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**The Power of the Word in Early  
Modern Greek Medical Texts**

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
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## **The Power of the Word in Early Modern Greek Medical Texts**

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### **Abstract**

In recent studies I have discussed practical medical texts called *iatrosophia*. *Iatrosophia*, used by doctors and healing practitioners from the early Byzantine era through the late nineteenth century, contain classical Greek, Byzantine, and post-Byzantine medical recipes and concoctions (mostly herbal) for treating physical ailments (arranged from head to toe). In this paper, I discuss the role of the spoken word in iatrosophic texts. I demonstrate that words can be as powerful as ethnopharmacological recipes. Sometimes the words are used to supplement the herbal concoctions, at other times they stand alone without any medical measures. Other words bind demons which cause illness, or bind the disease itself. The exorcisms, spells, and words in these texts demonstrate how magic and religion each comprised part of medical praxis in the post-Byzantine period of Greece.

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Historians have noted, with regret and perplexity, the infusion, from the earliest times, of what one could call magical elements in medical texts of the Western world. Egyptian medical papyri dating to 2,000 B.C. and Akkadian, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Sumerian healing texts from the second millennium and early first millennium B.C. contain spells, incantations, and exorcisms, as well as healing recipes with bizarre and magical ingredients. Especially under attack have been the Greek medical healing texts written during Byzantium and the centuries of the Ottoman occupation of Greece (A.D. 313–1821).<sup>1</sup> One scholar has described these texts as “diluted and darkened decoction[s] of the ancient teaching, mixed with all kinds of superstitious ingredients, sympathetic (therapeutic) means, and exorcism formulas.”<sup>2</sup>

What these scholars overlook is the fact that medical pluralism has existed in Western medicine from the earliest times.<sup>3</sup> People have always been willing to consult not just professional healers trained in medical schools, but also root-cutters, druggists, midwives, magicians and sorcerers, wise village men and women, staff personnel at temples or churches, priests, and other religious authorities. All these persons possessed validity as a medical practitioner if they could cure disease or preserve health.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I will discuss how the writers of early modern Greek medical texts used the power of the spoken word and the power of the written word in their medical practice. For convenience, I distribute into five categories how these words were applied by healers. The first group consists of spells and incantations that the healer spoke as he administered medicines. A second group involves the words that a healer should say while he cut roots or gathered herbs for his medical recipes. A third group is comprised of words that bind people like thieves or exorcise the demons and illnesses that plague the sick, and words that can be applied to everyday concerns like love and issues of life and death. A fourth group allows the release of patients who have been afflicted with binding spells; this most frequently involves married couples. By far the largest group (the fifth category) are healing words that are Greek Orthodox Christian in nature and often supplemented by *voces magicae*, or strings of letters, magic words, or proper names, all of which possess great power. These words were offered as part of a spell, or were written on pieces of paper or even on the body; no medical procedure or recipe was used in conjunction with the words.

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<sup>1</sup>Basic studies on these medical texts for the English reader are Touwaide 2007, Papadopoulos 2009, Clark 2002 and 2011 (Clark offers a comprehensive list of modern Greek bibliographical sources).

<sup>2</sup>Karl Krumbacher, as cited in Touwaide 2007, p. 154.

<sup>3</sup>See the extended discussion in my “Introduction: Medical Pluralism, Healing, and Dreams in Greek Culture,” in Oberhelman, Forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup>For observations on ancient Greece, see Lloyd 1979, pp. 37–58; 1991, pp. 295–296, 421–422; and 2003, pp. 40–83. Also McNamara 2003–2004, who offers excellent primary sources on this topic. For modern Greek parallels, see Blum and Blum 1970, pp. 22, 143–144, 207–208, 255–257.

## 1. The Spoken and Written Word and Medical Prophylaxis

In this category medical treatments are combined with a spell or the invocation of powers.<sup>1</sup> The following remedy contains folk medicine, a magical incantation, and an act of sympathetic magic:

*For someone who has a stone and cannot urinate. If a person wants to achieve health, write on his pubic area the following letters in red ink: “The Lord said, ‘He who believes in me will have rivers of living water flowing from his belly.’” But if [it is not possible to do this] in his pubic area because of a sense of modesty, write [those words] on a piece of paper with red ink and attach the paper to his pubic area. Take the root of the mallow and boil it. He should drink the broth with a small amount of salt on an empty stomach and he should then urinate; then take away his shoes and have him walk barefoot to a wild fig tree. There take off the bark, however much of it is dark in color. Then take four or six nails and nail them into the place where you had stripped the bark; while you are nailing them have another person ask you, “Why are you nailing?” [Respond to him:] “I am nailing here the gallbladder of NN.” Next hang over smoke the bark that you had removed. And just as the bark dries out, so too will the gallbladder. (Bibliothèque de la Société historique, no. 223, fol. 66<sup>r-v</sup>)<sup>2</sup>*

In this recipe, we have a biblical verse (John 7: 38) that is to be written on the sufferer’s pubic area. The verse carries with it the power of the divine word to bring healing: just as living waters flow from the stomach of a Christian believer, so the patient will be cleared of any stone or blockage. But the physician is also told to have the patient drink a concoction containing mallow root. Herbal books specifically recommend the mallow plant’s root boiled in water as a cure for problems of the urinary organs and the alimentary canal.<sup>3</sup> So, we have then good pharmacopeia, along with a snippet of biblical scripture. But as if more help is needed, the healer is instructed to bind the disease with the use of nails (a practice

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<sup>1</sup>Scarborough (1991, p. 156) points out that the *Greek Magical Papyri* contain over 450 active ingredients in their spells. Blum and Blum (1991, p. 144) in their study of modern rural Greek medical healing demonstrate that folk-prescribed therapies tend to combine medical pharmacology and magic, often to the point that they are indistinguishable. See also Blum and Blum 1965, chaps. 6 and 11.

<sup>2</sup>All translations in this article are my own. The exception is the translation of the *iatrosophion* taken from Clark 2011.

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., Kowalchik and Hylton 1998, s.v. *althaea officinalis*.

that goes back to antiquity).<sup>1</sup> The healer is to remove the discolored bark of a fig tree and drive nails into it; the purpose of the nailing is to bind the disease. And if this too is not enough, the healer next conducts an act of sympathetic magic. He hangs the bark over a smoky fire to dry it out; the patient's gallbladder will likewise dry up and cure him. A modern skeptic may wonder whether the biblical verse and the magical rituals were all meant for the patient's benefit, or if the healer actually believed that they were necessary to supplement the natural healing properties of the mallow plant.<sup>2</sup> But in my opinion the text implies that the written and spoken words, when used in conjunction with magical methods, were an essential part of the cure.<sup>3</sup>

A similar mixture of reliable herbal medicine and spoken magical words appears in this healing: "**Concerning pain of the teeth and molars and rotten gums and other such things:** Take 3 ounces of the juice of a mulberry tree and 1 ounce of the bark of its root; boil these for 30 minutes, and then give as a mouthwash for 3 days, saying [each time] '**Saraêl, Aêl, Heiea, Ios, Bouliêl, Surakhaêl, and Mikhaêl, come to my aid**'" (Codex Parisinus gr. 2419, fol. 265<sup>r</sup>). The mulberry is a tried and tested folk cure for toothache, as is a mouthwash with boiled mulberry root.<sup>4</sup> But the cure is accompanied here by a string of magical and religious names. Mikhaêl is an archangel in the Christian New Testament, and Saraêl appears in Gnostic Christian texts; the other names are unknown but when repeated, they obviously have power to cure.<sup>5</sup>

The following recipe combines pharmacopeia and names of three powers (angelic or demonic):

*Mix equal parts of the juice of white bryony and the juice of pondweed. Apply this to [the scalp] for three days. You will wonderfully cure the erosion of hair, ulcerous sores, dandruff, mange, and every other affliction of the hair and scalp. When you apply it, say this: 'Asmaraêl, Asmeêl, Aspekhh.'* The patient

<sup>1</sup>Gager 1992, p. 18 (with notes and figures).

<sup>2</sup>Modern anthropological research provides the answer here, namely that people, practitioner and patient alike, believed in the efficacy of oral magic, including 'gibberish' of sounds, names, and words. The groundbreaking essay by Tambiah (1968) has led to a reevaluation of the topic; see, e.g., Bell 1997.

<sup>3</sup>For contemporary parallels see my 'Introduction,' notes 49–53 in Oberhelman, Forthcoming. The divide between 'magic' and 'religion' is now recognized as slippery at best, if not nonexistent. The bibliography on the relations between magic and religion is immense. For sake of convenience, I will refer the reader to Faraone and Obbink's edited 1991 volume referenced throughout the bibliography; chapters 9 and 10 are especially wealthy with copious notes and references to scholarship; also Gager 1992, p. 39 note 114.

<sup>4</sup>Many herbal books recommend thus; see, e.g., Kowalchik and Hylton 1998, s.v. *morus alba*.

<sup>5</sup>Gager 1991, pp. 10–13. For modern Greek parallels, Blum and Blum 1970, pp. 15–22, 49, 133–138, 145, 149–156, 161–164, 254.



*will be cured of his suffering. (Codex Parisinus gr. 2419, fol. 264<sup>r</sup>)*

White bryony is used in herbal medicine for head and skin ailments,<sup>1</sup> while pondweed is a proven anti-inflammatory agent<sup>2</sup> and thus good for ulcerous sores. But it is clear from the recipe that the invocation of the supernatural powers will be equally important in supplementing the healing power of the plants.<sup>3</sup>

A third example comes from a Cretan healing text from c. 1800 but whose contents come from centuries of folk healing: “**For malaria.** Write on [each of] three almonds: ‘**Pheouramobo; Ekhimonbe; Karophêtês.**’ Or, write on [each of] five almonds: ‘**Boul; Tal; Melal; Thalal; Azaêl.**’ Then have the patient eat them” (Papadogiannakês 2001, p. 154, 2–6). What cures here? The names? The almonds? I would mention that recent studies have shown that malaria can be combated with zinc supplementation,<sup>4</sup> and almonds are high in zinc. But magical names apparently enhance the almonds’ properties and so are equally vital to the cure.

## II. Words Spoken While Collecting Medical Herbs and Plants

Ancient pagan Greek magical texts offered instructions on the spells to be uttered by people while they cut roots and gather plants for use in recipes and charms. An example is from the *Greek Magical Papyri*:

***Spell for Picking a Plant:** Use it before Sunrise. **The Spell to be spoken:** “I am picking you, such and such a plant, with my Five-fingered Hand, I, NN, and I am bringing you home so that you may work for me for a Certain Purpose. I adjure you by the Undefined Name of the God: if you pay no Heed to me, the Earth which produced you will no longer be watered as far as you are concerned—ever in Life again, if I fail in this Operation, MOUTHABAR NACH BARNACHÔCHA BRAEÔMENDA LAUBRAASSE PHASPHA BENDEÔ; fulfill for me the Perfect Charm!” (Papyri Magicae Graecae IV.286–295)<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>See the discussion in *Natural Healing*, s.v. bryony. Available at <http://www.healthcareattlas.com/homoeopathic-remedies/homoeopathic-remedies-in-common-use-a-b.html> [accessed 20 August 2012].

<sup>2</sup>Popov et al. 2007, for a scientific study.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Scarborough 1991, pp. 154–161.

<sup>4</sup>Black 1998.

<sup>5</sup>Translation and discussion in Betz 1992, pp. 43–44. Another good example is *Papyri Magicae Graecae* IV.2967–3006.

Even our early modern Greek medical texts, written in a Christian environment, have similar instructions, including invocations of the individual planets:<sup>1</sup>

*Plants in accordance with the planets: The plant of Hermes is the potentilla. Extract this plant in the first hour of Wednesday with an oath to Hermes. If you boil this plant, it is efficacious in many ways. . . . The plant of Aphrodite is the male orchid. Extract it during the first hour of Friday; first swear an oath three times to Aphrodite. Pull the plant out along with its root, fruit, and flowers. Fray the plant into a deer skin. Wear this skin on your right shoulder; if you do, everyone will love you. Pestle the male orchid's leaves into a powder; if you apply it to your face, you will be amazed. (Papadogiannakês 2001, p. 173, 4–14)*

We are not told what the healer is supposed to say when “swearing oaths” to a planet—whether, for example, the words should be pagan or Christian. But the latter is more likely, since elsewhere the same author recommends Christian prayers while one cuts roots:

*Take a newly made knife —one that has never been used to cut anything before—and on the fifth day of the moon's waning and draw binding circles with it around three roots of ribwort plantain. [While doing this,] say: “**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.**” Then cut out the roots with the knife and recite this prayer: “O God of heaven and earth and everything in them, holy trinity rulers of life, have mercy on us. Holy Lady Theotokos, Saint Lucian, Paul, the healing saints Cosmas and Damian, intercede with Holy God . . . By the intercession of the Blessed Theotokos and all the saints, we glorify and give thanks to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and always, forever and ever. Amen.” (Papadogiannakês 2001, p. 128, 4–19)<sup>2</sup>*

### III. Words That Bind

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<sup>1</sup>The influence of astrology on medicine goes back to Babylonia and continued down into the early modern period; see the essays in Akasoy et al. 2008.

<sup>2</sup>The plantain may be gathered through a magical technique, but it is then used in various medical recipes that are comprised solely of naturalistic ingredients.

Binding spells have always been a part of Greek culture.<sup>1</sup> Over 1,000 such spells have survived from ancient Greece alone. A binding spell was usually accompanied by ritual performance, such as abuse of voodoo figures, binding a wax or straw figure with knots, or nailing tablets. In our medical texts there are two types of binding spells: one that binds supernatural forces (demons), the other that binds the natural world (disease and humans like thieves and married couples).

Because demons are responsible for many afflictions and pains, they can be bound by spells.<sup>2</sup> Exorcisms are applied so that the demons will come out of a patient's body and thus allow a patient to return to health.<sup>3</sup> For example,

*O Lord God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, set free the pain in the head of NN, the slave of God, [set free] the migraine. I adjure you, every unclean thing always sitting on the head of the slave of God: withdraw from the one who has the pain in his head and keep closely [to yourself] the migraine. Trophon Skoudaos, come out of NN, the slave of God. Mikhaél, Gabriél, Ourouél, and Raphaél. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and always and for ever and ever. Amen. (Bibliothèque de la Société historique, no. 210, fol. 74<sup>v</sup>)*

*I adjure you, all unclean spirits, male and female demons, to depart from this slave of God and from his house, from his head, his forehead, brain, stomach, tongue, temples, eyelids, bones, intestines, shoulders, midriff, arms, hands, feet, belly, from the head to the toenails, from the knees, ankles, fingernails, kidneys, back, from the right side and the left side of the body, from all of his blood and his entire body . . . Every evil, flee and make your escape from this servant of God who has the cross as his protector. "God is my hope, Christ is my refuge, the Holy Spirit is my shelter. Praise to you, Holy Trinity. Jesus Christ conquers. In the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, now and always and forever and ever. Amen." (Bibliothèque Nationale gr. 2011, fol. 11<sup>r-v</sup>)*

Note that only Christian names and themes appear in these binding spells and exorcisms. But other spells contain magical words and magical names as well:

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<sup>1</sup>See Faraone 1991 and Gager 1992 for excellent introductions and bibliography.

<sup>2</sup>Kotansky 1991 and 2002; cf. Versnel 1991, pp. 60–68. For modern rural Greece, Blum and Blum 1970, pp. 124–132.

<sup>3</sup>For modern Greek parallels, see Stewart 1991, pp. 167–169, 207–221, 255–259.

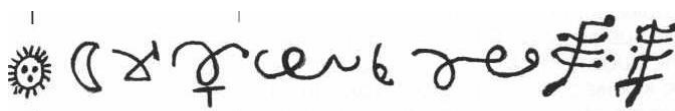
*A phylactery for the head when it hurts. Write: “Jesus Christ may You be victorious. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and always and for ever and ever. Amen. I adjure you, [evil] spirits, Tribolon in three, to depart into the heads of dragons. I adjure you in the authority of the One who ascended the cross and was on the Place of the Skull, that you flee from this slave of God. Médéo [fol. 73v] Katheudeiai, I adjure you on the precious cross and on the coming 12 signs of the zodiac. I adjure in the name of the archangel Mikhaël. Draw near, O Rhoureuthês, and depart from this slave of God. I adjure in the name of the archangel Gabriël, drawn near, O Brasephaël, and depart from this slave of God. Kharatô, Eulaséno, Eglê, I adjure you in the name of the holy angel Sabaël to depart from this slave of God. Jesus Christ, may You be victorious.” (Bibliothèque de la Société historique, no. 210, fol. 73<sup>r</sup>)*

A disease, like demons, can be bound by a spell. <sup>1</sup>In the following medical text, malaria is subjected to binding through tying knots in a cotton rope and the recitation of a verse from the Book of Joshua. The spoken words will cause the shaking and fever brought on by the malaria to come to a standstill, just as the sun was stopped in its orbit when Joshua defeated the Amorites:

*Take a rope made of cotton. Tie seven knots. Recite three times the following words each time you make a knot: “**Let the sun stand still over Gibeon, the moon over the valley of Aijalon** [Joshua 10:12]. May the shivering and fever also stand still.” (Papadogiannakês 2001, p. 153, 25–p. 154, 1)*

Early modern Greek healing texts offer advice in all areas of life, not just medical cures. Thus, the texts counsel readers how to bind various people. An early nineteenth-century text from Dimitsanas in the Peloponnesus of Greece offers the reader this spell for causing a woman to fall in love with him:

*For making a woman fall in love with you. Take a sheet of paper or unwet linen cloth. Write these characters:*



<sup>1</sup>Stewart (1991) offers some contemporary Greek binding spells: against erysipelas (pp. 222, 225–227), jaundice (pp. 221, 227–230), and headache (p. 287 note 10).

*Stir it into water or wine. Give this as a drink to the woman whom you desire; she will love you a lot. (Tselikas 2007, p. 32)*

The magical characters here are written in ink and dissolved in a liquid. The ink solution, when drunk, has the power to cause a woman to become passionately in love with the spell-caster.<sup>1</sup>

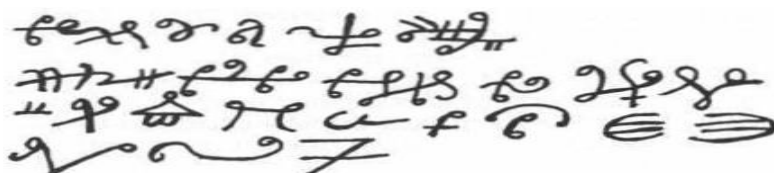
The proper magical characters can also prevent a woman from becoming pregnant, according to the same *iatrosophion*:

*For keeping a women from having a child. When a woman does not want to be pregnant, write these characters at the waning of the moon: α ξ β δ χ σ ω ξ η θ γ ω π φ ε γ χ. If the women wears these [characters] on her, she will not become pregnant. Just make sure that her husband does not discover this. And if you wish to put this to the test, tie these characters to any tree you wish; that tree will not bear any fruit or will thoroughly dry up. (Tselikas 2007, p. 32)*

As the writer of this text states, one can put the spell to the test; it is effective and reliable.

Finally, magical characters can be used for determining whether a patient will live or die according to this *iatrosophion* from Lamia, Greece:

*If you wish to know whether a person will die or till die. Take beeswax and write on it with leaves of the mullein plant. Write the following characters:*



*Light the wax. And when the burning flame comes near the letters, if the wax is not extinguished but the letters are consumed, know that the person will live; but if the fire flames out, then he will die. If [this method] is impractical, then just say to him: κάφω όροχ πάρχον. And if the sick person turns his eyes to look at you, he will live; but if he is too oppressed [and cannot respond], he will die. (Tselikas 2007, p. 35)*

This sort of divination, on the basis of magical means and the use of magical words and characters, appears in nearly all medical texts of the period.<sup>2</sup> I do

<sup>1</sup>For magical characters in spells, Gager 1991, pp. 10–13.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Papadogiannakês 2001, p. 190, 17–p. 191; p. 193; p. 198, 11–p. 199; and Clark 2011, pp. 133–41.

not think that this practice speaks to a high failure rate on the part of doctors or to poor medical practice; I would argue that it is consistent with an expectation by patient and doctor alike that God will provide them a glimpse into what the future holds.

Thieves are also subject to binding. The very high number of spells dealing with detecting thieves implies that theft was very common occurrence of the time.<sup>1</sup> The following is a typical spell on how to discover thieves and how to bind them:

*Get some wheat. Take as many handfuls of wheat as the number of people you suspect [of being thieves] and make flour. Knead and then shape into a loaf; bake it. Next break the bread into as many pieces [as the number of suspected thieves]. Write on each piece the person's name and underneath it [these biblical verses]: "His mouth is full of curses, and bitterness, and deceit. Under his tongue are hardship and sorrow" [Psalm 10:7] and "He has fallen into the hole that he made. His sorrow will be turned upon his own head, and his iniquity will descend upon his highest point" [Psalm 7:15–16]. These words are to be written on the Sabbath day before sunrise. The pieces should be made part of the Holy Eucharist celebration by being placed on top of the Lord's Table. Then after the "Prayer behind the Ambo," give each person who participated in the theft a piece to eat; [if they eat,] they will starve and be poorly off. And during the entire liturgy, keep repeating the psalm, "I will confess to you, Lord, with my whole heart" [Psalm 138:1] and the rest of [the psalm]. You can write the following as well on the underside of however pieces of bread [as thieves] you suspect: "Saa. Salla. Balmakha. Khanage. Samaêl. Azara. Loutêi. Pharasaga. Khatale. Astaroth. Eêi. Dikonomi. Iousok." Give the pieces to them to eat. Also write on the loaf itself the following: "Arapha. Exagrapha. Aragos. Euraphas." The [real] thieves will in no way be able to eat, and so they will reveal themselves. (Papadogiannakês 2001, p. 179, 2–17)*

In this next spell, magical names can be written on barley bread. The thieves' names should be written in reverse and a biblical verse will make the spell powerful:

*Write on however many pieces of bread as there are [thieves you suspect]: "Phorphori. Khorkhori. Thorthori," followed by everyone's name written in reverse. Give the first person a piece to eat, and while he is chewing it, say to yourself, "His mouth is*

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Versnel 1991, pp. 64–67, 75–79. Spells in *Papyri Magicae Graecae* include V.70–95 and V.172–212.

*full of curses, and bitterness, and deceit” [Psalm 10:7]. And [write as well] these on the bread: “Sra. Sela. Saltha. Mulmaiatha.” (Papadogiannakês 2001, p. 180, 1–5)*

#### IV. Releasing Married Couples Placed under Binding Spells

Married couples were often placed under a binding spell by a third party, and so they sought the advice of a practical healer.<sup>1</sup> One healing text offers these two spells for unbinding a couple. The spells involve religious prayers scribbled down on paper and then worn and put on the bed, or prayers written on apples that the couple then eats:

*Write the following [words] on three separate sheets of paper. Place one sheet in a basin of water so that [the written words] may dissolve; the man and the woman must then drink from this [water]. The man is to tie the second sheet on his right thigh. The third sheet should be placed underneath their pillow. [Here is what you write:] “Christ was born, Christ was crucified, Christ was baptized in the Jordan River, Christ crushed the heads of the dragons, Christ was crucified, Christ was entombed, Christ was raised from the dead, Christ took Adam and Eve from hell: He is our Lord Jesus Christ and God. May you dissolve every magic binding spell from this couple, NN [male] and NN [female], slaves of God. στμ. κλ. στμ. μτ. φβ. Θ[ε]ου. Amen. (Papadogiannakês 2001, p. 180, 13–p. 181, 6)*

*Write these [words] on two apples: “You who descended into hell dissolved the bonds of death, set free too NN [male] your slave and NN [female] your slave. στμ. κλ. στμ. μτ. φβ. Θ[ε]ου. Amen.” And the man should eat one apple, the woman the other, on Sunday; they should then resolve to have sex together. (Papadogiannakês 2001, p. 181, 7–13)*

Another healing text has these spells to release a married couple. One spell involves urinating on a young child; the other, the husband lying on a roof and uttering the Easter greeting, “Christ is Risen,” while having sex with one’s wife:

*So you can release a married couple (from binding spell): Take a child up to eight years old and put him so he falls on his back and let the couple undress, bare-naked without any clothing remaining on them, completely, and let the husband*

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<sup>1</sup>For spells and marriage and love, see Moke 1975; Winkler 1990, chap. 3; Gager 1992, chap. 2. For modern Greek parallels, see Stewart 1991, p. 231 with notes 13–14 (on p. 289).

*urinate over the child once and let him have a yoke from the ox and let him pass through the yoke's hollow, that is to say from inside from the two pieces of wood and let him return and go through again three times and let him sleep with his wife secure. (Clark 2011, p. 55)*

*(Another): On Easter Sunday let him lie down on the roof top of his house and just as they say the "Christ is Risen" let him be ready to lie with his wife while saying the "Christ is Risen." (Clark 2011, p. 55)*

## V. Religious Spells for Curing Illness

A final category consists of healing spells that contain biblical verses and prayers. There is no medical component—no herbs, no plants, no animal or mineral substances—which helps to achieve the cure;<sup>1</sup> sacred words, either spoken or written, carry the power in themselves to bring about the healing.<sup>2</sup> For example,

***Malaria:** Write on three slices of bread: on the first, "**Father**"; on the second, "**Life of the Light**"; and on the third, "**the Holy Spirit**." Also write on each of the three slices the verse, "**In the beginning was the Word**" [John 1:1]. The sick patient should perform three repentances in the name of Saint John the Baptist. Then you are to give him the three slices to eat; he will be cured. (Papadogiannakês 2001, p. 152, 6–11)*

This spell consists of writing each member of the Trinity on slices of bread. Every slice must also have the important biblical verse, John 1:1, which talks of the power of the Logos, the Word, of God, which created the world. By writing down the divine words of the divine Word (that is, the Bible), a healer can tap into this same power.

In a remedy that is similar to one we have already seen but this time without any herbal medicine, one can quote John 7:38 to cure blockage caused by a kidney stone:

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<sup>1</sup>In the *Papyri Magicae Graecae* this is the most common form of healing; see, e.g., VII.197–198, 199–201, 202–202, 203–205, 206–207, 209–210, 211–212, 213–214, 218–221; XIIa.1–27.

<sup>2</sup>This approximates the heavy use of amulets and phylacteries in Greek medicine from ancient times through the early modern period. For amulets and other magical means of healing in Byzantium, see Vikan 1984. For earlier periods see Bonner 1950, Kotansky 1991, Gager 1992 (esp. chapters 2–6). Healing amulets in the *Papyri Magicae Graecae* are numerous, e.g., XLIII.1–27, XLIV.1–18, LXXXVII.1–11, and LXXXVIII.1–19.



*Write with mercury sulfide on the patient's hypogastrium: "The Lord said, 'Whoever believes in me, rivers of living water will flow from his belly.'" He will urinate out the stone. (Papadogiannakês 2001, p. 116, 23–25)*

I would note here that this biblical verse would have to be very powerful, since mercury sulfide is highly toxic (modern clinical studies show that it poses great risk to a body's immune systems).<sup>1</sup>

This remedy for fever involves a string of magical letters:

*Another for fever: Before the sun rises, get up and go to a place where there are olive trees and write with simple black ink these letters: κ. α. ρ. ο. ι. α.<sup>2</sup> And hang them on the neck of the patient and you will be amazed. (Clark 2011, p. 115)*

In this final example, one also for treating fever, a hymn is written on a specific day and read in conjunction with the celebration of the Mass. The power of the hymn's words, the power of the elements of the Mass, and an exorcism prayer all act synergistically to remove the fever:

*Another for fever: Write the hymn below on the seventh day [Saturday], or the fifth [Thursday], no other day, and read it above the patient three times and have them celebrate Mass for him and put also the blessed bread of the Virgin Mary and have the patient keep it on top of him and it heals. "Holy John prophet and baptizer of our Lord Jesus Christ, your holy head carried gladly on a platter and a chill came upon those watching. And your holy head cried out and said, 'Fever of the second, third, and fourth both days and nights, flee from the servant of the Lord. Σ. Κ. Α. Μ. Τ. Ρ. Θ. Amen. Ili, ili, lima sauachthani, that is, my God, my God, to what purpose do you forsake me, the servant of the Lord? Christ is proclaimed, flee fever-chill. Christ is born, flee fever-chill. Christ is baptized, flee fever-chill from the servant of the Lord. Jesus Christ triumph and rules forever.'" (Clark 2011, p. 133)*

## Conclusion

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<sup>1</sup>See the recent scientific study by Son et al. 2010.

<sup>2</sup>These are typical magical strings of letters which make up part of a spell. Vowels especially are used since the seven Greek vowels were associated with the seven planets and thus contained power. The basic source for letters in Greek magical spells is Dornseiff's 1925 study.

Someone who lived in early modern Greece and saw a disruption in her or his life—falling ill, experiencing marital problems, being the victim of a crime, suffering an attack from demons—had the expectation that forces could be marshaled against that misfortune. Plant, animal, and mineral substances could be used as poultices, ointments, drugs, and potions, and many times were effective. The centuries-old knowledge and experience of folk healers, doctors, druggists, pharmacologists, root-cutters, and village men and women proved that such substances could work. But there were other forces—forces from the supernatural world—that could enhance these treatments or that alone, in themselves, could cure when natural means failed. Magical letters, names of unknown and known spirits and angels, repetition of written or spoken words, all had the power to cure illness, to bind or exorcise the causes and manifestations of disease, and to restore equilibrium in one's life. Religion also had a critical role to play: snippets of the Bible, ecclesiastical prayers, Christian hymns, sections of church liturgy, confession of faith in the Trinity, and similar holy words were able to bring the active Word of God into the restoration of an individual's health and life.<sup>1</sup> The writers of medical texts during the Byzantine and post-Byzantine centuries recognized the power of not only pharmacological prophylaxis and therapy but also the spoken and written word. Such a holistic approach allowed the doctor or healing practitioner to restore mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing.

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<sup>1</sup>Blum and Blum (1970, pp. 22, 143–144, 255) discuss how in rural modern Greece home illness is cured by home remedies and also 'magical' processes; if these fail, then one goes to a wise woman, magician, priest, or physician. See also pp. 207–208 and 256–257 for further discussion of multiplicity of healers, and Blum and Blum 1965, chaps. 12 and 13, for examples of folk healers, magicians, and priests who offer healing cures.

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