

Magic and the Forces of Materiality

David Frankfurter

1 Introduction

Does “magic” pertain usefully to the thing that is created, combined, or simply imbued with power over the course of a spell or ritual process? Many of the texts in the corpora of ancient spells culminate in the designation of some object that focuses the rite and materializes the spell: e.g., an image of Hermes from special dough,¹ a cake of bran and sandalwood to carry the name of a victim,² and a special ink used to write questions directed to corpses.³ Lead *defixiones* often refer to themselves in their “lead-ness”: “just as this lead is worthless and cold, so let that man and his property be worthless and cold.”⁴ Amulets, whether legible or not, involve words and names, symbols and icons, which transform the substance—metal, gemstone, or scrap of papyrus—into a thing that works against disease or demons.⁵ A type of Coptic formulary appends a series of material applications to a long incantation (covering, in one case [P. Macquarie 1] eleven codex pages!). Thus linseed oil and pitch, Spanish oil and gum ammoniac, wine, wormwood, embalming salt, nails, potsherds, and slips of papyrus are all invested with the capacity to bear, direct, and hold the powers of that spoken incantation—reflecting the way Christian liturgy involved the materialization of sacramental incantations.⁶

Anthropomorphic images like the clay female figurine in the Louvre, punctured with nails,⁷ (see Illustration 18-1) suggest that the manipulation of images could miniaturize a ritual cathartically—to allow a subject the experience of

1 PGM V.370–446.

2 PGM LXX.4–25.

3 PGM IV.2140–44.

4 DTA 107, in CTBS, 126–27. See Richard Gordon, “Showing the Gods the Way: Curse-Tablets as Deictic Persuasion,” *Religion in the Roman Empire* 1, no. 2 (2015): 153–57, 161–65.

5 Cf. PGM V.447–58.

6 Malcolm Choat and Iain Gardner, eds., *A Coptic Handbook of Ritual Power (P. Macq. I 1)*, Macquarie Papyri 1 (Brepols: Turnhout, 2013). Compare ACM no. 127 = London Hay 10391.

7 Cf. PGM IV.296–405.

gaining control over a fraught situation.⁸ The image is treated as the victim or patient, or even as the desiring or vengeful instigator of a spell. The image gains material efficacy through, and for, the ritual process.⁹

All these concrete features of rites and spells reflect the central value of materiality in the mediation of religion and religious ideas. This new paradigm in the history of religions has shifted the conceptualization of religion itself. Where religion has often been imagined as a series of ideas and sentiments that occasionally (and unnecessarily) latch onto “idols” or “fetishes,” now, with the recognition of the essential materiality of religion, we describe it in terms of how ideas, sentiments, and mythology are worked out through images, spaces, bodies, altars, animals, and so on.¹⁰ These media are not simply the byproducts or artifacts “of” religion—as if religion could be understood separately from materials—but the materials that articulate and motivate religion.¹¹ The materiality of religion, properly conceived, should not be simply a renamed archaeology of religion but rather a broader, comparative perspective that focuses on material media as (a) primary contexts for (rather than peripheral artifacts of) religious and ritual *experience*, and (b) as possessing

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- 8 Louvre figurine: see above, Eidinow, Chapter 15, and Wilburn, Chapter 18. On interpretations of this artifact see Pierre du Bourguet, “Ensemble magique de la période romaine en Égypte,” *Revue du Louvre et des musées de France* 25 (1975): 255–57; *CTBS*, 97–100; John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece*, New Ancient World (New York: Routledge, 1990), 93–98; and Andrew T. Wilburn, *Materia Magica: The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus, and Spain* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 28–31. On catharsis as a function of binding ritual see below, Eidinow, Chapter 28.
- 9 In general on function of female figurines in late antique Egypt: David Frankfurter, “Female Figurines in Early Christian Egypt: Reconstructing Lost Practices and Meanings,” *Material Religion* 11, no. 2 (2015): 190–223.
- 10 Useful manifestos and guides to the materiality of religion include Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); David Morgan, ed., *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London: Routledge, 2010); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011); Birgit Meyer, “Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion” (Utrecht: University of Utrecht, 2012); Birgit Meyer, “How to Capture the ‘Wow’: R.R. Marett’s Notion of Awe and the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22 (2016): 7–26. See also Wilburn, *Materia Magica*.
- 11 Compare Dietrich Boschung and Jan N. Bremmer, eds., *The Materiality of Magic*, *Morphomata* 20 (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015), whose essays (other than Richard Gordon, “From Substances to Texts: Three Materialities of ‘Magic’ in the Roman Imperial Period,” in *The Materiality of Magic*, 133–76.) address the artifactual *materials* of magic rather than the intrinsic *materiality* of magic.

and directing *agency* in the world—or at least in particular historical, social, or ritual contexts.¹²

The attention to the material object in the preponderance of ritual invocations and incantations does not mean that ritual specialists and clients imagined a “sympathetic” relationship between empowered or personalized object and the victim or subject of the spell, as James Frazer once proposed. Frazer’s principle of sympathy proposed that if the sorcerer created something that resembled the victim he wanted to influence, or if it bore some concrete connection to the victim (like a piece of her hair), then whatever he might do to that surrogate, he (and his immediate culture) believed that would happen to the victim. This is the principle behind the modern western notion of the “voodoo doll” (about which more later): the pin that the sorcerer inserts in the part of the poppet’s body is supposed to cause pain in the corresponding part of the victim’s body. But this is not how ritual cursing or the ritual use of dolls has ever worked. The principle of sympathy is not a nuanced, context-specific approach to ritual action. Rather, as Frazer conceptualized it, sympathy was a primitive misunderstanding of the laws of physics. Thus, when modern scholars refer to “sympathetic magic,” they shift the attention from the interpretation of ritual action to notions of physical causality.¹³

As we will see, there are many ways that ritual artifacts, figurines, and *defixiones* can function effectively and socially without presuming some primitive notions of sympathies. What we can observe more generally is the importance of materials and materiality in culminating or sealing rituals and the utility of material objects to focus attention, miniaturize, control, and in some cases gesture to “official” temple or church materials (symbols of a Great Tradition, like Christian sacraments or temple statuary).¹⁴ Indeed, “magic” seems bound up with materiality in so many ways that it is worth querying the object, the thing, that so readily and vitally conveys ritual force. So the question in this essay is: can the special value of materiality in religious and ritual contexts be productively labelled magic or magical? Can magic be used to denote object-agency

12 David Frankfurter, “Ritual Matters: Afterword,” in *Ritual Matters: Material Residues and Ancient Religions*, ed. Claudia Moser and Jennifer Wright Knust, *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 145–49. Cf. also Richard Gordon, “Straightening the Paths: Inductive Divination, Materiality and Imagination in the Graeco-Roman Period,” in *Ritual Matters*, 119–43.

13 See Stanley J. Tambiah, “Form and Meaning of Magical Acts,” in *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 60–86; Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, trans. Franklin Philip (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 105–15.

14 See below, Frankfurter, Chapter 27.

itself—the capacity of things (especially ritually prepared things to influence action and sentiments?)

2 “Magic” and the Agencies in Nature

One way of recognizing a magic in materiality is to take account of ancient authors' perspectives on the world as a humming assortment of fixed sympathetic forces (not in the general protoscientific way that Frazer used magical “sympathy,” but a more restricted and applied notion). Ancient medical authors offer a broad sampling of stones associated with hemorrhage, the powers of honey or vinegar over various ailments, diverse plants that cure not through chemical properties but through *concordia naturae ac repugnantia*, in Pliny's words.¹⁵ Passed down as they were in ancient medical and natural history manuals, these traditions and declarations about natural sympathies were not folk remedies, nor did they amount to some kind of primitive, observational science. Rather, they amounted to a recognition on the authors' parts—and presumably most ancient peoples'—that sympathies and antipathies exist in nature, to be discovered and applied, and further, that the efficacy of these various powers—to heal or to repel symptoms—constituted a kind of agency active in things in the world: that stones, plants, and other substances could act on us.¹⁶

So, for example, in an important 2011 article Christopher Faraone argued that the inscribing of gemstones with images and writing was historically and artisanally secondary to the uses of the stones by themselves, as potent apotropaia or healing objects in themselves. Jasper, hematite, lapis lazuli—all these materials traditionally held powers, sympathies with body-parts and fluids, and were used in a variety of healing practices.¹⁷ Thus the stones were no decorative backdrops or vehicles for the complex iconographies with which they were inscribed. Rather, the images, phrases, and signs that craftsmen carved into them served as interpretations of—even strategies to guide—the powers

15 Pliny, *Natural History*, 22.106.

16 See Patricia Gaillard-Seux, “Sur la distinction entre médecine et magie dans les textes médicaux antiques (I–V siècles),” in *Écrire la magie dans l'antiquité*, ed. Magali de Haro Sanchez (Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2015), 201–23. and further on Pliny and the properties of stones and plants, Gordon, “Straightening the Paths”; Gordon, “From Substances to Texts,” 142–52.

17 See now above, Dasen and Nagy, Chapter 17.

in the stones themselves.¹⁸ This kind of material approach provokes us to take the medium of amulets more seriously.

Although the ancient authors present these natural sympathies and antipathies in restricted, erudite form, their observations of these forces point to a larger sensibility about the world as pulsating with various agencies: from the “natural” faculties of stones to the authority of celestial bodies, and even to the places and rocks that host spirits. This is an idea recently developed by exponents of a “new materialism”: that we should reimagine our lives as subject in multiple ways to natural agencies rather than ourselves as dictators of nature (and prone simply to crude projections of our own intentionality onto things around us).¹⁹ While these New Materialists note natural agency in microbes, electricity, advertising media, and so on, the ancient medical authors attend particularly to portable substances—stones, plants, liquids—that allow the compounding or assemblage of those natural agencies.

Thus to speak of a magic in the stone or amulet or prepared remedy is not simply to gloss an ancient author’s notion of sympathy; rather, it is to recognize an ancient perspective on efficacies inherent in nature and natural substances: that things in nature have the capacity to act *on us*.

3 “Magic” and the Thing

Another context for the magic of objects is their regular shifts in cultural status—through performance, ritual, craft, exchange. In these shifts, neutral objects become subjects, *things*, set apart in our worlds and thus acquiring an agency in influencing and steering our behavior.²⁰ Sometimes we designate a thing, sometimes the thing thrusts itself into our awareness (like a strange stone or tree we come upon, or the dead chameleon, weirdly contorted, that the philosopher Libanius found in his lecture room); but in the end it becomes the actor in our experience, a subject rather than an object.²¹ Ancient landscapes

18 Christopher Faraone, “Text, Image, and Medium: The Evolution of Graeco-Roman Magical Gemstones,” in *Gems of Heaven: Recent Research on Engraved Gemstones in Late Antiquity, AD 200–600*, ed. Chris Entwistle and Noel Adams (London: British Museum Press, 2011), 50–61.

19 See, e.g., Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

20 See esp. Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001): 1–22; Bjornar Olsen, *In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects* (Lanham, MD: Altamira, 2010); Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

21 Libanius, *Autobiography*, 249.

were full of rocks, caves, statues, and other landforms that cried, moaned, and issued oracles—not as media for a god but as agents in themselves. In many ways the small, portable thing of magic was a microcosm of these pulsating landforms.²²

Ritual traditions regularly involve, as we have seen, the assemblage of things, the designation of things, and the imbuing of things that will stand out from the material world and convey aggressive or beneficial agencies. A “favor or victory charm” described in a Roman-era spell collection from Egypt involves the following: “Take a blood-eating gecko that has been found among the tombs and grasp its right front foot and cut it off with a reed, allowing the gecko to return to its own hole alive. Fasten the foot of the creature to the fold of your garment and wear it.”²³ Or, “take a completely black cat that died a violent death, make a strip of papyrus and write with myrrh the following (incantation), together with the one to whom you wish to send the dream, and place it into the mouth of the cat.”²⁴ In both cases everyday fauna are reconceptualized as liminal and distinctive through their specific sites (among tombs) or manner of death (violent), and in that way they become powerful as amulets or ritual media.

These systematic combinations of strange or abhorrent materials with prosaic or domestic materials recall the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski’s observation of ritual language as involving a “coefficient of intelligibility” and a “coefficient of weirdness”: that is, in the latter case, words that stand apart from the intelligible and that resist, even threaten coherence.²⁵ Here the object that one places in the fold of one’s garment comes from a reptile dwelling among tombs. Like Libanius’s chameleon, it is weird, out of place, an object challenging in its dissonance. It is the process of lifting the mundane gecko from its liminal habitat, and even amputating the foot in this precise way, that produces a potent thing, a subject with agency, a bringer of *charis*. In another example, we find a reference to a stillborn fetus [*brephos*] that a farmer and his henchmen used (according to a legal complaint in late second-century CE Karanis, Egypt) in order to “surround [a victim] with malice.”²⁶ Again, this

22 See Michel Tardieu, “Nommer la matière,” in *Noms barbares I: Formes et contextes d'une pratique magique*, ed. Michel Tardieu, Anna Van den Kerchove, and Michela Zago, Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, Sciences Religieuses 162 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 21–35.

23 *PGM VII.186–90*, trans. Hock, *GMPT*, 120.

24 *PGM XII.107–9*, trans. Grese, *GMPT*, 157 (emended).

25 Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1978), 2: 218–23.

26 P. Michigan VI.423–24. See David Frankfurter, “Fetus Magic and Sorcery Fears in Roman Egypt,” *GRBS* 46 (2006): 37–62; Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, 95–109.

object on its own would be unremarkable waste; but lifted from its place (and wrapped somehow?) the dead fetus becomes a thing capable of terrorizing neighbors. The magic, then, might be said to lie in the meticulous designation of a thing that will convey agency in the world, as well as in the agency carried by that thing.

One interesting section of the bilingual Leiden magical papyrus J384 (*PGM* XII) comprises a list of relatively mundane ritual ingredients and the exotic names by which—so the ancient compiler asserts—the “temple scribes” referred to them: “Tears of a Hamadryas baboon: dill juice; ... lion semen: human semen; Blood of Hephaistos: wormwood; Blood of Ares: purslane; ... Kronos spice: piglet’s milk; ... semen of Ares: clover.”²⁷ Renaming and redesignating an ingredient changes it from prosaic to unusual and even mythic in nature—a materiality from another world. The move is performative, as an outsider would merely recognize the stuff for what it is; but within the ritual context the redesignation of ingredients imbues the material substances themselves with strangeness—evocations (as the introductory section suggests) of priestly practices in ancient temples.²⁸

The probability that these ingredients were rarely held up or used in isolation but rather in various combinations introduces another aspect of the magic of the thing: the *assemblage*. The construction of the “power-bundle” in African traditional religion has been the subject of extensive art-historical and anthropological discussion. These artifacts involve a specialist’s careful selection of things weird—jawbones, skulls, blood—and more prosaic, like cowrie shells, twine, leather, and beads, to form a totality that resists representation: an animal or human form packed with ritual substances; a container practically bursting with bizarre objects; a wooden figure bound with twine and hung with innumerable cloth and leather strips, metal objects, and the thick remains of ritual substances.²⁹ The assemblage “works” through a combination of concealment (what lies within?) and emergence (what might come out?). The preparation of the assemblage is not so much the simple collection

27 *PGM* XII.414–40.

28 On this remarkable text see Lynn R. LiDonnici, “Beans, Fleawort, and the Blood of a Hamadryas Baboon: Recipe Ingredients in Greco-Roman Magical Materials,” in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, ed. Paul Allan Mirecki and Marvin W. Meyer, RGRW 141 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002), 359–77; Jacco Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites: The London-Leiden Magical Manuscripts and Translation in Egyptian Ritual, 100–300 CE*, RGRW 153 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2005), 185–203.

29 See Wyatt MacGaffey, “The Eyes of Understanding: Kongo Minkisis,” in *Astonishment and Power* (Washington D.C.; London: National Museum of African Art, 1993), 20–103; Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), 117–31.

of things, as the *PGM XII* list above might imply, but rather the careful three-dimensional combination of types of objects associated with particular functions (perhaps divination or the performance of oaths), wrapped and bound to present concealment and emergence, and thus to create an even more striking material agent.

African examples show that the assemblage is very much the innovation and interpretation of a particular ritual specialist. And in this way it is an especially “artisanal” example of Lévi-Strauss’s concept of *bricolage*: the selective and ad-hoc juxtaposition (by a specialist) of ostensibly random elements in more comprehensive form in order to express some tradition or truth.³⁰ But one glance at the power bundle or magical assemblage shows that it is the *material* elements, the things chosen, in juxtaposition and totality, that drive it—endow it with agency in the world. They are contained, even constrained with twine or string or in a bowl or carving; and yet they emerge in the world as extraordinarily potent agents.

While archaeologists of ancient religion are familiar with magical assemblages from excavations, often from domestic sites, the instructions in the so-called Greek Magical Papyri advise the preparation of diverse and elaborate material combinations, like those above using animal parts, and the following, for sending a particular dream into someone else’s sleep:

Make a hippopotamus of red wax, hollow, and put into the belly of this hippopotamus both gold and silver and the so-called *ballatha* of the Jews, and dress [*stolison*] it with white linen and put it in a pure window and, taking a sheet of hieratic papyrus, write on it with myrrh ink and baboon’s blood whatever you wish to send (in a dream). Then, having rolled it into a wick and using it to light a new, pure lamp, put on the lamp the foot of the hippopotamus and say the Name, and it sends (the dream).³¹

This assemblage is colorful and prominently placed in a domestic context, but the hippopotamus form involves a more chaotic animal (the red wax indicating a “Sethian,” or demonic, figure), conveying a potency outside that of the major gods.³² In contrast, a death-spell in the Oslo magical papyrus involves a very different and more secretly-placed assemblage:

30 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1966), 16–22.

31 *PGM XIII.309–19*, trans. Smith, *GMPT*, 181, emended.

32 Maarten J. Raven, “Wax in Egyptian Magic and Symbolism,” *Oudheidkundige Mededelingen uit het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden* 64 (1983): 17–18, 25.

Take a lead *lamella* and inscribe with a bronze stylus the following names and the figure [depicted below on the papyrus], and after smearing it with blood from a bat, roll up the *lamella* in the usual fashion. Cut open a frog and put it into its stomach. After stitching it up with Anubian thread and a bronze needle, hang it up on a reed from your property by means of hairs from the tip of the tail of a black ox, at the east of your property near the rising of the sun.³³

All that would be visible would be the dead frog, dripping blood from a reed some distance from the house. And yet, like the stillborn *brephos* that was probably wrapped in cloth before tossing at victims in second-century Karanis “to surround them with malice,” local people probably knew what powers the assemblage was meant to wield and against whom.³⁴

While it is difficult to imagine all these assemblages in their material prominence asserting their weird substances on *us* in time and space, it is important to consider their magic as a function of their materiality: particular objects “out of place” or resignified; substances amalgamated, juxtaposed, tied-up, inverted, secreted, tossed, or hung suggestively; the replacement of prosaic materials with more bizarre ingredients. It is not esoteric mythologies that endow these things with meaning (as scholars used to assert)³⁵ but their materiality—the ways they stand apart in the world and present a dangerous agency, whether imbued through the ritual or emergent from the very ingredients assembled. Binding figurines found at the spring of Anna Perenna in Rome were formed of diverse organic materials pressed around inscribed animal bones and placed in small containers of lead or terracotta.³⁶ A figure of Hermes to be used to provoke oracular dreams by one’s bed is to be made, not of terracotta or bronze like those for sale at temple festivals, but from a dough of “28 leaves from a pithy laurel tree and some virgin earth and seed of wormwood, wheat meal and the herb calf’s-snout ... pounded together with ... the liquid of an ibis egg,” the whole thing put in a lime-wood shrine next to one’s bed.³⁷ The North African author Apuleius’s effort to commission a small wood figurine “to whom I could address my regular prayers” begins to look like the makings of sorcery

33 PGM XXXVI.231–41. trans. Hock, *GMPT*, 274–75.

34 See David Frankfurter, “Fetus Magic,” 42–45.

35 Cf. Arthur Darby Nock, “The Lizard in Magic and Religion,” in *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, ed. Zeph Stewart, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 1: 271–76.

36 Marina Piranomonte, “Religion and Magic at Rome: The Fountain of Anna Perenna,” in *Magical Practice in the Latin West*, ed. Richard L. Gordon and Francisco Marco Simón, RGRW 168 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2010), 204–6.

37 PGM V. 370–99.

when the carver chooses the ambiguous Hermes as the model and gets—of all possible woods—ebony for the material.³⁸ To his accusers, Apuleius's black Hermes image seemed like the very god of sorcery. Thus images and figurines are likewise assemblages, depending for their agency and valence in the world on their very materials and the agencies latent in them.

4 The Materiality of the Figurine

When we consider the *materiality* of the figurine in relationship to magic, we are asking how the figurine comes to exert its own agency or to carry an agency endowed through a ritual process, but also how a figurine of whatever material ingredients impresses itself on *us*—what gestures and responses it impels in us. The last two examples of the iconic assemblage also illustrate the material aspects of the figurine.

In Andrew Wilburn's discussion of magical figurines above (Chapter 18) he makes the important observation that the process of forming an anthropomorphic (or other) medium for ritual purposes—binding, protection, erotic conquest, etc.—seeks not iconographic precision in the reproduction of the subject or victim but *congruencies*—that is, loci (arms, a head, a penis) or simply substance itself that allows ritual attention and effective gesture, rather than a miniaturization and condensation of the whole. The figurine might “be” the victim in the sense of a surrogate, providing a focal point for ritually binding that person (in the same way that another figurine might “be” the god Harpocrates in the sense of serving as a focal point for offerings); but the figurine is not in any way a complete and accurate reproduction of the victim (nor is the Harpocrates figurine a representation of the totality of the god).

The process by which a figurine becomes such a surrogate is itself a ritual transformation, involving incantations, declarative acts (see Frankfurter, above, Chapter 22), and the addition of substances. Rarely is there any intention of capturing the likeness of the subject or victim with accuracy. Neither the “wondrous spell for binding a lover” in the great Paris magical papyrus³⁹ nor the pierced figurine (now in the Louvre) made according to its instructions gives any indication of an effort to match the likeness of a particular person—nothing beyond “two figures, male and female.... the male as [*hōs*] Ares.”⁴⁰ In this way

38 Apuleius, *Apology*, 61.

39 *PGM* IV.296–466.

40 *PGM* IV.298. Du Bourguet, “Ensemble magique”; Sophie Kambitsis, “Une nouvelle tablette magique d'Égypte,” *BIFAO* 76 (1976): 213–33.

the process of investing the figurine as surrogate for self, victim, or beloved is comparable to the procedures (that Wilburn also discusses, above, Chapter 18) whereby images are invested with identities as royal enemies, demonic forces, or divinities in ancient Egypt and Babylonia, consequently to be destroyed meticulously (in the case of enemies or demons) or to receive veneration (in the case of deities). In many cases the investment of a material surrogate with the identity of a particular victim involves the insertion of some kind of “stuff,” perhaps from the victim. Thus the “wondrous spell for binding a lover” just mentioned instructs the attachment of some “*ousia* on the head or the neck.”⁴¹

While investing the figurine with the identity of a surrogate depends on a ritual process, the actual form of the figurine is determined only by the need for efficacy. Thus, on the one hand, a fragment of a formulary in Milan (*PGM* CXXIV) instructs the preparation of a wax figurine (*andreian*), inside of which one inserts an inscribed papyrus and on the head of which one writes *omega* signs. Then one sticks bones into the eyes and head, and finally one puts it in a pot with water up to its shoulders, to be left in the dark.⁴² (The actual purpose of this rite is unclear). The anthropomorphic form here is essential to the actions that address eyes, head, and shoulders; indeed, one might say the form governs the subsequent procedures in this rite. On the other hand, a spell to prevent one’s wife from being “had [*schethēnai*]” by another man involves molding a crocodile from earth, ink, and myrrh, and putting it in a lead coffin on which one writes the secret name of Helios, the name of the wife, and the command, “Let NN not copulate with any other man except me, NN.”⁴³ In this case the crocodile form is a miniature reference to the mummified form of the god Sobek—not in any way a dangerous or ambiguous image but one that could serve as a medium for transmitting a message to the divine world. So in one case the image used to bind the subject requires a human form, in another case a crocodile form. Efficacy is the goal of representation in both cases, not verisimilitude.

One component in the efficacy of the figurine is its *miniaturization*: of the human form in some cases or a divine image or animal avatar in others. The critic Susan Stewart has written helpfully about the various capacities of the miniature to allow idealization, intellectualization, control, and nostalgia.⁴⁴ For

41 *PGM* IV.303–4.

42 *PGM* CXXIV = *Suppl. Mag.*, no. 97

43 *PGM* XIII.320–26.

44 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 1993), 37–69; Jonathan Z. Smith, “Trading Places,” in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. Marvin W. Meyer and Paul Mirecki, RGRW 129 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 23–27. See also above, Wilburn, Chapter 18.

example, the female figurines used in Egyptian votive ritual in late Roman times—as deposits to mediate supplicants’ hopes at the shrine—condensed key aspects of the subject’s own procreative capacity (belly, breasts, vulva) as well as beauty in self-presentation and receptiveness to the deity, through hairstyle and eye cosmetics. Through such miniaturized ideals the figurine was capable of mediating the personal investment and agency of the supplicant.⁴⁵ The figurines recommended in the magical papyri (and those discovered in ritual assemblages) idealize subjects differently: *reducing* the social ambiguity that would follow from verisimilitude and instead providing a medium in which to practice ritual actions. As imaginative and ritual objects the binding figurines also allow *control*: unlike real people, they stay in place yet are physically manipulable, constituted of pliable materials into which things can be inserted and letters inscribed. Yet the images of animals (as above, from *PGM XIII*) or gods⁴⁶ work differently, even in wax: they miniaturize temple cult and mythology and allow an idealized appropriation of the efficacy of cult traditions into the more personal sphere of the binding ritual.⁴⁷

The miniature *calls for* a gestural response: placement in a shrine or a box or on a window; arrangement or insertion to incorporate a papyrus incantation; or manipulation to signify accompanying words. Miniaturization at a scale suitable to the hand involves certain gestural responses (sometimes in the crafting process itself); miniaturization suitable to one’s arms involves other gestural responses. One of the hand-sized wax figurines from the Anna Perenna spring in Rome was augmented with a wax snake, posed with its open mouth over the human figure’s head.⁴⁸ The Louvre figurine of the bound woman, reflecting instructions much like those in the erotic binding spell in the Paris papyrus (*PGM IV.296–466*), had pins inserted in her head, ears, mouth, belly, and vagina—that the intended love object might “remember”—in that part of her. A materiality of religion approach to such artifacts examines how the figurines, their form or materials, inspire or demand particular responses within the ceremony. Rather than imagining the figurine as a blank medium and responsive action dictated entirely by the instructions of some text, we ask how the ritualist or client is drawn toward particular gestures or responses. We

45 Frankfurter, “Female Figurines in Early Christian Egypt,” 205–10. Cf. David Frankfurter, “Terracotta Figurines and Popular Religion in Late Antique Egypt: Issues of Continuity and ‘Survival,’” in *Le Myrte et la rose. Mélanges offerts à Françoise Dunand*, ed. G. Tallet and Chr. Zivie-Coche (Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry-Montpellier III, 2014), 129–41.

46 E.g., *PGM IV.3125–71*; *V.370–99*.

47 On the miniaturization of cult action see Smith, “Trading Places”; David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 138–42.

48 Piranomonte, “Religion and Magic at Rome: The Fountain of Anna Perenna,” 207–8.

attribute agency to the figurine, responses to its user. A votive figurine “asks” to be touched a certain way, then deposited at some particular place at a shrine; a domestic figurine “asks” to be placed in a particular site in the house at a particular time, faced a particular way; likewise, the Louvre figurine has no other purpose—no other “request”—than to receive the pins that mark the hopes and ambition of the ritual subject and to be deposited with the appropriate messenger (a corpse *biaiothanatos*). Addressing the “affective postures” by which people in Mesoamerica hold and cradle (arm-scale) Catholic images, Jennifer Hughes has shown how these embodied responses extend to a range of interpretations, whereby the divine image becomes one’s child and cradling itself invites particular emotions towards an image.⁴⁹ So also handling, piercing, and flattening images call upon such archives of feeling—pleasure, anger, hope—in response to the image.⁵⁰

Figurines, of course, can undergo transformation through ritual gesture. As a sacred image can be dismembered or crushed in an act of purifying iconoclasm, so a wax image in a binding rite can be flattened or melted, a clay image can be twisted or flattened, a lead image can be sunk in a well. These transformations follow from the very nature of the materials: lead, wax, clay, and so on.⁵¹ In some ritual instructions or accompanying curse-tablets these material transformations are highlighted or implied in the treatment of the image—or the animals accompanying a binding tablet: “Just as this rooster has been bound by its feet, hands, and head, so bind the legs and hands and head and heart of Victoricus the charioteer ... and the horses”; “just as this puppy is (turned) on its back and is unable to rise, so neither (may the people named below).”⁵² Faraone has traced this kind of *similia similibus* formula to two ancient Near Eastern practices: destroying demons by means of wax figurines (“as this image melts, so the witch causing this plague will melt”), and ceremonializing oaths through animal sacrifices whose actions are then threatened against any oath-breaker (“as this calf’s head is cut off, so it will happen to anyone who breaks this oath!”).⁵³ As such formulae came historically to be retooled

49 Jennifer Scheper Hughes, “Cradling the Sacred: Image, Ritual, and Affect in Mexican and Mesoamerican Material Religion,” *History of Religions* 56, no. 1 (2016): 55–107.

50 For further examples see Christopher A. Faraone, “Binding and Burying the Forces of Evil: The Defensive Use of ‘Voodoo Dolls’ in Ancient Greece,” *Classical Antiquity* 10, no. 2 (1991): 165–220. (notwithstanding his unfortunate use of “voodoo doll” as a descriptive category).

51 See Raven, “Wax in Egyptian Magic and Symbolism,” 28–30.

52 *CTBS* 65–67 (no. 12), 143–44 (no. 53).

53 Christopher Faraone, “Molten Wax, Spilt Wine and Mutilated Animals: Sympathetic Magic in Near Eastern and Early Greek Oath Ceremonies,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 113 (1993): 60–80; Christopher Faraone, “Clay Hardens and Wax Melts: Magical Role-Reversal

for private binding spells and their accompanying images—so the argument goes—the *similia similibus* formula shifted conceptually from grotesque threat (in the case of oaths) or ritual control of danger (in the case of melting wax figurines) to *sympathetic magic*: the idea that aggressive acts performed on the surrogate (figurine or animal) are believed to do the same to the victim.

As mentioned earlier, we must be extraordinarily careful with the concept of sympathetic magic, which follows not from careful ethnographic description of ritual practices and artifacts but from Frazer's *Golden Bough* and its view of magic as a type of primitive misconception of the world.⁵⁴ While we are prone culturally to imagine that ritual figurines functioned like the stereotypical “voodoo doll”—itself a nineteenth-century notion that projected English poppet traditions onto African culture⁵⁵—in fact the acts and gestures of aggression and binding on figurines in ancient religion had quite different functions than the infliction of specific harms.⁵⁶ The Louvre figurine, bound and punctured, is the case in point: the pins serve not to inflict pain in these body parts but “remembrance,”⁵⁷ and the bound posture does not depict how the client wants to have his beloved's body but rather to signify her subjection to a figurine of Ares. Beyond that, the ritual seeks to bind her will to him and even to externalize his own lovesick suffering.⁵⁸ The wax image of the person assaulted by a serpent, from the Anna Perenna spring, clearly did not seek the very same monstrous experience for the victim; rather, the dramatic assemblage compounded the theatricality of the binding.

in Vergil's Eighth Eclogue,” *Classical Philology* 84, no. 4 (1989): 294–300. In biblical legend this kind of oath emerges in 1 Sam 11:7 and its hideous parody in Judges 19:22–30.

- 54 See esp. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 145–46, 205–15. See also Wilburn in Chapter 18, above.
- 55 See esp. Natalie Armitage, “European and African Figural Ritual Magic: The Beginnings of the Voodoo Doll Myth,” in *The Materiality of Magic: An Artefactual Investigation into Ritual Practices and Popular Beliefs*, ed. Ceri Houlbrook and Natalie Armitage (Oxford & Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2015), 85–102; M. Chris Manning, “Material Culture of Ritual Concealments in the United States,” *Historical Archaeology* 48, no. 3 (2014): 70.
- 56 This unfortunate term, imputing an invented European notion of harming foes to Haitian religious tradition, was introduced into the lexicon of ancient religions most prominently by Chris Faraone: Faraone, “Binding and Burying the Forces of Evil: The Defensive Use of ‘Voodoo Dolls’ in Ancient Greece,” 166n. 4; Christopher Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. Christopher Faraone and Dirk Obbink (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 25n. 3; see also Daniel Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), xxix, 3, 106.
- 57 *PGM* IV.327–28.
- 58 Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*, 93–98.

Likewise, in other cases of aggressive ritual uses of figurines (in archaeology or text), we must regard the ritual action as its own totality, as functional in the performance and deposit itself, *independent* of rational expectations for specific results. That totality encompasses (a) the preparation of the figurine from set ingredients (or its procurement from a craftsman), (b) the client's or ritualist's attention—indeed, response—to iconic form and materiality, and (c) the sequences of action, incantation, and finally deposit in a fixed place like a grave or spring. Within this totality of a ritual world—whether for binding or for votive deposit or for apotropaic protection—the figurine acquires a presence, an agency, that invites a range of gestural responses. And even for binding the responses were not uniformly aggressive: one assemblage from fifth-century CE Assiut, Egypt, included two wax images posed in an erotic embrace.⁵⁹

But while I have been focusing on the *material* presence of the figurine as the source of agency, in many cases the figurine—as a material thing—is meant to mediate someone or something else's agency. In his essay (above, Chapter 18), Wilburn discusses ways that ritual specialists imbue figurines with their own “extended” agency. Votive female figurines in Roman and Christian Egypt likewise acquire the agency of a supplicant through the protracted process of acquisition (in some cases involving a choice from a number of models), touching and carrying, comparing, and emotionally investing the figurine with the capacity to transmit one's hopes.⁶⁰ Likewise figurines meant to represent gods or ancestors are ritually endowed with the presence of the deity, such that it henceforth has the potential to represent the deity in the context of devotional practices. In the next section I address in general this material mediation of social agency in ritual.

5 “Magic,” Materiality, and the Distribution of Social Agency

Magic, so Malinowski observed among the Trobriand islanders, always has a pedigree, a mythic lineage that established the charm, gesture, object, or assemblage *in the beginning* as timelessly efficacious. The charm used in the here-and-now indexes an archetype that was first revealed to a culture hero or uttered by a god in the beginning of time; and its efficacy in this world,

59 See *Suppl. Mag.* no. 45 and *CTBS* 101–3, no. 30. On the range of figurines from western sites cf. Magali Bailliot, “Roman Magic Figurines from the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire: An Archaeological Survey,” *Britannia* 46 (2015): 93–110.

60 Frankfurter, “Female Figurines in Early Christian Egypt,” 204.

through the work of a ritual specialist, repeats—often via explicit recitation—the original act.⁶¹ But where Malinowski focused on the social value of the myth in sanctioning ritual powers in general, we might ask how this notion of the pedigree or mythic lineage might be a *feature* of the material object, the ritual thing. How can the magical object convey lineage, a sense of *social* context or recognizability, and how does that lineage itself create a kind of agency in the object?

Many ritual manuals instruct the preparation of some assemblage or compound of substances, to be wielded or applied to the body in conjunction with an incantation that mythically revalues that assemblage: from the work of the ritual specialist to the work or substance of a god. By these means the materiality of the compound or assemblage carries the agency of the god.⁶² For example, an Egyptian healing spell from a British Museum papyrus instructs the preparation of a poultice of acacia resin, barley dough, cooked carob beans, colocynths, and cooked feces, “to be made into one mass. To be mixed with the milk of a woman who has given birth to a male child. To be applied to the burn, so that it will be healed.” The incantation associated with this compound retells a story of the child Horus, away from his mother Isis, falling into a fire, and the laments of the goddess, his mother, on finding him: “Show me my way that I may do what I know (to do), that I may extinguish [the burning] for him with my milk, with the salutary liquids from between my breasts. It will be applied to your body ... I will make the fire recede that has attacked you!”⁶³ If we take seriously the materiality of the healing compound, its central function in mediating both myth and immediate ritual efficacy, then we see that the force of that compound comes from Isis herself. It is the milk of her breasts, that she offers of her own desperation. The material compound thus transmits *Isis’s* agency, will and capacity to act. It is not simply the mythic transvaluation of a ritual substance but the establishment of that substance’s agency in this world as the goddess’s own.

Declarations that a material substance or object is not a mundane instrument but that of a god are common features in Egyptian, Greek, and other recipes for healing, cursing, and gaining favors. All such declarations instill materiality with an agency greater than it might have outside the ritual context. We earlier saw the “translations of priestly ingredients” in *PGM XII*, in which

61 Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1954), 74–76, 83–84, 141–43.

62 See above, Frankfurter, Chapter 22, on the force of illocutionary utterances.

63 British Museum Papyri = P. B.M. 10059, no. 46, trans. J.F. Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts*, Nisaba 9 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), no. 34.

“blood of Ares” is merely purslane, “semen of Hermes” merely dill, “blood of Hestia,” simply chamomile, and so on.⁶⁴ As discussed above, this text reflects larger issues in the representation of Egyptian religion and its Greek interpretations; but it also addresses the agencies purported to lie in ingredients brought together for ritual assemblage, such that separately or in assemblage they can work as more than prosaic substances.

Thus the ritual declarations or indications that a substance, object, or assemblage conveys and will act through the agency of a god lift those materials from the prosaic or mechanical to the “magical”—things that are more than they seem, more than their ingredients, or more than they would be beyond their ritual infusion. But the agency of objects can have a more subtle, social basis as well. Any lineage or pedigree situates the assemblage, object, or incantation in a social context, integrating the thing (in all its weirdness or liminality) with the intimacy of social interaction and social imagination. In this way objects become subjects. The anthropologist Alfred Gell detailed the ways that things in our world acquire and convey an identity and agency derived from an original owner, craftsman, or giver, or even their embeddedness in our lives—as extensions of our social experience.⁶⁵ A wristwatch, a doll, a car, a shirt, or a picture may appear to have neutral value until something disrupts its status (“We can’t throw this away! Aunt Margaret gave it to us!” or “I can’t donate this shirt to Goodwill; I got it for our honeymoon” or “my car needs a tune-up; I have rearranged my day so I can get an appointment with the one mechanic who understands her”). At that point it becomes more than a neutral object; it becomes an *agentic subject*, a “thing.”

Gell’s argument, however, goes beyond the mere shift in materiality to object-agency, for the agency is always, ultimately, a reification of social forces: the thing as a player in our lives, a companion, a needy friend (as many people regard their cars), a hostile force (in the case of a disease). In this way the magic of things points back ultimately to the individual actors and performative and social contexts through which objects become things—a feature typically lost in the documents for ancient magic.⁶⁶

64 PGM XII.401–44.

65 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

66 Cf. Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 3–63.

6 Conclusion

A magical object can thus refer to any material thing that acts in the world as a subject—that carries agency—whether a mass-produced amulet, a material “blessing” from a holy man, an assemblage created as part of a binding ritual, a compound prepared by a local healer, or some other material transformed through ritual, exchange, or selection. The process of creating a magical object is manifold, involving a ritual expert’s verbal rites or creative assemblages or simply some situation in which an object is set apart in the world as a thing—e.g., the capturing of a lizard (or a still-born fetus) to function as the efficacious, material vehicle of a spell.

By referring to a “magic” in the material, however, we must be careful not to assume a temporary or tentative charge separate from the material itself. The nature of the magical object (and the basis for describing its agency) is that its potency, its capability to act and impel, lies in the material itself—the amulet or assemblage—and its appearance, its tactile features, and its smell. Even if its agency derives ultimately from a god, hero, ancestor, or ritual expert, the amulet, blessing, or assemblage bears that agency in its *material* form. This is the concept of “object agency.” And as controversial as this concept might be to those who might insist objects cannot possibly have agency in themselves, this concept is fundamental to any practices, artifacts, or lore we might associate with the category magic.

Suggested Readings

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