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Resurrection of the Body in the *Greek Magical Papyri*

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of resurrection of the body in the *Greek Magical Papyri*. Looking at specific magic spells, the study addresses these questions: Does the physical manipulation of the dead imply the resurrection of the body? If so, what is the purpose of the bodily resurrection for the magical rite? The paper attempts to explain the functions of the reanimated dead as an assistant, and the significance of such innovation in magic. It also examines this alternative notion of divinity of the resurrected body attributed to the concept of assistance.

Keywords

Magic, *PGM*, resurrection, assistant, dead body, skull cup

Introduction

This paper explores the concept of bodily resurrection of the dead who had untimely or violent deaths, as presented in the *Greek Magical Papyri* (*PGM*) from Roman Egypt.¹ The question I examine is whether the corpses and body parts are manipulated in magic just to achieve invocation of the spirits of the dead, or whether this physical manipulation implies resurrection of the body in some spells. The purpose of the paper is to identify the logic of these invocations. I shall also examine

¹) *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, hereafter abbreviated *PGM*. The editions for the *PGM* spells used in this paper are Preisendanz and Henrichs (1973–1974); I also refer to Betz's translation (1986) and correct it where necessary. The *PGM* references are given in Roman numerals followed by Arabic numerals.

the role of the resurrected dead in the magical operation and the professional life of the magicians.

PGM Spells to be Examined

I shall examine the issue of resurrection of the body focusing on three particular spells from the fourth magical handbook: “King Pitys’² spell that leads (ἀγωγή)³ over any skull cup (σκούφου)” (IV.1928–2005),⁴ “Pitys’ spell that leads” (PGM IV.2006–2125) and “Divine assistance from three Homeric verses” (IV.2145–2240).⁵ These spells are dated to the fourth century A.D., although their original context may have been the second century A.D. Another spell I shall also refer to is from the thirteenth magical handbook dated to the fourth century A.D. with the title “Resurrection of a dead body” (XIII.277–283).

² In PGM IV.2140, Pitys is called Thessalian. For the identification of the Thessalian Pitys with the Egyptian priest and prophet “Bitys, Bitos, or Bithus” (Iambl. *Myst.* 8.5, 10.7; Zos. *App. fr. gr.* 230–235), see Betz 1986:338; Ogden 2001:211; Faraone 2005:264 and 278.

³ Faraone translates the term ἀγωγή as “a spell that leads” (Faraone 1999:25). But, more precisely the term describes “the (procedure of) leading (daimons, or spirits).” Note also the compound ψυχαγωγία, as “evocation of souls from the nether world” (*LSJ*); also Dickie 2001:31. Ἀγωγή is usually used in the erotic spells in the PGM, but it is not restricted to erotic spells either in the PGM or elsewhere. In the two spells examined in this category, for example, IV.1928–2005 and IV.2006–2125, it is used for the “leading,” or “spell that leads” spirits, or daimons of dead persons from the underworld, even though in the second one there are traces of erotic formularies (e.g. IV.2090–1, “πορεύου, ὅπου κατοικεῖ ἡδε (ἡ ὅσδε), καὶ ἄξον αὐτὴν πρὸς ἐμὲ τὸν δεῖνα ἢ διὰ μέσης νυκτὸς ἢ διὰ τάχους”).

⁴ Discussion in Faraone 2005:257 ff.

⁵ Between the spells IV.2006–2125 and IV.2145–2240 there are two relatively short divinatory necromantic spells: IV.2125–39 with the title “Restraining seal,” in which a seal is to be used on a skull cup to prevent it from speaking, and the other IV.2140–44 entitled “Pitys the Thessalian for questioning corpses,” in which Pitys as mentioned in the two above spells is addressed this time as Thessalian.

Scholarly Debate

Ogden in his book on *Greek and Roman Necromancy* rightly argues on this issue that “the *Greek Magical Papyri* from Egypt provide a significant degree of context, if not for reanimation, then at least for the physical manipulation of corpses and body parts to achieve evocation” (2001:203 and 212).⁶ But in regard to IV.2006–2125 Ogden actually states, “Although the German translation of Preisendanz and the English translation of O’Neill stipulate that the whole body is to be used, the Greek is vague, and it is probably envisaged that again only a skull cup will be employed” (2001:212). Similarly, Faraone in his study on necromancy (IV.1928–2144) does not incorporate the notion of the bodily resurrection of the dead person into his study (2005:255–282).⁷ For he explicitly states concerning IV.1928–2005, “[T]his spell does not require a full corpse” (2005:263). On IV.2006–2125 also Faraone states first, “this is a spell designed to force the appearance and speech of a ghost,” but second, “it would appear that we are to do this to a head that is still attached to its corpse” (2005:266). In the same way, Johnston in her discussion on necromancy referring to these two Pitys spells among the eight spells of the *PGM* which she characterises as necromantic, or with necromantic elements, points out, “none of them promises anything as spectacular as the contemporary literary portraits of necromancy do — we hear nothing about reanimated corpses springing up out of their torpor, as in Lucan and Apuleius” (2008:174).

The section that follows aims to provide a detailed analysis of the relevant spells to address the issues raised by the scholarly discussion. Then I will explore the new aspect of bodily resurrection of the dead before reaching conclusions.

⁶ On necromancy see Hopfner 1974; Halliday 1913; Dodds 1973:207 ff.; Graf 2006; Bremmer 2002:71–86.

⁷ Although he does mention examples of corpse reanimation in his paper 2005:272ff.; see also Faraone 2004:18–21. Bremmer in his discussion on Greek and Roman necromancy also briefly mentions *PGM* IV.1928–2005 and IV.2140–44 as examples of necromantic spells without any further comments (2002:81 ff.).

The Issue of the Resurrection of the Dead in the Three *Paredros* Spells

But let us examine now how the relevant examples are displayed in these spells. In “King Pitys’ spell that leads (ἀγωγή) over any skull cup (σκούφος)”⁸ (IV.1928–2005), the magician is instructed to recite a spell to Helios, in order that he may, as expressed, “give me power over this spirit that died a violent death (βιοθάνατον πνεῦμα),⁹ from whose dead body (σκήνος)¹⁰ I hold this (skull cup)” (IV.1947–50).¹¹ Here the magician wants to have the power of the spirit of the dead body which, as we shall see, he intends to resurrect.

Accordingly in the Pitys spell, Helios is addressed as “the ruler of heaven and earth and chaos and Hades, where dwell the daimons of men who once looked into the light” (IV.1963–5). Hence the assistant is called *daimon*, when the magician asks Helios, “if you go to the depths of earth and the regions of the dead, send this *daimon*... from (the head of) whose dead body I hold this (skull cup)” (IV.1967–70).¹² The magician also gives Helios a more precise instruction: “ἀλλὰ φύλαξον ἅπαν δέμας ἄρτιον εἰς φάος ἐλθεῖν” (IV.1976). The translation here is crucial. O’Neil translates: “but guard that my whole body come to light intact” (Betz 1986:73). This is clearly incorrect, as Preisendanz already saw, since it is Helios who goes to the regions of the dead; the magician is praying for the total bodily resurrection of the

⁸) σκούφος, ὁ, τό; also σκυφίον, τό.

⁹) On *aoroi* and *biaiothanatoi* see Graf 1997:150–1, 194; Johnston 1999:78 ff.

¹⁰) On σκήνος see also Porph. *Plot.* 22.45 ff., “Νῦν δ’ ὅτε δὴ σκήνος μὲν ἐλύσσαο, σῆμα δ’ ἔλειψας ψυχῆς δαιμονίης”; see also the use of σκήνος in the pseudo-Platonic *Axiochus* 366 Al.

¹¹) In context, the reference and the meaning of *skyphos* in the title seems perfectly clear; see Faraone 2005:258–261 for an over-elaborate demonstration of these points. Note the later (7th c. A.D.) parallel medical use of σκυφίον for skull in Paul. *Aeg.* 3.22.5; also note the reference to medusa’s *skyphos* in *Ioannes Malalas*, according to which Perseus decapitated Medusa, in order to use her *skyphos* for magical purposes (Dindorf 1831:35–9).

¹²) These lines (IV.1967–70) belong to Hymn IV *To Helios* as reconstructed by Preisendanz; they also appear elsewhere in the *PGM*: IV.447–9, VIII.80–83 and I.317–320; Preisendanz 1974:II.239–40.

daimon.¹³ So, it should be translated as: “but guard that the whole (daimon’s) body come to light intact.”

The daimon should also reveal to the magician “τὸν χρόνον, ὃν παρεδρεύει” (IV.1977–8). O’Neil translates this as “at what time he serves as my assistant” (Betz 1996:73). But this makes no sense and ὃν is an accusative of time, so that the correct translation is, “the length of time he serves as assistant,” as Preisendanz already saw.¹⁴

In another spell with the title “Divine assistance from three Homeric verses” (IV.2145–2240), which involves the consecration of a *lamella*, among its various uses there is a reference to the *lamella* “for wrecking chariots” (IV.2211–16),¹⁵ according to which the *lamella* should be buried for three days “in the grave of someone who died untimely” and “εἰς ὃν κεῖται, ἐκείνος διημερεύσει” (IV.2215–16). Translation is again crucial. Martin translates this as: “he will come to life for as long as it stays there,” understanding χρόνον with ὃν (Betz 1986:77). But it is more easily understood as “[the person] onto whom it is placed, that man will have his day again” (with ὃν antecedent to ἐκείνος).¹⁶

In the parallel “Pitys’ spell that leads” (IV.2006–2125), the “daimon of a dead person” (νεκυδαίμων) is also invoked to become the assistant (πάρεδρος).¹⁷ This spell may have various functions; e.g. “it erotically leads and causes illness and sends dreams and restrains and obtains dream revelations” (IV.2075–7). The magical operation involves an elaborate series of rituals and spells. According to the ritual described, the magician should go quickly to where someone lies buried, or to where something has been thrown away, if he has no buried body, and spread the hide of an ass under himself at sunset (IV.2039–42). The magician should also place a leaf of flax with the depiction of Hecate and the inscription of the spell “on the head” (of the dead body)¹⁸ and

¹³) Preisendanz, *loc. cit.*: “die ganze Gestalt (des Dämons)”; Preisendanz 1973:I.133.

¹⁴) Preisendanz, *loc. cit.*: “die Zeit, während deren er Beistand leistet”; Preisendanz 1973:I.133.

¹⁵) “ἀρματοράκτης” (~ ἄρμα, ῥήγνυμι/ ῥήσσω, ῥήττω); not in *LSJ*.

¹⁶) The use of the verb διημερεύω could also possibly suggest the length of time of resurrection and assistance; διήμερον, τό: period of twenty four hours.

¹⁷) Similarly, in the *defixio* from Carthage dated to the 2nd/3rd c. A.D. (*TD* 234.1, A.D. II/III), the spirit of a dead person who has died before his time is adjured (Audollent 1904:308).

¹⁸) IV.2051, θὲς αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς.

wreathe him with black ivy, and he will stand beside him through the night in dreams (δι' ὀνείρων) (IV.2049–53). Here, the spirit of the dead person appears in the magician's dreams to offer his assistance. The last stages of the operation involve the agreement between the magician and the assistant (πάρεδρος) and the writing of the spell and task on a roll of hieratic papyrus for the assistant to accomplish (IV.2067–95, 2124–5).

In the same spell (IV.2006–2125), the assistant is addressed not only as the νεκυδαίμων (as in IV.2060), but also as “the chthonic daimon,” — “in whom the essence (ἡ οὐσία) of this female (or, of this male) has been embodied (ἐσωματίσθη) on this night” (IV.2086–8).¹⁹

Thus, on this analysis, in the two spells of Pitys and the *lamella* for wrecking chariots, dead bodies are manipulated not just to achieve invocation of the spirit of the dead, but, as the three examples have illustrated,²⁰ the concept of bodily reanimation, or resurrection of the dead who had an untimely or violent death, is implied.

But what is the purpose of reanimating the dead in the magical rite? In the first Pitys spell we examined (IV.1928–2005), its purpose is, as stated in the magician's invocation, to have the dead as “assistant” (πάρεδρος) and “helper and avenger” (βοηθὸν καὶ ἔκδικον) in the magical operation (IV.1950–2) and to reveal for him whatever he wishes (IV.1971). Similarly, in the other Pitys spell (IV.2006–2125) the magician adjures the daimon of the dead to stand beside him (παρασταθῆναι μοι, IV.2034) and to become his assistant.²¹ The aim of the third spell also, as the title indicates is, “Divine assistance” from three Homeric verses (IV.2145–2240). Hence, in these examples, the notion of the reanimation of the dead is associated with the concept of assistance (παρεδρία). But these three spells are the only cases in which the *paredroi* are related to the notion of resurrection. Therefore, they cannot be used as a generalisation for every *paredros* spell.

Examples of bodily resurrection appear in Greek and Roman literature.²² Pindar in *Pythian* III tells that Zeus killed Asclepius for

¹⁹ For οὐσία see Jordan 1985:253–55; Betz 1986:336; Fountoulakis 1999.

²⁰ See IV.1976, IV.2215–16 and IV.2086–8, and discussion above.

²¹ “Standing by” (IV.2034) could be used as a proof of resurrection of the dead, as with “walking” in XIII.277–283, p. 6.

²² See Ogden 2001, ch. 13.

raising a dead back to life (3.47–57). The use of ritual technology becomes more extensive and aggressive in Greek and Roman literature of the first centuries A.D. due to widespread use of *defixiones* and members of dead bodies, and to social and political factors.²³ The Thessalian witch Erichtho, in first-century Lucan's *Pharsalia* (6.654–827), resurrected a dead soldier for Sextus Pompey, in order to give a prophecy. Similarly, in the second-century Lucian's *Philopseudes* (11, 13), a Babylonian magician reanimated Midas who had been bitten by a snake, casting a spell to drive the poison out of his body and using a fragment from the tombstone of a dead maiden. In the second-century Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* again (2.28–9, 1.12–17), Zatchlas, an Egyptian prophet, resurrected the dead body of Thelyphron “as it was before his death” (2.28.5–6) using some herbs. In the fourth-century Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* (6.14–5), an old Egyptian woman of Bessa resurrected the body of her dead son to prophesy. Thus, the literary representations of using magic to resurrect the dead seem to be parallel to the descriptions of the magical papyri.

But why, in the two spells of Pitys and the *lamella* for wrecking chariots, is the issue of resurrection of the body only implied? The magicians in the three spells do not explicitly refer to the problem of resurrection, probably because there were still unsolved issues, mainly of magico-theological nature.

First, there is the issue of time. How long would the resurrected bodies serve as assistants, or what is the length of time of resurrection? In all three spells, as examined, the magicians are engaged with the problem of duration of resurrection: (a) “the length of time he serves as assistant” (IV.1977–8), (b) “[the person] to whom it is placed, that man *will have his day again* (διημερεύσει) (IV.2215–16), and (c) on this night” (IV.2088). In the aforementioned examples from Greek and Roman literature, the dead bodies are resurrected for a short time to prophecy, or answer questions.

On the length of time of assistance, Clemens Romanus of the first century A.D. in his *Homiliae* says that the *assistances* (παρεδρίαι) end

²³) In Roman literature magic discourse was part of the broader gender discourse and was intensified by Augustus' marriage and adultery laws passed in 18 and 17 B.C.

when “the soul having fulfilled the length of time in earth, in which she should have stayed in the body, moves to the underworld.”²⁴

On the other hand, in a spell from the thirteenth magical handbook there is the only explicit implication of the *PGM* spells on that issue, as indicated in the title, “Resurrection of a dead body” (“ἐγερσις σώματος νεκροῦ”) (XIII.277–283). Here the magician conjures the “spirit” (πνεῦμα) roaming in air to enter the dead body, “fill it with the breath of life” (ἐνπνευμάτωσον), empower and resurrect it, and make it walk. This is an example of the magical process of ἐνπνευμάτωσις (“filling with spirit”).²⁵ The greater explicitness regarding the resurrection of the dead body is probably due to the Christian influences on this spell; e.g. (a) the spirit is conjured to make the resurrected body *walk*, as a proof of its resurrection,²⁶ and (b) this spell is contained within a bigger spell XIII.1–343, which includes another short spell with Christian, Jewish and Gnostic influences called “Releasing from bonds” (XIII.288–95).

Second, there are further magico-theological implications, as for example, the relationship between the body and the spirit. Do the resurrected bodies replace the spirits of the dead which were predominantly used in magic? And what is the significance of such innovation in the magical rite? To answer these questions we need to look carefully at the example between the vessels and the *paredroi* from the “Pitys’ spell that leads” (IV.2006–2125), which illuminates the relationship between the body and the spirit.

In his justification of the functional importance of the assistant in the magical operation, Pitys cites the general experience of the majority of the magicians who have practiced it:

²⁴ Clem. Rom. *Hom.* 2.30.5.2 ff., “οὐκ ἐξετασθεῖς δὲ καὶ σὺ ὑφ’ ἡμῶν ποτὲ διὰ τί ἐνίστε καὶ παύονται αἱ παρεδρίαι, ἔφησ’ ὅτι: ψυχὴ πληρώσασα τὸν ὑπὲρ γῆς χρόνον, ὃν ἡμελλεν ἐν σώματι διατελεῖν, εἰς ἕδην πορεύεται...”

²⁵ For references to the magical process of ἐνπνευμάτωσις (“filling with spirit”) in the *PGM* see IV.964–6 and V.381–5; on the process of “filling with spirit” in relation to the statues of the gods note also the reference of Hermes Trismegistus to the “living statues filled with sense and spirit” in the “Holy book of Hermes Trismegistus addressed to Asclepius” in *Hermetica* (*Herm.Asclap.* III.24a and 37.23–5); see also *PGM* IV.2359–72, XII.32–4, III.282–409 and 296ff.

²⁶ See for example Lazarus’ resurrection, *Ev. Jo.* 43–44, “Λάζαρε, δεῦρο ἔξω... λύσατε αὐτὸν καὶ ἄφετε αὐτὸν ὑπάγειν”.

πλείστοι δὲ τῶν μάγων παρ' ἑαυτοῖς τὰ σκεύη βαστάζαντες καὶ ἀποθέμενοι
ἐχρήσαντο αὐτῷ παρέδρω καὶ τὰ προκείμενα διὰ πάσης ὀξύτητος ἐπετέλεσαν·
ἔστιν γὰρ ἄνευ πάσης λεσχολογίας, ἐν εὐκοπία δὲ τῇ πάσῃ εὐθέως τὰ προκείμενα
ἐκτελῶν (IV.2081–6)

The great majority of the magicians after carrying the vessels with them and after putting them aside, used him as an assistant and accomplished the preceding things in complete speed. For it has the power to accomplish the preceding things without any idle talk and immediately and in complete ease.

Here “the vessels” refer to “the magical implements” and “him” is the daimon.

Later, however, Pitys, addressing king Ostanes in the second person, explains to him that with the accomplishment of these rituals he may know, “πόσης φύσεως ἔχεται ἡ οἰκονομία αὕτη ἐν τῇ πάσῃ εὐκοπία παρέδρον οἰομένη τὰ σκεύη” (IV.2107–9). Translation here again is crucial. In the first place, what does the adverbial phrase “ἐν τῇ πάσῃ εὐκοπία” go with? Both Preisendanz and O’Neil take it with the participle “οἰομένη” (“*der in aller Leichtigkeit nur das Gerät als Beihelfer betrachtet*” and “since in all ease it considers the implements as the assistant”).²⁷ But this gives very unnatural sense, and Pitys should be reinforcing his emphasis on the utility of the magical operation, that is “ἐν τῇ πάσῃ εὐκοπία” should go with “ἔχεται.” This reading is confirmed by the earlier phrase “ἐν εὐκοπία δὲ τῇ πάσῃ εὐθέως τὰ προκείμενα ἐκτελῶν” (IV.2085), which ring-structures the section on the utility of the magical operation. The whole sentence can thus be translated, “how powerful a nature this magical operation gets hold of in all ease, considering the vessels as the assistant.”

But how can this sentiment be reconciled with the earlier “the great majority of the magicians have used him as an assistant, after carrying the vessels with them and after putting them aside”? While scholars have not seemed to recognise that there is a problem, there clearly is one, for these two statements seem diametrically opposed.²⁸ The answer is that the term σκεύη in the sense of “vessels” as “the magical implements” has been crucially redefined, to take the sense of “vessels” as “the

²⁷) Preisendanz, *loc cit.*; Betz 1986:75.

²⁸) Preisendanz in his apparatus on 2110 writes: “vgl. 2081f”; others do not comment.

skulls or bodies” of the soul.²⁹ This repetition of a term in order to distinguish its different meanings could be regarded as an example of the rhetorical figure known as ἀντανάκλασις, or more simply as a riddling verbal play characteristic of religious language.³⁰

To sum up my second issue on the relationship between the body and the spirit, the example of the vessels and the *paredroi* from the Pitys spell is a very powerful linguistic illustration of the resurrected bodies of the dead as assistants. The consideration of the magical implements/vessels consisting in the skull and skeleton of the dead as the assistant illuminates the concept of bodily resurrection of the dead. At the same time this association makes the role of the resurrected body as assistant very functional in the magical rite, replacing the assisting nature of the magical implements. But this is a two-way relationship, because the notion of resurrection of the body underlines the concept of *divine* assistance in these three spells. That means that the incorruptible nature of the resurrected body with its divine assimilations confers the *divine* character of the assistance.

Hence, this was an innovation in the magical operation. Nevertheless, the issue of resurrection of the body cannot apply to all the *paredros* spells. The reason, I suppose, is that such an innovation could completely change or even destroy the traditional form of magic. Therefore, it was safer to keep the traditional form of *paredroi* as the spirits of the dead, and leave the new problem of bodily resurrection in relation to the issue of time to be solved by new religion (e.g. Christianity).

Conclusion

Thus, in the two spells of Pitys, the *lamella* for wrecking chariots, and the “Resurrection of a dead body” spell examined in this paper, dead bodies and body parts of the dead who had an untimely or violent death are manipulated not just to achieve invocation of the spirits of

²⁹) The term σκεῦος literally means “vessel, implement, instrument”, but it can also mean “the body, as the vessel of the soul”: *LSJ s.v.* II.

³⁰) Cf. Quint. 9.3.68: “ἀντανάκλασις, where the same word is used in two different meanings”; 9.3.71: “it is more elegant, when it is employed to distinguish the exact meaning of things.”

the dead. This physical manipulation also implies the bodily resurrection of the dead, who function as assistants in the magical practices of the two Pitys and the *lamella* spells. But the notion of bodily resurrection is explicitly expressed in one single spell from the thirteenth magical handbook, probably, as explained, because of its Christian and Gnostic influences. However, that does not mean that the notion of bodily resurrection applies to every *paredros* spell.

The association, finally, of the vessels implicitly referring to the skull and skeleton of the dead and the *paredroi* in the Pitys spell, reinforces the concept of resurrection of the dead. The significance of resurrecting the dead is the incorruptible nature of the reanimated body, which offers an alternative notion of divinity, attributing to the notion of the reanimated body divine characteristics. Accordingly, that makes it a very useful innovation in the magical rite.³¹

Abbreviations

- LSJ* Liddell, H.G., R. Scott and S. Jones. 1996. *Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- PGM* *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Greek Magical Papyri*, Betz 1986 or Preisendanz 1973–1974 as cited.

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