

Seeking Help from the Gods and Men: Chronological Changes in the Language of Apotropaia

The first scholarly discussion of an object's ability to avert evil was made by Adolf Furtwängler in the late 19th century, whose brief commentary on the use of the gorgoneion as an artistic motif introduced the term *apotropaia* to the field (Roscher 1884, 1704). Since then, the definition of *apotropaia* has remained rooted in an assumption that all protective magical practices functioned in the same way, irrespective of historical or cultural context. To date, no studies have been performed to determine the nature of apotropaism as a practice in ancient Greece, with the result that chronological and cultural relationships between different forms of *apotropaia* have been overlooked. It is the intention of this paper to fill this lacuna through a systematic analysis of protective magic in Greek literature to determine the conditions under which apotropaia were used; to identify the nuances of the language of protection; and to understand the distinctions and changes between divine and mundane protection over time. The analysis proceeds through four distinct categories of terminology: (1) The synonym pair of *ἀμύνω* and *ἀλέξω*; (2) The term *ἀποτρέπω*; (3) The synonyms of *ἀποτρέπω*; and (4) The designators of amulets.

In general, it is clear that the modern scholarly understanding of apotropaia is a common designator for a variety of actions in antiquity. These actions can be further sorted into two chronological periods of evidence. The early discussions of apotropaia are characterized broadly by an interest in divine aid (Christensen 2013, 270) and specifically by direct entreaties to the gods for protection (Aesch. *Per.* 201-5). In these discussions, it is clearly the gods who are the agents of the protection that is sought, and any failure to acknowledge their agency results in the absence of the requested protection (Fraenkel 1950, 388). By the beginning of the second century A.D., discussions of tutelary action demonstrate that the agency of the protective actions has

shifted to human rituals rather than the power of the divine, with no punitive consequences from the gods (Plut. *Quaestiones Convivales* 7.2). By the end of the second century A.D., the language of protection shifts even further to reveal a contextual inversion in the roles of gods and men: human agents begin to be described as able to divert evils just as the gods were said to do in the fifth century B.C. (Paus. 1.5.1.7), while the gods perform ritualistic activities to avert evil as the mortals once did (Paus. 9.22.1).

This paper concludes with a discussion of amuletic terminology, in which three distinct patterns are revealed. First, the earliest uses of an amuletic term (*περίσπτος*) appear to indicate a preference for ornamental appendages rather than tutelary devices, the latter of which does not appear in the literature until the first century B.C. (Str. *Geo.* 16.4.17). Second, such tutelary devices, when mentioned, are marked out as unusual customs practiced by non-Greek foreigners. Finally, none of the amulets discussed function through the agency of the gods; rather, they are set up as being distinct from conventional religious practices and potentially at odds with it.

The chronological change that occurs between these categories of evidence is significant, and likely in response to the sociopolitical climate of the Hellenistic period and later. As scholars have indicated, numerous wars, military upheavals, and population movements in the centuries following the death of Alexander could result in changed ideologies to compensate for the failure of deities to protect their worshippers. In such cases, widespread disillusionment with traditional gods plausibly resulted in a demand for more tangible securities (Ath. *Learned Banqueters* 6.253e), thereby permitting the Greeks to explore an interest in alternative and foreign tutelary practices, such as human performance or amulets, which would be significantly more accessible to more people.

Bibliography

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