

Workshop

Manuscripts as Magical Agents

Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC), University of Hamburg
10–11 June 2016

One of the aims pursued at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures is to research agents and forms of agency in manuscript cultures. Manuscripts are not only objects of cultural practices, but can be understood as having a socioculturally mediated capacity to act by themselves. With their specific materiality and visual design, they actively contribute to cultural interpretations of reality and as such can be subsumed under the concept of *agency* or the German term *Wirkmacht*. This *agency* or *Wirkmacht* is constituted by the relationship and interaction between a manuscript as a physical object and human actors as producers, possessors and users of manuscripts.

Manuscripts as magical artefacts, be it amulets, magical recipes or manuals of magic, are a characteristic case of *Wirkmacht*. Besides the specific materiality connected to their use, such as size, form, and writing materials, magical manuscripts can exhibit specific visual designs, e.g. magical signs, diagrams or triangular vanishing schemes (*Schwindeschemata*), that are directly related to their assumed potencies. We can see in the use of miniature Qur'ans and miniature Bibles worn as protective amulets, that these religious manuscripts and artefacts are not merely to be seen as passive objects bearing texts, but need to be understood as actors that unfold independent *Wirkmacht* and thus contribute to magically influenced realities.

Human actors rely on the *Wirkmacht* of magical artefacts and, through the interaction with them, simultaneously affirm their efficacy. The potency of such manuscripts can be activated by their immediate presence, their contact to the human body, or by the material and visual, sometimes iconic or self-referential features of the objects. Magic manuscripts structure situations and actions and actively intervene in the everyday world of human actors (for example as charms for protection or charms for love).

The workshop aims at advancing our understanding of how manuscripts as magical artefacts (for example amulets, but also recipes or manuals) are attributed with *Wirkmacht* in cultural practices and are perceived as “performers of magic” themselves. Particular questions of interest are:

- How do the materiality and the design of manuscripts contribute to their *Wirkmacht* as magical artefacts?
- How does the assumed magical efficacy of manuscripts vice versa affect their production, possession, and use?
- Which historical changes is this *Wirkmacht* subject to?
- What is the social dimension of this *Wirkmacht* of magic manuscripts?

The workshop will cover a variety of manuscript cultures as well as different historical time periods up to the 20th century.

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Programme

Venue: Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, Room 0001, Warburgstraße 26, 20354 Hamburg

Friday, 10 June 2016

14.00–14.30 Welcome and Introduction
Michael Kohs (CSMC Hamburg)

Session 1 Chair: Jan van der Putten (CSMC Hamburg)

14.30–15.15 Danilo Valentino (CSMC Hamburg)
Therapy and Manuscripts in the Late Byzantine Society: Magic and Religion in the Medical Recipes of MS. Taur. B.VII.18

15.15–16.00 Boryana Pouvkova (CSMC Hamburg)
“Write It in Blood”: the Act of Writing as Magical Practice in Greek Iatrosophia

16.00–16.30 Coffee Break

Session 2 Chair: Cornelius Berthold (CSMC Hamburg)

16.30–17.15 Michael Kohs (CSMC Hamburg)
Magia figurata—The visual dimensions of Jewish magic manuscripts

17.15–18.00 Ortal Paz-Saar (Universiteit Utrecht)
Vanishing Words: Destruction of Manuscripts as a Magical Practice

18.00–18.15 Coffee Break

Session 3 Chair: Michael Friedrich (CSMC Hamburg)

18.15–19.00 Marco Heiles (Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf)
Was the German manuscript Dresden, Landesbibliothek, M 206 from about 1515 used as magical agent?

20.00 Dinner

Saturday, 11 June 2016

Session 4 Chair: Anna Boroffka (CSMC Hamburg)

10.00–10.45 Sabine Kienitz (CSMC Hamburg)
Celestial letters and apotropaic rituals. Magic practices in times of war.

10.45–11.00 Coffee Break

- Session 5** Chair: Michael Kohs (CSMC Hamburg)
- 11.00–11.45 Karl Schaefer (Drake University, Des Moines)
Malleable Magic: Medieval Arabic Block Printed Amulets and Their Audiences
- 11.45–12.30 J.F. Marc Des Jardins (Université Concordia, Montréal)
A Tibetan Bonpo priest's grimoire, its content and possible functions
- 12.30–13.00 Lunch Break
- Session 6** Chair: Margit Kern (CSMC Hamburg)
- 13.00–13.45 Andrea Acri (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore)
Palm-leaf Manuscripts as Magical Agents (or Just Books?) in Java and Bali
- 13.45–14.30 Farouk Yahya (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)
Malay paper wheels with strings used for divination
- 13.30–15.15 Final Discussion

Abstracts

Danilo Valentino

Therapy and Manuscripts in the Late Byzantine Society: Magic and Religion in the Medical Recipes of MS. Taur. B.VII.18

MS. Taur. B.VII.18 is a 16th century Greek handbook located in the Turin National Library, which was intended for practical usage. This manuscript offers on ff. 1r-67r a collection of medical recipes based on the classical medical tradition (their main source is the Pseudo-Galenic work *De remediis parabilibus*). However in them an important role is played by magic and religion: among others, love potions, exorcisms against uterine pain or methods to determine the gender of the child during the sexual intercourse are part of their therapy, and by analyzing them, it is possible to shed light on the nature and development of Greek medicine in the Middle Ages. Goal of this paper is to present different kinds of magic and religious remedies collected in the Turin codex and to describe the common features of them, with the intention of offering hints to the agency of this “practical-use” manuscript typology in the Late Byzantine Society.

Boryana Pouvkova

“Write It in Blood”: the Act of Writing as Magical Practice in Greek Iatrosophia

The main focus of iatrosophia is the human health and the different ways to restore it in case of illness. The manuscripts transmit long compendia with numerous chapters containing indications for the preparation of various ointments using mostly plants, but also animal or mineral substances. A considerable number of manuscripts also transmit chapters describing magical practices. They are not only concerned with the restoration or preservation of human health but also with the wish to acquire supernatural powers, to discover secrets, or have impact on nature or on the life of other persons. The act of writing itself, as well as the choice of the writing materials and inks, plays a central role in the magical practices described in Greek iatrosophia.

Michael Kohs

Magia figurata - The visual dimensions of Jewish magic manuscripts

Manuscripts of Jewish magic – codices of manuals and recipes as well as amulets – bear visual features of several types: In the Babylonian incantation bowls we find depictions of demons, the manuscripts often contain diagrams and bear specific textual layouts such as “highlighting” powerful magic names in the text. Scholarly studies on Jewish magic have claimed that through the centuries the visual dimension gained more and more importance in Jewish magic. The talk will deal with the question how the magical *Wirkmacht* that producers and users attributed to the manuscripts can be related to these visual features. To what extent do these features add to a magical agency of manuscripts in Jewish magic -- maybe even independently from the textual content?

Ortal-Paz Saar

Vanishing Words: Destruction of Manuscripts as a Magical Practice

Some practices of Jewish (and non-Jewish) magic required inscribing a text, and then destroying the resulting manuscript, either by burning, burying or effacing it with a liquid. These practices raise interesting questions and implications, e.g. is it allowed to destroy the name of God? Is manuscript destruction used primarily in aggressive/ erotic magic, or also in more positive and benign branches of magic? What evidence do we have for the actual performance of such practices, other than their being mentioned in recipes?

Marco Heiles

Was the German manuscript Dresden, Landesbibliothek, M 206 from about 1515 used as magical agent?

The manuscript Dresden, Landesbibliothek, M 206 is a paper manuscript in octavo format. It contains of two codicological units: The first unit is build by only one quire of eleven paper leafs from about 1495 and contains three Latin mass-texts with prayers in West Bavarian. The second codicological unit consists of 11 quires with altogether 122 leafs. This unit can be dated to about 1515 and contains texts in Thuringian-East Franconian. Its textual composition is without precedent in the history of German literature. Two main scribes and four later hands collected here only text, which the theological discourse of this period would classify as superstition or magic: text on divination, introductions for ritual magic and a huge collection of textual amulets. What was the function of this collection of amulets, which the text itself calls *fundamentum leonis pape super omnes caracteres*? Was it used as a handbook for the production of amulets? But why are the introductory phrases often missing and why is the name of *Reynhart Trugses* inserted in the text wherever possible? Or was this collection meant to give the book itself apotropaic power and the codex used as magical agent?

Sabine Kienitz

Celestial letters and apotropaic rituals. Magic practices in times of war.

Abstract will follow.

Karl Schaefer

Malleable Magic: Medieval Arabic Block Printed Amulets and Their Audiences

Amulets constitute the largest segment of the known corpus of medieval Arabic block prints. Their survival into our own time is due in part to their perceived agency as repositories of protective magical power. But this is a small and arguably diminishing factor in their appeal to those interested in them today. The agency of the block prints has caused them to enter a variety of ontological assemblages that has transformed both them and the different groupings of objects that they have become part of over time. The presentation examines the transformations of block printed amulets in terms of their materiality, agency and assemblages.

J.F. Marc des Jardins

A Tibetan Bonpo priest's grimoire, its content and possible functions

The Pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion of *Bon* is primarily a ritual tradition with four main divisions of practices. Those are: *mo* (divination), *rtsis* (astrological calculation) and *dpyad* (diagnosis), and *Gto* rites. The first three, namely, divination, calculation and diagnosis all support the last part which consists in ritual prescriptions and performance to obtain the desired results. *Gto* rituals are the main activities of *Bon* priests and are to be found in numerous ritual compilations or ritual cycles. These cycles follow a Tantric system similar to the *Mahayoga* rites of the most ancient order of Buddhist lamas (*Rnying ma pa*). Because of this, the latter has received strong criticisms from the other Buddhist schools which were established much later in Tibet. The Buddhist Tantric literature is replete with spells and rites with mundane objectives as opposed to soteriological discourses to achieve liberation from the cyclic world of reincarnation, *samsara*. Possibly because of high demand for these rites, Buddhist masters have collected various strategies in small personal handbooks, transmitted in secret from one generation to the other. These strategies are abbreviated notes and ritual methods and very few of these handbooks have appeared in print. The Tibetan *Bonpo* have their own version of these grimoires but so far, none has ever appeared in print or written about in the relevant literature (scholarly and otherwise). This paper presents such rare material from a photocopied manuscript which is now presumably no longer extant. It introduces its content, language, illustrations and gives us a rare glimpse at the everyday matters which may have been at the centre of a lama's professional activities.

Andrea Acri

Palm-leaf Manuscripts as Magical Agents (or Just Books?) in Java and Bali

An Indic-derived tradition of palm-leaf manuscripts has survived down to the present in Java and Bali (Indonesia). The near totality of the many thousands palm-leaf manuscripts known to us hail from the small island of Bali, where Hinduism is dominant, and Kawi (Old Javanese) and Balinese belles-lettres are (to some extent) still practiced. Conversely, Java has yielded only a few hundred specimens, mostly dating back to the beginning of the pre-Islamic period, between the late 14th and 16th century. In my presentation I will discuss the ways in which palm-leaf manuscripts are perceived and used in contemporary Java and Bali, i.e. as either powerful magical and ritual objects, sacred heirloom (*pusaka*), or "(old) books". My purpose is to contrast the different fates of those manuscripts in the socio-cultural settings of Islamic Java on the one hand and Hindu Bali on the other, and try to explain this state of affairs.

Farouk Yahya

Malay paper wheels with strings used for divination

This paper will explore the concept of agency as relates to a type of divinatory paper wheel found in the Malay peninsula and Sumatra. This technique consists of a round piece of paper which is divided into a number of sectors, each of which contains a prognostication with a piece of string attached to its edge. According to the instructions given in one example, the user chooses a sector at random by putting the paper onto his head and pulling at the string. The sector obtained will reveal the answer. These manuscripts are therefore not passive objects containing texts for reading, but, as divinatory tools that are activated by the human head, they have the agency of influencing people to make decisions and carry out certain actions.