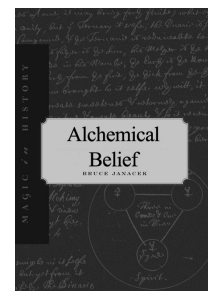
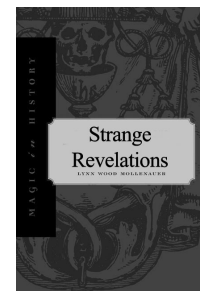
<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 85b 88b.

<sup>14</sup> Plutarch, *On Wealth*; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1256b26; 1257a14.

cont'd on page 6

## 20% Discount

Members of the Societas Magica are entitled to a 20% discount on all books in the Magic in History series put out by Pennsylvania State University Press. Mention that you are a Societas Magica member when ordering books by phone (800-326-9180) or fax (877-778-2665). These telephone numbers work from the US and Canada.



**Table 1 – Percentiles and Spell References by Deity Invoked**

Type of Calculation	Ratio (Percentile)	Specific Spell References (all listed references are from the <i>PGM</i> , unless otherwise stated as part of the Demotic Papyri)
Spells associated with a <b>sun/moon deity</b> , out of total purificatory spells	25 of 45 (56%)	I.95-130, I.262-347, II.1-64, II.64-183, III.282-409, III.424-611, III.633-731, IV.475-829, IV.2967-3006, V.172-212, V.213-303, VII.505-528, VII.664-685, XII.270-350, XIII.1-343, XIII.343-646, XIII.646-734, <i>PDM</i> xiv.150-231
Spells associated with <b>Osiris</b> , out of total purificatory spells	7 of 45 (16%)	IV.850-929, IV.2967-3006, VII.429-458, VII.540-578, XII.201-269, <i>PDM</i> xiv.150-231, XIIb. 27-31
Spells associated with <b>Hermes</b> and/or <b>Thoth</b> , out of total purificatory spells	6 of 45 (13%)	IV.2967-3006, V.172-212, V.213-303, VII.540-578, VII.665-685, XIII.343-646

**Table 2 –Percentiles and Spell References by Purpose of Spell**

Type of Calculation	Ratio (Percentile)	Specific Spell References (all listed references are from the <i>PGM</i> , unless otherwise stated as part of the Demotic Papyri)
<b>Summoning</b> spells, out of total purificatory spells	19 of 45 (42%)	I.42-95, I.95-130, I.262-347, II.1-64, II.64-183, III.633-731, IV.52-58, IV.475-829, IV.850-929, IV.930-1114, IV.2967-3006, V.172-212, VII.505-528, VII.540-578, XII.14-95, XIII.1-343, XIII.343-646, XIII.646-734, <i>PDM</i> xiv.117-149
<b>Divination and knowledge</b> spells, out of total purificatory spells	18 of 45 (40%)	III.282-409, III.424-611, IV.475-829, IV.930-1114, IV.3209-3254, VII.540-578, VII.664-685, VII.703-726, VII.740-755, VII.795-845, VII.846-861, XIII.1-343, XIII.646-734, <i>PDM</i> xiv.117-149, <i>PDM</i> xiv.150-231, <i>PDM</i> xiv.283, XXIIb. 27-31
<b>Summoning</b> spells associated with a <b>sun/moon deity</b> , out of total purificatory spells	12 of 45 (27%)	I.95-130, I.262-347, II.1-64, II.64-183, III.633-731, IV.475-829, IV.2967-3006, V.172-212, VII.505-528, XIII.1-343, XIII.343-646, XIII.646-734
<b>Love/popularity</b> spells with <b>purificatory instructions</b> , out of total number of love/pop. spells in the <i>PGM</i>	4 of 86 (5%)	IV.1265-1274, IV.2145-2240, VII.981-993, XII.14-95
<b>Wealth acquisition and success</b> spells with <b>purificatory instructions</b> , out of total number of wealth/success spells in the <i>PGM</i>	3 of unknown total*	XII.193-201, XII.201-269, XII.270-350
<b>Hostile target-oriented</b> spells with <b>purificatory instructions</b> , out of total number of hostile target-oriented spells in the <i>PGM</i>	0 of unknown total*	N/A

\*The spells that would classify as wealth acquisition, commercial success, and victory would be too time-consuming to list exhaustively, but they are certainly common enough (appearing at least ten times in the *PGM*).

**Copyright Notice:** The copyright for individual items published in the Societas Magica Newsletter remains with the authors. Copyright in the collection of articles comprising the the Societas Magica Newsletter is held by the Societas Magica. Materials from the Societas Magica Newsletter may be reproduced for educational use provided that (1.) no charge shall be made for the copy (2.) the author(s) and the Societas Magica Newsletter are identified and full correct citation is included. No other use may be made of these materials, in print or electronic form, without prior written permission from the author(s) and advance notification of the Societas Magica as represented by the chief executive officer.