Perseus, Mars and the *figurae magicae* of PGM XXXVI

Lloyd D. Graham

**Text abstract:**

Perseus’s decapitation of the Gorgon Medusa is suggested as a possible inspiration for the gruesome figurative drawings in PGM XXXVI. The same drawings prefigure an iconographic template later identified with Mars in the talismanic image magic of medieval and Renaissance Europe – one whose magical reputation persisted until very recently.

**Graphic abstract:**

![Image of Perseus and Mars with figurative drawings]

**Introduction**

Long neglected in favour of the text, the *figurae magicae* in the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (PGM)\(^2\) have at last begun to attract scholarly attention.\(^3,^4\) PGM XXXVI,\(^5\) which dates from the 4th century CE, is an unusual handbook in that six of its nineteen spells (spells 1-4, 7 and 10; Table 1) contain large figurative drawings (Fig. 1). In most cases, the image is referred to in the text by an instruction such as “Draw the figure below” (Table 1).\(^6\) Apart from spells 11 and 12, which share a single column, spells 1 to 13 occur in separate columns on the *recto* of the papyrus roll, separated by folding, with the *figura magica* (if present) occupying the lower portion of the relevant column.

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1 Left: Fig. 1f (PGM XXXVI, spell 10); middle, horizontal flip of Fig. 6d (Perseus); right, detail from Fig. 7a (Mars). See figure legends for image sources and credits.
3 Smith (2000), Martín Hernández (2012), McDonald (2014) & the TO ZODION database.
4 Also the forthcoming conference organised by Martín Hernández in Madrid, 15-16 Sep 2016.
5 P.Oslo I 1; Preisendanz (1973: 162-175).
6 Spell 8 contains a small sketch which is not mentioned in the text and whose details have largely been lost; this will be omitted from consideration. In doing so, I follow Betz (1986: 274).
Table 1. Key features of the spells in PGM XXXVI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spell no.</th>
<th>Col.</th>
<th>Line nos.</th>
<th>Purpose of spell</th>
<th>Deities invoked</th>
<th>Figure type</th>
<th>Accessories</th>
<th>Recognisable caption names</th>
<th>Figure instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recto</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1-34</td>
<td>Restrain Seth</td>
<td>Seth Typhon</td>
<td>Seth</td>
<td>RH batons/straps? LH empty</td>
<td>Seth</td>
<td>“Draw [...] the creature below”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>35-68</td>
<td>Secure favour (Restrain anger)</td>
<td>Iao Abrasax</td>
<td>Iao</td>
<td>RH snake LH “doll”/ankh</td>
<td>Iao</td>
<td>“Inscribe [...] the seal of the figure”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>69-101</td>
<td>Love spell Seth (Min)</td>
<td>Seth Typhon Abrasax (?)</td>
<td>RH whip LH “doll”</td>
<td>Seth</td>
<td>“Write the following [...] figure”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>102-133</td>
<td>Love spell (Fire divination)</td>
<td>(Min) Abrasax (?)</td>
<td>RH sword LH “doll”</td>
<td>Iao? (Iaeo)</td>
<td>“The figure to be written”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>134-160</td>
<td>Love spell Isis Osiris Abrasax</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>161-177</td>
<td>Restrain anger (Success)</td>
<td>Khepri Angels</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>178-187</td>
<td>Break spells Fettered man + snakes (?) + feline (?)</td>
<td>RH empty LH head (of feline?)</td>
<td>Charakteres</td>
<td>“Draw [...] a unique figure.” The figure to be drawn is specified in the text, but does not match the image actually present.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>187-210</td>
<td>Love spell Hekate Iao</td>
<td>Small figure Details obliterated</td>
<td>Charakteres, 7x7 Greek vowels</td>
<td>No mention of figure in text. Following Betz, this drawing will excluded from consideration.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>211-230</td>
<td>Avoid misfortune Secure favour</td>
<td>Helios</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>231-255</td>
<td>Curse Angels</td>
<td>Abrasax</td>
<td>RH sword LH head “doll”</td>
<td>Osiris</td>
<td>“Inscribe [...] the figure”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>256-264</td>
<td>Break spells -</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>264-274</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spell no.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>275-283</td>
<td>Secure favour (Protection)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>283-294</td>
<td>Love spell (Isis, Osiris)</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>295-311</td>
<td>Love spell God Angels</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>312-320</td>
<td>Open a door Horus (Typhon)</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>320-332</td>
<td>Contraceptive Kronos Hermes</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>333-360</td>
<td>Love spell Iao Abrasax Osiris Atum</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>361-371</td>
<td>Love spell Isis?</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td>No fig.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 1. *Figurae magicae* accompanying PGM XXXVI spells 1-4, 7 and 10. All images are from P. Oslo I 1, courtesy of the University of Oslo Library Papyrus Collection. Available online via OPES and TO ZODION. (a) Spell 1 (lines 1-34). (b) Spell 2 (lines 35-68). /ctd.
Fig. 1 (ctd.). (c) Spell 3 (line 69-101). (d) Spell 4 (lines 102-133). /ctd.
Fig. 1 (ctd.). (e) Spell 7 (lines 178-187). (f) Spell 10 (lines 231-255).
Each image is dominated by an anthropomorphic or therianthropomorphic figure (Fig. 1a-f). A comparison of each drawing and its captions with the purpose and contents of the cognate spell reveals that the *figurae magicae* do not depict the practitioner implementing the ritual or the outcome that the spell seeks to realise. Seemingly operating within a pre-existing iconographic convention, they serve “as intermediaries between the mundane and supernatural worlds.”\(^7\,8\) Indeed, the images appear to invoke the spiritual agent by whom the spell is to be accomplished, or to depict some mythical protagonist whose power is to be accessed by virtue of the image – the visual equivalent of a *historiola*.\(^9\)

Five of the six figures hold vertically a weapon or other elongated and threatening object in their right hand: a sword (spells 4 & 10), whip (spell 3), snake (spell 2) or batons/thongs (spell 1). Strikingly, five of the images hold in their left hand a severed human head dripping with blood, or a closely related form: in cases where the blood has been reinterpreted as legs (spells 3, 4 & 10), the dripping head has been transformed into a “doll.”\(^10\) An identical composition appears in PGM XXXIX (Fig. 2)

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\(^7\) McDonald (2014: v). They may empower the spell through persuasive analogy or talismanic efficacy; McDonald (2014: 80).

\(^8\) Such “[p]ictures, as ‘super-hieroglyphs,’ often functioned as literal extensions of the text – as supplementary descriptions or magical force;” Frankfurter (1994: 209).


\(^10\) For alternative interpretations, see e.g. Gordon (2002: 103).

and a similar one (with accessories and arm positions reversed) on the verso of PGM IX.\textsuperscript{12} In this latter case, as well as in spell 2 of PGM XXXVI, the doll is schematised or reduced to a stick-figure. Moreover, while lacking one or other accessory, the exceptions in PGM XXXVI (spell 1, no head; spell 7, no sword) share the pose of the sword- and head-carrying protagonist.\textsuperscript{13}

All but two images have the entity wearing a thonged kilt reminiscent of a Roman cingulum militare, or at least hint at one by way of hatching or a serrated border. Although unkilted, the figure in spell 7 seems to be wearing upper body armour like the Roman lorica segmentata.\textsuperscript{14}

Candidates for the cephalophoric warrior

Who is this gruesome gladiator? Several of the therianthropomorphic depictions have iconographic overlaps with Seth-Typhon (e.g. the creature with the pointed face and prominent ears/hair in spell 1)\textsuperscript{15} or Iao-Abrasax (such as the rooster-headed anguipede in spells 3 and 10).\textsuperscript{16,17} These deities are in fact named in the text of some of the spells, and – along with variants of the word Osiris – their names appear within the captions accompanying some of the figures (Table 1). However, given the syncretistic nature of Late Antique magic\textsuperscript{18} and the fluid nature of these notional identifications, it is unlikely that each (theri)anthropomorphic entity has a single origin and unambiguous identity. In view of the prominence of his name in the captions to the figure in spell 1, it makes sense to begin the search for sources and influences with Seth.

Seth, Horus and Akephalos

The resemblance of the schematised “doll” to an ankh\textsuperscript{19} suggests that the bearer may once have been an Egyptian god.\textsuperscript{20} In the core myth of ancient Egypt, Seth – the god of upheaval and confusion\textsuperscript{21} – murdered his brother Osiris and dismembered the body into fourteen parts.\textsuperscript{22} However, the head of Osiris receives no special attention, not

\textsuperscript{12} Redrawn in Betz (1986: 149).
\textsuperscript{13} Equivalent figures appear in other magical contexts, e.g. on lead containers 475539 and 475551 from the fountain of Anna Perenna in Rome; György Németh (2016: 44). Such finds suggest a non-Egyptian origin for the imagery, since most Greek and Latin curse-tablets show no influence of Greco-Egyptian practices; Gordon & Gasparini (2014: 41).
\textsuperscript{14} Abrasax (on whom the figure in spell 3 is clearly modelled; Table 1) is customarily attired in upper-body armour and a pleated kilt, but the armour on the torso is usually an unsegmented breastplate.
\textsuperscript{15} Seth was often represented with the head of a dog or jackal [Gager (1992: 269)] or, from Late Antiquity, with that of a donkey [Betz (1986: 339), entry Typhon/Seth].
\textsuperscript{16} Betz (1986: 331), entry Abrasax.
\textsuperscript{17} Blau & Kohler (1906).
\textsuperscript{18} Sfameni (2001).
\textsuperscript{19} PGM IX, and spell 2 of PGM XXXVI. The carried object is in fact identified as an ankh by Eitrem (1925: 46 & 49).
\textsuperscript{20} Some drawings of Seth in magical papyri (e.g., PGM XII 449-452; Suppl. Mag. 69, Daniel & Maltonini (1990:86-87)) conform strictly to pharaonic conventions in terms of figural pose and the animal attributes of the god’s head [Hart (2005: 145)], and are obviously derived from ancient Egyptian antecedents. The stance and attributes of the figures in PGM XXXVI are quite different, suggesting that these drawings may have originated in (or been modified by) a culture with a different visual convention, presumably that of Greece.
\textsuperscript{21} Hart (2005: 143-145).
\textsuperscript{22} Plutarch, Moralia V.18 (De Iside et Osiride, 18); Babbitt (1936:45).
even in ancient Egyptian magical spells. Osiris’s sister-wife Isis was decapitated, but by Horus rather than by Seth:

Horus, son of Isis, became furious at his mother Isis and came out [...] holding his cleaver of sixteen deben-weight in his hand. He removed the head of his mother Isis, put it in his arms, and ascended the mountain. Then Isis transformed herself into a statue of flint which had no head.

Some traditions hold that Horus ultimately decapitated Seth and his followers. By Greco-Roman times, Seth had become a demon and was identified with the Greek Typhon.

In the PGM, a deity known as the Headless One (Akephalos) is occasionally identified with Osiris (e.g., PGM V 96-100), which might by implication suggest that his murderer Seth had possession of his head. However, the Headless One is more often identified with the dwarf-god Bes (e.g., PGM VII 241-245 & VIII 64-110). The Headless One seems also to feature as a demon in the Testament of Solomon, an Old Testament pseudepigraphon of the 1st-4th centuries CE:

And there was brought to me [i.e., Solomon] a demon having all the limbs of a man, but without a head. [...] And he answered me: ‘I am called Envy. For I delight to devour heads, being desirous to secure for myself a head [...] For I grasp in all instants a man’s head, and with my hands, as with a sword, I cut it off, and put it on myself. And [...] by means of the fire which is in me, through my neck it is swallowed up.

Other translators name this demon Murder, and indicate that he sees through his breasts. These features align especially well with the figure in spell 2 of PGM XXXVI (Fig. 1b). Samson Eitrem’s description of this drawing observes that “a small human head is attached directly to the right shoulder above the arm [...] the mamillae appear directly below two eyes placed on the breast and the place where the head is cut off is made especially prominent.” The figure in spell 1 is also decidedly stethocephalic.

Several works of Sethian Gnosticism in the Nag Hammadi library are approximately contemporary with PGM XXXVI. Although the scholarly consensus is that the heavenly salvific Seth of the Gnostics (the third son of Adam and Eve, Gen 4:25) is unrelated to the demonic Seth (who, as mentioned above, is derived from the Egyptian god), we find in these Gnostic texts strings of repeated vowels like those in

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24 The Contendings of Horus and Seth, P. Chester Beatty I, recto, 9,10; Simpson (2003: 98).
27 Drawn also in PGM II, near line 170.
28 Betz (1986: 335).
29 Betz (1986: 123, 147 & 335).
30 Busch (2013: 188).
31 Eitrem (1925: 48).
33 Whittaker (1984: 744). The demon claims to see by means of his feelings, and is blinded when Solomon applies his hand (with his magical seal) to the demon’s chest; Conybeare (1989: v.44).
34 Here he is referring to the (absent) natural, central head of the figure.
35 Eitrem (1925: 46).
PGM XXXVI spell 8, as well as mention of Sesengenpharanges and Barpharanges, two voce magicae related to the SESENGENBARPHARAGGES and BAPHRENDEMOUN of spell 4 and the SESEGGENBARPHARAGGES of spell 10.

The writing of voce magicae on specific body locations (as in the figure accompanying spell 1) has parallels in Jewish Merkabah/Hekhalot mysticism (200-700 CE), whose practices included placing seals on the ritualist’s body and listing magical names for numerous parts of the Divine Body. While tantalizing, these overlaps with Jewish esotericism and Gnostic literature do not shed much additional light on the entities depicted in the drawings.

**Agave and Perseus**

Alternative candidates for the head-carrier come from Greek mythology. A drawing resembling our cephalophoric protagonist appears in an undated Coptic papyrus fragment (Fig. 3), which is thought to depict Agave carrying the head of her son Pentheus. Driven mad by Dionysus, she and other Maenads killed Pentheus thinking he was a lion, after which Agave took his head with her to Thebes. But Agave is no warrior and carries no weapon, and this minor mythological episode seems an unlikely referent for Late Antique magic.

A much better-known and more suitable candidate is Perseus, who used magical gifts from the gods to overcome the snake-haired Gorgon, Medusa, a monster whose stare turned people to stone. Having severed her head, Perseus carried it with him (Fig. 4a) and used the power of its gaze – which survived Medusa’s death – to eliminate many of his adversaries. Ritual representations of Medusa’s head would therefore have magical efficacy in restraining others, overcoming adversity, etc. Accordingly, the Gorgoneion was an apotropaic amulet – one used by no less a divinity than Athena. Alone, or carried by a sword-wielding Perseus, such Medusa-heads feature on magical gemstones (e.g., Fig. 4b), while specific invocations of “the Gorgonian

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38 On the prevalence of SESENGENBARPHARANGES and its derivatives in the PGM, see Betz (1986: 339).

39 Jackson (1989) takes it that Sethian Gnostics have borrowed from the magicians, but of course there may have been reciprocal influences as well.

40 “The true nature of sesengen barpharanges, later interpreted (by Jews) as the name of a powerful demonic spirit, or (by Coptic Christians) as the name of a group of angels, still awaits elucidation;” Scholem (1965: 100).


43 A connection with the Shīʿūr Qōmah, which assigns names of power to parts of the Divine Body, was proposed by Barb (1964: 5-6) and noted by Smith (2002: 27). We should not forget that the ancient Egyptians had earlier placed different parts of human bodies under the protection of different deities; Eitrem (1925: 39).

44 Kraft (2009), Penn Museum E 16449.


46 For summaries, see e.g. Eddy & Hamilton (2012: 36-41); Kershaw (2007:140-143)


48 E.g., Campbell-Bonner Magical Gems database, item CBd-1038, online at [http://www2.szepmuveszeti.hu/talismans/cbd/1038?related=bibliography&rid=30](http://www2.szepmuveszeti.hu/talismans/cbd/1038?related=bibliography&rid=30)

Fig. 3. Agave holding the head of Pentheus. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, papyrus E 16449, image courtesy of the Penn Museum.

Fig. 4. The Gorgon’s head. (a) Perseus severs the head of the Gorgon Medusa. Image on a red-figured vase from the eastern coast of Libya, ca. 475 BCE, reproduced here under licence CC-BY-SA 3.0 DE. (b) A magical gemstone of red jasper engraved with a Gorgoneion (CBd-1038); two snakes emerge from Medusa’s hair, while two more are depicted below her chin. Image courtesy of the Campbell Bonner Magical Gems database.

51 Cook (1940: 849), online at http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/cook1940bd3_1/0948.
head” (sometimes using lines from Homer) occur in Greek magical texts.\textsuperscript{53} An image of the Gorgon was evidently as efficacious as an image of Hekate.\textsuperscript{54} Within the PGM, we find allusions to the Gorgon’s name in the \textit{vox magica} ORGOGORGONIOTRIAN\textsuperscript{55} and the disappearing triangle of GORGÔPHÔNAS,\textsuperscript{56} while PGM IV mentions a “cat with its paw on a gorgon’s head.”\textsuperscript{57} As is typical for magical diagrams, the images in PGM XXXVI have suffered greatly from sequential copying;\textsuperscript{58} the compiler of the handbook may have been wholly unaware of the original referent of the images. The Gorgoneion survives as a magical motif to the present day in Ethiopia, where protective and healing scrolls continue to use the “despotic gaze” of a snake-wreathed face modelled on the Gorgon’s head (Fig. 5).\textsuperscript{59} Here, too, the ritualists are typically unaware of the true origins of the design, identifying it variously as a demon, angel or saint.\textsuperscript{60}

![Fig. 5. Gorgon-inspired motifs on an Ethiopian magic scroll.](image)

\textbf{Fig. 5. Gorgon-inspired motifs on an Ethiopian magic scroll.} Two details from a 20\textsuperscript{th} century vellum scroll, 160 x 20 cm. (a) A winged demon with a serpent-enmeshed double head; (b) A staring central face wreathed by snakes and surrounded by angels. Author’s collection.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{53} Collins (2008: 120).
\item \textsuperscript{54} CT 132, Gager (1992: 239). Hekate was possibly the most prominent of the deities to be invoked in ancient spells; Gager (1992: 267).
\item \textsuperscript{55} PGM IV, line 1418.
\item \textsuperscript{56} PGM XVIIIb, Betz (1986: 255); Kotansky (2002: 43).
\item \textsuperscript{57} PGM IV, line 2137.
\item \textsuperscript{58} For iterative degradation of \textit{charakteres} see, e.g., Graham (2011); for that of figural drawings, e.g., Graham (2013: Fig. 5a-c).
\item \textsuperscript{59} Mercier (1997: 95-99 & Figs. 103-106).
\item \textsuperscript{60} Mercier (1979: Pls. 14 & 24).
\end{itemize}
Perseus, too, had the pedigree of a magical figure. In the 5th century BCE, Herodotus asserted that Perseus, through his son Perses, had given his name to the Persian people, whose priests were the magoi (magi) – ritualists, diviners and interpreters of dreams. In the Greco-Roman world, their priestly leader Zoroaster was considered to have been the inventor of magic, and the magoi were strongly associated with mageia (magic). The link between Perseus and magic may actually have been less indirect than this. David Ulansey draws attention to a “late but nevertheless suggestive passage” from the Byzantine historian George Kedrenos (11th century CE) in which Zoroaster’s role has been usurped by Perseus:

Perseus, they say, brought to Persia initiation and magic, which by his secrets made the fire of the sky descend; with the aid of this art, he brought the celestial fire to the earth, and he had it preserved in a temple under the name of the sacred immortal fire; he chose virtuous men as ministers of a new cult, and established the Magi as the depositors and guardians of this fire which they were charged to protect.

Images of Perseus as a constellation can be found in astronomical and astrological manuscripts; naturally, the majority of extant illustrations come from relatively late copies. Perseus’s sword – a gift from Hermes or Athena – was originally a harpe, i.e. a curved sword which often has a spur on the cutting edge of the sickle-like blade (e.g., Fig. 6a-c), but in astronomical/astrological depictions he often holds a straight-bladed sword (e.g., Fig. 6d,e), like those in the figure accompanying PGM XXXVI spells 4 and 10. To quote Ulansey once more: “Perseus is often shown holding a normal straight sword or dagger. This is especially the case in representations of the constellation Perseus.” Some illustrations show the sword in Perseus’s right hand and the severed head in his left (e.g., Fig. 6a-c); others show the reverse (e.g., Fig. 6d-e).

Perseus is usually depicted with a selection of his other magical gifts, too: the reflective shield (from Athena), the Cap of Invisibility/Helm of Darkness (from Hades) and the winged sandals (from Hermes). Some of these may help us to understand refractory aspects of the drawings in PGM XXXVI. For example, the bar joining the male figure’s legs in spell 7 has been rationalised as a set of leg-fetters, but the hypothesis is unconvincing because this is a spell of liberation – “a charm to break spells” – and not one of constraint. Could the mysterious bar actually be a vestige of the wings on Perseus’s sandals? Little-understood projections from the ankles might readily be transformed into leg-fetters by uncomprehending copyists familiar with the shackles illustrated in some katadesmoi. In spells 1, 2 & 4, the ankles or feet of the protagonist again have unusual markings, and these are certainly not fetters.

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63 Pliny the Elder, Natural History 30.2.3; Jones (1963: 278-281).
64 On the relationship of the words magoi, mageia and magic see Bremer (1999).
66 Tarassuk & Blair (1986: 252)
68 Other examples of this type include Savage-Smith (1992: Fig. 2.40).
69 A good summary of the various proposals to date is given by McDonald (2014: 77-78).
70 E.g., CT 6, Gager (1992: 228, Fig. 28).
Fig. 6. Figurative depictions of the constellation Perseus. (a) *Kalendarius* of Johannes Regiomontanus (1512), Sächsische Landesbibliothek – Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden (SLUB) Astron. 190, misc. 1; Deutsche Fotothek, reproduced under licence CC-BY-SA 4.0.71 (b) Turkish copy (1717, by Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Shākir Rūzmah-ʿi Nāthānī) of Zakariyaʿ al-Qazwīnī’s *ʿAjāʿib al-Makhlūqāt [Wonders of Creation]*; The Walters Art Museum W.659.14B, reproduced under licence CC0.72

Fig. 6. (Perseus, ctd.) (c) Late 17th- or early 18th-century Persian manuscript, Wellcome Ms. Persian 373 f.14r, reproduced under licence CC-BY-4.0.  
(d) [bottom panel] Germanic astronomical and astrological manuscript, 1450-1499, Wien, Österr. Nationalbibl., Cod. 5442 127v, detail, © Austrian National Library, used by permission.  
(e) [top right panel] Persian translation of al-Süfi’s Star Atlas (1633/4); National Library of Egypt, public domain.

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In the same vein, one could speculate that the main figure’s wild hair (spells 1 & 2), strange headgear (spell 7), or helmet-like rooster’s head (spells 3 & 10) constitute late stages in the distortion of Perseus’s Helm of Darkness, originally depicted as a Phrygian cap\(^{76}\) but now morphed far beyond recognition. In Fig. 6b, we seem to witness a relocation of the snake-shapes from the severed head of the Gorgon to the head of Perseus himself, or at least to his turban; perhaps a similar transfer could explain the snakes – if indeed that is what they are – surrounding the head and shoulders of the male figure in the drawing accompanying spell 7. In addition, Perseus’s sword and shield would map readily onto the whip and shield of Abrasax,\(^{77}\) thus facilitating the kind of syncretism that epitomises magical traditions.

In a recent paper, Attilio Mastrocinque identifies the heroic Perseus with the lion-headed warrior god whose identities, in the context of magic, include Iao-Sabaoth.\(^{78}\) Interestingly, this is the first deity invoked in spell 2 of PGM XXXVI. Moreover, in a series of magical gems we find Iao-Sabaoth holding the snake-deity Chnoubis in his right hand,\(^{79}\) much like the image accompanying spell 2.

Mastrocinque’s attribution of leonine traits to Perseus is far from unique. For the Greeks of Tarsus, Perseus was considered a “winged lion.”\(^{80}\) He seems to have been identified with Mithras in the Mithraic tauroctony,\(^{81,82}\) which – if this motif reprises the ancient Leo-Taurus combat – puts Perseus in the role of the lion.\(^{83}\) Another possibility, argued by David Ulansey, is that the lion-headed figure of Mithraic cult is derived from Medusa.\(^{84}\) The serpentine hair of the latter certainly resembles a lion’s mane; as Stephen Wilk puts it, “the Gorgon looks like a lion.”\(^{85}\) Either way, we should note the presence of leonine associations for Perseus and Medusa in the Greco-Roman world.\(^{86}\) In the first instance, this may help us to understand the otherwise mysterious feline form beside the male figure in spell 7 of PGM XXXVI (Fig. 1e).\(^{87}\) It is also potentially relevant to the later development of the Perseus/Medusa template.

**Legacy**

Whatever its origin, the cephalophoric warrior template of the drawings in PGM XXXVI conforms to aspects of a planetary archetype preserved in the Arabic manual.

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\(^{77}\) Blau & Kohler (1906).

\(^{78}\) Mastrocinque (2013). Iao-Sabaoth often stands alone, but has also been depicted riding an eagle. We should remember that, after slaying Medusa, Perseus takes to the sky on her offspring Pegasus, the winged horse.

\(^{79}\) Mastrocinque (2013: 111 fn.47).

\(^{80}\) Frothingham (1918).


\(^{82}\) Indeed, in Fig. 6b we see Perseus carrying the head of a bull.

\(^{83}\) Bausani (1979); Ulansey (1989: 92-93).

\(^{84}\) Ulansey (1989: 31-35)

\(^{85}\) Wilk (2000: 94).

\(^{86}\) The strength of this ancient linkage was such that it survives to modern-day Ethiopia, whose protective magic scrolls use a Gorgon’s head with lion-like embellishments. Mercier (1997: 95-99 & Figs. 103-106).

\(^{87}\) Failing that, we are left with admissions of defeat such as “The animal-like figure (bottom right) and the head in the right hand remain obscure.” Gager (1992: 238). The head is at the right of the drawing, but actually held by the man’s left hand.
of magic known as Ghāyat al-Hakīm [The Goal of the Wise] and in its Latin translation, the Picatrix.

**The Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm and other early medieval texts**

The Ghāyat, composed in the 10-11th centuries CE, is an Arabic compilation of astral and talismanic magic. In it, one of four alternate descriptions of the planetary deity of Mars reads: “Mars in its sphere has the shape of a man who rides a lion and holds in his right hand a sword and in his left hand a human head. His robe is iron and silk.” For talismans of Mars,

One engraves for him on a magnetic stone the image of a man riding on a lion, with a drawn sword in his right hand and a human head in his left hand, namely, when he is at his hour in the second decan of the Ram. It works marvellously for good and evil, but its effect for evil is greater.

Furthermore: if the image of a standing, armoured man is engraved on one of the stones of Mars, he being girt with two swords, one of them drawn in his right hand, and with a human head in his left hand, at his hour, [when he is] in his house, so this drawing causes for its bearer awe and majesty in everyone who sees him or who associates with him.

That Mars brandishes a sword and holds a severed head suggests that this image is derived from the Perseus template discussed previously. The predatory lion has a natural fit with the god of war, but the leonine associations identified above for Perseus and Medusa would provide additional support the recruitment of a lion as the steed of Mars.

Two of the figura-bearing spells in PGM XXXVI are love-spells, in which the presence of the god of war might seem incongruous. However, we should recall that a sword-wielding Ares – the Greek equivalent of Mars – is invoked to coerce love in PGM IV. “Wondrous spell for binding a lover: Take wax [or clay...] and make two figures, a male and a female. Make the male in the form of Ares fully armed, holding a sword in his left hand and threatening to plunge it into the right side of her neck.”

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89 Ritter & Plessner (1962: 118-119), reproduced here under licence CC BY-NC 3.0 from the Warburg Institute: “Dass Mars in seiner Sphare die Gestalt eines Mannes hat, der auf einem Lowen reitet und in der Rechten ein Schwert und ein Menschenhaupt in der Linken hält. Sein Gewand ist Eisen und Seide.” Appended to this statement is “[Seide – übersetzung unsicher; Adl. hat ‘Erz’],” i.e. “[Silk – uncertain translation; Adl. has ‘ore’].”

Ferner ihm zugehörig: Wenn man auf einen der Steine des Mars das Bild eines stehenden, gepanzerten Mannes gravirt, der mit zwei Schwertern gegrübelt ist, das eine gezückt in seiner Rechten, und mit einem Menschenkopf in der linken Hand, zu seiner Stunde, [wahrend er] in seinem Hause [steht], so bewirkt diese Zeichnung für ihren Trager Ehrfurcht und Majestät bei jedem, der ihn sieht und mit ihm verkehrt.”
92 Some images of Mars and of Perseus show them holding their swords in their left hands (e.g. Figs. 6d,e & 7c).
93 Ares is also depicted with his lover Aphrodite on many gems, and – on his own (but with Medusa’s head) – invoked against pain on magical gemstones. Bonner (1950: 42 & 76); Michel (2005: 151-153).
In a Buddhist text of the 12th century CE, Mars rides a ram,94 no doubt symbolising his rulership of the Zodiacal house Aries. In another, Mars is described as “red, on a goat, holding a dagger in his right hand and a human head in his left, in the act of eating it.”95 One is reminded of the Solomonic demon Envy/Murder, who “delight[s] to devour heads.”

The Picatrix and later medieval texts

The Picatrix is a translation of Ghāyat into Latin (via Castilian) made in the 13th century CE; it proved hugely influential on the magical tradition of Europe.96 It preserves the iconography of Mars described in the Arabic original: “According to the opinion of other sages, the form of Mars is the form of a man riding on a lion, his right hand holding a sword and his left carrying the head of a man; and his clothes are of chain-mail and iron. And this is his form...”97 The Krakow Picatrix (1460) even preserves an illustration (Fig. 7a). The instructions for engraving talismanic images of Mars are also faithful to the account in the Ghāyat.98

The image of Mars to do what you wish, both in good and in evil. Make from the form of Mars the shape of a man riding on a lion holding in his right hand a naked sword and carrying in his left the head of a man, [make it] on a diamond in the hour of Mars, with the second face of Aries ascending and Mars within it. He who carries this stone will be powerful both in good and in evil, but more powerful in evil.

If you wish your appearance to cause fear or terror, make from the form of Mars a man standing upright and clad in a breastplate, holding two swords, one of them lying above his neck and the other [sword] naked in his right hand, and in his left hand the head of a man; [make it] in the hour of Mars, when he is in his house, on any of the stones of Mars. And whoever carries this stone, all who see him will be afraid, and no one may attack him.”99

One source adds:100

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95 Pingree (1989: 7-9).
97 Pingree (1986: 66): “Forma Martis secundum opinionem aliorum sapientum est forma hominis supra leonem equitantis, in dextra ensem habentis, in sinistra vero caput hominis gestantis; et eius vestes sunt ex lorricis et ferro. Et hec est eius forma...”

   Et si volueris ut ex tuo aspectu timeatur vel terreatur, ex forma Martis facias formam hominis erecti et lorica induti, duos ensen tenentis, unum sellicet iacentem supra collum et alterum nudum in eius dextra, et in sinistra caput hominis, in hora Martis in sua domo existentis, in aliquo ex lapidibus Martis. Et quicumque lapidem portaverit, omnes eum videntes timebunt, et nullus accedet ad eum.”
99 For a possible image of a standing man with “a sword lying above his neck,” see the drawing in PGM VIII, Betz (1986: 148), described in the text of the spell “a sword that by means of a bent [arm] rests on his neck.”
Fig. 7. Figurative depictions of the planet Mars. (a) Krakow Picatrix (1460), Biblioteka Jagiellońska BJ 793, f.190v, detail; public domain. (b) Ottoman Metali ül-saadet ve yenabi ül-siyadet [Book of Felicity] by Seyyid Mohammed ibn Emir Hasan el-Su‘udī (1582), f.8v; Bibliothèque Nationale de France, public domain.

Fig. 7. (Mars, ctd.) (c) Turkish copy (1717) of the *Wonders of Creation*, as for Fig. 6b; The Walters Art Museum W.659.14B, reproduced under licence CC0.\textsuperscript{103}

(d) *Ghāyat Al-Ḥākim*, Cairo imprint (undated).\textsuperscript{104}


\textsuperscript{104} Imprint by Maḥmūd Naṣār, Cairo, p.60; private collection, reproduced by kind permission of owner.
The ring of Mars. Among stones, Mars takes iron. If iron is engraved with a man wearing a breastplate with his arms protected, one blade sheathed and the other held naked in his right hand, and in his left hand the head of a man, and if it is carved in the day and hour of Mars, the bearer will subdue conflicts and triumph in them, and elephants, lions and vultures will appease him, and all the works of Mars will be favourable to him.

Anna Caiozzo mentions that the Cosmography of al-Dimashqī (1323) tells us that “the idol of Mars represents a man holding a sword in one hand and a severed head in the other.”105 To my knowledge, Caiozzo is the only author to connect this iconographic template with the myth of Perseus, and then only in passing.106

Related visual motifs, without any overt attribution to Perseus or Mars, appear incidentally in some medieval European manuscripts. For example, an illuminated French version of Robert de Boron’s L’Estoire de Merlin (BnF Fr. 95, ca. 1280) contains a border illustration of this type (Fig. 8).107

Fig. 8. Marginal illustration in an illuminated French manuscript (1270-1290). From Robert de Boron’s L’Estoire de Merlin, BnF Fr. 95, f.153v, detail; Bibliothèque nationale de France, public domain.108 A centaur-like creature (perhaps a refraction of Perseus riding Pegasus) wields a sword in one hand and holds the severed head of a lion in the other. As with Fig. 6b, the serpentine coiffure seems to have been transferred from the severed head to the head of the sword-bearer. Interestingly, the body of the hybrid resembles a lion more than a horse. Although this may merely accommodate a joke in which the severed head belongs to the leonine body of the hybrid,109 it nevertheless aligns the image with the incipient iconography of Mars (e.g., Fig. 7a,d).

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106 Caiozzo (2011: 66): “Mars, vêtu de rouge, en guerrier tenant une tête coupée, semblable à cell que tient Persée, sans doute son inspiration iconographique directe.” (“Mars, dressed in red as a warrior holding a severed head, like that held by Perseus, which is no doubt its direct iconographic inspiration.”)
107 Stones (n.d.), ref. S II 76. 12 M 252 (BnF Fr. 95 f.153v).
109 In similar vein, decapitated knights holding their own heads duel with swords in the margins of Verdun, Bibliothèque municipale, Ms. 107, f.99v (ca. 1302-1305).
Renaissance and modern texts

Although Marsilio Ficino usually synthesised the various alternative images listed for each planet in the Picatrix,110 his De Vita Libri Tres (1489) merely says “Mars armed and crowned.”111 In the Fourth Book of Cornelius Agrippa (ca. 1565), Mars is “an armed king riding on a wolf” supplemented, in some editions, with “otherwise, on a lion, and armed with a naked sword, while in his left hand is a man’s head.”112

Like the Buddhist text mentioned earlier, the Ottoman Book of Felicity (1582) has Mars riding the ram of Aries (Fig. 7b).113 Such depictions show that the lion is not an absolute fixture of the iconography. The tradition of Mars riding some sort of quadruped sits well with the idea that the animal may have evolved from depictions of Pegasus. Interestingly, in De Umbris Idearum (Paris, 1582), Giordano Bruno has separated key components of the visual template, parting the sword- and head-bearer from the beast: “The first image of Mars is an armed man, riding a lion, from whose helmet the beak of a vulture peeks”114 and “The fourth [image], a man having a drawn sword in his right hand and in his left a human head dripping blood, having a face as if burnt by the sun.”115 We have almost come full circle, back to the unmounted gladiator of the PGM XXXVI figurae.

A later image of Mars, also unmounted, can be found in an Ottoman Turkish copy of Zakariya’ al-Qazwini’s Wonders of Creation made in 1717 (Fig. 7c). Here the sword is in his left hand, the head in his right; the same manuscript uses the reverse configuration for Perseus (Fig. 6b). A version in an undated imprint of the Ghayat al-Hakim produced in Cairo has the more customary right/left sword/head configuration for Mars and restores the lion as his steed (Fig. 7d).

The magical reputation of the Mars template persisted until modern times. Francis Barrett wrote in The Magus (1801) that its imagery of “a man armed, riding upon a lion, having in his right hand a naked sword erect, carrying in his left hand the head of a man [...] renders a man powerful in good and evil, so that he shall be feared by all; and whoever carries it, they give him the power of enchantment.”116

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110 Ockenström (2014: 16-17 & Table 1).
112 Waite (1913: 87 fn.1). For context, see preface in Peterson (2000).
113 “The planetary lord of Aries is Mars, a warrior-like, mustachioed figure that invariably holds a sword in his right hand and often, as here, a severed head in his left.” Moleiro (2008), commentary on the Book of Felicity f.8v, The Image of Aries.
114 Tugini (1868: 147): “Prima Martis imago est vir armatus, leonem equitans, cujus galeam rostro vultur tundit.”
115 Tugini (1868: 147): “Quarta, homo habens in dextra strictum ensem et caput humanum sanguine rorentem, in sinistra habens vultum quasi sole adustum.” (“The fourth [image], a man having – in his right hand – a drawn sword and a human head dripping blood, in his left having a face as if burnt by the sun.”) Clearly, a misplaced punctuation mark has altered the sense from the original meaning, which I have restored in the main text. Jackson (2002), too, corrects the passage to restore the original sense.
116 Barrett (1801: 161), i.e., Book I, Part II, Chap. 38: Talismanic Magic – “Of the Images of Mars.” The words echo those of the Picatrix: “He who carries this stone will be powerful both in good and in evil [...]and all who see him will be afraid.”
Conclusion

Despite growing interest in the *figurae magicae* of the PGM, the drawings in PGM XXXVI have been described more than they have been analysed.117 While much degraded, and while clearly drawing upon multiple divine/demonic templates (most obviously, the iconography of Seth and Abrasax), it seems to me that most or all of these images share an underlying unity.118 This is perhaps unexpected, given that differential preservation of text passages suggests that at least some of the spells come from independent sources.119

In response to this underlying similarity, I suggest that the large drawings in PGM XXXVI may be – or at least may contain – refractions of Perseus brandishing his sword and carrying the severed head of the Gorgon. Given the syncretic nature of magic and the pluralism and multivalence of its symbolism, this proposal is not intended to deny or supplant other interpretations of the figures120 but rather to complement and enrich them.

Accordingly, we do better when we interpret the elements of magical drawings not in terms of exclusive or competing categories (“either/or”) but in terms of co-resident referents (“both/and”). For example, the object carried in the (theri)anthropomorphic figure’s left hand may simultaneously reflect the spell’s victim,121 an *ankh*,122 a Gorgoneion, and more. The emphasis may, of course, shift from one drawing to another. The author(s) of the drawings, and the practitioners making use of them, probably had only a partial awareness of the multi-layered heritage of their visual template. In the dynamic milieu of Late Antique magic, it is likely that new associations would quickly have arisen and an explicit awareness of older meanings been lost.

Whatever their origin, the images in PGM XXXVI seem to prefigure an iconography that later became identified with the god Mars. Preserved in the Arabic *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm* and its Latin translation, the *Picatrix*, this planetary archetype subsequently entered the talismanic image magic of medieval and Renaissance Europe. Advocated as recently as the nineteenth century, the reputation of this visual template for magical efficacy persisted until modern times.

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117 E.g., Smith (2000:37-41) and the TO ZODION database.
118 Similarly, Smith (2000: 41) observed of PGM XXXVI roll that “it is more notable for its unity, both in format and in the employment of visual strategies. This unity indicates the conception of the role [= roll] as its own entity.”
119 Spells 8 and 11 are preserved much more poorly than the others; Eitrem (1925: 31).
121 E.g., McDonald (2014: 61-62).
122 Eitrem (1925: 46 & 49).
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**Modern Studies**


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