The Use of the *Ostracon* in Magical Practice in Late antique Egypt
Magical handbooks vs. Material Evidence*

1. The ostracon

The term ὀστρακόν was applied in Greek (*LSJ* s.v.), among other uses, to any kind of earthen vessel, or a fragment of it, a “potsherd” (*IG* 4(1).121.82 [Epid., 4th cent. BCE], LXX *Ps.* 21.16, O.Wilck. 2.1152, etc.)*. Yet one more meaning of the term, relevant to our study, is applied to the hard shell of snails and mussels (*h.Merc.* 33, S.Ichn. 303, Hp. *Steril.* 245, Theoc. 9.25, Arist. *HA* 528a4). In Coptic (so Crum 38b), one often finds the term βλξει (variants βελξει, βληξι) to mean “earthenware”, “pottery”, “clay”, or also «document written on a shard», as well as, like in Greek, “shell” or “seashell”, but we find in our texts also εγχεκ ινομε/ναμε, lit. «on a valve (of a shell) made of clay» 3 or επιβιτ οβάλεςτ, «on the shard of a pot».

As a writing medium, the *ostracon* appears early in Antiquity and its use extended in Egypt at least to the Arabic period, when the use declined4. It was deployed for all kinds of documents, administrative or

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3 P.Bad. v 137, Bilabel translates “Meermuschel”.

4 On the use of the *ostracon* see A. Bülow-Jacobsen, *Writing Materials in the Ancient World*, in R.S. Bagnall (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, Oxford University Press,
private, be it tax receipts, accounts, letters, school texts, memoranda. It apparently served as a cheap substitute for papyrus\(^5\).

The aim of our study is to explore the use of ostraca in magical practice. We will describe their use as explicitly prescribed in magical handbooks, which assigned to medium a precise ritual significance. And we will compare this prescription to the extant evidence, i.e. the ostraca which have been classified by scholars as magical evidence. We will use this comparison in order to distinguish when their use was due to opportunity, rather than the fulfilment of instructions, and when it could be replaced by any other material without affecting in any way the efficacy of the magical act.

Magical handbooks often describe the materials needed in order to perform correctly a magical spell, charm, amulet, *vel sim*. It seems that the specificity of the materials required often had a relevant role in the type of charm performed. Among the prescribed materials one finds papyrus, *ostracen*, wood, linen, bone, and different kinds of metal *lamellae*, as well as more specific materials, like a strip of a shroud or a chip of the bone of a dead person, or even the skull. Often enough, there are further instructions about how to use or deposit the final “magical product” in tombs, baths, or at the gate of the targeted victim’s house. The prescribed use of ostraca as *materia scriptoria* for magical purposes is rare in the preserved Greek and Coptic magic handbooks, but since there are a few references and an important number of preserved pieces, our survey will attempt at clarifying the specific use of the ostracen in magic by comparing these two sources\(^6\).

2. The use of the ostracen in Greek and Coptic magical handbooks

2.1. Greek handbooks

a) Pottery ostraca in the PGM

As it will be surveyed in this section, the use of pottery ostracae is prescribed in the magical handbooks for aggressive magic\(^7\). It is interest-
ing to note that it appears in instructions related to the god Seth-Typhon and in love magic, both for causing separation and for causing unions. The instructions often indicate where to pick the ostracon, where to place it, what to write or draw on it and even which type of ink to use. We will survey now the precise instructions, providing a background for each of the cases.

*PGM* XII is a bilingual magical handbook (Greek-Demotic) preserved at Leiden. This roll has been dated to the fourth century CE, and it belonged to the so-called Theban Library. Among the various prescriptions compiled in this book we find the instructions for a charm for causing separation, ἀηδίαν, ἔχθραν, ὡς εἴχον Τυφῶν καὶ Ὅσις, εἰ δὲ ἄνηγ' ἐστίν καὶ γυνή: “ὡς εἴχον Τυφῶν καὶ Ὅσις”, «odiousness, enmity, just as Typhon and Osiris had, but if it is a husband and wife, “just as Typhon and Isis had”» (lines 366-375), which requires the use of an ostracon of pottery, specifically from a pot of salted fish (ταρίχου ὄστρακον) and a bronze stylus to write it (χαλκῷ γραφείῳ). The spell shall be recited after having been written. It closes with an invocation to the powerful Typhon: ἰσχυρὲ Τυφῶν, μεγαλοδύναμε, τὰς σὰς δυνάμεις ἀποτέλει, «Strong Typhon, very powerful one, perform your mighty acts». The specification of the type of pottery, that of a jar of salted fish, ταρίχου, can be perhaps an intended pun related to a part of the spell, the invocation of the god who «loves disturbances», ὁ φιλῶν ταραχὰς.

*PGM* XXXVI is an opistograph Greek magical handbook. This roll is preserved at the University Library in Oslo and, like the previous one, has been dated to the fourth century CE. The papyrus comes from Theadelphia, in the Fayum. Among the prescriptions there are instructions for a love spell, ὀγγυγή (189-203), which requires an unbaked ostracon, εἰς <ὁ>στρακὸν ὀμῶν, on which an invocation to Hekate has to be written using a bronze stylus. We wonder what is meant exactly by «unbaked ostracon». It may be understood that the text was written on the fresh clay with a chisel, and then fired, with the result that the text became fixed. We find a remarkable parallel for this method in the Aramaic use of

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control someone, his/her belongings, and his/her feelings, usually by inflicting damage to him or her in every sense. With this large definition, the prescriptions that are going to be taken into account are, mainly, binding spells, love charms, and instructions for sending evil sleep.

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10 This was suggested in a personal communication by Prof. Christopher A. Faraone.

11 P.Osl. I 1.
of «new» or «uncooked» ostraca: Naveh-Shaked Amulet 10\textsuperscript{12} is a fifth-sixth century CE Aramaic love charm on an ostracon from Horvat Rimmon, Israel. The text was incised on the ostracon while the clay was still fresh. This comparison brings us to Aramaic magical instructions. In the Aramaic handbooks this practice appears as using a «new potsherd»\textsuperscript{13}. In the Genizah fragments of magic books (Genizah 5, p. 3:12; 6, p. 1:3, 4:4 and 6, p. 1:15) the phenomenon appears with a more specific instruction, as «unbaked piece of pottery»\textsuperscript{14}. Apparently the firing of the object is part of the ritual, a similia similibus procedure\textsuperscript{15} («as this shard burns, so shall his/her heart burn»)\textsuperscript{16}. Though we do not find it in our text in the PGM, this was probably behind the intended use of unbaked ostraca. It is also remarkable that there is a coincidence in the ink used to dip the ostracon in the Aramaic handbooks, «black myrrh», with that in our texts (ζυμυρνομέλαν).

In the same papyrus, the instructions for a counter-spell given in 256-263 seem to be more specific. A three cornered shard picked up from a fork in the road (<οστρακον> ἀπὸ τριόδου τρίγωνον) is required, and even has to be picked with the left hand (τῇ ἀριστερᾷ χειρὶ ἄρας), written with myrrhed ink, ζυμυρνομελανίῳ, and be hidden.

In the Supplementum Magicum\textsuperscript{17} we find other examples of prescriptions or magical instructions. Suppl.Mag. ii 82\textsuperscript{18} is a very fragmentary papyrus, dated to the third century CE, featuring short prescriptions for different magical charms. In lines 4-6 there is a prescription which uses a potsherd\textsuperscript{19} for a charm ἀγώγ (ιμον), «to lead the beloved», an erotic spell.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{PGM} PGM XLVI, PLaur. III 57.
\bibitem{PGM2} Although difficult to read, the traces have been interpreted by the editors as ὄστρακιον or ὀστρακίνος.
\end{thebibliography}
Suppl. Mag. II 96\textsuperscript{20} preserves the instructions for several magical charms in a much abbreviated and misspelled Greek. The papyrus has been dated to the fifth-sixth century CE and its origin is unknown. In lines 48-51 the use of a potsherd is recommended for a woman in labor, πρὸς γενοῦσαν. The ostracon should be placed on the right thigh during labor (?). It is not clear if the words: ἥξεσο ἣν τοῦ μνείου σου· Χριστός σε καλῖ, «Come out of your tomb, Christ is calling you» have to be pronounced while holding the ostracon on the thigh, or written on the ostracon.

Suppl. Mag. II 97\textsuperscript{21} is again a magical handbook with very brief magical prescriptions. The papyrus preserves the lower part of an opistograph roll dated to the fifth-sixth century CE. It seems to have belonged to the same magical workshop as the previous one. Its origin is unknown too. It is a spell for calling in customers that has to be written on a triangular ostracon\textsuperscript{22}, τρήγονον ὀστρακον, and be buried in the house. The title of the spell, κατακλητικόν, appears also in PGM IV 2373, and it has been translated as «invocatory spell» in LSJ. Eitrem translates it in the apparatus of the edition of PGM IV as «Kundschaft ladend», i.e. «charm for calling in customers»\textsuperscript{23}. If it is taken as a misspelling of κατακλιτικόν\textsuperscript{24}, it becomes a spell for causing illness, bringing it to the sphere of aggressive magic we have been describing. The ritual of using blood of an animal to write magical signs on an ostracon that has to be buried is easily related to the other prescriptions for such a purpose.

b) Ostraca “from the sea”

Apart from the usual pottery shards, we have included in our survey the ostraca from the sea, i.e. seashells, called in Greek ὀστρακον ἀπὸ θαλάσσης. Most of the magical handbooks that we will mention were produced in Thebes, where seashells were probably not an ordinary commodity (they are hardly mentioned in the papyri\textsuperscript{25}), and it would not be strange to use a more common kind of ostracon, a pottery shard, as a sub-


\textsuperscript{21} PGM CXXIV, P. Mil Vogl. inv. 1251.

\textsuperscript{22} Compare above the triangular sherd in PGM XXXVI.

\textsuperscript{23} This interpretation of the word was preferred by R. Daniel - F. Maltomini, Suppl. Mag. II 97, cit., p. 257. Cf. below, the instructions in P.Macq. 1.

\textsuperscript{24} The word occurs in PGM VII 430 in the context of «a restraining rite for anything». κατακλίνω occurs in PGM IV 2076, 2450, 2497, 2624; PGM LXIV 1 f.; O 2, 31 f. See also D.R. Jordan, A Survey of Greek Defixiones not Included in the Special Corpora, in «Greek Roman and Byzantine Studies» 26 (1985), pp. 151-197, nos. 16 and 163.

\textsuperscript{25} For example, as an ornament, χώχλον ναυτικόν, in P.Cair.Zen. IV 59665, 10 (3rd cent. BCE).
stitute. In fact, as far as we know, there are no known seashells inscribed from Egypt. Moreover, the seashells are prescribed for similar purposes as the above mentioned pottery shards.

We find four cases of seashells as prescribed material in the magical handbooks. One of them comes from PGM IV 2220-2227. PGM IV, also called «Paris Magical Codex»

26, a codex composed of 36 folios. It has been dated to the fourth century CE and it probably comes from Thebes. As in the case of PGM XII, PGM IV has been connected to the Theban Library. These lines feature the instructions for «spells that restrain», and recommend the use of an ὀστρακὸν ἀπὸ θαλάσσης, a seashell, to write on with a special kind of ink to which Typhon’s blood (μιλτάριον Τυφῶνος) should be added. The object then is to be buried in a grave of someone who died untimely, εἰς ἀώρου μνῆμα. It also has an invocation which can be compared to the one in our first example (PGM XII)

27: Ἰὼ Βολχοσῆθ, Ἰακούβ ιαι Ἰὼ Παταθναξ Ἐρβηθ Ἰὼ Πακερβηθ used in aggressive magic.

PGM VII is a magical handbook written on an opistographic roll. It is preserved at the British Library

28 and has been dated to the third and fourth centuries CE

29. Its origin is not clear, but some scholars link the papyrus to the so-called Theban Library

30. Among different prescriptions this papyrus preserves the instructions for three love spells which require the use of a seashell, normally written on with a special kind of ink, the blood of a black ass, and instructions on how to deposit the pieces in graves or in the heating chamber of a bath. The first one, PGM VII 300a-310, is a love charm of immediate effect, ἀγώγιμον αὔθωρον, to be written on a sea-ostracon, ὀστρακὸν θαλάσσιον, with the blood of a black ass, διὰ αἵματος ὀνίου μελάνου (to be connected to Typhon?) with and invocation to Necessity, the Maskelli logos

31 and a series of magical words of power (?)

PGM VII 374-384 contains two different charms to induce insomnia, ἄγχοπτητικόν, one of them using an ostracon from the sea and writing the spell on it.

28 P.Lond. inv. n. 121.
29 The magical papyrus preserves spells written by two different hands.
And finally *PGM VII 467-477* is a spell of attraction, to be written on an *ostracon* from the sea with myrrh ink, ζύμυρνομέλανι. A figure of Typhon, ζῴδιον Τυφωνιακὸν, has to be copied from a model given below, his names must be written all around, and then it has to be thrown to the hypocaustum of a bathhouse (καὶ κύκλῳ αὐτοῦ τὰ ὀνόματα καὶ βάλε εἰς υποκαυστήριον βαλανεῖον), and the spell uttered at the same time.

According to the sources discussed, seashells were used for charms for restraining and for erotic purposes, three of them on the same magical handbook – perhaps a sign that the book or its source came from a marine area? In any case, as with pottery *ostraca*, the seashells are prescribed for aggressive uses, rather than protective. It is also important to note that there is a link with “Typhonic magic” in this case. It is our impression that the use of both pottery *ostraca* and seashells is parallel and possibly interchangeable in Antiquity. One may even argue that the use of the seashell, only possible in marine areas, was soon substituted by the use of the pottery *ostracon* in areas where shells could not be found. The fact that the name used for both was the same made this exchange easier.

2.2. Coptic handbooks

In line with what has been claimed about Greek magic, Coptic handbooks of ritual power also recommend the use of *ostraca* for magical purposes only in cases of aggressive magic. There are a few examples that we will survey here. *P.Bad. v 137.1-8* (Meyer-Smith 86) contains the instructions for the performance of a sexual curse to leave a man impotent and protect a woman from his sexual advances. It states at the beginning that the curse should be written on a sherd.

ξαι ηνπραν εγχεκ νουν εναμε - ναλμιτε ναλχωβια - εοογ εβαλ-ντα&piota; πεζα

«Draw our names on a shard of clay: Nalmite, Nalchobia. Wash them off with genuine (olive) oil».

The text of *P.Bad. v 122.272* (Meyer-Smith 73), though damaged, clearly refers to the ritual act of writing the prayer on an *ostracon*. A drawing of «three humanoids» filled with *charakteres*, *voces magicae*, and the name of archangels, follows the instructions. The purpose of the text is sexual.

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32 We say “Typhonic magic” in the sense of aggressive magic related to the god Seth-Typhon.
33 P.Heid.Kopt. 1682.
35 P.Heid.Kopt. inv. 1684.
P. Bad. v 139.48 (Meyer-Smith 105)\textsuperscript{37} presents the instructions for a cursing ritual aimed at a woman and her business. It involves the “persuasive” burning of a spell written on an ostracon. An image was meant to be drawn onto the ostracon with menstrual blood.

\begin{verbatim}
«Write (it with) menstrual blood on a potsherd; sleep behind (it). Set (it) upon three bricks; set fire under them. Bury (it) at a crossroad. Off(ering): olive pit; consume (it in) the fire. It is done».
\end{verbatim}

There are three more examples in a recently edited eighth century Coptic magical handbook, P. Macq. 1\textsuperscript{38}. In this handbook the use of ostraca is prescribed for three different spells: one for a business spell, one for a binding spell, and one for a binding spell specific for a ship.

\begin{verbatim}
5. A business (spell): Write Eremiel and those belonging to him. Do (?) four potsherds. Bury one at each corner outside the door. Write again four slips (and) place one at each corner inside the door. Say the formula on water, mix the pot three times; throw (it) inside and outside and in front of you».

8. A binding (spell): Say the formula over a new potsherd (and) bury it at the door».

20. A binding (for a) ship: Say the formula over a potsherd. Put it on its front».
\end{verbatim}

Finally, there is a later example, P. Bad. v 123. This is a Coptic-Arabic love spell, which starts (ll. 1-2) in Arabic with the words «Write these words on a shell from Aswan with menstrual blood and water from leeks». It is a love spell to be placed under the door of the targeted victim.

\textsuperscript{36} Translation by H.M. Jackson in M. Meyer - R. Smith (eds.), Ancient Christian Magic, cit., p. 158.
\textsuperscript{37} P.Heid.Kopt. inv. 1681.
\textsuperscript{38} M. Choat - I. Gardner, A Coptic Handbook of Ritual Power (P. Macq. 11), Brepols, Turnhout 2014, pp. 68-69. We are grateful to Malcolm Choat for letting us read the unpublished manuscript of this book, which will soon be out.
As shown above, the prescribed use of ostraca in magic, both in the Greek and in the Coptic manuals, is related mostly to aggressive practices, in all their varieties: curses of every kind and love magic. There are also two examples for business spells, possibly designed to summon clients, which could be related to the mentioned «attraction spells», and one example of an ostracon used for healing, in this case to help a woman in labor. However, we have to refer to a literary exception, that of the Geoponica (2.42.2)\(^\text{39}\): «If you wish that this plant (=«lion-pulse») in no way appears (i.e. in your fields), take five potsherds and draw on them in chalk or in another kind of white (a picture of) Heracles strangling the lion. Place these in the four corners (of the field) and in the middle».

3. Material evidence of ostraca\(^\text{40}\)

Now that we have surveyed the testimony from the handbooks, we turn to the evidence for applied magic, i.e. the actual ostraca which belonged to the ritual and which can be the product in some way of the instructions described above. As we have seen, the magical handbooks recommend the use of ostraca mainly for aggressive purposes, and hardly, and often doubtfully, for protective magic. Many of the pieces in our survey\(^\text{41}\) present a difficult interpretation and cannot be related to magic.

\(^{39}\) The Geoponica is a Byzantine tenth century compilation of earlier Greek agricultural knowledge. We thank Christopher A. Faraone for pointing at this text as an example of the use of ostraca in protective uses. There is no further evidence of this practice, unless we take O.Kellis 153, a “school text” which features the name of Herakles written three times. However, the fact that it appears together with other school texts and objects confirms that it has nothing to do with an amulet. For Geoponica, see A. Dalby, Geoponika. Farm Work, Prospect Books, Devon 2011, although it is just a translation into English with hardly any notes. The translation into Spanish by M.J. Meana - J.I. Cubero - P. Sáez, Geopônica o extractos de agricultura de Casiano Baso, Instituto nacional de investigacion y tecnologia agraria y alimentaria, Madrid 1998, has however plenty of notes on the text, though not precisely on this topic. For it see a brief reference in H.J. Rose, The Folklore of the Geoponica, in «Folklore» 44,1 (1933), pp. 57-90, esp. p. 69.


\(^{41}\) We have prepared a survey of “magical” ostraca with the help of the Leuven Database of Ancient Books (LDAB), Trismegistos Portal (TM), Religious, Ritual, Magical and Divinatory
with entire certainty. Some of them, as we will argue, are indeed difficult to interpret, since the few words, charakteres or drawings they feature are common not only in magic, but in other textual genres.

3.1. Dubious material

We will start with the case of those ostraca which can be interpreted both as magical texts and as school exercises. There are plenty of examples, but we will mention some representative of those that have been characterised as magical in their editions.

1. TM 82586 = KSB III 37\(^{42}\) is a limestone ostracon with roughly scrawled text and sketches of animals, and it cannot be asserted whether the text is magical or a school text.

2. TM 82612 = KSB III 38\(^{43}\) presents a very similar text, letters and the drawing of a face, which might be interpreted as the face of a teacher or an apotropaic figure (cf. the case of Bes or Humbaba)\(^{44}\).

3. TM 65328 = O.Crum 520\(^{45}\) presents a complicated case. It contains a doxology, but also alternatively considered pen trials by Crum, followed by the alphabet.
4. No TM nr.Edited by Wessely, this is an ostracon from Elephantine dated to the second century CE, which features parts of verses from the Iliad (12, 442-444). Wessely suggests that the ostracon should be interpreted as a magical amulet, based on the idea that verses of the Iliad and the Odyssey were used in magic, although he admits that it could also be a school exercise.

The use of some specific literary or biblical texts in magic allows the interpretation of certain pieces as magical. It is well known that Homeric verses played an important role in magic, as much as those from the Bible, especially the Psalms did. Our conclusion in general is that whenever a document features only a given text, generally related to magic, at least one more sign of being magical should be required in order to characterize the item safely. This would be for example the case of amulets featuring a sacred text (the beginning of the Gospels, the Psalms, the Letter of Abgar to Jesus): that they also show signs of having been folded originally (i.e. they were carried as amulets, folded and placed in a capsule), or that they also feature charakteres, or magical drawings, or any expression which can point to a magical use. In the case of ostraca, this is difficult to find, they do not normally present any drawing or character, and of course they cannot be folded.

We will now analyse some ostraca which contain the text of the Psalms and that have been interpreted as amulets. It seems that some of the Psalms were used in magic, especially Ps. 90. As we will see, there is no indication in the text or in their material features in any of these texts to prove that they are amulets. They do not preserve formulas like «protect So an So against whatever», or any sign of being worn by the user, which could help us interpret them as phylakteria. On the other hand, as Bucking has proposed, the ostraca containing Psalms at the Monastery of Epiphanius may be related to the fact that while working, monks recited Psalms, and in this monastery such fragments have been found

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in spaces devoted to weaving and basket-making, where the texts act as memoranda, rather than as amulets. This fact adds yet one more element of doubt in the interpretation of the use of ostraca. Our examples of ostraca featuring a text from the Psalms might be interpreted as an amulet but also as something else. The absence of supplementary characteristics makes it very difficult to affirm conclusively their use.

Here are some examples:

1. TM 62028 = SB III 196 (B-D 100) contains Psalms 117 in Greek and 118 in Coptic. The fact that these are two subsequent Psalms is probably a sign that this is rather a memorandum or a copy, than any kind of magical or ritual use of the ostraca.

2. TM 62207 = O.Petrie Mus. 2 = O.Crum VC 1 (B-D 137) preserves Psalm 30: 2-8.

3. TM 61973 = JNES 5 (1946) 181-182 (B-D 145) preserves Psalm 20: 1-5 in Greek.

4. TM 62101 = O.Eleph. DAIK 165 Ro (B-D 152) preserves the text of Psalm 91:14-16 in Greek.

5. TM 108552 = O.Vind.Copt. 5 = Crum ST 409, features Psalm 144.12-13 in Coptic.

6. TM 109073 = P.Sijp. 9a, features Psalm 5.7-8.

7. TM 107318, featuring Psalm 95, 4-5.

None of these ostraca has any indication of a magical use, so we insist on taking extra precautions in characterising the specific use of these pieces. There is a similar situation when it comes to the list of the martyrs of Sebaste, often found on papyri and parchment with amuletic use, but even some examples are inscribed on ostraca:


55 Vienna, Nationalbibliothek K. O. 645.

56 Amsterdam University Library O.174.

57 Ägyptisches Museum P. 1019. See W. Beltz, Die koptischen Zauberpapiere, cit., p. 38.

58 See D. Hagedorn, PUG 141 und die Namen der vierzig Märtyrer von Sebaste, in «Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik» 55 (1984), pp. 146-153. Other texts (on papyrus) with the list of martyrs of Sebaste are: TM 63026 (a papyrus from Berlin, classified as “catalogue”), TM 63027 (a papyrus from Berlin classified as magical: prayer for a good singing voice with
1. TM 65420 = P.Lugd.Bat. XXV 1259, (B-D 129). According to LDAB database, it is «no doubt amulet».
2. TM 68822 = «Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik» 146 (2004), n. 660 (B-D 133) is listed as an amulet in B-D.
3. TM 65450 = «Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik» 75 (1988), 147-14961 (B-D 132) is described in TM Magic as catalogue hagiography + magic, amulet
4. TM 34326 = O.Eleph. DAIK 32262 is characterized by the editor as magical.

As above, regarding the Psalms, an example of a different use of the same text, unrelated to magic, proves the uncertainty of the task of characterization. We present a school text as a means of comparison. If these ostraca are compared to TM 61737 = O.Brit.Mus. XXXII 163 an ostracon dated to the seventh-eighth century, the characterization as amulets may raise some doubts: this BM ostracon contains a list of Greek words, which can be partially grouped, some taken from the Acta Apostolorum, chapters 1-4 (recto cols. 2 and 3) and 20.4-10 (col. 1, 10-11); some are names of instruments of surgery or torture (verso col. 1, 1-5); all of it followed by the list of the 40 martyrs of Sebaste (verso col. 1, 9 - col. 2). This text has been interpreted as a school text.

Both the ostraca containing Psalms or the lists of the martyrs of Sebaste have been related to magic mainly because these texts appear in magical handbooks among other Christian texts, as for example the list of the seven sleepers of Ephesus, the beginning of the four gospels, and blessing of wine and honey; with voces magicae; after the spell a list of the 42 martyrs of Sebaste; TM 64676 (a papyrus from Berlin classified as catalogue, magic, invocation, with the list of the 42 martyrs of Sebaste); TM 65412 (a papyrus from Geneva described as magical: amulet with list of the 40 martyrs of Sebaste); TM 108452 (a papyrus from Manchester described as magical: spell with beginning of the gospel of Mark and 40 martyrs of Sebaste). But see A. Delattre, Noms rares et noms fantômes dans trois ostraca grecs d’Éléphantine, in «Chronique d’Égypte» 85 (2010), pp. 363-373, esp. p. 365, who suggests that the magical use of the list of the martyrs of Sebaste is assured in the case of his numbers 1-3, and 10-13, since they present other features, like foldings, other magical texts or drawings. In fact, the ostracon from Elphantine he edits does not present any of these supplementary characteristics.

59 Leiden, Papyrological Institute O. 1.
62 A. Delattre, Noms rares et noms fantômes, cit., n. 1.
the letter of Jesus to Abgar\(^{64}\). Precisely the latter text, the letter of Jesus to Abgar, is a common text appearing in amulets, typically written on parchment or papyrus, but also in a few cases on ostraca\(^{65}\). The checklist of amulets by de Bruyn - Dijkstra shows three examples made from papyrus (\(\text{TM} 58909 = \text{B-D} 183, \text{TM} 58906 = \text{B-D} 48,\) and \(\text{TM} 58907 = \text{B-D} 115\)), but we may add to this list, which collects only Greek texts, three more examples in Coptic on ostraca and one example on wood\(^{66}\). The examples on ostraca are: \(\text{TM} 111175 = \text{Crum ST} 36; \text{TM} 108824 = \text{KSB} \text{III} 182;\) and \(\text{TM} 110390 = \text{O.Crum} 22.\)

Finally, other texts have an even more difficult relation to magic. We speak about ostraca containing prayers and hymns whose use and purpose can be magical as much as religious\(^{67}\). We find a number of examples for the Trishagios hymn:

1. \(\text{TM} 64872 = \text{P.Lugd.Bat. XVII} 5 = \text{O.Zucker} 36.\) This is a fourth century Trishagios.
2. \(\text{TM} 65457 = \text{PGM O}^{3}\). According to Meyer-Smith \(6,\) the ostracon apparently was used as an amulet for healing because it preserves a Greek text referring, in a very general way, to John 9.1-12, the passage of the healing of the blind, and the probatic pool. Koenen does not agree with Preisendanz in including this piece in the \(\text{PGM}.\) We do not consider it magical either.
3. \(\text{TM} 65213 = \text{O.Mon.Epiph. 598},\) which also contains Ps. 95, 11-12\(^{69}\).
4. \(\text{TM} 65343 = \text{O.Bodl. II} 2165\).

Prayers on ostraca could have been used for a variety of purposes, from the memorandum to the protective use. As we stated above, refer-
ring to the Psalms on ostraca, we think that there must be some other indication of the use as an amulet in order to characterise safely these texts as magical. Here we list ostraca with hymns that have been catalogued as magical in TM Magic.

1. TM 64372 = PGM O471, which contains the Lord’s prayer
2. TM 64675 = P.Mon.Epiph. 610, an invocation to Cherubim, Seraphim, Michael, Gabriel and all of the undefiled.
3. TM 64877 = O.Leiden Gr. 335 preserves a fragment of a Greek prayer or hymn («help me, we sing hymns»), and it is difficult to assert that the ostracon is an amulet based only on the fact that it is a request for help, but it has been labelled as such in LDAB 6116.
4. TM 65236 and 65237 = O.Bodl. ii 2161 and ii 2162 present the same problem. Both ostraca preserve a prayer, and both are listed – with doubt – in databases as magical texts.
5. TM 102262 has been described as «amulet with prayer, maybe votive ostracon from a man»73.

Ostraca with invocations have been also classified as magical amulets in some studies and in TM Magic. From our point of view, however, it is even more difficult to establish a relation with magic than in the cases we have revised above.

1. TM 10226174 has a Coptic invocation to the Holy Trinity.
2. TM 10731175 «magical: amulet of unclear purpose with holy names and drawing of a cross».
3. TM 10732076 features an invocation. It has been classified as «magical amulet».
4. TM 10732277 is an «amulet with invocation with ornament».
5. TM 10732778 is a votive ostracon to God with invocation from a woman.
6. TM 10733679 is a votive ostracon to God with invocation.
7. TM 10841280 features a homily and figurae magicae.

71 Athens, National Museum 12227.
74 Ägyptisches Museum ÄM 747. See S. Pernigotti, La Magia, cit., p. 3727, n. 35.
75 Ägyptisches Museum ÄM 368. See W. Beltz, Die koptischen Zauberpapiere, cit., p. 36, n. 368.
3.2. Magical ostraca

So far, we have surveyed ostraca which were edited or catalogued as magic, but which in our opinion, present a basic problem of characterization. As explained above, whenever a parallel use, unrelated to magic, of a precise Biblical text vel sim, can be presented, the characterization is unsure. The mere presence of a Psalm on an ostracon, for example, without any supplementary features (magical figures, magical words) cannot be interpreted as the piece being an “amulet”, nor can it be excluded either. There are, however, other ostraca with texts that can be more clearly interpreted as magical texts. We survey below the ostraca that we consider should be characterised with more certainty as magical and, in case the text itself is not obviously magical, we indicate the criteria we have followed in each case:

1. TM 64315 = PGM O1 = O.Crum 522 (B-D 138) is a fourth century Greek binding incantation, or perhaps a spell of separation of two male lovers. It has the invocation of the «finger of God», associated with the angel Orphamiel (see infra), it could be related to a Christian environment.

2. TM 63587 = PGM O2, an ostracon dated to the second century, is an aggressive love spell against Alous.

3. TM 92330 = Suppl.Mag. ii 6784 has both a medical prescription on side B and the word αβλαναθαναλβα in a wing formation on side A. The ostracon is written on both sides by the same hand, but one cannot be certain that the two texts are related to each other. The use of the wing formation in amulets with a medical use is frequent.

4. TM 92334 = Suppl.Mag. ii 5886 is an ostracon dated to the fourth century CE, and it contains a curse to turn the opponents of the practitioner speechless.

5. TM 102068 = Meyer-Smith 11387, an ostracon from Cairo that preserves a text consisting on a liturgy for healing and adjuring a series of heavenly powers. Be-

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81 This is a problem not only referred to ostraca, but to magical texts in general, as noted by T.S. de Bruyn - J.H.F. Dijkstra, Greek Amulets and Formularies, cit., p. 168.


84 Milan, Università Statale O. 85.


87 Cairo, Egyptian Museum JdE 49547. Edited by L.S.P. Girard, Un fragment de liturgie
sides the invocations there are two personal requests to sanctify and presumably to empower containers. «Send me your breath of life into this vessel» and «Fill your hands. (Cast your) blessings downwards upon this chalice. Spell».

6. TM 102264 = Meyer-Smith 11488 is an ostracon that has been listed in the TM Magic as «amulet with invocation of the angel Orphamiel». The angel is well known from other Coptic texts of ritual power and he is associated with the «finger of God» (esp. the index finger of the God’s right hand). The text is as follows: «(cross) You are Orphamiel, the meaning of which is: the great finger of the father». It is difficult to assert that this ostracon is an amulet because nothing in the text indicates it and because the angel Orphamiel, as the «finger of God», is related rather to aggressive magic, as we have seen in the case of O.Crum 52289. But as Clarysse points out, the style and the expression of the text are those of magic.

7. An unpublished ostracon housed at the Petrie Museum (UC62838) features a figure in black outline, schematically drawn, holding an ankh with the right hand, and a sceptre with inverted ankh at the top with the other: it can be compared to other late Roman illustrations on magical papyri: e.g. PGM IX 14, and PGM XXXVI 45, both instructions for aggressive spells.

8. TM 1073120 is a Coptic ostracon with an exorcism featuring Abael and snakes.

9. TM 10731391 is an ostracon with the Sator formula.

10. A Coptic ostracon from Los Angeles92 features voces magicae and the drawing of a winged figure with the right arm upraised and holding a cross-shaped staff. The magical nature of the ostracon is clear, although it is difficult to identify its specific purpose. Some of the voces magicae have been related to aggressive spells by the editor princeps.

11. TM 10848893 is an unpublished Coptic ostracon featuring probably a magical text with charakters and drawings. The meaning of the text and its purpose is difficult to elucidate, but is undoubtedly magical.


89 See above § 3.2.

90 Ägyptisches Museum P. 936 + Ägyptisches Museum P. 971. See W. Beltz, Die koptischen Zauberpapiere, cit., p. 37, n. 936 and 971.


93 Cairo, Coptic Museum 5517. See L’art copte, cit., p. 121, n. 95.
12. TM 92864\(^94\) = Suppl. Mag. I 51, is a third-fourth century pottery vessel from Oxyrhynchus, carrying a love spell. In this case, it is not a sherd, but rather a whole small pot written all around its surface. While the use of pots is largely connected to divination, this one undoubtedly contains a magical spell.

13. TM 99593 = O.CrumST 399; Meyer-Smith 99. Contrary to the identification in Meyer-Smith, the object is an ostracon, not a papyrus\(^95\). Crum dated it to the sixth- or seventh-century. The text is a spell to cause a corpse to «bring forth blood» for an unknown purpose.

Three more ostraca have clearly a magical use, but we have chosen to treat them separately, since they contain magical instructions, and thus, the use of the ostracon is not prescriptive, but rather a medium — any other could have served — for writing down instructions. Another interpretation is that the instructions were copied mechanically, without really paying attention, and this copy was used as an amulet or charm itself.

1. TM 69046 = Suppl. Mag. II 89\(^96\) is a fourth century Greek ostracon preserving two charms against the scorpion sting. The two spells appear separated by a horizontal line. The first text presents the instructions to perform the charm, and features the typical abbreviation for δεῖνα that appears in the PGM.

2. TM 64128 = Suppl. Mag. II 68\(^97\) is an ostracon dated to the third century CE. It has been interpreted as instructions copied from a formulary for the preparation of an amulet, probably related to maternity.

3. TM 83376 = O.Crum 487\(^98\) contains magical-medical prescriptions. Its magical nature is very debatable.

Finally, we consider two more late antique ostraca, both of which originate outside Egypt, as of interest to our survey, especially as a means of comparison:

1. A sixth cent. CE ostracon from Reggio Calabria narrates a confrontation between Michael and a demon: «O god of Alexander, O god of Polydorus and the angel Michael. Help (βοήθει)! The angel intercepted the demon and said to the demon BARZÓN AYRM».\(^99\)

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\(^95\) We are grateful to Elisabeth O’Connell (British Museum), who called our attention to this piece.


\(^98\) London, British Library EEF 151, but uncertain whether in BM according to Delattre, BDC.

2. Amulet 10 (Naveh-Shaked) is a fifth-sixth century CE love charm on an Aramaic ostraca from Horvat Rimmon, Israel. The text was incised on the ostracon while the clay was still fresh.

4. Conclusion

We have surveyed the magical handbooks produced in Egypt in Late Antiquity, both in Greek and Coptic, in search of the use of the ostracon in magic. We are prone to think, from the examples found in these books (ranging from the fourth to the eighth centuries, with clear interdependence in some cases), that the ostracon is used mainly for aggressive magic, rather than for amuletic or protective purposes. We find binding spells, for love and business purposes, charms for separation, and even counter-spells. Only one example speaks about a certain magical-medical use of ostraca, but we are not sure in this case whether the ostracon used for labor was inscribed with spells and invocations or not.

After having a clear idea of the prescribed use of the ostracon, we surveyed the extant examples of ostraca which have been catalogued or edited as «magical», in order to find out on the one hand, if the prescribed use in the handbooks has a reflection in reality, i.e. in the remains we have of the actual practice, and on the other hand, and more from a methodological point of view, how do we characterise magical objects and their texts, and how do we identify their ultimate use in Antiquity with the evidence, sometimes very thin, that they present.

A revision of this material brought us to reducing the evidence to a few pieces. Of the ostraca catalogued as magical, many of these are not even clearly magical, and this is our main point. These are often too close to school texts and memoranda. The use of sacred texts on ostraca (Psalms, the letter from Jesus to Abgar or the incipit of the Gospels) is one of the main problems we are faced with, being their use very spread not only in the liturgical use of the Church, but also in school and in monastic daily life. If we exclude all these doubtful pieces we get a short but representative number of documents that more or less coincide with the instructions in the magical handbooks, the expected instances of aggressive magic, in the definition we have provided above. Most of these ostraca present spells of different kinds: to bind, love spells, business spells, or spells to cause separation. We have three examples of possible amulets (3, 5 and 6), all of them, however, doubtful.

How does this fit into the general use of different materials in magic in Late Antiquity? In the text of the PGM we have found that 49 prescriptions require the specific use of papyrus, while we have only ten exam-
amples of ostracon (eleven if we take into account the demotic spell on PDM XII 62-75), of which four refer to seashells. This represents a ratio of ca. a fourth of the total on papyrus. It is interesting to point out that while papyrus could be substituted by other media, the ostracon apparently could not.

Attending to the texts on PGM, the use of papyrus, and other less used materials, does not seem to be specialized. Papyrus is used for both aggressive and beneficial magic, and even for divination. The use of a specific medium does not seem to depend on the nature of the magical spell, but rather on the way the practitioner locates the magical artefact on his/her body or in a given place. The material features of the different media used in magic made them more or less suitable for wearing or for placing in the prescribed place to perform the magical act. As materials which are “worn”, one finds written papyrus, inscribed metal lamellae, small stones, seeds or bundles of herbs, all used for curing or protecting against disease. While an ostracon could be used for protection of a house or a field, rather than a person, we have not found this specifically prescribed in the handbooks, except for a reference in the Geoponica 2.42.2, mentioned above.

In general we are inclined to think that the ostracon was a most convenient writing medium, especially in Upper Egypt until the Arabic period, and as such, it was used whenever papyrus was lacking. In the case of the prescribed use of ostraca, it is clear that this material was adequate for being buried at a grave, the doorstep of a victim, or any place where a delicate material would easily disintegrate. At the same time, amulets which are worn by the user require a light material, which can be stored inside a capsule and worn around the neck.

But by no means do we think that it is completely excluded that an ostracon would be used at some point as an amulet, but we do think that more often they were used for spells, an extreme that both the magical instructions in handbooks and the extant ostraca with clear magical use prove. The lack of other writing medium would bring a person to write an amulet on an ostracon, and those ostraca mentioned above containing biblical quotes could in fact have an amuletic use, but this end is very hard to prove.

ABSTRACT

L’uso dell’ostrakon come supporto scrittorio nella magia greco-cop- ta non è ancora stato dettagliatamente studiato, sebbene l’ostrakon sia

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101 See PGM V 380-381 and VII 580-581.
102 An exception, though doubtful, being the use of an ostracon for labor (Suppl. Mag. II 96).
senza dubbio uno dei materiali di scrittura più utilizzati nell’Alto Egitto durante l’epoca tardo antica. Le informazioni fornite dai manuali greci e copti di magia saranno confrontate in questo contributo con le testimonianze conservate, ossia gli ostraka interpretabili come testi magici appartenenti alla pratica rituale. Questa metodologia non è stata mai applicata e fornisce risultati molto interessanti. Come verrà discusso, i manuali di magia prescrivono l’uso dell’ostrakon principalmente per riti di «magia aggressiva», mentre molti ostraka trovati sono stati catalogati come il risultato di pratiche magiche che appartengono all’ambito della magia protettiva, cioè, amuleti. Abbiamo circoscritto una tipologia di ostraka che sono stati classificati come «magici», per i quali si dimostrerà che è difficile asserire che il materiale sia esclusivamente «magico».

The use of the ostracon as a writing medium in Graeco-Coptic Magic has not been thoroughly studied, although it was a frequently deployed medium in Upper Egypt in Late Antiquity. The information we get from the magical instructions both in Greek and Coptic handbooks is compared in this paper to the extant evidence, i.e. the surviving ostraca that can be interpreted as magical texts utilized in ritual practice. This methodology has not ever been deployed and however it provides interesting results. As it will be discussed, the magical handbooks mention and prescribe the use of the ostracon mainly for «aggressive magic», while the ostraca found related to magical practices might also belong to the realm of protective magic, i.e. for amulets. We have developed a typology of the ostraca labelled as «magical» and prove that most of this material is difficult to classify as «magical».

KEYWORDS

Magia greca, magia copta, Egitto greco-romano, mezzi di scrittura, definitiones, amuleti

Greek magic, Coptic magic, Graeco-Roman Egypt, writing media, definitiones, amulets