FROM RITUAL TO MAGIC: ANCIENT EGYPTIAN PRECURSORS OF THE CHARITESION AND THEIR SOCIAL SETTING

Joachim Friedrich Quack

Introduction

Among the magical rituals attested in the Greek-language papyri of the Roman imperial period, there is one specific genre called charitesion. This aims at giving the beneficiary favor, love and similar gains, normally before the king or men (and women!) in general. Up to now, three specific studies have been devoted to it. One is an article by Faraone (1990) later reused as parts of a book (Faraone 1999: 97–110), another is a lengthy remark within the commentary by Kotansky (1994: 353–360) on such a spell attested in a Greek magical amulet. Finally, Winkler (1991, esp. pp. 218–220) noted the interlacing of spells for charm and violence, stressing how this is the necessary form in an agonistic, masked and duplicitous society.

Faraone started from the Homeric description in the Iliad (14th book) of how Aphrodite provided Hera with a kestos himas to give her affection and desire in order to subdue all gods and mortals. Discussing the various uses of straps, special rings or facial ointment, he pointed out some parallels in Assyrian cuneiform texts, as well as noting the relevant passages in the Greek magical papyri and the Cyranides (although they lay outside the time-span he was really dealing with). In spite of the enormous time-gap separating those sources, he spoke confidently of a long-standing Greek tradition of such devices, only partly visible in the extant evidence, that may be traced back directly to Mesopotamia (Faraone 1999: 104). He also noted the blurring of the categories between spells for friendship or love, for good luck and for restraining anger.

Faraone’s remarks have to be seen within the context of his general work on Greek magic. This is characterized by two basic assumptions. He tends to regard as Greek much that was transmitted in the Greek-language magical manuals from the Roman Period, rather downplaying the Egyptian religious influence in them. If he looks for foreign
sources and influences, his eyes are more intensely directed toward Mesopotamia, even if he still admits the presence of Egyptian elements (e.g. Faraone 1992; Faraone 1995). Although his work is understandable as a reaction to some excessive claims of Egyptian origin made by Ritner (which in turn were a reaction to previous graecocentric works), Faraone sometimes underestimates the explanatory potential of the Egyptian culture.

Kotansky took his lead from the occurrence of the rare word ἐπαφροδισία “loveliness, elegance” in the amulet he published. He noticed that exactly such an expression was used in a distinct “blessing”-formula attested in the Ptolemaic papyri of the 3rd century BCE. Apart from the documentary texts, the word is only attested in literary texts of the 2nd century CE, and only in authors having strong links with Egypt. As already noticed by Tait (1980: 194) and taken up by Kotansky, this blessing formula can be related to a Demotic greeting formula. Kotansky also demonstrated that extensions of this wish found in other letters combine the wish for loveliness with other items, which closely match the longer lists in some of the magical spells.

In indicating the occurrence of the same rare Greek word in the magical papyri, Kotansky concluded that there was a sharing of Graeco-Demotic terms, and that the magical spells would be the natural outcome of earlier prayers, or blessing formulae, in which favor and loveliness before Pharaoh were invoked. He also noticed that the social context changed, with the magical spells becoming more commercialized and opportunistic. They also often ask for favor before all men and women. Still, quite often, even in the magical papyri, favor before the king was specifically requested.

Although Kotansky did not really discuss the question of ethnic origin, his remarks have done much to clarify the situation. At the same time, it is a challenge to take up where he left off, concerning the relation of the magical spells to the letter formulae, while at the same time taking the lead from his pointing out Demotic Egyptian antecedents in order to arrive at a clearer conception regarding the ultimate origin. I intend to pursue those lines further, and to add a further line of inquiry—namely, concerning similar formulae in Egyptian ritual texts not normally considered magical. The two most important Egyptian key-words are ḥs.wt “favor” and mrw.t “love”—the latter, according to the typical Egyptian way of expression, the love which one inspires, not the love which one oneself feels.