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FROM CATO TO THE BRONZES OF TICINUM: MAGICAL-RELIGIOUS HEALING RITUALS IN ANCIENT ROME

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Abstract: This paper focuses on two very different rituals in their respective contexts, which provide valuable insights into magical-religious practices in ancient Rome. The first is found in Cato the Elder which contains a series of incantations – characteristic of early Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri, gems and execratory tablets – dating as far back as the early 2nd century BCE. The second ritual is documented on two bronze inscriptions found at Pavia/*Ticinum*, dating from the 3rd century CE, in which a series of deities are invoked to grant protection to the bearer of these objects. Both pieces of information illustrate the importance of magical-religious healing practices in Roman-Italic societies over a long period.

Keywords: Magic, Roman religion, healing rituals, ancient Italy.

Based on the widespread belief that illness and misfortune are caused by a malevolent or negative external agent – divine or human – a range of magical-religious rituals aimed at healing the bodies of the sick have been documented across a wide variety of cultural realms. Accordingly, this paper analyses two healing practices documented in ancient Rome.

In Cato's treatise *De Agricultura* (160), dating to the early 2nd century BCE, the following remedy is suggested for treating a broken bone:¹

Any kind of dislocation may be cured by the following charm: Take a green reed four or five feet long and split it down the middle, and let two men hold it to your hips. Begin to chant: *motas uaeta daries dardares astataries dissunapiter* and continue until they meet. Brandish a knife over them, and when the reeds meet so that one touches the other, grasp with the hand and cut right and left. If the pieces are applied to the dislocation or the fracture, it will heal. And none the less chant every day, and, in the case of a dislocation, in

¹ *Luxum siquod est, hac cantione sanum fiet. Harundinem prende tibi viridem P. IIII aut quinque longam, mediam diffinde, et duo homines teneant ad coxendices. Incipe cantare: 'motas uaeta daries dardares astataries dissunapiter,' usque dum coeant. Ferrum insuper iactato. Ubi coierint et altera alteram tetigerint, id manu prehende et dextra sinistra praecide, ad luxum aut ad fracturam alliga, sanum fiet. Et tamen cotidie cantato et luxato vel hoc modo: 'huat haut haut istasis tarsis ardannabou dannaustra.'*

this manner, if you wish: *huat haut haut istasis tarsis ardannabou dannaustra* (transl. W.D. Cooper and H.B. Ash).

This passage combines a medically effective method for treating a fracture (the use of a splint) with the recitation of a series of magic words.² Scholars who have studied this passage from Cato have done so from an essentially philological perspective, which does not quite correspond to the approach taken here. Yet whereas some specialists³ interpret the text as a surgical procedure that uses parts of a cane as a splint to set a fracture or dislocation of the femoral neck, reducing the role of magic to the recitation of the incantation, others believe it refers to a magical ritual in which the incantation simply formed part of the procedure.⁴ In this sense, it would have been a ritual of sympathetic magic,⁵ in which the green cane would have embodied the human bone. Specifically, it is cut to symbolise the fracture and the two halves must be brought together by two operators, while a third, presumably the owner of the house, would have recited the formula.⁶

The meaning of the two magic formulas included in the text remains unclear; they might have been the subject of an interpolation dating back to ancient times, judging by Pliny's references, which sheds no light whatsoever on the meaning of the incantation.⁷ According to Wessely, following Mommsen, it would be pointless to seek any meaning in them, as they were nothing more than phrases repeated for the sake of their sound and mystery.⁸ In his article in *Philologus* published as early as in 1864, Bergk attempted to provide an overall interpretation of the ritual, translating the first formula in the text (*motas uaeta daries dardares astataries dissunapiter*) in a highly imaginative manner as follows: 'Make the dislocated limbs return to their usual place, make them hold fast, stand upright, Zeus, heal, Father', while the terms *huat*, *haut*, *huat* call to mind the Punic goddess *Haout Allat Milkat*, supposedly mentioned on a curse tablet, who would have been analogous to Hecate.⁹ Far more plausible is Huvelin's interpretation, which draws a parallel between these Catonian formulas and the *Ephesia grammata*, inscribed, according to Pausanias, on the statue of Artemis (Pausan. Frg. 35; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* V 242; Hesychius, s.v.). Specifically, Huvelin linked the term *damnameneus* to the words *dannabo*, *dannaustra* and *ardnabou* from the Catonian formula. Given that *Dam-*

2 Heim compiled an initial list of therapeutic formulas as early as in 1893. See Addabbo 1989.

3 Such as Von Thielscher 1963 and Capitani 1968.

4 See Laughton 1938; Addabbo 1989; Goujard 1975, 319–321.

5 Laughton 1938, 52–54.

6 Tupet 1976, 170.

7 Plin. *N.H.* XVII, 267: 'A Catone proditis contra luxata membra ingendae harundinum fissurae (*iungenda* Parisina)'; XXVIII, 21: 'Cato prodidit membris carmen auxiliare'.

8 Wessely 1898, 135–140.

9 Clermont-Ganneau 1900, 304–319; see also Tupet 1976, 171.

nameneus was the name of an Ionian Dactyl, sometimes equated with the Sun, and since the verb *dámno*, ‘I bind’, ‘I tie’, ‘I subdue’, appears repeatedly in Greek *defixiones*, Huvelin deduced that this would be the god who subdues the will and that the Catonian formulas would have arrived in Italy with Pythagorean philosophy. This text would be of great importance, ‘for it attests both to the ancient use in Rome of the *Ephesia grammata* and to the use of the word *damno* as a technical term in the language of magic’.¹⁰ For his part, Von Thielscher interprets the formulas as a sequence in which a) exhortations to the damaged bones, b) advice to the patient and c) threats to evil spirits can be distinguished.¹¹ As for the *ferrum* mentioned by Cato, this would appear to be a ritual object; perhaps a kind of splint or brace to support the leg following the procedure.¹²

The Law of the Twelve Tables, dating from the mid-5th century BCE, already refers to an incantation formula alluding to *the malum carmen qui fruges incantassit*,¹³ the nature of which as a curse is questioned by Pliny,¹⁴ thus diverging from other interpretations according to which it is a defamatory chant.¹⁵ But Momigliano rightly pointed out that the two fragments from the Twelve Tables cannot not be equated, since *incantare* means ‘to chant magical formulas, to bewitch’, whereas *occentare* would signify a defamatory chant (*conuicium facere*), to raise a ruckus, according to Festus.¹⁶ Another passage from Pliny (*N.H.* 28, 10) is very interesting because it refers to the power of

10 Huvelin 1902, 47–50. On the *Ephesia grammata*, see also Bernabé 2013; Edmonds 2019, 144; Blakely 2024, 171. These formulae are usually understood as opaque or apparently meaningless words whose efficacy depended in part on their unintelligibility. Their name has been explained as originally deriving from *ephiemi*, ‘to avert’, before being reinterpreted as referring to Ephesus. Photius’ lexicon presents them as obscure charms connected both with the invincibility of Ephesian wrestlers and with protective magic, or *alexipharmaka* (Phot., *Lexikon*, s.v. *Ephesia grammata*). Edmonds describes their unintelligibility as a “coefficient of weirdness”, that is, as one of the features that marked their performance as extraordinary and contributed to their classification as magical agents (Edmonds 2019, 144; cf. Marco Simón 2021, 33). The evidence for the Ephesian Letters includes literary references from Anaxilas to Eustathios, as well as lead tablets from Crete, Egypt and Sicily, dated from the 5th century BCE through the 4th century BCE (Blakely 2024, 171; cf. Bernabé 2013).

11 Von Thielscher 1963, 384–392.

12 Capitani 1968, 34.

13 *qui malum carmen incantassit ... <quiue> occentassit carmen<ue> cond<issit> ...* (Plin., *N.H.*, 28, 2, 17; Fest., 190 L; Cic., *de rep.*, 4, 10, 12 ap. Aug., *de civ. Dei*, 2, 9; Aug., *de civ. Dei*, 2, 12–14; Hor., *ep.*, 2, 1, 152–155; Corn., *Ad. Pers. Sat.*, 1, 123; Porph., *ad Hor. Sat.*, 2, 1, 82–83; *ad Her.*, 4, 25, 35; D., 47, 10, 15, 3; Cic., *Tusc.*, 4, 2, 4; Arnob., *adv. gent.*, 4, 34; Paul., *Sent.*, 5, 4, 6; Cic., *Brut.*, 217; D., 50, 16, 236, pr.). See Crawford 1996, n. 40.

14 Plin. *N.H.* 28, 17: ‘Quid? Are not the very words of the laws in the Twelve Tables: “who has enchanted the crops”, and elsewhere: “who has enchanted the evil song?”’

15 As in Cic. *De rep.* IV 12; August. *Ciu. Dei* II 19; Paul. *Sent.* V, 6, 6; Cornutus in Pers. *Sat.* b1, 137; Arnob. *Adv. Nat.* IV 34.

16 See Tupet 1976, 168–69, with references.

formulas in general, without distinguishing between ritual prayers and magical incantations, or between beneficial incantations and curses.¹⁷ I believe this emic information is absolutely essential for it helps to gain a better understanding of Cato's text and, incidentally, to question the great dichotomy traditionally established between magic and religion.

As is well known, the power of incantations increases in proportion to the incomprehensibility of the language used. Homer (*Od.* 10, 305) states that '*moly*' is a term from the language of the gods and that repetition and alliteration confer upon these formulas a secret power, comparable to a password, over the occult forces that govern the universe (and comparable, to a certain extent, to the effects that hypnotic sleep produces in patients).¹⁸

Although he smiles at the Catonian formulas cited above, Varro, for his part, includes another one taken from Saserna and associated with the haruspex Tarquicius Priscus for curing the terrible pains of gout (something confirmed by Pliny *N.H.* 28, 21). The formula must be pronounced three times nine times (i.e. 27 times: 'ter noviens cantare'), touching the earth, spitting (the role of saliva in magical operations is well known) and reciting it on an empty stomach: 'I think of you, heal my feet, may the earth take away my pain, may health remain there, in my feet' (*RR* 1, 1). In this ritual, a transfer takes place, whereby the illness passes from the patient's feet to the earth.

These magical healing formulas found in the Latin works of Cato and Varro appear, as is common knowledge, in far greater abundance in the Greco-Egyptian magical papyri,¹⁹ as well as on gems and curse tablets. A typical example would be this series of *onomata barbarika* found on diverse tablets from Susa/Hadrumetum, in Roman Africa: *Alimbeu, colombeu, petalimbeu* (SIRAR 4472); *cuigeu censeu cinbeu perfleu diaruncodeasta* (SIRAR 5745, 5746, 5715). In the Hellenistic-Roman period, performative language was most prominently found not only in 'magical words' (*onomata barbarika*) but also in the so called *charaktêres* which, albeit missing from the earliest Greek magical papyri, began to appear in abundance in the 1st century CE, before becoming widespread in the 3rd.²⁰ This text by the Neoplatonist Iamblichus of Chalcis (c. 250–330) is particularly illustrative in this regard:

For you inquire 'what efficacy there is in names that are not significant.' They are not, however, as you think, without signification [...], yet to the Gods all of them are significant (*semantikâ*), though not according to an effable mode (*ou katà retón trópon*) [...]. But the intellectual and divine symbolical character (*simbolikós charaktér*) of divine similit-

17 But Pliny himself also stresses the difference between *ars magica* and *religio*: see Cordovana 2020, 73–74.

18 Tupet 1976, 172.

19 De Haro Sánchez 2010, 131–153. On the reception of the Greek *iatroi* in Republican Rome, see Alonso-Alonso 2024, 27–58.

20 On the *charaktêres*, see Martin 2015; Németh 2021.

ude must be admitted to have a subsistence in names [...] But you ask, ‘*Why, of significant names, we prefer such as are Barbaric to our own?*’ Of this, also, there is a mystic reason. For because the Gods have shown that the whole dialect of sacred nations such as those of the Egyptians and Assyrians, is adapted to sacred concerns; on this account we ought to think it necessary that our conference with the Gods should be in a language allied to them (*De Myst.* 8, 4, 4; trans. T. Taylor).

Ovid himself seems to allude to this type of formula when remarking that Circe worshipped unknown gods with obscure formulas.²¹

Latin sources (Cic. *Leg.* 2, 62; Quint. *Inst.* 8, 2, 8; Non. 145, 24) mention a type of magical incantation, the *neniae*, which is attributed to the most ancient peoples of Italy, specifically, to the Marsi who were also associated (like the goddess *Angitia* who they worshipped) with magical rituals against snakes, assuming – alongside the Etruscans and other ancient peoples of Italy such as the Sabines and the Paeligni – the role that Thessaly played in Greece. Of disputed etymology, the term *neniae* onomatopoeically refers not only to funeral chants (the goddess *Nenia* presided over funerals and had her sanctuary on the Viminal: Paul. Fest. 157, 5L) but also to children’s speech or the shrill squeak of a mouse. According to Horace, the Marsian *neniae* had the power to make one’s head burst (*Epod.* 17.27), whereas for Ovid (*Ars am.* II.101 ff.) they were intended to inspire love and served to transform witches into *striges*.

As to the second example, it is framed in a context very different from that of the passage from Cato. The excavation of a drainage channel carried out at Pavia/*Ticinum* (Cisalpine Gaul) led to the discovery of two bronze objects inscribed by the same hand and dating as far back as to the 3rd century CE. These are unique documents from an epigraphic point of view and provide important information on Roman medicine, magic and religion. Although the first edition was edited by Mommsen, it was Emilio Gabba who carried out a fundamental study of these pieces, which D’Angelo has recently analysed in depth.²²

Both bronze tablets are almost identical in size (14.6 × 4.5 (4.3) × 0.4 cm), as well as having the same tripartite structure: an introductory formula appeals to the patient to honour a group of deities (Jupiter, Minerva and Salus in one case; Asclepius, Salus and Mars in the other), followed by a medical prescription and a final recommendation to carry the remedy physically by tying it to the body with a bandage.

CIL V 6114: *Obscura fati qu{a}erella deum praesidio l[e]/nietur. Esto cura caut(a). Tu plac(a) Iovem Mine[r]/vam Valetudinem. Quo f(acto) myrte b(acas) myxas a[-?]/laur(i) f(olia) n oleo f(range). U(tere) usque quo fi at melius./Aquam f(erventem?) m(ulsam?). U(tere) d(enariis) XI storacis b(oni). F(ascia) l(igatum) porta. (Fig. 1).*

²¹ Ovid. *Met.* 14, 300 ff. Tupet 1976, 176.

²² Gabba 1957; D’Angelo 2017.

A mysterious illness sent by fate is soothed with the help of the gods. Be prudent. Pay homage to Zeus, Minerva and Valetudo. Once this is done, crush myrtle berries, *myxa* [fruits?] and bay leaves in oil. Use [the ingredients] until [the ointment] improves. [Take] boiling honey water [?]. Use eleven denarii of good-quality styrax. Carry [the remedy] with you, secured with a bandage (trans. D'Angelo).

CIL V 61415: *Obscura iniuria usu mea medicina le/nietur. Cur(a) et pia Esculapiu(m) Bonam Va/letudinem Martem. [Q](uo) f(acto) saliunculam/vettonicam anetum in aqua f(erventi?) m(ulsa?) f(range). U(tere) d(enariis)/ IX I s(emisse) o(mnium). Laur(i) b(acas) myrtam sicc(am) viol(a)e [r]ad(ices)/ in oleo [f](range). Uter(e) s[a]lis gra(nis). F(ascia) ligatu(m) porta.* (Fig. 2).

A mysterious illness is alleviated by the use of my medicine. Honour and propitiate Asclepius, Bona Valetudo and Mars. Once this is done, grind valerian, betony and dill in boiling honey water [?]. Use nine *denarii* and one *semis* of each ingredient. Crush bay berries, dried myrtle and violet roots in oil. Use grains of salt. Carry [the remedy] with you, secured with a bandage (trans. D'Angelo).

The *stachys* mentioned in the texts would be *Betonica officinalis* and *styrax*, an aromatic resin, while their magical nature lies in the last three words: *fascia ligatum porta* ('worn fastened with a band'), which suggests the possibility that the bronze objects themselves were worn as amulets.²³ Soranus (*Gyn.* 3, 10, 42) did not attribute any therapeutic power to amulets but did at least acknowledge their positive psychological effects on the wearer, particularly women. The term *ligatum* is clearly related to the word normally used for amulets, *adal-ligata*, and seems to be a good example of a practice that perfectly combines medicine, religion and healing magic. However, the part of the body to which the amulet is to be tied is not specified. In medical and agricultural texts, *fascia* is usually associated with the verb *ligare* (and similar terms) with the meaning 'to secure (the remedy) with a bandage', as shown by numerous examples ranging from Columella to Celsus through Marcellus Empiricus.²⁴

The appeasement of the gods (Jupiter, Minerva and Valetudo on the first bronze, and Aesculapius, Bona Valetudo and Mars on the second) serves not only a religious purpose but also appears to be essential for activating the healing properties of herbal remedies.²⁵ Valetudo, whose cult developed in Marsica in the 2nd century BCE, is the *interpretatio* of a local deity with the Greek Hygieia, while evidence in Italy appears above all in aquatic healing sanctuaries.²⁶ Similarly, the association of Mars and Minerva with healing and water is well documented in northern Italy, an example being the sanctuary of *Minerva*

²³ Gabba 1987, 44, n. 88; D'Angelo 2017, 201.

²⁴ D'Angelo 2017, 195, with references.

²⁵ D'Angelo 2017, 196.

²⁶ Prosperi Valenti 1998, 77–78.

Medica Memor Cabardiacensis (Travo).²⁷ In the specific case of Mars, Cato's account (*Agr.* 134.2) attests to his role in warding off visible and invisible ailments, thereby ensuring the good health and wellbeing of the faithful and their families. In sum, the bronze tablets from *Ticinum* provide important evidence for understanding the development of healing practices in Cisalpine Gaul in the late Imperial period. Furthermore, it is highly likely that the tablets are associated with the sacred realm, possibly coming from a rural shrine, thus bridging the world of medicine, magic and religion in the context of a local healing cult in Cisalpine Gaul.²⁸

Conclusion

The evidence discussed here may be set against the broader Weberian idea that rationalisation was a defining feature of the transition to modernity and was accompanied by the progressive “disenchantment” (*Entzauberung*) of the world.²⁹ From this perspective, phenomena once attributed to hidden or supernatural forces came increasingly to be explained through more systematic forms of technical and scientific knowledge. Yet ancient medical and literary sources show that the opposition between rational healing and magical-religious practice was already being negotiated in antiquity itself. Sophocles, for example, contrasts the healer who relies on amulets with the physician who treats the body with his hands (*kheirotéknes*) (*Trach.* 1001–1003). Galen likewise criticises Pamphilos for accepting old wives' tales and Egyptian magical practices, including the use of incantations and amulets in connection with plants (*De simpl.* 6, pr. = Kühn XI 792, 11–15), and he also associates Xenocrates of Aphrodisias with magical tendencies because of his use of Egyptian and Babylonian plant names (Kühn XI 793, 13–15). Elsewhere, Galen identifies amulets bearing barbaric names as characteristic of magical practice (*De simpl.* X 2, 21 = Kühn XII 297, 5–6). Similar reservations about magical healing are still found in the early 5th century CE in Caelius Aurelianus,³⁰ while Marcellus de Burdeos distinguishes between remedies grounded in nature and rational remedies based on experience (*remedia physica et rationabilia diuersa de experimentis*).

But reality is far more complex. Magical practices were linked to medicine from the ancient Near East through to Late Antiquity. Compared with other

²⁷ Cenerini 1992; Scheid 2007, 85–91. See, for example, this inscription from Vercelli (CIL XI 1306 = ILS 3137): *Minervae / Medicae / Cardabiac(ensis) / Valeria / Sammonia / Vercellens(is) / v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*. See Spagoci 2015, 65–73.

²⁸ D'Angelo 2017, 205.

²⁹ Weber 1971. On this topic, see now Satlow 2026; cf. Marco Simón 2021, 38.

³⁰ Gaillard-Seux 2015, 203.

forms of treatment, magic appears to have been the most economical and accessible solution for the poorest members of society. Both material and textual evidence suggests that, throughout the ages and across the Mediterranean world, many men and women turned to protective and healing magic because it offered extraordinary solutions to life crises. In magic, the cultural significance and perceived efficacy of amulets, objects and substances were transformed through ritual and illocutionary action. In this way, they were endowed with agency through the invocation of demons and gods who could help counteract external aggressions against the victim's body.³¹ It is this combination of natural and supernatural remedies that characterises healing magic within the broader tradition of ancient medicine, this association being clearly evident in both the passage from Cato and the aforementioned bronzes from *Ticinum*.

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³¹ Marco Simón, 2021, 421–442.

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Figures

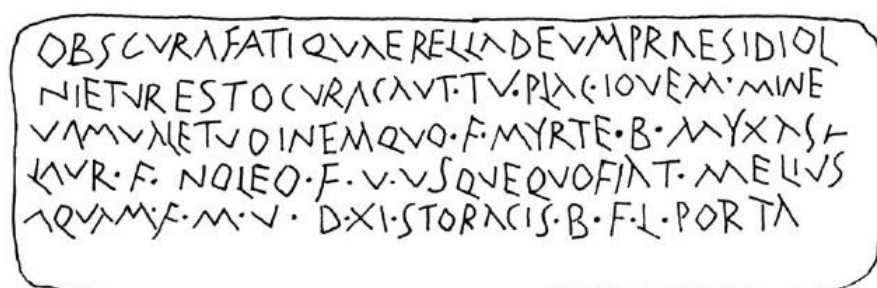


Fig. 1. CIL V 6414 (transcription by T. D'Angelo).

OBSCVRAINIURIAVSUMEA MEDICINALE
 NIETVR'LR. ET. PIA. ESCVLAPIN. BONAM VA
 LETVDINEM. MYRTEM. O. F. SAKUNCULAM
 VETTONICAM. NETVM. IN. AQUA. F. M. F. V. D
 IX IS. O. LAVR. B. MYRTAM. SIC. VIOLE. BAD
 I. NOLEO. E. VTER. SOLUSGRA. F. LIGNTVPORTA

Fig. 2. *CIL* V 6415 (transcription by T. D'Angelo).

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