

Christian Liturgical Formulae in Greek Amulets in Late Antiquity

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In the ancient Graeco-Roman world, as in other cultures past and present, people looked to the divine for healing from sickness, protection against harm, and success in life. One of the means they did so was through spells or appeals written on papyrus, metal, clay, wood, or other materials (amulets). The amulets typically included stylized phrases, esoteric words, and peculiar signs. They were prepared by specialists who often followed written instructions (formularies), many of which have been preserved in ancient manuals. The resulting amulets were rendered effective by certain rites and then worn on the body or applied in other ways.

We have numerous formularies and amulets from Egypt. They reflect various elements of the religious culture of the region over time (Egyptian, Graeco-Roman, Jewish, Christian, etc.), and thus are a valuable source for the study of continuity and change in processes of religious transformation or innovation. One such innovation was the spread of Christian norms, practices, and institutions in the Graeco-Roman world. Not surprisingly, Christian motifs begin to appear in formularies and amulets at this time. While there is continuity between Christian and pre-existing (especially Jewish) formularies and amulets, there is also evidence that the liturgy of the church influenced the ways in which the divine was invoked in formularies and amulets. Many of the correspondences between the Christian liturgy and formularies and amulets are associated with “high” moments in the liturgy when the people participated vocally and bodily in what was being said and done. According to one theory of ritual, this type of liturgical action is central to establishing the conventions that shape such practices as the use of amulets.

This research will undertake a systematic study of the incorporation of Christian liturgical sequences into Greek formularies and amulets dating from the second to the eighth centuries C.E. The research will identify correspondences between sequences in formularies and amulets and sequences in the Christian liturgy by drawing on the evidence we have of the liturgy of the churches in the eastern Mediterranean in late antiquity, particularly the church in Egypt. It will analyse the function of these sequences in the liturgy and in formularies and amulets in light of current ritual theory. And it will examine the extent to which liturgical sequences changed, or were themselves changed by, the prevailing practice of using amulets to ward off evil, cure illness, harm opponents, or achieve success.

This study will be the first of its kind. Its importance lies in its systematic and comprehensive examination of sequences found in formularies and amulets and those found in Egyptian and other eastern Christian liturgies, and in its analysis of the role of ritual in validating and communicating these sequences. To date, there has been no comprehensive study of the relationship between the action of the Christian liturgy and the invocation of the divine in formularies and amulets. Correspondences between the Christian liturgy and formularies and amulets have been overlooked by specialists in archaeological remains or in Christian liturgy, or they have been discussed only on an occasional basis, without a complete analysis of how the sequences in question functioned ritually in the liturgy or in the amulet.

The research will produce and publish an up-to-date catalogue of Greek formularies and amulets that contain Christian motifs, dating from the second to the eighth centuries C.E. It will produce and publish three articles on the incorporation of specific types of Christian liturgical sequences into formularies and amulets. And it will contribute to a monograph on the evolution of popular practices of invoking divine aid, particularly the use of amulets, as the Christian church became established in Egypt.