



Student Activity for Cosmology, Magic and Divination

Week 7

Magic, Medicine, Religion and Divination
in the Graeco-Roman World

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Ars longa, vita brevis

The art is long, but life is short.

This famous Hippocratic aphorism, well known in both its Latin and English translation, is actually the beginning of a longer quotation:

Ho bios brachus, he de techne makre, ho de kairos oxus, he de peira
sphalere, he de krisis chalepe

ὁ βίος βραχὺς, ἡ δὲ τέχνη μακρὴ, ὁ δὲ καιρὸς ὀξύς, ἡ δὲ πείρα
σφαλερὴ, ἡ δὲ κρίσις
χαλεπή.

Aphorisms I, 1, in Littré, Émile, ed. Hippocrate. Oeuvres complètes. 10 vols.

Paris: J.-B.

Baillière, 1839-1861. Reprint, 1962, here vol. 4, 458.

‘Life is short, but the art is great, the opportune moment fleeting,
experimentation perilous, discernment difficult’
(trans. D. G. Greenbaum)

Note: ‘art’ translates the Greek techne, which can also mean ‘craft’ (and
from which our word technology comes).

The phrase ‘opportune moment’ translates the Greek kairos. ‘Discernment’
translates krisis (from the verb krino, judge, discern, distinguish, decide)

How do medicine, rituals and doing things at the right time relate to the practice of medicine in its physical and spiritual aspects?

The Egyptian woman from Besa speaks of the time sensitivity of performing nocturnal rites upon her son who has just been murdered. Moon was just rising, had been full two nights prior.

The woman dug a pit, created a fire, and laid her dead sons body alongside. She then gave offerings from three separate bowls which included honey, milk, wine. Fennel cake in the pit, blood offering, incantation to the moon, and to her son.

Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds

p. 199

Is there a spiritual aspect to medicine,
or is it purely the physical application of remedy and treatment?

'Let us begin with the assumption that magic is a universal
notion and not one that is culturally specific.'

Dickie, Matthew. Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman
World. Taylor & Francis [CAM], 2003.

Doctors of this culture made offerings to the gods.

'The divinatory practices at sanctuaries of Asclepius, where sick people went to receive cures and advice about their health through dream incubation, by sleeping in the temple in order to receive an oracular dream.'

--Addey, Mirrors and Divination, p. 3

Asclepius's healing technology

People came with sores, wounded limbs, accidents, summer's fever, or winter's colds and would be healed by Asclepius. Incantations, mild drugs (pharmaka), or surgery were a few methods of healing. As Daniel Ogden states in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (p. 265), there was no differentiation between magical and medical.

Pharmaka was applied equally to drugs taken internally
and externally applied amulets.

For example, to cure a fracture here is the formula given for
healing:

Take a 4-5 ft green reed split down the middle and have two men
apply to either side of the hips of the patient.

Begin the incantation

motas vaeta daries dardares astataries dissunapiter.

While chanting wave a knife over the patient, cut the reeds and
bind them. The incantation could be used on a daily basis.

For dislocated bone the incantation was

huat huat huat istaisis taris ardannabou dannaustra.

In Greek, the same word is used for a song that heals or relieves pain and for incantation in general, epode or epaoide.

In Latin, the verbs *incantare* and *praecantare* have roughly the same basic meaning.

One of the techniques used in ancient medicine to cure conditions was singing over the affected body part. It seems mostly to have been used to relieve pain and to stop bleeding, but it may have had a wider application. In many cases this is treated as an accepted medical practice.

from Dr. Addey's notes on Magic, Medicine and Divination

PGM VII. 208–9

***For hardening of the breasts:** Take a fine linen rag and write on it in black ink:

⊗ ΕΡΤ ⊗ ΑΡ ⊗ ΡΖ.

***Tr.:** John Scarborough.

PGM VII. 209–10

***For swollen testicles:** Take a cord from a coin bag / and say with each knot “Kas- 210
tor” once, “Thab” twice.

***Tr.:** John Scarborough.

PGM VII. 211–12

***For fever with shivering fits:** Take oil in your hands and say 7 times, “SABAŌTH”
(add the usual, twice). And spread on oil from the sacrum to the feet.

***Tr.:** John Scarborough.

PGM VII. 213–14

***For daily fever and nightly fever:** On the shiny side of an olive leaf write ♂, and
on the dark side write ♀ and wear it as an amulet.

***Tr.:** John Scarborough.

From The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation

When religion is 'embedded' (i.e. thought to influence and underlie every aspect of human life and of the cosmos) and polytheistic, as Greek and Roman religion was, can there be a divide between secular and religious approaches towards phenomena such as healing?

Furthermore, when a religion often seems to be pantheistic (or at least many ancient philosophers, cosmologists and thinkers imply that they thought it was pantheistic), i.e. that all phenomena and everything in the cosmos is seen as being full of the divine and the gods are in everything, can there be a divide between religious and medical approaches towards healing?

From Dr. Addey's Notes

‘Life is short, but the art is great, the opportune moment fleeting,
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(trans. D. G. Greenbaum)

What do you think the writer of the aphorism intended?

The craft of life is intricate and requires both knowledge and
wisdom. Meanwhile timing is essential, as in any form of
divination.

To experiment with craft can be deadly, and to know how to
distinguish which remedy to offer required skill and expertise.

