

The 24 Presbyters in Hay 1 (British Museum EA 10391)

Ritual Practice and Biblical Reception at the Intersection of Inscription, Materiality, and Gesture*

Joseph E. Sanzo

Ca' Foscari University of Venice
joseph.sanzo@unive.it

Abstract

In this paper, I focus on the magical use of the 24 presbyters in Hay 1 (a.k.a. the London Hay Cookbook; British Museum EA 10391), an eighth- or ninth-century CE magical handbook. I examine how these characters from the biblical book of Revelation were integrated into its spells, with particular attention to the diverse ways in which they were connected to the conceptual domains of writing, materiality, and performative

gesture. I then reflect on the implications of the word-material-gestural relationships, which this object would have theoretically engendered, for biblical reception history. I argue that magical objects, such as this handbook, contribute to the reception history of the Bible by demonstrating the great extent to which biblical use in late antiquity and in the early medieval period was multi-traditional, multilayered, and multisensory.

Key Words

Magic, Coptic; late antiquity, Hay 1, Biblical reception

* This paper was completed as part of the project, “Early Jewish and Christian Magical Traditions in Comparison and Contact.” This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 851466 EJCM). This paper solely reflects the author’s views and, therefore, the ERC accepts no responsibility for the information contained therein. The author would like to express his gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and criticisms.

Introduction

While he was supposedly exiled on the island of Patmos at the end of the first century CE, the Seer of the Book of Revelation – putatively identified throughout history as the Apostle John – described 24 πρεσβύτεροι (usually translated as either «elders» or «presbyters»). His description of these characters extends over 12 passages, in which they are either numerically identified as the 24 πρεσβύτεροι or are merely called the πρεσβύτεροι.¹ We first encounter these characters in Rev. 4:4, where we read: «Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders (εἴκοσι τέσσαρας πρεσβυτέρους), dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads (NRSV)». In general, the πρεσβύτεροι – especially when they are referenced collectively as a group – tend to be depicted as worshipping God. Occasionally, however, one of them pauses from their divine worship and speaks with the Seer. Thus, in Rev. 5:5, one of the πρεσβύτεροι offers consolation to this Seer, who was apparently distraught because no one was able to open and read the holy scroll and break its seals: «Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals”».

But who or what are the 24 πρεσβύτεροι? The question itself is not new. In fact, an early commentator on Revelation, Ecumenius (6th century CE), emphasized that only God knows who these cryptic characters are.² Victorinus of Poetovio seems to reflect the diverse views of these characters – and the number 24 – in late antique imagination, arguing, on the one hand, that they were called elders because they were older than angels and men (*On the Creation of the World* 10) and, on the other hand, that the number 24 points to the Old Testament books and to the sum of the twelve patriarchs and the twelve apostles (*Commentary on the Apocalypse* 2.45-116 [4.3-5]).³ The Coptic church tended

1 Rev. 4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4.

2 Ecumenius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* 3.7.1. On the historical and methodological challenges associated with Ecumenius' commentary on Revelation, see John C. LAMOREAUX, «The Provenance of Ecumenius' Commentary on the Apocalypse», *Vigiliae Christianae* 52 (1998): 88-108.

3 It is possible that Victorinus drew the connection between the 24 πρεσβύτεροι and the books of the Old Testament from Melito of Sardis (Luke J. STEVENS, «Twenty-Four El-

to view the presbyters as angelic in nature and as patrons of the alphabet, thus also drawing on the symbolic significance of the number 24.⁴ This variety of early Christian interpretations of the 24 πρεσβύτεροι in Revelation would likewise come to characterize subsequent scholarly interpretations. As Günther Bornkamm noted more than a half-century ago, the comparative adjective πρεσβύτερος (cf. πρέσβυς) is intrinsically difficult to interpret in early Jewish and Christian literature; the term can refer both to the age of a person and to the title of a person in a given office.⁵ Not surprisingly, therefore, scholars have offered a range of identifications for these figures in Revelation, from angels to humans, in general, to prophets or wisemen to even tribal heads from the Hebrew Bible.⁶ Whatever their ostensibly «original» identification in Revelation might have been, the 24 πρεσβύτεροι made a significant impact on later Egyptian Christian ritual and visual cultures, appearing, for instance, in medieval Coptic hymns, liturgical performances, and iconographic contexts.⁷

These characters also figured prominently in the late antique and early medieval Egyptian rituals we might call «magical», especially in the Coptic tradition.⁸ The elusive identity of and diverse connotations

ders: Revelation and the Old Testament Canon in Victorinus and Melito», *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 30 [2022]: 165-192).

4 See Antonella CAMPAGNANO, Antonella MARESCA, Tito ORLANDI, a. c. di, *Quattro Omelie Copte: Vita di Giovanni Crisostomo, Encomi dei 24 Vegliardi (Ps. Proclo e Anonimo)*, *Encomio di Michele Arcangelo, di Eustazio di Tracia* (Milano: Cisalpino-Galiardica, 1977), p. 56.

5 Günther BORNKAMM, «πρέσβυς κτλ.» in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard KITTEL, Gerhard FRIEDRICH, trans. Geoffrey W. BROMILEY (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Printing Company, 1968; reprint 2006), p. 654.

6 See already J. Massyngberde FORD, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (The Anchor Bible; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 72-73.

7 See Otto MEINARDUS, «The Twenty-Four Elders of the apocalypse in the Iconography of the Coptic Church» *Studia Orientalia christiana. Collectanea* 13 (1968/69): 141-157; Ágnes T. MIHÁLYKÓ, «Mary, Michael and the Twenty-Four Elders: Saints and Angels in Christian Liturgical and Magical Texts» in *Proceedings of the 29th International Congress of Papyrology, Lecce, 28th July-3rd August 2019*, ed. Mario CAPASSO, Paola DAVOLI, Natascia PELLÉ (Salento: Centro di Studi Papirologici dell' Università del Salento, 2022), pp. 722-731.

8 On the category magic, see Joseph E. SANZO, «Deconstructing the Deconstructionists: A Response to Recent Criticisms of the Rubric 'Ancient Magic,'» in *Ancient Magic: Then*

associated with these entities likewise elicited a range of ways ritual practitioners invoked the 24 πρεσβύτεροι for protection, healing, and imprecatory purposes. One such ostensibly Coptic magical object in which these strange characters from Revelation play significant and recurring roles is Hay 1 (British Museum EA 10391]), a mid-eighth to ninth-century CE magical handbook that probably comes from Thebes.⁹

In this paper, I will focus on the presentation of the πρεσβύτεροι (hereafter «presbyters») from Revelation in this handbook, highlighting the manifold ways in which they are connected to the conceptual domains of writing, materiality, and performative gesture.¹⁰ I will then reflect briefly on the implications of the word-material-performative relationships, which this object would have theoretically engendered, for biblical reception history.¹¹ As will become obvious over the course of this paper, the complexities involved in the presentation of materials, words, and names (including the 24 presbyters) in Hay 1 often raise more questions than answers. Nevertheless, I hope to demonstrate that, despite such interpretive challenges, we can gain important insight into the dynamics of biblical reception by attending to interaction of these features within their historical, social, and ritual contexts in late antiquity.

and Now, ed. Attilio MASTROCINQUE, Joseph E. SANZO, Marianna SCAPINI (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2020), pp. 25-46.

⁹ Elisabeth R. O'CONNELL, ed., *The Hay Archive of Coptic Spells on Leather: A Multi-disciplinary Approach to the Materiality of Magical Practice* (London: The British Museum, 2022). On the date and provenance of this manuscript, see the discussion below.

¹⁰ In light of their authoritative and religious significance within late antique material, visual, and textual cultures, I agree with Michael Zellmann-Rohrer that πρεσβύτεροι should be translated as «presbyters» – and not the more vague «elders» – in Hay 1 (ZELLMANN-ROHRER, «Catalogue: Hay 1-7», in O'CONNELL, *The Hay Archive*, cit., p. 106). I would also like to thank Prof. Tonio Sebastian Richter for highlighting this issue of translation in his comments on my paper at the congress of the International Association for Coptic Studies (July 2022).

¹¹ I say «theoretically» because we are dealing here with spells and, therefore, we do not know if they – or versions of them – were ever performed. On the heuristic distinction between applied and non-applied magical materials for the Coptic tradition, see, for instance, Sergio PERNIGOTTI, *Testi della magia copta* (Imola: La Mandragora, 2000), p. 11.

Hay 1: A Brief Introduction to a Late Antique Magical Handbook

In 1931, Angelicus Kropp published the first edition (including a German translation) of an elongated parchment manuscript (62.9cm x 18.8cm) with diverse and complex invocations, prayers, and spells written in Coptic.¹² This manuscript was part of a substantial cache of manuscripts (including several other spell books) that the British Museum acquired in 1868 from the family of Robert Hay.¹³ It was registered later in 1868 in the British Museum as number 1868,1102.464 (= EA no. [pre-2017]: 10391). Walter Crum tentatively assigned a date of the sixth or seventh century CE to the entire group of «Coptic Magical Texts» from the Hay collection and speculated that these manuscripts came from Thebes.¹⁴ The conclusions of Crum on the date and provenance of this collection have been assumed by Kropp and most subsequent scholars until quite recently (see below).¹⁵ The text of 1868,1102.464 (= EA no. [pre-2017]: 10391) was also translated into English in 1995 by David Frankfurter and Marvin Meyer, who gave it the title, «The Hay Cookbook».¹⁶

Under the direction of Elisabeth O'Connell, a team of scholars has recently undertaken an extensive material and textual analysis of the manuscripts with spells from the Robert Hay collection.¹⁷ O'Connell's project, which is appropriately housed in the British Museum, has renamed this collection «The Hay Archive», with «The Hay Cookbook» now classified as «Hay 1». This project has been able to change or nuance our knowledge about this collection, in general, and about Hay 1, in particular. For instance, the team was able to redate Hay 1 to the mid-eighth or ninth

12 Angelicus KROPP, hrg., *Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte*, 3 vols. (Brussels: Édition de la Fondation égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1930-31), 1: 55-62 (no. M); 40-53 (no. XIV). For a summary of this handbook's structure and contents, see ZELLMANN-ROHRER, «Catalogue», cit., p. 79.

13 For a relevant historical overview of this acquisition, see O'CONNELL, *The Hay Archive*, cit., pp. 14-32.

14 Walter E. CRUM, «Magical Texts in Coptic: I», *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 20, no. 1/2 (1934): 51.

15 KROPP, *Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte*, cit., vol. 1, p. xii.

16 Marvin W. MEYER, Richard SMITH, ed., *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (rev. ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 263-269 (no. 127).

17 For the results of these efforts, see O'CONNELL, *The Hay Archive*, cit.

century CE.¹⁸ They were also able to determine to a high level of confidence that Hay 1 was made from calf skin.¹⁹ In addition, O'Connell's team has been able to support on firmer grounds (e.g., the use of leather in late antique Egypt; orthography; and details about Robert Hay's sojourn in Egypt) Crum's hypothesis that Hay 1 most likely comes from Thebes, with the further possibility that it comes specifically from Deir el-Bakhît.²⁰ Of particular significance for the concerns of this paper is the new edition and English translation of Hay 1 that one of the members of the British Museum team, Michael Zellmann-Rohrer, has prepared.²¹ Zellmann-Rohrer's reedition has made several improvements to the edition of Kropp – and, consequently, to the translation of Frankfurter and Meyer. On account of its several improvements over against the prior edition and English translation of Hay 1, I will use the edition of Zellmann-Rohrer as the basis for my analysis of the 24 presbyters in its spells.²²

The 24 Presbyters in Hay 1: Words, Materials, and Performances

The extant magical record from late antique and the early medieval Egypt includes several references to the 24 presbyters. The presbyters figured into ritual texts concerned with, inter alia, attaining favor, securing protection, and acquiring healing.²³ Although, as we will see below, the 24 presbyters might be referenced collectively as a group, Coptic practitioners often attributed specific names to these characters, whether in-

18 ZELLMANN-ROHRER, «Catalogue», cit., p. 79.

19 O'CONNELL, *The Hay Archive*, cit., pp. 29-30.

20 *Ibi*, p. 29. This thesis has also been proposed by Thomas BECKH, «Monks, Magicians, Archaeologists: New Results on Coptic Settlement Development in Dra' Abu el-Naga North, Western Thebes» in *Coptic Society, Literature and Religion from Late Antiquity to Modern Times: Proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Coptic Studies, Rome, September 17th-22th 2012 and Plenary Reports of the Ninth International Congress of Coptic Studies, Cairo, September 15-19th, 2008*, eds. Paola BUZI, Alberto CAMPLANI, Federico CONTARDI (*Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 247*; Leuven: Peeters, 2016), pp. 739-747.

21 ZELLMANN-ROHRER, «Catalogue», cit., pp. 79-110.

22 Unless otherwise stated all Coptic texts and English translations of Hay 1 in this essay have been taken from ZELLMANN-ROHRER, «Catalogue», cit.

23 E.g., Brit. Lib. Or. 5899 (1); Brit. Lib. Or. 5525; Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(2), (3), (1); P. Berlin 11347.

scribing all 24 names²⁴ or referencing the group metonymically through a few selected names.²⁵ The names mentioned on magical artifacts could be framed in diverse ways and thus could vary considerably.²⁶ One medieval Coptic spell for sealing curative and apotropaic oil (P. Berlin 11347) connects the presbyters with the 24 letters of the Greek alphabet,²⁷ a

24 E.g., Brit. Lib. Or. 6796 (2), (3), (1) r, ll. 43-48, which is part of a «portfolio of spells», reads: «...by the power of the 24 elders (ⲙⲓⲛⲕⲄ ⲛⲓⲣⲉ), whose names are Bēth Bēth[a] Bēthai Marnēl, Arnēl, Eriēl, Emaēl, Chōbaōth, Chanē, Acham, Ōmarima, Sab[...], Ischōsabaēl, Ioēl, Emiēl, Sabachō[...], Latan, Archimath, Alōēl, Mou[...], Siēl, Sedekiē, Bathuriēl M» Translation based on an autopsy of the manuscript I conducted at the British Library on 29 July 2019. For the application of the phrase, “portfolio of spells,” see MEYER and SMITH, *Ancient Christian Magic*, cit., p. 275.

25 For instance, on another artifact from the same «portfolio of spells» as Brit. Lib. Or. 6796 (2), (3), (1) (i.e., Brit. Lib. Or. 6796[4], 6796), the names Bēth, Bētha, Bēthai are written in ring script around an image of Jesus on the cross (ll. 43-48). That the two spells were penned by the same practitioner, who explicitly identified the names Bēth, Bētha[a], Bētha with the characters from Revelation in one of the spells, renders it quite likely that this identification likewise applied to these three names written around the crucified Jesus. From this perspective, the use of only the first three names was likely occasioned by the lack of space for all 24 names in the visual scene, especially since the practitioner wanted to include other sacred names, such as Iaō and the seven archangels. For a detailed analysis of these names and their significance for the complex relationships between words and images in Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796, see Joseph E. SANZO, «The Innovative Use of Biblical Traditions for Ritual Power: The Crucifixion of Jesus on a Coptic Exorcistic Spell (Brit. Lib. Or. 6796[4], 6796) as a Test Case», *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 16 (2015): 67-98, at 77-83.

26 For a convenient overview of the names of the 24 presbyters from Dongola, see Adam ŁAJTAR, Jacques VAN DER VLIET, *Empowering the Dead in Christian Nubia: The Texts from a Medieval Funerary Complex in Dongola* (Warsaw: Journal of Juristic Papyrology, 2017), pp. 181-190.

27 The text reads, «... your 24 presbyters (ⲙⲓⲛⲕⲄ ⲛⲓⲣⲉⲨⲪⲮⲮⲰⲪ), whose names are Achaēl, Banuēl, Ganuēl, Dedaēl, Eptiēl, Zartiēl, Êthaēl, Thathiēl, Iōchaēl, Kardiēl, Labtiēl, Méraēl, Nēraēl, Xiphiēl, Oupiēl, Piraēl, Raēl, Serōaēl, Tauriēl, Umnouēl, Philopaēl, Christouēl, Psilaphaēl, Ōlithiēl, who sit upon 24 thrones, with 24 crowns upon their heads, with 24 censers in their hands...» (P. Berlin 11347 r, ll. 15-24). Trans. Marvin Meyer in MEYER and SMITH, *Ancient Christian Magic*, cit., pp. 117-119 (slightly modified). For the *editio princeps* (with German translation), see Walter BELTZ, «Die koptischen Zauberpapiere und Zauberostraka der Papyrus-Sammlung der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin», *Archiv für Papyrusforschung und verwandte Gebiete* 31 (1985): 32-35. Although this spell has been dated to the eighth or ninth century CE, the fact that it was written on paper would imply that it was created later (see Marie LEGENDRE, «Perméabilité linguistique et anthropologique entre copte et arabe: L'exemple de comptes en caractères coptes du Fayoum fatimide,» in *Coptica Argentoratensia: Textes et documents Troisième université*

tradition known from other Coptic sources (see also above).²⁸

The presbyters are explicitly mentioned as a collective group – without any specific names included – in Hay 1 as part of eight spells that are designed for different purposes: ll. 78-79 (for favor); ll. 80-82 (for deranging); ll. 82-84 (for dividing friends); ll. 85-86 (for «laying-low» [ογωτω]); ll. 87-89 (for a productive workshop); ll. 90-92 (for love); ll. 93-94 (against one who thinks ill of you); ll. 94-95 («one whom you wish to destroy» [ογα εκογωωε ετακοι]).²⁹ Although the presbyters are consistently treated as a group, they are written, referenced, and abbreviated in different ways. The Greek derivative πρεσβυτερος is written in full twice (spelled consistently as πρεσβελερος), both of which also include the additional qualification «and their powers» (l. 85 [μν νεγδιναμικ]; l. 88 [μν νεγδιηναμικ]). In one of these instances (l. 88), the full spelling of πρεσβελερος occurs without the number 24. By contrast, these characters could also be referred to solely via the number 24, as in l. 94, in which we also find the additional phrase «their powers». The term «πρεσβελερος» is also abbreviated in manifold ways: πεκΔ ηπρ/ε (l. 78); πεκΔ ηπρες´ (l. 81); πεκΔ ηπρεβ´ (l. 83);³⁰ πεκΔ ηπρες (l. 92, 93); πεκΔ (l. 94).

The 24 presbyters explicitly emerge onto the scene in Hay 1 starting from l. 78, which is part of a section separated from what precedes and follows by extended *paragraphoi* (ll. 74-98). The usage of these characters in this first instance helps us gain a good sense of how they might be

d'été de papyrologie copte (Strasbourg, 18-25 juillet 2010), eds., Anne BOUD'HORS, Alain DELATTRE, Catherine LOUIS, Tonio Sebastian RICHTER [Paris: Éditions de Boccard, 2014], pp. 325-440, at 326-330).

28 For instance, an apse painting in the Monastery of St. Simeon at Aswan (ca. 9th/10th century CE), which is written across all four walls, seems to depict the 24 presbyters with the 24 letters from the Greek alphabet associated with each figure. For discussion, see MEINARDUS, «The Twenty-Four Elders», cit., p. 149. On the more general connection between the presbyters and the alphabet in the Coptic tradition, see CAMPAGNANO, MARESCA, ORLANDI, *Quattro Omelie Copte*, cit., p. 56 (and literature cited).

29 The opening section of Hay 1 includes the names Bēth, Bētha, Bēthai (ll. 2-4), which in other Coptic magical texts are associated with the 24 presbyters (see n. 25 above). Nevertheless, the three names in Hay 1 are not equated with the presbyters but form part of a list of nine guardians (ΖΟΥΡΙΤ) that are connected with the three members of the Trinity (ll. 1-5). For a useful discussion of these guardians, see ZELLMANN-ROHRER, «Catalogue», cit., pp. 92-93.

30 The kappa for the number 20 and the beta at the end of the abbreviation for πρεσβυτερος are exceptionally large in the manuscript.

integrated into a spell from this handbook as well as the kinds of interpretive challenges such spells raise. This first instance constitutes a spell designed for «favor» (οὔχαρις), which reads: «Write the 24 presbyters, bind them to your right forearm. It will give favor». Here we see the interface of writing and the performative gesture of binding that incorporates a specific body part (i.e., the right forearm). The vagueness of this spell, however, leaves several questions remaining. First, it is not exactly clear what it means to «write the 24 presbyters» (σχαλι πεκ.Δ ηηρ/ε). The imperatival phrase «write the 24 presbyters» occurs in seven of the eight instances in which these entities are incorporated into spells in Hay 1.³¹ In the other six cases, the practitioner has included the phrase «and their powers» immediately afterward. Based on what we find in other ostensibly Coptic magical contexts (see above), we might presume that the practitioner behind this spell is referring to the writing of the presbyters' names (and their powers), which the scribe who will prepare the applied version of this spell is expected to know already.

Second, the materials to be used for creating the object are conspicuously absent. This lack of information about the material is interesting since there are cases in which the reader is given more specific instructions in this regard. For instance, in a spell designed for οὔωτω (alternatively translated into English as «prostration» and «laying low»),³² which occurs later in the manuscript in a recipe with the 24 presbyters (ll. 85-86), we read, «write the 24 presbyters with their powers and the name of the man on a sprouted reed-stalk ([οὔχηρε κκα]ω ερηητ)». Meyer and Frankfurter translated this reconstructed Coptic phrase as «[reed pen] from a growing plant», thus implying that it was the writing instrument that was in mind.³³ In either case, this particular material figures again into a lacunose spell for love that does not include the 24 presbyters (ll. 90-92).³⁴ In other words, the practitioner behind Hay 1 occasionally

31 In one case (l. 94), we find the phrase, «Contemplate the 24 presbyters». On this instance, see the discussion below.

32 Marvin Meyer and David Frankfurter translate this word as «prostration» (MEYER, SMITH, *Ancient Christian Magic*, cit., p. 268) and Zellmann-Rohrer translates it as «laying low» (ZELLMANN-ROHRER, «Catalogue», cit., p. 89).

33 MEYER, SMITH, *Ancient Christian Magic*, cit., p. 268. This particular material figures again into a lacunose spell for love that does not include the 24 presbyters (ll. 90-92).

34 The Coptic term εὔκαδαω εϋ[ρηητ] appears in a spell on P. Fribourg AeT inv. 2006.4. For further information, see ZELLMANN-ROHRER, «Catalogue», cit., p. 107.

includes information on the specific material used as the writing surface or instrument.

Consequently, an important question presents itself: how should we interpret the lack of information about the materials to be used in l. 78-79? This is not an easy question to answer and, therefore, several scenarios are possible. Does the specific material not matter in certain cases? Are we, therefore, to assume that one can use whatever materials s/he has available (so long as the names are there)?³⁵ Although such a scenario remains possible, it is worth noting once more that this same practitioner has specified materials in other cases in which the 24 presbyters figure (cf. ll. 85-86 [see above]). Moreover, the practitioner has a general emphasis on specific physical materials throughout the manuscript (not only in the spells with the 24 presbyters): for instance, offerings of mastic (e.g., ll. 49, 56) and radish-oil (l. 35); procedures that emphasize substances, such as white wine, storax and calamus juice (ll. 10-13); and spells that command preternatural beings to descend upon a cup of water (l. 41) or that involve prayers spoken over «wild mustard» (ll. 77, 80, 84, 95 [see also discussion below]). Another possibility is that the precise material was considered secret information that would only be provided by the practitioner once performed or once payment was received. In such a scenario, the material used would have been a kind of cryptic assurance that nobody else could use this spell in an unsanctioned way. Toward this end, it is curious to note that scholars have uncovered from the Thebaid, in general, and from the monastery Deir el-Bakhît, in particular, considerable evidence for the use of cryptography, including within ostensibly magical contexts.³⁶ Alphabetic ciphers are attested, inter alia, in a third-fourth century CE magical codex, probably from Hermonthis (PGM VII.969-972);³⁷ on a wooden writing board from the

35 On the possibility of “unmarkedness” as it relates to the material support of magical objects, see Tonio Sebastian RICHTER, «Markedness and Unmarkedness in Coptic Magical Writing», in *Écrire la magie dans l'antiquité. Actes du colloque international (Liège, 13-15 octobre 2011)*, ed. Magali DE HARO SANCHEZ (Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2015), pp. 85-108, at 86-88.

36 See Jacco DIELEMAN, «Crypography at the Monastery of Deir el-Bachit» in *Honi soit qui mal y Pense: Studien zum pharaonischen, griechisch-römischen und spätantiken Ägypten zu Ehren von Heinz-Josef Thissen*, hrg. von Hermann KNUF, Christian LEITZ, Daniel VON RECKLINGHAUSEN (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), pp. 511-517.

37 As Korshi Dosoo has argued, PGM VII was likely not a part of the «Theban Magical

«Cell of Priest Elias» (P. Mon. Epiph. 616) discovered in a small structure between Djeme and Armant;³⁸ and on a Coptic ostrakon uncovered in 2002 at Deir el-Bakhît by the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut.³⁹ It is likewise possible that the absence of material in the spell reflects the practitioner's sources or, alternatively, that the material used was based on common knowledge (like the phrase, «write the 24 presbyters») and, therefore, it was merely assumed that the practitioner who would create the applied artifact would know what to use. Unfortunately, we are left to speculate on this matter.

The binding dimension to this spell likewise elicits various questions. It should be noted at the outset that ritual binding is integrated into earlier parts of Hay 1. For instance, the practitioner instructs the performer in l. 56 to «write the amulets; bind them (ΜΟΡΟΥ) to your thumb; utter the prayer (ΤΕΕΥΧΗ)». As we will see below, binding occurs in subsequent spells that include the 24 presbyters. The binding of an object to one's body seems to have played an important role in many of the extant textual amulets.⁴⁰ Such objects were typically suspended from one's neck, whether strings were tied to the textual amulet itself⁴¹ or to a container in which the textual amulet was

Archive», as has often assumed, but was probably part of the so-called «Hermonthis Magical Archive» (Korshi Dosoo, «History of the Theban Magical Library» *BASP* 53 [2016]: 265-266). Despite the proximity of the two locations to one another, Dosoo properly maintains this distinction based on internal features and the purchasing history of the manuscripts (*ibid.*, 266).

38 See Walter E. CRUM, Hugh G. EVELYN-WHITE, *The Monastery of Epiphanius, Part II* (New York: Publications of the Metropolitan Museum of Art Egyptian Expedition, 1926; reprinted 1973), pp. 136 and 321 (no. 616). For commentary, see also DIELEMAN, «Cryptography», cit., pp. 516-517.

39 Ostrakon Bachit 21. For an analysis of this ostrakon, see DIELEMAN, «Cryptography», cit., esp. pp. 511-514.

40 For an emphasis on the ritual significance of binding for amulets, see Don C. SKEMER, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), p. 141. There is evidence that late antique Egyptians also attached various *materia magica* to their bodies, such as snakes' heads (ϢΕΝΑΠΕ ΝϢΟϢ), crocodiles' teeth (ϢΕΝΝΑ.ΧΕ ΝΜϢΔϢ), and fox claws (ϢΕΝΙΕΙΒ ΝΒΔϢΟΡ), for healing and protection (Shenoute, *Acephalous work* A14, §§ 255-259). For discussion of this passage, see David FRANKFURTER, *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 69-70; Korshi Dosoo, «Healing Traditions in Coptic Magical Texts», *Trends in Classics* 13 (2021): 51-52.

41 Arthur S. Hunt noted that P. Oxy. 8.1151 was «tightly folded and tied with a string»

placed.⁴² Although the example of amulets might lead us to associate binding objects with the suspension from the neck, the binding of ritual objects to one's arm also has precedents in the world of early Christian apotropaic and curative practice. For instance, there are over 30 extant amuletic armbands that don visual scenes from the life of Christ on medallions (in some cases with LXX Ps. 90:1 written between the medallions) and whose geographical distribution extended from Egypt to Palestine to Cyprus to Syria.⁴³ In addition, it is possible that the practitioner envisioned a practice similar to or even based on the Jewish *tefillin* or phylacteries (specifically, the *tefillin shel yad* [hand phylacteries]), which, as Yehudah Cohn has noted, often served an apotropaic function in the ancient world.⁴⁴ With what material ought one bind the inscribed object with the 24 presbyters? Unfortunately, once again the practitioner does not specify.

The remaining seven spells likewise layer words and performative gestures in interesting ways – often also incorporating additional elements, such as specific materials, into the ritual. As we have already seen, the material on or through which the 24 presbyters are to be written might be specified. Other spells integrate materiality in more complex arrangements with text and other performative domains. In a spell for a productive workshop (ll. 87-89), one is instructed to write the 24 presbyters and their powers – again, without further clarification – on an unspecified object, which is then placed in a «new bowl» (ΛΙΚ ΝΩΡΡΕ). It is worth emphasizing a couple of points about this recipe. First, we find the role of

(Arthur S. HUNT, «1151. Christian Amulet» in *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*. Vol. 8, ed. Arthur S. HUNT [London: Egypt Exploration Society], pp. 251-253).

42 E.g., Roy KOTANSKY, ed., *Greek Magical Amulets: The Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper, and Bronze Lamellae, Part I: Published Texts of Known Provenance* (Opladen: Der Westdeutsche Verlag, 1994), pp. 16-21 (no. 4).

43 E.g., Jean MASPERO, «Bracelets-amulettes d'époque byzantine», *ASAE* 9 (1908): 246-258; Gary VIKAN, «Art, Medicine, and Magic in Byzantium», *DOP* 38 (1984): 65-86; Thomas KRAUS, «“He that Dwelleth in the Help of the Highest”: Septuagint Psalm 90 and the Iconographic Program on Byzantine Armbands», in *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon*, eds. Craig A. EVANS, H. Daniel ZACHARIAS (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), pp. 137-147. For a discussion of their implications for the relationships between words, images, and bodies, see Joseph E. SANZO, *Ritual Boundaries: Magic and Differentiation in Late Antique Christianity* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2024), pp. 65-88.

44 Yehudah COHN, *Tangled Up in Text: Tefillin in the Ancient World* (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2008).

performative gesture: the vessel – including the object on which the 24 presbyters and their powers were written – is to be buried at the door of the shop (l. 89).⁴⁵ This burying ritual seems to be part of a broader strategy of the practitioner as it relates to the material artifacts on which the 24 presbyters are written. In fact, in six of the eight spells in which the 24 presbyters figure (ll. 81-82; 84; 89; 92; 94; 95), we find the command to «bury them» (τομσοϋ).

Ritual burying – whether in graves, in cemeteries, in wells, at crossroads, or in circuses – was widely practiced in late antique contexts deemed «magical», typically for imprecation.⁴⁶ We can gain insight into the range of potential burial locations from PGM VII.451-452, which forms part of a general restraining rite: «...have (the tablet) buried or [put in] a river or a land or sea or stream or coffin or in a well».⁴⁷ Doorways, in particular, occasionally figured into myths about ostensibly magical contexts (again, malign magical contexts), as we learn from Sophronius, who narrates the story of how the martyrs Cyrus and John healed Theodoros of Cyprus, a physician who became lame on account of malign magic:

They [Cyrus and John] also took care to deliver him from the magical spell. He was commanded to send one of his servants back to Lapithos to inspect the space by the door of his bedchamber, where the wicked cause of his misery was hidden; when it was revealed, its author would be destroyed. Theodoros executed all these orders, regained his health, and learnt the cause of his misery.⁴⁸

45 It is also possible that we should regard the placing of the object in the vessel as a performative gesture.

46 See, for instance, Andrew T. WILBURN, *Materia Magica: The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus, and Spain* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), pp. 219-253; D. OGDEN, «Binding Spells: Curse Tablets and Voodoo Dolls in the Greek and Roman Worlds» in *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, Vol. 2: *Ancient Greece and Rome*, eds. Bengt ANKARLOO, Stuart CLARK (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), pp. 15-25.

47 Translation taken from Morton SMITH in Hans Dieter BETZ, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demotic Spells*, Vol One: *Texts* (2nd edition; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 130.

48 Sophronius, *The Miracles of Saints Cyrus and John*, 55 (PG 87.3, col. 3625). Translation taken from Julia DOROSZEWSKA, *Cult of Saints*, E07769 - <<http://cls.history.ox.ac.uk/record.php?recid=E07769>>.

Although this anecdote is interesting for illuminating many aspects of late antique ritual culture, including the intricate ways imprecatory and protective magic interact,⁴⁹ it is worth noting for our present purposes Sophronius's emphasis on the door as a site of harmful magic. The fear that doors could be sites for imprecatory purposes not only impacted literary imagination about magic, but it also made its way into Egyptian spells for protection against harmful rituals. For instance, the practitioner behind Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, a late antique Coptic magical codex, listed doors as one possible site in which a harmful ritual object might be placed:

[...] hidden in its foundations, or in its extended places, or in its entrance or in its exit, or in the door, or in the window, or in the bedroom, or in the yard, or in the dining room [. . .] or in any place. (2v, ll. 4-20).⁵⁰

In the spell from Hay 1, we thus find the complex layering of text, material object, and ritual action, all of which were embedded into longstanding ritual and even literary cultures in the late antique Mediterranean.⁵¹

But such configurations are not uniform in the spells that include the 24 presbyters. For instance, in ll. 82-84, there is a spell designed to divide friends from one another, which, once again, presents numerous interpretive challenges. In sum, the practitioner instructs the reader to engage in the now-familiar act of writing the 24 presbyters with their powers on an unspecified material, to «contemplate the prayer» over wild mustard, and to bury them in the place where the friends will pass

49 On this relationship more generally, see David FRANKFURTER, «Curses, Blessings, and Ritual Authority: Egyptian Magic in Comparative Perspective», *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religion* 5 (2005): 157-185.

50 Translation taken from Korshi DOSOO, Markéta PREININGER, eds. *Papyri Copticae Magicae: Coptic Magical Texts*, vol. 1, *Formularies* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), p. 119. For this practitioner's approach to harmful ritual, see now SANZO, *Ritual Boundaries*, cit., pp. 27-241.

51 The significance of burying objects was also important in Near Eastern contexts. We might think of the late antique Aramaic incantation bowls from Mesopotamia, many of which were discovered buried under houses. See Joseph NAVEH, Shaul SHAKED, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1985), pp. 15-16.

by. Like in the prior spell, we find the confluence of words, materials, and gestures, but here those dimensions are configured differently. As I have already noted, the act of burying plays an important role in recipes that incorporate the 24 presbyters in this manuscript, figuring into six of the eight spells. In ll. 82-84, the ritual action of burying has its more common association with imprecatory magic; the ritual participant is instructed to bury the object with the 24 presbyters in a space that the victims are likely to touch as they walk by. The material substance in this case – wild mustard (σιναποῦ ἡλιθίου) – is something over which one is instructed to «contemplate» (λογιζε). Several points are worth highlighting here. Wild mustard is not only mentioned in this particular spell, but also occurs in three – and perhaps four – other curses from the handbook (ll. 76-78; 79-80; 90-91[?]; 94-95). Although the text does not explicitly mention why wild mustard was chosen for these spells in Hay 1, we might reasonably assume that the physical properties of this plant carried some symbolic significance: mustard is a relatively pungent plant (especially when burned), which is incredibly resilient and thus can grow pretty much anywhere.⁵² Perhaps more importantly, our practitioner seems to be participating in a relatively far-reaching Egyptian tradition that associated mustard with cursing. The extant magical record from late antiquity preserves a series of so-called «mustard curses» that seek to divide people from one another. In addition to the other harmful spells in Hay 1 (ll. 76-78; 79-80; 90-91[?]; 94-95) and a fragmentary Greek spell seemingly designed for separation and now housed in Florence (P. Laur. IV 148), there is a bilingual Greek/Coptic object from Kellis that probably served as both a separation spell and as a letter (P. Kellis Copt. 35).⁵³ As part of the invocation of this text from Kellis, we find the following quasi *similia similibus* formula: «And you, O *burning* of the mustard, you shall put into the heart *burning* and scorching for each other!».⁵⁴ In P. Kellis Copt. 35, the burning-of-mus-

52 On relationship between the physical properties of certain materials and magical rituals, see, for instance, WILBURN, *Materia Magica*, cit., pp. 54-94.

53 Paul MIRECKI, Iain GARDNER, Anthony ALCOCK, «Magical Spell, Manichaean Letter», in *Emerging from Darkness: Studies in the Recovery of Manichaean Sources*, eds. Paul MIRECKI, Jason BEDUHN (Leiden: Brill, 1997), p. 10.

54 Translation taken from Jacques VAN DER VLIET, «Christian Spells and Manuals from Egypt», in *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, ed., David FRANKFURTER (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 322-350, at p. 333.

tard quality serves as a ritual analogy for the metaphorical burning in the victims' hearts, which, in this case, certainly means hatred for one another.⁵⁵ Although the directions and channels of influence are difficult to establish, we can say with confidence that the practitioner behind Hay 1 drew upon the broader connection between the substance (wild) mustard and imprecatory rituals for separation in late antique Egypt.

Second, a few words are in order concerning the verb $\lambda\omicron\upsilon\zeta\epsilon$, which stands behind the English «contemplate». We are dealing with a reconstruction of a lacuna in the manuscript. The six letters of the verb $\lambda\omicron\upsilon\zeta\epsilon$ – which Kropp proposed in his edition and scholars have universally accepted – fit well within the missing space of the manuscript. Moreover, the verb occurs elsewhere in this portion of Hay 1 (e.g., ll. 81, 84 [?], 87, 94, 96). To take just one example, the verb is found in ll. 80-82 in a spell for «deranging» or «causing idleness» ($\sigma\omega\rho\mu\ \epsilon\beta\omicron\lambda$), which not only tells us to «write the 24 presbyters with their powers» on an unspecified object, but also to «contemplate» ($\lambda\omicron\upsilon\zeta\epsilon$) the prayer ($\epsilon\gamma\chi\eta$) over them (i.e., the written names embedded into the material object).⁵⁶ Kropp's reconstruction is, therefore, quite reasonable.

The meaning of the Greek-derivative $\lambda\omicron\upsilon\zeta\epsilon$, however, is anything but straightforward. Kropp, Meyer, and Frankfurter have understood this verb as denoting a verbal utterance and, therefore, have translated it as «*spricht*» and «pronounce» respectively.⁵⁷ By contrast, Zellmann-Rohrer in his commentary on the handbook intuits here something like silent reading or contemplation, noting that «pronounce» does not work well with the Greek background of the verb and that one would expect $\omega\upsilon$ if a verbal utterance were intended (cf. l. 79).⁵⁸ In my estimation, Zell-

55 P. Kellis Copt. 35 also draws an analogical connection between hatred and other substances, such as dung and natron from Arabia. For discussion, see VAN DER VLIET, «Christian Spells», cit., p. 334.

56 The performer is then instructed to bury the material object at the altar of the *topos*.

57 KROPP, *Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte*, cit., vol. 2, p. 46; MEYER, SMITH, *Ancient Christian Magic*, cit., p. 268.

58 Although there has been a strong tendency in history-of-the-book scholarship to claim that silent reading by and large gained traction only from the medieval period, classicists and other historians of antiquity have reasonably postulated a proliferation of diverse reading practices (including both silent reading and reading aloud) even from an early period. For a useful survey of this debate, see R. W. MCCUTCHEON, «Silent Reading in Antiquity and the Future History of the Book», *Book History* 18 (2015): 1-32.

mann-Rohrer's interpretation of λογίζε as some kind of non-verbal activity makes better sense of the evidence.

The specific prayer (εϋχη) associated with λογίζε is unstated. It is, of course, possible that here again the practitioner who performs this ritual is supposed to know the proper prayer to speak. It is also possible that this prayer refers to one or more of the invocations or entreaties highlighted in earlier sections of the text or, more likely, to the words that immediately follow the closest *paragraphos* in the text (i.e., ll. 74-76): «I beg, I entreat you today, Marmariōth, the one who presides over all the powers, I entreat you today and your form, which is a flame of fire. I entreat you».⁵⁹ In either case, we can see here a complex arrangement of scribal practice (writing the 24 presbyters and their powers), materials (wild mustard), contemplation, and the ritual gesture of burying. Such elements, as we have seen, had diverse associations within ostensibly magical contexts, including especially within imprecatory rituals.

Conclusions: Reception History of the 24 Presbyters at the Intersection of Materiality and Religious Experience

The configurations, mixtures, and layering techniques that are apparent in the Hay 1 recipes that include the 24 presbyters ought to cause us to reflect on the overlapping themes of the reception history of these characters from Revelation and the religious experiences that the practitioner's spells would have engendered if, in fact, they were ever performed. Indeed, so-called magical objects, such as Hay 1, are particularly useful for illuminating what David Brakke has called «scriptural practices», especially as it relates to late antique lived religion.⁶⁰ Brakke responds to what he properly regards as a teleological assumption embedded into scholarly discussions of the Christian canon; that is, scholars have tended

59 Zellmann-Rohrer contends that the prayer at the beginning of this section is the ΕΥΧΗ referred to in the spells, usefully highlighting a parallel with P. Cair. Inv. 45060, which is a list of magical names applied to prescriptions that follow (ZELLMANN-ROHRER, «Catalogue», cit., p. 105).

60 David BRAKKE, «Scriptural Practices in Early Christianity: Towards a New History of the New Testament Canon», in *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation: Discursive Fights over Religious Traditions in Antiquity*, eds., Jörg ULRICH, Anders-Christian JACOBSEN, David BRAKKE (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 263-280 ; SANZO, *Ritual Boundaries*, cit., pp. 112-113.

to assume that Marcion, Athanasius, Eusebius, the Meletians, and the like were all engaged in the same project that eventually led to the Christian canon. Instead, Brakke notes that these diverse actors, groups, and communities were engaging with the Christian authoritative tradition for different purposes (e.g., teaching, liturgy, Christian exhortation). For Brakke, therefore, there is historical value in assessing «...the differing ways that Christians appropriated and produced sacred texts».⁶¹ Although Brakke emphasizes three forms of scriptural practices ([1] study and contemplation; [2] revelation and continued inspiration; and [3] communal worship and edification), he entertains the possible value that magical objects might carry for the study of scriptural practices:

The so-called magical papyri use scriptural texts to invoke supramundane beings and to make things happen in the social and physical worlds. These practices should be studied alongside the enforcement of an authoritative canon and in continuity with the liturgical use of texts in the official church context.⁶²

The magical objects can, in fact, provide insight into the diffusion of certain notions of canonicity in lived religious contexts. The use of Gospel *incipits* on late antique Egyptian amulets and handbooks, for instance, at times display an interest in what we might call canonicity, highlighting the four-fold Gospel corpus with phrases, such as «the Four beginnings of the Gospel which is Holy: the Gospel according to Matthew, the Gospel according to Mark, the Gospel according to Luke, the Gospel according to John».⁶³

But the complex ways in which Hay 1 incorporates the 24 presbyters from Revelation into its various spells require us to reflect on another dimension of late antique scriptural practice: the intersection of biblical reception, materiality, and religious experience. In this vein, it is useful to highlight the category «mediality», as expressed by the Lived Ancient Religion (LAR) project (University of Erfurt).⁶⁴ According to

61 BRAKKE, «Scriptural Practices», cit., p. 271.

62 *Ibi*, p. 280.

63 Bodleian Coptic Inscription 426, ll. 11-16. On the Gospel *incipits*, see Joseph E. SANZO, *Scriptural Incipits on Amulets from Late Antique Egypt: Text, Typology, and Theory* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), pp. 75-99, 151-165.

64 See Janico ALBRECHT, Christopher DEGELMANN *et al.*, «Religion in the Making: The

this project, «mediality» refers to «the roles of material culture, embodiment and group-styles in the construction of religious experience».⁶⁵ In dialogue with the rubric mediality, Emma-Jayne Graham has shown how ancient objects facilitated religious performances and experiences that included a range of senses in lived religion.⁶⁶ In particular, Graham has usefully noted how hand votives from mid-Republican Italy – as material «things,» with their sights, sounds, smells, and haptic qualities – diversely entangled themselves with human bodies and senses. She argues that such votive hands would have exerted themselves on the body in lived practice on three different levels: «as a material thing, as a representational thing (votive hand), as a thing that was simultaneously a material *and* representational proxy for a real hand».⁶⁷ She thus appropriately concludes more generally that:

religion [can be studied] as a form of embodied knowledge which is both produced and ‘felt’ through the lived performance of activities and movements that encompass both the human body and the rest of the material world.⁶⁸

Her words here are useful to keep in mind for an analysis of Hay 1 since the 24 presbyters were integrated into spells that juxtapose diverse actions (e.g., writing; contemplation or silent reading; binding an object to one’s forearm; and burial) with a range of materials (e.g., the unspecified writing surface or instrument; wild mustard; a bowl or pot; sprouted reed stalk). If ever performed, such gestures and materials would have engaged every sense except taste. Yet, these materials and gestures simultaneously mapped onto the tradition of the 24 presbyters longstanding magical conventions and relationships, including: scribal magic; imprecation and burial; bowls; mustard curses; binding rituals (and perhaps even

Lived Ancient Religion Approach», *Religion* 48 (2018): 570. The LAR project drew attention to four categories: appropriation, competence, situational meaning, and mediality.

65 ALBRECHT, DEGELMANN *et al.*, «Religion in the Making», *cit.*, p. 570.

66 Emma-Jayne GRAHAM, «Hand in Hand: Rethinking Anatomical Votives as Material Things», in *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World: Approaching Religious Transformations from Archaeology, History and Classics*, eds. Valentino GASPARI, Maik PATZELT, Rubina RAIA *et al.* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 209-235.

67 GRAHAM, «Hand in Hand», *cit.*, p. 226 (emphasis in original).

68 *Ibi*, p. 212.

the Jewish *tefillin*). This fusion of diverse materials, gestures, authoritative traditions (biblical, magical, liturgical, and otherwise) in the spells with the 24 presbyters from Revelation hints at the great extent to which biblical reception and use in lived religion was not only occasionally mediated through «official» Christian ritual contexts, such as liturgical performance (e.g., hymns), but it was also multi-traditional, multilayered, and multisensory.⁶⁹

69 On the relationship between magic and liturgy, see Jacques VAN DER VLIET, «Literature, Liturgy, Magic: A Dynamic Continuum», in *Christianity in Egypt: Literary Production and Intellectual Trends; Studies in Honor of Tito Orlandi*, eds. P. BUZI, A. CAMPLANI (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2011), pp. 555-574.