

Ritual Paraphernalia Toward a Modular Approach to Coptic Magic

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Abstract This article explores the redactional strategies through which ritual experts in late antique and early medieval Egypt articulated their textual products. It adopts what is here heuristically termed a ‘modular approach’, which treats magical texts as *assemblages* of discrete textual segments that could be extracted, recombined, and adapted to different redactional agendas. Drawing on selected case studies from Coptic ritual manuscripts, the article offers a new model for understanding scribal practice and the transmission of ritual knowledge.

Keywords Magic. Late antiquity. Redaction criticism. Oral-written transmission. Coptic papyri.

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1 Introduction

The surviving corpus of Coptic magical manuscripts from late antique and early medieval Egypt invites us into a world of ritual creativity. Ritual products – whether in the form of applied amulets or larger ritual handbooks – do not appear as rigid compositions, fixed once and for all by a monolithic authoritative tradition.¹ Rather, they reveal the handiwork of ritual experts who worked with shared ritual materials arranged in flexible and inventive ways. Formulae, invocations, and narrative vignettes recur across manuscripts, yet rarely in identical arrangements. What confronts us is not a stable literary form but a repertoire of ritual paraphernalia, continuously reconfigured to meet the demands of shifting ritual aims and clientele.

This paper develops a new analytical framework for approaching this fluid textual landscape, which I term ‘modular approach’. This heuristic model approaches magical texts as *assemblages* of discrete modular units – here referred to as ‘frame units’ – that ritual specialists could differently manipulate (e.g., combine, juxtapose, expand, shrink) to articulate their own brand of ritual products. These frame units form the textual building blocks of a ritual text and can range from compact and recurring brief sequences of names (e.g., the Bêth- series, the couplet Ōrphamiêl/Ō(r)pha) and scriptural excerpts (e.g., the Gospel *Incipits*), to longer and more complex invocations (e.g., the *Adjuration of the Nine Guardians*, the *Invocation of Baktiotha*) and refrain formulae (e.g., the *Binding of the Sky* refrain) – all of which will be discussed in greater detail below. I here heuristically posit that these modular units exhibit a spectrum of variation that may be grouped under two broad categories: ‘intertextual development’ and ‘idiolectic variation’. The former encompasses textual divergences that arise on a structural level – through processes of expansion, contraction, or repositioning of textual sequences – while the latter accounts for lexical or stylistic alterations, reflecting the personal repertoires and preferences of individual ritual experts.

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their incisive feedback and to Joseph Sanzo, Raʿanan Boustán, and Dylan Burns for their insightful comments at various stages in the development of the article and on earlier versions of the manuscript. This article develops and substantially revises material originally presented in the Author’s doctoral dissertation, *Ecclesiastical Magic: The Emergence of a Christian Ritual Discourse in Late Antiquity* (Ca’ Foscari University, 2026). The categories employed throughout it are offered as heuristic instruments rather than definitive propositions and are presented in the hope that they may stimulate further discussion and refinement. This said, *errata, si quae occurrent, benevolus lector*.

1 For the purposes of this study, ‘magic’ and ‘ritual’ are used interchangeably, without prejudice to the broader theoretical debates surrounding these categories.

The modular approach draws theoretical support from biblical redaction criticism, particularly from the analytical insight that the study of redactional strategies in scriptural traditions requires approaching texts as organized in discrete unit-based segments, the *pericopae*. At the same time, the modular approach builds upon more recent scholarly discourse on late antique ritual texts, including Sanzo's engagement with the Gospel *Incipits* tradition, Schäfer's modular configuration of the Hekhalot corpus into redactional units labeled 'macroforms' and 'microforms', and Shaked's differentiation between 'formula' and 'spell' in the Aramaic incantation bowls – to which I will return in the discussion below. These approaches to textual sources, though developed for different literary corpora, share the assumption that texts are organized into clusters of modular units that can be easily extracted and recombined with other sections. By analyzing the ways in which textual modules have been arranged, combined, and juxtaposed, a modular approach may illuminate dynamics of redaction and transmission in magical manuscripts. When examined both diachronically and synchronically, frame units indeed reveal a spectrum of variability that is indicative of their strategic deployment to suit diverse spell formats and ritual objectives. Through close analysis of selected case studies, I here argue that ritual practitioners, operating as 'cut-and-paste' redactors, organized their texts by assembling, modeling, and adapting a vast range of frame units that constituted the ritual paraphernalia of a shared cultural world.² Far from being simple copyists, their operative crafting logic shows that the 'cutting' was oriented by the hand of distinct authoritative traditions and the 'paste' was tailored to produce distinct ritual effects.

On a broader level, these compositional logics further invite us to speculate that the scribal world in which ritual experts moved was one where ritual texts emerged through a performative process that combined oral strategies of memorization with the adaptation of pre-selected texts stored in template-style archives. One crucial piece of evidence in this respect is Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, MS AMS 9 (=PCM I 11; KYP M 171), a sixth-to-eighth-century Coptic papyrus codex whose contents, format, and layout suggest its use by ritual experts as a working manual for storing and copying relevant ritual frame units. Ultimately, the mixed model advanced here offers a novel perspective on late antique and early medieval magic as a performative genre situated at the intersection of oral and written modes of transmission.

2 The rubric 'ritual paraphernalia' is employed here in a metaphorical sense to designate the repertoire of textual resources available to ritual specialists. Much as physical paraphernalia furnish the material means by which an activity is carried out, these textual resources – preserved in the form of frame units – could be selected, adapted, and recombined in the production of ritual texts.

2 Redaction Criticism and the Modular Composition of Jewish and Christian Ritual Texts

What I here designate as the ‘modular approach’ draws much of its analytical capacity from biblical redaction criticism.³ Like this latter scholarly approach, it seeks to reconstruct the logics that orient redactional activity by observing how ritual practitioners select, arrange, and adapt a shared repertoire of textual materials organized into textual segments – conventionally labeled *pericopae* in this scholarly tradition. In this particular case, redaction is understood as an interpretive act rather than as a purely mechanical process of transmission. At the same time, however, the modular approach diverges in important ways from classical redaction criticism as traditionally practiced in Old and New Testament studies. Redaction criticism has often been guided – explicitly or implicitly – by philological concerns oriented toward the reconstruction of earlier textual strata and, in some cases, toward the retrieval of an ‘original’ or least contaminated version of a literary unit. Even when emphasizing theological creativity, redaction-critical analyses generally operate on the assumption that redactional activity takes place upon relatively discrete textual traditions or source materials. The ritual sources examined in this article, however, sit uneasily with these assumptions. Both synchronic and diachronic analysis reveals that ritual practitioners were generally less concerned with preserving fixed textual forms than with actively recombining circulating materials in response to shifting ritual aims. Textual variants and the repositioning of textual modules, rather than signaling corruption or degeneration, appear to have been constitutive of ritual creativity.

With specific reference to magical sources, a view of these materials as organized into module-based texts has already been alluded to by scholars of ancient magic. For instance, Sanzo has engineered a meaningful theoretical approach for analyzing scriptural *pericopae* featuring in late antique ritual amulets (Sanzo 2014). Sanzo’s model operates on the working hypothesis that the extant amuletic evidence from late antique Egypt shows an approach to Scriptures (i.e., the Bible and the Gospels) based on meronymic relations between the wholes and their respective parts (Sanzo 2014, 24-53). As Sanzo has further detailed, this part-whole relation is organized around a partonomic structure that moves from the general to the specific. Accordingly, the Bible occupies the apex of the hierarchy as the encompassing whole, while its constituent sub-corpora (e.g., the Gospels and Psalms) appear at subordinate

³ For a general overview on redaction criticism, see for instance Barton 1992; Collins 2011.

levels. Down this hierarchy are the sections of each biblical book and, yet at a lower level, selected chapters, paragraphs, and sentences from a biblical work. Sanzo has meaningfully illustrated the extent to which this taxonomic structure becomes instrumental in approaching scriptural *incipits* in amulets from late antique Egypt. Scriptural *incipits* in Egyptian amulets are consistent with the fact that, in Late Antiquity, many individuals encountered the Bible through formats such as incipient forms of lectionaries and other collections of scriptural excerpts intended for liturgical performance; that is, compilations of portions of scriptural texts (e.g., portions sourced from the Gospels, from the Old Testament, from the Prophets, or from individual Psalms) collected and organized around a common theme (Sanzo 2014, 30-2). The way Gospel *Incipits* are employed in amulets thus presupposes a textual architecture built from thematic units designed to be extracted and arranged alongside other sections:

I contend that in late antique Egypt the scriptural ‘wholes’ containing ritual power were limited to individual thematic units. These units could range partonomically from entire psalms or narrative/apophthegmatic items to single verses or phrases and could be ‘tapped’ in various ways, from direct citation to visual depiction to creed-like summaries. (Sanzo 2014, 26)

Sanzo’s extensive examination of the occurrences of MT PS 91:1 (LXX Ps 90:1) along with the *incipits* of the Gospels in magical sources lends support to this view, thereby illuminating how these scriptural passages were extensively employed in a range of different combinations by ritual specialists (Sanzo 2014, 47-52). At a more general level, Sanzo’s analysis attests to how a module-based view of Scriptures betrays a specific bent of the mind of late antique ritual specialists (Sanzo 2014, 70-2).

Looking outside Egypt, Schäfer’s modular approach to the Hekhalot – a post-Talmudic corpus of adjuration and visionary materials revolving around the depiction of the divine chariot (*merkavah*) as portrayed in Ezekiel’s vision by the Chebar river (Ezek. 1) – has highlighted the need for an investigative model grounded in a partonomic view of textual composition, structured into larger and smaller redactional units named ‘macroforms’ and ‘microforms’ (Schäfer 1983).⁴ Schäfer’s model emerged from the recognition that the deep divergences among surviving textual witnesses of this tradition resist reconstruction of a single *Urtext*, instead pointing to a compositional logic oriented toward creative recombination. More recently, Swartz has sharpened this insight

⁴ For a general overview on Hekhalot, see for instance Boustán 2007.

by fostering broader reflections relative to the logics that drive the performance of scribal profiles behind such practices, characterizing Hekhalot scribes as ‘cut-and-paste’ redactors who continually extracted and rearranged textual materials that amounted to the formation of a shared cultural world (Swartz 2018, 200-20). Swartz’s formulation thus extends Schäfer’s corpus-specific model into a broader scribal habitus that resonates strongly with recent scholarly work on the Aramaic incantation bowls, where a comparable concern with the organization of ritual texts into discrete textual units may already be observed in Shaked’s analysis:

The text of a bowl will be called an *incantation*. An incantation may consist of one or more segments (which we shall call ‘spells’), and these can turn up on occasion in other incantations as well. A spell reflects, with greater or lesser fidelity, what I should like to call a *formula*. This term denotes an *ideal structure of a text* which the practitioner aims at reproducing. A formula may be envisioned as the text that could have been placed in a carefully written model book of spells, even though no such composition is known to have existed. (Shaked 2011, 188)

Although framed in different nomenclature (spells, formulas, and incantations), Shaked’s configuration of bowl texts exhibits a logic broadly compatible with the modular approach. Particularly significant is his distinction between individual spells and the larger incantations into which they are incorporated, a relationship that similarly presupposes the circulation and recombination of discrete textual units. Further in this vein, Shaked captures the significance of this part-whole logic when he says:

A formula is thus a construct, not a concrete text. Borrowing an idea from linguistics, a formula would represent the *langue*, while a spell, which constitutes the performance of a formula, corresponds to the *parole* of the text. (Shaked 2011, 189)

By invoking the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole*, Shaked operates on the assumption that ritual products originate from the creative configuration of materials drawn from a shared textual repertoire – namely, the *langue* in Saussure’s discourse. This latter point comes into sharper focus in Gross’s and Manekin-Bamberger’s recent analysis of modularity in the bowl incantations (Gross, Manekin-Bamberger 2022). In a recent joint study, the two scholars have introduced the category ‘cluster bowls’ to designate a subset of incantation formulae that avoid invocations of foreign deities or formulations resistant to clear Jewish identification. Instead, these bowls string together clusters of texts sourced from rabbinic and

para-rabbinic materials, including liturgical formulae, halakhic discourse, and mystical traditions. This compositional strategy is not haphazard. Rather, it reflects a deliberate attempt to harness the authoritative power of specific textual clusters in order to augment the ritual potency of the bowl. Let's consider, for instance, the text of Moussaieff 164:

(1) Bound and sealed are you who are the Lilith, the evil tormentor. Making for your name. So, for your name I am making [this magical act]. May there be healing from (2) heaven for the house of Abandad son of Batgada. At your right Uziel, at your left Susiel, in front of you Michael, behind you Hananel, above you (3) the presence of God [...] (4) In the name of YHWH YHWH the God of Israel whom thousands upon thousands (5) will serve before him and myriads upon myriads will attend before him [...] (6) In the name of Zahuvari YHWH the God of Israel and in the name of Zabudiel YHWH the God of Israel, and in the name of Metatron the Prince of the Countenance. For the name of the servant is similar to the name of his master, (7) for it is said: "for my name is within him" [...] If you appear as a pig I adjure and put you under oath by means of (9) YHW YHW. If you appear as a ram I adjure and put you under oath "'By *Alef-Daleth*' or 'by *Yod-He*' or 'by *Shaddai*' or 'by *Sabaoth*' or 'by the Merciful and Gracious' or 'by him that is long suffering and of great kindness', and by any substituted name". If you appear as a dog I adjure (10) and put you under oath by means of "I am that I am" [...] (12) And if you do not flee and go out from the house of Abandad son of Batgada and from the dwelling of Sami daughter of Parsita his wife, you demons and afflictions and satans and shadows, you shall all be under the ban of Rabbi Joshua bar Peraḥia, amen amen selah. (Gross, Manekin-Bamberger 2022, 8-9)

As the two scholars have detailed, the bowl incorporates textual clusters from different sources, including a quasi-verbatim quotation from the Talmud (bSan 38b) and the Mishnah (mShev 4:13), along with the above-mentioned ban of Joshua bar Peraḥia, which is here severed from its usual formulaic context and stitched into the bowl's cluster structure. Notably, while Gross and Manekin-Bamberger do not foreground the modularity of these clusters as a primary analytical category, their study nonetheless underscores how the act of 'clustering' served as an operative logic of ritual composition.

In dialogue with these scholarly insights, this section has attempted to situate the heuristic designation 'modular approach' within the broader scholarly discourse on late antique Jewish and Christian texts. The present model is therefore not intended to replace the approaches developed by Sanzo, Schäfer, Shaked, and others, but to

provide a common heuristic vocabulary for describing comparable compositional dynamics across ritual corpora. While these scholars have identified analogous phenomena within particular traditions, the modular approach seeks to articulate a broader framework for analyzing the extraction, recombination, and adaptation of ritual materials. As I will show below, magical literature emerges less as a fixed textual tradition than as a flexible *assemblage* of materials drawn from a shared ritual repertoire. These recurring textual building blocks will be here designated as ‘frame units’, a term whose rationale and analytical significance will be developed in the following section, which turns to materials drawn from the expansive corpus of Coptic ritual texts.

3 Ritual Paraphernalia: A Meta-Analysis of Ritual Texts

My investigation into the range of redactional strategies deployed by ritual experts now requires us to grapple with the notion of ‘frame unit’ as applied to magical sources. Within the context of the present study, the term frame unit designates a recognizable textual configuration that circulates as a reusable segment within ritual literature and is subject to processes of redactional manipulation. Frame units may operate at different textual scales, ranging from recurring sequences of names (e.g., the Bêth- series) to extended invocations or scriptural excerpts. Frame units should therefore be understood as heuristic categories whose boundaries may remain fluid. What distinguishes such units is their capacity to recur across different artifacts and textual contexts while retaining a recognizable structure, even as they undergo variation in length, wording, or placement within a spell. In more practical terms, a frame unit can therefore be identified whenever a cluster of textual materials appears in multiple ritual sources in comparable form and is capable of being extracted, rearranged, or recombined with other textual segments. The main advantage of this definition lies in its ability to describe the constituent parts of a ritual text without relying on narrower categories such as formula, spell, *historiola*, or adjuration. Given the frequent overlap between these rubrics, identifying a single term capable of designating a specific portion of ritual discourse is often difficult. The category of frame unit therefore encompasses a wide range of textual materials, including invocations such as the *Adjuration of the Nine Guardians* (see below) and the *Invocation to Baktiotha* (see below), refrains such as the *Binding of the Sky* (see below), as well as scriptural and apocryphal passages such as the *Jesus-Abgar Correspondence*, Ps 90 (91), and the Gospel *Incipits*. This working definition of frame unit builds on Foley’s analysis of the Serbian healing-charm tradition known

as *basma* (see Foley 1995, 136-81; Foley, Halpern 1978) – a ritual performance that was preserved and passed down by the female part of the classical Serbian extended families, the *zadruga*. As Foley illustrates, frame units constitute the discrete textual sections that, arranged together, compose the structure of the ritual performance uttered by the female ritual specialist, the *bajalice*. Frame units exhibit variability contingent upon the performer's discretion in arranging and deploying his repertoire of formulae. Their variability manifests in dimensions of length and placement, in prosodic and semantic nuance, and in the shifting ritual functions they assume within the spell. The concept of frame unit employed here extends this insight to the study of Coptic ritual texts.

Armed with this definition of frame unit, I now turn to the principles governing its variation. For heuristic purposes, these variations may be grouped under two broad categories: 'intertextual development' and 'idiolectic variation'. Starting from the first rubric, 'intertextual development' designates variations that arise through the rearrangement, expansion, contraction, or conflation of frame units. These redactional strategies may be observed in my first case study, the abovementioned *Adjuration of the Nine Guardians*. This ritual invocation features both in London, British Museum, EA 10391 (=Hay 1; KYP M 302) – an eighth-to-ninth-century magical formulary from Upper Egypt (Thebes?) – and in the later (tenth century CE) magical handbook P. Heid. Kopt. 685 (=PCM I 25; KYP M 186) from the Heidelberg Magical Library, where it appears after a version of the *Prayer of Mary 'at Bartos'*.⁵ The Nine Guardians are invoked for protecting the Holy Trinity, with each triad overseeing a distinct person – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. According to their representation in P. Heid. Kopt. 685, the guardians hold crosses in their hands, and their semblance is adapted to the guarded component of the Trinity: anthropomorphic figures protect the Father and the Son, whereas bird-like figures defend the Holy Spirit – likely echoing its appearance as a dove. In the synopsis below, I discuss the two versions of this ritual invocation:

⁵ On the Heidelberg Magical Library, see Gardner, Johnston 2023, 51-63; Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 259-63. For a general overview on the *Prayer of Mary 'at Bartos'*, see Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 287-9.

Hay 1

‘Amanou, Phourat, Phourani, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the almighty; Bêth, Bêth, Bêthai, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the beloved son, Abiout, Karnabot, Karnabiël, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the holy spirit. (O’Connell 2022, 87, ll. 1-5; underlining added)

P. Heid. Kopt. 685

Manix, Phourat, Phouranei, O Three Guardians who protect the body <of> the Father Almighty, may you (s.) protect my body, me, Iōsēph, son <of> Paraseu! Abiouth, Garnabiouth, Garnabiël, O Three Guardians who protect the body of Jesus Christ, the son <of> God, may you (s.) protect my body, me, NN, child of NN! Bêth, Bêthaf, Bêthaei, O Three Guardians who protect the body of the Holy Spirit, may you (s.) protect <my> body, me, Iōsēph, son <of> Paraseu, yea, yea! (Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 313, ll. 1-10; underlining added)

Notably, the two textual units present the invocation to the Nine Guardians in a different order, as Hay 1 follows the series: “Amanou, Phourat, Phourani, Bêth, Bêth, Bêthai, Abiout, Karnabot, Karnabiël”. By contrast, P. Heid. Kopt. 685 invokes them in a different sequence: “Manix, Phourat, Phouranei, Abiouth, Garnabiouth, Garnabiël, Bêth, Bêthaf, Bêthaei”.⁶ Furthermore, it is noteworthy to highlight how the two redactional units amalgamate and organize the entreaty to the Nine Guardians with other identifiable frame units. Specifically, Hay 1 combines the angelic adjuration with a liturgical-style invocation, creating a seamless and cohesive continuum:

Amanou, Phourat, Phourani, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the almighty; Bêth, Bêth, Bêthai, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the beloved son, Abiout, Karnabot, Karnabiël, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the holy spirit and the remnant that lies on the holy table of the son and the sign of the lamb, I beg and I entreat you and your names and your powers and your images and your amulets, that you leave every place where you are and come to me, to the place where I am, I, NN, and you come upon my offering, this one that lies before me, NN, yes, yes, quickly, quickly! (O’Connell 2022, 87, ll. 1-10; underlining added)

By contrast, the same adjuration in P. Heid. Kopt. 685 figures in a larger and more sophisticated format, centered around a crucifixion

⁶ On the series Bêth, Bêth, Bêthai, see the commentary in Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 311.

scene and a description of God's gargantuan body, interspersed with other identifiable frame units:

I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the first labour pang that Mary suffered until she gave birth to Christ, the Son of God that you (s.) protect NN, child of NN, yea, quickly! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the suffering that the son of God experienced upon the wood <of> the cross that you (s.) protect the body <of> NN, the son <of> NN, yea, yea, quickly! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the five nails which pierced the hands and feet of Jesus Christ, the Son of God – whose names are Sôtôr, Aretô, Tenêt, Ôtera, Rôtas – that you (s.) watch over the body of NN, child of NN, yea, quickly! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, <by> the vinegar and the gall that Jesus, the Son of God, tasted when he was upon the cross, that you (s.) protect NN, child of NN, yea, yea! I adjure you, Nine Guardians, by the three sounds that Jesus cried out until <he> gave the spirit <into> the hands of the good Father, that you (s.) watch over NN, child of NN, yea! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the wound <from> the spear which was thrust in the right side of Jesus, the Son of God, when he was upon the cross – water and blood poured out – that you (s.) protect NN, child of NN, yea! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the three teardrops which came from the eyes of the good Father upon the head of his son, Jesus, when he was upon the cross, that <you> watch over NN, child of NN, yea, quickly! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the holy remains that were placed upon them, the body and the blood of Jesus, the Son of God, in the Church of <the> Firstborn in the heavens, that you protect <NN>! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by Ôpha, the body of the Father, and Ôrphamiël, the great finger on the right hand of the Father, and Abrasax, who measures the right hand of the Father, that you (s.) protect the body <of> NN, child of NN, yea, yea, quickly! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the two hands of the Father Almighty, whose names are Andramiël, which is his right, Drakhaël, which is his left, that you watch over NN, child of NN, yea! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the two feet of the Father Almighty, whose names are Thaôth, which is his right, Thaôtha, which is his left, that <you> watch over NN, child of NN, yea, quickly! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by the four pillars that bear heaven, whose names are Sêt, Sêntas, Sêntalalas, Sêntalalia, that you protect the body <of> NN, child of NN, yea! I adjure you, O Nine Guardians, by these blessed names, which are on the right side of the altar of the Father, which are Sabaoth, Mêthêmôn, Soumithion, Perikhê, Akramata, Taektôr, Fmiël, Santalalia, may you protect NN, child of NN, yea! (Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 313-17; underlining added)

The observed redactional interventions strongly indicate that the copyists of the spells purposefully stylized their materials to accommodate the ritual format of their compositions. This adaptation serves the dual purpose of fitting the prescribed ritual structure and effectively conveying a distinct ritual thrust. Notably, the redactors of P. Heid. Kopt. 685 created their own brand of the *Adjuration of the Nine Guardians* on behalf of a certain Iōsēph son of Paraseu.⁷ The subsequent crucifixion scene and depiction of God's gargantuan body emerges as a balanced and negotiated conflation of ritual materials - including the widespread satōr formula and the couplet Ōrphamiēl/Ō(r)pha⁸ - skillfully adapted into a coherent continuum. In the case of Hay 1, which persists as an anonymous formulary, the copyist appears to have reconfigured the ritual position of this text by incorporating a liturgical-style invocation into the coda of the appeal to the Nine Guardians. This addition is introduced by the recurring connective formula, "I beg and I entreat you and your names and your powers and your images and your amulets".⁹ This sequence is particularly noteworthy as it often appears in crucial junctures of ritual manuscripts, suggesting its use as a form of refrain aimed at amalgamating two discrete frame units. With regards to Hay 1, for instance, the refrain sequence appears to sew into a coherent continuum the *Adjuration of the Nine Guardians* with the subsequent liturgical invocation:

Amanou, Phourat, Phourani, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the almighty; Bēth, Bēth, Bēthai, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the beloved son, Abiout, Karnabot, Karnabiēl, the three guardians strong in their power, these ones who watch over the body and the blood of the holy spirit and the remnant that lies on the holy table of the son and the sign of the lamb, I beg and I entreat you and your names and your powers and your images and your amulets, that you leave every place where you are and come to me, to the place where I am, I, NN, and you come upon my offering, this one that lies before me, NN, yes, yes, quickly, quickly! (O'Connell 2022, 87, ll. 1-10; underlining added)

⁷ On this personal name, see Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 313.

⁸ On the couplet Ōrphamiēl/Ō(r)pha, see the commentary in Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 205.

⁹ The recurrence of this connective phrase across multiple ritual contexts strongly suggests that it functioned as a linking sequence signaling the introduction of a new invocation. Dosoo has aptly described this type of connective formula with the term *horkōmos* (Dosoo 2022, 131).

Another significant instance in which this refrain sequence appears to serve this use is found in an amulet preserved in the private collection of the antiquities dealer Robert Nahman (=ACM 62; KYP M 529).¹⁰ Notably, the refrain sequence here sews together the Gospel *Incipits* with a form of liturgical invocation directed to God's throne and his angelic retinue:

The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. Since many have taken in hand. The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I adjure you by your powers, your names, your holy potencies.
I adjure you by Orphamiel, the great finger of the Father.
I adjure you by the throne of the Father.
I adjure you by Orpha, the entire body of God.
I adjure you by the chariots of the sun.
I adjure you by the entire host of angels on high.
I adjure you by the seven curtains that are drawn over the face
[of God.
I adjure you by the seven cherubim who fan the face of God.
I adjure you by the great cherub of fire, whose name no one knows.
I adjure you by the great name of God, whose name no one
[knows except the camel.
I adjure you by the seven archangels.
I adjure you by the three words that Jesus spoke on the cross:
Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani - that is, *My God, my God, why have*
[you forsaken me?
(Meyer, Smith 1999, 115-16, ll. 14-34; underlining added)

Further evidence for the modular manipulation of ritual texts is provided by scribal markers that appear to signal points of insertion or personalization. For instance, Dosoo and Preininger have stressed how the frequent appearance of the Greek markers κοινά (usual) and ἀπολογία (request) may signal the juncture where the practitioner should personalize the text (Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 34). An illustrative case in point is the so-called 'Rossi's Tractate' (=P. Biblioteca Nazionale Turin, a.IV.27; PCM I 12; KYP M 283), a seventh-to-eighth-century Coptic papyrus codex wherein the marker ἀπολογία likely served as the placeholder signaling where the text is to be personalized by the ritual expert:

¹⁰ Edition in Drescher 1950.

Adōnaēl, the one who is over the coming in of the Father and his coming out! - request (ἀπολο) - so that you will come to me. (Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 183, ll. 5-7)¹¹

More explanatory in this respect may result P. Heid. Kopt. 683 (=PCM I 24; KYP M 312), an early medieval Coptic formulary part of the Heidelberg Magical Library. Notably, the marker $\overline{\pi\omicron}$ (for ἀπολογία) closes the previous frame unit plausibly indicating an insertion point to be adapted by the ritual expert to meet his client's specific needs:

I entreat and I invoke you again today, Salathiel, the Ethiopian of the Four Powers - whose names are these: Arax, Barax, Sax, Thax - the one who went to Eve when she was within the enclosure and deceived her mind so that she ate from the tree, and she stripped naked! Thus again I entreat you today that you go to NN, child of NN, and trouble her mind so that she walks on her feet and goes to <the> door of the house of NN, child of NN, and he puts his male lust into her female lust with a shameless face - request ($\overline{\pi\omicron}$) - yea, yea, quickly, quickly! (Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 285, ll. 26-36)

If intertextual development concerns the arrangement, recombination, or insertion of frame units, a second dimension of variation is what Foley has termed 'idiolectic variation' (Foley 1990, chs 5, 8). This rubric denotes the diverse solutions negotiated by individual ritual experts that draw on a shared lexical and performative repertoire yet enact it according to their own ritual idiom. A compelling case of idiolectic variation discussed by Foley involves the Slavic epic singers Mujo Kukurozović and Halil Bajgorić (Foley 1995, 155-6). In portraying the epic motif of the 'crying prisoner', the two poets diverge as they rely on different arsenals of formulaic expressions. While Kukurozović usually employs the two expressions "He cried out for a period of time" or "How he cried out, it was misfortune", Bajgorić propends for the formula "[name] cried out in prison". In turn, when they want to voice the length of the prisoner's sufferance, Kukurozović can either say "For three white days" or "A little week of day", while Bajgorić usually says "For two white days". As Foley points out, although the sentences share a number of features, they are framed according to the author's own arsenal of formulaic expressions. By analogy, idiolectic variation in the Coptic ritual corpus may be observed whenever different ritual specialists draw

11 On the Turin magical papyri see Vassallo, Carlig, Dosoo 2025.

on a shared linguistic and ritual tradition while expressing it through distinct formulaic preferences.

I will now illustrate how the principle of idiolectic variation as formulated by Foley can fruitfully be applied as an analytical tool to illuminate the variations of formulaic expressions in the frame units composing magical texts. For instance, let us examine the spectrum of idiolectic variation apparent in the *incipits* of the following magical manuscripts:¹²

P. Macquarie I 1

I give thanks to you
and I call upon you, the
Baktiotha: The great one,
who is very trustworthy;
the one who is lord over
the forty and the nine
kinds of serpents, they
all being servants to him,
namely, the ones who are
in the abyss and under (?)
the air, the deaf and the
blind, those who can hear
and (those) who can see.
It is your fear which is over
them all.
(Choat, Gardner 2014, 45,
ll. 1-10)

Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987

I invoke you today,
Baktiotha, the great one
above who is trustworthy,
who is trustworthy
over the ninth kinds of
serpents.
(Choat, Gardner 2014,
107-14, ll. 1-5)

P. Berlin 5527

I call upon you,
Bakthiouthah, the great
one who is trustworthy,
the one who is set over
the forty-nine races (and)
kinds, and all who are
servants to you; namely,
the deaf and the blind and
those who are in the air,
the ones that we know
and the ones we know
not: The lord over them
all.
(Choat, Gardner 2014,
115-17, ll. 1-5)

The three manuscripts here under scrutiny open with an invocation directed to an otherworldly being named Baktiotha.¹³ They exhibit cases of idiolectic variation as their copyists, despite relying on a very similar group of stock phrases, negotiated their own version of the invocation to the supernal being through diverse formulaic expressions, emphasis, and narrative coloring. By way of example, over the opening formula of P. Macquarie I 1, “I give thanks to you and I call upon you” (τῷ θεῷ καὶ ἐπὶ τῷ μεγάλῳ ἐρωκ), Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987 and P. Berlin 5527 preserve the slightly differing variants “I invoke you today” (ἑπικαλεῖ ἡμεῖς ποσὺ) and “I call upon you” (τῷ θεῷ ἐλπί οὐκ), which appear to have been adapted from each copyist’s own repertoire of expressions. In a similar vein, the epithets

12 P. Macquarie I 1 (=P. Macq. Inv. 375; KYP M 167) is a seventh-to-eighth-century Coptic parchment codex now housed in the Museum of Ancient Cultures at Macquarie University, Sydney. Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987 (=ACM 70; KYP M 282) is a Coptic papyrus roll dated between 501 and 650 CE. P. Berlin 5527 (=KYP M 194) is a sixth-to-seventh-century loose-leaf Coptic papyrus held in Berlin (Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung).

13 On this supernal being, see Dosoo 2016, 1237-44.

accompanying the angelic being Baktiotha are differently negotiated according to each copyist's own repertoires of formulaic expressions:

P. Macquarie I 1

ΠΝΟΘ ΕΤΝΖΟΤ ΕΜΑΤΕ ΠΕΤΟΝΧΟΕΙΣ ΕΖΡΑΙ
ΕΧΕΝ ΠΙΣΜΕ ΜΗ ΠΨΙC ΚΕΝΕC ΝΖΟΟΒ
ΕΥΟ ΝΝΖΕΜΑΛ ΝΑΒ ΤΗΡΟΥ ΒΙΝΕΤΥΟΟΠ
ΖΝΠΠΟΥΝ ΜΕΔΠΑΗΡ ΝΚΟΥΦΟC ΜΝΕΒΕΛΕ
ΝΕΤCΩΤΜ ΜΕΤΝΔΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΚΤΕΚΖΟΤΕ
ΤΕΤΖΙΧΩΟΥ ΤΗΡΟΥ

The great one, who is very trustworthy;
the one who is lord over the forty and
the nine kinds of serpents they all being
servants to him, namely, the ones who
are in the abyss and under (?) the air, the
deaf and the blind, those who can hear
and (those) who can see. It is your fear
which is over them all.
(Choat, Gardner 2014, 45, ll. 3-10)

Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987

ΠΙΝΟΘ ΕΤΖΝΖΟΤ ΝΤΠΕ ΕΤΝΖΟΤ ΕΖΡΑΙ ΕΧΝ
ΠΙΜΕΖΨΙC ΝΓΕΝΟC ΝΖΟΥ

The great one above who is trustworthy,
who is trustworthy over the ninth kinds
of serpents.
(Choat, Gardner 2014, 111, ll. 1-5)

P. Berlin 5527

ΠΙΝΑΘ ΕΤΑΙΝΑΖΤΙ ΠΗΖΕΤΚΗΖ ΕΖΛΗΪ ΕΙΧΕ
ΤΗΜΘ ΦΗΛΗ ΓΕΝΟC ΜΝΝΤΕΥΕ ΝΖΕΜΖΕΛ
ΛΕΚ ΤΗΛΟΥ ΒΙΝΙΚΟΥΧ ΜΕΝΙΒΛΗΟΥ
ΜΝΝΕΚΕΚΔΥΝΙ ΕΘΕΠΑΕΡ ΝΕΤΕΝCΔΥΝ
ΕΜΔΥ ΜΝΝΕΤΕΝCΔΥΝ ΕΜΔΥ ΕΝ ΠΘC
ΧΙΧΩΟΥ ΤΗΛΟΥ

The great one who is trustworthy, the
one who is set over the forty-nine races
(and) kinds and all who are servants to
you; namely, the deaf and the blind and
those who are in the air, the ones that
we know and the ones we know not: The
lord over them all.
(Choat, Gardner 2014, 116, ll. 1-5)

Alongside cases of idiolectic adaptations, the three manuscripts under scrutiny display further divergences that suggest their copyist were adapting the text under the pressure of diverse redactional agendas. P. Berlin 5527, for instance, preserves a markedly shorter version of the invocation. This abbreviation was most likely dictated by the physical constraints of the writing surface, since the text was copied on a loose-leaf papyrus sheet that originally carried a Greek receipt or list (Stern 1885). The copyist appears to have deliberately stylized the invocation so that it would fit within the limited space available. In this respect, P. Berlin 5527 provides valuable evidence for the circulation of the *Invocation of Baktiotha* as a portable textual unit that could be adjusted to the material circumstances of individual manuscripts. This flexibility becomes even more apparent in the subsequent frame unit preserved in P. Berlin 5527, which contains a shortened version of an invocation directed to Jesus Christ. Parallel forms of this invocation appear in both P. Macquarie I 1 and Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987, but there they survive in a considerably more elaborate form:

P. Macquarie I 1

the living Christ in heaven, the one who was begotten at the right side of the father; the Barbelo, the living wisdom (sophia) who was filled from the loins of the father and has begotten for us a perfect living Man. He was sent for us to the world; he gave his blood on behalf of the living and the dead, that he would redeem us from our sins.
(Choat, Gardner 2014, 45, ll. 10-22)

Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987

The one who was begotten within the father, until born for us a perfect Man through the angels and archangels; and he was sent to us upon the earth, and have his body and his blood for us all and raised the dead. Reach out and listen to us today: Sabaoth.
(Choat, Gardner 2014, 111, ll. 5-11)

P. Berlin 5527

lord, God: The one who begot the perfect Man. He gave his blood for every person, so that whoever ... has life. This one: May you give your blood upon NN ... NN.
(Choat, Gardner 2014, 116, ll. 5-12)

The comparison of these passages suggests the presence of a second layer of redactional activity, this time shaped by differing theological agendas. In P. Macquarie I 1, the birth of Christ is framed in language that bears a distinctly Sethian coloring. This is indicated by the reference to Barbelo (ⲃⲁⲣⲃⲉⲗⲱ) and to the ‘living wisdom’ (σοφία ἐστὼς), together with the phrase “who was filled from the loins of the Father” (ντⲁⲥⲙⲟϥⲥ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ϩⲏⲧⲕⲉⲥⲧⲉ ϣⲏⲧⲉ ⲙⲡⲱⲧ),¹⁴ which correlates with Sethian theological discourse (see Choat, Gardner 2014, 31-5).¹⁵ By contrast, the copyist of Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987 appears to have reshaped the invocation to align it with a different theological orientation. Here Christ is described as “begotten within the Father” (ⲡⲏⲧⲁϥⲉⲃⲟⲓ ⲏⲥⲁⲁⲟϥⲏ ⲏⲡⲱⲧ), a formulation that resonates more closely with Nicene Christological language and implicitly distances the text from the Sethian Barbelo-Sophia genealogy. A close comparable formulation is found, for instance, in the version of the Coptic Nicene creed found in MS M 574 (ninth century CE) from the Pierpont Morgan Library, which similarly designates Christ as “begotten within the father” (ⲡⲉϭⲡⲟ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ϩⲏⲡⲱⲧ) (Quecke 1970, 437, l. 13).¹⁶ In a similar vein, the copyist of P. Berlin 5527 appears to have rejected any Sethian coloring, likewise aligning the text to a theologically neutral account of the generation of Christ. Regardless of the precise theological stance governing the logics of these interventions, the

¹⁴ Cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I 30.2.

¹⁵ On Sethian gnosticism, see the fundamental study of Schenke 1974. See also Burns 2014. For a more general overview on the rubric ‘gnosticism’, see King 2003.

¹⁶ For a more general overview on the Nicene creed in the Coptic traditions, see Dossetti 1967, 123-31.

manuscripts together bring into sharper focus how the redactional activity of ritual specialists appears to have been oriented by diverse redactional agendas.

Another compelling case study that displays both instances of intertextual development and idiolectal variation is the refrain sequence which I here conventionally label the *Binding of the Sky*. Notably, this frame unit appears in both P. Heid. Kopt. 682 (=PCM I 23; KYP M 291) – a tenth-century Coptic curse part of the so-called Heidelberg Magical Library – and Chicago OIM E13767 (=ACM 85; KYP M 7),¹⁷ a tenth-to-eleventh-century paper amulet:

P. Heid. Kopt. 682

Binding of the sky
Binding of the earth
The binding of the mountain
The binding of the water

The binding of the finger-ring of the Father
The binding of the axe that is in the hand of flesh

The binding by which the Christ was bound upon the tree of the cross
(You will bind the virginity of NN. NN will not release her virginity until the virginity of the holy Virgin is released!)

The binding of the speech that Elias the prophet spoke upon the holy mountain; their names are these:
Chakouri Chabnei Chabna Shōrani Shouiona

May this be the binding that comes about upon the male organ of NN inside NN:
It will not be able to release the virginity of NN;
it will not become hard;
it will not be erect;
it will not ejaculate.
(Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 276-9, ll. 21-44)

Chicago OIM E13767

The binding of the sky
The binding of the earth
The binding of the air
The binding of the firmament
The binding of the Pleiades
The binding of the sun
The binding of the moon
The binding of the birds

The binding of the finger-ring of the Father

The binding by which Jesus the Christ was bound upon the tree of the cross

The binding of the seven words that Iliseoos (Elias?) spoke upon the head of the holy ones; their names are these:
Psuchou Ithouni Anashns Shourani Shouranai

May that binding come about upon the male organ of Pharaouō and his flesh, and you (pl.) dry it like a twig (?) and make it like a rag upon a dunghill:
His penis will not become hard;
it will not be erect;
it will not ejaculate.
(Meyer, Smith 1999, 178-9)

¹⁷ Coptic text in Stefanski 1939, 305-7.

As the two texts lay bare, at the heart of their internal affinities lies a pool of textual materials that form a quite identifiable frame unit. Notably, while it comprises the whole textual structure of the Chicago amulet, P. Heid. Kopt. 682 amalgamates it with other frame units and ritual instructions, thereby indicating that this open formula circulated as a pre-set textual module amenable to suit different adaptations. Notably, the Chicago manuscript served as an applied amulet crafted against a designated target – Pharaouō – while P. Heid. Kopt. 682 persists as an anonymous formulary. Following the logics of the principle of intertextual development, it is noteworthy to underscore how both texts display a slightly divergent list of ‘binding motifs’, which is notably expanded in the Chicago amulet:

P. Heid. Kopt. 682

Binding of the sky
Binding of the earth
The binding of the mountain
The binding of the water

The binding of the finger-ring of the Father
The binding of the axe that is in the hand of flesh
The binding by which the Christ was bound upon the tree of the cross.
(Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 277; underlining added)

Chicago OIM E13767

The binding of the sky
The binding of the earth
The binding of the air
The binding of the firmament
The binding of the Pleiades
The binding of the sun
The binding of the moon
The binding of the birds

The binding of the finger-ring of the Father
The binding by which Jesus the Christ was bound upon the tree of the cross.
(Meyer, Smith 1999, 178; underlining added)

At the same time, both texts slightly rearrange the binding motifs according to the principle of idiolectic variation. In this vein, a major difference in terms of repertoire of sentences can be seen in the second block, which presents divergent expressions, including differing *voces magicae*:

The binding of the speech that Elias the prophet spoke upon the holy mountain; their names are these: Chakouri Chabnei Chabna Shōrani Shouiona.
(Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 279; underlining added)

The binding of the seven words that Iliseoos (Elias?) spoke upon the head of the holy ones (sic); their names are these: Psuchou Ithouni Anashns Shourani Shouranai.
(Meyer, Smith 1999, 178; underlining added)

Finally, an additional adaptation of *Binding of the Sky* frame unit surfaces in Strasbourg Bibliothèque nationale P. K 135 (=ACM 87; KYP M 474) dated between the seventh and the ninth centuries CE.¹⁸ Similarly to the Chicago exemplar, this papyrus served as an applied curse targeting a certain Shinte, the son of Tanhēu:

It is upon Shinte, the son of Tanhēu, that I shall work in a binding procedure. Keuentious, Patilos, Kous, Makous, he who fell from his invisible chariot (?) and cast himself into the outer darkness; bind, make fast the flesh of Shinte, the son of Tanhēu! Bar, Bare, Apakēntōr, Methalai; bind, make fast the flesh of Shinte, the son of Tanhēu, unable to rise, unable to harden, unable to ejaculate. Shinte, the son of Tanhēu, let him become like a dead person, lying in a grave, and like a torn rag lying on the dungheap. He will not be able to have intercourse nor will he be able to release the virginity of Seine, the daughter of Moune, yea, yea, quickly, quickly! (KYP M 474; underlining added)

Notably, this specimen preserves a limited range of stock phrases, including the refrain rubric $\mu\omicron\gamma\tau$ (bind), the sequence “unable to rise, unable to harden, unable to ejaculate”, and the sequence “let him become like a dead person, lying in a grave, and like a torn rag lying on the dungheap. He will not be able to have intercourse nor will he be able to release the virginity”. On a more general level, Strasbourg Bibliothèque nationale P. K 135 further attests to the portability of the *Binding of the Sky* frame unit and to the extraction and reuse of some of its constituent phrases in other ritual texts. Once again, the flexible redactional status of this frame unit bears witness to the creative intertextual and idiolectic adaptations negotiated by ritual experts in articulating their own brands of ritual products.

In order to recapitulate, this section has focused on the rubric ‘frame unit’ and its heuristic capacity to interpret both lexical and positional variations of segments of ritual discourse within Coptic ritual spells. These frame units display a spectrum of variability that can be organized into two broad categories of redactional intervention: intertextual development and idiolectic variation. The former refers to the structural logic that governed a ritual scribe’s arrangement and positioning of frame units within a given composition, while the latter designates the lexical modifications negotiated through individual repertoires of formulae and stock phrases. Taken together, these categories are aimed at capturing the fluid processes through which ritual specialists shaped, reconfigured, and transmitted their

18 Edition in Crum 1922, 541-2.

textual materials, thereby illuminating apparent modular logics of composition of Coptic magical spells.

4 **Leiden, MS AMS 9: A Manual for Ritual Specialists?**

In light of these developments, questions now arise as to what kinds of writing-supported media may have facilitated storage and transmission of frame units among groups of ritual scribes operating across the Nile Valley. One quite famous explanatory model emerges from the so-called *Letter of Oualēs to Psais* (=P. Kell. V Copt. 35; PCM I 1; KYP M 176), which instructs us on the exchange of magical materials between a member of the Manichaean community of Kellis, Psais, and his correspondent, Oualēs, whom scholars have speculated to have been attached to the Manichaean monastic and clerical group known as the Elects (Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 48). Notably, the letter permits to infer that Oualēs copied for Psais a magical separation recipe, while requesting in return to copy a set of “quaternions” (ⲛⲓⲧⲉⲧⲣⲁⲥ), understood – following Dosoo and Preininger (2023, 53) – as a small four-bifolio codex that often served as a notebook. Now, while evidence does not justify assuming that this ostensible notebook contained magical texts, it nonetheless gestures toward a milieu in which modular textual units – such as the single-sheet separation recipe referenced in the letter – may have been produced, exchanged, and archived through similar writing-supported media. As Faraone has already observed, this model of transmission is prefigured in Galen’s *Peri Alupias*, where the physician recounts the loss of his treatise *On the Composition of Drugs according to Kind* (Faraone 2022, 422-3). There, Galen narrates how he had purchased the recipes forming that tractate from a certain Eumenes, a physician from Pergamum, who had gathered an extensive collection of loose-leaf recipes into two “notebooks of parchment” (ⲉⲓⲡⲉⲣⲁⲥ), compiled over years of travel across the Mediterranean basin. Building upon Galen’s account, Faraone has proposed two complementary scenarios to explain the circulation of magical recipes in Graeco-Roman Egypt. The first envisions a ‘centrifugal’ process, in which individual recipes were extracted from larger handbooks and sold to clients or shared among practitioners. The second envisions a ‘centripetal’ movement, whereby local single-sheet recipes were copied and incorporated into more extensive compilations (e.g., notebooks and working manuals). With regards to Coptic magic, a similar dynamic may underlie Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, MS AMS 9 (=KYP M 171), a sixth-to-eighth-century Coptic magical codex from the Theban region. Much like Galen’s notebooks, this manuscript appears to have served as a writing-supported repository – a working manual in which

ritual specialists stored modular ritual materials for later adaptation into specific spell formats. This hypothesis rests on the composite nature of the text, whose content, following the division established by Dosoo and Preininger, comprises (Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 109):

1. p. 1 l. 1 – p. 14 l. 13: Prayer of Gregory¹⁹
2. p. 14 l. 14 – p. 20 l. 5: Prayer for protection
3. p. 20 l. 6 – p. 23 l. 26: Letter of Abgar to Jesus²⁰
4. p. 24 l. 1 – p. 25 l. 23: Letter of Jesus to Abgar
5. p. 25 l. 24 – p. 28 l. 21: Prayer of Judas Cyriacus²¹
6. p. 28 ll. 22-7: Names of Seven Sleepers of Ephesus²²
7. p. 29 ll. 1-22: Names of Forty Martyrs of Sebaste²³
8. p. 29 l. 23 – p. 30 l. 28: *Incipits* of the canonical Gospels and Ps 90 (91)

Most notably, each of the textual units found in Leiden, MS AMS 9 represents widely known tactics in the arsenal of ritual specialists from late antique Egypt that appear across Coptic and Greek magical texts. Yet, what distinguishes Leiden, MS AMS 9 is the juxtaposition of these materials. Rather than forming a single coherent composition, the codex assembles a miscellany of ritual frame units, which were likely extracted and adapted by ritual specialists to suit the textual structure of their products.²⁴ This working hypothesis finds a suggestive parallel in a seventh-century monastic grotto from Faras (Nubia) (KYP M 91), whose painted inscriptions bring together a similar constellation of texts, including the Gospel *Incipits*, the *Jesus-Abgar Correspondence*, the *Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*, and the *Seven Sleepers of Ephesus*.²⁵ What interests me here is the copyist's deliberate decision to cluster together the Gospel *Incipits*, the *Jesus-Abgar Correspondence*, the *Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*, and the *Seven Sleepers of Ephesus*. The deliberate aggregation of these frame units strengthens the hypothesis that Leiden, MS AMS 9 may have functioned in an analogous way – as a practical handbook for storing

19 On the *Prayer of Gregory*, see Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 109-72. See also Sanzo 2019. For a Greek parallel of this textual tradition, see Strittmatter 1930; 1932.

20 On the *Jesus-Abgar Correspondence* in magical texts, see references in Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 151. On its widespread circulation in monastic settings, see Bélanger Sarrazin, unpublished.

21 On the *Prayer of Judas Cyriacus* in magical texts, see the commentary in Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 161.

22 On the occurrences of the *Seven Sleepers of Ephesus* as magical names see Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 167.

23 On the *Forty Martyrs of Sebaste* in magical texts, see Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 169.

24 For Leiden, MS AMS 9 as a miscellaneous codex see for instance Petrucci 1995, 10; de Bruyn 2017, 87; Sanzo 2014, 61-4.

25 For the *editio princeps*, see Griffith 1927.

modular ritual units. Francis Griffith's description of the Faras grotto is striking in this respect:

But the most interesting memorial that the hermit has left us is the series of Coptic texts which he painted upon the whitewashed walls in square compartments like the *pages of a book* greatly magnified. (Griffith 1927, 82)

Griffith's impression captures more than the aesthetic on display; it indeed encourages us to conjure the scenario in which the anchorite living there was copying his texts by mimicking the layout of a written exemplar. Though admittedly speculative, this possibility underscores a broader point. The redactional patterns observed throughout this study encourage us to view magical texts not as fixed compositions but as *assemblages* of frame units selectively extracted, adapted, and recombined by ritual experts drawing upon a shared repository of ritual paraphernalia. In this sense, Leiden, MS AMS 9 may be seen as a working manual for the production of ritual texts. On a broader level, recognizing this module-based logic not only clarifies the redactional processes that shaped these texts but also sheds light on the intellectual labor of those who produced them.

5 From Performance to Text: The Interface Between the Oral and the Written in Ancient Magical Practice

The redactional strategies examined thus far invite a final shift in focus toward the scribal milieu in which ritual specialists operated. The modular approach advanced in this study has sought to demonstrate, on the one hand, that Coptic ritual texts circulated in the format of discrete frame units that appear under different instantiations (e.g., length, placement, narrative coloring). On the other hand, it has brought into focus a range of textual variations that go beyond the more common visual errors committed by copyists, such as haplography, dittography, skipped lines, or misinterpreted letters. They indeed exhibit more substantial textual modifications, alterations, and readaptations that open a new window into the world of ritual scribes.

In a recent and stimulating contribution, Dosoo and Blumell have advanced the hypothesis of an oral-written continuum as a model for the transmission of magical manuscripts in Coptic Egypt (see Blumell, Dosoo 2018). Building on David Carr's influential analysis of the compositional processes underlying the biblical *Book of Proverbs* (Carr 2011), the authors propose that the textual fluidity observable in the so-called 'Schmidt Magical Dossier' (=PCM I 6

[=KYP M 120], 7 [=KYP M 121], and 8 [=KYP M 129]), together with related exempla, attests to a spectrum of transmission dynamics in which ritual knowledge circulated across both oral and written registers. Specifically, Dosoo and Blumell have pinpointed sets of textual variations – including abbreviation or expansion of a textual sequence, presence/absence of optional prepositions, spelling and word-order variation, or replacement of terms with slightly different rubrics – which bear the marks of the scribe’s attempt to bridge an oral-derived tradition with a written *Vorlage*. While their argument is not without merit, it nonetheless presupposes a conception of scribal practice oriented toward the transmission of an original textual form – a putative *Urtext* whose recovery anchors their analytical framework. By contrast, the evidence examined in this study suggests a more performative dimension to scribal activity. On the basis of the analyzed case studies, ritual specialists appear to have deliberately reconfigured textual modules – here designated as frame units – in ways that challenge the logic of mere replication. Extending Dosoo’s and Blumell’s insights, I postulate that the nature of the textual variations detected in the above-surveyed materials can be best interpreted as the result of the author’s active ‘performance’.²⁶ The benefit of embracing the concept of performance rests on the assumption that ancient magic was less interested in transmitting than in creating always new configurations of the same redactional units. In consideration of the concepts intertextual development and idiolectic variation explored in this study, we are prompted to interpret textual discrepancies as deliberate redactional interventions negotiated by ritual experts in the course of crafting their products. Within this framework, the term performance is construed as the deliberate utilization of a shared repository of ritual materials preserved in the form of textual modules, resulting in the creation of novel iterations of the same ‘virtual texts’. My notion of performance finds broader theoretical grounding and analytical support from Lundhaug’s recent work on the fluid transmission of apocryphal materials across diverse strata of Coptic literature in Late Antiquity (Lundhaug 2020).²⁷ Lundhaug has shown that the intrinsic instability of apocryphal narrative cycles – most notably the so-called ‘angelic investitures’ – demands an interpretive framework that acknowledges their nature as dynamic systems, marked by what Stephen Nichols has aptly termed ‘mutable stability’ (Nichols 2016). These narratives, he observes, operate through modular yet flexible configurations of motifs – such as the creation of Adam or the fall

26 For a particularly illuminating application of this rubric to the dynamics of oral-written transmission, see Foley 1995, 1-28.

27 See also Lied, Lundhaug 2017, 1-16.

of Satan – which serve as conceptual blueprints for the continual generation of new textual iterations, each adapted to the different audiences.

If Lundhaug illuminates the textual logic underlying the continual generation of new iterations, Smallwood (Smallwood 2004) offers fresh insights for understanding the performative practices through which such variations could emerge in the course of transmission. In particular, Smallwood has likewise argued for a mixed oral-written interpretative model to account for the diverse strategies of transmission adopted by copyists of ritual texts in medieval England. Smallwood's argument presupposes an ostensive metric of categorization by which oral and written modalities of transmission can be deduced on the ground of contents and format of the spells. As such, a short, loose-leaf spell could be indicative of an oral milieu of transmission, while longer spells appearing in different versions across diverse manuscripts could be well have been subjected to written transmission. Yet, Smallwood concedes that the two poles of this spectrum can intersect in different ways. As Smallwood details, one can find cases in which different versions of a putative written charm exhibit variations inexplicable as mere scribal error. To the contrary, Smallwood registers other cases in which scribes, as part of their performative engagement with the text, purposefully altered sequences of words in order to produce an impact on the readers:

And one or two charms in Middle English are so long and factually detailed that it is hard to think of them as often memorised. Nevertheless, this is written transmission with a difference. It is selective copying, and perhaps not always straightforward copying at all, since what was read in the exemplar might have had to compete with knowledge of a charm already carried in the head. The form of most charm-copies in Middle English accords very well with transmission of this sort. Textually they seem in most cases to have been treated with little respect; the compiler/copyist seems to have felt entitled to rework them as he thought fit. This might involve finding fresh rhymes for old ideas. (Smallwood 2004, 18)

The model described by Smallwood resonates closely with the dynamics I have traced for late antique and early medieval Egypt, particularly with the idea that, for ritual specialists, textual transmission was less an act of faithful reproduction than one of creative reconfiguration.

Against this background, the *Invocation of Baktiotha* examined above offers a particularly illuminating example. The three manuscripts preserving this frame unit draw upon a closely related pool of formulaic expressions, yet each arranges this shared material according to its own repertoire of formulae and stylistic preferences.

The performative nature of scribal intervention becomes especially evident in the way the copyists adapted the unit to distinct redactional programmes and ritual aims. The scribe responsible for P. Berlin 5527, for instance, copied the invocation on a relatively small loose-leaf papyrus sheet. By contrast, P. Macquarie I 1 and Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987 preserve considerably longer parallel invocations that appear to have been adapted to markedly different redactional agendas and formats. P. Macquarie I 1, in particular, forms part of an extended ritual handbook that includes a drawing and more elaborate ritual instructions. Brit. Lib. MS Or. 5987, on the other hand, presents a shorter composition whose ritual instructions appear to serve somewhat different aims. On this reading, the manuscripts bring into sharper relief how their copyists, in articulating their own brand of ritual products, operated at the intersection of oral techniques of memorization, re-adaptation, and the copying of written *Vorlagen*. Scribal practice thus emerges not merely as an act of reproduction but as a creative process in which ritual specialists actively reshaped inherited materials in order to produce new and contextually meaningful ritual texts.

Viewed through the critical perspective opened by both Lundhaug and Smallwood, magical sources may be well understood as inhabiting the liminal zone between the oral and the written, as Dosoo and Blumell have also suggested; yet they occupy this fertile terrain of creation by deftly amalgamating techniques drawn from both spheres in order to articulate their own, tailored brand of ritual products.

6 Conclusion

Drawing on insights from biblical redaction criticism and more recent scholarly discourse on Jewish and Christian magical texts, this article has developed a ‘modular approach’ to interpret the redactional strategies employed by ritual experts in crafting their products. According to this theoretical framework, ritual sources are amenable to be organized into discrete modular units, here referred to as ‘frame units’. These frame units form blocks of redactional materials that are strategically manipulated by ritual experts (e.g., combined, expanded, shrunk, adjusted) to accommodate various formats and performative needs. Moreover, I have argued that frame units vary according to two main principles, here labeled ‘intertextual development’ and ‘idiolectic variation’. These two rubrics have been designed to illustrate different ranges of textual variations across closely aligned frame units found in magical materials. Through my analysis of selected case studies, I have shown how the two principles can serve as a valuable analytical toolbox for illuminating the redactional interventions implemented

by ritual specialists in shaping their magical materials. At the same time, this investigative approach has opened a new window onto the scribal world of ritual specialists. Their adroit capacity in negotiating new versions of circulating frame units is informed by the logics of ritual performance. The notion of ‘performance’ adopted in this study has prompted us to approach redactional interventions operated by ritual specialists as indicative of an operative logic that combined oral techniques of storytelling and invocation with pre-selected texts stored in designated archives. In this respect, I have argued that Leiden, MS AMS 9 offers a particularly suggestive example of how a working manual for ritual specialists may have functioned. The nature of this Coptic codex’s contents indeed exemplifies the kind of writing-supported material media in which frame units could have been stored and transmitted among groups of ritual specialists. On a more general level, by developing a modular analytical framework for reading Coptic ritual texts, this study has sought, on the one hand, to make the field more cognizant of the logics that oriented the composition of ritual texts, and, on the other, it hopes thereby to equip scholarship on ancient magic with a more robust model that draws on recent scholarly discourse to illuminate the creative scribal culture in which ritual specialists operated.

Abbreviations

ACM = Meyer, M.; Smith, R. (eds) (1994). *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
KYP M = Dosoo, K.; Love, E.O.D.; Preininger, M. (eds) (s.d.). *Kyprianos Database of Ancient Ritual Texts and Objects*. Würzburg: University of Würzburg. <https://www.coptic-magic.phil.uni-wuerzburg.de/index.php/texts-search/>.
PCM = Dosoo, K.; Preininger, M. (2023). *Papyri Copticae Magicae. Coptic Magical Texts*. Vol. 1, *Formularies*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

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