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HPCA7027

Critically analyse a text from the Greek or Demotic Magical Papyri in ONE of the following in terms of: 1. its cosmology and astrology 2. its magic and divination.

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This essay critically analyse a text (PGM IV.475-829)¹ from the collection of Hellenistic magical material designated *Greek Magical Papyri* (PGM), a segment from the *Grand papyrus magique* (PGM IV, Supplément grec 574) housed at the *Bibliothèque nationale* in Paris.² The fragment's controversial nickname, known as *Mithras Liturgy* (ML) after Albrecht Dietrich's volume *Eine Mithrasliturgie*,³ raised several reactions, Franz Cumont *in primis*,⁴ pertaining not only its relationship with Mithraism, but also the very definition of "liturgy". A product of the rich eclecticism of the Hellenistic period, ML presents elements related to Hermeticism, Chaldaean Oracles, Theurgy, magic, along with diverse religious references. I shall present the text, reflecting on its purpose and on its content in terms of magic and divination.

PGM is composite body written in Coptic Greek, produced in Egypt between the I-II century BCE and the V century CE⁵ and containing binding spells, invocations, *voces magicae*, recipes, instructions for various purposes—from attracting a lover or keeping 'bugs out of the house',⁶ to receiving dream revelations or establishing a relationship with a *daimon*. A conspicuous number of these papyri, including PGM IV, was found by Jean d'Anastasi, Consul in Alexandria,⁷ in Thebes,⁸ and was eventually auctioned off. Nothing certain can be asserted on the relationship between Anastasi's manuscripts, and despite the likelihood that they came from the same place,⁹ the whole collection cannot be considered as a consistent corpus. Conversely, PGM IV is a document produced by a

¹ The translations provided in this paper are Meyer's as in *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation. Including the Demotic Spells*, H.D. Betz (ed.), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1996 and are indicated as "PGM" followed by the number of the papyrus and the corresponding lines. the Greek transcription can be found in *The "Mithras Liturgy"*, H.D. Betz (ed.), Mohr Siebek, Bonn 2005 as well as in *The "Mithras Liturgy"*, M. Meyer (tr. and ed.), Scholars Press, Montana 1976.

² The papyrus is fully accessible on the website of the library. See 'Supplément grec 574': Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b525030475>> [accessed April 2024].

³ *Eine Mithrasliturgie*, A. Dietrich (ed. and tr.), Teubner Verlag, Leipzig-Berlin 1903.

⁴ F. Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, Kegan, Trench, Trübner, Chicago 1911, pp. 260-261.

⁵ Betz (1996), p. xli; S.I. Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden-Oxford 2008, p. 149.

⁶ PGM VII 149-154.

⁷ 'Supplément grec 574', NP.

⁸ Betz (1996), p. xlii.

⁹ *Ibidem.* (Betz (1996), p. xlii.)

single author in the early IV century BCE, probably part of a ‘magician’s collection’,¹⁰ as Arthur Nock proposed, composed of several charms, spells, prayers, invocations. According to Hans Betz, the author was not only trained in magic, but also a skilled scholar and writer, who compared more than a single source for his final version,¹¹ and completed it with personal contributions and adaptations, comments and revisions. Following Dietrich’s, Betz claimed that the process for the development of such a material reasonably required a couple of centuries, hence the origin of the sources should be anticipated to 100-150 CE.¹²

When considering ML as a fraction (475-829) of such a longer work, its placement within the papyrus and its relationship with the other parts should be taken into account. Radcliffe Edmonds¹³ noticed that, while sun-Helios is praised and celebrated especially in the earlier portions of PGM IV, including ML, the spells invoking moon-Selene-Hekate are grouped towards the end of the papyrus, somehow alluding to a perception of the moon as a ‘hostile power trapping souls in *genesis* through hostile *daimones* and the chains of fate’,¹⁴ partially akin to the Chaldaean Oracles’s view,¹⁵ presented by Hans Lewy. Mark Stoholski¹⁶ analysed the relationship of ML with some of the Homeric quotations surrounding it. Several delimitations have been proposed for ML, with Dietrich dismissing the instructions for the recipe, Betz accepting it, as it is generally accepted, and Marvin Meyer ‘cautiously’¹⁷ considering the idea of including even the Homeric lines preceding ML.¹⁸ Indeed, in the original papyrus, the gap between the last Homeric verse (474) prior ML and the beginning of the invocation (475) is not wider than the usual interlinear space within a paragraph. Conversely, such a gap can be seen between the last line of ‘Wondrous spell for binding a lover’ (266) and the first Homeric verse (267).

“Betz’s” ML (475-820) can be divided into four main parts. The scholar distinguished exordium (475-485), main body (485-732), supplemental rituals (732-819) and closing statement (819-820) right before the Homeric verses. Despite the presence of *voces magicae* – names, unknown words or vowels – and a clear set of instructions for a magical procedure, Dietrich proposed the title *Mithrasliturgie* for the invocation of Helios-Mithra and of his role of preeminence in the text. The god presents the typical features of the god of the mysteries: young and shining face, golden hair surmounted by a golden crown, wearing ἀναξυρίς – trousers ‘worn by Eastern nations’¹⁹ – and a

¹⁰ A.D. Nock, ‘Greek Magical Papyri’: *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 15 (1), 1929, p. 220.

¹¹ Betz (2005), p. 10.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 9.

¹³ R.G. Edmonds III, ‘At the Seizure of the Moon: The Absence of the Moon in the Mithras Liturgy’: S. Noegel, J. Walker, B. Wheeler (eds.), *Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World*. Penn State University Press, (2003), pp. 234s;

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 239.

¹⁵ H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy: Mystic Magic and Platonism in the Later Roman Empire*, Troisième édition par Michel Tardieu avec un supplément «Les Oracles chaldaïques 1891-2011», Institut des Etudes Augustiniennes, Paris 2011, p. 54..

¹⁶ M. Stoholski, “Welcome to Heaven, Please Watch Your Step”: The Mithras Liturgy and the Homeric Quotations in the Paris Papyrus’. *Helios* 34, n. 1, Texas Tech University Press 2007, p. 70.

¹⁷ M. Meyer, *The “Mithras Liturgy” as Mystery and Magic*: C.H. Bull, L.I. Lied, J.D. Turner (eds.), *Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature: Ideas and Practices*. Brill, Leiden-Boston 2012, p. 449.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 450.

¹⁹ H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon. Revised and Augmented throughout by Sir Henry Stuart Jones*, with R. McKenzie, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1940. Consulted online:

<[https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=a\)nacuri/des](https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=a)nacuri/des)> [Accessed April 2024].

golden bull's shoulder in his hand.²⁰ Comparing the content of the ML with some raffigurations of Mithra and Mithraeums, Dietrich conjectured that the fragment was originally an authentic Mithraic liturgy which was subsequently adapted to meet the magician's needs.²¹

Following Cumont's skepticism, Nock remarked that 'that document is neither a liturgy nor, properly speaking, Mithraic. It is an ἀπαθανατισμός, directions how one shall make oneself immortal and pass through the heavens'.²² Indeed, the text presents itself as an appeal for immortalisation right from the exordium: 'I write these mysteries [...] for instruction; and for an only child I request immortality [ἀθανασία]',²³ 'so that I alone may ascend into heaven as an inquirer and behold the universe',²⁴ and before the last section with the recipe of 'the ointment for the immortalisation [ἀπαθανατισμός]'²⁵ it is noted: 'This immortalisation [ἀπαθανατισμός] takes place three times a year'.²⁶

Dietrich, even recognising the incorporation of the liturgy into a magical procedure for predicting the future,²⁷ compared the process of ἀπαθανατισμός described in the text with the initiations of the Mithraic mysteries ('*Mithrasweihe*')²⁸ aiming at lifting the soul into heaven.²⁹

The matter raised by Nock – along with 'most scholars', according to Graf and Edmonds³⁰ – concerns the definition of this material as "liturgy", and poses the difficult problem of distinguishing between religion and magic due to the similarities between their practices. 'The boundary line is so hazy and indefinable, that it is almost impossible to tie it down and restrict it to the narrow limits of some neat turn of phrase', commented J.E. Lowe, as Robert Fowler reported while he was listing possible ways of identifying specific traits of magic and religion, each of them confuted by equally numerous exceptions:³¹ private, individual magical practices, frequently secret, aiming at achieving power, knowledge and immediate satisfaction *versus* public, collective, exoteric religious practices organised around a central theology, aiming at obtaining an elevation of the spiritual status and a deeper connection with the divine—³²none of these distinctions seem, in fact, uniformly applicable. Mysteries, for instance,

²⁰ PGM IV 700.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 82-83. Also: Betz (2005), p. 135.

²² Nock (1929), p. 231.

²³ PGM IV 476-477.

²⁴ PGM IV 484-485. In Betz's revision, "inquirer" is substituted with "eagle". See Betz (2005), p. 50.

²⁵ PGM IV 771.

²⁶ PGM IV 747.

²⁷ Dietrich (1903), p. 85.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 83, 86, 90.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

³⁰ F. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, tr. by F. Philip, Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 1997, p. 98. R.G. Edmonds III, *There and Back Again: Temporary Immortality in The Mithras Liturgy*: B.S. Bøgh (ed.), *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity. Shifting Identities – Creating Change*. Peter Lang Verlag, Berlin 2014, p. 186. See also R.L. Gordon, 'Probably not Mithras': *The Classical Review* 55.1, 2005, p. 99.

³¹ R.L.H. Fowler, 'Greek Magic, Greek Religion': *Illinois Classical Studies* 20, University of Illinois Press, 1995, p. 20.

³² *Ibidem*.

share with magic secrecy, the quest for a direct contact with the divine and complex rituals of initiation, remarked Graf.³³

The fact that the ML provides immortality, as Edmonds pointed out, led Dietrich to intend the original ritual not for divination but for a permanent transformation of the initiate.³⁴ Dietrich's theory concerning the existence of an "Ur-"liturgy, used and adapted by a magician, is accepted by scholars like Graf, who imagined an adept of some mystery cult to as the author of the Paris papyrus.³⁵ Though, two elements should be considered. Firstly, with the claim: 'After you have said these things, he [Helios-Mithra] will immediately respond with a revelation [χρησιμοδοτώ]',³⁶ the text indicates that ML has two purposes: attaining immortality and obtaining an oracle. A closer analysis of the fragment reveals that *de facto* the ritual's goal is primarily receiving a divinatory response, one that probably concerns matters of high spiritual value, since the necessary requirement to benefit from such divine wisdom is ascending to a place that is inaccessible to mortal beings. Only by *improving* [βελτιώω]³⁷ his mortal condition and releasing himself 'for a short time' of his 'human soul-power [ψυχική δύναμις]'³⁸ the 'μύστη'³⁹ can 'envision the immortal beginning'⁴⁰ and the 'immortal Aion'⁴¹ with 'immortal spirit'.⁴² Hence, even in the case that the "Ur-"liturgy aimed not at divination, the final version of it had an explicit oracular purpose.

Secondly, as mentioned, the operation is only effective 'for a short time', and it needs to be repeated 'three times a year'—⁴³ or, according to the god's amendment, 'once a month, at full moon'.⁴⁴ Relying on Petersen's *reflections*, Edmonds reminded that whereas ML provides a temporary immortality, initiations are permanent rituals, 'irreversible without other special ceremonies',⁴⁵ and proposed, instead, to interpret ML as a rite of purification, which is 'temporary, a special improvement'⁴⁶ that vanishes as soon as the individual comes back to ordinary business, is contaminated by the sublunary impurity and is burdened by the 'relentless necessity'.⁴⁷ Having been transmitted directly by god himself ('But the god spoke to me: use the ointment [...]'),⁴⁸ for Edmonds ML

³³ Graf (1997), p. 99.

³⁴ Edmonds (2014), p. 187.

³⁵ Graf (1997), p. 98.

³⁶ PGM IV 724-725.

³⁷ PGM IV 518.

³⁸ PGM IV 523.

³⁹ PGM IV 477.

⁴⁰ PGM IV 504-505.

⁴¹ PGM IV 520-521.

⁴² PGM IV 505.

⁴³ PGM IV 747.

⁴⁴ PGM IV 796-797.

⁴⁵ Edmonds (2014), p. 188. See Petersen *Rituals of Purification, Ritual of Initiation. Phenomenological, Taxonomical and Culturally Evolutionary Reflections*: D. Hellholm, T. Vegge, Ø. Nordeval, C. Hellholm (eds.), *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism. Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2011, p. 30.

⁴⁶ Edmonds (2014), p. 188.

⁴⁷ PGM IV 504.

⁴⁸ PGM IV 792.

instructs on how to perform a ‘purificatory ritual of sanctification’.⁴⁹ In the process of preparation for the oracular moment, it is vital to ensure that the individual undergoing the divinatory practice is physically and psychologically pure, that the procedure is perfectly followed, that every sign sent by the god are carefully examined, to ascertain whether or not the god is well-disposed and that the entire operation is carried out in the right place and, especially, at the right moment. All these features are strongly emphasised by Plutarch who, in *De Defectu Oraculorum*, highlighted the necessity to seize the *καῖρός* and to be in the sacred space of Delphi, to make sure that both the sacrificial victim and the Pythia remain in a state of purity in body and in soul,⁵⁰ to be mindful of the expected behaviour of the victim, which must shake visibly in all its body and make sounds,⁵¹ as well as of that of the Pythia. Overseeing the rules and possible omens sent by the god, proved Plutarch, can lead to tragic consequences, like the death of the Pythia⁵² that he reported in his writing.

An example of ritual purification aimed at cleansing body and soul is attested by Psellus who, Lewy mentioned, reports the Chaldaean view that the ascension towards god can only occur if the soul is strengthened and purified by material sacraments like ‘stones, herbs and incantations [ἐπωδή]’.⁵³ Similarly, theurgists like Iamblichus and Porphyry considered purification of the soul through philosophy to be an essential prerequisite for the ascent to the divine, Addey remarked.⁵⁴ The proximity of ML to the aforementioned practices can provide useful material to understand the ritual. In particular, Lewy⁵⁵ and Edmonds⁵⁶ highlighted, ML presents several points in common with the Chaldaean Oracles, starting from the very concept of ἀπαθανατισμός⁵⁷ achieved by means of a ritual that involve establishing a special connection with the sun,⁵⁸ just like in ML.

The requirement of undertaking the ritual in a condition of purity is communicated in ML both in an explicit, prescriptive, way, and implicitly, by expressing intolerable frustration for mortal constraints, which prevent the access to the heavenly realm for human beings.

Within the praise of the introducing invocation, the author reminds: ‘furthermore, it is necessary [...] to take the juices of herbs and spices’.⁵⁹ The instructions are provided afterwards: ‘And having kept yourself pure for three

⁴⁹ Edmonds (2014), pp. 195-196.

⁵⁰ 435D; 437B. Plutarch, *The Obsolescence of Oracles (De defectu oraculorum)*, F.C. Babbitt (trans.), *Moralia* vol. V, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 1936.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 435C.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 438A-438B.

⁵³ Psellus, *Commentaire des Oracles chaldaïques*, 1132a, in E. De Places, *Oracles chaldaïques. Avec un choix de commentaires anciens: Psellus, Proclus, Michel Italicus*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1971, p. . See also: H.Y. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy: Mystic Magic and Platonism in the Later Roman Empire*, *Troisième édition par Michel Tardieu avec un supplément «Les Oracles chaldaïques 1891-2011»*, Institut des Etudes Augustiniennes, Paris 2011, p. 178.

⁵⁴ Addey (2014), pp. 24-25.

⁵⁵ Lewy (2011), p. 209.

⁵⁶ R.G. Edmonds III, ‘Did the Mithraists Inhale? - A Technique for Theurgic Ascent in the Mithras Liturgy, the Chaldaean Oracles, and some Mithraic Frescoes’: *Ancient World* 32.1, 2000: 10-24.

⁵⁷ Lewy (2011), pp. 461-462.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 198s.

⁵⁹ PGM IV 478-480.

days in advance, come at morning to face the sunrise'.⁶⁰ For a consultation *via* another adept, seven days of abstention from any impurity, no meat and no bath.⁶¹

The instructions carefully indicate the right place, that is, facing the sunrise, and the right moment: the ointment should be prepared 'when the moon is invisible',⁶² whereas the invocations over the magic balm 'while the sun is in midheaven',⁶³ but the 'encounter with the great god' can only occur 'at the conjunction [σύννοδος]' of the sun and the moon in Leo,⁶⁴ which is the zodiacal sign ruled by the sun—even though the god corrected the pivotal moment to be at full moon.⁶⁵ The solar symbolism is further remarked by the use of a 'sun scarab which has twelve rays',⁶⁶ as one of the ingredients for the ointment, together with the concept of immortality, for in the '*Charm that produces direct vision*', a few lines apart, the scarab is invoked as a god, called the 'self-engendered one [...] the first-appearing one', 'who drive[s] the orb of fertile fire'.⁶⁷ The presence of the seed of lotus⁶⁸ in the lotion seems to allude to the god Nefertum 'a god of the rising sun' and 'pure lotus', stated Budge referring to the *Book of the Death*;⁶⁹ he is a primordial divinity from which the sun is born, as Plutarch mentions in *De Iside et Osiride*.⁷⁰

Honey, food of the gods,⁷¹ preserved from putrefaction,⁷² according to Porphyry; he also reported how Zeus, following the advice of Night, offered Saturn some honey, likely fermented, but the god indulged too much in it and got intoxicated 'as if from the effects of wine'.⁷³ In the context of a divinatory text, the presence of honey, frequently accompanied with wine in rituals throughout the papyrus, might relate to the ecstasy that the adept or the prophet goes through and is comparable to altered states induced by alcohol—'For Bacchic rout and frenzied mind contain much prophecy', according to Euripides quoted by Plutarch,⁷⁴ with an allusion to the relationship with divine ἐνθουσιασμός and Dionysian cults. The Homeric Hymn to Hermes, instead, expressed the relationship between divination, Apollo and the bees, for 'they are sources of [...] prophecy'.⁷⁵

⁶⁰ PGM IV 783-784.

⁶¹ PGM IV 733-735.

⁶² PGM IV 753-754.

⁶³ PGM IV 762.

⁶⁴ PGM IV 781-782.

⁶⁵ PGM IV 797.

⁶⁶ PGM IV 752.

⁶⁷ PGM IV 943-945.

⁶⁸ PGM IV 755.

⁶⁹ E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians in two volumes*, v. I, Dover Publications, New York 1969, p. 521.

⁷⁰ 355C. *Isis and Osiris (De Iside et Osiride)*, F.C. Babbitt (trans.), Moralia vol. V, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 1936

⁷¹ Porphyry, *On the cave of the nymphs in the thirteenth book of the Odyssey*, T. Taylor (tr.), Watkins, London 1917, p. 21.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

⁷⁴ Plutarch, *De defectu*, 432E.

⁷⁵ *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, 550-567. *Homeric Hymns. Homeric Apocrypha. Lives of Homer*, M. West (ed. and tr.), Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 2003.

Such ingredients (and astrological aspect, at least before the subsequent divine amendment) might be intended as material *sunthemata* as well as protective aids. Gregory Shaw explains that *sunthemata* (συνθήματα) are tokens of the divine whose anagogic function is granted by the intimacy [φιλία] and the degree of participation in their corresponding god.⁷⁶ Stones, plants and animals associated with a particular divinity – the scarab and the lotus are associated with the sun and, therefore, with Helios-Mithra; honey is associated with Apollo – were considered necessary to establish a theurgic connection and raise the soul.⁷⁷

Amongst the ingredients used to ensure the encounter with the god, is mentioned the juice of a plant called *kentritis*⁷⁸—the author provides some unclear indication about its aspect and how to find it at the end of the instructions—that needs to be either spread over the eyes of someone who wants to have the same vision of the adept, or used as an ink, employed to write a secret god's name, and subsequently licked off. Under the voice “κεντρίτης”, the Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* reports:⁷⁹ ‘a kind of serpent’; for “κεντρον”: ‘any sharp point’, ‘the sting of bees and wasps’, ‘weapon’, ‘the stationary point of a pair of compasses’, ‘centre of a circle’; also, in the obscene slur pronounced by the poet Sotades to Ptolemy II Philadelphus to make fun of his wedding with his sister Arsinoe, reported by Plutarch, “κεντρον” is used figuratively to indicate the male genitalia⁸⁰ It seems plausible to suspect that the plant might not only be related to the symbolic chain honey - altered state - Apollo - bees - divination, but also be a symbol of the divine as fixed centre and origin of the cosmos. ‘[...] God intercalated the sun among the seven (zones) and made the six other zones dependent upon it, and [...] the solar fire “...was established at the site of the heart...”’,⁸¹ stated Proclus, for in the Chaldaean doctrine ‘the sun functions as ‘the “heart” or “center” of the Universe’, Ruth Majercik wrote. Even the idea of the viril member conveys a meaning related to the divine. Plutarch recalled the Osiris' phallus consecrated by Isis and celebrated in the Egyptian festival of Pamyliia⁸² – in a similar fashion to the celebrations around Dionysos' λίκνον, explicitly identified by Plutarch with Osiris⁸³ – along with the ‘statues of Osiris in human form of the ithyphallic type, on account of his creative and fostering power’.⁸⁴ Moreover, Shaw reported Iamblichus' claim that “the erection of phalli is a *sunthema* of generative power [...] this act calls out for the fecundation of the cosmos”’.⁸⁵ The plant of *kentritis*, thus, might have been perceived as yet another solar *sunthema*, as an image of rebirth (serpent, *ouroboros*), divination (bee), fertility (phallus), in harmonious *sympathy* with Helios, the sun gifted with piercing rays and a golden crown, and even further with Helios-Mithra, the highest god.

⁷⁶ G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul. The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, Angelico Press / Sophia Perennis, Kettering 2014, p. 187.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 188-189.

⁷⁸ PGM IV 774-775; 780.

⁷⁹ H.G.Liddell, R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, with Prof. Drisler, Harper&Brothers, New York 1883, p. 796.

⁸⁰ 11A. Plutarch, *On the Education of Children (De Liberis Educandi)*, F.C. Babbitt (trans.), *Moralia* vol. I., Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 1927.

⁸¹ Fr. 58. *The Chaldean Oracles*, Majercik (ed. and tr.), Brill, Leiden-New York-Copenhagen-Köln 1989, pp. 70-71.

⁸² Plutarch, *De Iside*, 355EF; 365B.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, 354E.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 371E-372A.

⁸⁵ Shaw (2014), pp. 189-190.

The ascension towards the divine realm is not an easy and safe journey and the author of ML expressed quite openly his concerns when he begs for mercy and protection: ‘Be gracious to me, O Providence and [ψυκν/τυκη]’,⁸⁶ or ‘[receive] me safe and sound’.⁸⁷ Despite their conventional appearance – or perhaps precisely by virtue of their exact conventionality – these standardised *formulae* are, together with the *voces magicae* spread throughout the text, safe words, keywords that ensure the alliance with the divine beings and their protection—and their efficacy was granted by the tradition that established the formulae themselves. Respecting not only the right order of the charms, but also the correct spelling becomes a matter of great concern, considering the account of Plutarch.

This concern can be observed in our liturgy as well. The text presents portions with prescriptive function and others with descriptive function, as Betz noticed.⁸⁸ The former contain technical instructions to be followed precisely, ritual elements like the utterance of *voces magicae*, invocations and petitions, *formulae* of self-identification with the god, even several ‘popping’ or ‘hissing’⁸⁹ sounds. Meyer identified symbolic, onomatopoeic and glossolalic *formulae*, permutations of the divine name IAO, some of which appear as an imitation of (or derivation from) Semitic, Egyptian or Greek vocabulary.⁹⁰ Long lines of unintelligible vowels, consonants, ὀνόματα βάρβαρα, probably used as divine epithets, can be found in the text and their exact interpretation is quite doubtful even though, as Majercik commented, these utterances reveal definite patterns ‘not only to the arrangements of the vowels and consonants, but also in terms of numerical equations, all of which had potent magical properties’.⁹¹ Fragment 150, published in Majercik’s volume: “Do not change the nomina barbara; that is, the names handed down by the gods to each race have ineffable power in the initiation rites”,⁹² in perfect agreement with the initial discourse of Asclepius to King Ammon in the XVI treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, ending with an exhortation: ‘Therefore, my king [...] keep the discourse uninterpreted [...] We [...] use not speeches but sounds that are full of action’.⁹³ A similar view is assumed by Iamblichus, who claimed that such names are not meaningless even if they are unknowable, reported Shaw, and indeed theurgic practices involve the use of *voces mysticae* that, Majercik wrote, are equivalent to the *sunthemata*.⁹⁴ Hence, precisely by virtue of their divine origin and their ineffability, *voces mysticae*, or *magicae*, are able to awake the divine presence within human soul. The seven vowels in particular, for Iamblichus, are connatural – hence, *sunthemata* – of the seven planetary gods, and this, Shaw wrote, is also akin to certain Gnostic traditions.⁹⁵ An explicit example can be found in the PMG XIII of

⁸⁶ PGM IV 475. The first letter is unclear on the papyrus and is therefore difficult for scholars to determine whether the author is addressing the Cosmic Soul or Fate—Meyer and Betz render it as “Soul”, Dietrich and Wessely as “Fortune”.

⁸⁷ PGM IV 534-535.

⁸⁸ Betz (2005), p. 134.

⁸⁹ PMG IV 579.

⁹⁰ M. Meyer, *Introduction: The “Mithras Liturgy”*, M. Meyer (tr. and ed.), Scholars Press, Montana 1976, pp. ix-x.

⁹¹ Majercik (1989), p. 25.

⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 107.

⁹³ *Hermetica. The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in A New English Translation with Notes and Introduction*, B.P. Copenhaver (tr. and ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, p. 58.

⁹⁴ Majercik (1989), pp. 25-26.

⁹⁵ Shaw (2014), p. 208.

Leyden (papyrus W), containing an ‘instruction [for recitation] of the heptagram’,⁹⁶ which establishes a direct relationship between the divine ‘seven-lettered name’, the ‘harmony of the seven sounds [of the planets]’ and the ‘twenty-eight forms of the moon’,⁹⁷ providing visual aids to address each uttered vowel towards specific spacial directions.⁹⁸ In ML the author addresses the divine ‘first beginning of my beginning’, as the sum of all the vowels, ‘αηιουω’,⁹⁹ while a long list of anagrams of the vowels, rearranged in group of two, three or four, can be found in the ‘Third prayer’,¹⁰⁰ after the invocation of the god as light and fire through mysterious numinous epithets.¹⁰¹

The power of such *voces magicae* consists in creating a divine connection and in “binding” the god, in theurgic terms. Yet, as Shaw reminded, for Iamblichus the theurgic ritual is accomplished solely by god,¹⁰² who has ultimate control over the whole process, having communicated the binding charms himself, highlights Majercik.¹⁰³ ML alludes to a sort of *unio mystica*: ‘I am a star [ἀστήρ], wandering about with you, and shining forth out of the deep’;¹⁰⁴ ‘Life [ζωή] of me [...] stay! Dwell in my soul! Do not abandon me’.¹⁰⁵ The ‘art of conjunction’ [σύστασις], as Majercik explained,¹⁰⁶ was practiced by the Chaldaeans especially to bind with Time gods – like Chronos or, as in ML, Aion – and it was precisely the repetition of the mysteriously concealed divine name that, like keywords, allowed the conjunction to occur. Besides the direct exhortations to be visited and possessed by the god, in our liturgy there are other more subtle allusions to the same concept. The most evident one is perhaps the indication that the ointment must be prepared during the new moon, and that the encounter with the god occurs at the conjunction of the sun and the moon. The idea of a conjunction with the god in terms of an intimate possession could be, if the conjecture is acceptable, inferred also from the relationship of the plant *kentritis* with the fecundating phallus that, following the semantic connections within the term “κέντρον”, pierces like a pointed weapon similar to the sting of bees sacred to Apollo—or even to his infallible arrows. Since, as Lewy claims, an identification of Apollo with Helios occurred,¹⁰⁷ as a sign of the henotheism of the Hellenistic period, then advancing a symbolic connection between the concept of being hit by the far-shooting god’s arrows and being spiritually enthused by the divine rays of Helios might be sound. This seems confirmed by Proclus’ *Hymn to Aphrodite*, mother of immortal Erotes who ‘shoot with noetic arrows at souls in order that, having taken the upward-leading goads [ἀναγώγια κέντρα] of desires, these long after seeing the fiery courts of their mother’.¹⁰⁸ In the Chaldaean system, Eros is a

⁹⁶ PGM XIII 760.

⁹⁷ PGM XIII 775-779.

⁹⁸ PGM XIII 825-840.

⁹⁹ PGM IV 487-488; 743.

¹⁰⁰ PGM IV 610-616.

¹⁰¹ PGM IV 591-604.

¹⁰² Shaw (2014), p. 210.

¹⁰³ Majercik (1989), p. 27.

¹⁰⁴ PGM IV 574-575.

¹⁰⁵ PGM IV 709-710.

¹⁰⁶ Majercik (1989), p. 25.

¹⁰⁷ Lewy (2011), pp. 199-200.

¹⁰⁸ *Proclus’ Hymns. Essay, Translations, Commentaries*, R.M. van den Berg (ed. and tr.), Brill, Leiden-Boston-Köln 2001, Pp. 101-102.

cosmic principle that maintains the harmony in the universe, explains Majercik,¹⁰⁹ due to his quality of “bond of Love [Ἐρως]”¹¹⁰ that connects the Paternal Intellect with the human soul.

The first instructions in ML invite the adept to

‘draw in breath from the rays, drawing up 3 time as much as you can, and you will see yourself being lifted up and ascending to the height, so that you seem to be in midair. You will hear nothing either of man or of any other living thing, nor in that hour you will see anything of mortal affairs on earth, but rather you will see all immortal things [...] you will see the divine order of the skies: the presiding gods rising into heaven, and other setting’.¹¹¹

The inhalation of solar rays constitute the act enabling the adept’s soul to receive the immortalising power of the god, to transmute temporarily his mortal condition and to envision ‘the immortal beginning with immortal spirit’.¹¹² The same anagogic and immortalising function of solar rays can be found in the Chaldaean theories, as well, as Lewy and Majercik explain,¹¹³ while the divinatory power provided by the sunbeams was a central concept for Plutarch’s explanation of the Pythia’s prophetic inspiration: ‘for the sun kindles and promotes and helps to keep in activity the power of vision in our perceptive senses, just as the god does for the power of prophecy in the soul’.¹¹⁴

The inhaling and interiorisation of the divine rays frees the human soul from its constraining burden, allowing the beginning of the heavenly journey. As previously mentioned, the oppression of the mortal condition is denounced in ML by blaming the human ‘exceedingly pressing need [χρεία]’,¹¹⁵ ‘bitter and relentless necessity [ἀνάγκη]’,¹¹⁶ ‘inexorable and pressing need’.¹¹⁷ The sacrifice of the mortal body becomes the necessary premise for the ascension, for no mortal man can access the ethereal lands. In the section after a ‘memorandum’ constituted by four Homeric Hymns, is claimed that ‘Zeus went up the mountains with a golden bullock and a silver dagger [μάχαρι]’ he bestow a share to all, only ‘on this day’ [αμάρα] he did not give and said: “let go of what you have, and then you will receive”. On a technical note, the translation of “αμάρα” as “on this day” instead of “to Amara”¹¹⁸ seems pertinent to the context: “αμάρα” is a variation of “ἡμέρα”, meaning “time”, “day”, while in dative means “on this day”.¹¹⁹ The ascension of Zeus up the mountains seems an indication, as noted also by Graf, of the vertical

¹⁰⁹ Majercik (1989), p. 16

¹¹⁰ Fr. 39, *Ibidem*, p. 63.

¹¹¹ PGM IV 539-546.

¹¹² PGM IV 505.

¹¹³ Lewy (2011), p. 40, Majercik (1989), p. 39.

¹¹⁴ Plutarch, *De defectu*, 433E.

¹¹⁵ PGM IV 504.

¹¹⁶ PGM IV 526.

¹¹⁷ PGM IV 534-535.

¹¹⁸ As in Preisendanz (*Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri*, K. Preisendanz (ed. and tr.), Teubner Verlag, Berlin 1928, p. 101); Dietrich, p. 20; Meyer, p. 27; Betz, p. 54.

¹¹⁹ Liddell & Scott (1883), p. 648.

axis connecting the adept with the sun and the divine realm.¹²⁰ The golden bull – which is already present in ML, as a golden bull’s shoulder in the hand of Helios-Mithra¹²¹ – and the silver blade seem to be an allusion to the conjunction between the sun and the moon. Zeus did perform the sacrificial act, but on *that* day – the very day of the ritual, for which the adept should have cast a ‘horoscope’ to bring along, according to the author¹²² – one condition needs to be satisfied in order to receive the divine inspiration: any possession must be left behind—that is, one’s own mortal body must be denied by performing a mystical self-sacrifice, undergoing a ‘supernatural death’, as mentions Majercik.¹²³ Lewy recalled Proclus’ statement that in theurgical consecrations the body is buried with the exception of the head,¹²⁴ for this is the domicile of the soul, and the vessel in which the god can be hosted. In the ML the process starts from the very beginning, with, plausibly, the dissolution of each element constituting the body and their return to their prime source, which is evoked by the invocations: ‘spirit of spirit, the first [πρῶτον] of the spirit in me [...] the first of the fire in me [...] the first of the water in me [...] the first of the earthly material in me’.¹²⁵ The concept of the return of the bodily substances to their matrices, the four elements, reminded Lewy, is frequently found in the late Hellenism—Olympiodorus, for instance, claimed that theurgists followed this practice.¹²⁶

The process is concluded with the complete abandonment of the body: ‘Having been born again, I am passing away; [...] I am dying; after been born from a life-generating birth, I am passing on, released to death’.¹²⁷ After releasing the constraints of the body, the soul is free to conjoin the divine spirit. This is the moment of the oracular revelation: the adept is “en-thused” and speaks as ‘inspired in ecstasy’,¹²⁸ having comprehended ‘all these matters’ that he will be able to remember infallibly.¹²⁹ Just like in Delphi, the god arrives, utters ‘in verses’¹³⁰ and departs, leaving the “host” like abandoned instruments, as imagined Plutarch.¹³¹ The ritual is therefore concluded with the releasing of the divine presence, a rite that Chaldaeans call “loosing”, explains Majercik.¹³² and the potential complications that might arise in this delicate moment – like difficulties in loosing the god, as Porphyry explains,¹³³

¹²⁰ Graf (1997), p. 116.

¹²¹ PGM IV 700.

¹²² PGM IV 650-651.

¹²³ Majercik (1989), pp. 37-38.

¹²⁴ Lewy (2011), p. 205.

¹²⁵ PGM IV 490-495.

¹²⁶ Lewy (2011), p. 217.

¹²⁷ PGM IV 719-722.

¹²⁸ PGM IV 738.

¹²⁹ PGM IV 729-730.

¹³⁰ PGM IV 727.

¹³¹ Plutarch, *De defectu*, 431B.

¹³² Majercik (1989), p. 27.

¹³³ Lewy (2011), p. 42.

or being overpowered by harmful *daimons*, reminded Lewy¹³⁴ – are suggested in ML by the wish for a safe return,¹³⁵ as well as exorcised by means of the apotropaic formulae and *voces magicae*.

It was previously mentioned that ML is contained between some Homeric verses. The authority of Homer perceived as an inspiring ‘wise sage and a seer’ has its roots in traditional Greek culture, explains Crystal Addey,¹³⁶ such that in Argos sacrifices were performed to the poet along with Apollo.¹³⁷ The use of Homeric texts as oracles is attested by the existence of *Homeromanteia* (oracles of Homer) amongst the Late Antique divinatory practices quite broadly.¹³⁸ There are four groups of verses, almost symmetrically copied before and after ML (the structure of the composition is: 4 – 3 – 2 – 1 – ML – 2 and 4 – 1 – 4 – 3). Stoholski relate the context of the verses with the ritual, noting the theme of the interaction between humans and divinities – that is embodied in the relationship between Diomedes and Athena – and the related issues of potential harm, misleading aid and reliability of the gods.¹³⁹ On the other hand, the reference to Otus and Ephialtes, who killed each other due to their *hybris*, is interpreted by Stoholski as a warn for those who approach the ritual with wrong intentions.¹⁴⁰

In their divinatory function as *Homeromanteion*, these isolated verses might also be interpreted independently from their original context, in their own right. In brief, they concern: (1) Daring to raise a spear against Zeus;¹⁴¹ (2) Seizing something;¹⁴² [(3)a] Driving horses through a ditch;¹⁴³ (b) Men gasping out their lives in a terrible slaughter;¹⁴⁴ (c) Washing off in the sea the sweat covering “them”;¹⁴⁵ (4) ‘Mars endured, when Otos and mighty Ephialtes [bound]¹⁴⁶ him’. Leaving the Iliad aside, a possible interpretation of these oracles might suggest the need to maintain a humble attitude, recognising the sole responsibility of the whole divinatory process in god’s will (1). Having granted that, the attempt to establish a connection with the divine can begin, and the adept “seizes” the divine power in an increasingly rarefied form of integration of god: by licking (ingesting, absorbing) the enchanted spells written with a magical ink; pronouncing unintelligible epithets and *voces magicae*; inhaling sunbeams (2). The soul leaves the body; the adept goes through a mystical death, and cleanse himself from earthly impurities (3); finally the god is bound and painfully dwells into the adept, enduring temporarily human limitedness.

Considered in such a way, the *Homeromanteion* seem to reiterate the salient passages of the process towards the heavenly realm.

¹³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 236-236.

¹³⁵ PGM IV 534.

¹³⁶ C. Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism. Oracles of the Gods*, Routledge, New York 2014, p. 59.

¹³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 60.

¹³⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 71s

¹³⁹ Stoholski (2007), p. 87.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

¹⁴¹ PGM IV 467-468; 831-832.

¹⁴² PGM IV 469-470; 833-834.

¹⁴³ PGM IV 471; 821.

¹⁴⁴ PGM IV 472; 822.

¹⁴⁵ PGM IV 473; 823.

¹⁴⁶ 5.385. Homer, *Iliad*, A.T. Murray (tr.), vol. I, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, London 1924.

In conclusion, ML is a text offering a direct and individual encounter with god accomplished through a temporary immortalisation of the soul. Besides the Mithraic cult, ML shows strong affinities with both mantic rituals – from Delphic divination to Chaldaean Oracles and theurgy – and magical procedures. The unsolvable matter of distinguishing between magic and religion finds here a concrete example, for the threshold between prayers and *formulae* becomes almost undistinguishable. Iamblichus, reports Shaw, noted a different *attitude* towards the divine, for theurgy aims at lifting the soul up to heaven recognising the ritual as god's will, while sorcerers aim merely at calling the gods down.¹⁴⁷ ML certainly contains *voces magicae*, but the entire ritual proceeds in a vertical direction, as it is efficaciously portrayed in the image of Zeus climbing up the mountain. Indeed, the entire text is extremely visionary. The precise instructions are interspersed by the anticipation ('you will see')¹⁴⁸ of the expected visions described in great detail; such vivid scenarios constitute a reliable countercheck of the correct outcome of the ritual, and assume an anagogic function in addressing and focussing the mind's adept, so that he could "let go of what he has" in order to be enthused and receive the divine inspiration.

¹⁴⁷ Shaw (2014) p. 210.

¹⁴⁸ PMG IV 540.

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