

Chase the Hymn: Music and Magic in the *PGM* Hymn to Hermes

Hymns occur in spells throughout the *Papyri Graecae Magicae*; far from a state-sanctioned group performance, these hymns were part of popular or personal religion, performed by an individual spell user to the (hopefully) receptive audience of a god or goddess. Many of these hymns have only recently received extensive study. Bortolani 2016 provides text and commentary for the *PGM* hymns to Helios, Apollo, Hecate, and Selene, making these difficult texts more accessible. Historically, studies of the *PGM* hymns often focus on what these hymns reveal about religion (Graf 1991). More recent studies focus on the role of narration in the *PGM* hymns (Petrovic 2015) and question the extent of syncretism in the *PGM* hymn to Hermes specifically (Bortolani 2019). Instead, I analyze the performance of the hymns and what it means for the relationship between music and magic. To what extent were magical hymns considered music? Does the evidence suggest that ancient practitioners would have spoken, chanted, or sung the hymns' dactylic hexameters?

To answer these questions, my paper focuses on the *PGM* hymn to Hermes, reconstructed as hymn 15/16 in Preisendanz 1973. A similar hymn survives on three different magical papyri from three different centuries—with three different implications about whether the hymn should be sung:

1. *PGM* 17b.1-23: 2nd c. AD papyrus; found in Hermopolis; Strasbourg, Bibliothèque Nationale: P.gr. 1179. No spell (non-metrical portion) preserved.
2. *PGM* 7.668-81: 3rd-4th c. AD papyrus; originated in Egypt; speculated to have come from Thebes; British Library: P.Lond. 121. Spell for a dream revelation.
3. *PGM* 5.400-21: 4th c. AD papyrus; found in Thebes; British Library: P.Lond. 46. Spell for a dream revelation.

In order to provide the necessary background for my arguments, I first discuss these papyri and explain the content of each hymn and spell. I then discuss the interpretive issues surrounding version one of the hymn, since it survives without the non-metrical instructions that would have indicated how the hymn should be performed. The survival of the hymn on its own suggests that practitioners may have viewed these hymns as having ‘magical’ qualities in and of themselves.

I then turn to the musical qualities of versions two and three of the hymn, focusing on the language used in the instructions of each spell and the physical presentation of each spell on the papyrus. In version two, the metrical portion seems to be understood as a spoken section that is not greatly distinguished from the non-metrical portions of the spell, but in version three the metrical and non-metrical portions are distinguished on the papyrus, and the language suggests that the hymn was sung. Specifically, in this version the practitioner is told to “chase” the hymn (*δίωκε*; *PGM* 5.394, 422). After discussing relevant comparanda for this phrase (such as Pindar’s Isthmian 4), I argue that this language is more active and vivid than just ‘saying’ something and is associated with musical performance. The intended role of music in each spell thus seems to be different. I discuss the reasons for these differences and their implications. Different magicians or practitioners could have performed each hymn using their unique personal preferences: perhaps some users would prefer to chant or sing to the god, while others would simply recite the words. The spell represents a private interaction between the user and the god, so there would have been some flexibility in its performance. What one magician recites, another might sing, and I argue that this individualized component of spells explains the different relationship between music and magic exemplified in three versions of a hymn to Hermes.

Bibliography

- Bortolani, L. M. 2016. *Magical Hymns from Roman Egypt. A Study of Greek and Egyptian Traditions of Divinity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bortolani, L. M. 2019. "The Greek Magical Hymn to Hermes: Syncretism or Disguise? The Hellenization of Thoth in Graeco-Egyptian Magical Literature." In Miller, J. F. and Clay, J. S. eds. *Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury*. New York: Oxford University Press. 293-307.
- Graf, F. 1991. "Prayer in Magical and Religious Ritual." In Faraone, C. and Obbink, D. eds. *Magika Hiera. Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press. 188-213.
- Petrovic, I. 2015. "Hymns in the *Papyri Graecae Magicae*." In Faulkner, A. and Hodkinson, O. eds. *Hymnic Narrative and the Narratology of Greek Hymns*. Leiden: Brill. 244-267.
- Preisendanz, K. 1973. *Papyri Graecae Magicae*. Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner.