Miscellanea

Notes on a Nestorian Spell against Headaches

An anonymous Nestorian magic spell, the short text of which is preserved only in Syriac, raises some interesting questions about the relationship between medicine, magic, and religion. A copy of the text survives in a manuscript which was collated in the eighteenth century from a miscellaneous collection of documents pertaining to medieval Arabic medicine. An edition of the text was prepared in 1919 by Nau as part of the P.O. series.

Nau’s observations regarding the manuscript are curious, and need to be discussed before analysis of the text. He records the presence of twelve concentric circles drawn in red and yellow. At the centre he notes a cross written in two words of almost illegible nature. The word written horizontally in the cross (ܬܪܥܐ) means one of many things: ‘bondage’, ‘fetters’, ‘handcuffs’, ‘imprisonment’, or ‘binding promise’. The word written vertically (ܐܣܪܥܐ) means ‘gate’, ‘entrance’, ‘court’, ‘palace’, or ‘chapter’. These details are central to the manuscript, and are striking to any reader who comes across it. Of them, however, Nau makes no comment beyond basic observation.

Yet it is evident that these details provide some vital context for the work. Concentric circles are a feature of many Islamic and Christian manuscripts. They are often found drawn in vivid colours and in varying numbers. In some

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1 Paris BnF syr. 347. See Mss-syriaques.org (2015). The manuscript was found in the village of Artun, Iran. It was supposedly collated by an illiterate fisherman called Galw at the beginning of the eighteenth century, but, because of its content and writing style, is clearly a collection of much, much earlier magical material from nearby Syria and Turkey.


3 Nau 1919, 319.

4 In other parts of the manuscript can be found other interesting symbols: magical diagrams, miniature figures of human beings, bows and arrows, decorative bands, and incantations and charms written in a circle.

5 Witkam 1985, 271.
manuscripts, these colours are representative of magical forces and mysticism. Red is often associated with fire;\(^6\) the meaning of yellow is less clear, but that yellow was an imported synthetic pigment nevertheless makes it a symbol of mystique.\(^7\) These colours ordinarily symbolise the physical elements of the earth.\(^8\) In the manuscript the concentric circles are placed at more or less equal distances from each other.\(^9\) They therefore cannot be confused with a scribal amusement or random gesture; there is purpose in their placement which suggests a statement of meaning. It is likely that this meaning is religious. In many religions, the number twelve is of significance. In Judaism, it represents the twelve tribes; in Christianity, the twelve Apostles; in Islam, there is less significance in the number, apart from the coincidence that the sect of Twelvers believe in the lineage of twelve Imams. The suggestions raised here are by no means conclusive. It is quite possible that the twelve concentric rings meant something entirely different to the individual who inscribed them. But because the text is religious in nature, and because it is Christian in content, it is most likely that the circles are connected in some way to Christian doctrine. That it is a Nestorian text raises the possibility that the sign of twelve is either a sign of blasphemy or a sign of identification: a reminder of the twelve anathemas raised by Cyril against Nestorius at the Council of Alexandria (430 CE), by which Nestorius was essentially cast from the Church.

The presence of the cross in the manuscript raises the odds of this possibility. The meaning of the cross, which is written in the words detailed above, is prohibitive in nature. But is it prohibiting the magical content or the Nestorian support raised by its content? It may indeed be prohibiting both. Essential, however, is the fact that it is a Syriac text, written in Syriac by Syrian scribes. In Nestorian Syria, the faith of the Apostles was rejected as strongly as was the Monophysite movement. At a distance from the centre of the empire, Persia and Eastern Syria found in Nestorianism a means to protest against the vigorous doctrinal disputes of the West.\(^10\) As a result, the argument that the twelve concentric circles represent the heresy of Nestorius—no matter whether their inclusion be used as a source of strength to Nestorian scribes or as a sign of defamation by later anti-Nestorian scribes—becomes more compelling. Add to this the magical element also provided by the concentric circles, and it seems that the manuscript was most likely declared a heresy to authority both because it espoused a certain magical interpretation of Nestorian doctrine, and

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\(^6\) Golladay 2007, 629.  
\(^7\) Delamarter, Haile and Terefe 2013, 416.  
\(^8\) Delamarter, Haile and Terefe 2013, 416.  
\(^9\) Nau 1919, 319.  
\(^10\) Fortescue 2001, 55.