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Magic and Witchcraft

Essay 1

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Language and Magic

The language that is in magic of the ancient Greek and Roman world was created with the sense and hope for secrecy and being more powerful than ordinary day-to-day language and vocabulary. The formation of words, their spelling, added words, and of course the spells description, all contributed to the expected and interpreted outcome. Witches and Magicians of the time would typically produce their spells onto a tablet, which has been divided into a four-step process: Writing up the spell with verbal incantations, manufacturing the tablet, inscribing the tablet, and lately depositing the tablet. Although the writing of the spell itself has the most to do with influence of the language, but the other steps to have their own part as well, which is why step one will be explained last. Overall, the language used in ancient Greek and Roman magic has its own context, meaning and hopeful outcome, creating its importance in understanding magic of the time.

When a spell was written, it was done so on a tablet made from lead. The lead was a common material of the time and place, meaning that it was nearly effortlessly obtained. It was heavy, but also soft enough to a point that it could be malleable and easily written onto. Meaning, respectively, not every piece of lead someone were to run into would have a spell written on it, but most every spell was written on lead. After manufacturing this piece of lead, it was then time to inscribe the spell, which was typically done so by a professional, a theory pulled from the evidence that similar patterns are seen among found tablets. Once they were inscribed, they were then rolled up and pierced with a nail. This was done as a form of imitative magic: since the piercing of the nail symbolically constrained and pinned down the lead and the spell. The Greek word *Katadesmoi* and the Latin word *Defixiones* both were a term meaning to pin down or constrain. Lastly, the tablets were to be deposited. A very common place that this was done was at a grave site, usually one of a ‘restless’ soul, meaning someone murdered or a young child, put here because their soul was considered to be angry since their life was cut short. Other possible deposition sites were wells, since it was believed that water could communicate with the underworld powers, or the tablet was left at a place of relevance to the person of which the spell was written towards, maybe their garden or their front door step. Before all of these steps could be done, however, a person had to write out their spell, in which reveals much of the language in Greek and Roman magic.

There were a lot of different phrases and linguistic aspects that supposedly gave the spell its power. First off, when creating a spell, there were three different formulas typically used: direct binding, prayer, and persuasive analogy. When using direct binding, the spell will contain the verb “binding” or antonym, for example, stating “I bind X” or “I secure X”. A prayer spell had a tendency to sound more like a wish, for example, “may X fail”. Lastly, the persuasive analogy formula is a use of imitative magic, for example, “as this lead is cold…”. All three of these formulas were common findings in magic spells. Another widely used aspect of a spell was using the identifier of the target’s mother to further specify to the god(s) and/or deity(s) whom they are talking about. The mother’s name was typically used because in society during this time, people could always be certain of someone’s mother since they gave birth to them, but using a father as an identifier was more difficult since no one could confirm paternal DNA. Using repetition was also a large factor in spells, repeating a phrase three times was common, but people would also go further by repeating multiple times.

Uncomprehensive words were an extremely common part of a binding spell. The use of *voces mystice*, Latin for ‘mysterious words’ were words that were really, a mixture of letters to create a word, a word that has no meaning. For example, one spell found states: “EULAMON, restrain, OUSIRI OUSIRI APHI OUSIRI MNE PHRI…as I entrust you this impious and lawless accursed Cardelus, whom his mother Fulgentia bore, so may you bring him a bed of punishment, to be punished with an evil death, and to die within five days! Quickly! Quickly!” (Flint 6-7). This example clearly shows the unpronounceable words as well as naming the mother to ensure the god knows who the target is. The names of the target would also typically be found jumbled, as a form of imitative magic to jumble their names as to jumble their lives. Although these unpronounceable words already had a lot of power in themselves, the more vowels they contained, the more powerful they were seen to be. What was also seen as powerful was the geometric shape in which the spell was written in. If the spell was set up in a certain shape, it would usually lead down to a single letter, this was viewed as a very compelling way to communicate with the divine.

There were five different types of binding spells, or *dexifiones.* These included competitive, legal/political, commercial, erotic, and prayers for justice. The first four of these all had to do with something that was to come in the future compared to the last, which was in revenge of something that had already happened. For example, the person would state, “I have been wronged” or something along those lines. This spell would indicate a thief or some form of wrongdoing. The erotic spells are ones concerning love – either attraction or separation. An attraction spell was typically placed by men to attract someone and start a relationship, since women were typically restricted to their household, and fathers had control over their daughters, doing so was very difficult. On the other hand, women would typically use a separation spell when they felt that their significant other had been unfaithful. As for the rest, competitive, legal/political and commercial, these would have to do with someone a person would want to win in a sport/game, maybe in a political race, or even a store one wants to fail because it is hurting their own business.

Although there are many ways in which language has to do with ancient Greco-Roman magic, these are just a few. The use of language overall was what witches and magicians of the time found to be most powerful – the way words were organized, which words were used (vowels, specifically), and even the way things were spelled (correctly or backwards), knowledge all of which creates a much better understanding of magic of the time. Clearly, the use of spells and language had much to do with society of the time. People had true fear of what these words and phrases being said could do to their lives, creating a fear in all communities and in all people. No one was immune to what the words in these spells could do.

Word Count: 1207

Bibliography

Flint, Valarie; Gordon, Richard; Luck, Georg; and Ogden, Daniel. *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe Ancient Greece and Rome.* The Athlone Press London, 1999.