CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ASSUMING THE MANTLE OF THE GODS: ‘UNKNOWNABLE NAMES’ AND INVOCATIONS IN LATE ANTIQUE THEURGIC RITUAL

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I am the hearing that is attainable to everything;
I am the speech that cannot be grasped. 

Thunder, Perfect Mind

The use of ‘unknowable’ or so called ‘meaningless’ names and strings of vowels (voces magicae) is well attested within ritual invocations found in religious, magical, and theurgic late antique texts. For example, many such names and vowel-strings are found in the magical handbooks discovered in Egypt and now known under the name of the Greek Magical Papyri. The vowel-strings are a written record of a sound sequence, while the names are strange words which do not have any obvious meaning. These names were often referred to as onomata barbara, ‘non-Greek names/words.’ Both were spoken or uttered within ritual contexts, as well as being inscribed upon cult statues and other ritual paraphernalia.

1 Robinson (1977) 77. I wish to thank all speakers and participants at the Eighth Biennial Conference on Orality and Literacy in the Ancient World: Orality, Literacy and Religion, held at the University of Nijmegen, 2–6 July 2008, at which this paper was originally presented, for their valuable feedback and discussion. I also wish to thank the organizers of the conference, André Lardinois, Josine Blok and Marc van der Poel, for their warm and generous hospitality and for providing such pleasant and congenial surroundings for the conference. I wish to express my warmest thanks and gratitude to my supervisor, Gillian Clark for reading and commenting on drafts of this chapter. I also wish to thank all participants at the seminar on 'Jamblichos: His Sources and Influence,' held at the Irish Institute of Hellenic Studies, Athens, at which a draft of this paper was presented.

2 Cf. for example, PGM IV.930; 960–965; XIII.762–772; XIII.880–886; ed. Preisendanz (1928–1931). All quotations from the PGM are from this edition, unless otherwise stated.

3 For example, the Ephesia grammata, a particular set of mystic letters or unknowable names, were allegedly incised on the famous cult statue of Artemis of Ephesus and were often used in apotropaic rituals, both verbally and as parts of inscribed texts. A story
This points towards the significance both of language and of oral performance within a ritual context. However, the meaning of such ‘unknowable’ ritual formulae is little discussed in extant sources from antiquity. Iamblichus provides one of the few discussions of the context and operation of ‘unknowable’ names within the ritual praxis of late antiquity, although he does not refer to the vowel-strings.  

Iamblichus was a late antique philosopher who lived in Syria in the third century CE (c.240–c.325 CE), but wrote in Greek. He was a Neoplatonist, a modern term used to describe philosophers of this period who followed and interpreted Plato’s philosophy. His treatise, now called De mysteriis (On the Mysteries), is one of the most extensive surviving late antique works on Graeco-Roman religious practices. This work shows a synthesis of such practices with Egyptian, Chaldaean, and Assyrian ritual practices. Composed between 280 and 305 CE under the pseudonym ‘Abammon,’ Iamblichus’ work answers the questions on religious phenomena posed by the philosopher Porphyry. In this sense, the work functions as a kind of dialogue. Iamblichus was a theurgist, a practitioner of theurgy (θεουργία), which literally means ‘god-working.’ This was a type of religious ritual which included divination as one of its essential elements. Its central aim was to reawaken the soul’s inherent connection with the gods, thus allowing the soul to attain anagôgê, the ascent of the soul to the divine, intelligible realm. Thus, Iamblichus’ treatise also functions as an explanation of theurgic ritual; his discussion of the names takes place within this context. Iamblichus’ De mysteriis comprises our central evidence for the operation and scope of theurgic ritual within...