Jay Johnston and Iain Gardner

Relations of Image, Text and Design Elements in Selected Amulets and Spells of the Heidelberg Papyri Collection

This article reports on the preliminary examination and re-reading of selected materials from the Heidelberg Papyri collection – Coptic magical texts numbered P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 678–686 – undertaken as part of the Australian Research Council funded project: The Function of Images in Magical Papyri and Artefacts of Ritual Power from Late Antiquity.[1] This chapter will first introduce the corpora being discussed, then outline the holistic methodology of analysis and finish with three case studies, each of which propose a new reading of the material (the integrated analysis of the corpora will be published at a later date).

1 Heidelberg Collection: Overview and Discussion of Provenance

This is a sizeable body of amulets and handbooks in Coptic on parchment and paper, dating from the tenth century. They were purchased by Carl Schmidt in 1930 and 1933 in Cairo (see further below). The pieces examined in our larger project are grouped together under current inventory numbers P. Heid. Inv. Kopt 678–686. That is, nine separate productions, three of which are single quire codices commonly termed magical handbooks and which contain lengthy invocations, ritual instructions, drawings and prescriptions. It is these three handbooks with which we are primarily concerned.

To outline briefly the three codices: The first, P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 684, known as the "Erotic Spell of Cyprian of Antioch", is a book comprised of sixteen pages on paper (14.3 x 9cm) dated to the eleventh century on paleographic grounds. It was published by Friedrich Bilabel and Adolf Grohmann in *Griechische, koptische und arabische Texte zur Religion und religiösen Literatur in Ägyptens Spätzeit*, in 1934, with Greek and Arabic parallels;[2] an English translation was published by Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith, in 1994, in *Ancient Christian Magic*.[3] The second, P. Heid. Inv. Kopt.

---

1 Project team: Jay Johnston (Sydney), Iain Gardner (Sydney), Julia Kindt (Sydney), Erica Hunter (SOAS, London), and Helen Whitehouse (Oxford).

2 Bilabel/Grohmann 1934, 304–325; see also Polotsky 1935.

3 Meyer/Smith 1994, 153–158.

685, "The Magical Book of Mary and the Angels" comprises twenty pages (22.2–23.4cm x 17.2–17.3cm: outside pages slightly wider) on parchment. It was published by Meyer in 1996 as *The Magical Book of Mary and the Angels*.[4] The third 'magical handbook' in the Heidelberg collection is "The Praise of Michael the Archangel" (P. Heid. Kopt 686); it comprises sixteen pages on parchment and was published by Angelicus Kropp as *Der Lobpreis des Erzengels Michael* in 1966.[5] Considered lost since World War Two it was accounted for again in 2010.

In addition to the handbooks, the other six pieces in the collection are short, singular works, probably amulets, but their exact function remains to be determined in each case. All nine productions were already associated together by Bilabel in his 1934 publication with Grohmann, where he presented the *editio princeps* of all six of the shorter pieces and one of the magic handbooks containing the famous erotic spell of Cyprian of Antioch. In this same publication, Bilabel noted all the works he published had been purchased by Carl Schmidt in 1930, and that there were two further pieces, that is the two magic handbooks he did not publish, which he referred to noting that this apparent magical library was still not exhausted.[6] These two other handbooks were then published, firstly *Der Lobpreis des Erzengels Michael* by Kropp,[7] and finally *The Magical Book of Mary and the Angels* by Meyer in 1996.[8]

It now appears clear that Bilabel did not publish the latter two books as they had only just been purchased. This is evidenced by Richard Seider's account of the Heidelberg papyrus collection published in 1964, where he collated information about purchases according to the year.[9] There he clearly states that in 1933 Schmidt obtained from Maurice Nahman, the famous antiquities dealer in Cairo, an additional two works, in very much the same style as those previously obtained in 1930. Therefore, "Erotic Spell of Cyprian of Antioch" was purchased in 1930, while "The Praise of Michael the Archangel" and "The Magical Book of Mary and the Angels" were purchased in 1933.

Considering this purchasing history, the question arises as to why the nine works have continually been associated together? Firstly, there is the issue of their collective purchase by Schmidt, but one does wonder why an extra two handbooks became available in 1933. Secondly it is notable that many of the works exhibit elements of Fayumic dialect (though they are by no means uniform linguistically). Further, six of the nine were written by what appears to be either a single scribe, or at least in such similar style of hand that they must be productions of a single workshop or scripto-

---

4 Meyer 1996.
5 Kropp 1966.
6 Bilabel/Grohmann 1934, 392.
7 Kropp 1966.
8 Meyer 1996.
9 Seider 1964.

rium (or whatever origin we may suppose for them). This much is clear. At the same time the other three works (P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 678, 679 and 684), although of similar content in a general sense, are in very different hands, and are on paper (the other six are all on parchment). When considering the collection in its entirety this does raise the issue as to whether all nine of the pieces should continue to be treated together as has previously been the case. It is clear, at least, that regarding the three handbooks central to this analysis only one was purchased in 1930 (P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 684); the other two (P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 685 and 686) in 1933.

2 Holistic Methodology

In taking a holistic approach to this material we contend that accurate interpretations of magical handbooks and ritual practices cannot be produced without considering *both* text and image elements as of equal importance for scholarly analysis and as necessarily integrated with one another. We engage with questions of the production and function of the artefact as a whole, the role of images and design elements, issues such as orality and agency. Our methodological program includes (i) producing a typographic catalogue of design and figural elements for each collection; (ii) undertaking detailed analysis of the placement of image, text and other design elements within the bounds of the material form (for example their spatial arrangement in terms of codex leaf, papyrus roll); (iii) developing inventories of their deployment across material types and text genres, for example amulet, handbook of prescriptions; and developing inventories of their deployment in relation to ritual experts, clients and religious communities.

Included in this approach is engagement with the vexing issue of image agency. That is, we ask questions of what type of scopic regimes – modes of visuality – were employed to both produce and use such magical texts and artefacts without simply 'importing' our contemporary visual regimes (with which we operate unconsciously) and assuming they are necessarily applicable. To do so we need to include amongst our methodological tools the idea that an image may be attributed ontological status. It must be stressed that this is not our *only* approach, but one that must be acknowledged as a possibility along with considering the images as instructive – that is diagrammatic – and representational. Indeed, it is likely that such texts required a range of scopic regimes and this was part of the ritual practitioner's 'expertise'. That is, knowing which way to view various aspects of the image and text.

There have been various scholarly engagements with the ontology of the image over the past fifty years, most notably David Freedberg's *The Power of the Image*.[10] In

---

[10] Freedberg 1989.

short, this text highlighted the potential of the image or artefact to have agency, or 'power'; a particularly relevant concept for considering material culture employed in theurgic practices. Therefore, when applying such ideas to the interpretation of image and design elements found in ritual handbooks, decision must be made about whether, for example, the depiction of a spirit-being be read as an illustration (in the modern sense of the term) or as a manifestation of the actual being itself.

In addition, the relationship between placement of text and image warrants close scrutiny. For example, does the placement of repetitive vowel sequences inside the 'body' of a depicted angel or spirit-being represent the physical location from where such sound was understood to emerge; and thus a sign of ritual chanting? In short, the placement of visual elements in magical handbooks should not be viewed as arbitrary or ad hoc, but rather as consciously deployed, following a logic known to the ritual practitioners. That is, images are not mere decoration or 'empty' illustration.

While conscious that something of the agency of an 'ontological' image will necessarily slip beyond our grasp and, further, that we can never fully know the intent and purposes to which such images were put (we cannot 'inhabit' the conceptual and visual world of Late Antique people) it is clear that some images – certainly in their 'amulet' form – were attributed an efficacy. This can be demonstrated by the "Solomonic Spell for Exorcism and Protection" given in *The Magical Book of Mary and the Angels*,[11] which is accompanied by an image of a 'guardian figure' (the figure itself is discussed in more detail below).

Meyer notes that the client is directed to "put on that figure", in the form of an amulet or phylactery "after it has been copied onto some appropriate material surface".[12] He notes further: "From the moment that the client puts on the amulet, the adjuration insists, the guardian will become the client's protector, 'all the days of his life'."[13] Therefore, this figure is either activated by the spell and/or the spell's residual efficacy is located in the figure. In short, it is attributed some type of power linked to the specific guardian and remains a material embodiment of the relation between client and spirit-guardian created by the 'magician'.

In considering further other design elements in the text, we note that the way in which images and texts work together has long been an art historical focus.[14] However, the objects and texts of this type of material would not traditionally be considered 'art', and this is perhaps one of the reasons why they have lacked the type of critical study that they warrant. To study these images not only will relations between specific drawings and text elements need to be examined, but also occurrences where the text itself operates as an 'image'. An example would be the palindrome (sometimes placed within a box), or sequences of vowels (often arranged in pyramid shapes).

---

11 Meyer 1996, 26–27.
12 Meyer 1996, 82.
13 Meyer 1996, 82.
14 See, e. g., Diebold 2000.

Indeed, perhaps the books themselves had an ambiguous status: both as book (text of ritual instruction) and as an object of ritual power in and of itself (so both functional and symbolic). We are concerned to investigate how placement indicates the 'function' of each image: for example as illustration, or as ontological being, or as metaphysical 'description', etc. That is, what is the range of 'functions' that images could possibly have and can their positioning on the page give an indication as to how they should be read? For example, if a spell opens with an image of a power or angel does this figure operate differently than a figure drawn at the close of the spell? Is one presiding over and the other an illustration? Needless to say, there are very many questions to be asked when approaching these artefacts from this framework.

3 Revised Readings: Three Examples

To follow we will offer some preliminary application of this holistic methodology to the Heidelberg 'magical' papyri. These are three instances where we think a more rounded, holistic understanding will be possible; rather than just a narrow focus on the editing of Coptic text, without concern for the books as actual ritual objects in their own right. These readings emerged from an initial period of examination in July 2013. A much more substantial discussion of the corpus will be published in the future.

3.1 Example One: P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 684: Erotic Spell of Cyprian of Antioch

In this example we focus on the functionality of the 'magic book' and what its material 'state' (materiality) may be able to offer in terms of understanding its ritual use. The manuscript (on paper) is in fairly good condition, excepting two pages: page 12; and the final page of the 'spell,' page 13, which carries the image. In book form these two pages would have contacted one-another, when the text was closed.

The text of the ritual instructions given just prior to the image was first edited by Bilabel[15] and has been translated by Howard M. Jackson:

> The offering takes place for him with mastic, alouth, storax . . . daily prayers . . . as long as you like, while you fast daily, while you ... tell them ... (?) ... and oil ... while you ... while you fast, are in a state of purity, and wear garments, until ... on a potsherd with hair (brush?) the prayer ... let them watch over ...[16]

---

15 Bilabel/Grohmann 1934, 313, 319.
16 Jackson in Meyer/Smith 1994, 157–158.

The ingredients listed are typical of these ritual texts. Such were selected for their fragrance, as with incense, or their relaxing qualities; or otherwise they were stimulants, perhaps sometimes to promote altered consciousness, or associated with the healing of specific physical ailments.

Considering the placement of the ritual instructions in relation to the image we wonder whether the degradation of the image page (p. 13) was caused by its repetitive ritual oiling, or rubbing, as part of the invocation, and that perhaps this action was understood to 'activate' Gabriel's (if one reads the title above the image as identifying the main figure) intercession/bidding of the ritualist's intent. Damage to its opposing page, page 12, is primarily on the right hand-side. This uneven distribution is curious, but can best be explained by residual oil matter seeping in that direction when the book was closed and stored. Nonetheless, the wear on page 13 would indicate that the book and its images had an active role in ritual invocation.

Fig. 1: P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 684 © Papyrologisches Institut, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg.

From such a perspective, the book is not something that is simply read (even by select specialists) but itself becomes a locus of ritual activity. Degradation of the image evidences that the ritualist, whose fingers etc. were presumably smeared with oil and various substances in some fashion, must have utilised the image in the performance of the ritual. Of course, exactly how this happens is unclear. For example, was the image pressed upon the ritual subject? One way or another we would imagine there must have been some sort of tactile transference of efficacy from the page, so that the book is no longer just instructions but is itself a player – an actor – in the ritual process.

3.2 Example Two: P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 685, "The Magical Book of Mary and the Angels" / 4.2 Solomonic Spell for Exorcism and Protection (10, 1–18)

This spell commences with an image on the left-hand side described by Meyer as a drawing of a birdlike figure[17] and there written beside it (according to the edition) ⲙⲁⲥⲃⲏⲛ, i. e. *masbēn*. The spell text refers to the use of an amulet, indeed the use of this image as an amulet for somehow begging and invoking "Nassklēn, who guards and protects the body of King Solomon"; and that "at the moment that NN wears your figure, you must begin guarding him ..." (10: 2–7). Thus, in the commentary to his edition, Meyer notes that this Nassklēn is a guardian of Solomon (pointing out that the latter "was prominent in Jewish and Christian traditions about magical power") and is "drawn as a bird-like figure with a cross-shaped crown, a wand, ring signs and letters, and the word or name Masbēn."[18]

In considering the relation between text and image in this spell, we examined the way in which this word has been presented beside the figure. It is not written with super-linear lines above it, as many proper nouns or words of power are in such texts, especially in association with a figural element. Indeed, the word is separated into two encased rings (one open-ended) or circles; one is placed around "mas" and the other drawn around "bēni". This additional final *iota* has been assumed part of the design elements in previous readings. In this revised reading it is understood as the final letter of a second word.

Thus, on careful examination, it is clear enough that there are two words, which by the use of the rings were still conceptually linked together, and via their placement at the side of the image related in some way to it. Iain Gardner has subsequently offered a revised reading where *mas* refers to the young of an animal and *beni* refers to

---

[17] Meyer 1996, 82.
[18] Meyer 1996, 82.

a swallow[19] (or perhaps some other species of bird, but the exact identification is not of any particular relevance to this argument here). Thus *mas* + *beni* = swallow-chick.

Thus, a series of new questions arise. Is this an image of a guardian, or of a swallow for ritual use? Are the figures on the stomach of the bird somehow related to ritual action to be performed on a young swallow? Is the guardian thought to inhabit the young swallow's body and they therefore have a relation of correspondence (such logic was very common in Renaissance Hermetic 'magic'), and thus this 'special' swallow is distinguished from others by its cross crown? Is the reference to young swallow to be read as separate from the guardian figure, and with regard to the spell as a whole? Does this image have any relation to the one that is 'activated' and to be worn as a phylactery?

Clearly we are still thinking through the ramifications of these text-image relations. However, we hope to have demonstrated that here is not to be read Masbēn, the name of some unknown being or suchlike, for which no other parallel is currently known. Rather, it refers clearly to a known entity; that is, a young swallow, and not a spirit-being, demon, or angelic power at all! Of course, the further question of the role of the swallow chick remains to be determined; but this reading – of just one small element – opens up a whole new avenue to consider.

Fig. 2: P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 685 © Papyrologisches Institut, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg.

---

19 See Crum 1972, 40a s. v. ⲃⲏⲛⲉ and 185b-186a s. v. ⲙⲁⲥ ".. young, mostly of animal or bird".

3.3 Example Three: P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 682

This example is taken from a single spell on a strip of parchment. It has been of crucial importance to the Heidelberg collection due to the colophon containing both authorial identity and date:

(Colophon)

ⲀⲚⲀⲔ ⲠⲀⲒ ⲒⲰ ⳿ ⳿ⲀⲘⲀⲀⲗ ⲘⲒⲬⲀⲏⲖ
ⲉⲠ⳪ⲗⲗⲏⲧ ⲀⲉⲥⲈⲀⲒ ⲥⲟⲨⲒⲁ ⲉⲠⲁⲀ
Ⲡ ⲘⲉⲚ ⲬⲠⲆ ⲉⲣⲁⲘⲠⲒ//

Bilabel gives this as:

> Ich, der ... Diener Michael, (Sohn) des Pgellēta, habe (es) geschrieben am 21. Paophi und im 684. Jahr (n. der Märtyrerära).[20]

Meyer translates this in *Ancient Christian Magic*:

> I, Pdi Yo, servant of Michael, (son) of Pcelleta, have written on Paope 21 and in the year 684.[21]

Iain Gardner, however, proposes this revised reading of the colophon:

> I, the deacon Io(hannes), servant of Michael, being the one entrusted to write on 11 Paophi in the year 684.

As the previous quotations indicate, Bilabel left blank any translation of the name ("Ich, der ..."), while it is transcribed by Meyer in *Ancient Christian Magic* meaninglessly as "I, Pdi Yo." Gardner has recognised the 'Pdi' as an abbreviation of *p-di(akonos),* that is, "the deacon;" while understanding the 'Yo' as an abbreviation for the name Io(hannes). In both instances the abbreviation is marked clearly by the scribe employing a super-linear stroke, thus: ⲠⲀⲒ ⲒⲰ.

Equally, here both Bilabel and the translation given by Meyer in *Ancient Christian Magic*[22] have not understood a word they read as Ⲡ⳪ⲗⲗⲏⲧⲁ and consequently supposed it to be a name; indeed, as the imagined father of Michael. But there is no evidence for such a name in the standard list by Monica Hasitzka.[23] Gardner proposes it as much more sensible to make a slight textual emendation and also shift the supposed final alpha, which enables one to read this not as a nonsense name (for which there is no parallel) but rather as the common enough phrase "the one entrusted to ..."[24]

---

20 Bilabel/Grohmann 1934, 395.
21 Meyer/Smith 1994, 180.
22 Bilabel/Grohmann 1934, 395; Meyer/Smith 1994, 180.
23 Hasitzka 2007.
24 See Crum 1972, 808b–809a s. v. ⳪ⲟⲉⲓⲗⲉ.

Thus the revised reading is: "I, the deacon Io(hannes), servant of Michael, being the one entrusted to write on 11 Paophi in the year 684". This evidences vitally important and new information regarding the production and the identity of the scribe. As a deacon, was such spell-production part of Iohannes' everyday role? Further, in describing himself as a "servant" of Michael, is he referring to Michael the Archangel, the centrality of whom to healing and protective magic is well attested and evidenced here already by P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 686, "The Praise of Michael the Archangel"? Further detailed paleographical comparison may be able to identify the degree to which the same hand could have produced both pieces. This latter text evidences a 'ritual' relation between the practitioner and Archangel Michael, both in the sense of identification "I am Michael; my name is god and humankind" and of devotion"I Michael, with all those who follow me" (pp. 2–3).[25] By naming himself as "servant of Michael", did the deacon Iohannes intend to express his spiritual indebtedness to the Archangel Michael; rather than some prosaic human relationship?

Thus, in conclusion, these three brief examples evidence that by more centrally considering figural elements in relation to text, and more consciously considering the potential ritual use of the texts themselves, one can achieve revisions in understanding the ritual role of such books, revised interpretations, and indeed new readings of both text and image.

Bibliography

Bilabel, Friedrich/Grohmann, Adolf (eds.) (1934), *Griechische, koptische und arabische Texte zur Religion und religiösen Literatur in Ägyptens Spätzeit* (Veröffentlichungen aus den badischen Papyrus-Sammlungen, 5), Heidelberg.

Crum, Walter E. (1972 [1939]), *A Coptic Dictionary*, Oxford.

Diebold, William J. (2000), *Word and Image: An Introduction to Early Medieval Art*, Boulder/Oxford.

Freedberg, David (1989), *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago/London.

Hasitzka, Monika (2007), "Namen in koptischen dokumentarischen Texten", Vienna: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek <http://www.onb.ac.at/files/kopt_namen.pdf> (seen 1.07.2013).

Kropp, Angelicus P. (1966), *Der Lobpreis des Erzengels Michael (vormals P. Heidelberg Inv. Nr. 1686)*, Brussels.

Meyer, Marvin M. (1996), *The Magical Book of Mary and the Angels (P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 685): Text, Translation, and Commentary*, Heidelberg.

Meyer, Marvin M./Smith, Richard (eds.) (1994), *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*, Princeton.

Polotsky, Hans J. (1935), "Zu einigen Heidelberger koptischen Zaubertexten", in: *Orientalia* IV, 416–425.

Seider, Richard (1964), "Aus der Arbeit der Universitätsinstitute. Die Universitäts-Papyrussammlung", in: *Heidelberger Jahrbücher* VIII, 142–203.

---

25 Meyer/Smith 1994, 327.