

## ANTIKE RITUALMAGIE




---

NOWITZKI, TOBIAS (2021). *Antike Ritualmagie. Die Rituale der ägyptischen Zauberpapyri im Kontext spätantiker Magie*. Hamburger Studien zu Gesellschaften und Kulturen der Vormoderne, 17. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner. 494 pp., 86.00 € [ISBN 978-3-5151-3090-5].

---

SOFIA BIANCHI MANCINI

Max Weber Kolleg, Universität Erfurt  
sofia.bianchi\_mancini@uni-erfurt.de

In *Antike Ritualmagie. Die Rituale der ägyptischen Zauberpapyri im Kontext spätantiker Magie*, Tobias Nowitzki addresses an important lacuna in the ever-burgeoning number of scholarly studies on the magical papyri, that is: whether the texts per se present enough common grounds that justify their traditional view as a corpus. Nowitzki's monograph, based on his PhD thesis carried out at the University of Hamburg, proposes therefore to close this gap through a systematic analysis of all existing magical papyri that can reveal how every text belongs to, and was thereby integrated into, a specific "magical *koine*" of late antiquity. By primarily relying on the prescriptions of Hans Dieter Betz's PGM (*Papyri Graecae Magicae*), Nowitzki ultimately

explains that the magical papyri follow certain basic structures, which suggest how all the recipes share ideas pertaining to the realm of late antique magic.

After a well thought out introduction that recollects past studies on the magical papyri, Nowitzki ventures into an explanation of the terms “magic” and “ritual” in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively. In a book that deals with a controversial topic and material, both chapters are not only a necessary incorporation, but they also allow Nowitzki to position himself very clearly in relation to the long-standing debate over the two concepts. Following these chapters, where Nowitzki even offers a compelling definition of the terms, the author proceeds into an examination of what he calls the “*Quellen magischer Macht*” (pp. 52-135). Such “*Quellen*” are explained as means through which magical rituals gained credibility (p. 52) and are divided into the following groups: spoken and written words, which include *charaktères* and *voces magicae*, purity, sacrifice, sympathy and analogy through *similia similibus* formulas, images and drawings, magical figures, and at last liminality. From Chapter 5 to Chapter 11, Nowitzki selects and examines one kind of magic: sexual magic, mantic, healing, protection, favour, harm, and varia. For each type, Nowitzki departs from a descriptive analysis of a single ritual, representative of a given sub-category, to study the type of magic it represents in terms of ritual, religious, personal, and social dimensions. The final chapter analyses the “Book of Secrets”, also known as *Sefer ha-Razim* (SHR), a Jewish magical compilation that Nowitzki chooses with the intent to compare it with the results emerged from his analysis of the PGM. The comparison enables Nowitzki to conclude that, even if the two textual collections share some ritual similarities, the “*SHR und die Zauberpapyri entstammen unterschiedlichen Dialekten der magischen koine*” (p. 425).

Overall, the author should be commended for his attempt to systematise a large number of texts and to propose a theoretical framework that shows how the PGM should be regarded as a corpus containing prescriptions that follow coherent sets of ideas. However, beyond its merits, the book presents some inaccuracies and mistakes to which I would like to draw attention. The first is the complete omission of the original texts, which has led Nowitzki to depart from Betz’s translations of the PGM and give interpretations that are not always easy to prove. One example is PGM LXVI, which Nowitzki interprets as a separation spell potentially directed at a male couple (p. 190). This conclusion is difficult to sustain as the original text uses the word φίλος which does not necessarily imply a sexual relationship between two individuals.<sup>1</sup> Likewise problematic is the inclusion of PDM/PGM XIV 956-960 in the list

---

1. Cf. Nowitzki’s more cautious statement on p. 191.

of prescriptions for “Geburtenkontrolle” (p. 471), also understood as “rituelle Verhütungsmittel” (p. 177), when the ritual in question is more of a pregnancy test than a “ritual contraceptive”.<sup>2</sup> For lines 1196-1198 of PDM/PGM XIV, Nowitzki even proposes that “*muss Dampf von brennendem Ichneumon-Kot in die Vagina der Frau eindringen, damit das Menstruationsblut aus Ekel davor zu fließen aufhört*” (p. 267 n. 171), but I fail to see where disgust and its function as a blocker of menstrual blood occur in the text.

Other problems lie instead within several facts that Nowitzki reports throughout the book. I will give two examples. On p. 137, Nowitzki points out that what scholars have commonly called “love magic” or “erotic magic” implies an attitude towards the victim that from a modern perspective can be labelled as “rape”. In refuting the implications that the terms bear, he explains that our view of rape differs from its ancient notion, albeit he affirms that non-consensual intercourse was already illegal in antiquity. Nowitzki, however, places adultery (in Gk. μοιχεία) in the category of non-consensual sex (p. 138), ignoring the important question that in ancient Greece – especially in Athens – μοιχεία could also entail a consensual relation between a man and one’s wife that nevertheless defiled the household.<sup>3</sup>

On p. 341, Nowitzki states that the deposition of *defixiones* in tombs was a “deviant, illegal und rituell verunreinigend” act done “*außerhalb der normalen antiken Gesellschaft, um die Besonderheit des Ritus zu betonen*”. Letting aside the legal issue, is it appropriate to speak in terms of *deviant* practice and *normal* ancient society without taking into account the underlying moral and modern implications that *deviant* and *normal* have? Nowitzki’s dichotomous thinking returns on p. 343, where he asserts that: “*In den vielen Fluchtafeln, die keine direkte Anrufung oder Erwähnungen von Göttern oder Totengeistern aufweisen, wird der Fluchende wahrscheinlich dennoch davon ausgegangen sein, dass die Götter den Fluch beachten würden. Weil diese Form der religiösen Kommunikation über defixiones zumeist kein menschliches Publikum mehr besaß, war sie sozial weniger akzeptiert als beispielsweise die teils in Tempeln abgelegten Gebete um Gerechtigkeit*”.

Those who are conversant with the *defixiones* and “prayers for justice” will find Nowitzki’s assertions problematic. In proposing that the *defixiones* were less socially accepted than the “prayers for justice” as they had “no human audience”, Nowitzki precisely falls into that structuralist trap which regards the former as a

2. See Betz, 1986, p. 242 for the ritual as a pregnancy test and, more recently, GEMF 16.

3. See, for instance, Lys. 1. For μοιχεία and its implications, Nowitzki only references Wagner-Hasel, 1997, p. 900, omitting therefore works like Pomeroy, 1975; Cohen, 1984 and 1991; Kapparis, 1996.

distinct category from the latter. Nowitzki's stance, reaffirmed on p. 345 with his neat systematisation of the *defixiones* and "prayers for justice" into the categories of private and public curses respectively, simplifies an important debate that has met with differing opinions in the scholarship. Apart from referencing in passing Martin Dreher's contribution to the discussion,<sup>4</sup> Nowitzki not only sets aside what other scholars have argued so far,<sup>5</sup> but even arrives at conclusions that are often linguistically unverifiable.

To conclude, Nowitzki's book certainly has its value, but readers should be careful with the various pieces of information they will encounter throughout the work. For this reason, I recommend caution to non-specialists who may be misled by some of Nowitzki's assertions, especially those that are not grounded in the original text of the sources.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Betz, Hans Dieter (1986). *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation. Including the Demotic Spells*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cohen, David (1991). *Law, Sexuality, and Society. The Enforcement of Morals in Classical Athens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, David (1984). The Athenian Law of Adultery. *Revue Internationale des Droits de l'Antiquité*, 31, pp. 147-165.
- Dreher, Martin (2010). Gerichtsverfahren vor den Göttern? „Judicial Prayers“ und die Kategorisierung der *defixionum tabellae*. In Thür, 2010, pp. 301-335.
- GEMF = Faraone, Christopher A. & Torallas Tovar, Sofia (2022). *Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies, Vol. I: Text and Translation*. Berkeley: California Classical Studies.
- Kapparis, Konstantinos (1996). Humiliating the Adulterer. The Law and Practice in Classical Athens. *Revue Internationale des Droits de l'Antiquité*, 43, pp. 63-77.
- Pomeroy, Sarah B. (1975). *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves. Women in Classical Antiquity*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Sánchez Natalías, Celia (2022). *Sylloge of Defixiones from the Roman West. A comprehensive collection of curse tablets from the fourth century BCE to the fifth century CE*, Vol. I. Oxford: BAR Publishing.
- Thür, Gerhard (ed.) (2010). *Symposion 2009. Vorträge zur griechischen und hellenistischen Rechtsgeschichte*. Wien: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Wagner-Hasel, Beate (1997). Ehebruch. *Der Neue Pauly*, 3, pp. 900-901.

---

4. Dreher, 2010.

5. For a thorough summary of the debate, see Sánchez Natalías, 2022, pp. 59-62. .