

PART I

The Discursive Boundaries
of Rituals and Groups

Ritual Boundaries in Late Antique Lived Religion

Augustine's polemic against the blood festival mentioned at the beginning of this book also includes another detail that testifies to the difficulty of distinguishing proper from improper rituals based on the phenomena themselves. Although, as we have seen, the bishop of Hippo castigates as un-Christian the "mingling" of Jesus's name on *ligaturae*, he also lauds the Christian who places a "gospel" (*evangelium*) by his head for healing. We read:

When you have a headache, we commend you if you put the gospel by your head and do not hurry to an amulet [*ligaturam*] . . . we rejoice when we see that a man, confined to his bed, is tossed by fever and pain and yet has placed no hope anywhere else except that he put the gospel by his head, not because the gospel was made for this but because it has been preferred to amulets. (*Tractates on the Gospel of John* 7.12)

In this text, we see how Augustine bestows praise on these hypothetical Christians because they trust solely in the healing properties of a gospel artifact and, therefore, reject *ligaturae*—presumably *ligaturae* that "mingle" Jesus's name into an incantation (see introduction).¹ While we might perceive as odd Augustine's seemingly arbitrary distinction between a ritual object inscribed with the name of Jesus and incantations, which is suspended from one's body, on the one hand, and a gospel artifact placed at one's head, on the other hand, this distinction makes a great deal of sense from his theological and social perspective: for Augustine, mixture fell squarely within the domain of the devil and his minions; a gospel artifact represented a "pure" artifact that supported ecclesiastical ritual idiom and, moreover, did not require ailing Christians to visit practitioners who might influence them in theologically unsavory ways.²

Augustine's rhetorical bifurcation of these practices simultaneously epitomizes an important theme in the study of (Christian) antiquity: narratives and statements against harmful or improper ritual or "magic." This so-called "discourse of

ritual censure” penetrated numerous genres and cultural contexts and in fact constituted one of the primary discursive registers through which ancient writers promoted, maintained, and reflected their social identities.³ Although this theme has impacted diverse areas of ancient and late antique studies,⁴ several helpful surveys of late antique Christian discourses against harmful or “magical” rituals, in particular, have emerged over recent years.⁵ These more recent studies largely reject the approach of prior researchers, such as Alphons A. Barb, who took Christian literary testimonies against improper ritual at face value and thus allowed these polemical sources to shape researchers’ portraits of late antique apotropaic and curative practices.⁶

Scholars now tend to drive a firm wedge between the perspectives of late antique actors who slandered rituals that they considered wicked and those who performed such rituals. For instance, Theodore de Bruyn presupposes this dichotomy in the very structuring of his monograph on late antique Christian amulets, formally separating his study of the statements against certain ritual practices and the like by patristic, monastic, and other Christian writers from his analysis of the amulets themselves.⁷ David Frankfurter draws a firm distinction between literary depictions of local ritual specialists and the actual rituals of those practitioners, even claiming that “we should not assume any overlap” between these two kinds of sources.⁸ More recently, Megan Nutzman has utilized the elite–non-elite binary to frame these respective views of ritual healing practice, relegating the concern for differentiation solely to the realm of the “elites”:

the distinction between “religious” cures and “magical” cures . . . is a reflection of the rhetoric of ancient elite authors who sought to define their religious traditions by excluding certain rituals and practitioners.⁹

As the words of Nutzman imply, the scholarly distinction between literary and material forms of evidence on this issue is not merely related to their respective genres, interests, and occasions, but it is also often framed in dialogue with an elite–non-elite binary. In short, ritual practice itself and normative accusations against improper ritual are typically understood as reflecting two distinct ideological domains of ancient social discourse.¹⁰

This division between normative discourses—Christian and otherwise—on the one hand, and the material evidence of ritual practitioners, on the other hand, is useful insofar as it reminds us that this polemic was not designed to characterize ritual practices and their practitioners in an accurate fashion. Nevertheless, the strict adherence of scholars to this binary has obfuscated the great extent to which some early Christian practitioners promoted their own taxonomies of ritual difference, which were framed in highly theological, polemical, and normative ways. Indeed, there are cases in which the worlds of ritual practice and fierce invective against harmful ritual intersect.

This chapter focuses on one of the clearest examples of such intersection during late antiquity: *The Prayer of Saint Gregory* in Leiden, Ms. AMS 9.¹¹ By highlighting the ways the practitioner behind this codex navigated the distinction between proper and improper ritual in light of his late antique Mediterranean contexts, I hope to make a broader statement about the nature of ritual boundaries in late antiquity.¹²

AT THE INTERSECTION OF CHRISTIAN RITUAL
PRACTICE AND THE SLANDER OF IMPROPER RITUAL:
THE PRAYER OF SAINT GREGORY IN LEIDEN, MS. AMS 9

A considerable body of scholarship has argued that many of the figures who procured Christian amulets and participated in other ostensibly “Christian magical” rituals in Egypt operated within the social and spatial orbits of churches or monasteries.¹³ This growing consensus is based on close readings of the creedal,¹⁴ biblical,¹⁵ and liturgical language¹⁶ found on the ritual artifacts, conciliar and patristic condemnations of priests and monks for creating such objects,¹⁷ and even archaeological discoveries *in situ* of *grimoires* in monasteries.¹⁸ Przemysław Piwowarczyk, however, has recently argued that scholars have been too quick to identify a monastic/priestly setting for many of these sources.¹⁹ Piwowarczyk points to selected literary texts and selected material objects (e.g., P.Berol. inv. 11347), which, he claims, seem to envision laypeople as ritual practitioners. He also emphasizes the absence of explicit information connecting many apotropaic and curative objects to monasteries.²⁰ Although scholars will no doubt continue to debate the precise proportion of ritual objects that were created by monks/clergy or by laypeople, David Frankfurter seems to be on the right track when he concludes that many Coptic apotropaic, curative, and divinatory objects from late antiquity “point to the overlapping social worlds of saint’s shrine, church, and monastery—the spatial centers of Christianity in the late antique Egyptian landscape.”²¹

The general shift in the social locus of ritual practice from indigenous temple functionaries toward Christian monks and clergy during late antiquity facilitated mergers of old and new cultural competencies—ritual, theological, among others. Aggregations of these competencies or literacies could at times crystalize in unexpected and even counterintuitive ways—at least relative to our inherited taxonomies.

One such unexpected manifestation appears in Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 (see fig. 1). My analysis will focus on its opening text, the so-called *Prayer of Saint Gregory*, situating it within the contexts of both ancient ritual objects and invective against improper ritual. As we will see, this object betrays qualities that prompt us to contextualize it comparatively *both* in reference to sources and concerns typically deemed “magical” *and* to those usually placed under the category “religion.” Although I am not the only scholar to observe this codex’s emphasis on

improper ritual,²² my alternating taxonomic approach to it highlights to a much greater degree how even the very Christians whose ritual practices might draw ecclesiastical accusations of improper or illicit practice could promote clearly demarcated and theological sensitive notions of good and evil rituals—analogue to what we find in patristic and monastic sources. Accordingly, I will argue that ostensible “magicians” and their “magical” artifacts, such as Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, were not merely the objects or victims of discourses against improper, negative, or illicit ritual; they were also participants in such discourses, promoting their own taxonomies of ritual practice to the exclusion of those of their rivals. This point, I will further argue, carries implications for how we might imagine discourses of illicit, improper, and harmful ritual working in late antique quotidian religion.

Ritual Practice in *The Prayer of Saint Gregory*

In the *Prayer of Saint Gregory*—a text, for which we have later Greek exemplars²³—we find a first-person Christian tradition (attributed to a certain ‘Gregory’), which is explicitly called a “prayer” (*euchē*) and an “exorcism” or “adjuration” (*eksorgismos* [read: *eksorkismos*]). The text begins as follows:

A prayer and an adjuration which I wrote, I, Gregory, the servant of the living God, so that it might be an amulet [*phylaktērion*] to all who will take it and read it . . . (Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, 1r, 1–6)²⁴

As is well known, the first-person narrative was one of the means by which ritual experts achieved efficacy.²⁵ In the case of Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, the practitioner assumed the identity of a Christian authoritative figure named Gregory. This Gregory, who is hailed in the text as a saint,²⁶ could be Gregory of Nazianzus (329–89) or perhaps even Gregory Thaumaturgus (ca. 212–ca. 270).²⁷ Whatever the case might have been, there are other pseudepigraphic Coptic spells in which the practitioner—or the prospective client—takes on the identity of an authoritative person or preternatural entity. For instance, Brit. Lib. Or. 5987, a Coptic spell that probably dates from the seventh or eighth century CE, reads, “For I am Mary, who is hidden in the appearance of Mariam. I am the mother who has given birth to the true light.”²⁸ Another sixth- or seventh-century CE Coptic practitioner takes on the personae of several angelic and divine entities, including Michaël, Ouriël, Iaō, Sabaōth, Gabriël, and Abrasax.²⁹

The labels our practitioner uses to describe *The Prayer of Saint Gregory* are worth noting; as we have already seen, he explicitly claims that his “prayer” or “exorcism” becomes an “amulet” (*phylaktērion*).³⁰ Yet, despite this initial claim of transformation, the practitioner continues to call his text a *prayer* (*euchē* and its cognates), even when it is clearly used as an amuletic object; the specialist notes not only that his “prayer” can be read³¹ and recited,³² but that it can also be deposited

(or placed)³³ and worn (or held),³⁴ and has the capability to deflect the violent actions of the “magician” (*magos*) back against him.³⁵ As is clear from this text, the practitioner conceptualized prayers and *phylaktēria* as overlapping on textual, material, depositional, and functional registers.³⁶

This practitioner’s emphasis on the language of prayer no doubt worked in dialogue with his well-informed Christian faith, evinced by a rather impressive knowledge of global Christian traditions about God and biblical history. In addition to the various Christian texts included in the codex (e.g., the Abgar-Jesus correspondence; the prayer of Judas Cyriacus), he also uses numerous Christian expressions, such as “the servant of the living god,”³⁷ the “Holy Trinity [*trias*],”³⁸ “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,”³⁹ and the “holy, consubstantial [*homoousion*], and life-giving Trinity.”⁴⁰ Moreover, we find the following summary of the exodus and Decalogue narratives, which are bracketed by adjuration formulae:⁴¹

I adjure all you, every act of violence [*‘nčinqon’s nim*], by the great name that is glorious, God almighty—the one who brought his people out from the land of Egypt with a strong hand and an exalted arm, the one who struck Pharaoh and all his power, the one who spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai as he gave his law and his commandments to the children of Israel and he caused [them]⁴² to eat manna—that you flee far away, and you do not return at all to stand in the place in which this prayer is placed. (Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, 4r, ll. 5–26)⁴³

This practitioner’s knowledge of several (extra-)canonical Christian texts, Christological and Trinitarian expressions, and the exodus story and Moses’s reception of the Decalogue suggests that, if not a monk, he at least had considerable training in biblical traditions. In either case, the practitioner’s substantial religious education allowed him to use, for instance, biblical traditions as historical precedents for the might of God, whose name supported his protective ritual.

Discourse Against Illicit Rituals in *The Prayer of Saint Gregory*

As part of the *Prayer of Saint Gregory*, the practitioner also discusses the negative rituals that his *phylaktērion* counteracts. What I find particularly interesting about this discussion is how the practitioner frames these negative rituals. For instance, he deems the improper ritual activities of the *magos* both demonic (Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, 6r, ll. 13–14) and as an operation of the devil (Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, 7r, ll. 18–19). The practitioner also emphasizes the theme of evil. We read that his amuletic prayer will “undo every working [*energia*] that comes about by evil [*ponēros*] people, that is sorceries [*‘mmēntreferhik*], and enchantments [*‘mmēntrefmoute*], and bindings [*henmēntrefmour*] of people through terrible sicknesses . . .” (Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, 1r, ll. 7–14).⁴⁴ In this passage, the practitioner slanders as evil the people who engage in harmful ritual practices against a

possible user of his *phylaktērion*. In another section of this text, he applies the category “evil” to the actions or objects themselves, requesting that the person in possession of this *phylaktērion* be spared from “every evil thing and every evil” (*hōb nim ʿmponēros auō epethoou nim* [Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, 4r, ll. 2–4]).

Beyond the link to evil and the demonic, Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 also connects harmful ritual with ethnic alterity.⁴⁵ The practitioner explicitly lists Persians, Chaldeans, Hebrews, and Egyptians among the unsavory characters whose rituals he aims to counteract: “whether it is . . . a Persian man, or a Persian woman, or a Chaldean, or a Chaldean woman, or a Hebrew, or a Hebrew woman, or an Egyptian, or an Egyptian woman, and in short whoever it is” (Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, 3r, l. 26–3v, l. 7).⁴⁶ Of course, the Egyptian men and women mentioned here would have presumably possessed a different kind of alterity for this *Egyptian* practitioner; in light of his overtly Christian way of framing ritual practice more generally, I consider it likely that “Egyptian” here connoted “non-Christian” Egyptian practitioners.⁴⁷ In any case, the practitioner’s list no doubt operated synecdochically, encompassing all possible harmful experts by way of reference to a few ethnic exemplars, as is especially evident from the inclusion of the final phrase “whoever it is” (*petentof pe*).

The practitioner also provides a considerable list of the harms, which these troublemakers cause, including not only “magic” (*ʿmʿntmagos*), but also actions that “cause terror and torments and dumbness and deafness and speechlessness . . . and all types of pain” (Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, 4v, ll. 9–21). As we will see below, this list of potential troubles reflects widespread fears about the nature of harmful rituals in the ancient world. The practitioner also seems to be drawing on popular ideas about evil ritual—and perhaps even lived experience—when he enumerates the various places that the *magos* might practice his craft or deposit harmful objects. He asks God to do away with violent deeds directed against a place, which has been bound with a ritual object, whether that object is:

hidden in its foundations, or in its extended places, or in its entrance or in its exit, or in the door, or in the window, or in the bedroom, or in the yard, or in the dining room . . . or in any place. (Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, 2v, ll. 4–20)

Although the final, all-encompassing phrase, “in any place” (*hʿn topos nim*) would have sufficed, this practitioner—as we have already seen—has invested considerable value in the writing of lists.⁴⁸ In this passage, it is clear that he assumes the domestic sphere is particularly susceptible to attack. That this fear was widespread in Egypt and beyond is evident from the other practitioners, who expressed the need to protect the house.⁴⁹ To offer just one example, P.Oxy. 8.1152, a late fifth- or early sixth-century CE amulet from Oxyrhynchus that we will discuss in more depth in chapter 2, reads: “Hōr, Hōr, Phōr, Elōei, Adōnai, Iaō, Sabaōth, Michaēl, Jesus Christ. Help us and this house [*kai toutō oikō*]. Amen” (fig. 2).⁵⁰

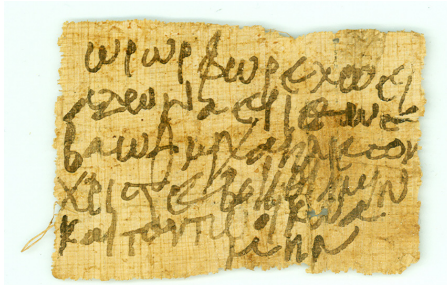


FIGURE 2. Greek amulet for protection of a house. P.Oxy. 8.1152. Special Collections, Wright Library, Princeton Theological Seminary.

DISCOURSES AGAINST WICKED RITUALS AND RITUAL
PRACTICE IN EVERYDAY LIFE: LIVED RELIGION
AT THE INTERSECTION OF RITUALS, GRECO-ROMAN
LITERATURE, AND CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

It is useful at this point to situate our Coptic practitioner within the world of claims against illicit, evil, or harmful ritual practice. Taxonomies and accusations of improper ritual in antiquity were disputed within and across various social, literary, and institutional contexts. As I hope to demonstrate, the distinction in Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 between the practitioner's positive *phylaktērion* and adjurations, on the one hand, and the incantations, idols, sorcery, and bindings of the evil, demonic *magos*, on the other hand, demonstrates how the diverse cultural competencies of practitioners might crystalize into taxonomies of good and evil ritual, which, while differing to varying degrees from those expressed in patristic, monastic, and conciliar sources, were still clearly demarcated and theologically oriented.

This practitioner's claim that his prayer could be used as a *phylaktērion* placed him within a robust early Christian debate about the proper boundaries of ritual practice. Indeed, the term "*phylaktērion*" was evaluated in various ways within early Christian imagination. Much like Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, many Christian papyrus and parchment amulets from Egypt and many Christian amuletic gems from various regions of the ancient Mediterranean use "*phylaktērion*" as a self-designator.⁵¹

On the other side of the spectrum, we have already seen that the Phrygian canon—falsely attributed to a single Council of Laodicea (see introduction)—condemned the production of *phylaktēria* by clericals and priests and demanded excommunication for their users.⁵² In addition, an early sixth-century Coptic copy of the so-called *Apostolic Tradition*⁵³ bars from baptism a host of illicit ritual practitioners, ranging from the *magos* to "the one who makes *phylaktēria*."⁵⁴ To be sure, not all early Christian literary texts took such a negative view of *phylaktēria*.

Presumably this more tolerant perspective was related to the mostly beneficial functions of *phylaktēria* (despite the negative or imprecatory effects they might have on rival practitioners [see discussion below]). Commenting on Matt 23:5, where Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for drawing attention to themselves by, among other things, broadening their *phylaktēria*,⁵⁵ Jerome and John Chrysostom both make a comparison between the Pharisees and the curative/prophylactic uses of gospel objects by women.⁵⁶ While these authors do not frame this ritual practice in a particularly favorable way, they also do not forbid congregants from using biblical artifacts for prophylactic or curative purposes.⁵⁷

Although the self-identification of Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 as a *phylaktērion* launched the practitioner and his object into a cultural fray, his slandering of negative ritual merged less controversial discourses within and across material and literary sources. His claim that the rites of the *magos* fell squarely within the realm of the devil and his demonic minions certainly resonated with global Christian discourses about harmful ritual. This theme is present in the words of several late antique patristic writers. As early as Justin Martyr, we find the connection between demons and the world of *mageia* and its cognates:

For we forewarn you to be on your guard, lest those demons [*daimones*] whom we have been accusing should deceive you, and quite divert you from reading and understanding what we say. For they strive to hold you their slaves and servants; and sometimes by appearances in dreams, and sometimes by magical impositions [*magikōn strophōn*], they subdue all who make no strong opposing effort for their own salvation.⁵⁸

What Justin regarded as improper ritual activity constituted for him one of the primary ways demons deceive believers. The demonic association continued to characterize the denunciation of improper ritual throughout late antiquity, making its way into the work of writers like Tertullian of Carthage (160–220 CE), Origen of Alexandria (184–253 CE), Arnobius of Sicca (255–330 CE), and, of course, Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE).⁵⁹

This demonic-ritual interface was also a persistent motif among ancient practitioners. A wide array of sources from the Mediterranean and ancient Near East includes “counter-magical” incantations, which link rituals harmful for their clients with evil spirits and demons. Although examples are not in short supply, we might consider a certain Jewish Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowl now housed in the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem that requests Goray son of Buzanduk and his family be spared from a host of malevolent forces, including: “all evil spirits, demons, plagues, devils, afflictions, satans, bans, tormentors, spirits of barrenness, spirits of abortion, sorcerers, vows, curses, magic rites, idols, wicked pebble spirits, errant spirits, shadow spirits, liliths . . . and all evil doers of harm.”⁶⁰ This bowl—and many others from late antique Mesopotamia—stand alongside Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 in promising protection from the intersecting worlds of harmful ritual and malicious spiritual attack.

The association of evil ritual with a host of ethnic Others—including Persians, Chaldeans, Hebrews, and Egyptians—also transcended the ostensible divide between the worlds of practitioners, early patristic writers, and Greco-Roman writers in general. James Nathan Ford and Ohad Abudraham have recently published a lacunose Syriac incantation bowl (T27983) written in Manichaean script, which utilizes ethnic categories to organize ritual practices considered harmful to the client, emphasizing, for instance, the Arab, Persian, and Jewish origins of witchcraft (*hrš*).⁶¹ Likewise, the redactor behind the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* participated in the far-reaching ethnographic stereotype linking Egypt with magic when he placed on the lips of the fictional Clement the following words:

I shall proceed to Egypt, and there I shall cultivate the friendship of the hierophants or prophets, who preside at the shrines. Then I shall win over a magician by money, and entreat him, by what they call the necromantic art, to bring me a soul from the infernal regions, as if I were desirous of consulting it about some business.⁶²

As David Frankfurter has noted, this third- or fourth-century text merely provides a Christian version of an Egyptomania already well embedded in literary imagination, evident in the writings of Lucian, Apuleius, and others.⁶³ We might say that Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 presents an even later version of this tradition.

The practitioner's resonance within and across Greco-Roman and Christian contexts is also found in his description of the signs that might indicate the operation of a harmful ritual. As I noted above, he emphasizes that the negative rituals, which his *phylaktērion* counteracts, inflict a wide range of harms, including those that affect communication (esp. "speechlessness" [*hen^em^entatšače*]).⁶⁴ The belief that imprecatory utterances could alter speech was central to the ritual texts of several curse tablets, especially those concerned with influencing judicial rulings. For instance, a curse tablet from Athens dating to around 300 BCE includes the following words:

Theagenēs, the butcher/cook, I bind [*katadō*] the tongue and soul and speech [*logon*] that he is practicing. Purrias, I bind the hands and feet and tongue and soul and speech that he is practicing . . . Dokimos, the butcher/cook, the tongue and soul and speech that they are practicing . . . If they lay any counterclaim before the arbitrator or the court, let them seem to be of no account, either in word or in deed.⁶⁵

As is clear from such curse tablets, practitioners believed they could negatively impact the speech abilities of individuals, so that they could not, among other things, perform properly in court.

The idea that there were harmful rituals, which could affect one's speech, also crept into early Christian literary imagination. Jerome mentions in his *Life of Hilarion* that a young man wielded an amatory spell against a young Christian girl, with whom he was smitten. We learn that, on account of the spell, "the virgin went mad, threw aside her veil, tore her hair, gnashed her teeth, and shouted the name of the young man [*inclamare nomen adolescentis*]" (21.4). Like the practitioner

behind Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, Jerome's tale presupposes that spells could alter one's bodily movements, including speech. Indeed, according to this story, the young girl was unable to control her verbal utterances—involuntarily calling out the name of her curser—up until the moment Hilarion exorcized the spirit inside her.

These counter-rituals in the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds represent a phenomenon that even transcends the division between antiquity and contemporary societies. As M. Reyes-Cortez has noted about the “magical practices” associated with the cult of Santa Muerte in Mexico City, Mexico:

Cemetery workers and visitors believe in two methods of defense against magic and occultism: they can destroy the objects or the animals used, thereby disrupting the associated magic causing no further harm or, if the magic has already taken its toll they can combat black magic with white.⁶⁶

This battle between black magic and white magic provides a rough analogue to many of the rituals operative in the objects mentioned above. It is not surprising, therefore, that scholars of antiquity have tended to understand the counter-rituals on objects, such as Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, as being by and large in dialogue with a kind of cross-cultural and pragmatically oriented notion of “magic”: In other words, if a ritual helps the client (even if it harms someone else), it is presented as positive; if someone else's ritual harms his client, that ritual is framed as negative. In short, this perspective assumes that practitioners' views of ritual practice were primarily—or exclusively—determined by the practical needs of their clients and could change accordingly.

This interpretation is not without supporting evidence. Yuval Harari has recently highlighted how the overlaps between protective and aggressive magic in the Jewish incantation bowls from Mesopotamia suggest that practitioners served a dual function for clients:

On the one hand, they [the practitioners behind the bowls] functioned as agents of harmful magic in the service of whoever wanted to harm another. On the other, they offered protection from such acts of witchcraft with the same linguistic and ritual means, but this time to offset the witchcraft. We need not assume that the same writer was responsible for both aspects in any particular case, but in the broad social perspective reflected in the bowls, as professionals skilled in the activation of ritual power in the service of the individual, they served the interests of both parties.⁶⁷

The textual overlaps between apotropaic, curative, and imprecatory incantation bowls from Mesopotamia are quite intriguing and lend credence to the idea that *some* practitioners might have created both protective and aggressive bowls. Indeed, the ways in which the *phylaktērion* is presented in Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 reveal how the concerns of positive rituals for healing and protection could intersect with those of more negative rituals; his *phylaktērion* is said to “undo” or “destroy” (*bōl ebol*) the harmful actions of the rival practitioner and to send back

that practitioner's harms against him (see Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, 1r, l. 7; 3r, l. 15–3v, l. 7). In short, his *phylaktērion* is a blessing to his client and a curse to his rival.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, a purely pragmatic interpretation of the counter-ritual testimonies on such objects frames a priori their approaches to ritual differentiation *solely* within the ostensible world of “magic”—understood here as an almost cynical, yet discrete sphere of (ancient) social existence in which religious beliefs or identities were irrelevant or unimportant (see also chapter 2).⁶⁹

But, as we have seen, the practitioner behind Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 not only shares a good deal with ancient practitioners; he also finds kindred spirits among early Christian writers, framing his statements against certain rituals in a highly theological way. For instance, he calls his *phylaktērion* a “prayer” (*euchē*); he draws on well-known Trinitarian and Christological phrases and Christian textual traditions; and he associates other practitioners with demons and the devil and calls them and their rituals “evil” (*ponēros*), placing that evil in direct contrast to his Christian ritual practice. This theological dimension should not necessarily be surprising since, as I noted above, much scholarship over the past couple decades has shown that Christian ritual experts during late antiquity were often monks, priests, and others operating within or on the margins of Christian institutions, such as monasteries and churches. Again, in my estimation, our practitioner was likely a monk—or at least trained in a monastery.

Like many early Christian writers, this practitioner presumably drew from a host of traditions about evil rituals that cut across the ostensible worlds of early Christian literature, Greco-Roman literature, and ritual practice itself. And, like these Christian writers, he framed his presentation of negative ritual in Christian theological terms. In short, he fully participated in what is traditionally called “anti-magical discourse.” It is no wonder, therefore, that, although the practitioner's promotion of his *phylaktērion* put him in direct opposition to the taxonomies of improper ritual found in the Canon of Laodicea and the Coptic copy of the *Apostolic Tradition*, his theologically oriented distinction between his *phylaktērion* and the harmful rituals of the *magos* aligns quite closely with the presentations of certain Christian heroes' counter-ritual activities. As we've already seen in the introduction to this book, the highly influential fourth-century *Life of Antony* attributes to Antony the following words: “Where the sign of the cross is made, magic (*mageia*) wastes away and poison (*pharmakeia*) does not work.”⁷⁰ Much like Antony, who is here said to have rendered *mageia* and *pharmakeia* ineffective by virtue of his ritual gesturing of the cross, the practitioner behind Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 seems to have understood his “prayer” (*euchē*) or “amulet” (*phylaktērion*) to be an antidote to harmful rituals. Consider also Macarius of Egypt, who, according to one tradition, was said to have counteracted a love spell that turned a young girl into a mare with a combination of prayer, genuflection, and *materia magica* (i.e., sacred oil).⁷¹ This confluence of speech (specifically prayer), gesture, and material

in Macarius's story is not altogether different from the way *The Prayer of Saint Gregory* is said to have worked as a protective device.

Of course, one might productively frame the counter-ritual materials in Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 and in these and other Christian (monastic) texts together within the domain of "magic."⁷² But, for the purposes of this chapter, there is heuristic utility in placing all these sources under the category "religion" to stress their emphases on ritual differentiation and boundaries. Differences in genre notwithstanding, the counter-rituals in Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 align with those described in the monastic literary texts—at least insofar as they map early Christian symbols, materials, and gestures vociferously hailed as proper, legitimate, and God-fearing onto long-standing Mediterranean counter-ritual paradigms. In this way, we might say that in all these sources discourse against rituals deemed wicked were simultaneously linked to—and contrasted with—alternative and "proper" practices.

By attending to this merger of anti-harmful-ritual testimony and ritual practice itself, we can better contextualize and understand discourses against improper ritual in late antique quotidian life. The Coptic practitioner's promotion of his *phylaktērion* was in no way in conflict with his firm distinction between proper and improper rituals. To state the matter somewhat differently, he did in fact presuppose a concept that resembles our category "magic" (in its negative sense), but it did not encompass the recitation, suspension, or deposition of a *phylaktērion* (in contrast, again, to certain ecclesiastical voices).⁷³

Of course, Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 is unique because it gives us an extraordinarily clear expression of a strongly demarcated Christian taxonomy of proper and improper rituals, which conflicts with conventional portraits of early Christian ritual practice. Nevertheless, this Coptic codex seems to reflect a broader trend in late antiquity. For instance, the practitioner behind Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796 (see also chapter 4) distinguishes his text from harmful rituals such as "sorcery" (*pharmako*) and "magic" (*magia*), as well as from demons.⁷⁴ Likewise, P.Vindob. K 8302 promises the client deliverance from anything evil, including any "potion or magic or a drug" (*hik eite magia eite pharmagia*).⁷⁵

Yet, similar to the practitioner behind Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, the scribes who crafted objects, such as Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796 and P.Vindob. K 8302, framed their anti-ritual invective in highly Christianized terms. In Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796, the practitioner includes within his text, for instance, a prayer of Jesus on the cross (ll. 1–10) and an image of the crucified Jesus (ll. 53–59) that draw from biblical and parabiblical traditions (see chapter 4). Much like the scribe behind Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, this practitioner was well-steeped in various Christian texts. The practitioner behind P.Vindob. K 8302 used the Abgar-Jesus correspondence as a basic literary template for one of his spells (P.Vindob. K 8302[a]) and incorporated into his text a *historiola* based on the crucifixion of Jesus (P.Vindob. K 8302[a] ll. 2–4), as well as various Christological formulae, such as the "Jesus Christ" (e.g., P.Vindob. K 8302[a] ll. 4, 6, 24) and "our Lord Jesus Christ" (P.Vindob. K 8302[a] ll.

10–13).⁷⁶ Like Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, these other spells follow the patristic and monastic writers in framing their rituals in highly Christianized ways.

Yet, also like Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, their thematic, ritual, and scribal features would have placed their versions of Christian ritual at odds with those of many patristic and conciliar voices; both objects, among other things, draw from the long-standing practice of inscribing *charaktêres* on ritual texts when they incorporate rings around the letters of select divine names (Brit. Lib. Or. 6796[4], 6796, ll. 53–59; P.Vindob. K 8302[a], ll. 6–8).⁷⁷ As we have already seen in the introduction, Augustine explicitly condemned the use of such “*caracteres*,” emphasizing their demonic origin and their association with the “art of magic” (*magicarum artium*).⁷⁸

Alongside the evidence gleaned from such ritual objects, which might have been created by monks or local church functionaries, literary texts occasionally suggest that alternative taxonomies of ritual practice could even be held by users of these ritual materials. In other words, belief in rigid ritual boundaries seems to have permeated diverse Christian social strata and therefore was not limited to some putative category of “elites.” In *Homily 8 in Colossians 5*, John Chrysostom includes a hypothetical conversation he has with a Christian woman, who uses an “incantation” (*epôdê*): “Tell me, then, if someone says, ‘Take him to an idol’s temple, and he will live,’ would you allow it? ‘No’ she says. ‘Why not?’ ‘Because he is urging me to commit idolatry. ‘In this case,’ she says, ‘there is no idolatry [*eidôlalatreia*], but only incantation [*epôdê*].’”⁷⁹ If we focus on the perspective of this hypothetical woman, the passage seems to corroborate what we find in the material record: people who participated in what certain patristic writers regarded as improper rituals could themselves have clearly demarcated notions of proper versus improper ritual, which were at least partly impacted by normative Christian traditions. Indeed, for this hypothetical woman, participation in the temple cult constituted an illegitimate, idolatrous practice. We do not find here an absence of normative Christian ritual, but a different configuration of it from the one Chrysostom promoted.

It is, of course, not surprising that those participating in rituals sometimes deemed evil in late antique literary sources would appropriate the symbols and idioms of early Christian institutions. Theodore de Bruyn has persuasively demonstrated the great extent to which practitioners drew on the symbols, rituals, and idioms of what he calls “the institutional Christian culture.”⁸⁰ But, if we examine the evidence with an eye toward broader Mediterranean discourses of proper and improper ritual, many of the extant “magical” objects reveal another kind of ecclesiastical impact; they gesture toward a world in which at least some late antique ritual practitioners and participants were also influenced by *Christian normativity itself* (even if they adhered to different versions or configurations of that normative Christian discourse). Accordingly, individuals whom ancient patristic or monastic writers or contemporary scholars might call *magoi*—or

clients of *magoi*—could themselves happily condemn *mageia* and *magoi*, complete with the usual claims of demonic influence or exotic ethnic origin. Evidence of this kind reveals the coexistence of *different configurations* of the boundaries between proper and improper ritual, which were no less vehement or clearly demarcated than those promoted by many late antique literary authors.⁸¹ These diverse, yet clearly demarcated, configurations of ritual practice should prompt us to consider a broader methodological point: what appears to be blurred boundaries between proper and improper ritual relative to our inherited categories should not necessarily be taken to imply blurred boundaries—or a lack of interest in ritual differentiation—in our ancient sources.⁸²

As a corollary to this point, the objects and texts that I have discussed seem to shed light on the proliferation of discourses against evil ritual in late antiquity. Such discourses penetrated the overlapping worlds of ecclesiastical and political leaders, local practitioners (whether monks or priests), and parishioners; a rigid distinction between “elites” and “non-elites” does not seem to apply to this issue. These various actors constructed taxonomies of ritual difference in dialogue with several, at times intersecting, cultural competencies—theological, ritual, ascetic, and the like. The boundary between proper and improper ritual was, in effect, being negotiated within and across multiple social strata.

To be sure, condemnations of harmful practices in these material sources do not focus on legal arbitration. What is more, the particular taxonomies of local practitioners or parishioners would probably not have had as broad an impact or influence as those operating more directly or officially within institutional centers of Christianity.⁸³ Nevertheless, the denunciations of harmful ritual in Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 and related texts suggest that *discourses* of ritual censure, including theologically informed claims of improper ritual behavior, were probably regular features of late antique quotidian life.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this chapter focused on Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, a Coptic papyrus codex that demonstrates how developments at the intersection of late antique ritual practice and anti-ritual discourse might reveal themselves in late antiquity. Its Egyptian practitioner drew from a repository of traditional tropes against *magoi* (e.g., their foreignness, their harmful practices, and demonic influence), many of which also made their way into early Christian literary traditions against improper ritual. His ritual practice likewise reflects his adroit ability to navigate the intersection of early Christian and traditional Mediterranean discourses. He not only incorporated into his codex a wide range of Christian idioms and insisted on referring to his text as a “prayer” (*euchē*)—which he attributed to a Christian authority—but he also made use of long-standing invocatory formulae and assumed the validity of

well-established traditions regarding the recitation, deposition, and suspension of textualized objects.⁸⁴

The negative approach to improper ritual found in Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 is especially worth noting since it carries broader implications for the study of late antiquity. Despite the claims that his prayer could function as an “amulet” (*phylaktērion*)—thus placing him in direct opposition with, for instance, those behind the so-called “Council of Laodicea” and the Coptic copy of the *Apostolic Tradition*—the practitioner operated according to strict distinctions between proper and improper ritual. This Coptic codex ought to remind us, therefore, that Christian objects, which appear *to us* to blur the boundaries between “religion” and “magic,” might in fact simply reflect different configurations of proper and improper ritual—no less stringently demarcated than those promoted in patristic, monastic, and conciliar sources. Indeed, as heirs to local ritual practices, Christian idioms, and both traditional Mediterranean and Christian discourses of ritual censure, individuals operating within or on the margins of monasteries and churches could integrate invective against *mageia* and the like into their Christian healing, exorcistic, and apotropaic rituals without any hint of intellectual tension or contradiction. All indications suggest that, despite the claims of certain Christian literary writers, local specialists often viewed their amulets and spells as falling squarely within the world of Christianity (on this point, see also chapter 2). For them, *mageia* was the antithesis of what they were doing; it therefore needed to be condemned and combatted. The verbal strategies and contexts that Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 embodies thus give palpable expression to the multiple discursive worlds behind and created by statements against harmful rituals.