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Andrew T. Wilburn, *Materia Magica: The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus, and Spain*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2012. xvi + 342 pages. ISBN 978-0-472-11779-6.

*Materia Magica* by Andrew T. Wilburn (henceforth: W.) is an original and thought-provoking book that illustrates the importance of archaeological contexts in identifying and interpreting ancient magical rituals. This study thus comes as a welcome supplement to the several surveys of ancient Mediterranean magic that have been published in recent decades.<sup>1</sup> The book consists of six chapters (plus a short introduction), 25 plates, 2 appendices, an extensive bibliography, and an index of authors, subjects, and ancient artifacts.

The first two chapters establish the theoretical and methodological frameworks for the three case studies that follow in chapters three, four, and five respectively. In chapter one, W. defines the key terms of his study, namely “magic” and “archaeology.” He offers an “etic” definition of “magic,” which emphasizes its ritual and result-driven character, its frequent dependence on “religion,” and its relegation primarily to the private sphere – though he concedes that certain practices were performed publicly. His approach to magic is further supplemented by Bronisław Malinowski’s principle of the “coefficient of weirdness,” which in W.’s formulation emphasizes the strangeness and distinctness of magic vis-à-vis quotidian language, objects, and actions. W. also establishes the methodological parameters of his object-specific approach to the archaeology of magic, which analyzes magical performance at the intersection of depositional space, material artifact, and ritual texts and actions. He closes the chapter with a discussion of how ancient magic can be mapped onto both global (Mediterranean) and local spaces.

In chapter two, W. continues the theoretical and methodological prologue to his case studies. He proposes a typology of *materia magica* – ranging from physical substances to more abstract concepts – based on literary evidence and extant formularies and applied magical devices: (1) inscribed objects; (2) images and figurines; (3) plants, animals, and natural ingredients; and (4) household objects repurposed for magical use. W. surveys these four categories of “materials” in detail, demonstrating with numerous examples the wide range of substances, objects, and ritual techniques that were created/reapplied/performed for magical purposes. W. also implores scholars to evaluate entire archaeological contexts, with particular attention to the relationships among

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., F. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (trans. P. Franklin; Cambridge 1997); M. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York 2001); D. Collins, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World* (Malden, MA 2008).

artifacts – “magical” and otherwise – and the circumstances of a given artifact’s deposition. W. argues that this approach has a two-fold benefit: it can help scholars identify which objects and substances were utilized as *materia magica* and it can provide invaluable information about the nature of the magical ritual performed at a given site. W. also contends that attention to archaeological context can offer precious insight into the reception of a magical ritual within its immediate social environment.

The next three chapters are W.’s three case studies, which are organized by archaeological site. W. presents the historical background of each region and summarizes and evaluates the archaeological excavations that have been conducted at the particular site under investigation. In chapter three, W. treats four exemplars from Karanis that he claims demonstrate the value of archaeology for assessing magic in Egypt: (1) a fever amulet beneath House 242, which, according to W., resides at the interstices of “pagan” and “Christian” ritual practice and, as such, attests to a growing “Christian” population in Karanis; (2) a magical ostrakon in Structure C403, which W. suggests was used as a model text for a ritual to protect the grain or grain processing (perhaps from vermin) at the site; (3) a collection of five artifacts (a lead amulet, a figurine, and three bone pins) discovered under Structure 165 that were apparently used in an erotic magical ritual; and (4) a collection of painted bones from areas A262 and A265 (shown on the cover of the book), which he argues served a magical function. W. concludes that the particular collection of magical items at Karanis, uncovered through archaeological analysis, is significant since it differs drastically from the magical handbooks and other ritual devices from Egypt. Accordingly, this collection expands our understanding of the parameters of magic in Late Antique Egypt.

In chapter four, W. investigates the archaeology of magic at Amathous (Cyprus) through a close reading of two exemplary artifacts that illuminate the site’s extant cache of more than 200 lead and 30 selenite curse tablets: *DT* 22, which is a lead curse tablet that refers to itself as a “muzzling deposit” (φιμωτι[κοῦ κ]αταθέματος) and served as a kind of preemptive strike against judicial abuse, and *NGD* 115, which is another “muzzling” spell that uses the epithet “chthonic” after each of the divine names listed and has close affinities with a spell from the Egyptian magical papyri (*PGM* IV 1390-1495). According to W., the similarities between the selenite tablet from Amathous and the *PGM* text from Egypt may reflect their mutual dependence on a common “Hellenic” source. W. then draws conclusions about ritual expertise and the social context of magic at Amathous, arguing that, *inter alia*, the adroit negotiation of “religious” and “magical” motifs in the extant evidence most likely reflects the work of a cadre of professional practitioners who were probably associated

with the local temple or civic cult. He also notes that some of the curse tablets (e.g. *DT* 25-26) were directed against provincial authorities and, as such, reflect a veiled act of resistance against imperial authority.

In chapter five, W. analyzes magic in the archaeological remains of the Ballesta necropolis in Empúries (Spain), paying particular attention to three Flavian-era curse tablets from a single enclosure at the site: Ballesta Tablets 1-3. Since curse tablets were typically deposited in graves long after burial, it is significant that the Ballesta curse tablets were intentionally deposited simultaneously inside three cinerary urns as part of or before the vessels' inhumation. W. argues that this depositional context may suggest that the practitioner knew or was related to the individuals whose remains were placed in the urns. In either case, the curse tablets likely reflect the willingness on the part of the family – not unknown in the ancient Mediterranean world – to permit a deceased loved-one to assist in a ritual activity. W. further argues that, since these curse tablets were directed against local administrators (i.e. the *procurator* and the legates) in response to perceived judicial abuse (perhaps over land), they join a small group of ancient curse tablets that were used as a kind of covert resistance against imperial control and/or oppression (cf. the examples from Amathous in chapter four). In the case of the Ballesta curse tablets, however, the likely participation of an entire funerary party, who allowed their loved-ones to aid in this ritual, suggests that this resistance was not entirely covert, but semi-public. Nonetheless, the anonymity of the curser in the texts and the hidden location of their deposition (in a necropolis outside the city gates) offered protection against imperial suspicions and punishments.

In the final chapter, W. offers an assessment of his archaeological approach to magic. Among the more significant methodological points in this chapter is his concession that the archaeological record is often incomplete or inaccurately described in excavation reports – which, while problematic, does not negate the important place of archaeology in the study of magic – and his suggestion that scholars should look for magical objects in locations known to be associated with magic (e.g. graves and wells). W. also draws broader conclusions about Mediterranean magic based on his case studies, including the following: curses against magistrates may have had a cathartic effect; magic was not necessarily a private affair, but was a “public secret” and, accordingly, derived at least some of its power from the “partial revelation” of the ritual to the victim; practitioners often had a connection to a religious institution – though whether or not they acted in an official capacity is often unknown; magic – both aggressive and protective – played a considerable role in the quotidian activities of ancient towns and villages; and the circulation and travel of magical handbooks and applied artifacts in addition to the work of itinerant

practitioners may help account for the development of similarities in magical practice across the Mediterranean.

*Materia Magica* is a useful book for anyone interested in ancient magic. W. certainly has an excellent grasp of the relevant archaeology and most of the significant scholarship on magic. His book is not only well researched and, by and large, well written, but it is also aesthetically pleasing to the eye (e.g. it has a nice cover and numerous beautiful plates). Moreover, his discussion of *materia magica* in chapter two is an excellent introduction to the subject and would be a great selection for an undergraduate survey course or graduate seminar on ancient magic. Finally, his general thesis (i.e. that close attention to the archaeological context can yield important results for identifying and interpreting magic within its social context) is unlikely to find many detractors.

Nevertheless, a few critical remarks on this book can be made. First of all, W.'s analyses vary considerably in terms of persuasiveness and explanatory value. Some discussions are well argued and firmly grounded in archaeological and textual evidence (e.g. his analyses of the erotic ritual in Karanis and the Ballesta curse tablets). Others, however, are far more speculative and illustrate the dangers of using archaeological context as a rigid hermeneutical tool (e.g. his discussion of the ritual at Karanis that was allegedly designed to protect grain).

To be sure, one should not expect every discussion in a study of this length to be equally compelling. But W. certainly could have structured the book in a way that prioritized his best evidence. In this vein, it is regrettable that he inaugurates his case-specific analysis of the archaeology of magic with the fever amulet beneath House 242 in Karanis, which, he concedes (pp. 112-113), is hardly illuminated by its immediate archaeological context. The misplacement of this example is exacerbated by his unpersuasive contention that the fourth-century CE amulet exhibits "Christian" characteristics.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps even more regrettable is that he buries his excellent analysis of the erotic ritual under Structure 165 from Karanis in the middle of the chapter (i.e., the third case study out of four). Indeed, W. demonstrates quite convincingly from the ar-

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<sup>2</sup> W. also does not refer to relevant scholarship on the relationship between "Christianity" and "magic"; however, the two most recent articles on this front may not have been available to him at the time his book went to press: T.S. de Bruyn and J.H.F. Dijkstra, "Greek Amulets and Formularies from Egypt Containing Christian Elements: A Checklist of Papyri, Parchments, Ostraka, and Tablets," *BASP* 48 (2011) 163-216; W. Shandruk, "Christian Use of Magic in Late Antique Egypt," *J ECS* 20 (2012) 31-57. On the problems with the label "Christian" for analyzing amulets and other "magical" artifacts, see J.E. Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits on Amulets from Late Antique Egypt: Text, Typology, and Theory* (Tübingen forthcoming).

chaeological context that the figurine was not a toy, as was previously assumed, but was pierced with the contiguous bone pins from the site and burned in a “magical” ritual. The strength of W’s argument would have increased dramatically had his discussion of this erotic ritual been placed first.

His treatment of the category “magic” also deserves critical reflection.<sup>3</sup> W’s approach to this controversial term is especially evident in his definition of magic vis-à-vis religion.<sup>4</sup> One of his fundamental claims about magic is that it “may draw on religious traditions for both efficacy and exoticism” (p. 15). But, while W. spends a considerable amount of space defining “magic,” he does not provide any working definition of “religion,” even in his extended discussion of the magic-religion relationship (pp. 17-18). His apparent assumption that religion is a stable analytical category and is thus inherently useful for describing the ancient world stands in opposition to a growing body of recent scholarship.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the lack of a definition for religion undermines the meaning and significance of his claim that magic is occasionally dependent upon religion.

What is more, our uncertainty about whether or not practitioners performed magic as part of their official roles within local religious institutions (cf. chapter six), such as the temple or civic cult (cf. chapter four), raises fundamental questions about the organization and general utility of his governing taxonomy of magic and religion. Indeed, if priests and other *religious* leaders performed magic as part of their *religious* duties, it would seem to be more heuristically useful to classify magic as a subcategory of religion;<sup>6</sup> by contrast, if practitioners performed magic in a non-official capacity, it would be more reasonable to follow W. in understanding magic and religion as overlapping categories on the same taxonomic rank – perhaps under a *summum genus*, such as “culture” (see p. 18). These respective classificatory configurations in

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<sup>3</sup> For a convenient summary of the problems with the term “magic,” see most recently D.E. Aune, “‘Magic’ in Early Christianity and Its Ancient Mediterranean Context: A Survey of Some Recent Scholarship,” *ASE* 24 (2007) 229-294.

<sup>4</sup> On the problems with distinguishing magic from religion, see H.S. Versnel, “Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic – Religion,” *Numen* 38 (1991) 177-197.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Aune (n. 3); B. Nongbri, “Dislodging ‘Embedded’ Religion: A Brief Note on a Scholarly Trope,” *Numen* 55 (2008) 440-460; idem, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven 2013). On the problems with “religion” more generally, see, e.g., J.Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in M. Taylor (ed.) *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago 1998) 269-284; W.E. Arnal, “Definition,” in W. Braun and R.T. McCutcheon (eds.), *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London 2000) 21-34; T. Fitzgerald, “Bruce Lincoln’s ‘Theses on Method’: Antitheses,” *MTSR* 18 (2006) 392-423.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. D.E. Aune, “Magic in Early Christianity,” in *ANRW* 2.23.2 (1980) 1507-1557 at 1516.

turn hint at the manifold ways analytical constructs, such as borrowing and dependency, can be mapped onto magic and religion as discursive domains. In sum, W's claim that magic may borrow from religion rests on a series of assumptions that require more nuance and certainly better justification.

These criticisms notwithstanding, W. has produced an important book that represents the first programmatic application of archaeology to the study of ancient magic. Moreover, W's helpful discussions of the primary sources and secondary scholarship in the field make this book valuable even to those with a cursory understanding of magic in antiquity. *Materia Magica* is thus not only a necessary addition to the specialist's library; it is also an extremely useful book for scholars and novices who have a general interest in ancient magic.

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