Coptica

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A Coptic Magical Text
From the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)
*Ostracon LACMA MA 80.202.214**

Jacco Dieleman

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art holds among its Egyptian Art collection a fair number of items that can be dated by style or, if inscribed, by language to the Late Antique and Medieval periods. For convenience sake these objects are catalogued under the very general rubric 'Coptic'. Currently 27 of these objects have been made available in photo on the website http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/. The website features several wooden combs, a few bronze figurines, an oil lamp, a small fragmentary ceramic stele with a Coptic inscription, and six pottery sherds (ostraca) with Coptic writing. Among the latter group a small pottery fragment with writing stands out because it contains a peculiar drawing of a figure holding a staff in its right hand. This article takes a close look at this object which, due to its fragmentary nature, permits only a description in general terms (see Appendix I).

The text and image are written on an oblong piece of pottery that must once have been part of a platter. Its dimensions are 18.8 x 7.5 cm. The rim of the platter runs along the left edge of the sherd and shows only a slight curvature. The surface of the sherd is polished, reddish in color and shows hardly any incline towards the center of the platter. The line of the break at the right side of the sherd reveals that the clay used in the production of the platter contains no irregular inclusions and was thus very fine tempered. From this it follows that the platter must once have been of reasonable size, fairly flat and of high craftsmanship. The red-faced, polished surface also suggests that

the platter belongs to the so-called imitation Arretine ware type. The object is unprovenanced.

The text is written at straight angles to the rim of the platter and occupies the upper half of the space available. The right side of the ostracon is broken and, as a result, none of the lines are completely preserved. The lower half of the sherd shows two asterisk-like marks with small lobes at each end of the crossing lines and a depiction of a figure with a tail-like underside that swings to the left, which must be its right leg. The surface of the sherd is damaged here, so that its left leg, which was probably identical in form and swung to the right, is no longer visible. The figure has its right arm upraised and holds a staff in its hand. The left arm of this figure is no longer present, but was probably parallel to the right arm. The staff has the motif of a cross at its upper end, so that the figure is likely to be identified as an angel. Traces of ink are still visible under the figure, but it is now impossible to ascribe any meaning to these traces.

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x + 1.	C̄ОYX̄ M̄[
x + 2.	ϤР̄IX̄ : ϤР̄Ш[
x + 3.	X̄Р̄ . X̄ΘX̄ ϕ[
x + 4.	C̄XРM̄XTXР X̄ΘX̄[
x + 5.	T̄ШBHΘ T̄Ш̄ϕ[ΟBHΘ
x + 6.	OC †ПXРXКXX[ЄI M̄MOK/M̄MШTN̄
x + 7.	XЄ XXC 2N̄T[
x + 8.	РЄПK̄Y BXK[
x + 9.	C̄ШH̄ XПXT[
x + 10.	MOOY †NOY[
x + 11.	2HT XOYЄ [
x + 12.	[washed out]
x + 13.	[washed out]

x + 14.   ... NHZϵ...

Textual notes

x + 2:   It cannot be determined securely whether the final sign is ⲱ
         or ο due to the break of the sherd. The preserved ink traces
         are a bit more angular than the roundly shaped ο of the
         former line, which suggests reading ⲱ rather than ο here.

x + 3:   As the supralinear stroke is discontinuous, three separate
         names must be read. The first group consists of only two
         letters and is therefore likely the end of a word that started at
         the end of the foregoing line – is it ⲁⲣ or ⲁⲃ? The sign
         immediately following is faded beyond recognition –
         perhaps a ⲗ or Δ. Whether the third name starting with ⲫ had
         a supralinear stroke as well can no longer be determined.

x + 4:   The discontinuous supralinear stroke suggests reading two
         names here.

x + 5:   For the reconstruction of the lacuna, see PGM I.253-54 and
         the commentary here below.

x + 7:   The third letter is illegible; possibly ⲕ or ⲧ.

x + 8:   The combination K̅Y̅ is the abbreviation for ⲕⲩⲣⲓⲟⲩ or
         ⲕⲩⲣⲓⲉ.

x + 9:   ⲥⲱⲏ is a variant writing for ⲍⲱⲏ, 'life', which usually refers
         to Eva when written with supralinear stroke.

x + 11: The lower half of this line is badly mutilated. The ⲭ is
         conjectural; the ink traces would also allow ⲭ. The end of
         the line is illegible, but there is enough space for two more
         signs.

In the first five lines of the preserved text supralinear strokes appear
above the words. These strokes are very helpful, because they allow
the lines to be easily broken down into individual words. However, it
is less easy to determine the exact meaning of these words, because
they are mere gibberish or abracadabra. The words that can be
recognized are ⲥⲟⲩⲭ, ⲫⲣⲓⲍ, ⲥⲁⲣⲙⲁⲧⲁⲣ, and ⲓⲱⲃⲏⲑ. These are
commonly referred to as *voces magicae* or *nomina barbarica*,
powerful, secret names of deities and demons that magicians used to

invoke occult powers.[1] Such names began to occur in magical spells around the first century CE and soon became pervasive in magical and Gnostic texts and on gems and amulets. They were widely regarded as powerful names and were accordingly in use not just in Egypt, but throughout the Roman empire, where they were particularly abundant in the eastern Mediterranean. The names are meaningless in the sense that they were not meant to be translatable into a human language: they form part of a divine speech register.[2] Knowledge of these names would enable the practitioner to address the occult powers directly without the distorting interference or inaccuracy of human language. The practice is rooted in the ancient Egyptian idea that any ritual is a cosmic drama which interferes with the divine world.[3] In order to partake in this event the officiating priest had to momentarily discard his human nature and take on the role of a god. In the ritual the priest must demonstrate his divine nature by introducing himself, by name, as a divine being, for example the god Horus or Thoth, and by addressing the deity whose aid he sought by his many hidden names and epithets. Knowledge of these secret epithets and mythological roles proved beyond doubt to the deity addressed that a fellow divine being is asking for his attention. However, in contrast to the *voces magicae* of later times the

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[1] For an introduction to these names and a list of occurrences (with suggested interpretations) in the Greek and Demotic Magical Papyri, see William M. Brashear, "The *Greek Magical Papyri*: An Introduction and Survey," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* 18.5 (1995), 3429-38 and 3576-3603. See also Heinz J. Thissen, "Ägyptologische Beiträge zu den griechischen magischen Papyri," in: *Religion und Philosophie in alten Ägypten. Fs. Derchain* eds. U. Verhoeven and E. Graefe (OLA 39; Leuven: Peeters, 1991), 293-302; David G. Martinez, *P. Michigan XVI. A Greek Love Charm from Egypt (P.Mich. 757).* American Studies in Papyrology 30 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 88-92, 134; Joachim F. Quack, "Griechische und andere Dämonen in den spätägyptischen magischen Texten," in: *Das Ägyptische und die Sprachen Vorderasiens, Nordafrikas und der Ägäis,* ed. Thomas Schnieder. Alter Orient und Altes Testament 310 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2004), 427-507.

[2] Of interest in this respect are Iamblichus' comments on the use of unintelligible words in divinatory practices: *On the Egyptian Mysteries,* VII.4-5. See also John Dillon "The Magical Power of names in Origen and Later Platonism," in: *Origeniana Tertia* eds. Richard Hanson and Henri Crouzel (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo 1985), 203-16.

[3] This idea is best explained in Jan Assmann, "Unio Liturgica. Die kultische Einstimmung in Götterweltlichen Lobpreis als Grundmotiv 'esoterischer' Überlieferung im alten Ägypten," in: *Secrecy and Concealment. Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* eds. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 37-60.

names and epithets used in these rituals were in standard Egyptian and conformed to well-known religious imagery.[4]

In the majority of cases *voces magicae* appear to be a collection of random sounds. However, they are in fact quite often garbled versions of ancient epithets in Egyptian, Aramaic, Hebrew, Akkadian, Greek, or Persian. In this way they continue the ancient ritual tradition of listing divine epithets to attract the attention of the god, even though the correct identification of the original epithet was totally unimportant – and most often not understood – to the ancient practitioners by that time. Nevertheless, a fair number of *voces magicae* recur in different texts and are attested over long periods of time demonstrating that some of the names had acquired a prestige of their own. Famous examples are ABRASAX, BAINKHÔKH, and ABLANATHANALBA.

On the present ostracon the first name is COYX, which also occurs prominently next to a drawing of a bound figure on a Coptic magical text preserved in Heidelberg dating to the 11th century CE (Heidelberg Kopt. 679).[5] The latter is a page from a recipe book giving instructions for performing a curse rite against a person whose name the magician is to fill in when performing the rite and reciting the curse. The figure is drawn in frontal position, wearing a crown of some sort and having its two arms and two legs extending from its head immediately instead of a trunk. The arms come together at its hands, while its legs cross at the position of the feet. This particular arrangement of the limbs suggests that the figure is bound at its hands and feet, presumably to prevent it from moving and evading the curse. The prescribed preparation of a wax doll and the depiction of the victim with hands and feet bound is reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian execration rituals, which were conducted in state temples and at fortresses near the borders of the country to ritually ward off

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[4] This statement is in need of some refinement. Unintelligible or fanciful words and phrases do occur in magical texts of the pharaonic period as early as the Pyramid Texts, but they are very rare and never constituted a discrete kind of ritual speech in the way the *voces magicae* did. In several cases these words may very well be unintelligible only to modern readers, because the language or dialect they represent is no longer known.

[5] For an image of this drawing and a translation of the accompanying texts, see pBaden V, nr. 142 (drawings on pp. 411f.): Friedrich Bilabel and Adolf Grohmann, *Griechische, koptische und arabische Texte zur Religion und religiösen Literatur in Aegyptens Spätzeit* (Heidelberg 1934). See also Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith (eds.), *Ancient Christian Magic. Coptic Magical Texts of Ritual Power* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), nr. 110, 222-24 and Jacques van der Vliet, "Varia magica coptica," *Aegyptus* 71 (1991), 217-42, 225-28.

state enemies as early as the Old Kingdom (ca. 2575-2150 BCE).[6] Small dolls of bound prisoners in wax or clay were humiliated, decapitated and put to fire in order to magically transfer these properties of subjugation and destruction to the real-life enemies of the pharaonic state. The use of the motif of the bound prisoner in the Coptic magical text suggests that the mechanics of curse rituals changed little over time.[7] The instruction to bury two wax dolls nailed back to back in a mummy cloth, reinforces the connection with ancient Egypt quite vividly. However, the names of the occult powers invoked in the Heidelberg text reveal a different religious outlook from the ancient Egyptian one and the connection should accordingly not be pushed too far.

In the Heidelberg text the name COYX occurs three times: once alone, once in the sequence ZOACAX CAABEX COYX, and once in a list, from top to bottom, ZOACAX TAA2 CAABEX COYX. In all three instances the name is written directly next to the image of the bound enemy. It is unlikely that the names identify the depicted figure or, by extension, the intended victim of the spell, because the spell itself leaves the name of the victim open for the practitioner to fill in later. They are probably meant to invoke an occult power intended to destroy or guard the enemy. However, the spell itself addresses as aggressors eleven "strong angels who always stand before him", who go by different names: YOHAU, LOHEP, ACHAB, AOU, ASEL, AKALATA, KASIS, KERIA, ACHARAH, SALANI, PAPLIN (lines 6-9).

It is tempting for an Egyptologist to trace the etymology of this magical name back to the name of the ancient Egyptian crocodile god Sobek, whose name was written Σοῦχος in Greek. However, this god is never invoked in magical texts to my knowledge. A similar name, written ZOYX, occurs in two recipes of the fourth century CE Paris Magical Handbook (PGM IV.1919 and 1983).[8] Both are aggressive

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[6] Best introduction to this subject is Robert K Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice.* SAOC 54 (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1991), 112-90. For the continued use of this technique into late antique and medieval times, see Nicole B. Hansen, "Ancient Execration Magic in Coptic and Islamic Egypt," in: *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* eds. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer. RGRW 141 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002), 427-45.

[7] For corroborating evidence, see the introductory essay by Robert. K. Ritner on Coptic curse spells in Meyer, Richards, *Ancient Christian Magic,* 183-86.

[8] For the Greek text, see Karl Preisendanz (ed.), *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri* [2nd ed., Albert Henrichs (ed.); Stuttgart 1973-74]; for translation, see, Hans D. Betz (ed.) *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

spells of attraction, but no connection with the god Sobek is detectable. In the Gnostic treatise 'The Paraphrase of Shem' from the Nag Hammadi Library the name ⲤⲰⲬ occurs. If this is a variant writing of the ⲤⲞⲨⲬ of the present spell, the identification with the god Sobek becomes even less convincing, because ⲤⲰⲬ is juxtaposed here with ⲘⲞⲗⲨⲬⲐⲗ, a demon of the impure earth, whose name betrays rather a Hebrew than an Egyptian etymology (NH VII.1 32/3 and 47/2-3).[9]

. The second line of the broken text starts with the *vox magica* ⲪⲢⲒⲌ, which is not attested in any other text to my knowledge. In Greek the word means 'shivering' (LSJ 1955a), a fitting name for an aggressive demon[10]. In combination with the next name, only partly preserved as ⲪⲢⲰ[..., or ⲪⲢⲞ[..., the line displays the often observable tendency to form alliterating patterns with *voces magicae*, as in a curse of the fourth century CE addressed to the moon: EUPHORBA PHORBA PHORBOREOU PHORBA PHORBOR PHORBOR PHORBOR BORBORPHA etc. (PGM IV.2348ff.). This rhetorical technique presumably lent an alienating effect to the rite and was, in addition, aimed at putting the practitioner into a trance through the repetition of similar sounds with the same cadence over an extended period of time.[11]

The *vox magica* ⲤⲗⲢⲘⲗⲦⲗⲢ of line x + 4 is otherwise unknown. It may as well be the final part of a longer name that started in the broken part of the foregoing line. Alternatively, as Jacques van der Vliet suggested in a personal communication, it could perhaps be connected with the following word and thus be reconstructed into an otherwise unattested palindrome ⲤⲗⲢⲘⲗⲦⲗⲢⲗⲐⲗ[ⲢⲗⲦⲗⲘⲢⲗⲤ] with Ⲑ as its switch point as in the common αβλαναθαναλβα.

Of interest is the combination in line x + 5, where ⲦⲰⲂⲎⲐ ⲦⲰⲪ[... can be recognized. The repetition of the element ⲓⲱ is reminiscent of the formula ιω-ερβηθ ιω-πακερβηθ ιω-βολχωσηθ ιω-πατаθναξ ιω-οσεσρω (and variants), which occurs in several curse formulae among the Greek, Demotic, and Coptic Magical Papyri.[12] The

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[9] I thank Jacques van der Vliet kindly for giving me the references discussed in this paragraph.

[10] I thank Tim Vivian for this suggestion.

[11] See also, Quack, *Griechische Dämonen*, 442.

[12] For example PGM III.71*-79*; IV.260-85; PDM xiv.675-694 [PGM XIVc.22-23]. For Coptic examples, see pBaden V, nr. 134, ll. 5ff. and pMil.Vogl. Coptic 16, C II, ll. 3-4; S. Pernigotti, "Una rilettura del P.Mil Vogl. Copto 16," *Aegyptus* 73 (1993), 93-125, see especially p. 116 for important references. See also Jacco Dieleman,

etymology of the element ιω remains unclear; possibly it is Egyptian ειω, 'donkey', the animal of the god of disorder Seth, whose name is indeed explicitly invoked in PDM xiv.675-694 [PGM XIVc.16-27] and pMil.Vogl. Coptic 16, text C.[13] The second name of this line starts as ΤΩϤ[... , which, in combination with the preceding ΤΩ<ЄΡ>ΒΗΘ, is reminiscent of a string of *voces magicae* in PGM I.253-54 which follows closely upon several clauses in Old-Coptic: ιωερβηθ ιωφορβηθ ιωπακερβηθ ιωαπομψ. Possibly the line in the present text can be reconstructed accordingly.

If the identification and reconstruction are correct it remains to be explained why the scribe omitted the element ЄΡ in the name ΤΩΒΗΘ. It could very well be a mere typo, but it cannot be ruled out that the scribe confused the ιω-ЄΡΒΗΘ formula with the ΒΗΘ ΒΗΘΛ ΒΗΘΛ formula, which occurs in several Coptic charms,[14] and as a consequence only wrote ΒΗΘ. It is clear from other sources that the name ΒΗΘ was considered powerful in its own right. It also worthy to note that this name also occurs in the above mentioned Heidelberg curse, where the following instruction is given at the bottom of the page: "write these (names) with ink on [...]: ΒΗΤ ΒΗΘΛ ΒΗ."[15] The magical names are here written in ring letters. An alternative explanation could be found in the spell of attraction pMil.Vogl. 16,

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Priests, Tongues, and Rites. The London-Leiden Magical Manuscripts and Translation in Egyptian Ritual (100-300 CE). RGRW 153 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2005), 135-38.

[13] A variant interpretation takes the ιω to be an abbreviated form of the common vox magica ιλο; for references, see Martinez, *A Greek Love Charm from Egypt*, 80.

[14] For example, London Oriental Manuscript 5525, ll. 109ff. [For the Coptic text, see Angelicus M. Kropp, *Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte* (Brussels: Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1931), text C; vol. 1, pp. 15-21; for a translation, see ibidem, vol. 2, pp 199-207 and Meyer, Richards, *Ancient Christian Magic*, nr. 64, pp. 120-24], London Oriental Manuscript 6796 [2.3] recto, ll. 44ff. [Kropp, *Zaubertexte*, text G, vol. 1, 35-40 and vol. 2, 104-9; Meyer, Richards, *Ancient Christian Magic*, nr. 131, 283-89], London Oriental Manuscript 6796 [4], ll. 53-56 [Kropp, *Zaubertexte*, text J, vol. 1, 47-49 and vol. 2, 135-43; Meyer, Richards, *Ancient Christian Magic*, nr. 132, 290-92 (a photo of the drawing is given on p. 292)], London Hay 10391, ll. 1-6 [Kropp, *Zaubertexte*, text M, vol. 1, 55-62 and vol. 2, 40-53; Meyer, Richards, *Ancient Christian Magic*, nr. 127, 263-69]. Note that the element ΒΗΘ does not occur in the Greek and Demotic Magical Papyri other than in the formations ιω-ЄΡΒΗΘ and ιω-ΠΛΚЄΡΒΗΘ.

[15] This line is written on the verso side of the page. At the top of the page is another drawing of the bound prisoner, while charactères or ring letters occupy the rest of the available space; see pBaden V, 413 and Meyer, Richards, *Ancient Christian Magic*, 223. I take ΡΟΥ to derive from Egyptian *rjw*, *ryt*, 'ink' (DG 241 and WB II.399). It is unlikely that the last name should be read ΒΗΘΛΜΟ instead of ΒΗ, because the following ΘΛΜΟ part is not written in charactèr signs.

text C, where the line "IѠ CHθ IѠ ΠΛKЄPBHθ IѠ ФЄNIϩ IѠ my protector Baôtôr (who is) Retribution (= Petbe)" occurs. In association with the opening combination IѠ CHθ the scribe of the present ostracon may have decided to drop the ЄP element, knowingly or unknowingly.

The following 9 lines of the LACMA ostracon are very difficult to read, but it is clear that they explain the purpose of the rite. In line x + 6 the verb ΠΛPΛKΛΛЄIN is partly preserved. It can probably be reconstructed as †-ΠΛPΛKΛΛЄI ṀMOK or †-ΠΛPΛKΛΛЄI ṀMѠTṈ, "I call to you (singular or plural)". Unfortunately, the name of the entity invoked is not preserved. For example, in the London Hay magical handbook, a powerful being is invoked thus: †-COΠCṈ †-ΠΛPΛKΛΛЄ ṀMOK ṈΠOOY 2Ѡ NNOϬ NXѠPЄ 2N TЄФϬOM: 'I beseech, I call out to you today, myself, O great one, strong in your power' (line 12).[16] Other examples of the use of this idiomatic expression in Coptic magical texts are easily found, which shows that the present text follows a common rhetorical format.[17] Note that the Greek verb is not prefixed with the auxiliary verbal form P̄-, which indicates that the text is written in the Sahidic dialect.

In line x + 7 the practitioner is then probably speaking to the invoked being. If this is correct, then the first two letters should be read as the conjunction XЄ introducing the speech of the ritualist. The first letter of the following word is hardly legible, but K is very well possible, so that the clause would read KΛΛC 2NT: "put her/it into the [...]". The invoked being is thus given a command to act for the practitioner. Unfortunately, the precise instructions cannot be reconstructed from the preserved signs of the following two lines. A reference to a/the lord is given in line x + 8 and another possibly to Eva with the name C̄ѠH̄ in line x + 9.[18]

In line x + 10 the word MOOY may refer to water, but the broken context does not allow for any meaningful reconstruction. The

[16] For London Hay 10391, see Kropp, *Zaubertexte*, text M, vol. 1, 55-62 and vol. 2, 40-53; Meyer, Richards, *Ancient Christian Magic*, nr. 127, 263-69.

[17] For example, London Oriental Manuscript 6796 (2.3), line 10; London Hay 10391, ll. 7, 76; Rossis Gnostischer Traktat, passim [all these texts are available in Kropp, *Zaubertexte*, volume 1]. The expression already occurs in the Greek Magical Papyri; for example, PGM II.147, IV.1292, 2976, LI.1, etc.

[18] Jacques van der Vliet wonders whether the text refers here to "the children / daughters of Eva" and suggests reconstructing something like ṄϢHPЄ THPOY ṄC̄ѠH̄ NΛΠѠT Є, "all Eva's children will run to." If this tentative interpretation is correct, the text is most likely an erotic spell of attraction; see also Van der Vliet, "Varia magica coptica," 227-28.

following traces †-ⲚⲞⲨ[could be emended either as an imperative
followed by an object with indefinite article, "Give a ...!", as †-ⲚⲞⲨ
ⲬⲈ, "Now then", or as †-ⲚⲞⲨⲬⲈ ⲈⲂⲞⲖ, "I cast out". The combination
ⲚⲞⲨⲬⲈ ⲈⲂⲞⲖ is an idiomatic expression often occurring in exorcising
spells or protective spells against evil spirits, but it normally requires
a second or third person subject and a hortatory verbal form such as
the subjunctive as, for example, in the following clause ⲚϤⲚⲞⲨⲬⲈ
ⲈⲂⲞⲖ ⲘⲠⲚⲀ ⲚⲒⲘ ⲚⲔⲀⲐⲀⲢⲦⲞⲚ, "may he cast out every unclean spirit,"
where the phrase refers to Jesus on the cross (London Oriental
Manuscript 6796 [4]. 6796, ll. 34-35). The use of the present tense
and first person singular in the suggested emendation make it unlikely
that it is correct.

Immediately below the invocation one can discern two asterisks
with small lobes at both ends of each crossing line. This type of sign
can be found frequently on Late Antique magical material
irrespective of the language used or the region where it was found.
They are usually called ring signs or *charactères* and constitute some
sort of sacred writing, which was supposed to enable direct written
communication with the divine world. The signs have primarily a
visual, not phonetic quality and thus were not meant to be
pronounced. They were not in any sense a formalized script, but show
free variation and a certain degree of improvisation within their
uniformity. Characteristic for the signs are the lobes at the end of
lines. In the present case the two signs look fairly similar, but in many
other cases sequences of variant signs suggest the idea of artificial
letters encoding a sacred message. As a variant to this device, *voces
magicae* were sometimes written with common letters in the shape of
charactères, as is the case in the Heidelberg curse, where ⲂⲎⲦ ⲂⲎⲐⲀ
ⲂⲎ is written in such letters (Heidelberg Kopt. 679, see also above). In
the present case the right part of the ostracon is broken off, so that it
can no longer be established whether other *charactères* followed the
preserved two signs and whether they were meant to encode some
sort of message or hidden name. However, in Late Antiquity
charactères developed from merely being symbols into being
powerful entities in their own right. Accordingly, they became
pervasive on magical charms and amulets, sometimes even to the
extent that they appear to be nothing but appropriate space fillers to
appease feelings of *horros vacui*. The two signs may very well have
had this function here.

The most conspicuous element of the ostracon is certainly the
drawing of the figure holding the staff. Unfortunately identification of

the figure seems impossible, because no caption accompanies the image and the spell itself is too badly preserved to make out the name of the creature. In light of the cross ornament at the tip of the staff, I cautiously interpret the figure as an angelic being. Drawings like this are quite common in Coptic magical texts. They can represent demons, angels, Jesus on the cross or identify the victim of a curse ritual, as is the case in the Heidelberg text. In this case it probably depicts the being invoked in the spell.

All things considered, it is warranted to conclude that the ostracon was once used in a magical ritual. The invoked *voces magicae* continue a tradition of using exotic names to invoke occult powers and to secure their help and efficaciousness. The precise purpose of the spell cannot be established, but it was likely a spell of an aggressive nature. The name COYX occurs elsewhere in rites of an aggressive nature, while the ιω-ερβηθ formula, if only attested here with the deviant name ιωβηθ, belongs to a long tradition of spells with malicious intent, such as binding, attracting, restraining and sending bad dreams. A common ritual technique with such spells was to draw images of demons or the victim and to write the wording of the invocation on a piece of papyrus, lead tablet, bone, reed or bay leaf, or a pottery sherd. In the present case the ritualist used a red-faced imitation Arretine ware platter, the use of which is indeed prescribed in Coptic magic handbooks under the name of "platters from Aswan."[19] The object had then to be buried where the victim would pass by, for example under the doorsill of the victim's house, or where the invoked being was most likely to be about, as for example in a tomb. It is therefore quite probable that the present sherd is preserved thanks to the fact that a ritual expert had carefully buried it in a place where it remained undisturbed for many centuries.

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[19] For the identification of "platters from Aswan" as imitation Arretine ware, see Van der Vliet, "Varia magica coptica," 224-25. An imitation Arretine bowl with the ink inscription "platter from Aswan" is object 27718 of the British Museum; H. R. Hall, *Coptic and Greek Texts of the Christian Period from Ostraka, Stelae, etc. in the British Museum* (London 1905), 49 and plate 38.

Appendix I

LACMA MA 80.202.214