

P. Oxy. VIII 1151

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1 Description

P. Oxy. VIII 1151 is an approximately fifth-century CE healing amulet from Egypt for Iōannia, daughter of Anastasia (a.k.a. Euphēmia), that invokes the Christian God and draws from diverse biblical, liturgical, and amuletic traditions. This amulet is part of a larger corpus of late antique Christian apotropaic, curative, and exorcistic artifacts.

2 Witness

Late antique amulets were typically written for specific occasions and include texts that, while drawing from a broad repository of tropes, traditions, and the like, were usually written in an ad hoc fashion and thus unique. Like most amulets from late antique Egypt, therefore, P. Oxy. VIII 1151 does not correspond to any other known late antique artifact nor is there evidence that it was based on a specific formulary, exemplar, or model. That said, it does contain features that are comparable with other late antique amulets (see below).

This amulet was discovered in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt and has been tentatively dated to the fifth century CE on the basis of paleography. It consists of a text written along the fibers (→) of an elongated strip of papyrus (4.4 [w] x 23.4 [h] cm). This textual artifact was found “tightly folded and tied with a string” (Hunt 1911, 251). The Greek text of P. Oxy. VIII 1151 is divided into 56 lines that are written in “an informal majuscule” hand (Jones 2016, 137). In addition to visual markers (see below), the ritual specialist who created this amulet deployed a host of contemporary scribal practices (e.g., *nomina sacra*; abbreviation of the final *nu*; and the so-called “kai-compendium”). De Bruyn has, therefore, reasonably concluded that P. Oxy. VIII 1151 was created by a “professional scribe” (De Bruyn 2017, 107). The artifact is now housed in Glasgow University Library’s Special Collections Department (MS Gen 1026/12).

3 Formal Description

The amulet’s invocation/prayer deviates from the general structure of late-antique Christian (liturgical) prayers, which tended to include: an *invocatio* (invocation); a *pars epica* (usually consisting of a few epithets relating to creation or salvation); and the *preces* (petition) (Maravela 2014; cf. Hickson Hahn 2007; Edmonds 2019, 155–61). Such early Christian prayers would typically then be “rounded off with further praise and a closing valediction to the divinity,” which usually constitutes a formal doxology that is standardized. (Maravela 2014, 294). Instead, P. Oxy. VIII 1151 seems to reflect an invocatory/prayer structure that consists of: (1) a direct address to an evil spirit with *preces* (ll. 1–6); (2) a condensed Christian prayer with invocation that includes the name of the client, Iōannia, and her mother, Anastasia (a.k.a. Euphēmia), (ll. 7–14); (3) a citation of John 1:1,3 (ll. 15–22); (4) an *invocatio* to Christ which also notes the specific ailments and the name of the client (ll. 23–38) and a list of other sources of power (Mary Theotokos and various Christian saints; ll. 38–51); and (5) a final – rather idiosyncratic – doxology to God (ll. 51–56). Although P. Oxy. VIII 1151 deviates from the structure of late antique prayers, the expressions used in this amulet resemble late antique and early medieval liturgical prayers (see Commentary).

4. Occasion and Function

This elongated strip of papyrus displays clear indications of amuletic design and use, including: the presence of invocations; folds; cruciform symbols; and specific biblical/liturgical phrases common on known amulets (e.g., John 1:1,3; “the one who healed every disease and illness”). Scholars have noted that such criteria indicate on textual, material, scribal, and traditional levels an apotropaic or

curative function (cf. De Bruyn and Dijkstra 2011). Based on both internal features (e.g., its use of biblical and liturgical language [see below]) and external factors (e.g., the presence of parallels from ecclesiastical, liturgical, and conciliar texts and contexts), AnneMarie Luijendijk has reasonably concluded that this papyrus amulet was most likely created by a local Christian priest or monk, probably at a shrine (Luijendijk 2014, 425–30).

The amulet was made for an otherwise unknown Iōannia, daughter of Anastasia (a.k.a. Euphēmia [ll. 13, 32]), to heal her from an already existing fever, which was evidently accompanied by various kinds of chills. These symptoms might indicate that she had malaria, which was particularly dangerous to late antique women and children (Luijendijk 2014, 421). At the same time, the practitioner directs the charm against an unwanted spirit, which was believed to cause the illness, thus attesting to the considerable extent to which the conceptual domains of illness and harmful spirits intersected in late antiquity.

5 Variation and Reception

As part of its ritual strategies, P. Oxy. VIII 1151 engages with a wide range of traditions, which, when taken together, cut across the boundaries between the Christian and the non-Christian. For instance, this amulet cites, echoes, or alludes to several biblical traditions. In addition to the expression “God of the sheep-pool” (see Commentary below), the practitioner behind P. Oxy. VIII 1151 cites John 1:1, 3. The use of opening lines (or *incipits*) of biblical texts was a well-established practice in late antique Egyptian amuletic contexts (Sanzo 2014). Although LXX Ps. 90:1 is the most common scriptural *incipit* among the extant apotropaic, exorcistic, and curative ritual objects, the opening line of the Gospel of John appears quite frequently on amulets and related contexts (e.g., on the walls of monks’ cells). Typically, the Johannine *incipit* is accompanied by at least one other Gospel *incipit*. Moreover, the use of Gospel *incipits* falls within a much broader strategic approach to biblical tradition in ancient amulets, some of which are also found in P. Oxy. VIII 1151. The Matthean version of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13) figures prominently in Christian amulets from this period (Kraus 2006; Sanzo 2020, 102–104), whether cited in whole or in part. Greek Christian practitioners occasionally drew from other New Testament passages, such as Romans 12:1–1a; John 2:1–2; 1 Timothy 1:15–16; and Jude 4–5, 7–). In some cases, Egyptian practitioners also drew from texts and traditions outside the traditional Christian canon, such as the Abgar-Jesus correspondence (e.g., P. Oxy. LXV 4469; Brit. Lib. Or. 4919[2]). Christian practitioners were also not averse to citing from the Septuagint, especially from the psalms. In fact, LXX Ps. 90:1 (= MT Ps. 91:1) was the most commonly cited biblical passage in the extant Christian amuletic record from late antiquity (e.g., Kraus 2018).

In lines 25–27, we find the phrase “who heals every disease and every illness,” which is used as a title for Christ. This phrase can be traced back to Matthew 4:23 (cf. Matthew 9:35). Although this phrase is common on late antique amulets (see De Bruyn 2008), it is not always clear if this phrase was meant as a citation from the Gospel of Matthew or derived from the liturgy (cf. De Bruyn 2008; Mihálykó 2019). The shorter version of the Matthean formula (“every disease and every illness”), which we have in P. Oxy. VIII 1151, is likewise attested in the Markan liturgy in the Synapte and in the Anaphora; the longer version, which includes the phrase, “among the people,” is attested in the Little Entrance and the Prayer of the Trisagion. The shortened version of this phrase is also found in another liturgical context – the *Euchologion* attributed to Serapion (Prayer 17: a blessing for the sick). The popularity of this phrase within early Christianity is likewise reflected in its common use among early church fathers (see De Bruyn 2008, 70–76). According to Luijendijk, the magical use of such liturgical language functioned as legitimation strategy for practitioners (Luijendijk 2014, 428).

P. Oxy. VIII 1151 also engages with local Christian traditions. The practitioner has invoked a series of saints (John, Serēnus, Philoxenos, Bēktōros/Victor, and Iustus/Justus), all of whom were venerated in Oxyrhynchus (Papaconstantinou 2001, 115–16, 187–88, 203–204, 62–68, 108–109). P. Oxy. VIII 1151 is especially useful for understanding the early development of certain saints’ cults;

P. Oxy. VIII 1151 is one of the earliest extant witnesses to the appealing of the intercessions of Mary (De Bruyn 2017, 109). This interface of local religion and amuletic practice is likewise evident in the practitioner’s invocation of “John the Evangelist” since Oxyrhynchus was the only city that had a church specifically devoted to him by this title (Luijendijk 2014, 420–21; Papaconstantinou 2001, 115–16; De Bruyn 2017, 109). Although some of the saints mentioned were not exclusively venerated in Oxyrhynchus and, therefore, can be found on amulets from other parts of Egypt (e.g., BGU III 954, which comes from Heracleopolis Magna, invokes Serēnus), P. Oxy. VIII 1151 provides exceptional evidence for the close relationship between amuletic practice and local religious devotion and ritual. At the same time, the fact that the saints appear before the doxology as a request for intercession implies that the practitioner was also influenced by more global liturgical traditions: this is way the saints generally appear in the liturgical prayers of the Byzantine prayer books. In short, P. Oxy. VIII 1151 incorporates both local and global Christian traditions.

But not all traditional elements can be traced back to so-called “Christian” sources – whether local or global. For instance, the opening “flee formula” has parallels in several late antique amulets, magical gems, and formularies (e.g., P. Lond. Lit. 231; PGM XX.13–19). The combination of an imperative of *phugein* (“flee” [l. 1]) with the third-person singular present active indicative *diōkei* (“pursues” [l. 3]) is likewise found in a hexametrical charm against impetigo described by Pliny (*HN* 27.75.100), but which might go back to the classical period or even earlier: “Flee (*pheugete*), beetles, a fierce wolf pursues you” (trans. Kotansky 1991, 113).

6. Comparative Features

P. Oxy. VIII 1151 shares many features with contemporary amulets and other ostensibly “magical” artifacts from the late antique Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds. The practitioners behind the Jewish Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowls, for instance, cited biblical texts, such as Zechariah 3:2, Numbers 9:23, Deut. 6:4, as part of their rituals (cf. Korsvoll 2018). The *incipit* of Ps. 91 (in the Masoretic Text) also occasionally appears in an every-other-word alternation with Deut. 6:4 on Jewish magical objects, including incantation bowls (e.g., AMB, bowl 11), rings, and pendants (Elitzur-Leiman 2021). These Jewish and Christian exemplars in turn seem to reflect a more ancient tradition of using sacred texts, such as Homeric poetry, within ostensibly magical contexts (see Collins 2008, 104–131). In all of these sources there is a strong preference to use sacred texts whose words provide some kind of analogy to the situation at hand or bestow glory and honor to the divinities invoked.

The practitioner behind P. Oxy. VIII 1151 is also not unique in his use of cruciform symbols (ll. 1, 15, 23, 56). Several Greek and Coptic amulets and magical recipes mark the beginning of their texts with crosses, Christograms, Staurograms, and the like (e.g., ACM 13, 18, 129; P. Princ. II 107). These objects follow more general scribal conventions in marking the beginnings of texts, a trend especially evident in genres, such as letters (e.g., Blumell 2012, 43–46). Such ritual techniques should be situated with the broader world of late antique scribal culture, in which scribes might use various markings, such as a line, a *paragraphos*, or a *diairesis*, to indicate divisions in their texts (De Bruyn 2017, 53–54).

7 Translation

†Flee, oh detested spirit! Christ pursues you.⁵ The Son of God and the Holy Spirit have anticipated you. Oh God of the sheep pool, rescue¹⁰ your servant, Iōannia, whom Anastasia (a.k.a. Euphemia) bore, from every evil/bad (thing).

¹⁵ † In the beginning was the Word and the Word was towards God and the Word was God. All things through him²⁰ came into being, and without him nothing came into being which has come into being.

Oh Lord † Christ, Son and Word of the living God,²⁵ the one who heals every disease and every illness, heal and take care of even your servant³⁰ Iōannia, whom Anastasia (a.k.a. Euphēmia) bore,

and chase away and banish from her every ³⁵ fever and every kind of shivering fit, quotidian, tertian, quartan and from every evil (thing) by the prayers and intercessions of ⁴⁰ our Lady, the Theotokos, and of all the glorious archangels and of the holy and glorious apostle and ⁴⁵ evangelist and theologian John and of St. Serēnus and of St. Philoxenos and of St. Bēktōros and of ⁵⁰ St. Iustus and (of) all the saints.

Because your name, oh Lord God, I have invoked, (the name that is) marvelous, both exceedingly glorious and ⁵⁵ frightful to (your) enemies. Amen†

8. Commentary

7–9. “God of the sheep-pool.” The reference to the “sheep-pool” probably goes back to John 5:2–9. In this Johannine passage, Jesus heals a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years with the command, “Arise, take up your bed and walk.” Accordingly, this geographical reference probably functioned as a kind of metonymic shorthand for a *historiola* (i.e., an abbreviated narrative used for ritual power). In other words, the significance of this sacred site was intimately linked to a particular biblical story. Such biblical narratives – perhaps also understood in dialogue with local traditions (see Sanzo 2014, 153–57) – function as precedents or paradigms for the healing of the client in the here-and-now (Frankfurter 1995; Luijendijk 2014, 423). In addition, as Gary Vikan has noted, the title “god of the sheep pool” on P. Oxy. VIII 1151 also seems to work on an “‘aretalogical’ level, since the power of the deity, as if this were Isis, is also being invoked through a recitation of His most glorious deeds” (Vikan 1995, 387; cf. Luijendijk 2014, 423). Perhaps aware of the amuletic use of this passage, John Chrysostom praises the man in this story specifically because he did not resort to the use of amulets in his time of need (*Adv. Jud.* 8.6.5).

51–56. “Because your name, oh Lord God, I have invoked, (the name that is) marvelous, both exceedingly glorious and frightful to (your) enemies. Amen†.” For a similar praise formula, which likewise highlights the name of God, see *Metaphrasis martyria sanctae Tatianae* 6 (Halkin 1973, 56–81, at 61; cf. de Bruyn 2017, 109 n. 121): “for blessed is the name of your glory – (the name that is) great, glorious, and frightful to (your) enemies”. For the phrase, “your name...I have invoked” (ll. 52–53), cf. Joel 3:5; Rom. 10:14; Acts 2:21.

9. Bibliography

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