PART III

GREEK & ROMAN RELIGIOUS TEXTS
Words, especially well crafted or set in special meters or rhythms, can have a powerful impact on sentient beings, both divine and human. This idea is, of course, a central tenet of most human societies and it was important to the ancient Greeks, who were especially conscious of the need to cultivate the science of rhetoric and who in many ways became obsessed with its special power. That words can likewise affect or influence the natural world is a more difficult proposition for most moderns to accept, but this too was a popular idea among the Greeks. We hear, for instance, of Orpheus, a mythical hexametrical poet, who moved trees and boulders with his songs and of Empedocles, the famous Sicilian poet and charismatic, who in his own verses claims to know how to heal the sick and control the weather by means of his poetry. And the recent publication or republication of a series of inscribed lead amulets from Crete and Magna Graecia provides for the first time important new evidence that the Greeks in the late-classical period used hexametrical verses in a similar manner to ward off danger from their houses and persons. Parallels, moreover, between these new texts and previously known literary accounts allow us to see where and how contemporary authors quote or paraphrase traditional charms and how these charms change from one area of Greece to another and from one time period to the next. A propos of this volume, I discuss these hexametrical incantations as both oral and written phenomena, beginning with the growing evidence that the Greeks from the fifth-century onwards used such incantations for a variety of purposes. As we shall see, variations in these texts point to an even older (and now invisible) oral pre-history. The inscribed lead amulets, on the other hand, are themselves obvious testimony to an entirely new phenomenon: the special power of these same incantations once they are preserved in writing. I close my paper by discussing how one of the Sicilian amulets emphatically calls attention to itself as a text that is powerful precisely because it is written down.